

## Religion and Well-being

By David B. Newman, University of Southern California; Jesse Graham, Eccles School of Business, University of Utah

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### Abstract:

Religion plays an important role in the lives of many people. To understand how religion relates to well-being, it is important to consider the beliefs and practices of the world's main religions. In the first section, we begin by describing how various religions define well-being and how religions envision God. Next, we outline various beliefs about the afterlife and key religious teachings that may affect well-being. In the second section, we describe how religious practices such as prayer, meditation, and fasting could influence one's well-being. We conclude by arguing that it is crucial to consider the specific beliefs and practices of religions to understand more fully how religion relates to well-being.

**Keywords:** Religion, Well-being, Overview

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Religion is a central part of the lives of many people. According to one estimate, 68% of humans claim that religion is an important part of their lives (Diener, Tay, & Myers, 2011). According to a 2016 Gallup poll, roughly 51% of Americans attend church or synagogue once a month or more frequently (Gallup, 2016). Given the paramount role of religion in many people's lives, it is important to understand how religious beliefs and traditions could relate to individuals' well-being.

Research suggests that people who engage in religious activities report higher levels of well-being (Diener et al., 2011; Hackney & Sanders, 2003; Oishi & Diener, 2014). More specifically, religious individuals report higher levels of life satisfaction and positive feelings in the US (Diener et al, 2011) and lower levels of depression in the US and Europe (Smith, McCullough, & Poll, 2003). These effects tend to be small and positive, and the effects also depend on the level of analysis (Tay, Li, Myers, & Diener, 2014). For example, within countries, religion can fulfill needs such as a sense of belonging and community affiliation, which promote well-being. Between countries, religious practices could increase volunteerism and altruistic behaviors. The relationship between religiosity and well-being in non-western nations also appears to be positive but weak (Tay et al., 2014).

In many of these studies, religiosity has typically been measured with a single item, such as "Is religion an important part of your daily life?" or "Thinking about your life these days, how often do you attend religious services, apart from social obligations such as weddings or funerals?" Although such measures could be informative in predicting well-being, specific religious beliefs and practices could relate to well-being in nuanced ways. In order to more fully understand the complex relationship between religion and well-being, researchers should carefully consider what religions *say* about well-being. The goal of this chapter is to provide an overview of these teachings, and of how the beliefs and practices of the major world religions relate to well-being.

To provide an overarching framework to this chapter, we rely on the distinction of *doxis* vs. *praxis* often used to define religions (e.g., Snoek, 1999). *Doxis*, from the Greek word *doxa*, refers to worldviews, beliefs, and thoughts, whereas *praxis* refers to actions, rituals, and practices. Religions are often defined by these two characteristics. Given these two dimensions, we believed it would be helpful to use this distinction in framing our chapter.

To narrow our focus within each of these broad dimensions of religion, we rely on the conceptualizations of religion developed by Ninian Smart (Smart, 1998, 1999). According to Smart, a

religious framework is composed of seven dimensions: narrative/mythological, doctrinal, ethical, institutional, material, ritual, and experiential (Smart, 1999). These dimensions capture the broad and encompassing nature of religion. The *narrative dimension* refers to the foundational stories of a religion, passed down through history either orally or written. These stories often concern the religion's founder. The *doctrinal dimension* is related to the narrative dimension as it refers to the philosophical nature of the religion, such as the nature of God. Next, the *ethical dimension* refers to the rules or laws of a religion. The *social or institutional dimension* concerns the organization and gathering of a religious community, for example in a church, mosque, or temple. Religions typically designate a particular day of the week for worship in addition to particular days of celebration or remembrance during the year. Somewhat related, the *material dimension* refers to specific places and artifacts that are of particular importance to a religion. The *ritual dimension* concerns the specific practices in which religions express themselves, such as prayer and meditation. Finally, the *experiential dimension* refers to the strong emotional experience connected to the rituals that provide them with meaning.

The advantage of such an organization and framework allows one to categorize and define a religion. Of course, debate continues as to the best way to do this and whether it is even possible (cf., James, 1902). Putting this debate aside, we opted to use a common-sense approach by describing the main world religions. Most individuals are familiar with the names used to define the world's core religions, and some scholars categorize religion using these common labels (e.g., Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, etc.; Smith, 1991). Similar to Smith's categorization, we believed that fine distinctions between particular religious denominations, such as the difference between Baptists and Presbyterians, would not be fruitful for a concise overview. Therefore, we have opted to rely on Smart's dimensions of religion to guide our discussion of how religion relates to well-being while still referring to core religions. After discussing the main topics and dimensions, we will provide examples from the major world religions, such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism.

