

The Religion Paradox: If Religion Makes People Happy, Why Are So Many Dropping Out?

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As we estimate here, 68% of human beings—4.6 billion people—would say that religion is important in their daily lives. Past studies have found that the religious, on average, have higher subjective well-being (SWB). Yet, people are rapidly leaving organized religion in economically developed nations where religious freedom is high. Why would people leave religion if it enhances their happiness? After controlling for circumstances in both the United States and world samples, we found that religiosity is associated with slightly higher SWB, and similarly so across four major world religions. The associations of religiosity and SWB were mediated by social support, feeling respected, and purpose or meaning in life. However, there was an interaction underlying the general trend such that the association of religion and well-being is conditional on societal circumstances. Nations and states with more difficult life conditions (e.g., widespread hunger and low life expectancy) were much more likely to be highly religious. In these nations, religiosity was associated with greater social support, respect, purpose or meaning, and all three types of SWB. In societies with more favorable circumstances, religiosity is less prevalent and religious and nonreligious individuals experience similar levels of SWB. There was also a person–culture fit effect such that religious people had higher SWB in religious nations but not in nonreligious nations. Thus, it appears that the benefits of religion for social relationships and SWB depend on the characteristics of the society.

Keywords: religiosity, religion, subjective well-being, happiness, culture

Researchers find that religious people, on average, report higher subjective well-being (SWB; e.g., Hackney & Sanders, 2003; Koenig & Larson, 2001) and also have fewer psychosocial pathologies such as domestic abuse (e.g., Waite & Lehrer, 2003). In the National Opinion Research Center's General Social Surveys of Americans between 1972 and 2008, the percentage of people reporting that they were "very happy" ranged from 26% among those never attending religious services to 48% among those attending services more than weekly. However, people in the wealthiest nations tend to be leaving organized religion or have no specific religious affiliation (e.g., Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2007). This exiting from organized religion is most pronounced in Northern Europe and in many other highly economically developed nations. Why are people leaving organized religion in nations where religious freedom is high, if it is associated with benefits such as higher SWB?

Barro and Mitchell (2004) reported that declines in religiosity are associated with economic growth. On the basis of this lead, we hypothesized that religion helps people cope with difficult circumstances and therefore is most beneficial when people's life context is difficult. Economically developed nations, on average, are superior in meeting basic needs, education, safety, and longevity. They also have better infrastructure that safeguards against natural disasters and epidemic diseases. Thus, in economically developed nations, we surmise that people are better able to achieve high SWB without the help of organized religion. When people are frequently faced with hunger, illness, crime, and poor education—all of which are relatively more uncontrollable and more prevalent in poor societies—religion can perhaps make a greater contribution to well-being.

Our exploration of religiosity begins with a description of the level of religiosity in the world, as defined by weekly attendance at religious services and reporting that religion is important in one's daily life. We also analyzed the degree to which religiosity varies between societies—across nations and across the states of the United States. When one observes the religiosity of nations, it seems that the least religious nations are primarily stable and democratic nations with high economic development, such as in Northern Europe. In contrast, the most religious nations are usually poor ones with substantial social problems, primarily in parts of Asia and Africa. Thus, we first analyze levels of religiosity in societies and determine whether it is related to circumstances.

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Does religion harm or enhance SWB? Although religion is a widespread social and cultural phenomenon, its atheist critics claim that it is dysfunctional. It is “dangerous nonsense” (Dawkins, 2001) that does “not make its adherents happy” (Hitchens, 2007, p. 16). “There’s probably no God,” said 800 U.K. bus advertisements launched by Richard Dawkins (Gledhill, 2009), “so stop worrying and enjoy your life.” This religion-breeds-misery meme resonates with the surmise of Sigmund Freud (1907/1961), who famously viewed religion as “a universal obsessional neurosis” (p. 126).

To the contrary, respond several evolutionary analysts, religion is nearly universal because it serves adaptive purposes. The supporters of religion argue that by fostering morality, social cohesion, and group survival, religion may aid coping (Wade, 2010; D. S. Wilson, 2003; Wright, 2009).

Since W. Wilson’s (1967) review of SWB, scholars have concluded that religiosity often is associated with greater happiness. Thus, the second question we address is whether religion is associated with SWB and whether this association emerges most strongly in challenging circumstances.

The next question is why, if religion supports well-being, controlling for life circumstances, would people be leaving it? In recent years, organized religion has declined in economically developed nations (Gill, Hadaway, & Marler, 1998; Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2007), reaching low levels in Northern Europe. Koenig and Larson (2001) noted that the vast majority of Scandinavians are atheists or nonreligious. At the same time, Scandinavian nations tend to experience the highest levels of SWB in the world (Diener, Helliwell, & Kahneman, 2010). However, religiosity remains strong in many nations, for example, in Africa, although less so in more prosperous nations (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2007).

Pargament (2002) proposed that when people

face problems that push them to their limits . . . religion offers a number of aids: spiritual support, ultimate explanation, a sense of larger, benevolent, forces at work in the universe, and a purpose in life that holds sacred significance. (p. 175)

In prosperous nations with higher levels of security, people might feel less need for additional coping mechanisms beyond their personal resources. Thus, where people’s needs are met and they feel secure, they may feel more self-sufficient, and interest in organized religion may ebb. We hypothesize that difficult circumstances may be associated with religiosity, and when circumstances become more secure, religiosity might decrease. With our analyses, therefore, we examine whether religion has a greater association with SWB in societies where circumstances are most difficult and whether all groups, regardless of formal religiosity, tend to have high SWB in felicitous conditions.

If religiosity increases SWB, what processes might be responsible? One possibility is that religion enhances SWB through relationship variables such as social support and respect. If one belongs to a religion, other members may be likely to provide help in time of need, and regular religious meetings offer opportunities for social contact. In societies with less social cohesion, religion may be particularly beneficial for providing bonds based on common beliefs and shared activities. Because people in a religion tend to share beliefs, values, morals, and activities, they may be more likely to trust each other and be respected by coreligionists. Also,

religion might foster feelings of purpose and meaning in life, which predict life satisfaction and can compensate to some degree for less enjoyment of life (Diener, Fujita, Tay, & Biswas-Diener, 2011). Steger and Frazier (2005) found in samples of college students that meaning in life mediated the association of religiosity and life satisfaction. Thus, a major purpose of our studies was to test potential mediators of the religion and SWB link in populations that represent the world. It seems likely that social support, feeling respected, and purpose or meaning in life predict SWB in all cultures, but it could be that in the most difficult societal circumstances, religion is more helpful in obtaining these resources. In better societal conditions, it may be easier to achieve support, respect, and purpose or meaning without joining an organized religion.

We address several additional issues beyond our core questions. First, we ask whether there are differences across four major religions world—Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam—in the degree of association between religiosity and SWB. Another question is whether religiosity is associated more with some forms of SWB than with others. We examined the association of religiosity with life evaluation, positive feelings, and negative feelings. Although different forms of SWB are often grouped together, research shows the importance of separately analyzing different types of SWB (e.g., Emmons & Diener, 1985; Kahneman & Deaton, 2010; Larsen & Ketelaar, 1991). It might be, for example, that religiosity does more to lower negative feelings than it does to raise positive feelings such as enjoyment. Thus far, few studies have examined the association of religiosity with various forms of SWB, and none have done so in a representative sample of the world.

