



**Doctoral School of  
Sociology and  
Communication  
Science**

## **THESIS SYNOPSIS**

**Hámori Ádám**

**Well-being and Christianity**

**Relationship between Contemporary European Religiosity and Subjective  
Well-Being**

PhD Dissertation

**Supervisor:**

**Rosta Gergely PhD**  
associate professor

Budapest, 2021

**Department of Sociology and Social Policy**

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**Table of contents**

- 1. RESEARCH BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES ..... 4
  - 1.1. *THEORETICAL BACKGROUND* ..... 4
  - 1.2. *RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES*..... 10
- 2. METHODS ..... 11
  - 2.1. *ANALYTIC STRATEGY*..... 11
  - 2.2. *DATA AND VARIABLES*..... 12
- 3. FINDINGS OF THE EMPIRICAL RESEARCH ..... 14
  - 3.1. *MAIN RESULTS*..... 14
  - 3.2. *IMPLICATIONS*..... 20
- 4. REFERENCES..... 21
- 5. RELEVANT PUBLICATIONS BY THE AUTHOR ..... 30

# 1. RESEARCH BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

## *1.1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND*

This research aims at a deeper understanding of the assumed causal relationship between religiosity and subjective well-being in contemporary Europe. Earlier research suggested a positive link between religiosity and happiness even when controlled for socio-demographic background. While the relationship between religious commitment and diverse elements of subjective well-being (health, perceived social status, life satisfaction, positive emotions etc.) is an emergent research field, the causality of this relationship and mechanisms that can explain it need further scrutiny. Large-scale cross-national longitudinal surveys including data on religiosity and well-being provide important data for gaining explanations that are more reliable. Therefore, I build this research on the multivariate statistical secondary analysis of a cross-national quantitative database offering a variety of information on religiosity and well-being.

The relationship between religion and social structural positions and material well-being has been evidenced in various contexts by, among others, Darnell and Sherkat (1997), Sherkat and Darnell (1999), Davis and Robinson (2001), Hegedűs (2001), Sander (2002), Lipford and Tollison (2003), Rosta (2007), Sherkat (2008), Glaeser and Sacerdote (2008), Hungerman (2014), Keister (2003, 2008), Schieman (2010) and Spenkuch (2017). A number of research findings focus on the issue how religious persuasion or belonging relate with social status, and how this influences happiness. (Lelkes, 2002; Gyorgyovich and Pillók, 2014; Bradshaw and Ellison, 2010; Hoverd and Sibley, 2013; Gundlach and Opfinger, 2013)

However, the direction of the association is apparently unclear or context-dependent. Notably, material well-being showed a variability across religions and denominations. Among others, Davis and Robinson (2001), Spenkuch (2017) or Jagodzinski (2009) have observed the contribution of different denominations to the persistence of various work values or ethics. Furthermore, Malka and Chatman (2003) evidenced that differing work orientations affected higher subjective well-being, job satisfaction and income on the long run differently.

As to the individual level, faith and happiness are, according to several studies, closely linked. As Francis (2011), reviewing relevant theoretical literature and some empirical findings, concludes, “a clear and consistent positive association exists between religion and happiness”, despite the lack of clarity and consistency in the conceptualization of the two (Francis, 2011, p. 113). Research into this relationship goes back as early as the 1970s: Hadaway (1978) suggested that people claiming to be religious showed a higher level of life satisfaction compared to non-

religious population. More recently, Diener et al (1999), Sherkat and Ellison (1999), Dolan, Peasgood and White (2008), Myers (2008), Rosta (2011) and Fidrmuc and Tunali (2015), among many others, admitted that religion may have had a positive effect on subjective well-being. However, some scholars debated the positive association between religiousness and happiness (see, for example, Argyle and Hills, 2000; Francis, Ziebertz and Lewis, 2003; Stolz, 2009; Sillick, Stevens and Cathcart, 2016). Snoep (2008) found only an insignificantly weak correlation or a relationship that was significant in certain parts. Diener, Tay and Myers (2011), Cohen and Johnson (2017), Ross et al (2009), Mochon, Norton and Ariely (2011) Monnot and Stolz (2016) and Van Cappellen et al (2016). Importance of the context and the differentiation of dimensions was stressed by Graham and Crown (2014), and Van de Velde, Van der Bracht and Buffel (2017).