In the first half of the chapter we cover *doxis*, religious beliefs and thoughts. First, we describe how religions conceptualize well-being. Next, we discuss how various religions conceive God (e.g., as a forgiving and loving father, as a harsh and powerful entity) and how these conceptions might relate to well-being. Following this, we depict various beliefs of the afterlife and how these thoughts could influence one's current well-being. Finally, we outline various key rules and guidelines that religions endorse and what role these rules play in influencing one's well-being. Finally, in terms of Smart's dimensions, *doxis* covers the narrative, doctrinal, and ethical dimensions.

The second half of the chapter covers *praxis*, the rituals and practices of religions. We begin with a description of many common rituals such as prayer, meditation, fasting, religious services, pilgrimages, and festivals and holiday celebrations. In each of these sections, we discuss the emotional or experiential aspect that accompanies these rituals. These rituals and practices overlap with Smart's social, material, ritual, and experiential dimensions. The chapter concludes with a section on implications for well-being research.

## Doxis

The key beliefs and thoughts discussed in this section cover religious conceptions of well-being, envisagement of God, beliefs about the afterlife, and ethical teachings.

### Conceptions of Well-being

Before discussing how religions define well-being, it is important to delineate different types and definitions of well-being used by researchers. One broad and helpful way of classifying well-being is through the hedonic vs. eudaimonic distinction (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Hedonic well-being refers to pleasure and positive feelings. The goal of striving for as much pleasure and hedonic well-being as possible was even endorsed by the philosophers Aristippus, Epicurus, Hobbes, Locke, and Hume (Joshanloo, 2013a). In contrast, eudaimonic well-being refers to a sense of meaning, purpose, and fulfillment in life. Plato, Aristotle, and Fromm endorsed this type of well-being by suggesting that it was more worthwhile to strive after virtue than hedonic happiness (Ryan & Deci, 2001).

Empirically, hedonic well-being typically includes measures of positive emotions, negative emotions, and life satisfaction. Someone experiencing high levels of hedonic well-being is assumed to experience high levels of positive emotions and life satisfaction, and low levels of negative emotions. A common way of categorizing some of these measures is through the term subjective well-being, which consists of positive emotions, negative emotions, and life satisfaction (Diener, 2000). Positive and negative emotions define an affective well-being component, and life satisfaction defines a cognitive well-being component.

Specific definitions and measures of eudaimonic well-being definitions often vary. Measures of

eudaimonic well-being include self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, personal growth (Ryff, 1989), meaning in life (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006), vitality, and self-actualization (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Despite the many different measures used to capture eudaimonic well-being, researchers tend to believe that eudaimonic well-being is some form of well-being that extends beyond pleasant emotions and feelings.

A useful way of categorizing the well-being types is through the categories of evaluative, experiential, and eudaimonic (Schwarz & Strack, 1999; Steptoe, Deaton, & Stone, 2015). Evaluative refers to judgments of life satisfaction; experiential refers to emotions, often captured in real time through the use of ecological momentary assessment techniques (Shiffman, Stone, & Hufford, 2008); and eudaimonic refers to a sense of meaning and purpose in life. In terms of the broader distinction between hedonic and eudaimonia, evaluative and experiential would fall under the hedonic category.

With this categorization in mind, it is important to understand what happiness and well-being mean in different religious contexts. Certain differences in relationships between religious practices and well-being could stem from how religions define well-being. In Judeo-Christian traditions, two primary Hebrew words are used to refer to happiness: *ashrey* and *smh* (Charry, 2010). *Ashrey* is often translated as “blessed” or “happy” although it does not refer to a subjective pleasant state or feeling. This word is often found in the Psalms and the book of Proverbs. Typically, this word is used in connection to God and God’s teaching. Grammatically, *ashrey* always accompanies another noun to describe the meaning of the word. For example, Psalm 1 begins with the word *ashrey*: “Blessed (*ashrey*) is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked....” One would not use the word *ashrey* as a self-descriptive adjective the way one might use the word happy in contemporary language (e.g., “I am happy”).

In Greek, *ashrey* is translated as *macarios*, which could also be defined as happy or blessed. The word *macarios* is the word used often in Jesus’ sermon on the mount. Here the word *macarios* is used in a similar way to its use in the Old Testament, in connection to God’s commands (e.g., “Blessed (*macarios*) are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...”; Matthew 5:6).