We also examined whether the degree of fit in religiosity between an individual and his or her society influences the degree to which religiosity is related to SWB. Recent research shows that people are happiest when they fit in with the dominant characteristics of their culture. For instance, Fulmer et al. (2010) found that extroverts are happier if they live in more extroverted nations than in more introverted nations. Diener and Diener (1995) found that self-esteem is more predictive of life evaluation in individualistic nations than in collectivistic nations, and Suh (2002) found that cultural congruence predicted SWB in terms of cross-situational consistency of personality. Much of past research on religion and SWB has been conducted in the United States, which is a moderately religious nation and a very religious nation relative to most wealthy nations of the world (Inglehart, 2010). Jagodzinski (2010) found that life evaluation was more related to religiosity in Asia than in Europe, raising the possibility that the association differs across societies. Thus, the generality of past findings needs to be examined in a sample of the world. It could be that the United States is atypical, and it may be that the association of SWB and religiosity varies depending on the degree of religiosity within nations. For this reason, we analyzed both a world sample and a separate sample of the states of the United States.

Hypotheses

We address several hypotheses. To the degree that these hypotheses are confirmed, our reasoning offers a plausible explanation for the decline of religiosity in some parts of the world, despite the advantages religiosity can provide.

Hypothesis 1: Although religion is widespread, it is more prevalent where conditions are difficult.

Hypothesis 2: Religiosity is associated with higher SWB, especially where circumstances are difficult.

Hypothesis 3: In nations that have achieved relatively high levels of social stability and safety and where people's needs are largely met, religiosity is less prevalent because SWB tends to be high without religiosity.

Hypothesis 4: The association of religion and SWB is mediated by the resources that religion can provide, including social support, respect, and purpose or meaning.

Hypothesis 5: People living in societies where circumstances are not especially difficult achieve higher levels of the mediating variables of social support, respect, and purpose or meaning, even without the aid of religiosity, and therefore tend to have relatively high SWB.

Summary of Study Purposes

We analyzed representative samples of the United States and the world to determine how widespread religiosity is across cultures and whether it varies according to the characteristics of the society. In addition to the primary analyses of the studies, we examined the generality of the religion and SWB association in terms of different religions, as well as different types of SWB. We also explored person–society fit in terms of the benefits of religiosity. It might be that there is a person–culture fit effect, in that religion might be more helpful to SWB when it is dominant in the society and less helpful where religious people are in the minority. Because the United States is a moderately religious nation, the findings from this nation might not apply to other societies, either where religiosity is very low or where it is nearly universal. If religion is more related to SWB in highly religious societies than in less religious societies, it would suggest that it is more beneficial to SWB when it results in an individual's fit with their societies.

Study 1: The United States

Method

Respondent sample and religiosity measures. We used an ongoing daily U.S. poll of 353,845 individuals from 50 states and the District of Columbia conducted by The Gallup Organization. Religiosity was measured using a single yes-or-no item: "Is religion an important part of your daily life?" Data were collected daily from some 1,000 individuals every night from January 2009 to December 2009. Sampling frames by regions (East, Midwest, South, and West) and gender for both landline and mobile phones were used. Sampling weights are assigned on the basis of probabilities of selection and whether a landline or a mobile phone was used. Collected data were then poststratified on the basis of age, gender, education, race, and ethnicity.

Personal and societal circumstances. A measure of personal circumstances was created on the basis of a set of five variables that were standardized and averaged. Basic needs were assessed with two items (sufficient money for food and for shelter); safety

was assessed with the item "feel safe walking alone at night"; income was measured using 10 income brackets; education was measured using six categories ranging from *less than high school diploma* to *postgraduate work or degree*; and state life expectancy at birth (American Human Development Report, 2008–2009). The determination of societal circumstances was based on the state aggregated personal circumstances. *Difficult circumstances* were defined as having low education, income, life expectancy, safety, and basic need fulfillment.

In 2010, the United Nations Development Program defined poverty with the Multidimensional Poverty Index (Alkire & Santos, 2010), including more elements than just income to assess poverty. This new measure was meant to reflect people's capabilities in life to pursue different options, and it included factors such as clean water, years of schooling, and adequate nutrition. In a similar manner, our difficult life index includes measures of education, longevity, safety, and adequate money for nutrition and housing to reflect how difficult a respondent's life circumstances are and how circumscribed their choices are. Individuals who score high on our difficult circumstances index have lower income and education (limiting their choices and opportunities), have poorer health and health prospects, lack basic needs, and feel unsafe. Each of these has been associated with lower SWB in past research (e.g., Diener, Ng, Harter, & Arora, 2010).

Subjective well-being. Current life evaluation was measured using Cantril's (1965) 11-step life evaluation ladder (formally labeled the Self-Anchoring Striving Scale), where the top step represents the best possible life for you (10) and the bottom represents the worst possible life for you (0). Positive feelings (smile/laugh, experience enjoyment; $\alpha = .64$) and negative feelings (worry, sadness, depression, anger; $\alpha = .64$) were measured using the average of the component items. For each emotion, respondents reported whether they experienced the feeling "a lot of the day yesterday," where *yes* was scored 1 and *no* was scored 0.

Results

Numbers of religious people. Table 1 displays the means, standard deviations, and zero-order correlations between the study variables from the U.S. poll. Table 1 shows that 66% of U.S. respondents regarded religion as important in their lives, indicating that the United States is a moderately religious nation, as found in previous research (Inglehart, 2010).

Diversity of religiosity across states. In Table 2, we present the striking diversity of religiosity across states of the United States. Religiosity between states ranged from Vermont, where 44% reported religion was important, to Mississippi, where 88% did. What predicts these differences between state religiosity? Table 1 shows that the correlations between religiosity and difficult circumstances are positive at both the individual and the state levels, suggesting that undesirable circumstances are associated with greater importance being placed on religion. Indeed, at the level of states, the .73 correlation indicates that states with poorer living circumstances are very likely to be the most religious ones.