Certain elements of the religious teachings have already proved to be related with subjective well-being. Azzi and Ehrenberg (1975) have offered an already classical example of a proposed explanation, which is based on the content of belief. More recent findings are by Ferriss (2002), Clark and Lelkes (2006), Dehejia, DeLeire and Luttmer (2007), Beard et al (2011), Bruce et al (2005), McCullough and Worthington (1999), Fisher (2013), Hui et al (2014), Bradshaw, Ellison and Marcum (2010), Ellison et al (2013), Wilt et al (2017), Janssen et al (2005). However, Kennedy (1999) or Schuurmans-Stekhoven (2011) partly opposed these findings. What might partly explain these contradictions is a complexity of belief and faith; see, for example, Martos, Kézdy and Horváth-Szabó (2011). Role of meaning in life as an important contributor to well-being has been empirically convincingly justified, for example, by Oishi, Diener, Suh and Lucas (1999), Oishi, Diener, Lucas and Suh (1999), Steger and Frazier (2005), Headey et al (2010), Diener, Tay and Myers (2011), Grouden and Jose (2015). This relationship is by no means straightforward, however; see Ardel (2003), Francis, Jewell and Robbins (2010), Affrime (2011), Halama, Martos and Adamovová (2010), Martos and Kopp (2012).

Observing a religious tradition makes certain behaviour and decisions more likely. As to personal values and social attitudes see, for example, Torgler (2006), Ruffle and Sosis (2007), Sieben and Halman (2014), and Pusztai (2016). Another area affected by religious persuasion is that of social and political values, as evidenced by Owen and Videras (2007), Lasinska (2013), Scheepers, Gijsberts and Hello (2002), Doebler (2014), and Glazier (2017). Religiosity also apparently influences consumption habits and choices through the value preferences as observed by Cohen-Zada and Sander (2011), Chai and Chen (2009), Coşgel and Minkler

(2004a, 2004b). Partly against these, however, are Schwadel (2002) or Bognár and Kmetty (2020).

Offerings and donations as well as volunteering are but a few typical example of religiously motivated prosocial behaviour as found by Reitsma, Scheepers and Te Grotenhuis (2006), Abreu (2016), van Tienen et al (2011), Son and Wilson (2012), Van Cappellen, Saroglou and Toth-Gauthier (2016). Some, however, questioned the existence of such a commonly proposed link, like Anderson and Mellor (2009), Anderson, Mellor and Milyo (2010) and Galen (2012). Myers (2012) and Saroglou (2012) convincingly opposed Galen's critiques.

A positive relationship between personal religious commitment and subjectively experienced well-being has been observed in multiple contexts, as Eger and Maridal (2015) concluded. Ellison (1991) already evidenced the direct effect of the strength of belief. Colón-Bacó (2010) observed that both happiness and life satisfaction were positively related to attendance and prayer, and added he that the importance of religion in one's everyday life measured by the frequency of prayer appeared to be such an important factor that in a regression model it even reduced the effect of the frequency of religious service attendance. However, as Voas and Day (2010), studying secular Christians (i.e. those having a confessional identity without religious commitment and practice) underline, the actual strength of religious persuasion, identity and practice should be differentiated and may have separately identifiable effect. Furthermore, as Finke, Bader and Polson (2010) argue, different religiosity items can be deemed as measures of different aspects of religiosity and thus, they actually provide a more accurate and reliable result when measured together at the same time.

However, contrary to these, Bechert (2013) identifies only weak, but mainly positive relationship between religiosity and happiness and suggests a minor importance of belief compared to practice. Van de Velde, Van der Bracht and Buffel (2017) found no effect of overall religious saliency on frequency of depressive symptoms, and they presented that depression was positively associated with religious salience in countries with lower religiosity. An ambiguous association was present between happiness and internal religiosity according to Steiner, Leinert and Frey (2010).

Ellison (1991) observed a denominational variation in life satisfaction but not in happiness. Ferriss (2002) also found that observing different traditions significantly correlated with general happiness, varying by denomination. Steiner, Leinert and Frey (2010) also pointed out that belonging to the Protestant denomination strongly and positively affected happiness. Ngamaba and Soni (2018) also supported the importance of religious denominations as they experienced

a significant variation in the level of subjective well-being across religions, with Buddhist and Protestant respondents exhibiting the highest level of happiness and Roman Catholic, Protestant and Buddhist people the highest satisfaction with life. As to an effect in an opposite direction, Fenelon and Danielsen (2016) described that disaffiliation lead to lower level of subjective well-being and worse health.

For most traditional religions, a particular kind of personal devotion, most typically individual prayer, is among the central tenets; however, evidence for its effect on happiness appears to be more mixed. Ellison (1991), for example, suggested only an indirect effect of personal devotion on happiness. While, according to Ferriss (2002), prayer was not significantly correlated with general happiness, Colón-Bacó (2010) suggested that the frequency of prayer appeared to be such an important factor that in a regression model it even reduced the effect of the frequency of religious service attendance, whereas according to Van de Velde, Van der Bracht and Buffel (2017) concluded that depression was positively associated with frequency of prayer.

