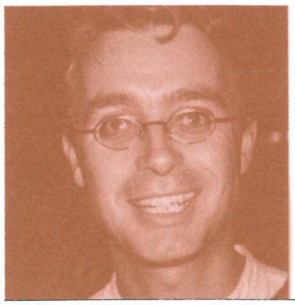
THE EMERGENCE OF WELL-BEING

NICK SPENCER



NICK SPENCER worked as a researcher and consultant for Research International and The Henley Centre, before joining the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity and the Jubilee Centre. He has written a number of books. This is an extract from the first Theos report. The full report is available at www.theosthinktank.co.uk

'IT'S TIME WE ADMITTED THAT THERE'S MORE TO LIFE THAN MONEY, AND IT'S TIME WE FOCUSED NOT JUST ON GDP, BUT ON GWB – GENERAL WELL-BEING.' So spoke Conservative leader David Cameron at the Google Zeitgeist Europe conference in May 2006. 'It's about the beauty of our surroundings,' he went on, 'the quality of our culture … above all [it's about] the strength of our relationships.' In other words, it's not (just) the economy, stupid.

Cameron's speech was reported as a major shift for his party but the new road on which he was placing them was already becoming rather well trodden. Numerous books, papers and articles over the preceding years had discussed, analysed and attempted to find answers to one of the most important trends of our time: the decoupling of wealth and happiness.[1]

HEALTH, WEALTH AND …?

The facts are well established. The British, like most Westerners, are richer than ever before. GDP per capita has risen almost constantly over the last 35 years, all but doubling between 1971 and 2004. Over this period, real household disposable income per head (the amount of money a household has available to spend or save) has increased even further, reaching nearly 2½ times its 1971 level by 2003.[2]

We earn more than ever before so we spend more than ever before. The total volume of domestic spending on goods and services reached 2½ times its 1971 level by 2003, allowing for inflation. The greatest spending increases were for non-essential items, with people spending proportionally less on food, housing, water and fuel, and proportionally more on communication, holidays, recreation and culture. The British are not so much a nation of shopkeepers now as a nation of shoppers.

Accordingly, we own more than ever before. Ninety-nine per cent of UK homes have a television and the average household has around 2½.[3] Eighty-nine per cent have a video recorder, 50 per cent a DVD player, 84 per cent a compact disk player, 58 per cent a home computer, and 48 per cent satellite, cable, or digital TV. Ninety-nine per cent of people have access to a telephone at home, 76 per cent to a mobile phone and 48 per cent to the Internet. Ninety-six per cent of homes have a fridge/freezer, 89 per cent a microwave oven, 57 per cent a tumble drier, and 31 per cent a dishwasher. Out on the drive, 74 per cent of households have a car or van, and 29 per cent have more than one.

Most people in Britain live in a material paradise that would have left their grandparents speechless.

And we live longer and healthier lives in which we may enjoy the fruits of our labour. Life expectancy is 10 years greater now for men and women than it was at the end of the Second World War.[4] Over the same period, infant mortality has fallen from 40 deaths per 1,000 births to under five.

This is all genuine and inspiring progress. And yet, all the evidence points to fact that we are no happier than we were, say, 30 years ago, and some studies even suggest we are less happy. As Tony Blair said (of his generation) in 1995, 'We enjoy a thousand material advantages over any previous generation, and yet we suffer a depth of insecurity and spiritual doubt they never knew.'

Measuring a nation's well-being (or happiness or life satisfaction – the terms are often used interchangeably) is far from straightforward. One way of doing so is by looking at its opposite: personal psychological ill-health at an individual level, or crime levels at a corporate level, although both of these must be treated with caution (approaches to prescribing drugs and recording crime have changed over the years). Nevertheless, the fact that the levels of obesity, alcohol and drug abuse, depression, and sexually transmitted infections, recorded crime and the prison population have risen notably over recent decades does not suggest a population at ease with itself.

A better idea of people's happiness can be gained from what people themselves say about themselves in life-satisfaction surveys.[5] In the early 1970s approximately a third of British people said they were 'very satisfied' with life. By the late 1990s that proportion was unchanged. Referring to these findings, one academic paper notes laconically, 'life satisfaction has run approximately flat in Great Britain. In a period of increasing material prosperity … these results may surprise some observers.'[6]

The UK is not alone.[7] Wherever one goes in the world, the evidence points to a decoupling of wealth and happiness. In the words of the economist and Labour peer, Richard Layard, 'People in the West have got no happier in the last 50 years. They have become much richer, they work much less, they have longer holidays, they travel more, they live longer, and they are healthier. But they are no happier.'[8]

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It is important to emphasise, however, that there *is* a relationship between wealth and well-being. Figures show that richer countries tend to be happier than poorer ones, richer individuals tend to be happier than poorer ones in the same society, and that the richer a society gets, the happier it is. But in each of these cases the correlation exists *only up to a point*. Once a certain level has been reached, there is at best a very weak and at worst no correlation between wealth and happiness. After a certain point money does not make either nations or individuals any happier. In the USA, for example, there is no reported difference in happiness between those on $20,000 per annum and those on $80,000. Similarly, nations such as Japan and Germany are no happier than Mexico or Indonesia, despite having considerably higher levels of GDP per capita.

