

TRADITIONAL AND
NON-TRADITIONAL
RELIGIOSITY

PUBLISHED BY

Institute of Social Sciences, Belgrade 2019

Yugoslav Society for the Scientific Study of Religion (YSSSR), Niš.

PUBLISHER

Goran Bašić, Ph.D.

Dragan Todorović, Ph.D.

REVIEWERS

Nonka Bogomilova, Ph.D., Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Sofia

Prof. Pavel Sergeevich Kanevskiy, Faculty of Sociology, Lomonosov Moscow State University

Prof. Zorica Kuburić, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Novi Sad

SERIES

Edited Volumes

SERIES EDITOR

Natalija Mićunović, Ph.D.

Prepared as part of the project "Social Transformations in the European Integration Process:

A Multidisciplinary Approach" supported by the Ministry of Education, Science and

Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia (III 47010)

ISBN 978-86-7093-227-2

ISBN 978-86-86957-21-4

edited volumes

TRADITIONAL AND NON-TRADITIONAL RELIGIOSITY

(A Thematic Collection of Papers of International Significance)

EDITED BY

Mirko Blagojević, Ph.D.

Dragan Todorović, Ph.D.



Institute of Social Sciences and YSSSR | Belgrade and Niš 2019

VLADIMIR MENTUS
Institute of Social Sciences, Belgrade

Religiosity and Life Satisfaction in economically Developed European Countries

Abstract

In this paper the relationship between religiosity and life satisfaction in economically developed European countries is examined. The data come from the last round of the European Social Survey, from 2016. This data gives an opportunity to analyze three dimensions of religiosity – self-rating religiosity, frequency of attendance of religious services apart from special occasions, and frequency of praying apart from at religious services. On the other hand, life satisfaction data is provided using the single-item self-rating scale. The data from more than 22,000 respondents from 12 economically developed European countries indicated very weak relationship between all examined religiosity dimensions and life satisfaction. In the discussion, possible explanations for lack of relationship between these variables are provided – in the first place by examining existing evidence that in economically developed societies religion has little importance for individual well-being.

Keywords: religiosity, life satisfaction, Europe, secularization, cross-section

Introduction

■ Religiosity is a behavioural and psychological phenomenon that could be defined as the degree to which beliefs in specific religious values and ideals are held and practiced by an individual (Delener, 1990, p. 27, as cited in: Yeniaras and Akarsu, 2016). To a large degree it shapes individual behaviour as well as cognitive judgmental processes such as life satisfaction (Yeniaras and Akarsu, *ibid*).

There has been much prior research on association between religiosity and different measures of well-being, and vast

majority of these reported some positive association between religiosity and life satisfaction, happiness, positive affect or some other measure of well-being (Johnson et al., 2008). One of the most comprehensive reviews about these relations is conducted by Koenig (Koenig, 2012). According to him, by mid-2010, at least 326 quantitative peer-reviewed studies had examined these relationships. Of those, 256 (79%) found significant positive relationship. Only three studies (<1%) reported a significant negative relationship. Similarly, of the 120 studies with the highest methodological rigor (7 or higher in quality on the 0–10 scale), 98 (82%) reported positive relationship, and only one reported a negative relationship.

Strong and repeated evidence indicates that religiosity has beneficial effects in nearly every aspect of social concern and policy (Fagan, 2006; Vladisavljević and Mentus 2018; Mentus, 2017). Specifically, the available data clearly indicate that religiosity is associated with: greater longevity and physical health, higher levels of well-being and happiness, perceived quality of life, higher levels of self-control, self-esteem, and coping skills, optimism, better mental health, higher levels of good work habits, higher levels of marital happiness and stability, stronger parent-child relationships, greater educational aspirations and attainment (especially among the poor), higher recovery rates from addictions to alcohol or drugs, higher rates of charitable donations and volunteering, higher levels of community cohesion and social support for those in need, larger support networks, more social contacts, and greater satisfaction with support, increases in civic involvement, lower divorce rates, less abuse of alcohol and drugs, lower rates of suicide, depression, and suicide ideation, lower levels of many infectious disease, less juvenile crime, less violent crime, less domestic violence etc. (Mochon et al., 2011; Johnson et al., 2008; Fagan, *ibid.*).

