

## Article

# Happiness and Being Human: The Tension between Immanence and Transcendence in Religion/Spirituality

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**Abstract:** What is the happiness that we strive for and what does it mean for our understanding of being human? As we pursue happiness, we find that happiness is complex, in many ways subjective to the experiences and contexts of individuals or groups. Happiness also can be found in attaining greater self-awareness and a sense of meaning/purpose. This article argues that religion/spirituality has a role to play in facilitating well-being/happiness in terms of the tension held in their understanding of immanence and transcendence. This will be done, using a science and religion discourse.

**Keywords:** happiness; immanence; transcendence; religion; spirituality

## 1. Introduction

In 1988, Bobby McFerrin, an American musician, released a song which became an instant global hit. The song's title was "Don't worry, be happy". For readers who lived during this period, and I am certain that there are those of younger generations too, the tune must be mulling around in your head. Apologies for creating an earworm. The song posed a series of existential problems, all too familiar to any listener. These include facing daily difficulties, being victims of crime, having to deal with financial strain, and struggling with relationships. These words of advice were then offered: "Don't worry, be happy". By this, the song conveyed the message that when we stoop ourselves in our worrisome situations, we will be stripped of life's joy and hence be deprived of happiness. More recently, Pharrell Williams echoed similar sentiments in a song which he released, called "Happy". Irrespective of where we come from, what our life-stories are, there is one thing all human beings can agree on: Everybody wants to be happy. The question is: what does it mean to be happy, or stated somewhat differently, what is happiness?

When we consider the message shared in these songs, happiness is set as the ideal towards which we as humans should aspire, a state of being which elicits a sense of living a life which is fulfilled, content, and a "space" where personal harmony is experienced. The problem with this understanding of happiness, and its accompanying expectation of what life should/could be, is that it poses the experience of life in dualistic terms: One is either happy or you aren't. In turn, within this dualistic reality one is further enticed to believe that if you are happy, then one should try to stay in this state for as long as possible. Conversely, if you are not happy, then something in the experience of life is amiss which should be remedied.

This notion treats the state of life in rather simplistic terms, describing the happiness/unhappiness dualism as if it were a choice, a switch to be flipped. "Don't worry, [just] be happy". Life experience dictates that although perspective and attitude towards life play very important roles in one's sense of being happy, happiness is complex, dependent on many different variables that independently or correspondingly contribute towards a person's sense of well-being. Notwithstanding the complexity of happiness, some of which will be explored later in this article, there is no denying that happiness is sought after and is an important part of the experience of life and of being human. The songs referred to here may be anecdotal, but they echo sentiments that run through history.



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Just to offer a few examples: Aristotle's "eudaemonia", loosely translated as "happiness", speaks of a state of human flourishing, or a life well lived, which makes for a good and virtuous life. As Kretzschmar & Van Niekerk point out (Kretzschmar and Van Niekerk 2009, p. 65), Aristotle's "eudaemonia" does not refer to the abuse of pleasure for the sake of one's own happiness. Instead, the pursuit of happiness has to do with a person's intention to striving for the 'highest good', focusing on advancing internal virtues, such as temperance and justice, using one's resources for the greater good, and partaking in true friendship (Kretzschmar and Van Niekerk 2009, p. 66). From a religious, more specifically a Christian perspective, the notion of happiness (being fulfilled) is described in terms of devoting one's life to certain principles. The Beatitudes, for example, recorded in Matthew 5:3–12, serve as an example of this intention. Many English translations start each line of the Beatitudes with the words "Happy are those who. . .". As with Aristotle's "eudaemonia", the word "Happy" here too serves as a rather loose translation. The Greek word "Makarios" is used to denote a sense of blessedness, or fulfilment while investing oneself in the activities or principles outlined in the Beatitudes.

In this article, the notion of happiness and how it relates to religion/spirituality will be explored. This will be done from a science and religion discourse perspective. It will be argued that happiness has both transcendent and immanent aspects, which when expressed through the lens of religious devotion and spirituality, can translate into the person's sense of fulfilment.