The word *ashrey* has been defined somewhere in between hedonic and eudaimonic well-being (Charry, 2011). Although it is often translated as happy, its meaning is certainly different from a pleasant emotional state one might experience at a party. Perhaps *ashrey* could be considered closer to eudaimonia as it refers to a sense of “enduring pleasure, contentment, satisfaction...” (Charry, 2011, p. 244), but this must be connected to a life characterized by obedience to God’s commands.

The Hebrew word *smh* also means happiness and is found often in the book of Psalms. In contrast to *ashrey*, however, *smh* is more closely related to a positive feeling (Charry, 2010). *Smh* can also be used self-referentially (e.g., “I am happy”) and would be categorized as a form of hedonic well-being. Thus, happiness in the Old and New Testaments can refer to both hedonic and eudaimonic well-being.

The concept of happiness or well-being in Islam is also a complex one. It has often been defined in terms of physical, social, mental, and spiritual health (El Azayem & Hedayat-Diba, 1994). Similar to Christianity and Judaism, the concept of happiness is connected to having faith and practicing that faith, i.e., by obeying commands (Joshani, 2013a). Furthermore, the Islamic culture views true happiness as inner peace that comes from devotion to God (Joshani, 2013a). In terms of the hedonic vs. eudaimonic distinction, the goal of Islam is not to maximize positive emotions or minimize negative emotions (Quran 7:169). Thus, this would seem to favor a eudaimonic goal. However, the Quran also says that Muslims who follow customs, laws, and lifestyles will experience positive emotions, suggesting some hedonic benefits of the devout life as well (Joshani, 2013a). Moreover, Islam values low arousal positive emotional states over high arousal positive emotional states, a finding consistent with some cross-cultural research (Tsai, 2007). Thus, the concept of happiness or well-being in Islam consists of both low-arousal hedonic and eudaimonic aspects.

In Buddhism, the concept of well-being is often connected to a practice and cultivation of an equanimity mindset that is achieved through meditation. One must first realize that life is suffering (the first Noble Truth). From this realization, there are multiple steps one should take, outlined in the Eightfold Path, such as practicing mindfulness and compassion. One purpose of these steps is to detach oneself from the desires of the world. In light of these teachings, happiness is sometimes defined as the state beyond bliss that is achieved through right concentration and meditation. Thus, the type of happiness one should strive to achieve does not refer to the hedonic definition of happiness described and sought after in many western cultures.

In Hindu traditions, one of the key objectives is *kama*, which can be defined as pursuit of sensual pleasures, broadly defined. That is, *kama* refers broadly to all senses involved in aesthetic experiences, such as romantic love and the appreciation of beauty in music, art, and food. This concept relates to the notion of

hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. Furthermore, this pursuit of sensual pleasures should not be pursued over other primary objectives, such as the pursuits of righteousness (*dharma*), economic prosperity (*artha*), and release from sorrow (*moksa*). Thus, the concept of well-being may not be as highly prioritized as some other values.

Finally, it is important to briefly describe the moral concept of pursuing happiness across religions. In Christianity, for example, Jesus taught people to value the pursuit of a life with God rather than a pursuit of hedonistic pleasures. Jesus once spent 40 days fasting to spend time with God. His teaching to pursue God rather than pleasure evolved somewhat in the Middle Ages such that Christians believed the pursuit of happiness to be morally corrupt. In Islam, the pursuit of hedonism has been discouraged since the original writings of the Quran (Joshanloo, 2013b). Even modern Muslim teachings oppose the pursuit of hedonic well-being, although extreme asceticism and celibacy is also not advocated (Husain, 1998). The Buddha denounced a life of pleasure after becoming aware of sickness and death; He led a life of asceticism until receiving enlightenment. One of the Buddha's teachings was that desire, including sensual desire, was a cause of suffering. In sum, the main world religions do not teach their followers to pursue happiness as characterized by a hedonistic lifestyle. Rather, they instruct their followers toward a pursuit of deeper meaning, such as connection to God or a state of mindfulness through meditation. In this way the major world religions, by urging against simple pursuit of pleasure but promising deeper meaning and purpose, embody the hedonic/eudaimonic distinction in the modern science of happiness.

### **Conceptions of God/gods**

The way in which one views God or other supernatural powers could potentially influence well-being. For example, viewing God as a harsh, judging figure can lead people to cheat less (Shariff & Norenzayan, 2011). This action may follow from a sense of fear of punishment that could lower one's well-being. The specific views that religions have about God -- from the metaphysical nature of God to what God is like -- can affect people's well-being as well.