Provided that individual religiosity contributes to individual happiness, it can be assumed that more religious – and thus, happier – people in a given social context will positively impact the happiness of all members of that society. Clark and Lelkes (2009) have supported it, and diagnosed a spillover effect of religiosity. Furthermore, as is has been argued above, religious people tend to be more prosocial, and as a consequence, if more people are religious in a society, its positive consequence can be enjoyed by the non-religious members of that society, too. Stavrova and Siegers (2014) found that in societies where cultural norms enforced religiosity, religious orientation was higher related to prosocial behaviour. This effect proved to be stronger in countries where religiosity was more a matter of personal choice.

Moreover, some scholars suggest that not only religious persuasion, belief or any particular religious practice but also denominational belonging itself contribute to happiness of also those out of any confessional communities (see, for example, Bjørnskov, Dreher and Fischer, 2008). Furthermore, it can be assumed that if in a society a larger share of people belongs to a particular confession, it creates a value community that might influence society in a wider context (see Sagiv and Schwartz, 2001). A high presence of religion may take a form of having a higher share of religious people, that is, more religiously committed fellows in one's immediate social environment (like, e.g., family members; see Petts, 2014; Pusztai, 2016)

Another important aspect of religiosity is that of community, which in most of the traditional religions can be experienced obviously by participating in communally organised religious

occasions. Community membership and participation in activities of faith-based communities is an important dimension of individual religious practice (Brehm, Eisenhauer and Krannich, 2004). Ellison (1991) suggested only an indirect effect of participation on happiness. At the same time, Ferriss (2002), Greenfield and Marks (2007), Steiner, Leinert and Frey (2010), and VanderWeele (2017) too, found that churchgoing strongly and positively affected happiness. Helliwell and Putnam (2004) and Morrone, Tontoranelli and Ranuzzi (2009) have evidenced that among other measures of social ties, trust was related to happiness. Trust and religious community membership, by any means, are confirmed to be linked, even if the extent of this relationship is apparently conditional on denominational or sociocultural context. (Traunmüller, 2011; Tan and Vogel, 2008) A more frequent church attendance enhances trust as well (Schnabel and Groetsch, 2014).

A powerful effect of social relations on happiness is asserted by Lamu and Olsen (2016) and Diener and Seligman (2002, 2004). Helliwell and Putnam (2004) presented that measures of social relations including family, workmates, civil activity, religious and community ties, as well as trust were all robustly and independently related to happiness both directly and mediated through a better health status. Fenelon and Danielsen (2016) proved that disaffiliation lead to lower level of happiness through losing community contacts. Lim and Putnam (2010) also suggested that religious community affiliation significantly affected happiness, regardless of denominational differences. Significance of having close friends from the congregation was higher for those having a strong religious identity. Graham and Haidt (2010) suggests that religion binds individuals into tightly bound moral communities, thus promoting social giving, integrating them as being religious and protecting them from threats. Krause, Ironson and Hill (2018) added that higher frequency of attendance was associated with higher commitment, which, in turn, was associated with higher compassion, thus promoting helping others, which latter one was associated with happiness. At the same time, as Driskell, Lyon and Embry (2008) described, there was an apparent trade-off between religious and civic activity, which might turn the religiosity – well-being link somewhat ambiguous. Some scholars have also added that network and group processes, together with previous socialization influences, make the religious phenomenon a matter of social status, too.

While assuming a robust effect of religiosity dimensions on subjective well-being, it should be taken into account that religiosity shows a variability across social groups defined by demographic and socioeconomic characteristics and by cultural contexts. These differences not only affect the shares of religious people in the groups examined may also influence how much



religiosity in general is valued in a society and also the level of effect that religiosity bears on well-being.

Social status and demographic background are both evidenced in the literature to impact, and often to interplay with, personal religiosity. What is more, they can alter the effect of religion on subjective well-being. Variability of religiosity of diverse age groups is frequently observed. (Idler, Kasl and Hays, 2001; Hayward and Krause, 2013; Hegedűs, 2008; Wink and Dillon, 2002; Uecker, Regnerus and Vaaler, 2007) Voas (2015) described that many individuals fluctuated back and forth between the religious and non-religious categories, making thus the boundaries between them fuzzy. Paralleling that, as the results of a qualitative study on intergenerational change in religiosity in Hungarian context showed recently, life-course religious change, whether multidirectional or fluctuating, was more the norm than the exception. (Luxné Prehoda and Hámori, 2020) Moreover, the differing religiosity by gender is also commonly observed in a Western and Christian context, even if the explanation of this is still not evident; Miller and Stark (2002), for example, did not find support for the popular hypothesis that different gender socialization was underlying the gender differences in religiosity.