## 2. The Subjectivity of Happiness

Not only do people strive to find happiness, but both medical science and psychology point to the numerous benefits of living a happy life. It has been shown that a sense of personal well-being improves mental health, boosts the immune system, and helps to achieve or maintain overall health, while decreasing the risk of suicide or self-harm (Bekhet et al. 2008, p. 15). In medical science and psychology, the relationship between (physical and mental) health and happiness is of greatest concern. In other words, it is understood that to be healthy will lead to a greater sense of well-being, and the experience of living a happy life.

It comes as no surprise that these sciences encourage people to engage in activities that promote physical and mental health to attain a sense of well-being. These include having a healthy diet, exercising, getting enough sleep, meditating, mindfulness etc., all of which have their own scientific studies to show their efficacy in promoting personal health and happiness. Just to highlight one of these is to point to the evidence that shows the correlation between physical exercise and a sense of well-being (happiness). Of course, there are the well-known effects of exercise, like improving cardiovascular function, maintaining healthy body weight, improving Musculo-skeletal health, and on a hormonal level, raising levels of serotonin and dopamine, all of which improve a person's sense of well-being. More recently, during the COVID-19 pandemic, a study showed that during lockdown, there was a heightened awareness to the positive effects of exercise on physical and mental health (Ai et al. 2021, p. 2). Exercise assisted in people's ability to cope with the stressors brought by the pandemic. This study also found that exercise assisted people in reducing their anxiety sensitivity, while promoting self-efficacy, self-image, and a sense of control (Ai et al. 2021, p. 2), all of which improved their sense of personal happiness.

This said, it should be noted that what constitutes a sense of well-being (happiness) is rather subjective, far removed from the earlier described notion of happiness as a personal choice. One cannot just make yourself happy, whether it be through choice, diet, exercise, or meditation. As Tay and Kuykendall put it: "Trying to be happier is as futile as trying to be taller" (Tay and Kuykendall 2013, p. 160). So, what then is happiness and how can it be achieved? Psychology differentiates between two forms of happiness. First, measures, such as the Oxford Happiness Inventory assess a person's overall state of psychological well-being, determining whether a person can function "happily" within their environment with the least amount of distress. Other measures, such as the Depression–Happiness

Scale focus more intently on the person's immediate (but persistent) sense of well-being and is described in the term 'Subjective Wellbeing' (SWB) (Lewis and Cruise 2006, p. 220). SWB fluctuates and is dependent on both internal and external factors. Intrapersonal SWB relies on factors, such as personality, the person's individual ability to self-regulate after experiencing either positive or negative life events (Tay and Kuykendall 2013, p. 162), and a person's ability to make life choices that have a greater possibility of resulting in positive and/or favorable outcomes (Tay and Kuykendall 2013, p. 163).

External factors, such as material living standards, socio-political context, the nature and extent of interpersonal relationships, and connectedness, all show a correlation with a person's sense of well-being (Tay and Kuykendall 2013). In short, SWB is not just a matter of will and neither is it a standardized set of variables. It is subjective in the sense that each person's life journey is unique, and it is therefore difficult to find a standard definition of happiness, or 'recipe for happiness' that can be universally applied.

It therefore appears that the understanding of happiness is that a person's sense of well-being manifests on two different levels. The first is the immanent experience of happiness, which is more closely associated with SWB, and second, the transcendent aspect of happiness. For the purposes of this article, I will now explore the role religion/spirituality plays in these forms of happiness.

### 3. Religion/Spirituality and Happiness

It should be noted that it is important to draw a distinction between religion and spirituality. On the one hand, religion typically involves customs, rituals and traditions that are associated with beliefs in a deity or deities, or a higher order of living, while spirituality "... refers to an individual investigation for a life of meaning and purpose." (Papaleontiou-Louca et al. 2022, pp. 327–28). Of course, several studies have been done on the relationship between religion/spirituality and happiness, of which the outcomes have been inconclusive, or shall we rather say, dependent on various factors.