In Christian and Judeo traditions, the nature of God is quite complex. On the one hand, God is viewed as a powerful, judging God. For example, when God sends a flood to destroy mankind with the exception of Noah and his family, God clearly shows power. He is also viewed as a judging God who does not tolerate sin. Such patterns are seen in the Old Testament in various instances, such as the flood during the time of Noah. On the other hand, the God of the Bible is also viewed as a loving father who cares for His children and who forgives those who repent. This view is exemplified in particular in the New Testament, as Jesus welcomes children to come to Him, places them in His arms, and blesses them (Mark 10: 13-16). In numerous occasions, Jesus also forgave those who had sinned (e.g., a paralyzed man, Matthew 9; those who crucified Him, Luke 23).

These particular views of God can lead to different well-being outcomes. Imagining God as a punishing God could lead to a sense of fear which could lower one's well-being, particularly if one believes the sins committed are not forgivable. In contrast, imagining a loving God who desires a personal relationship with people could provide one with a greater sense of hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. The mechanisms explaining how social relationships could increase well-being could be similar to the mechanisms explaining how a relationship with a kind and loving God could increase well-being. This likely improves both hedonic and eudaimonic aspects of well-being.

In Islam, God is viewed as a powerful creator who can judge and also as a merciful and compassionate God. In a similar manner to the Christian view of God, this juxtaposition could have diverse effects on well-being. In contrast to the Christian view of the Trinity (i.e., God as three persons in one), Muslims believe in a monotheistic God, i.e., God as a single entity. They also believe that God cannot be fully comprehended, but they believe it is possible to have a personal relationship with God. That is, no intermediary is necessary to communicate with God.

The view of God in Hinduism and Buddhism is a bit less straightforward. There are various different views in Hinduism about the nature of god, whether one even exists, whether multiple gods exist, etc. Some Buddhists, such as those part of the Theravada school, follow the teachings of Buddha, but they would not consider Buddha God in the same way that Christians refer to Jesus as God or the way Muslims refers to Allah as God. Buddhists who are part of the Mahayana school, in contrast, consider Buddha as a god. Among the various schools of Buddhism, a main focus seems to center on the practice of teachings rather than on the nature of God. We will return to the effect of these teachings on well-being in a later section.

### **Beliefs about the Afterlife**

Another aspect of Smart's doctrinal dimension concerns beliefs, specifically regarding views of the afterlife. Similar to common values, these beliefs can have important and somewhat complex associations

with well-being.

A common belief among some of the main world religions is the belief that the afterlife consists of some form of heaven and hell. In the US, for example, 85% of Christians and 89% of Muslims reported believing in heaven; 70% and 76% of Christians and Muslims, respectively, believe hell exists (Pew Research Center, 2014a). Islam describes heaven as a place filled with joy and happiness, also referred to as paradise (*Jannah*). Christianity describes heaven as the dwelling place of God (Psalm 33), paradise (Luke 23), and where the streets are paved in gold (Revelation 21). Hell, in contrast, is described in Islam as a place of blazing fire. In Christianity, hell is often depicted as a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth.

According to Christian and Islamic traditions, people will face a day of judgment and their fate will be determined, often by what they have believed or done while on earth. A common belief seems to follow the saying that one will reap what one has sown. Good deeds and actions will be rewarded, whereas bad deeds will be punished.

This view of the afterlife and judgment can certainly influence well-being. One psychological theory that pertains to these beliefs is systems justification theory (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004), which states that individuals want to hold a favorable view of themselves and a positive attitude about the system and how it is organized. Although the system often refers to current political and economic situations, it can be applied to beliefs about the afterlife. Some empirical work suggests that the belief in a just world in which one can rationalize inequality relates positively to life satisfaction (Napier & Jost, 2008).

Although Christianity and Islam believe in some sort of reward and punishment system, it is important to make a distinction between different views about how one can enter heaven. According to some denominations of Christianity, one enters heaven by committing good deeds or actions (e.g., going to church/mass, giving money to the poor, etc.). When asked about whether one will go to heaven, this view may cause some uncertainty, stress, and worry (e.g., "have the good deeds I have done outweighed the bad ones?"), which could lower one's well-being. In other Christian denominations, salvation is not earned by deeds committed by the individual, but rather it is granted by grace, a sacrifice made by Jesus on behalf of those who believe in God. This view of salvation by grace likely promotes a sense of calm, relief, and joy which could increase well-being. This distinction between belief in salvation by grace vs. works -- and its relationship to well-being -- remains a fruitful avenue for future research.

