



# Why are religious people happy? The effect of the social norm of religiosity across countries

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing on social norms theories, we suggest that religiosity substantially increases subjective well-being if it is considered normative in a certain national context. In Study 1, we test this hypothesis using an indicator of a country's social norm of religiosity that includes both the national level of religiosity and the social desirability of religion. The results of a multilevel regression analysis suggest that religious individuals are on average happier and more satisfied with life than non-religious individuals. This effect is stronger in religious countries with dominant negative attitudes towards non-believers. In Study 2, we further examine whether the differences in social recognition of religious and non-religious individuals in countries where religiosity is normative account for this finding. The results of a moderated mediation analysis indicate that in religious countries, religious people report being treated with more respect, which partially explains their higher levels of happiness and life satisfaction.

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## 1. Introduction

*“And whoever trusts in the Lord, happy is he” Proverbs 16:2 (KJV)*

The results of numerous psychological studies indicate that religious people benefit from greater physical and mental health and report higher life satisfaction (e.g., see [Idler, 2009](#); [Koenig, 2001](#)). In the United States—one of the most religious countries among the Western democracies—this effect is especially strong and persistent ([Snoep, 2008](#)). Interestingly, the US is not only a highly religious country, it is also a country where more than the half of the population has negative attitudes toward atheists and will never vote for an atheist in presidential elections ([Edgell et al., 2006](#); [Joyner, 2007](#); [Zuckerman, 2009](#)). It seems that, at least in the US, following a religion remains a socially approved normative behavior. This observation raises the question of whether the happiness effect of personal religiosity is a function of the degree to which religiosity represents a social norm in a given society.

Recent research in subjective well-being suggests that the same behavior can have a substantially different influence on subjective well-being depending on the extent to which this behavior is regulated by social norms in a given society. For example, unemployed people are more dissatisfied with their life in countries with a strong norm of working for a living than in countries with more tolerant attitudes toward living off public funds ([Stavrova et al., 2011a,b](#); [Stutzer and Lalive, 2004](#)). Similarly, unmarried cohabitators are less happy than married individuals only in nations where cohabitation is not socially

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accepted (Soons and Kalmijn, 2009). Finally, cohabiting women are psychologically worse off than married women in societies with a strong normative expectation for women to marry (Stavrova et al., 2011b).

Taking these findings into account, as well as the theoretical assumptions of social norms research (e.g., see Cialdini and Goldstein, 2004; Horne, 2009), we suggest that the extent to which religiosity is normative within a society can enhance the subjective well-being of religious individuals and decrease the subjective well-being of non-religious individuals. We further hypothesize that this effect is explained by social sanctions and rewards that religious and non-religious individuals receive in their respective societies.

## 2. Religion and subjective well-being

The connection between religiosity and subjective well-being has been established through numerous studies. Personal aspects of religiosity, such as religious beliefs and intrinsic orientations, salience of religious identity, and subjective religiosity were linked to higher levels of subjective well-being and resilience (Green and Elliott, 2010; Greenfield and Marks, 2007; Koenig, 2001; Laurencelle et al., 2002; Pargament, 2002; Phillip, 2011; Regnerus and Elder, 2003). Similarly, religious practices and frequent church attendance were shown to have positive outcomes for physical and mental health (Ellison et al., 2009; Ellison, 1991; Smith et al., 2003; Strawbridge et al., 2001) as well as for happiness and life satisfaction (Abdel-Khalek, 2006; Diener and Suh, 1999; Mochon et al., 2008). In addition, a number of longitudinal studies suggest that causality is likely to run from religiosity to psychological well-being, but the reverse is not true (Childs, 2010; Headey et al., 2010; Lim and Putnam, 2009).

Why are religious people happier than non-religious people? Thus far, the research has identified several mechanisms by which religion affects psychological well-being (for a review, see George et al., 2002). These mechanisms include a healthy lifestyle (Musick et al., 1998; Wallace and Forman, 1998), social support (Eliassen et al., 2005; Krause et al., 1999; Krause and Wulff, 2005; Lim and Putnam, 2009), a specific emotional culture that prescribes happiness (Wilkins, 2008), and religious coping mechanisms (Pargament et al., 1990; Park, 2005). For example, religious practices such as prayer represent a widely used coping method in situations of uncertainty, serious illnesses, the death of a relative, or even threats to one's own life (Hogg et al., 2010; Hood et al., 1996; Norenzayan et al., 2009; Pargament, 1997; Sharp, 2010). By promising life after death, religion represents a powerful tool of mitigating death anxiety and thus serves a terror-management function as well (Vail et al., 2010). In addition, God represents an attachment figure that supplements personal affiliations or attachments in real life or compensates for the lack of them (Granqvist and Kirkpatrick, 2008; Granqvist et al., 2010; Kirkpatrick and Shaver, 1992).

Finally, the effect of religiosity on well-being was considered from the perspective of self-categorization, social identity, and social attraction theories (Hayward and Elliott, 2009; Ysseldyk et al., 2010). For example, Ysseldyk and colleagues (2010) regard religiosity not only as a belief system but also as a source of social identity that strengthens the religious person's subjective well-being. Drawing on social identity theory as well, Elliott and Hayward (2009) demonstrated that personal religious identity represents an additional source of life satisfaction in countries where democratic liberties are curtailed. In those countries, it remains one of the sources of self-expression when other sources are restricted. Another theory—self-categorization theory—suggests that the effect of group membership on the self depends on the salience of group identity. Indeed, in a study by Greenfield and Marks (2007), people who identified themselves with a certain religious group drew greater emotional benefits from their religious participation than people whose identification with their religious group was weaker.

## 3. Religiosity as a social norm

One aspect that, to our knowledge, has been consistently overlooked in previous research is that religious beliefs and behavior often represent a desirable way of life or, in other words, a social norm.

The concept of social norms has a long tradition in sociological and psychological research (Cialdini et al., 1990; Deutsch and Gerard, 1955; Parsons, 1937). The main theoretical contribution of studies of social norms consists in using others' behaviors and attitudes to explain why people behave the way they do. For example, the concept of social norms turned out to be very helpful in explaining why people are more likely to litter in littered environments than in clear ones (Cialdini et al., 1990), adolescents are more likely to abuse alcohol when their peers do so (Rimal and Real, 2003), or hotel customers are more likely to reuse their towels when they know that other customers do (Goldstein et al., 2008). Religious behavior and beliefs can be influenced by social norms as well (White, 1968). For example, individuals whose friends regularly attend religious services are more likely to have heightened religious beliefs and attendance than individuals whose social networks are concentrated outside of the congregational community (Cornwall, 1989; Stroope, 2011). Why are individuals so easily affected by social norms?

Social norms are enforced by providing rewards for conforming behavior (social approval and acceptance) and applying informal sanctions for counter-normative behavior (social disapproval and rejection) (Cialdini and Trost, 1998; Hechter and Opp, 2001; Horne, 2009; Schachter, 1951). For example, it has been hypothesized that one's friends within a congregational community may apply informal sanctions to enhance one's bonds with the religious community and prevent one from leaving (Stroope, 2011; White, 1968).

We hypothesize that social rewards and sanctions may represent another source of the differences in happiness between religious and non-religious individuals. Recently, several authors have noticed that the national level of religiosity can influ-

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