Among others, Deaton (2008) and Lamu and Olsen (2016) emphasised the importance of the effect of health on happiness. At the same time, McCullough et al (2000), Hank and Schaan (2008), Koenig (2012), Levin and Chatters (1998), George, Ellison and Larson (2002) and Ellison and Levin (1998) concluded that religion has contributed to health. Some evidence, however, suggest that the link can be somewhat ambiguous (Ferraro and Albrecht-Jensen, 1991; Powell, Shahabi and Thoresen, 2003; Hall, Meador and Koenig, 2008; Son and Wilson, 2011; Janssen et al, 2005; Pargament and Mahoney, 2009; Ellison et al, 2009; Schwadel and Falci, 2012). A possible interaction between the effect of religiosity and health can also be present (Levin and Taylor, 1998). What is more, the religion—health link can affect also in the opposite causal direction (Benjamins et al, 2003).

Between-country variation in well-being (Tov and Diener, 2007; Fischer, 2010; Hritcu, 2015) can be explained by societal-level differences (Inglehart and Klingeman, 2000; Lengyel and Hegedűs, 2004; Easterlin, 2013; Stam, Verbakel and De Graaf, 2013; Burger et al, 2015; Spruk and Kešeljević, 2016; contrary to this, however, Brulé and Veenhoven, 2014). The strength of the relationship between religiosity and well-being apparently also shows such a variation (Kogan et al, 2013; Scheepers, Te Grotenhuis and Van Der Slik, 2002; Hayward and Elliott, 2014; Diener, Tay and Myers, 2011; Sabatier et al, 2011; Stavrova and Siegers, 2014).

Notably, Edling, Rydgren and Bohman (2014) observed in a Swedish context that in a country with low individual religiosity, religiousness did not count much. Diener, Tay and Myers (2011) concluded that all major religions contributed to the subjective well-being, but only in nations with high-level religiosity and low-level societal well-being. This latter proved to be a strong predictor of overall religiosity in a country. It seemed that religious affiliation contributed especially to the well-being of those experiencing hardships in life, while in highly developed countries with a higher level of overall well-being, respect, community attachment and purpose provided by religions elsewhere were attainable without organized religiosity. The level, the situation and the composition of religiosity also varies across countries (Pickel, 2011; Müller, 2011; Storm, 2009).

### *1.2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES*

In sum, the question to be answered is whether a robust relationship between various aspects of religiosity and happiness can be evidenced in the contemporary European society even if the differing social and cultural settings and individual socio-economic background are considered. This general research problem can be itemized through the following research questions that this paper is intended to answer:

**Q1: What kind of relationship exists between personal religiosity and individual happiness?**

**Q2: What kind of relationship exists between societal level religiosity and individual happiness?**

It should be also asked whether diverse aspects of individual and societal-level religiosity (being affiliated with denominational groups, religious practice and congregational belonging) make people happier than unchurched respondents and whether social background and social involvement are equally important for the happiness of religious and non-religious people. To answer these, multi-variate statistical method is applied including indicators of religious identity, religious behaviour, social status and social involvement. Based on the above-cited earlier research findings and theoretical considerations, I aim at testing the hypotheses as follows below.

#### *1. Hypotheses about individual religiosity and happiness:*

**H1.1: The higher degree of religiosity contributes to happiness.**

**H1.2: The belonging to a religious denomination is associated with a higher level of happiness.**

**H1.3: The higher frequency of attending religious occasions brings a higher level of happiness.**

**H1.4: The higher frequency of individual prayer brings a higher level of happiness.**

*2. Hypotheses about societal religiosity and happiness:*

**H2.1: The higher average level of religiosity within a society is associated with a higher level of individual happiness.**

**H2.2: The higher rate of those belonging to a religious denomination within a society is associated with a higher level of individual happiness.**

**H2.3: The higher average societal frequency of church attendance contributes to a higher level of individual happiness.**

**H2.4: The higher average societal frequency of prayer contributes to a higher level of individual happiness.**

*3. Hypotheses about the impact of individual and societal background on the effect of religiosity on happiness:*

**H3.1: The positive effect of religiosity dimensions on happiness varies by one's gender, age, education, income and health as well as social network participation on the individual and societal level.**

**H3.2: The positive effect of religiosity dimensions on happiness time-invariantly varies in different country-level religious and economic contexts.**

