

Does Religiosity Really Enhance Our Well-Being?

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ABSTRACT

The concepts of Religiosity and Well-being are positively correlated, as many researches have shown. However, this relation is quite complex when we observe it in the real world. The World Happiness Report, which is published every year by the United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Networks, ranks the Nordic countries to be the happiest ones. Surprisingly, these are also the nations which have a very high population of atheists. Thus, the nature of the relationship between the two variables becomes somewhat unclear. This review paper attempts to presents a brief overview of the evolution of researches in the field of well-being and attempts to provide an explanation as to why this contradiction between the research findings and real-world situation exists.

Keywords: *Religiosity, Well-Being, Happiness*

The Concept of Well-Being

Well-being is a concept that is concerned with people's "optimal psychological functioning and experiences". (Ryan and Deci, 2001)
Studies in the area of Well-being are based on two broad approaches the origins of which can be traced back to different philosophical points of view.

The first of these employs a hedonic approach and focuses on pleasure. This is also referred to as Subjective Well-being, the essential of which are experience of positive affect, absence of negative affect and life satisfaction. (Diener, 2000)

The second perspective is Eudaimonic. It sees happiness as- Meaning in life, Self-realization and Personal Growth, and Authenticity and Personal Expressiveness. (Ryff, 1995) (Waterman, 1993) Ryan et. al. (2008) consider Eudaimonic happiness as intrinsic motivation.

Having elaborated the two approaches of happiness, one noteworthy aspect of happiness should also be emphasised upon. Happiness, like many other psychological phenomena, can fully be understood only in the cultural context of the person.

Seligman and Csikzentmihalyi (2000) argued that only stable, peaceful and prosperous cultures have the privilege of focusing on the standard of human existence. They give the

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Received: November 12, 2024; Revision Received: June 26, 2025; Accepted: June 30, 2025

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examples of Athens of 5th century BCE, Florence of 15th century and the English society of the Victorian era.

However, all of these cultures focused on different qualities of the human existence. Florence focused on art and aesthetics, England focused on pride and honour, and Athens on enhancing one's character.

Happiness- Through an Indian Lens

Contemporary scholars believe Vedas to be the oldest texts of the Aryan world. The Vedas, along with Upanishads, Brahmanas and Aranyakas are considered to be the oldest sources of Indian philosophy and knowledge system. (Jha, 2020)

In one such Upanishad, the Taittiriya Upanishad, we find the mention of a concept that can be considered as a theoretical model- the Panch Kosha model. This model is considered as a "cosmic hierarchy". (Goertzel, 1997)

This model considers the atman or soul to be surrounded by 5 sheaths. (koshas).

The outermost sheath is the Annamaya Kosha which represents the Physicality, Pranamaya Kosha represents the Vital functions, Manomaya Kosha represents psychological aspects, Vijnanmaya Kosha represents Intuitive self and Anandamaya Kosha depicts the Blissful self.

Epics such as Ramayana and Mahabharata also talk about righteousness. The characters in these epics stood by what was correct even when the situations went against them.

Thus, the Indian conception of happiness can be understood as more of a virtue that one inculcates than a state that can be attained and maintained.

Happiness In Contemporary Researches

Dodge in 1930 propounded that no advancements have been made in the area of study of happiness after the theories that Greek thinkers and philosophers had devised. (Wilson, 1967)

Wilson 1967 in a paper titled ' "Correlates of Avowed Happiness" ' concluded that someone who is 'young, healthy, well-educated, well-paid, extroverted, optimistic, worry free, religious, married person with self-esteem, job morale, modest aspirations, of either sex and of a wide range of intelligence' is a happy person. (Wilson, 1967)

As researches progressed, the role of genetic influences in deciding one's predisposition to well-being came into the picture.

Consider this study by Tellegen et. al. (1988) which studied identical and fraternal twins some of which were raised together and some separated at birth and were raised in different environments. They found that identical twins raised in different environments had much more in common than fraternal twins who were raised in the same fashion.

Dynamic Equilibrium Theory by Headey and Wearing (1989) proposes that there are baselines for positive and negative affects and people eventually come to those baselines after experiencing favourable or adverse situations of the life.