There are many possible explanations for such results. First, religiosity serves functions that fulfil inherent human needs; these functions include greater purpose and meaning in life, higher levels of social support and social capital, and positive coping strategies when facing loss or difficulties (Tay el al., 2014). There is increasing evidence that there are inherent universal human needs that, when fulfilled, could enhance life satisfaction, and this psy-

chological perspective may be traced back to evolutionary roots (ibid.). According to Sedikides and Gebauer (Sedikides and Gebauer, 2013), religiosity fulfils fundamental self-needs – self-esteem, control, uncertainty reduction, and meaning (connected with the individual self), attachment (connected with the collective self), and social belonging (connected with the collective self). These authors add that in cultures that particularly value religion, need fulfilment is associated with improved psychological adjustment. According to prior research, other authors also emphasize social support and prosocial behaviours that religiosity encourages, coherent framework that it provides, and coping mechanisms associated to religiosity that make stress and loss less intense (Mochon et al., 2011).

However, there are some relatively common limitations of the most of previous research. First, they are often based on non-samples and/or unrepresentative parts of the population (Yeniaras and Akarsu, 2016). Second, most findings to date are based on the US data (mostly General Social Survey) or a comparable survey in a single country, while there is a lack of cross-national research (with only few cases that directly focus on religion) (Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2010). Third, prior research generally evaluated religiosity as a one-dimensional concept with focus on religious attendance (Bergan and McConatha, 2001). So, as ten Kate and her associates (ten Kate et al., 2017) argue, although the claim that religion has a positive effect on life satisfaction finds widespread support in the literature, the relationship appears to be in need of further scrutiny. In the next part, the importance of dimensionality issue will be examined in detail.

Dimensions of Religiosity

As religiosity refers to the various dimensions associated with religious beliefs and involvement, more recent studies have stressed the importance of evaluating religiosity as a multidimensional concept focusing on subjective, cognitive, behavioural, and the social and cultural components (Bergan and McConatha, 2001). Dimensions of religiosity such as private devotion and existential certainty thus are

now also regarded as important components of this trait, and reliance on religious attendance as a sole measure of religiosity may be insufficient and lead to incorrect conclusions (*ibid.*).¹ This study defines religiosity in terms of both objective religiosity (praying and religious participation) and subjective religiosity (religious belief).

Ten Kate and her associates (ten Kate et al. 2017) explain importance of every of these dimensions for life satisfaction. When it comes to religious beliefs, one characteristic of religious individuals is that they adhere to religious beliefs that offer interpretations of the empirical world and the right role of the individual in it. Belief carries potential to cope with, and thus alleviate, experience of insecurity. Religious beliefs may make events more comprehensible and gives meaning on seemingly mundane affairs; religious individuals are thus less likely to perceive their problems as a threat. Religious beliefs as such may be important coping devices, allowing individuals to adjust to major life events more easily and offering a more stable view of the world. Also, religious faith provides moral guidelines which give a special value to individual's life, and this enhances self-perception as a good and virtuous person and may enhance an individual's sense of self-worth. The same group of authors add that traditional religions provide a sense of safety thanks to the idea that a divine force or God will ensure that all goes well, or at least will be well in the future; this further reduces feelings of stress about the future, which contributes to overall well-being. Religious beliefs may also be related to self-worth through the conviction that one is loved and valued by God.

