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The Influence of Religiosity on Subjective Well-Being

by Misha Nayyar

(English 1102)

Well-being is defined as the integration of good health, happiness, and success into one's life, something that all humans strive for; however, it is a multifaceted concept. Objective well-being is measured through "observable indicators including economic, social, and environmental statistics" (Achour et al. 985), with emphasis on the material aspect of life. Subjective well-being, on the other hand, involves feelings of pleasant emotions and a high satisfaction with life, and in simple terms, just feeling happy. Despite living in a materialistic world, people tend to perceive their environment subjectively rather than objectively, because they see a good quality of life being obtained through positive cognitive appraisals¹ of everyday situations (Achour et al. 985). So if subjective well-being facilitates happiness, how does one increase their level of subjective well-being?

One answer to this question is through religion. An individual's religiosity can be determined through their set of beliefs and how often they integrate religious practices into their lives. In Islam, for example, religiosity is "the commitment to the empirical and theoretical fundamentals" (Achour et al. 987) provided by God. Man is required to fulfill these fundamentals with faith demonstrated through rituals² and maintenance of a "state of purity of heart" (Achour et al. 987), which also prepares Muslims for life after death. Religions vary socially and culturally, but despite the differences, it is understood that religion as a whole "provides social support, comfort, and strength for people" (Achour et al. 986) by giving meaning to the origin and purpose of life, as well as laying out a path to thrive in an afterlife. When considering the impact religion has on an individual, religiosity is positively correlated with the increase of one's subjective well-being.

Various studies have been conducted on Muslims, and how integrating Islam into their daily lives contributes to their well-being. In order to explore this concept, Achour, Grine, Nor, and MohdYusoff, a group of researchers from the Academy of Islamic Studies at the University of Malaya in Malaysia, surveyed 315 Muslim female staff, between the ages of 30 and 60, working at research universities across the Klang Valley of Malaysia. The University of Malaya, the National University of Malaysia, Putra University, and the International Islamic University, Malaysia were all selected, based on the encouragement they provided for students to pursue academic research and practice Islam.

The researchers of this experiment discovered that Islamic religiosity plays "a highly significant role in developing and improving the well-being" (Achour et al. 994) of Muslim women. The method used to obtain this finding involved, a questionnaire given to the female participants, asking them to rate their job, family, and life satisfaction, to measure their well-being. In order to measure religiosity, the questionnaire gave different scenarios on Islamic practices, and participants used a five-point Likert scale to respond: 1-Strongly Disagree to 5-Strongly Agree. The higher their scores, the stronger their religious faith. Overall, the results indicated that with every "unit increase in ... religiosity, there [is also] an expected increase in ... well-being" (Achour et al. 993). Data was obtained through statistical analyses of the results to conclude that there is a distinct positive correlation between religion and well-being. This study also discovered that Islamic religiosity was "used as a remedial tool for coping with life's problems" (Achour et al. 994) for many of the experiment's participants, further implicating that religion increases happiness and subjective well-being by reducing stress.

A similar study was conducted by Ahmed Abdel-Khalek, a professor of Psychology at Kuwait University. His purpose was to explore the connection between religiosity and subjective well-being, as well as religion's effects on self-esteem and anxiety among Muslim adolescents. A sample of 499 Kuwaiti secondary school Muslims were asked questions that evaluated their religious beliefs, physical and mental health, happiness, and satisfaction with life (Abdel-Khalek 133). They were then asked to respond by rating each question on a scale of 1-10 that best associated their general feeling with each question. Similarly, students were given questions on self-esteem and anxiety, and used 5 point and 4 point Likert scales, respectively, to respond to each question.

After analyzing the data statistically, Abdel-Khalek concluded that religiosity is "positively associated with ... happiness, satisfaction with life, physical ... and mental" (Abdel Khalek 136) well-being. It was also concluded that religiosity is "negatively correlated with anxiety" (Abdel Khalek 136). This goes back to the finding in the previous study that religious Muslims have lower levels of stress because one way Islam advocates for inner peace is by displaying ethical acts of "honesty, precision, and conscientiousness" (Achour et al. 990). These actions heighten positive feelings and emotions, consequently, reducing anxiety and increasing well-being.

The positive correlation between religion and subjective well-being is also highlighted in an experiment conducted by Naser Aghababaei of the Department of Clinical Psychology at Allameh Tabataba'i University in Tehran, Iran. This study differed from the previously discussed studies because Aghababaei looked at how belief in science, in addition to believing in God, can influence positive psychological functioning.

Three hundred seventy-three university Muslim students in Iran between the ages of 18 and 49 were administered various questionnaires about their satisfaction with life, subjective happiness, self-esteem, belief in hope, and belief in science. Aghababaei discovered that although scientific faith is negatively correlated with religious faith, both belief systems improve feelings of happiness; however, there was a difference in the extent of happiness felt. Even though belief in both science and religion had positive effects on well-being, results demonstrated that higher positive functioning was witnessed in those who had a stronger belief in Islam than in science. This can be attributed to the claim that there may be an increase in well-being of scientific based beliefs "in cultures where religion is not norm" (Aghababaei 739). Regardless, the participants reported higher levels of happiness, life satisfaction, and self-esteem (Aghababaei 737). The results present a broader indication that faith – whether it be in the natural or the supernatural – can instill positive psychological functioning.

The studies discussed above provide support for the notion that belief in religion is strongly correlated with the enhancement of one's subjective well-being. Although Islam was the main focus in these studies, religion in general provides people with a social support network, helping them cope with the stresses of life. It enables individuals to establish a trusting relationship with God, or a higher being, to whom they look for help to solve their problems. As the burden of difficulties are lessened, anxiety is reduced, and happiness is increased. Higher levels of subjective well-being are seen in the religious; however, it is not to say that atheists or agnostics are not happy and content with their lives; religion is just one of the many influencing factors.

Notes

1. A theory of emotion which refers to the personal interpretation of a situation, influencing the extent to which a situation is perceived as stressful.
 2. The rituals of Islam revolve around the Five Pillars: declaration of faith (*shahadah*), prayer (*salah*), fasting during the month Ramadan (*sawm*), charity (*zakat*), and performing a pilgrimage to the city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia (*hajj*). All five pillars are a requirement to be fulfilled by every Muslim.
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