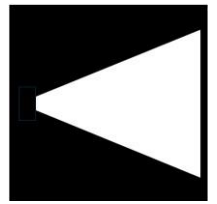


A Religious Paradox ?



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Research Papers

Garssen et al (2021). Does spirituality or religion positively affect mental health? Meta-analysis of longitudinal studies. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 31(1), 4-20.

Helliwell et al (2024). World Happiness Report: Origins, Purpose, Contents, Impact and Future. In *Encyclopedia of Happiness, Quality of Life and Subjective Wellbeing* (p. 296). Edward Elgar Publishing.

Yaden et al (2022). A meta-analysis of religion and life satisfaction. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 23(8), 4147-4163.

Deci & Ryan (2000). The what and why of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological inquiry*, 11(4), 227-268.

Chen et al (2020). Religious-service attendance and subsequent health and well-being throughout adulthood: evidence from three prospective cohorts. *International journal of epidemiology*, 49(6), 2030-2040.

Corrigan et al (2016). *Jews, Christians, Muslims: a comparative introduction to monotheistic religions*. Routledge.

Overview

Whilst religion can enrich individual lives by providing comfort, support, and existential meaning, when religious doctrine permeates government, instigates restrictive moral codes & limits freedom, national happiness tends to suffer.

Key Findings

At a personal level, attending religious services is linked with mental health benefits & higher life satisfaction, perhaps due to the community support, moral frameworks, shared values and coping strategies that help people navigate uncertainty and stress. People who voluntarily join faith-based groups often report higher average levels of happiness, similar to the social benefits of secular hobby groups but perhaps with broader spiritual meaning (Garssen et al, 2021, Yaden et al, 2022).

Longitudinal cohort research even suggests a dose response relationship; more frequent religious service attendance being associated with lower mortality risk and improved mental health (Chen et al 2020).

At a national level, countries governed under religious rule often rank lower on happiness scales compared to those with secular governance models (Helliwell et al., 2024). For example, the Taliban's strict governance in Afghanistan or Iran under its Islamic Republic framework, where citizens face constraints on personal freedom, gender equality, and freedom of expression. These conditions erode trust in public institutions and foster inequality.

9 out of the 10 happiest countries have secular governance, with laws typically free of religious influence. Israel is the other top 10 country, with democratic institutions sitting alongside a strong religious influence (Corrigan et al, 2016)

Insight

The paradox between the benefits of personal spiritual engagement and societal religious control underscores the importance of autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Religion, embraced voluntarily, bolsters personal well-being, communal ties, and offers a buffer against life's adversities.

Yet, when religious tenets become instruments of state policy, curtailing personal choice & penalising dissent, a nation's collective happiness declines. The optimum 'intervention' for a nation would appear to be a secular state within which individuals can freely opt into any faith they like, so long as the faith's principles align with the shared values and laws of the country. Within this framework we might even consider ardent football supporters as a faith group !?