HOW TO BE HAPPY

This trend came as something of a shock. It wasn't *only* the economy that makes people happy. But if it wasn't only the economy, what was it? What does make us happy and, just as important, what can we do about it?

Addressing the first question is complex enough. A number of factors such as age, gender, looks, IQ and education have negligible or no impact on personal well-being. Others like one's genetic inheritance or health do, although not as much as one might intuitively think.[9]

Overall, studies suggest that six factors are significantly correlated to well-being: (in no particular order) money, work, state of governance, levels of interpersonal trust and community participation, family upbringing and relationships, and religiosity.

Money, as we have seen, is correlated to happiness, but only up to a point. 'Studies show that the relationship between income and life satisfaction is both positive and statistically significant … but [that] the size of the positive effect of income is small compared to other factors such as marriage, divorce and unemployment.'[10]

The second factor, work, is important in two different ways. Unemployment is particularly destructive, with its loss of earnings, loss of self-esteem, lower social status, and reduced personal and social opportunities.[11] Conversely, and obviously, employment is linked to life satisfaction, although low levels of job satisfaction can sever this link. The more one experiences 'personal control, variety, income, job security, skill use, and physical security' in one's job, the higher the level of job satisfaction tends to be, and the higher the consequent level of life satisfaction.

Third, is state of governance. Factors such as stability, accountability, rule of law, absence of corruption and a greater sense of control over one's civic destiny are all positively linked to well-being. An analysis of the relationship between life satisfaction and democracy in Switzerland found that those who lived in cantons with more referenda and higher levels of direct democracy were happier than those who did not.[12] On a larger scale, it is common for those people living in countries, like Belarus, which exercise severe restrictions on freedom of speech, assembly and religion, to be among the most miserable in the world.

The fourth factor, the level of interpersonal trust and community participation, is one of the most important contributors to life satisfaction. Evidence suggests that higher levels of trust within a community are directly linked to higher levels of happiness. 'Preliminary research into the effects of levels of trust on life satisfaction show that those who believe it is wrong to cheat on their taxes and those who believe people can generally be trusted are, on average, more satisfied with their lives.'[13] Directly linked to this, there is a strong correlation between social engagement and life satisfaction. Perhaps, not surprisingly, those who are very active in the community are more satisfied than those who never attend local groups.

Fifth, but most importantly, is the role of family upbringing and relationships. Family break-up significantly affects personal happiness. If a child's parents split up, he or she is approximately twice as likely to become depressed, irrespective of age. According to Layard, 'if by 16 you are living with only one of your biological parents, you are more likely to suffer from multiple disadvantages, compared with other children. You are 70% more likely to have a criminal conviction by the age of 15; you are twice as likely to leave a school with no diploma; you are twice as likely to have a child in your teens; you are 50% more likely to be doing nothing by the age of 20. You are no better off if your mother remarries or if your grandmother moves in. As adults, people from single parent families are more likely to die young and to get divorced themselves.'[14]

The pattern continues in adulthood. Marriage is consistently shown to be the most important single factor within life satisfaction. Married people tend to be

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1. See, e.g., R Layard, 'Happiness: Has social science a clue?' Lionel Robbins Memorial Lectures, London School of Economics, 2002/3, see http://cep.lse.ac.uk/events/lectures/layard/RL030303.pdf; R Layard, *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science* (London: Allen Lane, 2005); C Hamilton, *Growth Fetish* (London: Pluto Books, 2003); DG. Blanchflower and AJ Oswald, 'Well-being over time in Britain and the USA', *Journal of Public Economics* 88 (2004), pp. 1359–86; N Donovan and D Halpern, 'Life Satisfaction: The state of knowledge and implications for government' (London: Prime Minister's Strategy Unit, 2002).
2. C Summerfield and B Gill (eds), *Social Trends 35* (Newport: Office for National Statistics, 2005).
3. The figure of 2½ televisions per household is from www.ofcom.org.uk, the others in this paragraph from the Office for National Statistics, 'General Household Survey 2003' (www.statistics.gov.uk).
4. See 'A Century of Change: Trends in UK Statistics since 1900' (House of Commons research paper 99/111).
5. These too have obvious problems, such as being susceptible to moods and circumstances, but are conducted and analysed so as to address such problems. See Layard, *Happiness*, for details.
6. Blanchflower and Oswald, 'Well-being'.
7. Other European countries have been similarly static. Despite a sixfold increase in income per head since 1950, the Japanese have recorded no increase in happiness. See Layard, 'Happiness: Has social science a clue?'. In the USA, reported levels of well-being have actually declined over the last thirty years. See Blanchflower and Oswald, 'Well-being'.
8. Layard, 'Happiness: Has social science a clue?', p. 14.
9. Health is a complex factor. Self-reported health is strongly correlated to life satisfaction but more objective measures of health are not. People become habituated to some forms of ill-health but not to others. Mental health is strongly correlated with low levels of well-being.