These studies draw one common conclusion: Generally, those who adhere to a religion or partake in spiritual practices indicate that their faith conviction plays a vital role in their personal sense of well-being (happiness) (Pérez and Rohde 2022, p. 4587). How this manifests in reality, becomes a point of contention. The main point of divergence stems from the understanding of happiness used in the respective studies. When religious/spiritual associated happiness is measured, using the Oxford Happiness Inventory, it does indeed point to individuals feeling an overall sense of personal happiness. However, when measured on the Depression-Happiness Scale, religious/spiritual devotion has shown to be less prevalent in a person's sense of happiness (Lewis and Cruise 2006, p. 218). This indicates that although religion/spirituality can play an important role in a person's general sense of happiness, the person's immediate SWB is less dependent on their religious devotion or spirituality.

This can be explained in terms of the following factors:

First, religion/spirituality can offer a person a sense of belonging. As social beings, humans have a propensity for desiring social inclusion, or at least a sense of belonging (Steffen 2012, p. 78). Religion offers an avenue for people to belong to a community or group with whom they can associate or with whom they share a common belief system. Second, religion/spirituality offers the person an avenue to pursue happiness in both hedonistic and eudemonic terms (Steffen 2012, p. 76). This means that religion is seen as a path that can improve the person's immediate SWB, for instance in the pursuit of divine affirmation, manifest in the promise of well-being, such as health, prosperity, and security (hedonistic happiness). Religion/spirituality is seen as an instrument that can increase pleasure while avoiding pain (Steffen 2012), a promise that is not often fulfilled, possibly leaving the person either hoping for these to be fulfilled in the future or disillusioned with or skeptical of religion/spirituality's ability to meet their immediate needs. Eudemonic happiness, correspondingly, affords religion/spirituality the role of contributing towards a person's sense of meaning, growth and positive relationships, a role that is much more

readily attainable, and hence, may render adherents to religion/spirituality to experience a greater sense of general wellness. The relationship between hedonistic and eudemonic forms of happiness as offered by religion/spirituality is, however intertwined. Steffen shows that while a person strives towards eudemonic desires, it may lead to hedonistic pleasures, but the converse is not necessarily true (Steffen 2012, p. 73). This, in turn, may be more dependent on the person's socio-economic locus, which will not be investigated in this article.

A third factor is a person's religious/spiritual perspective within their belief system. It has been shown that adherents to beliefs that emphasize tenets, such as hell and punishment are more prone to feelings of guilt, worry and anxiety and hence have a diminished sense of happiness, compared to their counterparts who emphasize forgiveness, compassion, love and grace (Pérez and Rohde 2022, p. 4600). A deity who is seen as angry tends to form anxious and generally unhappy adherents, while belief in a loving and benevolent deity leads adherents to be more content, loving and caring themselves (Yaden et al. 2022, p. 4148). The latter group present to be happier than the former.

It has also been shown that in comparing Eastern and Western religions/spiritualities, divergent trends in understandings of happiness can be identified. Joshanloo finds that Western religious concepts of happiness are largely based on hedonistic principles (pleasure and positive feelings), while in Eastern cultures and religions, eudemonic principles, emphasizing human potential through virtues and positive functioning are more dominant (Joshanloo 2014, p. 476). Where Western religions, such as Christianity show a more individualized focus (emphasizing personal salvation and individual notions of righteousness, having a personal relationship with God, leading to an individualized eternal outcome), Eastern religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism show a greater social or communal footprint. In Hinduism, for instance, atman (the self) and Brahman (ultimate reality) are in essence the same. In the veiled truth of experienced reality, the purpose of the self is to strive for and towards the integration of both the atman and Brahman. What holds the two together? "Dharma is the principle that governs the universe" (Joshanloo 2014, p. 478), it upholds order, and thus virtues amount to that which is in harmony with Dharma, leading to the integration of atman and Brahman.