Predictors of religiosity. To further examine the interconnections between life circumstances, religiosity, and SWB, we conducted a multilevel structural analysis that allowed us to examine both the societal and the individual levels simultaneously. Because Deaton and Arora (2009) found that age and gender are

Table 1
Religiosity and Well-Being in the United States: Means, Standard Deviations, and Zero-Order Correlations

Variable	Individual level		State level		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>							
1. Religiosity	.66	.47	.65	.10	—	-.01	-.20	.21	.12	.25	.73***
2. Life evaluation	6.81	2.04	6.83	.11	.06***	—	.66***	-.56***	-.48***	-.27	-.22
3. Positive feelings	.83	.32	.83	.02	.06***	.27***	—	-.78***	-.47***	-.36**	-.32*
4. Negative feelings	.21	.28	.20	.02	.00	-.34***	-.39***	—	.20	.45***	.51***
5. Age (in years)	48.33	17.51	48.33	1.63	.15***	.04***	-.02***	-.06***	—	.17	.10
6. Gender (male = 0, female = 1)	.52	.50	.52	.02	.13***	.05***	.00	.09***	.07***	—	.52***
7. Difficult circumstances	.00	.59	.01	.32	.15***	-.23***	-.15***	.27***	.02***	.15***	—

Note. Values above the diagonal reflect state-level correlations; values below the diagonal reflect the individual-level correlations.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

related to religiosity, we included these in our model. Figure 1 shows the multilevel standardized estimates for the associations between variables using the statistical software MPlus 5.2 (Muthén & Muthén, 2007). This multilevel structural model is saturated because we estimate all of the direct and indirect paths for a mediational model.

State- and individual-level effects correspond with the top and bottom halves of the figures (shaded in white and grey), respectively, and difficult circumstances were scored so that high scores represent poor life circumstances. The figure shows that undesirable circumstances at the societal level are strongly associated with greater state religiosity. At the individual level, the path from difficult circumstances to individual religiosity is small but significant. A concern is that education should not be included in our circumstances measures because lack of education does not necessarily represent difficult circumstances in all societies. Thus, we also examined a structural model where the measure of difficult circumstances excluded educational attainment, and the same results held (state circumstances $\phi = .70$, $p < .001$; individual circumstances $\beta = .07$, $p < .001$). Consistent with Deaton and Arora (2009), females and older people tend to be more religious.

Religiosity and SWB. After controlling for difficult circumstances, the path diagrams in the top half of Figure 1 reveal that the relation between religiosity and the various types of SWB is positive. As can be seen, state-level religiosity tended to be positively associated with life evaluations and positive feelings and inversely associated with negative feelings after controlling for other variables such as life circumstances.

At the individual level, the zero-order correlations in Table 1 show that religiosity was also associated with the different types of SWB with the exception of negative feelings, which was close to zero. Controlling for difficult circumstances, the U.S. path diagram in the bottom half of Figure 1 shows that religiosity was positively and significantly associated with the three forms of SWB: life satisfaction, positive feelings, and negative feelings.

Our analyses revealed that difficult circumstances are associated with greater religiosity but also lower SWB. When circumstances were controlled, we observed a positive association between religiosity and well-being. Although the associations were small at the individual level, they are substantial at the state level. Because societies tend to be somewhat homogeneous in terms of religiosity (see Study 2), it could be that the benefits of religiosity are larger at the level of groups compared with individuals.

Having replicated earlier findings, we extended this analysis to a world sample in Study 2. Our aim was to examine whether religiosity is more helpful in difficult circumstances compared with a more benign national environment and in religious compared with nonreligious nations. We also examined the question of the mediators of religion's association with SWB, as well as whether there is a person-environment effect in the relation. Because the United States is a relatively religious nation compared with many other economically developed societies, it could be that there is a relation between religion and SWB that is not found in less religious societies. In addition, in the world sample, we had sufficient numbers of respondents from several major religions to explore whether there are differences between them in the association of religiosity and SWB.

Study 2: The World

Method

Sample and religiosity measures. The Gallup World Poll from 2005 to 2009 sampled 455,104 individuals from 154 nations, an average of 2,955 per country. All samples are nationally representative of the resident population 15 years of age and older. The coverage included both rural and urban areas. Telephone surveys were conducted when telephone coverage in the nation represented at least 80% of the population. In such instances, a random digit dial or a nationally representative list of phone numbers is used. In countries with high cell phone penetration, a dual sampling frame was used. In many developing nations—including Central and Eastern Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and Africa—a geographical area frame was used for sampling in face-to-face interviews. Primary sampling units were stratified by population size or geography. Random route procedures were then used to select households. Unless an outright refusal occurred, at least three attempts were made to reach a person in each household, spread over different days and times of days. Within each household, respondents were randomly selected by means of the Kish (1949) grid technique.

The surveys were translated from English, French, or Spanish base languages into the major languages used in each country. Translation was conducted by a translator who was proficient in the administered language and the major language. A second translator reviewed the translation and recommended refinements.

Table 2
Religiosity of States: "Is Religion an Important Part of Your Daily Life?"

State	Religiosity
Mississippi	0.88
Alabama	0.85
Louisiana	0.82
South Carolina	0.79
Tennessee	0.79
Arkansas	0.79
North Carolina	0.77
Georgia	0.77
Kentucky	0.76
Oklahoma	0.75
Texas	0.75
West Virginia	0.72
South Dakota	0.71
Utah	0.71
Missouri	0.70
Kansas	0.70
Virginia	0.70
Indiana	0.69
North Dakota	0.69
Nebraska	0.69
New Mexico	0.68
Pennsylvania	0.67
Ohio	0.67
Iowa	0.67
Delaware	0.66
Michigan	0.66
Florida	0.66
Minnesota	0.65
Maryland	0.64
Illinois	0.64
Wisconsin	0.63
Montana	0.62
Idaho	0.62
Wyoming	0.62
New Jersey	0.61
Arizona	0.61
District of Columbia	0.59
Colorado	0.59
California	0.58
New York	0.57
Nevada	0.55
Alaska	0.55
Connecticut	0.54
Oregon	0.54
Washington	0.54
Hawaii	0.53
Rhode Island	0.52
Maine	0.51
Massachusetts	0.50
New Hampshire	0.48
Vermont	0.44

The World Factbook (Central Intelligence Agency, 2009) population data for July 2009 indicates that these countries encompass 98.7% of the human population. Excluding China, where we were unable to ask the religion questions, our data come from 427,540 people in the remaining 153 nations, representing 79% of humanity. People responded, "yes" or "no" to two questions concerning their religious attitude and behavior: "Is religion an important part of your daily life?" and "Have you attended a place of worship or religious service within the last seven days?" Although these

questions do not cover all dimensions of religiosity, they capture whether respondents believe religion is an important component in their lives.

Personal and societal circumstances. In the Gallup World Poll, a measure of difficult personal circumstances was developed using the same types of variables as in the U.S. data, which were standardized and averaged: basic needs (whether individuals had sufficient money for food and shelter and did not go hungry in the past year), safety (whether individuals feel safe walking alone at night and whether within the past 12 months they have had money or property stolen or have been assaulted or mugged), log-transformed household income, educational attainment on three ordered categories (completed elementary school or less [up to 8 years of basic education], completed secondary school [9–15 years of education], or completed four years of education beyond high school and/or received a college degree), and life expectancy at birth (obtained from *The World Factbook*; Central Intelligence Agency, 2009). Difficult individual circumstances were defined as having low education, income, life expectancy, safety, and basic need fulfillment. The measure of societal circumstances was based on the country aggregated personal circumstances.