'Religious people report higher levels of life satisfaction'

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10. Donovan and Halpern, 'Life Satisfaction', para. 39–40.
11. These factors are slightly mitigated if you 'live in a region with a high unemployment rate; have family members who are also unemployed; or you have been repeatedly unemployed in the recent past'. (Donovan and Halpern, 'Life Satisfaction', para. 8).
12. Quoted in ibid., para. 15.
13. Quoted in ibid., para. 73.
14. Layard, *Happiness*, p. 61.
15. Ibid., p. 72.
16. Quoted in Donovan and Halpern, 'Life Satisfaction', para. 74.
17. Hamilton, *Fetish*, ch. 2.
18. A fact emphasised by RD Putnam in *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2000).
19. Layard, *Happiness*, pp. 85–90.
20. K Browne and C Hamilton-Giachritsis, 'The influence of violent media on children and adolescents: a public-health approach', *The Lancet* 365 (2005), pp. 702–10.
21. Hamilton, *Fetish*, p. 53
22. R Reeves, *The Politics of Happiness* (New Economics Foundation, 2003).
23. H Koenig and HJ Cohen (eds), *The Link Between Religion and Health: Psychoneuroimmunology and the Faith Factor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
24. Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (London : Burns & Oates, 2005), p. 174.
25. 'Can't buy it', in *The Economist*, 13 January 2005.

▶ happier than those who never married or those who have divorced or separated or been widowed, a fact that holds across cultures and even when income and age are taken into account. Accordingly, divorce, separation or the death of one's spouse is more harmful than almost anything else.

Last, but by no means least, comes the God factor. Study after study records the importance of religiosity in its various forms. As Layard writes, 'One of the most robust findings of happiness research is that people who believe in God are happier.'[15] And the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit states, 'Religious people report higher levels of life satisfaction. Research, mostly into Christianity, has found a correlation between life satisfaction measures and religious certainty, strength of one's relationship with the divine, prayer experiences and devotional and participatory aspects of religiosity. Both the effect of religious belief per se and the social benefits provided by participation in religious activities have independent effects upon life satisfaction.'[16] And the Australian economist Clive Hamilton: 'A sense of meaning and purpose is the single attitude most strongly associated with life satisfaction … religious commitment and participation consistently appear as significant contributors to life satisfaction … spiritual striving contributes more to well-being than any other type of goal, including the goals of intimacy, power and symbolic immortality.'[17]

Hamilton goes on to refine this conclusion: 'Research affirms that higher forms of spirituality … a search for meaning, for unity, for connectedness, for transcendence … contribute more to contentment than the rituals of church attendance and daily prayer – extrinsic manifestations of religion that may reflect nothing more than a desire for social acceptance, the internalisation of parental expectations, or an insurance policy against the possibility of an afterlife.'

If, as the research indicates, it is these six factors that make us happy, what makes us unhappy will be reasonably clear: the opposite.

That said, there is one factor that erodes our unhappiness that is not so obvious and is worth mentioning. Layard discusses how exposure to advertising and to violence and sex through the media is correlated to life dissatisfaction. Not only can television reduce our social life and community involvement,[18] but it also exposes us to the world, especially in its more extreme forms, in such a way as to breed anxiety and, very often, a coarsened and brutalised outlook.

Advertising places people on a 'hedonic treadmill', which either fosters insecurity ('Life has enough embarrassments without your mobile phone being one of them') or promises happiness/freedom/sexual magnetism/etc. from your next purchase. Similarly, 'people who watch more TV believe there is more crime in real life and more adultery than there really is … [becoming] desensitised to these activities and more willing to contemplate them for themselves'.[19] The problem, Layard emphasises, is not TV per se – there were no measurable increases in violence when TV was first introduced to 1950s America – but its content.

