

Is religion good for you? Analysing three decades worth of academic research on the relationship between religion and well-being

*The relationship between religion and well-being is widely and frequently reported. Over the past year, the think tank **Theos** has analysed 139 academic studies conducted over the last three decades to discover whether there is a link, and if so, what this link means. Here, author of the report, **Nick Spencer** writes that it is in breaking down 'religion' into the multiple ways the term has, and can, be used that a fuller picture starts to appear. Indeed, the clearest beneficial effects of 'religion' come from a particular aspect of religion – group participation. The benefit of collective action can also offer lessons for wider society.*

The idea that religious belief is somehow parasitic on other, more substantial aspects of human nature is perhaps best associated with Marx. It has, however, been a long-standing challenge to religious faith. Whether it is on account of ignorance (the most common explanation) or economic alienation (Marx's preferred option) or simply the pressure to conform socially, the idea that religiosity is not a natural state for the human species remains a common one, bringing with it the implication that once we have shaken off this (admittedly historical and rather rich) cultural inheritance, we simply won't see the need for religion.

There are plenty of people in Western society who seem to exemplify this view. The social psychologist Jonathan Haidt has baptised them with the acronym WEIRD – Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic – in his book *The Righteous Mind* and it has long been assumed that they represented the norm to which the world is inexorably travelling.

Developments in global secularisation – or rather its apparent stalling in an age of unprecedented industrialisation and urbanisation – combined with a careful re-examination of the nature of childhood belief, such as in Justin Barrett's *Born Believers: The Science of Children's Religious Belief*, is beginning to suggest that this conclusion is, at best, problematic, and that religiosity may be more hard-wired than previously thought.

One relevant but often-ignored contribution to this field lies in the now well-developed study of religion and well-being. This has been going strong for at least two generations (and the earlier studies go back even further) and has consistently and repeatedly shown that religion is strongly and positively correlated with well-being.

The problem, however, is that the key terms in this debate – 'religion' and 'well-being' – are unhelpfully broad. The fact that the former can stretch from Anglicans to the Taliban rather suggests that it won't do much fine analytic work without further clarification. Similarly, does 'well-being' mean feeling your heart strangely warmed on a Sunday morning kind of wellbeing or leaping out of an Intensive Care bed having shrugged off a brain tumour kind of wellbeing? If the former, well, that's nice for you, and certainly not to be sniffed at, but nor is it likely to grip the world of sociology and shake it to its foundations.

Over the last year, the religion and society think tank **Theos** has trawled through nearly **140 studies** from the last thirty years to see, firstly, whether the celebrated correlation holds when you pull back the lens from individual studies and look at the big picture, and second, if it does, is the big picture all one colour, or are there angels lurking in the details?

The conclusion of the first is reasonably straightforward. The correlation between religion and well-being is pretty strong, wherever you go and whatever kind of religion you are talking about. There are a few outlier studies, some inconclusive, some negative, but the weight of the evidence is overwhelmingly positive.



The second is more complex but more interesting. 'Religion' has and can be used in different ways. We found five, reasonably discreet, categories which pertained to religious affiliation, subjective religiosity, religious belief, religious group participation, and religious personal participation. Much the same can be said of 'well-being', which certainly means subjective well-being – how well I feel about myself and my life – but can also incorporate more objective criteria like mental health, physical health, and health supporting behaviours, avoiding those habits like alcoholism, substance abuse or poor eating that ruin our lives.

The literature appears to show that religious affiliation had a pretty weak correlation. What you call yourself doesn't really matter or rather, it probably only matters when taken in tandem with other factors. Simply calling yourself a Christian, for example, doesn't appear to correlate with any particular well-being category.

Religious *belief* was a bit stronger, being found, on balance, to have a largely positive, but more varied, impact on the different measures of well-being. This, like affiliation, was probably more down to the extent to which belief translated into practice but it may (we don't have enough evidence to be confident) also relate to the content of the belief, the more punitive the God in whom you believed, the more likely you were to be anxious about meeting him.

Personal forms of religious 'participation' – engaging in acts of private devotion such as prayer, scripture reading or listening to religious music – showed a still stronger positive correlation, but it was religious *group* participation that evidenced the strongest relationship, with study after study demonstrating how participation in group religious worship services (and in some cases other forms of religious social participation, such as volunteering) was powerfully correlated with well-being.

On the other side of the equation, it was, as one might expect, subjective well-being that showed the most consistent responsiveness to these different aspects of religiosity, though importantly this responsiveness was not limited to the subjective measure. Studies showed that mental health, health supporting behaviours and even physical health were improved by different kinds of religiosity, though the correlation with the last of these was weak, mixed and sometime negative as it appears that some people with acute physical problems actually turn to religion as a way of dealing with it.

More research is needed: on the content of belief, on the extent to which beliefs can be separated from practices, on non-Christian religions, in non-Western places. However, what we have is powerful and highly indicative.

Some have argued from this basis that 'religion' (let's slip back into the generic term for the sake of readability) clearly, therefore, has offered us some evolutionary advantage and that a propensity towards it is all-but hard-wired into our species. Some sceptics agree but then say that this simply means we need to redouble our efforts to eradicate it from our hearts and minds, adding that if it is group participation that is really correlated to well-being, we simply need to participate in more groups. Atheist church, anyone?

That may be so but it is harder to work against the grain of human nature than with it, as the Soviets discovered, their leading anti-religion campaigner, Yemelyan Yaroslavsky, once famously remarking that "religion is like a nail, the harder you hit, the deeper it goes in". Group activity, pure and simple, may do the job, but as anyone who has ever tried to organise and sustain such activity will know, it is not easy, the challenge of maintaining some effective centre of moral gravity without the whole thing degenerating into an oppressive or dictatorial institution being extremely hard. The surprising thing about most 'religions' is not that they have failed so often but that they have managed to keep on going, adopting, adapting and surviving.

The strength and nature of the correlation between religion and well-being should give everyone pause for thought. For the believer, particularly of the more Protestant/ evangelical flavo



stark reminder that what you call yourself or even what you believe is not enough. You may not need to do 'works' to demonstrate your faith, but it surely helps.

For the unbeliever, even the strident New Atheist, the connection is an important reminder that religion is not simply a matter of believing six things, impossible or otherwise, before breakfast; that religion is clearly good for you, as the vast body of scientific research shows; and that no matter how much you might find the matter distasteful, it seems highly unlikely that we will ever shuck off religion by means of education, technology, or the proletariat finally getting their hands on the means of production.

About the Author



Nick Spencer is Research Director at Theos. He is the author of *Religion and well-being: assessing the evidence*.

June 28th, 2016 | [Featured](#), [Latest](#) | [1 Comment](#)