## **2. METHODS**

### *2.1. ANALYTIC STRATEGY*

The research is built on a multivariate secondary analysis of a cross-national longitudinal database including variables of contemporary European religiosity and well-being. As religion influences happiness both on the micro- and on the macro-level, it is justified to apply multilevel regression analysis. This method treats the clustering of cases and the resulting the lack of independence of observations more effectively, that is, the fact that both the level of average religiosity and average happiness level are varied across countries and by time, producing a certain level of similarity between respondents within the same sample. Furthermore, multilevel approach is useful for a large number of clustering groups and a large case number within clusters. Finally, the main advantage is that in multilevel modelling, one does not have to assume that the observed relationships are the same across all groups of observation but these

can be specified as variable effects. To control for the effect of religion on happiness both on the micro- and on the macro-level, multilevel analysis is applied, among others, by Haller and Hadler (2006), Jagodzinski (2009), Okulicz-Kozaryn (2010, 2011, 2012), Stavrova, Fetchenhauer and Schlösser (2013), van Hoorn and Maseland (2013), Stam, Verbakel and De Graaf (2013), Hritcu (2015), and Van de Velde, Van der Bracht and Buffel (2017).

In the grouping of cases, I follow a method similar to that of Aarts et al (2010). That is, grouping variables are country and year of survey (i.e. year of respective ESS round). Data of individual respondents are nested within study (ESS round in studied country) and studies are nested within countries. Building a 3-level mixed model is to control both for time-variant and country-level effects. In building and evaluating the models, I rely on Peugh (2010) and Peugh and Enders (2005). As to the issue of why random-effect models instead of fixed-effect models are used, I follow the argumentation of Bell et al (2019), Bell and Jones (2014) and Snijders and Berkhof (2007). Analysis is conducted by the MIXED procedure of IBM SPSS (see West and Galecki, 2011).

After adding the primary independent variable to the baseline model, I enter the higher-level terms and further religiosity indicators as explanatory variables step-by-step. Through the subsequent models, individual level socio-demographic control variables are added to check whether religiosity remains a significant explanatory variable. Finally, other country-by-time- and country-level contextual variables are added to the model to see if religiosity measures still have a significant impact on subjective happiness. A similar systematic model building approach is applied similar to those by Scheepers, Te Grotenhuis, and Van Der Slik (2002) or Dolan, Peasgood and White (2008). This approach helps to test the interconnectedness of explanatory variables and thus, to understand better how they interact and how actually influence subjective well-being.

For the current research, cross-level interaction effects (i.e. the effect of national- or sample-level characteristics on the nature or strength of the relationship between the individual-level outcome variable and predictors) are not of concern. Furthermore, to keep the models simple, I do not scrutinize interaction terms, as the individual direct effect of the key explanatory variables is in the focus of the research.

## *2.2. DATA AND VARIABLES*

For the analysis, the aggregated database of the first seven waves of the European Social Survey (ESS) is used. The ESS measures the attitudes, beliefs and value patterns of diverse populations

in more than thirty nations. As this survey has been fielded in every 2 years since 2002, it provides a good basis for time series comparison. All consecutive waves of this cross-national longitudinal survey contain relevant information on religiosity and subjective well-being. A detailed overview of the design, contents and methodological underpinnings of the ESS can be found in Schnaudt et al, 2014 and Rydland, Arnesen and Ostensen, 2007. For this analysis, the pooled dataset of the first seven rounds are examined from 2002 to 2014. Altogether, 25 surveyed countries are included where data from at least four waves are available. Germany is included with separating the samples from the old and new federal states.

As the dependent variable, subjective well-being is measured by the response given to the question “How happy are you?”. The variable is an 11-point scale scored between 0 and 10, 0 meaning “Not at all happy” and 10 “Very happy”. As a key independent variable, the question “How religious are you” is used. The variable is a 11-point scale scored between 0 and 10, 0 meaning “Not at all religious” and 10 “Very religious”.

I include other religiosity measures as control variables in more complex models to control for various aspects of personal religious practice beyond the degree of religiosity. Past and present denominational belonging is recorded in the ESS. For the current research, “Jewish”, “Eastern religions” and “Other religions” in the original variable “Religion or denomination belonging to at present” have been merged as “other”. An additional “Denominational belonging only in the past” category has been added, using the merged values from the variable “Religion or denomination belonging to in the past” concerning those not belonging to a church anymore at the time of being surveyed. Response categories of the variables “How often attend religious services apart from special occasions” and “How often pray apart from at religious services” have been transformed to time scales. That is, the original frequency categories used in the questionnaire (Every day; More than once a week; Once a week; At least once a month; Only on special holy days; Less often; Never) have been recalculated into a numeric variable approximating the number of days in a year practicing the respective religious activity.

