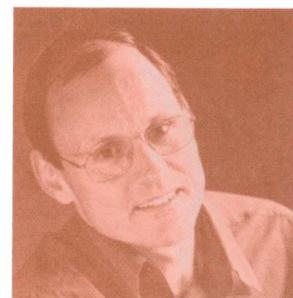


EDITORIAL

HAPPINESS AND WELL-BEING

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SOMETIMES THE GROUND MOVES. THE SIGNS ARE SMALL AS YET, BUT THEY ARE THERE. THE OLD IDEAS ARE LOSING THEIR GRIP ON PEOPLE. LESS AND LESS OF US ARE IMPRESSED BY A POLITICIAN ENDLESSLY TALKING ABOUT INCREASING GROSS DOMESTIC PRODUCT.

We have a growing sense of foreboding about what this simplistic language is doing to the planet. More than that we may be beginning to sense the contempt implicit in being labelled a 'consumer' and the shallow superficiality of a society oriented around products and the manipulation of people. As a result politicians are having to rethink their positions and they have come up with a new idea. Politicians are now appealing to people about happiness. This issue of *TransMission* explores the significance of this change.

In an extract from the first report of the new think tank Theos, Nick Spencer takes a critical look at the state of happiness in Western societies. Despite a considerable increase in disposable income over the last 30 years, people report no greater satisfaction with their lives. Those who have analysed what makes for a sense of well-being report the importance of factors such as participative government, social engagement, trust and family life. In particular they show that religious belief tends to have a very positive impact. Nick Spencer points out how many of the factors that enhance life satisfaction are positively influenced by Christian faith. Christian beliefs clearly nurture trust, work against corruption, uphold marriage and encourage social engagement. So is this happiness idea creating some ground in which we can properly talk about the impact of the Christian faith on society? After years of being told that faith should properly be kept in the private world of the home perhaps we are seeing a move toward public appreciation of its role? Nick Spencer puts it starkly when he declares, 'The public square is coming back to God.'

Of course the terms of this rapprochement between faith and the public world need to be negotiated carefully. Tim Anstiss is a medical doctor with a specialist interest in happiness theory. He defines 'subjective well-being' for us and enters into a conversation with Stephen Plant, a Methodist theologian, about the potential contribution of Christianity to this hunger for life satisfaction. Stephen is convinced that a biblical perspective on this issue would have certain unique qualities, while Tim counsels us to be very open and honest about the damage that certain types of religion can cause to a society even if its overall impact is often beneficial.

I suspect that many readers of *TransMission* may be initially sceptical about all this happiness talk. It all sounds rather superficial and contra those who would

follow a 'man of sorrows'. But happiness might be a key to a much deeper conversation. Robert Ellsberg certainly sees it as well beyond the vain project of the self. He looks at the saints of Christian history and notes how the pursuit of happiness often begins with an initial thirst for a more authentic life. He describes how the desert fathers felt the emptiness of what their own culture called happiness and set out to find another way. Their ultimate experience was often a joy of soul that shone in their faces and gave strength to their lives even when they had to pass through suffering.

If the culture is moving toward the Church, one might wonder whether there might be new, but authentic manifestations of church that specifically set out to relate to our culture. Readers will be interested in the perspective offered by Peter Holmes. He insists that the key to engagement is to recognise journey. We have to move beyond static conceptions of the spiritual life. The whole narrative structure of the Bible testifies to the life journeys of individual people. Peter encourages us to think in both psychological and spiritual terms about our life journey. It is a journey toward wholeness and a journey toward Christ and the two are inextricably linked.

Bruce Stanley is another practitioner who has been consciously working with happiness and well-being, this time in the field of life-coaching. Life-coaching is different from psychotherapy. Bruce describes it in terms of being a wilderness guide, helping people to get where they want to go to in life, realising solutions and removing cognitive hindrances. Some readers may find that Bruce's article feels strange as he moves beyond the comfort of our religious language looking for ground that everyone can relate to. Yet Bruce has noticed how often his work slips easily into spiritual language and values. It may begin as a search for subjective pleasure but is frequently surpassed by the search for meaning.

So there it is, our first foray into the happiness dimension. Is it really a first sign of a deep paradigm shift? Readers will make their own judgements, but I expect that this conversation will go on and will broaden and deepen. It may not be long before the people of the UK are truly reaching for the big picture and looking to articulate a vision for the well-being of the whole society. My prayer is that we will then be ready to offer an authentic, biblical perspective into the public square. I hope that you will agree that Theos' first report is a powerful step in the right direction. The full report can be downloaded from www.theosthinktank.co.uk. ■