

Let me begin with this video - it was shot last Sunday in Jerusalem, in the Basilic where the Holy Sepulchre, the tomb of Jesus Christ, is vigilated by two opposing platoons of Armenian priests and Orthodox popes, under the surveillance of two Muslim families, helped by the occasional police patrol.

(Hat Tip: [Le Monde](#) via [Yasmine Bouagga](#))

I know, I know, this is an unfair, demagogic, uselessly provocative way to introduce the topic of today. The reason I couldn't help but show it is because it reminds me of endless "[Street Fighter](#)" afternoons. I would love to play the man in the red satin robes.

But to my point: [many recent posts, papers and articles](#) are discussing whether strong community ties and religious beliefs reliably contribute to happiness. That they do is widely believed, on the basis of previous studies of self-reported happiness in the USA. Several theorists, for example Jonathan Haidt, in [his paper](#) 'Planet of the Durkheimians', made the very Durkheimian point that a strong, holistic, cohesive social system (in Durkheim's example, a catholic, collectivist, family-bound social life, compared to a protestant, "anomic", individualistic one), with a coherent and authoritative belief-system, is the kind of social system we evolved to be in. It ought, therefore, to make us happy. And indeed, inside the USA, religious people give more and they report being more happy with their lives...

But the studies reporting links between happiness and a conservative frame of mind involving a "holistic", integrative social environment and religious orientations, were mostly done inside one country. You might think that all this charity-giving, feeling-good-with-one's-life vibes should make a nation as a whole feel happier - but it doesn't seem to be the case. New measures of happiness between countries show Planet of the Durkheimians not to be such a great place to live after all.

Adrian White, who meta-analyzed data from 100 different studies to produce a [world map of happiness](#), found that the poster-boys of "holistic" societies, such as India or Japan, score awfully bad (respectively 120th and 90th in a list of 178; China is 82d), especially given the state of their healthcare system, education and economic growth. Many top countries, on the other hand could be described, comaratively, as irreligious, individualistic, laissez-faire capitalistic hells (1. Denmark, 2. Switzerland, 3. Austria, 4. Iceland - well, I guess the crisis changed that - 5. The Bahamas - same).

[In Slate](#), Paul Bloom wonders why record-setting atheist countries like Denmark and Sweden consistently show up in the top percentiles of studies about happiness, or low murder and abortion rates. Will Wilkinson makes the same point about Arthur Brooks, one of the leading proponents of the religion-breeds-happiness hypothesis.

But wait a minute. Cross-national comparisons are arguably dirtier, messier and more confounded by various factors (e.g. cultural factors) than individual comparisons. Shouldn't we keep to the beautiful individual data that we have, and just disregard messy cross-national comparisons?

Conclusions from cross-national data should not be taken for granted, but there are reasons to take them seriously. [Will Wilkinson](#) lays them down quite well: first, individual data on self-reported happiness exist that point toward the same conclusion. Will Wilkinson cites [a study](#) where it is shown that, in Denmark and the Netherlands, there is only a weak relation between self-reports of happiness and religiosity (the relation is only slightly stronger in the USA). One might object that the claim that religion breeds happiness is valid only in religious countries - but that would amount to saying that people are more happy when they are adjusted to the belief-system that dominates their society (an interesting claim no doubt, but weaker, and slightly beside the point).

Second, and more importantly, the Durkheimian assumption is not merely a claim about individuals, but about whole societies. Strongly cohesive, "holistic" social links, and religiosity are supposed, according to defenders of the claim, to benefit society as a whole as they help develop charity, solidarity, concern for others, etc. If they are as central to social life as proponents of the assumption suppose they are, they should easily trample occasional confounding factors, at least when comparing countries as economically and culturally similar as Denmark, the Netherlands and the USA: holistic causes should beget holistic effects.

Links:

Adrian White's World Map of Happiness - [here](#).

Religiousness and happiness in three nations (Denmark, Netherlands and USA) - [here](#).

Will Wilkinson discusses Arthur Brooks - [here](#).

Paul Bloom discusses the relation between religion and happiness - [here](#).

'Planet of the Durkheimians: where Community, Authority and Sacretness are foundations of Morality' by Jonathan Haidt - [here](#).