According to Islamic traditions of the afterlife, both notions of grace and works are important. On the one hand, Muslims are instructed to pray daily, give to the poor, and fast; they are rewarded based on these actions. On the other hand, entering Paradise is ultimately based on God's grace. According to one hadith by the Prophet Muhammed, "No one of you will enter Paradise by his deeds alone." They asked, "Not even you, O Messenger of Allah?" He said, "Not even me, unless Allah covers me with His Grace and Mercy." Some scholars believe that entering Paradise depends on God's grace, and the level in Paradise depends on one's actions. Clearly, grace and action play important roles in understanding the afterlife in Islam.

Related to the notion of the afterlife is the belief in *karma*, common in Buddhism and Hinduism. According to these religious traditions, karma represents a cycle of suffering and rebirth. Actions and events that occur in one's life could be the result of the actions of one's life, either in one's own past or from a past life. The general belief is that actions may have consequences in the future. The good deeds could be rewarded by a higher being. In terms of one's well-being, this belief could lead to exaggerated reactions to positive and negative events. For example, when a negative event occurs, one might believe that God is punishing them even though they did nothing wrong at the present time. Alternatively, when positive events occur, one might receive a boost in momentary happiness if one believes that this positive event is a reward for a previous action.

### **Ethical Teachings**

There are certain teachings that are common across many or all of the main religions of the world. These teachings express moral values, rules of conduct, and ethical principles. Here we describe a few of these common rules and teachings and explain their relationship to well-being.

The first is the "golden rule," which states that you should do to others as you would have others do to you. Practicing this principle should increase one's well-being in multiple ways. It could increase one's eudaimonic well-being by providing one with a closer sense of connection to another. It could also provide a reciprocal effect in which the recipient of the kind act could become happier which could reflect positively on the benefactor. Empirically, some research suggests that people tend to report greater well-being on days when they engage in eudaimonic behaviors, such as volunteering, in comparison to days when they engage in hedonistic activities, such as attending a party or getting drunk (Steger, Kashdan, & Oishi, 2008). However, doing unto others as one would do unto oneself could also result in lower well-

being if these actions require one to sacrifice certain needs that would otherwise increase well-being, such as autonomy. In fact, when Mother Theresa was engaged in helping the poor, she often felt sad, unhappy, and lonely (Ward & King, 2016; Zaleski, 2003).

Related to golden rule, according to many religions, it is considered better to give than to receive. In Islam, for instance, individuals are told that true enrichment comes primarily from the soul. Secondary importance is placed on material wealth. In Christianity, money is listed as the root of all evil. Pursuing money can be considered an idol and can lead to greed. Instead, individuals are told to give away a portion of money back to God as a tithe. It is often said that it is better to give than to receive. In contrast, according to the Hindu principle of *Artha*, one should actually pursue wealth or material well-being. Buddhists believe that money is not intrinsically evil or wrong, but it could be used for the wrong reasons.

Research has shown that there is a positive relationship between income and well-being, but the positive effects tend to slope off around yearly salaries of \$75,000, depending on the specific well-being indicator (Kahneman & Deaton, 2010). The way one spends money, however, can influence one's well-being (Dunn, Gilbert, & Wilson, 2011). Spending money on others, for example, can actually increase momentary well-being (Dunn, Aknin, & Norton, 2008). Presumably, the act of prosocial spending fosters social relationships and can make one feel good about oneself.

Many of the world religions encourage its followers to express gratitude. Christians are called to give thanks in all circumstances (1 Thessalonians 5:18) and express gratitude to God (Psalm 118). The Quran mentions that the soul will profit by being grateful (Quran 31:12). The Buddha taught his followers to express gratitude as well. Empirical research suggests that expressing and feeling grateful can increase one's well-being (e.g., Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Nezlek, Newman, & Thrash, 2017; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). Relatedly, it is commonly taught that one should not worry. For example, Christians are commanded to not be anxious about anything (Philippians 4:6). Removing worry can alleviate stress and improve well-being.

Similarly, many of the world religions encourage or teach their followers to forgive one another of their wrongdoings. The act of simply belonging to a religious group could even increase the likelihood that one would forgive others (Wuthnow, 2000). Individuals who tend to forgive others report higher self-esteem and lower anxiety and depression (Hebl & Enright, 1993). The process or act of forgiving someone could increase one's well-being by lowering grief, anger and anxiety (Coyle & Enright, 1997). In one study examining forgiveness behaviors over time, benevolence toward an aggressor was positively related to satisfaction with life, positive mood and was negatively related to negative affect (Bono, McCullough, & Root, 2008). Thus, the teaching to forgive another of their wrong could help improve one's well-being.