Subjective well-being. Following the procedure used in the U.S. data, we used measures that applied the same sets of items. Life evaluation was measured using Cantril's (1965) 11-step life evaluation ladder. Feelings were based on the average of emotional experiences felt yesterday: positive feelings (smile/laugh, experience enjoyment; $\alpha = .62$) and negative feelings (worry, sadness, depression, anger; $\alpha = .68$). A dichotomous scale format was used for each of the emotion terms (yes = 1, no = 0).

Results

Numbers of religious people. Table 3 shows that 74% of respondents reported that religion is important in their lives and about half (48%) indicated that they attended worship or a religious service in the past week. To obtain population estimates of religiosity, we further weighted our calculations on the basis of country representation of the world population. About three in four respondents (78%) reported that religion is important in their lives and over half (55%) reported attending worship or a religious service in the past week. Deaton and Arora (2009) estimated on the basis of an earlier survey that approximately 25% of people in China regard religion as important in their lives. Including this approximation, we estimate that 68% of humans—about 4.6 billion people—regard religion as an important part of their daily lives.

Diversity of religiosity across the world. Despite relatively high levels of religiosity across nations in the world, there is also great diversity. In Table 4, we show the vast diversity in religiosity—indexed by the importance of religion in daily life—across nations. Compared with the states of the United States, nations vary in religiosity by a factor of six, whereas states of the United States vary by a factor of two. Thus, although two thirds of the world's inhabitants report that religion is important to them, this varies hugely across countries. Because the correlation between religious importance and religious attendance is very high at the nation level ($r = .86$), we averaged both variables to obtain a reliable estimate of religiosity.

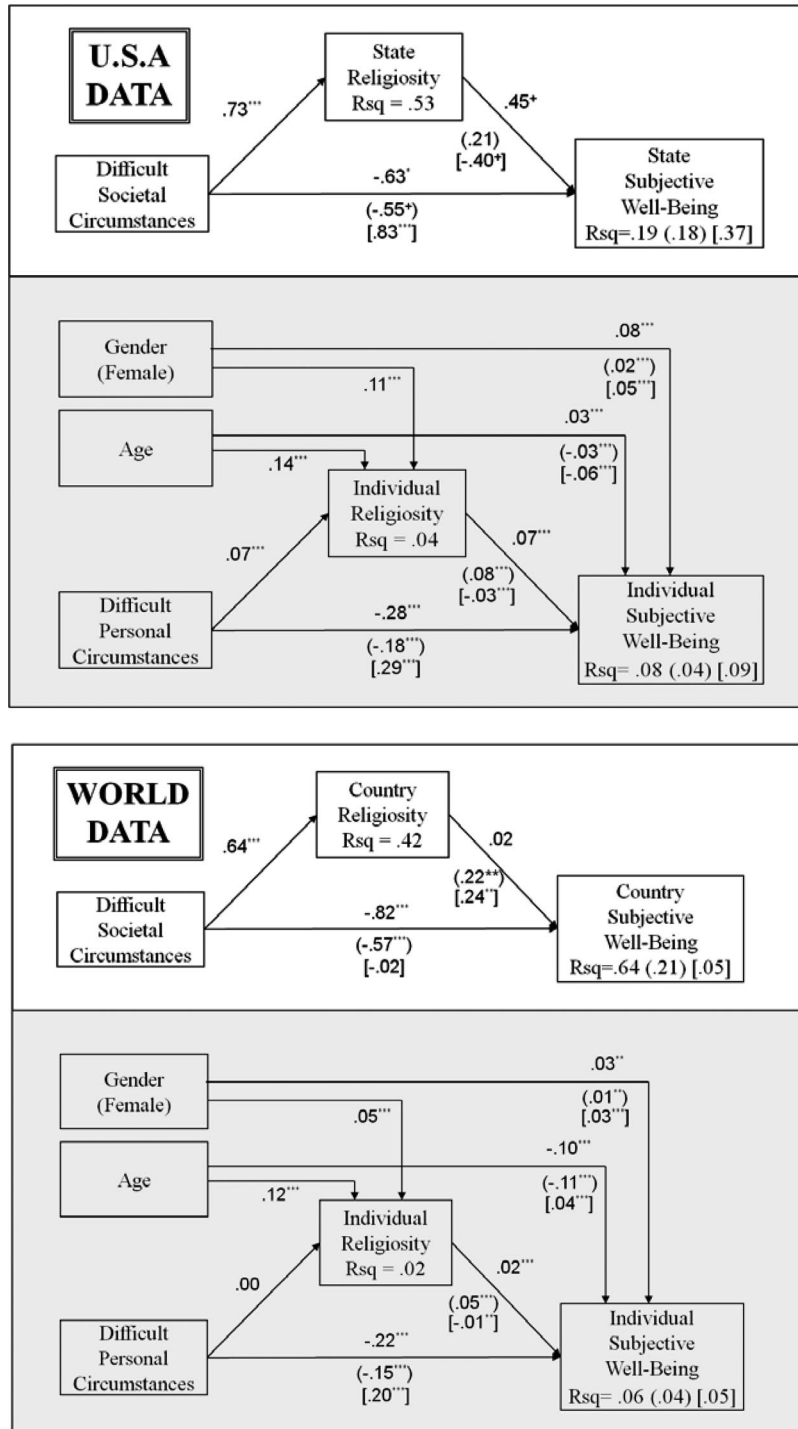


Figure 1. Multilevel structural models: Relations among difficult circumstances, religiosity, and subjective well-being. To separate the predictive effects for each level of analysis, we group-mean centered personal circumstances and individual religiosity. In the Gallup World Poll, religiosity is measured using both religion variables ($\alpha = .63$). In the U.S. data, religious attendance was not polled and only religious importance was used. Values above the paths represent life evaluation; values in parenthesis below the paths represent positive feelings; values in brackets below the paths represent negative feelings. As is conventional in multilevel models, exogenous variables gender, age, and difficult personal circumstances were allowed to covary. $^+ p < .10$. $^* p < .05$. $^{**} p < .01$. $^{***} p < .001$.

Table 3
Religiosity and Well-Being Around the World: Means, Standard Deviations, and Zero-Order Correlations

Variable	Individual level		Country level		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
	M	SD	M	SD									
1. Religiosity	.61	.41	.61	.23	—	.97***	.96***	-.48***	-.06	.18*	-.78***	-.44***	.65***
2. Religion important	.74	.44	.73	.24	.84***	—	.86***	-.53***	-.12	.20*	-.81***	-.40***	.64***
3. Religious attendance	.48	.50	.49	.22	.87***	.46***	—	-.44***	-.04	.14	-.73***	-.45***	.65***
4. Life evaluation	5.39	2.19	5.40	1.09	-.13***	-.15***	-.08***	—	.64***	-.25**	.59***	-.03	-.79
5. Positive feelings	.71	.39	.70	.10	.03***	.01***	.03***	.23***	—	-.44***	.21**	-.07	-.34***
6. Negative feelings	.22	.29	.22	.06	.02***	.03***	.01***	-.19***	-.38***	—	-.13	-.06	.09
7. Age (in years)	38.38	17.03	38.21	4.95	-.03***	-.05***	-.01***	-.01***	-.09***	.04***	—	.47***	-.74***
8. Gender	.51	.50	.51	.02	.03***	.07***	.00	.01***	.00	.05***	.01***	—	-.06
9. Difficult circumstances	-.01	.65	-.01	.53	.29***	.29***	.22***	-.42***	-.15***	.14***	-.10***	.05***	—

Note. Values above the diagonal reflect country-level correlations; values below the diagonal reflect the individual-level correlations.
 * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Predictors of religiosity. From Table 3, we observe that the correlations between difficult circumstances and religiosity are associated at the individual level ($r = .29$) and country level ($r = .65$), suggesting that difficult circumstances lead to greater religiosity. This trend was consistent with that found in the U.S. data and reveals the strong tendency for nations with worse living circumstances to be more religious and for nations with relatively better conditions to be less religious.