In models that are more complex some key demographic background variables are controlled. These are gender (categorical variable with two values), age (calculated from year of survey and year of birth, weighted grand mean centred for multilevel analysis using post-stratification weight including design weight, *pspweight*), years in full-time education completed (weighted group-mean centred using *pspweight*), feelings about present household income (categorical variable with four values) and subjective health status (categorical variable with five values).

For measuring social capital, an indirect variable to control for social network embeddedness of respondents is added. This variable “How many days in a year meeting others socially” is calculated from the original “How often socially meet with friends, relatives or colleagues” transforming response categories to a time scale in a similar manner as presented above concerning variables of religious practice. Lastly, an 11-point scale variable “Most people can be trusted or you can't be too careful” has been used to control for generalised trust in people, an assumable accompaniment of religiosity as well as other social activities in order to control for a non-spiritual part of religious practice as a community activity.

Country context can interplay with the level of subjective well-being through either cultural traits or socioeconomic well-being as well as economic and institutional development. Moreover, it can influence the relationship of religion with subjective well-being through the religious context and denominational or religious composition within the country as well as the societal attitudes towards religion. Therefore, it is important to control for these national characteristics, which may also be variant with time. As to the economic and institutional context, GDP can be used as a reliable proxy of economic development in general. In order to prevent scaling problems, I use the real GDP per capita at purchasing power parity in a grand-mean centred, standardized value.

As to the societal religious environment of respondents, I use the data calculated from the pooled dataset being analysed. Societal level average degree of individual religiosity, the share of belonging to a religious denomination in the respective country at the measured time point, the societal level average frequency of meeting others socially and the share of those attending religious occasions in the respective country at the measured time point are included in the final models testing higher level effects.

### **3. FINDINGS OF THE EMPIRICAL RESEARCH**

#### ***3.1. MAIN RESULTS***

My models verify the general hypothesis of a robust positive association between individual religiosity and subjective well-being, even if this effect is stronger in generally less happy nations and, at the same time, the effect of other well-evidenced correlates is also present. A total of 24 different models were significant and analysed thoroughly, the results of which are not detailed in the present synopsis to save space. It is important to highlight here that in model 3, a level-3 grouping is introduced, that is, national samples from various ESS rounds are

grouped by the countries themselves. This model is to test whether differences from countries show higher variability than longitudinal changes. To put it another way, it is tested if changes by time across Europe or the assumed relatively stable cross-country differences are more important. When differentiating both countries and countries by ESS rounds, the intraclass correlation (ICC) is 0,17 indicating that 17% of total variance results from country and time differences. The design effect is 298, which is much higher than the threshold value of 2 (following the argumentation of Peugh. 2010). This justifies the application of a multilevel model, as for a single level OLS regression model, the assumption for the independence of observations would be violated. Moreover, based on  $ICC = 0,136$  it can be stated that approximately 14% of variation of mean happiness across samples is due to country differences.

After building a three-level multilevel model with random intercepts and random slopes with a possible interaction between them both on level 2 and level 3, throughout the more complex models, the following dimensions and indicators are entered in order:

- Individual level effect of religiosity dimensions
  - Denominational affiliation
  - Attending religious services
  - Frequency of prayer
- Individual and societal-level demographic and economic background
  - Gender, age
  - Educational attainment
  - Household income
  - Subjective general health
  - Social capital
    - Trust
    - Frequency of meeting others
- Higher level effect of economic development
- Sample-level average religiosity
- Sample-level average frequency of participation in social networks
- Sample-level average frequency of participation in religious occasions
- Sample-level average frequency of individual prayer (not sig)
- Societal level participation in church religious occasions

An excerpt of the results of the final and most complete model is presented in *Table 1* below. As the social and cultural significance of religiosity varies by country, here, the effect of

denominational identity is also allowed to be random at level 3. This model is much better fitted than any of the previous models are (AIC is 1034820,34 and  $-2LL$  is only 1034748,34 with a very highly significant  $-2LL$  change of 5672,3 compared to model 23 previously tested). As this final model makes it evident, religiosity dimensions all have a consistently significant effect even if the model is controlled for individual socio-economic factors and social network indicators.