Relating to the participation in religious services, ten Kate and associates (*ibid.*) write about cultural and structural benefits of it. Cultural benefit originates from the binding power of a common framework of meaning and the sense of belonging that comes with it. In other words, religious narratives, rites, and rituals form a system of symbols, which creates and maintains a sense of togetherness, group membership and identification with the group. These individuals share the same worldview and belonging to such a community may

¹ Bergan and McConatha (*ibid.*) note that this could be especially the case with older adults with physical limitations, who are unable to attend religious services regularly. Thus, at least for this population, certain dimensions of religiosity, such as private devotion and religious belief systems, may serve as more accurate measures of religiosity than participation.

be beneficial for individual well-being in several ways. It incites a sense of intimacy – members that are involved in religious participation feel that they matter to each other, fit within the group, and are accepted by its members, which fosters a sense of closeness. Sense of being accepted by like-minded peers has positive effect on individual well-being. Perception of intimacy may be protected by group boundaries, which safeguard the beliefs of group and the safety of its members. Feeling of emotional security is thus another important benefit of participation in religious services.

Structural advantages of religious participation lie in the larger amount of social relations which it embodies (*ibid.*). Belonging to a religious community may result in social spill-overs in nonreligious domains; for example, the religious are more embedded in a cohesive neighbourhood. In this way, religious participation serves as a potential source of social benefits in terms of self-esteem and social support, which may have positive effects on individual well-being. Religious participation also offers a variety of tools that are helpful in coping problems and has important role in coping strategies employed in times of stress; it is associated with higher levels of self-esteem and a sense of control, through the provision of social support in the form of love, caring, and sympathy; finally, religious participation gives a greater availability of social resources that aid coping with encountered problems and alleviate feelings of loneliness (*ibid.*).

Finally, when it comes to praying, along with religious beliefs, practicing religion in a private setting is a dimension of religiosity that can play a role in enhancing a sense of security and coherence (*ibid.*). Ten Kate and her associates note that religious activities such as praying are very important for developing a relationship with a divine other. According to them, religious attachment figures may serve as a source of support and companionship in stressful times and provide individuals with feelings of love, safety, hope, control, and an overall feeling of tranquillity. Also, as prayer and divine interaction strengthen the feeling of being valued and helped by a divine force, it may further gain a heightened sense of self-worth and control; personal prayer plays an important role in accounting for variations in depressive symptoms, anxiety, and self-esteem (*ibid.*). Ten Kate and her associates also note that in addition to praying, reading religious texts may explain why religiosity is positively related to life satisfaction –

through reading such texts, individuals may feel connected to the characters in them (which is especially the case if they face similar issues). In this way, identifying with these characters may help in dealing with a many type of problems – individuals may get ideas about how to behave and think in order to solve their problems. Individuals may also feel less alone in facing these problems when they perceive their own issues in terms of the situation of such characters. Religious texts provide the moral codes and guidelines for behaviour which may further help individuals to solve these problems, but also avoid risky situations and behaviours. Reading religious texts is thus may also lead to enhanced perceptions of control (ibid.).

In the next part, we present measures of dimensionality that we have used in this study, as well as the data processed.

Data and Measures

We have used the data from the last (eighth) wave of the European Social Survey, conducted in 2016. Every two years, beginning in 2002, in a number of European countries, European Social Survey supervises a large set of demographic and attitudinal questions to randomly selected, nationally representative population samples; the samples are consisted of those aged 15 and over in each country (Bullivant, 2018). The survey is a multinational partnership with exceptionally high standards of design, execution and cross-national comparability (Voas, 2007). Data are being collected using personal interviews supplemented by short self-completion questionnaires; a great deal of expert attention has been devoted to sampling strategy, translation, methods, and quality assurance, with the highest possible level of cross-national comparability (ibid.). This survey provides better coverage of issues related to religion than most general-purpose surveys, covering the three main areas of affiliation, practice and belief. Although the questions on how religious the respondent is and how important religion is to him/her do not measure beliefs directly, it seems likely that there is a strong association between these variables and strength of religious belief (ibid.).

The last wave of survey covers over 30 European nations, and isolated sample for this research consists of respondents from twelve

European economically developed countries. Examined countries are France, Ireland, Great Britain, Belgium, Germany, Austria, Netherlands, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Iceland, and Switzerland. Isolated sample consists of 22,521 respondents, with minimum age of 15 and maximum of 100 ($M = 47.14$, $SD = 18.86$), and with 50.8% of females, and 49.2% of males.

