

Why Do Religious People Tend to Be Happier?

The results of [a Pew Forum Survey](#), posted last week indicate that “highly religious people” are, on average, more engaged with family, volunteer more, and are happier overall than non-religious people.

Before anybody concludes that “religion” is better than irreligion, however, three fair questions need to be raised and pondered.

First, is this study isolated, or an outlier? Or is it confirmed by other studies?

That’s an easy one. I’ve already [posted](#) about how it’s undeniable, sociologically, that conservatives tend to be happier than liberals, whether happiness is measured by reported feelings of satisfaction or objective measures of well-being. As indicated by the copious data, the two most prominent objective factors which might account for the difference are *marriage* and *religion*. A greater proportion of conservatives than liberals tend to be married and/or religious.

But that just raises the second question: Regarding religion and happiness, what’s the direction of causation? After all, correlation does not equal causation, even when the correlation is clearly established.

It could be that being highly religious causes people to be more content in life. If and when it does, though, that might be due less to the mere fact that they practice a religion than to the **way** in which they’re religious. Thus having an unshakable love for and trust in God, as one conceives of God, would certainly help. But how common is that? In my experience, that attitude is far from universal even among

people who attend church every week—though it certainly exists.

On the other hand, it could be that people *already* disposed to be more content than average—perhaps because their lives have gone better than average in various ways—tend to be more religious because their good fortune causes them to believe that the Higher Power is good. Among religious folk, I suspect, that dynamic is more common than many realize. Some regular churchgoers are indeed disposed to attribute their favorable lot in life to their being faithful to God: “God’s been good to me because I’m good with God.”

That attitude isn’t just found among today’s half-Christian “[prosperity-gospel](#)” believers. It’s as old as the Bible. How so?

Consider first the converse attitude: If your life is a mess, you must somehow have done something to deserve it. In the biblical book of Job, that’s what the long-suffering Job’s friends tell him in effect. That’s what many Americans today are inclined to believe about the able-bodied poor. And it was also the common attitude among the religious Jews who encountered Jesus. Thus it was often assumed that the leprous, crippled, or otherwise disabled were that way because God was displeased with them. So Jesus’ disciples asked him about a man who had been blind from birth, but whom Jesus went on to heal: “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” (John 9: 1).

That kind of thinking is the converse of the belief that if a person is successful and happy, that must be because God was pleased with them. That’s why the disciples were “astounded” when Jesus asserted: “Amen I say to you, it is easier for a camel to pass through a needle’s eye than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.” Their response was: “Then who can be saved?” (Matthew 19: 24-25). In keeping with the largely Calvinist roots of the early American colonies, many

Americans also seem to think that if you're doing well, it's because you've got good credit with God.

Now holding that sort of theology is more likely to be a result than a cause of a satisfying life. If so, then the fact that "highly religious" people tend to be happier than their less-religious counterparts might well say less about their religion than about an all-too-human tendency to take undue credit when things go well.

Whatever the direction of causation, though, a final question about the survey's results admits a reasonably straightforward answer. If we ask, as we should, whether such results supply evidence that any particular religion is true, the answer is clearly "no." But it's quite plausible to think that believing in some sort of Higher Power helps people weather life's storms with greater equanimity than others who don't so believe.