DOES RELIGION MATTER FOR HUMAN WELL-BEING?

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SP: Tim, you've been involved for several years in trying to raise levels of human well-being. To begin, let me place a number of questions in your court. Can you tell me if there is an agreed understanding of what constitutes human well-being? If there is, how was that consensus arrived at? Just what sorts of things, for the purposes of public policy, health strategies, etc., are considered to contribute to a sense of human well-being?

TA: Some of the people researching and writing about this area – positive psychologists – use the term 'subjective well-being' (SWB) as synonymous with happiness. This helps differentiate it from related areas, such as physical well-being, economic well-being, etc., and emphasises the fact that, like pain, the experience of happiness or SWB is a subjective phenomenon. And they think that SWB is not one thing, but three: the presence of positive emotional states (e.g. joy, hope, fun, relaxation, contentment, etc.), the relative absence of negative emotional states (anxiety, anger, dread, guilt, shame, bitterness, hurt, etc.) and a cognitive evaluation of how satisfied you are with your life as a whole. Consensus in this area has been reached by researchers, writers and thinkers getting together, agreeing definitions, developing measurement scales, proposing and developing models and exploring statistical relationships between variables.

People vary in how much happiness they experience, and the emerging consensus in the scientific community is that perhaps 50 per cent of your happiness level is genetically determined, 15 per cent explained by your environment or situation, and 35 per cent or so explained by what has been called 'volitional activities' or things which people have varying degrees of control over, including day to day behaviours, beliefs and attitudes. More specifically, climate, age and gender don't make that much of a difference, the relationship with money is curvilinear (poverty reliably lowers your happiness, but once you've got enough stuff, more doesn't reliably increased your happiness further), good quality relationships including marriage make a big difference, having a mental health problem will reliably lower your well-being level, as does unemployment, especially if you are male. The happiest people tend to have good friendships, volunteer more often, enjoy contact with nature, and take adequate levels of physical activity. People who see themselves as religious report higher levels of well-being, as do people who see themselves as spiritual, even if not participating in organised religion.

Public policy wise, most governments have chosen to maximise economic growth using GDP as a proxy, but several are realising this may be a poor choice for maximising citizen well-being, especially once a given level of economic development has been achieved. Some are considering developing policy and strategy informed more explicitly by the merging science of positive psychology. Consider visiting the New Economics Foundation site[1] to learn more about policy that puts people and the planet first.

SP: Your brief description of SWB, and of some of the things that contribute to it (including religion), raises interesting questions for me as a Christian theologian. To a Christian it ought to be unsurprising that there is evidence that religious people report higher levels of well-being. Churches are human institutions and people can behave badly in them; but by and large church life fosters human relationships, encourages service and volunteering, values nature, and discourages excessive materialism or reliance on things that are *un*conducive to well-being, such as smoking or excessive drinking. In other words, the Church tends to accentuate several aspects of life that contribute to SWB. It is also clear that raising SWB – within and without the Church – is generally something Christians should be keen to promote: Christians, as citizens, have the same stake as everyone else in raising standards of public health and well-being. Pursuing a conversation between churches and agencies keen to raise levels of public health and well-being along these lines might well create possibilities for practical cooperation. But I want to take our conversation in a different direction: I want to ask 'What is happiness?', in particular, I want to ask if there is a distinctively *Christian* answer to that question, one which might lead Christians to think differently about well-being.

One way to do this is to look at the so-called beatitudes (Mt 5.3–11). The Greek word *makarioi* used by Matthew (and by Luke in his version, Lk 6.20–26), and rendered in English as 'blessed' by most translations (and as 'happy' in the Good News Bible), had quite a bit of philosophical baggage. Aristotle, for example, differentiated between *eudaimonia* (whatever life is most desirable) and *makarios* (a rarified blessedness theoretically achievable only by the gods). But by the time Matthew used the word, it was used commonly both in colloquial wisdom sayings and in esoteric mystery religions. Jesus may have known this background (it's plausible he knew some Greek); he certainly understood the biblical background of the

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beatitudes, a genre employed for example in the apocryphal book of Ecclesiasticus/Sirach 25.8–11.