In European Social Survey, general life satisfaction is measured using question: "All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole nowadays?" The answers were on an eleven-point scale, where 0 meant "Extremely dissatisfied", while 10 meant "Extremely satisfied". Intensity of religious belief is measured using question: "Using this card, how religious would you say you are?", where 0 meant "Not at all religious", while 10 meant "Very religious". Religious participation is measured twofold: in terms of participation in religious services, on the one side, and frequency of praying, on the other side. Participation in religious services is measured using question: "Apart from religious activities at the occasion of social events as weddings, funerals, christenings, and circumcisions, about how often do you attend religious services these days?", where 1 meant "More than once a week", while 6 meant "Never". Frequency of praying is measured using question: "About how often you pray?" and the answers were the same as for participation in religious services.

Results

With regard to general satisfaction with life, the sample studied indicated a high level of life satisfaction overall (7.58 on an eleven-point scale) (Table 1). Nearly 80% of the sample rated their life satisfaction with 7 or more, and below 7% rated with 4 or less. The finding that in general, people are more often satisfied than dissatisfied with their lives is consistent with many previous researches, at least in economically developed countries. Religious belief is rated approximately as neutral, where nearly half of the respondents rated it with 4 or less, and less than 30% with 7 and more. Two dimensions of religious participation indicate even less religiosity. Only 2.5% of the whole sample attends religious services apart from special occasions every day or more than once a week, and 80% of the sample

only on special holy days, less often or never. Additionally, less than 25% of the respondents pray apart from at religious services every day or more than once a week, and 64% of them only on special holy days, less often or never.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

	N	Min	Max	M	SD
How satisfied with life as a whole	22479	0	10	7.58	1.875
How religious are you	22436	0	10	5.66	3.101
How often attend religious services apart from special occasions	22469	1	7	5.68	1.432
How often pray apart from at religious services	22317	1	7	4.98	2.356

Regression analysis indicated the predictor structure of life satisfaction: the statistical significance of the model is determined, but it is very weak ($r = .073$, $r^2 = .005$, $\Delta r^2 = .005$, $F_{(3/22258)} = 39.984$; $p < .01$), and all three dimensions of religiosity are very weak predictor of life satisfaction (table 2). The size of the sample is the reason for indicated statistical significance of the model. The results indicate that the investigated determinants, as a set, have a satisfactory degree of internal consistency ($\alpha = .792$), which indicate strong mutual association between three dimensions of religiosity, which is also consistent with much of a previous research.

Discussion

Having in mind results of previous researches, the lack of relationship between religiosity and life satisfaction indicated in this study is not expected finding. However, it is probably effect of the sample that we have used – since is consisted of individuals from exclusively economically highly developed societies. More specifically,

all twelve countries that the data were used from, are according to the classification of the World Bank highly developed,² with GDP per capita of at least 35 000 US dollars in 2016.³ Much of literature show that in context of high level of economic development, religiosity in fact has very little importance for individual well-being (Diener et al., 2011; Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2009; ten Kate et al., 2017; Jong, 2008; Jagodzinski, 2009).

Table 2: Multiple linear regression with life satisfaction as a dependent variable (n = 22479).

Independent variables	B	SE	Beta	t	p
How religious are you	.045	.006	.074	7.852	.000
How often attend religious services apart from special occasions	-.058	.012	-.045	-5.020	.000
How often pray apart from at religious services	.055	.008	.070	7.118	.000
R Square = 0.005; Adjusted R Square = 0.005; SEE = 1.87					
* B – unstandardized coefficients; SE – standard error; Beta – standardized coefficients					

The results generally indicate very weak relationship between all three dimensions of religiosity and life satisfaction.