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Circumstances can make people move up and down with respect to this benchmark but it is this point that they ultimately come to. (Headey and Wearing. 1989)

Baker, Cesa, Gatz and Mellins (1992) in a study found that heredity plays a role in negative affect but environmental influences are more important for positive affect. (Baker et. al 1992)

Personality also is an essential factor for determining happiness. Costa and McCrae (1980) theorized that Extraversion is correlated with Positive affect and Neuroticism with negative affect. (Costa and McCrae 1980). This association is so powerful and congruous that Watson and Clark (1984) went as far as to label the trait of neuroticism as negative affectivity.

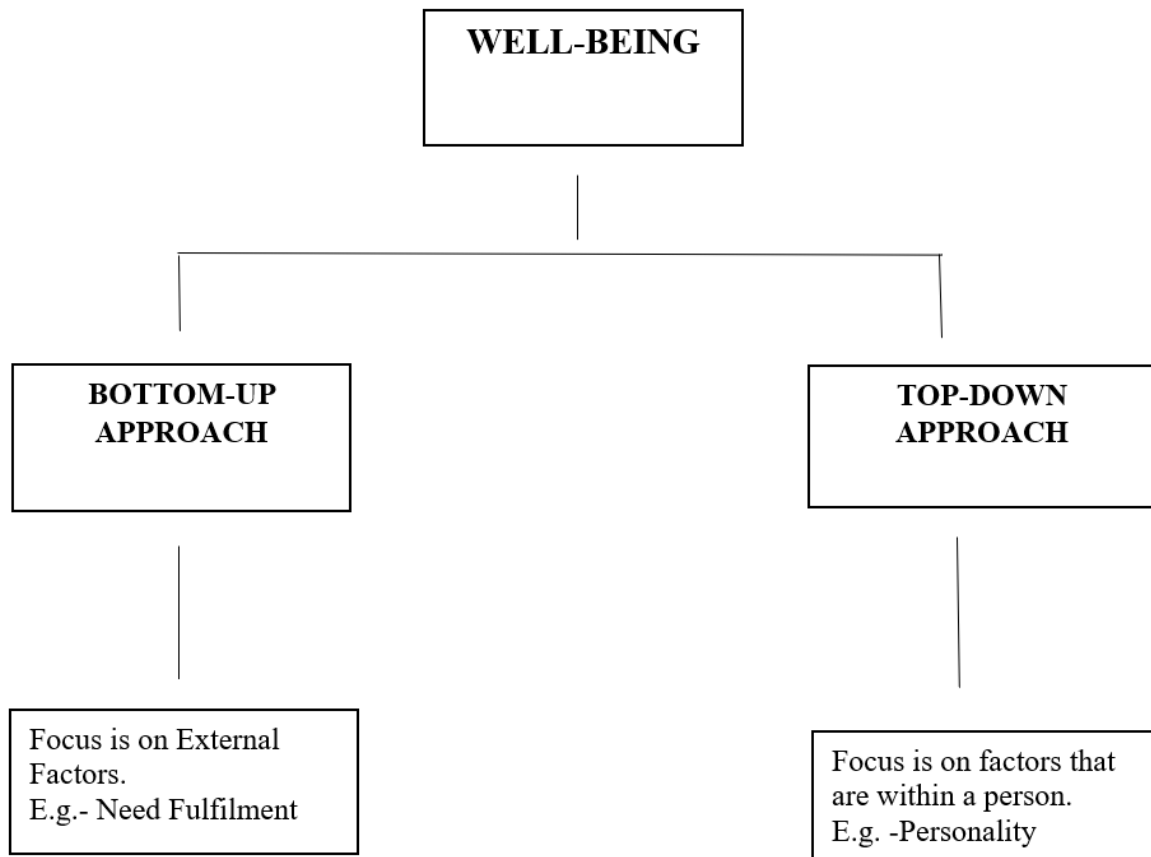


Fig 1- The two approaches of studying well-being (Ryan et. al., 2008)

DISCUSSION

Religion And Happiness: An anomalous relationship

Western Europe and Scandinavian regions are very high in atheism and they are also the happiest regions of the world.

On the other hand, highly atheistic regions such as Middle-East and South Asia are ranked quite low in the Happiness Index. For example, Jordan, India, Egypt and Sri Lanka rank 125, 126, 127 and 128 respectively, out of 143 countries/ regions. (World Happiness Report, 2023)

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However, these results are not in line with the results that many researches over the years have suggested.