Happiness, fulfilment, and well-being can therefore be defined in terms of being in unison with the self, with others, and with nature in all its existential levels (Joshanloo 2014, p. 477). In Buddhism, the notion of a "permanent self with well-defined boundaries not only is an illusion, but also is the main source of unhappiness" (Joshanloo 2014, p. 479). This means that when, in the pursuit of happiness, the self is lifted above all others and all things, the opposite of happiness is experienced as an outcome. Joshanloo (Joshanloo 2014, pp. 482–86) concludes the argument by drawing these following (broad) distinctions between Western and Eastern religions/spiritualities:

- Eastern religions/spiritualities define happiness in terms of self-transcendence, while Western religions/spiritualities emphasize self-enhancement.
- Eastern religions/spiritualities focus on eudemonic happiness, while Western religions/spiritualities emphasize hedonistic happiness.
- Eastern religions/spiritualities describe happiness in terms of harmony, while Western religions/spiritualities seek happiness through mastery.
- Eastern religions/spiritualities seek happiness through contentment, while Western religions/spiritualities look for happiness in satisfaction.

This differentiation between Western and Eastern religions/spiritualities must be seen in generalized terms. The one point that does stand out, is Western religion/spirituality's focus on the individual, while Eastern religion/spirituality tends to promote the self in relationship. Irrespective of context, the 'self' desires hedonistic pleasure. It is Freud's 'Id' at work. This drive is, however, always reminded that such pleasure, if not accompanied by the journey of eudemonic principles, provides short-lived happiness. How do these forms of happiness, hedonistic and eudemonic, personal, and communal then relate to each other?

Perhaps, using the terms “immanence” and “transcendence” as per my definition in a previous publication (Bentley 2023, pp. 3–4) can be of help in understanding happiness in particular the hedonistic/eudemonic tension. Immanent happiness, or “dwelling in a state of happiness” is associated with SWB and hedonistic aspects of happiness. Also, transcendental aspects of happiness, or “is, but more than (hedonistic happiness)” refers to happiness as an ideal, or the partaking in eudemonic principles to attain fulfillment can be argued that the immanent and transcendental aspects of happiness, especially in religion/spirituality are not mutually exclusive, but are equally important in the experience of being human. If in religion, there is absolutely no sense of happiness in the present, be it through pleasure or SWB, then why pursue it? Religion/spirituality would then be rendered a punishment and will be well worth avoiding. If religion/spirituality were devoid of the potential to allow a person to find fulfillment through growth, being able to assess one’s own ascension in finding meaning and value, then why put in so much energy in this aspect of living?

Although finding broad critique, Maslow’s “Hierarchy of Needs” (Maslow 1943) offers a valuable model of how immanence and transcendence play a part in a person’s sense of well-being, or happiness. At the lower levels, material and immediate needs need to be met, while on the higher levels, self-actualization forms the pinnacle of human well-being. It would be a mistake to isolate religion/spirituality only to the higher strata of Maslow’s hierarchy. Also, to associate happiness only with being able to achieve self-actualization would be a misrepresentation of Maslow’s model. None of the strata represented in Maslow’s model are independent; each higher level is subject to the needs of each of the lower levels being met. Similarly, both immanent and transcendental aspects of happiness find that their existence in the present is formulated by the co-dependent tension between them.

Although history shows that religion/spirituality has played an important role in facilitating humanitarian efforts, religion itself has not always been faithful to holding the tension between the immanent and the transcendental needs of people. At times the transcendental aspects of religion have been emphasized at the expense of the immanent needs of people, making the metaphysical the projected source of happiness, while ignoring the immediate material needs of people. Doing so, religion has not added to people’s sense of well-being or happiness but has rather become an oppressive tool which has negated well-being and happiness. A good example of this is found in a quote attributed to Desmond Tutu, where the late Archbishop is said to have jokingly stated: “When the missionaries came to Africa, they had the Bible, and we had the land. They said, ‘Let us pray.’ We closed our eyes. When we opened them, we had the Bible, and they had the land.” (Gish 2004, p. 101). In this pun, religion is seen to have offered only a transcendental option of happiness (personal salvation), while stripping people of their lower levels of need (land). Higher levels of need cannot exist without the underlying lower levels, and so how could the missionaries expect people to be happy when they have been assured of their personal salvation, but had to forego their security in their ownership of land?