One possible explanation for such findings could be found in the religious values hypothesis (Norris and Inglehart, 2004). It holds that the conditions that people experience in their formative years have a profound impact upon their cultural values and growing up in societies in which survival is uncertain is conducive to a strong emphasis on religion – experiencing high levels of existential security throughout one’s formative years reduces the subjective importance

² https://datahelpdesk.worldbank.org/knowledgebase/articles/906519#High_income

³ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?end=2016&start=2016>

of religion for individuals. Consequently, according to this hypothesis, the demand for religion should be far stronger among low-income nations than among rich ones, and among the less secure strata of society than among the affluent. Norris and Inglehart add that as a society moves past the early stages of industrialization, and life becomes more affluent, people tend to become more secular. They also notes that analysis of data from societies around the world revealed that the society's level of economic development and other indicators of human development predict with considerable accuracy extent to which people emphasize religion and engage in religious behavior, even without taking into account the specific belief-systems of given countries, or the institutional structures of religion. The most crucial explanatory variables are those that differentiate between poor societies, and societies in which survival is so secure that people take it for granted during their formative years (ibid.).

Inglehart (2000) states that in the uncertain world of subsistence societies, the need for absolute standards and a sense that an infallible higher power will ensure that things ultimately turn out well filled a major psychological need. According to Inglehart, one of the key functions of religion was to provide a sense of certainty in an insecure environment – and physical as well as economic insecurity intensify this need. But peace, prosperity, and the welfare state have produced an unprecedented sense of security, which has diminished the need for the reassurance that religion traditionally provided (ibid.).

Diener and his associates (Diener et al., 2011) agree that religiosity's associations with life satisfaction may depend on whether a society faces very difficult living conditions – in societies with relatively favourable circumstances, high average life satisfaction is achieved by most people, regardless of religiosity. In other words, the benefits of religion for life satisfaction depend on the societal circumstances – religion helps in a coping with difficult circumstances and therefore is most beneficial when people's life context is difficult. Thus, societies with more difficult life conditions were much more likely to be highly religious. When people are frequently faced with permanent hunger, illness, crime, or poor education – all of which are relatively more prevalent and uncontrollable in poor societies – religion can have a stronger effect on well-being. In these societies, according to Diener and his associates, religiosity is thus strongly associated with life satisfaction.

On the other side, as the same group of authors note, economically developed societies, 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; consequently, people there might feel less need for additional coping mechanisms beyond their personal resources. When circumstances become more secure, religiosity might decrease.

According to the same group of authors (*ibid.*), when one observes the religiosity of nations, it seems that the least religious nations are primarily stable and democratic nations with high economic development; on the other side, in contrast, the most religious nations are usually poor ones with substantial social problems. 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 even may be negative in the least religious nations (*ibid.*). Diener and his associates conclude that, where people's needs are met, and they feel secure, they may feel more self-sufficient, and interest in organized religion may decline; in economically developed nations, people are better able to achieve high life satisfaction without the help of organized religion. In these societies, religiosity is less prevalent and religious and nonreligious individuals experience approximately same levels of life satisfaction (*ibid.*). Similarly, in words of Pargament (1997, as cited in: Pargament, 2002) religion might be particularly valuable to people when they are facing problems that push them to the limits of their own personal and social resources, exposing their basic vulnerability to the world; in response to situations that point to human insufficiency and finitude, religion offers much of possible solutions: spiritual support, ultimate explanations, a sense of larger, benevolent forces at work in the universe, and a purpose in life that holds sacred significance.

The second important factor is a person-culture fit effect, such that religious people had higher life satisfaction in religious nations but not in nonreligious nations (religiosity is most beneficial to life satisfaction 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 life satisfaction (Diener et al., *ibid.*). In other words, in highly religious societies, the benefits of religiosity for life satisfaction are attenuated probably because even nonreligious individuals have high levels of social support and respect, as well

as life satisfaction; 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 life satisfaction (ibid.). As more individuals enter religion, there is greater climate for religiosity which enhances religious capital – in less religious nations, the relationship between life satisfaction and religiosity thus is not evident, or even (according to some authors) may be negative (Tay et al., 2014).