Thus, it can be concluded that the relationship between religiosity and well-being is not very well defined. The aim of this review paper is to understand this complexity and provide a direction to future researches in this area so that this association can be detangled and a better understanding of it can be developed.

Studies have found a positive relationship between Religiosity and Happiness.

Bradshaw et. al. (2022) in a study conducted on 1251 adults of the United States of America using the statistical method of multivariate regression found that people who consider themselves as accountable to God show a positive association with four measures of Psychological Well-being. They are- Happiness, mattering to others, Meaning in life and Dignity.

Myers (2000) concluded that religiosity is correlated with lower levels of suicide and alcohol abuse.

In a study done by Poloma et. al (1990) it was found that religious satisfaction is an essential component of existential well-being and satisfaction with life. In the same study, it was further concluded that under no circumstance is any component of religiosity a reason of negative affect.

Shiah et. al. (2014) conducted an interreligious study which aimed to compare how different religions conceive the idea of well-being.

They compared Buddhists, Taoists, Christians and Atheists using the Chinese version of Socially Oriented Cultural Conception of Subjective Well-being Scale. It was found the highest in Buddhists, followed by Taoists, Atheists and Christians.

This study illustrates the differences that exist between different religions in their perceptions of well-being.

All of these studies focus on the positive association of religion and well-being. These researches are in line with findings of Argyle et. al (1989) and Diener & Seligman (2004) which state that social activities and relationships foster happiness.

However, the fact that countries with higher percentages of population that identifies as atheist being happier is not explained by these and other studies of such nature. Perhaps a shift in the perspective is needed to understand this anomaly.

This contradiction has been explained by Horning, Davis, Stirrat, and Cornwell (2010). They state that in many such studies where people who claim to be highly religious or less religious, do not include non-religious people. No difference was found in levels of life satisfaction of agnostic, atheists and religious people in a study conducted by them.

Sigmund Freud (1927), the father of psychoanalytic school of psychology, had called religion a “universal obsession.”

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Koenig et. al. (2009) state that religious practices can be depicted as a source of comfort, hope and meaning in life, but they are also the underlying reason for many disorders. Thus, to determine the exact nature of the relationship between these two concepts becomes difficult.

Diener et. al. (2011) perhaps provides the best explanation of this discrepancy. They claim that religiosity is associated with higher subjective well-being. Factors such as social support, feeling respected and purpose in life mediate the aforementioned association. The role of religion in determining subjective well-being however, ultimately depends on the nature of the society. Nations with adverse situations (e.g. Hunger) are very likely to be religious.

Prosperous societies having positive situations experience a similar level of subjective well-being between religious and non-religious people. The concept of Person-Culture fit also plays a role in making religious people have higher level of well-being.

CONCLUSION

Religious beliefs and Happiness are correlated to each other as many theories propound. However, this relationship is not as simple as it sounds. In real world where a lot many factors are at play, this association is affected by them.

As it can be observed that war torn regions like Middle-East are very religious yet are one of the unhappiest, one can deduce that external situations such as prosperity of the country, fulfilment of basic needs of the people and having a safe and secure environment is of utmost importance for happiness to blossom.

Limitations

The present study has several limitations that must be kept in mind before drawing conclusions. Although an attempt to be as comprehensive as possible has been made, researches from other disciplines such as Philosophy and concepts of other subjects like Economics, Anthropology etc. could not be included. Furthermore, studies from different regions of world were not considered. The studies from Europe and North America have been principally included. This partly is also because of a dearth of availability of such studies from other regions such as Latin America and Africa.

Future Researches

A lot many research gaps were identified while going through the studies. The most glaring one of course is the smaller number of studies that compare religious and non-religious people. Then, studies on people who do not necessarily ascribe to the western notion of happiness can also unearth some new facts. Lastly, studies involving different correlates of happiness and well-being with one another on diverse populations should be done to see the cross-cultural implications of these variables.

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Acknowledgment

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Singh, M.V. & Shukla, A. (2025). Does Religiosity Really Enhance Our Well-Being?. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 13(2), 5281-5287. DIP:18.01.465.20251302, DOI:10.25215/1302.465