All of this is important for our purposes because it helps us to understand where Jesus' teaching about 'blessedness/happiness' resembles and where it departs from the views of it common to the culture(s) he inhabited. It wasn't uncommon at the time for beatitudes to draw a contrast between what the foolish majority believed happiness to be and what the wise (or religiously informed) minority believed it to be: the *structure* of the beatitudes is not new. What is distinctive in Jesus' teaching about blessedness/happiness is that it situates a blessed state in the joy individuals and communities find by sharing in the salvation of the kingdom of God. Jesus' interest is not practical wisdom but eschatological proclamation. Secular goods are, Jesus teaches, subsidiary to the ultimate end or goal of human life – the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God turns all human accounts of blessedness/happiness upside down. The blessed mourn, they are meek, hungry for justice, merciful, pure in heart; they make peace and are persecuted and falsely accused.

What has this got to do with well-being as discussed and pursued by positive psychologists and policymakers? Your observation that well-being (like pain) is experienced differently by different people is important. It suggests, for example, that it may be helpful to distinguish between 'happiness' as an emotion and 'happiness' as a state of being/fulfilment. Jesus is primarily interested in the latter. This doesn't necessarily mean that the former – SWB – is of no concern Christianly speaking. But, as Jesus teaches a little later in the Sermon on the Mount, one's heart will lie where one places one's treasure (Mt 6.21). In other words, what one values determines what constitutes one's well-being. Some things that contribute to SWB will be the same for Christians and for others (e.g. friendship). But while the SWB of Christians may very well be helpfully *evaluated* in terms of 'positive emotional states', 'the absence of negative emotional states' and a 'cognitive evaluation of how satisfied you are with your life as a whole', there will be a kind of distinctive family resemblance for Jesus' followers in what *leads* to SWB.

TA: You confuse SWB with the emotional elements of its make-up only, and perhaps I didn't explain the concept as well as I might have. The way SWB is defined, it is not that there are two different types of happiness – happiness as an emotion and happiness as a state of being or contentment. It is that happiness is a combination of nice positive feelings/emotions with a relative absence of negative feelings/emotions combined with an evaluation that life is going OK or well. It is not the same as pleasure, although pleasure contributes to happiness. Typically, happiness has a longer duration than pleasure – when people think of happy periods of their life they may think of their childhood, when they first moved into a house, or a particular relationship, i.e. something that lasts several weeks or months.

However, I very much like your point that people experience happiness in various ways, and the diverse parts of the happiness mixture, if you will, are emphasised differently by different teachers. Epicurus, for instance, did not as is commonly assumed advocate a life of hedonistic sense pleasure, but rather suggested that people simplify their desires, prioritise friendship, withdraw from politics and reduce their experience of anxiety and fear be realising that the gods, if they existed, did not bother about humans and that existence ceased with bodily death so there is no need to worry about what happens later.

I think what you are saying is that Jesus' followers were relatively unconcerned with maximising their happiness via maximising of their experience of positive emotions, or with reducing their experience of negative emotions. That their behaviour, maybe, was not consciously driven by a desire for happiness per se, but rather by the desire to do something else – to serve, witness, or make progress in the Christian life, perhaps?

I wonder if I might share with you though, my concerns about distinctly religious approaches to happiness? Some of these are similar to Marx's view that religion can act as an opiate, drugging people into a state of passive contentment and obedience in the service of other people's ends. For instance, if I believed strongly enough – as many religious people do – that I am destined for everlasting life in some eternally pleasant or blissful state then I will probably experience a degree of positive emotion and happiness. Such a belief might cause me to either not try to throw off the chains of my oppression and exploitation (Marx's point) or it might alternatively lead me to become quite indifferent to my worldly existence and decide to serve God by, perhaps, going on a crusade to liberate a piece of holy land or to fly a passenger aircraft into a building. Not many atheists do that. Don't you have concerns about the potential 'side-effects' of religion-induced happiness?

