

Is religion good for human flourishing?

The Global Flourishing Study is producing a dazzling amount of data to help us answer this sort of question.

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [September 2024](#) issue

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I began my career as a scholar of crime, deviance, and social problems, studying where things went wrong in the world and in people's lives. Only in recent years have I come to appreciate a whole other way of approaching things, which represents one of the most vibrant and genuinely exciting fields of scholarship right now: that of human flourishing or, as it is sometimes described, of well-being. Just

look at the sheer number of books and journals out there on this topic, many of which have appeared in the past four or five years, not to mention all the research centers, programs, and scholarly conferences.

To oversimplify, what conditions or factors allow people to believe that they are living a good life? Or in biblical terms, that they are flourishing like a healthy fig tree or a growing vine? Of course prosperity and health count, as do such factors as civil peace and good government; justice, however we define that flexible word, matters immensely. But there are so many other possible factors, drawn for instance from culture and the arts, just as broadly defined.

Religious life also plays its vital role. Nobody suggests that *only* religious believers can achieve this kind of good life, that they alone can flourish. But how much of a role does religion play? And what kind of religious ideas or outlook? Do some “work” better than others?

These are of course very large questions indeed—arguably the most important in the world. Through none of my own doing, I have found myself in a setting where many of them are likely to be answered, at least as far as this is possible in the present life. My academic home is Baylor University’s Institute for Studies of Religion, which is presently engaged in a vast global research project on this very theme of human flourishing—in cooperation with the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University, as well as Gallup and the Center for Open Science. The project’s directors are criminologist Byron R. Johnson at Baylor and epidemiologist Tyler J. VanderWeele at Harvard, and it is primarily funded by the John Templeton Foundation, to the tune of an impressive \$43 million. You can find ample information at the ISR website.

Let me be clear that I am not personally part of the Global Flourishing Study. But as the GFS findings appear, I am dazzled by the potential for pursuing my own long-standing interests in worldwide religion and especially Christianity. Within a couple of years we are going to know far more about such issues, and on a more reliable basis, than we have ever dared imagine in the past.

The sheer scale of the GFS is astonishing. It aims to survey a stunning 200,000 people in 22 countries, the respondents being chosen as representative samples of the whole population. In each case, the survey will follow those cohorts over the course of several years, to observe how their attitudes and responses change over time. Questions will examine the general domains of health, relationships and

community, character, financial and economic concerns, and—most important for my purposes—religion and spirituality.

Although the GFS is not focused on religious issues and attitudes, those inevitably arise, and the amount of granular detail is amazing. The nations studied include the most populous centers of Christianity (the United States, Nigeria, Brazil, Mexico, the Philippines), Islam (Indonesia, Turkey, Egypt, Nigeria), Hinduism (India), Buddhism (China, Japan), and Judaism (Israel). They include rich societies such as the United States but also an excellent representation of rising and economically middling countries. Over time, the GFS will allow us to measure the relationship between religion and prosperity and how that relationship changes during rapid modernization.

Within that framework, the study aims not just to find the number of Christians or Muslims (say) in country x but also the particular denominations and traditions to which they adhere. The data offer abundant evidence about many detailed aspects of religious life and experience. Questions address the idea of a profound religious or spiritual awakening as a feature in religious life. The survey asks questions about belief in God or gods, belief in life after death, attending services, the nature of religious experience, the practice of prayer and meditation, religious reading, how people obtain comfort from religion, whether one feels loved by God, and belief in divine punishment. Do people believe in a divine plan or providence? What about spiritual evil and diabolical forces? Asking the same questions across multiple societies permits a startling degree of cross-cultural comparison, and again, all from extremely large and representative population samples.

So many of the theories that scholars have advanced through the years can now be tested in unprecedented ways. I can only mention a couple of examples here, but look at the matter of switching between religions. Someone entering the study is asked a series of retrospective questions about their religious affiliations and outlook when they were 12 years old as opposed to today. Think of the potential for tracking religious change through the years.

No less important is the evidence that now becomes available for the ways in which people are affected by religion in everyday life. International comparative studies commonly focus on Christianity and Islam, but now we can see a much wider representation, drawing heavily on Hinduism and Buddhism as well.

Or think about gender issues. We know all the obvious stereotypes about female religiosity, of religious women and less committed men, but to what extent does this remain true in Africa or Latin America? Are women leading the way toward a secular change? We will soon be able to test such notions across faith traditions and in multiple, very different societies. We can trace gender differences in styles of religion, for instance, in the kind of God that people imagine or in their belief in the existence of evil.

And there are plenty of other potential issues. Think about the religious impact of global migration or of the nature of faith in minority settings. The study of religion worldwide looks set to flourish, and as never before.

After 16 years of my regular columns in The Century—first under the title Notes from the Global Church and then here in the Voices section—this will be my last column. I might well crop up occasionally elsewhere in the magazine, not least in book reviews. Warmest thanks to the magazine and to the editors I have worked with through the years for providing such a hospitable environment. May The Century flourish for another century.