Moreover, one should not compare oneself with others, but rather should be content with what one has. The Bible often warns people to not compare them with others, but to think about how God views them. In Islam, individuals are actually encouraged to look at those below them, i.e., those less fortunate, and not to look above them. Research suggests that comparisons can alter the standard to which one makes a judgment (e.g., Bless & Schwarz, 2010).

In addition to these relatively straightforward ways of attaining happiness, some religious teachings concerning well-being are actually counterintuitive. For example, one of the Beatitudes from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount says, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." As described previously in this chapter, the word for blessed here is the Greek word *macarios* which is roughly equivalent to the Hebrew word *ashrey*, meaning happy or blessed, but typically in reference to obedience of God's commands. Another counterintuitive Beatitude says, "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." The second half of each of these verses provides some insight into how those who mourn and those who are meek will be happy. Nevertheless, these teachings do not converge with commonsense views of how to become happy. Finally, at the end of the Beatitudes, people are told to rejoice and be glad when others insult and persecute them because of God. They are told that their reward in Heaven will be great.

These teachings actually overlap to some extent with the teachings concerning how one should handle negative experiences. According to the Hindu principle of *moksa*, one can find liberation from sorrow. The goal is to achieve a level of bliss or happiness by understanding one's soul. This should help one in the midst of life's setbacks. That is, one can actually experience happiness in the face of tragedies. Buddhist wisdom says that the mind should be balanced and that mental training can help one maintain a level of happiness in the face of life's difficulties. As discussed previously, Christians can expect to suffer and those individuals should be considered blessed and happy if the suffering comes because of their faith. In a similar manner, Islam preaches that God tests people through hardships. This knowledge can actually help one cope with suffering and could increase one's well-being in the long term.

## Praxis

The second section of the chapter concerns religious practices and behaviors and how they relate to well-being. The description of these practices and behaviors conceptually overlap with various dimensions outlined by Smart, such as ritual, ethical, and institutional. We begin with a section on religious rituals. The goal of this section is to provide a broad overview of some of the main rituals common across the main world religions. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to cover every ritual, so we will focus on acts of prayer, meditation, fasting, worship services, pilgrimages, and holiday festivals and celebrations.

### Prayer

According to a Pew Research Center poll, 55% of Americans pray on a regular basis (Pew Research Center, 2014b). Some form of prayer or communication with a higher being is described in many religions, although the exact form of prayer may vary from religion to religion. In Islam, for example, prayer is a mandated part of their religion as one of the five pillars of Islam. Muslims are required to pray five times a day; parts of these prayers involve reciting sections of the Quran in Arabic. In addition to these obligatory prayers, Muslims may pray voluntarily, and additional congregational prayers occur as well. Obligatory or congregational prayers are also often performed in various Catholic and Anglican denominations. Many Christian traditions have prayers that are recited from passages in the Bible, but there is also great emphasis on voluntary prayers. These prayers occur at various times during the day. In fact, Christians are called to pray without ceasing (Thessalonians 5:17). Prayers are often regarded as conversations with God. Specific categories of topics such as adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication are often taught as a guideline for how one should pray. Prayers among Hindus and Buddhists are also important aspects of their worship. Sometimes prayers occur in private in the face of a deity (e.g., an image or statue) or in larger congregations.

Given the nuances and different types of prayer, the relationship to well-being could be complex. Prayers should help one feel connected or closer to God, and this could influence well-being depending on how one views God (e.g., as a loving father or as a judgmental ruler). The effects of obligatory prayer on well-being may dissipate with time given the habitual nature. Voluntary prayers may have a stronger influence on well-being or could be the result of some event which could have a strong influence on well-being (e.g., a negative event occurs which causes one to feel sad and to pray). The content of the prayer could influence well-being in different ways. Some research suggests that individuals who engage in prayers of thanksgiving and adoration tend to be happier than those who do not, whereas those who engage in obligatory prayers, and prayers of confession and supplication tend to report lower levels of well-being (Whittington & Scher, 2010). Of course, further research is needed to understand the effect of these processes on well-being. Additional research is required to understand the effect of prayer location (e.g., whether one is in isolation or with others) on well-being.