As with the U.S. data, the same multilevel structural model was specified for the Gallup World Poll data and is depicted in Figure 1. Religiosity is measured using two variables: religious importance and religious attendance ($\alpha = .63$). The diagram shows that undesirable societal circumstances are associated with greater national religiosity, although individual circumstances were less strongly related to religiosity than societal circumstances, replicating Study 1. Those living in societies with difficult conditions are very likely to be religious, regardless of their individual circumstances. We found that difficult circumstances in societies correlated .36 with the religiosity of individuals in them. We further examined a measure of difficult circumstances without educational attainment and the same set of results held; difficult circumstances was related to national religiosity ($\phi = .62, p < .001$) but not to religiosity at the individual level. Females and older individuals tend to be more religious, which is consistent with findings for the United States and with Deaton and Arora (2009).

Across nations, the average level of religiosity correlated .56 with the religiosity of individuals within them. It may seem self-evident that the average religiosity of nations is correlated with the religiosity of individuals within them. However, note that this correlation can be large in the case where there are small individual differences in religiosity and small when variation within nations is large. The high correlation suggests that there are substantial national differences in SWB and relative homogeneity within them. The .56 correlation in this case is related to the amount of variation in religiosity between nations versus total variation and suggests that about a third of the variance in individual religiosity can be accounted for by the religiosity of the society in which people live (intraclass correlation = .31). Three conclusions emerge:

- Poor societal circumstances are strong predictors of societal religiosity,

- societies are relatively homogeneous in religiosity, and
- societal circumstances are better predictors of religiosity than are personal circumstances.

Religiosity and subjective well-being. Across nations, religiosity correlates $-.48$ with life evaluations, which ranged from 3.0 in Togo, where 88% said religion is important in their daily lives, to 7.9 in Denmark, where 19% said religion is important. As depicted in Figure 1, controlling for difficult circumstances tended to eliminate the negative association between national religiosity and SWB. After controlling for circumstances, national religiosity was not associated with life evaluations but was positively associated with positive feelings. However, national religiosity was also associated with more negative feelings.

At the individual level, the path diagram in Figure 1 indicates that, after controlling for negative circumstances, religious people tend to have higher SWB. Although these paths are small, they reveal that religiosity tends to be slightly associated with higher SWB when circumstances are controlled. These results are consistent with the U.S. path analyses.

Although SWB showed a slight association with religiosity, we predicted that this association would be conditional on the circumstances of societies, with a larger beneficial effect being found in difficult nations. Using a group-centered random coefficients model, we tested the cross-level interaction of difficult societal circumstances and religiosity. The random effects for religiosity and circumstances were significant at $p < .001$. The interactions were significant for positive feelings ($\gamma = .03, p < .001$) and negative feelings ($\gamma = -.02, p < .001$) but not for life evaluations ($\gamma = .01, p > .05$). To show these interactions visually, we depict the top 25% of nations with the best circumstances and 25% with the worst circumstances in Figure 2. In the figure, we present the three types of SWB in religious and nonreligious individuals in nations differing in the difficulty of societal circumstances. As can be seen, although individuals living in nations with highly difficult circumstances generally have lower SWB, religious individuals had higher positive affect and lower negative affect compared with nonreligious individuals. In good circumstances, nonreligious individuals, compared with religious individuals, had slightly higher life evaluations, slightly lower positive affect, and lower negative affect. In such circumstances, nonreligious individuals generally had equal or better SWB compared with nonreligious individuals.

Table 4
Religiosity of Nations: "Is Religion an Important Part of Your Daily Life?"

Country	Religiosity	Country	Religiosity
Egypt	0.99	Honduras	0.88
Bangladesh	0.99	Ivory Coast	0.88
Sri Lanka	0.99	Togo	0.88
Somaliland	0.99	Syria	0.87
Saudi Arabia	0.98	Burundi	0.87
Indonesia	0.98	Iraq	0.87
Malawi	0.98	Panama	0.87
Laos	0.98	Dominican Republic	0.86
Mauritania	0.98	Guatemala	0.86
Niger	0.98	Nicaragua	0.86
Senegal	0.98	Puerto Rico	0.86
Afghanistan	0.98	Trinidad & Tobago	0.86
Comoros	0.98	India	0.85
Congo (Kinshasa)	0.98	South Africa	0.85
Djibouti	0.98	Zimbabwe	0.85
Pakistan	0.97	Colombia	0.85
Nigeria	0.97	Romania	0.84
Tanzania	0.97	Costa Rica	0.84
Myanmar	0.97	Peru	0.83
Sierra Leone	0.97	Turkey	0.82
Bahrain	0.97	Ecuador	0.82
Guinea	0.97	Turkmenistan	0.82
Philippines	0.96	Iran	0.81
Liberia	0.96	Macedonia	0.80
Sudan	0.96	Tajikistan	0.80
United Arab Emirates	0.96	Georgia	0.78
Jordan	0.95	Haiti	0.78
Kenya	0.95	Venezuela	0.77
Thailand	0.95	Cyprus	0.76
Cameroon	0.95	Poland	0.75
Qatar	0.95	Moldova	0.75
Yemen	0.95	Botswana	0.74
Morocco	0.94	Italy	0.73
Zambia	0.94	Portugal	0.73
Central African Republic	0.94	Greece	0.71
Congo Brazzaville	0.94	Jamaica	0.71
Ghana	0.93	Kosovo	0.70
Uganda	0.93	Bosnia Herzegovina	0.69
Mali	0.93	Chile	0.69
Chad	0.93	Croatia	0.69
Nepal	0.93	Mexico	0.68
Cambodia	0.92	Kyrgyzstan	0.68
Namibia	0.92	Armenia	0.68
Paraguay	0.92	United States	0.66
Tunisia	0.92	Belize	0.65
Palestine	0.91	Argentina	0.64
Benin	0.91	Singapore	0.60
Madagascar	0.91	Uzbekistan	0.60
Angola	0.91	Azerbaijan	0.59
Burkina Faso	0.91	Ireland	0.57
Ethiopia	0.90	Austria	0.53
Rwanda	0.90	Serbia	0.53
Algeria	0.90	Kazakhstan	0.50
Malta	0.90	Montenegro	0.49
Lebanon	0.89	Israel	0.48
Guyana	0.89	Slovakia	0.48
Kuwait	0.89	Canada	0.45
Malaysia	0.89	Taiwan	0.44
Brazil	0.88	Spain	0.43
Mozambique	0.88	Ukraine	0.43
Bolivia	0.88	Slovenia	0.43
El Salvador	0.88	Switzerland	0.43