**Table 1: Multilevel models – Effect of country-level religious and cultural context**

Parameter	Estimate	Sig.	
Degree of individual religiosity	0,056816	***	
Roman Catholic	-0,040244	*	
Protestant	0,038416		
Eastern Orthodox	-0,126423	***	
Religious affiliation (ref: not religious)	Other Christian	-0,002903	
Islam	-0,087284	**	
Jewish & Eastern religions	-0,156451	***	
Religious in the past	-0,057633	***	
Frequency of attending religious occasions	0,000267	**	
Frequency of individual prayer	0,000149	***	
Male	-0,082780	***	
Age of respondent (grand mean centred)	0,000150		
Years of full-time education completed (group mean centred)	-0,002941	**	
Feeling about household's income (ref: Very difficult)	Living comfortably	1,731011	***
Coping	1,390369	***	
Difficult	0,779589	***	
Very good	2,489116	***	
Subjective general health (ref: Very bad)	Good	2,044109	***
Fair	1,557958	***	
Bad	0,826442	***	
Frequency of meeting others socially	0,001245	***	
Trust in people	0,093688	***	
Gross Domestic Product, purchase power parity (standardised, grand mean centred)	0,260357	***	
Sample-level average degree of individual religiosity	0,132249	**	
Sample-level share of belonging to a religious denomination	-0,749952	**	
Sample-level average frequency of meeting others socially	-0,003295	***	
Sample-level average frequency of attending religious occasions	0,012118	*	
Country-level variance in the effect of religious belonging	0,002565	*	
Between-person difference (Residual)	2,836932	***	
Level 2 intercept variance	0,016633	***	
Level 2 intercept+slope interaction	-0,000707	*	
Level 2 slope variance	0,000157	***	
Level 3 intercept variance	0,120348	**	
Level 3 intercept+slope interaction	-0,007118	**	
Level 3 slope variance	0,000654	**	

Notation: \* Wald sig.  $p < 0,05$ ; \*\* Wald sig.  $p < 0,01$ ; \*\*\* Wald sig.  $p < 0,001$

I turn now to the research hypotheses and review the main findings relevant to these.



### **H1.1 verified: The higher degree of religiosity contributes to happiness.**

The effect of the *degree of individual religiosity* proved to be weak, but consistent and significantly positive throughout all analysed models. The parameter estimate is 0,0568, suggesting an approximately 0,06 difference of respondents' mean happiness with one scale value increment on the 11-item scale scoring 0 for "not at all religious" to 10 for "very religious". That is, compared to the approximately 3,2 value of mean happiness for the completely irreligious people, the mean happiness of those at the opposite end of the scale can be estimated close to 3,8, all other variables controlling for individual and societal-level background and economic characteristics, religiosity and social capital held constant. This effect is robust, even if not completely independent of other religious dimensions: its observed effect somewhat raised when denominational affiliation and later the frequency of prayer were introduced in the models, and controlling for age, educational attainment and health further increased its apparent effect. Inclusion of trust, however, somewhat decreased its influence. This suggests the theoretical validity of the differentiation of various religiosity dimensions.

### **H1.2 falsified: The belonging to a religious denomination is associated with a higher level of happiness.**

Contrary to some earlier research findings proposing a positive contribution of *denominational affiliation* to individual well-being, it turned out that affiliation – at least on the level of identification with a religious tradition – did not in itself enhanced happiness, when controlling for the strength of religious persuasion. Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Islam and Jewish affiliation as well as being associated with other minor and Eastern religions, all impacted individual happiness negatively. Almost down to the final model, *Protestant* affiliation was the only one that showed consistent positive association with higher happiness. However, this apparent positive effect was turned to insignificant at the 5% level by letting the effect of denominational belonging to be random on the country level. It can be concluded that it is not primarily the Protestant affiliation what matters in happiness, but belonging to a Protestant church in a country having a higher share of Protestant church members.

### **H1.3 verified: The higher frequency of attending religious occasions brings a higher level of happiness.**

Regular church going significantly promoted happiness across all models. It is strange, however, that a part of this effect was suppressed by individual prayer (see below); meaning that among those who pray more frequently, church attendance adds more to their happiness. This implies that formal participation in the rituals is not as effective as the more devout religious practice. Furthermore, its effect was somewhat weakened by the inclusion of indicators on socio-economic position, health and social capital.

**H1.4 verified: The higher frequency of individual prayer brings a higher level of happiness.**

Prayer in the simpler models apparently affected happiness in a negative way. Its effect was considerably weaker with age and years in education included, implying that older and undereducated people tended to pray more. With income controlled, however, the significance of its effect disappeared, and then with subjectively judged health status introduced, it turned positive. A clear implication of this observation is that those experiencing unfavourable life circumstances tend to pray more, but between two persons suffering from the same conditions, the one who prays more will be happier.