Okulicz-Kozaryn (2009) agrees religion is context dependent and that at the societal level, the relationship of different dimensions of religiosity with life satisfaction is not the same for different countries and cultures. According to this author, religion is more important not only in religious societies, but also in countries with poor social welfare. Finally, ten Kate and associates (2017) add that it is found that in pluralistic contexts, where a variety of lifestyles are accepted, and personal freedom is encouraged, traditional religions meet fierce criticism, so it is possible that the degree to which a country is pluralistic also plays a role in determining the effect of religion on life satisfaction. All of these factors may be very important in countries examined here

Literature

- Bergan, A., and McConatha, J. T. (2001). Religiosity and Life Satisfaction. *Activities, Adaptation & Aging*, 24(3), 23–34.
- Bullivant, S. (2018). *Europe's Young Adults and Religion Findings from the European Social Survey (2014-16) to inform the 2018 Synod of Bishops*. St Mary's University, Twickenham, Uk; Institute Catholique de Paris, France.
- Diener, E., Tay, L., and Myers, D. G. (2011). The religion paradox: If religion makes people happy, why are so many dropping out? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 101(6), 1278-1290.
- Fagan, P. (2006). *Why Religion Matters Even More: The Impact of Religious Practice on Social Stability*. Background, 1992, Washington, DC: Heritage Foundation.
- Inglehart, R. (2000). Globalization and postmodern values. *Washington Quarterly*, 23(1): 215–228.
- Jagodzinski, W. (2009). Economic, Social, and Cultural Determinants of Life Satisfaction: Are there Differences Between Asia and Europe? *Social Indicators Research*, 97(1), 85–104. doi:10.1007/s11205-009-9555-1

- Johnson B., Brett Tompkins, R. and Webb, D. (2002). Objective hope: Assessing the effectiveness of faith-based organisations: A review of the literature, University of Pennsylvania: Center for Research on Religion and Urban Civil Society.
- Jong, E. (2008). Religious Values and Economic Growth: A Review and Assessment of Recent Studies, Nijmegen Center for Economics (NiCE) Working Paper 08-111, Nijmegen.
- Koenig, H. G. (2012). Religion, Spirituality, and Health: The Research and Clinical Implications. ISRN Psychiatry.
- Mentus, V. (2017). Validity and Reliability of Subjective Wellbeing Indicators in Sociological Research – the Measurement of Life Satisfaction, *Sociological Review*, 51(1), 157–180.
- Mochon, D., Norton M. I., and Ariely D. (2011). Who Benefits from Religion? *Social Indicators Research*, 101: 1–15.
- Norris, P., and Inglehart, R. (2004). *Sacred and secular: Religion and politics worldwide*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Okulicz-Kozaryn, A. (2010). Religiosity and life satisfaction across nations. *Mental Health, Religion and Culture*, 13(2), 155–169.
- Pargament, K. L. (2002). The bitter and the sweet: An evaluation of the costs benefits of religiousness. *Psychological Inquiry*, 13(3), 168— 181.
- Sedikides, C., and Gebauer, J. E. (2013). Religion and the self. In V. Saroglou (Ed.), *Religion, personality, and social behavior*. New York: Psychology Press.
- Tay L., Li, M., Myers, D., and Diener, E. (2014). Religiosity and Subjective Well-Being: An International Perspective. In C. Kim-Prieto (ed.). *Religion and Spirituality Across Cultures*, Cross-Cultural Advancements in Positive Psychology 9, Dordrecht: Springer.
- ten Kate, J., de Koster, W., and van der Waal, J. (2017). The Effect of Religiosity on Life Satisfaction in a Secularized Context: Assessing the Relevance of Believing and Belonging. *Review of Religious Research*, 59(2), 135–155.
- Vladislavjević, M., and Mentus, V. (2018). The Structure of Subjective Well-Being and Its Relation to Objective Well-Being Indicators: Evidence from EU-SILC for Serbia, *Psychological Reports*, online first. doi: 10.1177/0033294118756335
- Voas, D. (2007). Surveys of Behaviour, Beliefs and Affiliation: Micro-Quantitative. In: *The Sage Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, edited by James A. Beckford and N. J. Demerath, 144–66. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Yeniaras, V., and Akarsu, T. N. (2016). Religiosity and Life Satisfaction: A Multi-Dimensional Approach. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 18(6), 1815-1840.