### Meditation

Related to prayer, meditation and mindfulness techniques involve some type of quiet reflection, an emptying of one's thoughts, and a time in which one is not disturbed or distracted by external stimuli or environmental factors. In Buddhist traditions, meditation involves a focus on a narrow or specific object, such as one's breath. Next, the goal is to be mindful of one's environment and surroundings while still remaining calm and focused on the narrow object. In Hindu traditions, the goal of meditation is to become one with God. Although people commonly associate meditation and mindfulness to Buddhism, meditation and mindfulness techniques are also practiced in Christian traditions. Christians are often called to meditate on God's Word (i.e., the Bible) by considering the commands and reflecting on them.

Research suggests that mindfulness can lower one's stress and increase well-being (e.g., Brown & Ryan, 2003). The exact mechanisms explaining how and why mindfulness techniques improve well-being is an active area of research (e.g., Gu, Strauss, Bond, & Cavanagh, 2015). Future studies can examine whether these processes exist within religious contexts as well.

### Fasting

Another common ritual in many religions is fasting. Similar to meditation, the goal of fasting is to become less focused on a particular external distraction. In Islam, fasting is one of the five pillars. Muslims are called to fast from dawn to sunset each day during Ramadan. The goal is to feel more closely connected to God, and this could increase a feeling of attachment to God. Because all Muslims are called to fast during the same time, it could also promote a sense of belonging and connection to others which could increase well-being. Hindus will often fast on particular days of the month or even specific days of the week. It can also occur during religious festivals and holidays. Buddhists will often fast during spiritual retreats and it accompanies meditation. In many Christian denominations, fasting involves not only abstinence from food, but emphasis is placed on devoting oneself to God and Biblical commands. This

emphasis on a connection to God, similar to the other religions during fasting, likely increases one's well-being.

Of course, fasting could occur with more negative thoughts and feelings. In Judaism, for example, fasting often occurs with sorrow. The two most common days of fasting are on Yom Kippur and Tisha B'Av. Yom Kippur is known as the day of repentance or atonement. This is typically a sorrowful day as one reflects on and repents for one's sins. Tisha B'Av is a day meant for remembering tragedies that have happened to the Jewish people. Thus, the act of fasting on these days likely occurs with lower levels of well-being. Thus, the act of fasting may lead to increases or decreases in well-being depending on the specific contexts.

### **Worship Services**

Religious services and community worship are important ritualistic experiences that have important implications for well-being. In Christian and Jewish traditions, fellow believers gather together at a church, cathedral, or synagogue for worship. At worship services, people hear the word of God, often through the preaching of a pastor, priest, rabbi, or spiritual leader. Songs are often sung and passages of the Old Testament or Scripture are read aloud. In some denominations, attendance is considered obligatory, whereas attendance is voluntary in others. Muslims also gather together for worship, but the emphasis of meeting at a mosque is typically for prayer and a reminder. An imam will deliver a homily or short speech on Fridays, but the meeting or gathering follows a different format from Christian or Jewish worship services. Hindus and Buddhists often meet together for temple worship even though emphasis is also placed on private worship. Buddhist monks will often live together in intentional and/or monastic communities.

Being together in community can fulfill needs for affiliation and belonging, which can increase eudaimonic well-being. Community can also provide encouragement, laughter, and joy, which could increase hedonic well-being. A gathering together for the purpose of worship provides individuals with a sense of unity and it binds people together (Graham & Haidt, 2010). These gatherings also provide individuals with a social support system that could increase well-being (Salsman, Brown, Brechting, & Carlson, 2005).

### **Pilgrimages**

An example of another community activity is a pilgrimage, a form of which is present in most of the main world religions. In Islam, Muslims are obligated to take a pilgrimage to Mecca at some point in their life as this is one of the five pillars of Islam. The pilgrimage involves sleeping in various desert plains, walking around the Kaaba in Mecca, and walking between Mount Safa and Mount Marwah.

In other religions, pilgrimages are not required but are often undertaken by a substantial portion of followers. In Hindu traditions, for example, various cities in India are visited which are considered to be holy. Some Christians will take trips to the Middle East to visit important sites described in the Old and New Testament. An important pilgrimage among Catholics is the Camino de Santiago (aka Way of St. James), a route that culminates in a visit of the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Spain. The culminating purpose of this pilgrimage is to visit the remains of Saint James, who is believed to be buried in Santiago de Compostela.

