



THE GLOBE AND MAIL

December 12, 2010

Happiness and the God spot

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From Monday's Globe and Mail

It's not faith, but community that contributes to life satisfaction, a study of churchgoers concludes. But that assumes we can measure such things

Chalk it up to a form of rationalism and reductionism.

That's the practice - very popular at the moment - of using quantitative research to measure life satisfaction. Think of it as "statisfaction": that is, obsession with stats. Surveys of people. Questionnaires with blunt, predetermined questions. Numbers, the crunching of which we draw conclusions from about the most intricate, private workings of the spirit and mind; the black box of the human condition.

It's like performing surgery with a shovel.

And when this rational (however well-intentioned) practice is applied to religion, well, watch out. The most recent study, "Religion, Social Networks and Life Satisfaction," published in the December issue of the American Sociological Review, reveals that religion's "secret ingredient" is the friendships in the congregation.

It's the dude in the pew who makes all the difference, not necessarily The Dude (or Dudess, depending on your beliefs) in the sky, say the researchers.

"Once you control for church attendance, almost no other measure of religiosity or theology - praying, believing in God or afterlife, what you think about God, whether you personally experience God's presence - matters for life satisfaction," explains Chaeyoon Lim, an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, who was the lead author of the study.

Prof. Lim and his co-author, Robert Putnam, the Malkin professor of public policy at Harvard University, found that if someone has a lot of friends in her place of worship, she's likely to be happier than someone who is also religious but doesn't have a social network there. She could go just once or twice a year to church and still report greater happiness than someone who goes frequently but has no friends there.

But is this really helpful in understanding an inherently mysterious thing such as faith?

Many longstanding studies show that believers are happier than non-believers: They're better citizens, more generous, better neighbours and more involved in their communities.

Lovely, but research efforts are often restricted by the limitations (or agenda) of the methodology. Not that this stops the authors from celebrating the results as if they've unlocked one of humanity's most ancient, perplexing mysteries.

"It turns out that theology has nothing to do with it," pronounced Prof. Putnam about his research results, which used data from the Faith Matters Study, a survey of U.S. adults in 2006 and 2007.

Yes, well, maybe that's because quantitative research has a hard time penetrating the subject of belief.

"Findings around the relationship between theology and life satisfaction are really mixed, and don't present anything like the clear picture you get when you look at the kinds of things Putnam and company are looking at here - relationships and so on," says Nancy Ammerman, a professor of sociology of religion at Boston University and author of *Pillars of Faith: American Congregations and their Partners*.

"Studies that have tried to find links between various kinds of theological positions and life satisfaction ... have been explicitly looking at wanting to prove that people who are spiritual are happier and have phrased the questions in ways that made it likely to find exactly that," she says. Those are "countered by other people who often have the opposite agenda - of wanting to prove that people who believe in silly things like heaven and hell are going to be unhappy because they're putting all their eggs in otherworldly baskets."

Add to that another question: Who's to say it isn't happy people who seek out religion rather than faith that makes them happy? No one, frankly. It's the old chicken-and-egg conundrum, something happiness researchers always have a hard time addressing, let alone figuring out.

And trickier still is a more philosophical question of whether the purpose of faith is to make you happy. "That's a Western, modern aberration of religion - what sociologist, Christian Smith calls 'moralistic, therapeutic deism,'" says Phil Reinders, pastor at River Park Christian Reformed Church in Calgary, Alta. "I advise people, 'Don't come for happiness. Yes, you'll find the deepest existential joy you can know, but as a by-product of something bigger, a worldview that makes sense of injustice and evil, that makes joy plausible within the onslaught of irritations, struggles and wrongs of today.'"

Faith is a quirkily subjective thing: irrational, mysterious and even fickle. It waxes and wanes, and unfortunately disappears for periods of time. Maybe because of its inherent privacy - it lives in the mind and heart where no one can see how it soothes and excites certain thoughts - we want to decode it. Debate it. Debunk it. Understand it. Measure it. Even MRI it, if you look at the practice of spiritual neuroscience (or neurotheology) that tries to find the correlations of neural phenomenon - the God spot - with subjective experiences of spirituality.

We want to out faith, and that could be because it is such a potent force - for good and bad. It's like dismantling a bomb.


All this is not to say that the study's findings on the importance of social capital in the congregations is unimportant. Prof. Ammerman, who has studied congregational life for several decades, understands why it matters. "When people become part of a religious community, they have people praying for them, making them a casserole when they have a new baby. There are all kinds of things that people can expect of one another."

Still, the research from Prof. Lim and Prof. Putnam could not discount the idea that a secular community with what they call "morally infused" social support, would not deliver a similar level of life satisfaction. What about a zealous environmental group? What about a 12-step program? Hey, what about a really passionate atheist clan with Christopher Hitchens as their patron non-saint?

"It is plausible in principal, but we really don't have data to test it at this point," responds Prof. Lim.

I rest my case.

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