Not surprisingly, the effect on children can be particularly serious. According to an overview of the relevant research published in *Lancet* a few years ago: 'From a public-health perspective, there is evidence that violent imagery has short-term effects on arousal, thoughts, and emotions, increasing the likelihood of aggressive or fearful behaviour … Long-term outcomes for children viewing media violence are more controversial … nevertheless, a small but significant association persists in the research, with an effect size that has a substantial public-health effect.'[20]

MOVING ONTO GOD'S TERRITORY

This analysis of the factors linked with well-being – both positively and negatively – brings God back into the public square, although not in the way that one might at first think. The obvious link between well-being and religiosity is the least relevant. No one seriously thinks it is within any government's right to promote religious belief, no matter how closely it is correlated with well-being. The subtler and more important link has two strands to it, one general and one specific.

The general strand is that religious thinking has long been concerned with well-being in a way that political thinking is now attempting to become. Religious groups have long preached (and sometimes even practiced) value systems that have fostered well-being and acted as a counterbalance to the human inclinations towards greed and materialism that are so dominant in our overwhelmingly and overwhelming consumerist culture.

This is a point constantly made by those who have written on the emergence of well-being in the public square, irrespective of their own religious (non-)beliefs. Clive Hamilton writes, 'In the world of market relationships the inner worlds of feeling and spirituality were banished from the conscious mind and trivialised

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to the point where religious affiliation or expression of religious sense attracted derision. In popular culture, spiritual urges and religious convictions are disparaged, and a series of superficial arguments is advanced to prove the irrelevance and futility of religion – it causes more wars than it solves, it's a crutch for weak people, and so on. All this reflects a deeper transformation, the alienation of self from the seminal urge for meaning and the flight to the triviality of material consumption and frivolous gratification. In the end, religion is seen as 'uncool', something that says much more about modern marketing culture than about the relevance of religious striving to the human condition. The argument here is not that wellbeing should or can be advanced through the promotion of religious belief or spiritual endeavour; it is that a society that scorns intrinsic religiousness and trivialises the pursuit of meaning discards thousands of years of insight and can only suffer for it.'[21] Richard Reeves, writing for the think tank the New Economics Foundation, makes the same point, more directly: 'Given the orthodoxy of the grow-earn-spend philosophy, the case for the church and other religious agencies to act as counter-cultures has never been stronger.'[22]

The second strand moves from the general point that religious value systems provide an important counterbalance to those held captive by consumerism, to the specific one that many of the factors that are most positively correlated with well-being are significant features of the major religions. Thus, the lifelong, faithful, monogamous marriage that contributes so much to personal and social well-being has long been central to major religious traditions. The focus on the family as the best environment in which to raise children, now recognised as one of the two or three biggest contributors to human well-being, is, again, central to most religious traditions. Campaigns about broadcasting standards, so often associated with religious groups, and derided by the mainstream, might, after all, have something profound to contribute to our communal life. Trust and community participation, closely correlated with personal, social and economic flourishing, are central features of faith groups today. Even health is affected. 'In a recent systematic review of scientific literature that uncovered 100 studies of this relationship [between religious beliefs and practices, and well-being and mental health], 79% reported a significant positive association.'[23]

All this means not so much that religion is coming back into the public square, as the public square itself is shifting, orienting itself around the question of well-being, and in so doing moving into territory that religions have inhabited for many centuries. The public square is coming back to God, rather than the other way round.

To be sure, religious engagement in the question of well-being far exceeds anything that the political community should or will be concerned with. The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the {Catholic} Church* describes how 'the common good of society is not an end in itself [but] has value only in reference to attaining the ultimate ends of the person and the universal common good of the whole creation … a purely historical and materialistic vision would end up transforming the common good into a simple *socio-economic well-being*, without any transcendental good, that is, without its most intimate reason for existing.'[24] The object of politics and the goal of human flourishing, as understood in Christianity, are not the same thing. Yet, the slow reorientation of the former indicates that they will share more common ground in the future than has recently been the case.

If all this is true, we are still left with the second 'enormous' question mentioned above: what can we do about it? Or rather, what *should* we do about it? Religiosity may be positively correlated with well-being but that doesn't mean government should 'compel the worship of a higher being', as *The Economist's* review of Layard's book on happiness pointed out.[25]

The question is unlikely to find an easy, popular or widespread answer, as people's responses depend on their view of the right and proper objectives of government. Neither is there reason to suppose that religious thinkers, across or within particular traditions, will agree on the solutions any more than politicians do. But that is neither here nor there. The fact remains that if politics is to regain and retain public interest it will need to venture into well-being territory, as David Cameron, Tony Blair and others have argued. And in doing so they will find themselves sharing the public square with the religions that some had imagined were gone for good. ■