(table continues)

Table 4 (continued)

Country	Religiosity
South Korea	0.42
Uruguay	0.42
Germany	0.41
Hungary	0.41
Lithuania	0.41
Luxembourg	0.40
Belgium	0.39
Iceland	0.39
Latvia	0.36
Vietnam	0.35
New Zealand	0.35
Albania	0.35
Bulgaria	0.35
Cuba	0.35
Netherlands	0.33
Belarus	0.33
Australia	0.32
Russia	0.32
United Kingdom	0.30
Finland	0.28
France	0.27
Czech Republic	0.26
Japan	0.26
Hong Kong	0.23
Norway	0.22
Denmark	0.19
Estonia	0.17
Sweden	0.16

What is evident is that both religious and nonreligious individuals in upscale societies had high SWB compared with their counterparts in difficult societies.

Mediating mechanisms. We sought to examine mediating mechanisms between religion and SWB in the Gallup World Poll on the basis of the availability of variables. These included social support (“If you were in trouble, do you have relatives or friends you can count on to help you whenever you need them, or not?”), the experience of feeling respected, and feelings of purpose and

meaning (“Do you feel your life has an important purpose or meaning?”). To account for the religiosity cross-level interaction effects on SWB, we specified a multilevel mediation model, which is shown in Figure 3 in simplified form.

At the individual level, a mediation model is specified, where Path C represents the unmediated individual-level association of religiosity with SWB and Paths A and B represent the effect of religiosity on the mediator variable and the effect of the mediator variable on SWB, respectively. We tested each of the mediators separately in a multilevel modeling framework, in which country-level religiosity, individual-level religiosity, and difficult circumstances were also included. Models were individually tested for each of the three types of SWB (and for each of the mediators). The circumstances of an individual’s life and the circumstances of the nation both predicted religiosity, as found in the earlier analyses, even after the mediating A and B paths were included in the model.

Table 5 shows that the mediators are positively and significantly related to all forms of SWB (Path B). Further, individual-level religiosity was positively related to the mediators of social support, respect, and purpose or meaning (Path A). As can be seen in the table, the direct path from religiosity to the SWB variables (Path C) were small and in some cases nonsignificant. This pattern suggests that the positive relation between individual-level religiosity and SWB is mediated by social support, respect, and purpose or meaning.

In Figure 4, we present mean levels of the mediators in the two types of societies, for religious and nonreligious individuals. As can be seen, individuals in benign societies experienced high levels of social support regardless of their religiosity. Although religious individuals, compared with nonreligious individuals, had somewhat higher feelings of respect in upscale nations, the difference was not large and both groups felt considerably more respected than did their counterparts in difficult societies, where the religious held a considerable advantage over the nonreligious.

The findings for purpose or meaning were unexpected. People in benign societies reported less purpose and meaning in life, and

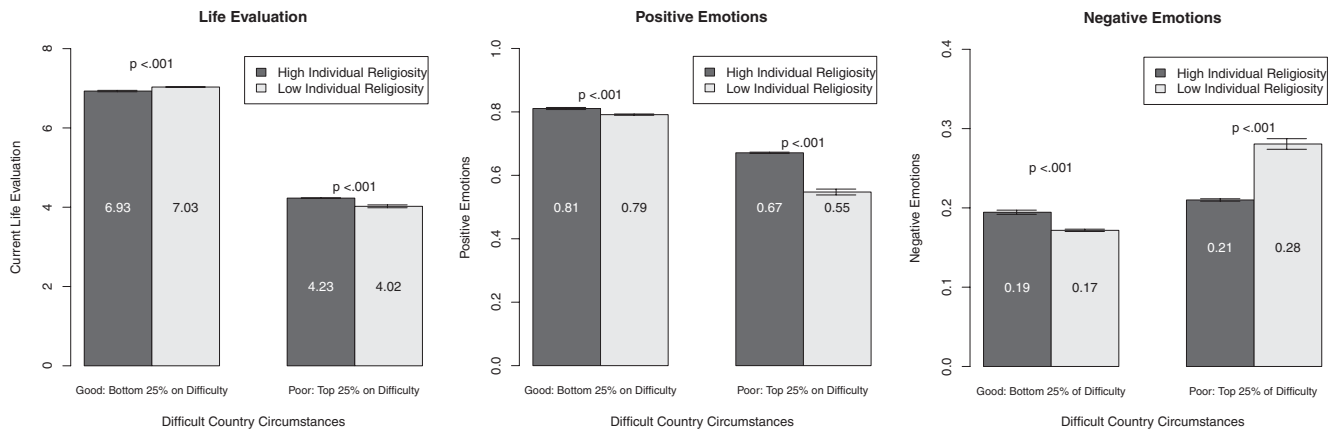


Figure 2. Religiosity and subjective well-being in nations differing in difficulty of circumstances. Individuals who indicated that religion is important and attended a religious meeting in the past week are categorized as high individual religiosity. Conversely, individuals who indicated that religion is not important and did not attend a religious meeting in the past week are categorized as low individual religiosity. Error bars represent the standard errors.

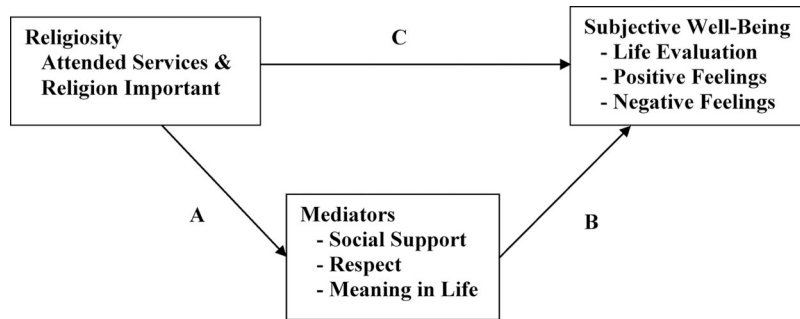


Figure 3. Mediation model pathways.

religious individuals felt more purpose and meaning in both types of nations. Pursuing matters further, we found that purpose was predictive of SWB in both benign and difficult societies. Thus, purpose is an anomaly that does not fit in with our other findings. The results on difficult versus benign societies indicate that (a) people in benign societies have high levels of social support, respect, and the three types of SWB and (b) religiosity does not produce any strong benefits to these resources in these nations. However, religiosity seems to produce substantially more feelings of purpose in both benign and difficult societies. Why this does not result in differences in SWB is unclear, but discussed further in the General Discussion section.

