

Study Proves Religious People Have More Joy

There may be a few atheists in foxholes, but a new study suggests that in societies under stress, those who are religious outnumber—and are happier than—their nonreligious counterparts.

Where peace and plenty are the norm, however, religious participation is lower and people are happier whether or not they are religious, the researchers found.

The study analyzed data from the 2005-2009 Gallup World Poll, a survey of people in more than 150 countries that included questions about religious affiliation, life satisfaction, respect, social support and positive and negative feelings. The researchers also looked at 2009 Gallup polling data from the U.S.

This is the first study to analyze religion and its relationship to happiness on a global scale, said University of Illinois emeritus professor of psychology, Ed Diener, who led the research and is a senior scientist with the Gallup Organization.

Previous studies, many of them focused on the U.S., suggested that religious people tend to be happier than nonreligious people, Diener said. The new findings indicate, however, that religiousness and happiness are closely linked to the characteristics of the societies in which people live, he said.

“Circumstances predict religiousness,” he said. “Difficult circumstances lead more strongly to people being religious. And in religious societies and in difficult circumstances, religious people are happier than nonreligious people. But in nonreligious societies or more benign societies where many

people's needs are met, religious people aren't happier—everyone's happier.”

Religious affiliation appears to boost happiness and well-being in societies that fail to provide adequate food, jobs, health care, security and educational opportunities, the researchers found.

Religious people in religious societies are more likely to report that they feel respected, receive more social support and experience more positive and less negative feelings than their peers who are not religious.

In secular societies, which in many cases are wealthier and have more social supports, religious and nonreligious people experience higher well-being and positive feelings. Religious people in secular countries report more negative feelings than the nonreligious do, however.

The same trends can be seen in individual states of the U.S., the researchers found, with more people reporting they are religious in poorer states with fewer social supports, Diener said. Religious affiliation also seems to boost their wellbeing and positive feelings, compared to their nonreligious compatriots.

The differences in religious affiliation between states is quite pronounced, the researchers found, with Mississippi reporting the highest (88) and Vermont the lowest (44) percent of people reporting that religion is an important part of their daily life.

Globally, 68 percent of people surveyed said that they were religious.

The study team included graduate student Sien Chieh (Louis) Tay, and David G. Myers of Hope College, in Holland, Mich.