Pilgrimages, when done with other fellow believers, can have similar positive effects on one's well-being as worship services. These acts likely bind people closer together, providing them with a sense of closeness and bonding. These pilgrimages can also instill experiences of awe and wonder, experiences that often covary with well-being (e.g., Rudd, Vohs, & Aaker, 2012).

### **Celebrations of Holidays and Festivals**

Festivals and holidays can be times of great celebrations and exuberance, times of somber reflection, or some mix of the two. In Christian traditions, the celebrations of Christmas and Easter are oriented around the birth and resurrection of Jesus. These days of celebration are joyous occasions accompanied by food, presents, and friends and family. The Jewish New Year celebration of Rosh Hashanah is also a festive and joyous occasion. Buddhist festivals are typically joyous occasions as well that involve food and some sort of ceremony.

More somber holidays include Good Friday and Yom Kippur, days of remembering the death of Jesus and the atonement of one's sins, respectively. The two major holidays in Islam, Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha begin with the word *Eid* which translates to solemn festival. Eid al-Fitr occurs just as Ramadan ends and means the "festival of breaking of the fast." It is obligatory to give money to the poor, pray, and display signs of happiness. Eid al-Adha is celebrated in remembrance of Abraham who was saved from having to sacrifice his son Ishmael after being presented with a ram as a substitute. This festival is



sometimes referred to as the festival of the sacrifice.

In Hindu traditions, the word for festival comes from the Sanskrit word “utsava” which means removal of worldly sorrow. Hindu religious festivals are typically joyous occasions (e.g., *Pongal*) but they can also include time for fasting and serious reflections (e.g., *Maha Shivaratri*). The festival celebrations can sometimes last for several days and often involve feasting with friends and family. This would certainly seem to increase hedonic and eudaimonic aspects of well-being.

Clearly, festivals can have mixed effects on well-being. Most celebrations likely increase hedonic and eudaimonic well-being as they involve a gathering of people with food and merriment. Somber holidays and festivals likely do not increase hedonic forms of well-being at the moment, but they could increase a sense of meaning and purpose in life by solidifying one’s belief or by enabling one to remember a somber past.

## Conclusions

In this chapter, we have outlined various beliefs and practices of the main religions of the world. These beliefs and practices could have important implications for well-being researchers and could highlight avenues for future research. Although it has been shown that religious individuals report greater well-being, the exact mechanisms are less well understood. Specific religious practices could potentially mediate the relationship between religiosity and well-being. Moreover, certain religious beliefs may moderate relationships between religiosity and well-being. For example, the belief about how one is accepted into heaven (e.g., grace vs. works) could moderate the relationship between a specific act (e.g., committing a transgression) and well-being. Among those who believe they will earn salvation through their actions, a transgression could cause one to worry about how that could potentially affect their eternal destination, whereas those who believe in salvation by grace may not be as influenced by a transgression in terms of the well-being. Furthermore, a greater understanding of the process from religiosity to well-being could be achieved by building models that integrate beliefs and practices as moderators and mediators, respectively. For example, social support found in community worship may mediate the relationship between religiosity and well-being more strongly among Christians than other religious groups. The key mediator among Hindus, on the other hand, may be related to a sense of peace or tranquility that occurs through individual prayer. That is, a specific religious belief may moderate the mediation or indirect effect from religiosity to well-being.

To examine such models and test these kinds of theories, it is critical to move past single item measures of religiosity. One possible solution would be to ask participants to report their specific religious belief. To make such statistical comparisons, it would require large and diverse samples. Of course, there is often great heterogeneity of specific religious beliefs and practices within a particular religion, denomination, or sect. For example, two individuals might report being Buddhist, but yet their beliefs and practices may vary substantially. It would be important to ask participants to describe their actual beliefs and to record their religious practices in real time.

Future research could utilize text analysis techniques to capture individual differences in religious beliefs. Another avenue to address religious practices would be to utilize ecological momentary assessment techniques by having participants record their religious experiences and well-being in the moment.

One limitation of this review is that we have not addressed all religious beliefs and practices. Within each major religious group there are many specific denominations and sects, and these differences should be considered when researchers examine the link from religiosity to well-being. There are also individuals who identify as atheist or agnostic who nevertheless have spiritual beliefs and/or engage in certain religious practices, such as meditation (e.g., Harris, 2014). Future research should try to disentangle these individual differences. Our goal was to provide a useful overview of what the main world religions say about well-being through their beliefs and practices. We hope that well-being researchers can use this chapter as a guiding framework to address research questions concerning religion and well-being.

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