Person–environment fit. To examine the extent to which the fit of individual religiosity and country religiosity leads to SWB, we applied a random coefficients multilevel model to explore the cross-level interactions of individual and country religiosity on SWB. All cross-level interaction effects were significant at $p < .05$. As can be seen in Figure 5, religious individuals living in religious nations fare better than nonreligious individuals in terms of life evaluations, as well as positive and negative feelings. The least religious nations have higher mean levels of SWB and life

circumstances compared with the most religious nations. It is important to note that religious people and nonreligious people alike had similar and relatively high well-being in nonreligious nations, and nonreligious individuals had lower levels of negative feelings. Thus, the claim that religious people are happier must be qualified by the society in question.

Specific religions. Are the causes and consequences of religiosity generalizable, or are they specific to certain religions? After all, there are large differences between religious beliefs and practices. We analyzed four major religions for which we had large sample sizes: Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam. Applying the multilevel structural model found in Figure 1, we found that the patterns of relations within these religions seem more similar than distinct. For example, difficult societal circumstances strongly predict the degree of religiosity for individuals in each of these four religions (path coefficients γ ranged from .63 to .70, all $ps < .001$). Similarly, the age of individuals positively predicts degree of religiosity in each of the four religions (β s ranged from .07 to .12, all $ps < .001$). There was a difference between the religions for which gender was most religious. For Christians and Buddhists, women were most religious (β s = .12 and .07, respectively, $ps < .001$), but this was nonsignificant for Hindus ($\beta = .03$). However, for Muslims, men were more religious ($\beta = .17$, $p < .001$).

After controlling for age, gender, and individual and societal circumstances, religiosity predicted positive feelings for those affiliated with all four religions (β s ranged from .04 to .06, all $ps < .001$). Negative feelings were inversely related to degree of religiosity for members of all four religions (β s = $-.01$ to $-.02$), although this was nonsignificant for Buddhists. For three of the religions but not Islam, life evaluations were significantly related to religiosity (β s = .02 to .04, ps from $< .05$ to $< .001$). Thus, after controlling for predictors of religiosity, religiosity in all four religions tended to be associated with SWB.

We also examined the SWB of only those actively involved in each of the four religions (indicating both religious importance and attendance) compared with secular individuals (i.e., those who were secular, nonreligious, agnostic, or atheist or who had no religion). We predicted each type of SWB by age, gender, personal and societal circumstances, and dummy variables for those active in each of the four religions. The findings generally showed that individuals in all four religions had significantly higher life satisfaction, higher positive feelings, and lower negative feelings than did secular individuals (all $ps < .01$). The only exceptions were

Table 5
Gallup World Poll: Unstandardized Paths of Multilevel Mediation Analysis

Mediator	Individual-level religiosity direct path to SWB	Indirect effects: Mediation	
	Path C	Path A	Path B
	Life evaluation		
Support	0.07	0.05***	0.44***
Respect	0.04	0.17***	0.20***
Purpose or meaning	-0.03	0.24***	0.35***
	Positive emotions		
Support	0.01	0.05***	0.06***
Respect	-0.01***	0.18***	0.14***
Purpose or meaning	-0.02***	0.24***	0.07***
	Negative emotions		
Support	0.05***	0.04***	-0.03***
Respect	0.06***	0.18***	-0.08***
Purpose or meaning	0.06***	0.24***	-0.04***

*** $p < .001$.

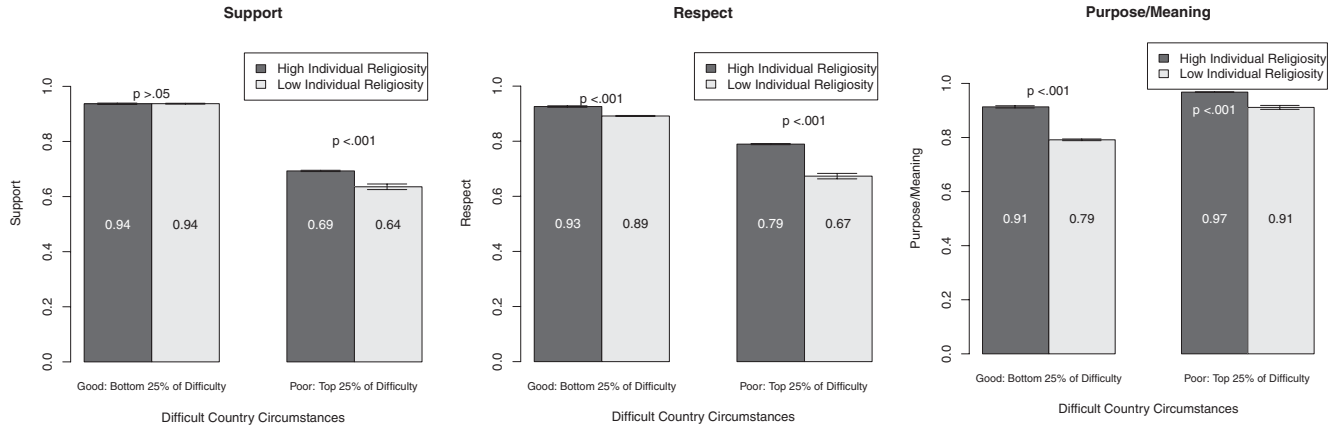


Figure 4. Religiosity, mediators, and nation circumstances. Error bars represent the standard errors. Individuals who indicated that religion is important and attended a religious meeting in the past week are categorized as high individual religiosity. Conversely, individuals who indicated that religion is not important and did not attend a religious meeting in the past week are categorized as low individual religiosity.

that Buddhists did not have higher life satisfaction and Hindus did not have lower negative feelings compared with secular individuals. In the 18 comparisons between religions across the three types of SWB, only two were significant, even with our large sample sizes. Thus, religions tend to be more alike than different in their association with SWB, with all associations going in the same direction for all three types of SWB.

General Discussion

A number of important new findings emerged in the two studies. We found that although the majority of people in the world are religious, there is large diversity of religiosity across nations and states. The findings reveal that a strong predictor of an individual’s religiosity is the conditions of the society in which he or she lives. Many nations are relatively homogeneous in terms of religiosity. People living in nations or American states with more difficult life

circumstances were substantially more likely to be religious. In prosperous nations that have achieved high material and social well-being, religiosity is less prevalent. Difficult individual circumstances also were associated with religiosity, although not as strongly as societal circumstances.