**H2.1 ambiguous result: The higher average level of religiosity within a society is associated with a higher level of individual happiness.**

**H2.2 ambiguous result: The higher rate of those belonging to a religious denomination within a society is associated with a higher level of individual happiness.**

Neither sample-level degree of religiosity, nor sample-level share of religious affiliation alone affected individual happiness significantly. However, when including both indicators simultaneously in the model, their effect was significant. The effect of the sample-level average degree of individual religiosity was significantly positive, whereas that of the share of population affiliated to a religious denomination was significantly negative. A plausible reason behind this is a weak, yet significant correlation between the two.

**H2.3 verified: The higher average societal frequency of church attendance contributes to a higher level of individual happiness.**

A positive impact of the higher sample-level average regular church going on individual happiness was found, independently from that of individual religious attendance. What is more

surprising is that the effect of the sample-level average frequency of church attendance is not significant, if it is included in the model without controlling for the average frequency of meeting others socially. The theoretical explanation that can be offered is that in a society where frequently meeting others socially is more a part of the mainstream culture, meetings in religious occasions also may serve as opportunities for seeing friends, thus these contribute also as do social events.

**H2.4 falsified: The higher average societal frequency of prayer contributes to a higher level of individual happiness.**

This hypothesis did not gain support by the models. As a matter in fact, within the model including sample-level average frequency of individual prayer, neither this nor the measure of sample-level average frequency religious attendance proved to be significant. Moreover, not even in the model without sample-level church attendance resulted in parameter estimates with a significant effect of sample-level prayer. Clearly, prayer is so much an intimate spiritual matter of religious behaviour that only the one who practices it will be profited.

**H3.1 ambiguous results: The positive effect of religiosity dimensions on happiness varies by one's gender, age, education, income and health as well as social network participation on the individual and societal level.**

A robust effect of most religiosity dimensions could be observed throughout the models, which remained significant even when controlling for socio-demographic background as well as social capital. The effects of the degree of religiosity and individual church attendance on happiness were rather consistent. However, the significance, the sign and the magnitude of other measures were somewhat more unstable. In particular, the positive impact of more frequent prayer was affected by one's income and health status, and the affiliation-happiness link was varied by individual income satisfaction and the country-level overall religious setting.

**H3.2 verified: The positive effect of religiosity dimensions on happiness time-invariantly varies in different country-level religious and economic contexts.**

It was ascertained that the level of religiosity significantly differed by samples and by countries. Furthermore, even at the start of model building, a certain level of relative within-sample and within-country homogeneity of happiness level became observable. That the variation was caused by differing cultural and economic contexts was evidenced by the significant covariance

parameters. Both the sample-level intercepts and the country-level intercepts were significantly varied, as well as the sample-level and country-level slopes representing the relationship between religiosity and happiness. In more complex models (after controlling for income and health on the individual level), a significant negative intercept-slope interaction was observed, meaning that the contribution of religiosity is assumedly lower, but still significant and positive, to happiness in samples and countries with a society consisting of happier people. What is more, a significant variation by the country-level share of religious people suggests that the country's religious culture indeed affects religion's contribution to individual happiness.

### *3.2. IMPLICATIONS*

The findings of my research suggest that, despite the assumed decline in the role of religions in a contemporary European setting, religiosity still can significantly contribute to people's happiness by belief, commitment, participation, devotions and community attachment. This contribution can be statistically separated from that of similar, non-religious counterparts like, e.g., meaning in life gained from other sources, involvement in non-religious formal or informal communities, or even probably the participation in spiritual activities outside the church. Nevertheless, it is not formal membership that counts; rather, affiliation with certain religious traditions in some settings may become a marker of disadvantageous life circumstances. Individual religious practice including regular church attendance and frequent prayer, however, can positively impact one's subjective well-being. Interestingly, religious commitment raises happiness significantly without actual practice, even if the effect is smaller in happier or more well-to do nations.

The highly raised scientific interest in happiness and well-being studies, especially since the turn of the millennium, indicates the growing need within democratic societies to understand what kind of social factors influence happiness, well-being and life-satisfaction. This research has made it clearer whether it is worth to promote religiosity by policy measures, e.g., through state subsidizing or regulating religious education. A rather simple policy implication is that subsidizing traditional formal churches will not necessarily make people happier; however, if this support ultimately reaches those with the most severe needs, it might contribute to the welfare of all. Health and financial satisfaction apparently counts more, and thus, it can be proposed that religion does not seem to work as "people's opium" anymore.

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## 5. RELEVANT PUBLICATIONS BY THE AUTHOR

### 5.1.1. Chapters in books in Hungarian

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