NOTES

1. http://www.neweconomics.org/gen/m1_i1_aboutushome.aspx.
2. (London: Bantam Press, 2006).
3. (London: Penguin, 1991).
4. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eudaimonia.

'The kingdom of God turns all human accounts of blessedness/ happiness upside down'

SP: Your last point is important and is not, I fear, taken seriously enough by many Christians. It might be possible to trade apologetic blows with you – for example, by arguing that atheistic ideologies, such as Marxism and Nazism, have caused death and injury on a greater scale than any religious ideology, or by pointing out the logical inconsistency in your claims both that religion leads to both social and political withdrawal and that it leads to social and political fanaticism. But this is to miss the substantive issue: religion can be bad for those who practice it and bad for those who suffer at the hands of the religiously committed. This is a worry not only for politicians but for believers too. One might try to offset the bad effects of religion by recalling religion's positive contributions to art and literature or its service to the poor and needy. One might argue that in the main religion makes people happier in themselves and more ready to contribute to the common good. Yet it remains the case that distinguishing damaging forms of religion from benign ones is hard. In his most recent polemic, *The God Delusion*,[2] Richard Dawkins makes the strong point that religious moderates make the world safe for religious fanatics by promoting faith as a social and personal virtue. Putting the same point in the vocabulary of our conversation, the fact that religion can contribute to the SWB of many makes it possible for religion to be harmful for a few. It is important to recognise, reflecting out of my own faith tradition, that Christian churches of several eras and several hues have wittingly or unwittingly been cultures in which some adherents led (and lead) lives driven by fear and guilt rather than hope and forgiveness. The Marxist historian EP Thompson made this point supremely well of the dark side of my own Methodist tradition in his classic *The Making of the English Working Class*.[3]

It will be clear that I not only concede that religion in general and Christianity in particular *can* be harmful – as if grudgingly giving ground – I think it is vital that this is given serious attention by social scientists, politicians, and by religious practitioners. Yet these questions – and the question of the role of religion in human well-being – are essentially concerned with religion as a human *phenomenon*. Although it can accommodate such phenomenological reasoning, Christian theology is primarily the Church's talk about *God*. It proceeds on the basis of what God has revealed about himself in Jesus Christ, who is both the messenger and the message of the gospel, its deliverer and its content. For a Christian, therefore, Jesus Christ is both what is hoped for and is the hope that he inspires (Col 1.26–28). Thus, while the Church affirms belief, for example, 'in the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting', it does so because these things come about through Jesus Christ in the world. Christian faith is hopeful and liberating; its opposites are fear and guilt. Despair is sinful because it refuses to acknowledge that God's promises for the future, made real in Christ's humanity, his death and resurrection, are true. Phenomenological and empirical approaches to well-being will ask it, and how, religion contributes to human well-being. The common sense answer – that if often does, but sometimes it doesn't – won't get anyone very far, except perhaps Richard Dawkins and his publisher. A theological answer makes clear that a hopeful disposition to life, what St Paul calls 'the hope of glory', lies alone in the promise of 'Christ in you'. Jesus Christ is not merely hope for the individual subject: he is hope for the world.

TA: We agree about a lot, including that fact that a hopeful disposition – optimism – is typically associated with higher levels of well-being (and health and success) and that religion helps folk become more hopeful. But I would disagree that the cause of optimism lies solely in the promise of an internal Christ. I myself am optimistic, and one of the things I am optimistic about is the possibility for individual human beings to learn to unlock their unrealised potential, to develop their character, to flourish and achieve *eudaimonia* (a classical Greek word commonly translated as 'happiness')[4] to love and forgive themselves and others more fully. Christianity is certainly one way to do that, but the exclusive way?