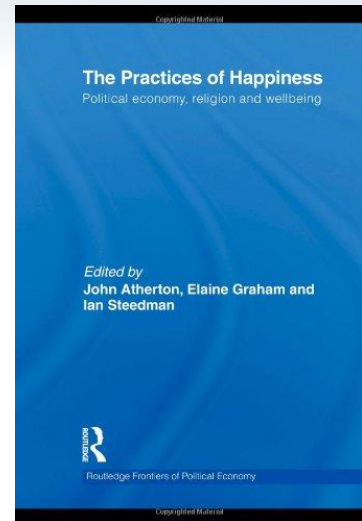


Religion Adds Value to the Happiness Hypothesis

We now know that rising levels of material wealth do not lead to similar increases in happiness and quality of life, so what *does* make people happier? Religion seems to, but how does this happen? A research network, funded by the [Religion and Society Programme](#) and led by Elaine Graham and John Atherton offers some answers.



Far from making you happy, above a certain income level, increased income is actually associated with greater social and individual stress. This observation has become known as the 'happiness hypothesis'. Religious values and participation have, however, been found to be significant for enduring levels of happiness. The economist Richard Lanyard has identified seven key indicators of well-being: secure family relationships, income, meaning and relationships in work, community and friendship networks, health, personal freedom, and personal values and philosophy of life. You can see how religion could positively affect well-being providing networks, meaning, values and a philosophy of life. Indeed, Lanyard says 'People who believe in God are happier.'

The network investigated the supposed 'added value' of religion by bringing together economists, psychologists, statisticians and theologians from the Estonia, India, Sweden, the UK and USA in a series of workshops held between 2008 and 2009. Participants included Chris Baker, Peter Gilbert, Zahid Hussain and Adrian Thatcher. There was unanimous recognition of the contribution of religion to the multidimensional phenomenon of happiness and well-being, with participants identifying the specifically religious and spiritual dimensions of Lanyard's 7 points. The project suggests certain specific areas of added value, including:

Social policy: The value of 'circles of support'. Evidence comes from a wide variety of examples, including faith-based involvement in the rehabilitation of offenders, the significance of marriage, particularly for the well-being of children, and faith communities promoting restorative justice.

Social Psychology: There is a positive correlation between measurements of happiness and religious affiliation and belief. Spirituality often has positive effects in developing the mental health of individuals, communities and societies.

Economics: Social inequality is not conducive to happiness, and religion can play a role in promoting more egalitarian economies, including with respect to health, mortality and morbidity rates, and in developing alternatives to existing mainstream economic systems, (Islamic banking, fairtrade, etc.)

The research network has led to the publication of the book *The Practices of Happiness* by Routledge in 2010 (see below). It also led to two one-day conference events: 'Religion, Social Policy and Social Capital' held at the University of Warwick, May 2009; and 'Spiritual Progression in Economic Recession?' in March 2011, held in Chester under the auspices of the new Centre for Faiths and Public Policy.

Find out more...

- Read the article 'Health, Wealth or Wisdom? Religion and the Paradox of Prosperity' written by Elaine Graham and published in the *International Journal of Public Theology*, 3, 2009, pages 5–23:
http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/uploads/docs/2009_12/1259854421_Graham_2009_article.pdf
- Look up the book produced from this network *The Practices of Happiness*, published by Routledge in 2010 and edited by Ian Steedman, John R. Atherton and Elaine Graham:
<http://www.routledge.com/books/details/9780415550970/>
- Access more detail about the project from here: <http://www.intute.ac.uk/cgi-bin/fullrecord.pl?handle=20090220-15365935>
- Look up articles coming out from the research: Atherton, John, 'Well-Being in the C21st: the role of ethics and religion', *Crucible* July-Sept 2009; Atherton, John (2009) 'Mainstreaming the Edges', in C.R. Baker and J. Reader (eds) *Mapping the new Theological Spaces*, Ashgate.

You might also be interested in...

- Listening to the debate which formed part of a day the Programme co-organised on Faith and Policy in July 2010 during which Elaine Graham asked a question:
http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/publications/podcasts/show/faith_and_policy_debate_session_3
- Reading about and listening to podcasts from a day held in Chester on 'Spiritual Progression in Economic Recession?' in March 2011 at which Elaine Graham, Chris Baker and Peter Gilbert spoke:
http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/events/programme_events/show/spiritual_progression_in_economic_recession
- The 'Religion, Social Policy and Social Capital in the UK: Taking Stock, Engaging Policy' workshop report can be read from here: <http://www.wtf.org.uk/documents/Workshopreport6May.pdf>
- Accessing this website, which identifies some future projects associated with the Happiness and Well-Being project, which will develop its work within a reconstituted William Temple Research Centre for Faiths and Public Policy at the University of Chester.
<http://www.wtf.org.uk/ReligionandCapitalismNetwork.php>.

Project Details

Award Title

Promoting Greater Human Wellbeing: Interacting the Happiness Hypothesis and Religion



Arts & Humanities
Research Council



Team

Principal Investigator: Prof Elaine Graham (Chester)

Co-Investigator: Dr John Atherton (William Temple Foundation)

University

University of Chester

Research Partners

William Temple Foundation, Mission and Public Affairs Unit, Church of England

Award Type

Phase 1 Network & Workshop Grant

Key terms

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