In both the United States and the world, there were small positive correlations of religion with SWB at the individual level, after controlling for life circumstances. Thus, we replicated earlier findings, at least when circumstances are taken into account. Why might religion be associated with higher SWB, controlling for circumstances? We found that religiosity predicted social support, respect, and purpose or meaning in life, which, in turn, each predicted SWB. It is plausible that religion provides supportive and integrative social structures that can, to some degree, dampen the harmful effects of difficult circumstances. It is noteworthy that in more benign and less religious societies, nonreligious individ-

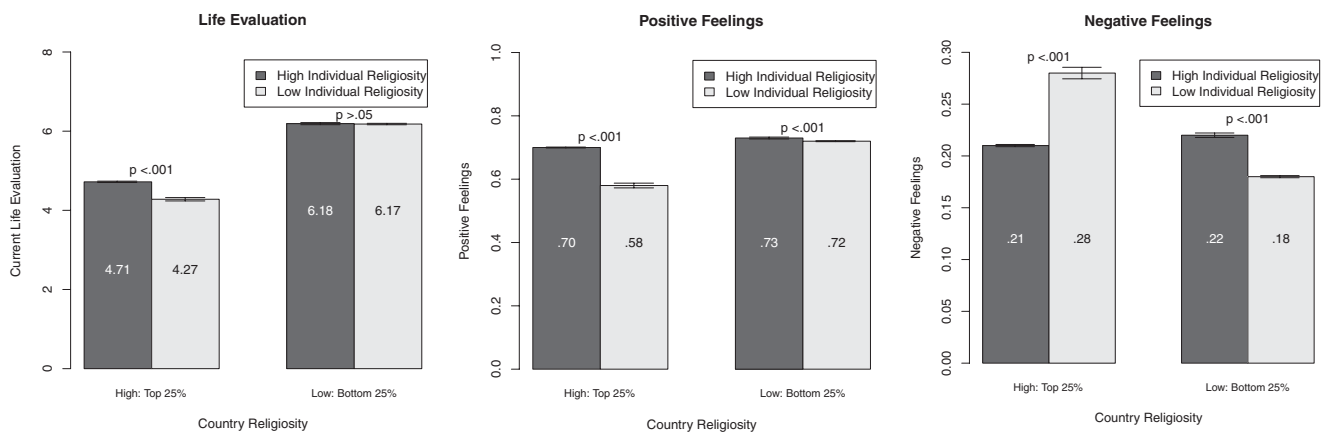


Figure 5. Person-environment fit for religiosity’s association with subjective well-being. Individuals who indicated that religion is important and attended a religious meeting in the past week are categorized as high individual religiosity. Conversely, individuals who indicated that religion is not important and did not attend a religious meeting in the past week are categorized as low individual religiosity.

uals were able to achieve high levels of SWB. They were also high in social support and respect, although not in purpose or meaning in life. Thus, in nonreligious societies with relatively favorable circumstances, people seem to be able to more readily achieve a rewarding life—social support, respect, and SWB—without formal religion.

Why might purpose or meaning in life be associated with SWB but not show the same pattern as the other variables? Diener et al. (2011) found that purpose primarily helped the life satisfaction of those who were unhappy. Happy people reported high life satisfaction regardless of whether they felt purpose in life. Furthermore, satisfaction with the day, as opposed to life satisfaction, was not predicted by purpose in life. Thus, if one has an enjoyable life, feeling purpose might not be as important to life satisfaction; purpose is most critical for those with an unhappy life. Clearly, more research on this issue is needed.

In societies where circumstances are more benign, the nonreligious have superior life satisfaction, as well as less negative affect. They also have greater social support and feelings of being respected. Thus, the pattern of religiosity and well-being is largely reversed in difficult versus benign societies. The nonreligious in poor societies are at the biggest disadvantage, with noticeably lower positive feelings and higher negative feelings, as well as substantial deficits in social support and respect. In addition, religious people were more likely to prosper in terms of SWB if they lived in religious societies rather than nonreligious societies. In the least religious countries, nonreligious individuals often reported the highest SWB.

Our major findings generalized across four major world religions. Difficult societal circumstances and age predicted religiosity in all four religions. In general, religiosity was associated with all three types of SWB in all four religions.

We cannot be certain of the causal direction between our variables. Although it is plausible that difficult societal circumstances lead to greater religiosity, it is also possible that religious people focus less on the material aspects of life and therefore are less prosperous. After all, the idea that wealth is an impediment to religiosity has been voiced in religious teachings, such as Jesus' reported words about the difficulty of a rich person entering heaven and Hindu and Buddhist teachings that attachments to material wealth are impediments to spiritual fulfillment and ultimate liberation. Longitudinal research that follows lives through time could explore causality and reveal whether SWB changes on the heels of changes in religious engagement. One analysis of data from the German Socio-Economic Survey Panel found that, indeed, "individuals who become more religious over time record long term gains in life satisfaction, while those who become less religious record long term losses" (Headey, Schupp, Tucci, & Wagner, 2010, p. 73). Quasi-experimental and experimental studies also can be used to help understand the psychological processes related to religiosity. However, very religious nations have in the past sometimes achieved very rapid economic growth; therefore, the causal direction going from religiosity to low economic development seems somewhat unlikely. The causal direction going from difficult societal circumstances, strongly replicated in both the United States and the world, seems quite plausible.

Take-Home Message

In the first-ever representative sample of the world and a representative sample of the United States, we found widespread religiosity but also large variability between nations and states. In the United States, religiosity across states varied by a factor of two; across nations, it varied by a factor of six. In some nations, virtually everyone—99%—report being religious, whereas in other nations, fewer than one in five report being religious. Thus, the religious impulse is not universal. Difficult life circumstances strongly predict societal and state religiosity. The religiosity of nations, in turn, correlated strongly with individuals' religiosity, revealing relative homogeneity within nations. Thus, social societal factors are very important in whether an individual becomes religious.

Our findings from the United States largely replicated previous findings showing that, controlling for conditions, religiosity has benefits for SWB. The world data replicated the U.S. findings in highly religious nations but showed a different pattern in less religious nations. Thus, previous findings from the United States might have occurred because this country is a moderately religious nation, unlike many other economically advanced nations that are less religious.

At the individual level, the three types of SWB have small inverse correlations with religiosity, but the associations reverse to small positive ones when circumstances are controlled. These findings tended to replicate across major religions of the world, which did not show consistent differences from one another. The mediation analysis found that religiosity is associated with greater purpose and meaning in life, as well as with more respect and social support. These psychosocial characteristics are, in turn, associated with higher SWB. Thus, it is possible that religiosity helps SWB by advantages it provides, such as increasing the likelihood of social support.

The association of religiosity with SWB varied with both societal circumstances and societal religiosity. The effects of religiosity on SWB are positive in the nations with relatively bad conditions and in highly religious countries, and they are neutral or negative in the least religious nations. For example, greater religiosity is associated with more negative feelings in the least religious nations and less negative feelings in the most religious nations. Clearly, our results indicate the need for much greater cross-cultural sensitivity when the effects of religion are considered. Our analyses suggest that individual religiosity is most beneficial to SWB when it is congruent with the culture, that is, if religion is widespread in the society. Where organized religiosity is in the minority, religiosity does not have a clear benefit for SWB.

In conclusion, religiosity's associations with SWB may depend on whether a society faces very difficult living conditions or is highly religious. In less religious societies with relatively favorable circumstances, high average SWB is achieved by most people, regardless of religiosity. In these societies, the benefits of religiosity for SWB are attenuated because even nonreligious individuals have high levels of social support and respect, as well as SWB. It appears that in very challenging societal circumstances, religiosity aids respect, social support, and purpose or meaning in life, which, in turn, are associated with higher SWB.

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