The tension between immanence and transcendence in religion is important, laying the foundation not only of what constitutes well-being or happiness, but the very nature of being human. Immanence without transcendence makes us as humans no more than the animal realm (said with respect to animals, acknowledging that humankind is very much a species among species). What makes humans distinct from their animal counterparts is the notion of transcendence, being able to project beyond ourselves and striving towards self-transcendence. Shouldn’t the locus of religion/spirituality be situated here, that it facilitates our experience of the immanent and immediate presence in terms of our self-projection towards transcendence, or what Maslow calls self-actualization? The argument is that happiness does not rely purely on satisfying the primary needs of humans. If this were the case, then we won’t be able to account for why poor people or countries are often ‘happier’ than their counterparts who find themselves in more affluent socio-economic contexts (Papaleontiou-Louca et al. 2022, pp. 340–41). Spirituality, whether expressed through formal religion or through spiritual movements “goes even beyond the satisfaction

of most of our emotional, cognitive, aesthetic and esteem needs. It rather, depends on some more inner human qualities and reaches the deepest part of our human existence.” (Papaleontiou-Louca et al. 2022, pp. 340–41), speaking to our search for more than simply ‘what is’. So, what are some of the principles that religion/spirituality need to present in order to contribute towards people’s happiness, both in general terms and in their SWB?

#### 4. Principles of Happiness in Religion/Spirituality

It can be argued that the challenge faced by religion/spirituality is to not only find a balance between immanence and transcendence, but to facilitate a sense of being in which both immanence and transcendence find expression in experiential reality without negating or compromising the other. An overemphasis on transcendental aspects of religion/spirituality can leave adherents in a state of “being so heavenly-minded, that they are of no earthly good”. An overemphasis on immanence will turn adherents to religion/spirituality into ‘navel-gazing’ individuals or groups that show little inclination of taking note of their potential for meaning beyond themselves. Neither of these possibilities make for living a happy life. Religion/spirituality therefore needs to take the baton and recognize its responsibility in being a role player in people’s well-being, not only in material terms, but also in allowing people to grow in their sense of meaning. There is no denying that in striving towards self-actualization, the human needs to embrace the fact that spirituality and spiritual experiences are an important aspect of not only mental health, but also a general sense of well-being and living a happy (fulfilled) life (Papaleontiou-Louca et al. 2022, p. 329).

Religion/spirituality can bring immanence and transcendence together by offering the space for people to gain perspective. An overemphasis on immanent needs or transcendental goals can be overwhelming and can lead to greater distress and lower levels of feelings of meaning and purpose. To mitigate this and to ‘ground’ people in the experience of the existential present, the tension between the immanent (and all its needs) and the transcendent (with all its goals and ideals) need to be held together and allow the adherent to find themselves in the ‘reality of now’. One of the buzzwords that expresses this notion, is ‘Mindfulness’. In psychology, the use of Mindfulness-based interventions has been clinically proven to be effective in the treatment of several psychological disorders. Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy is used for the prevention of depression relapse, Mindfulness-based Relapse Prevention is used for substance abuse and addiction relapse, Mindfulness-based Relaxation response facilitates cardiovascular health, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy is used for a wide range of psychological disorders, and Dialectical Behavior Therapy, to treat borderline personality disorder (Vago and David 2012, p. 4). Although psychology is seen to own Mindfulness in its various therapeutic interventions, it needs to admit that it has borrowed a practice which is deeply rooted in religious/spiritual practices, such as prayer, meditation, contemplation, to name but a few. Religion/spirituality is however indebted to psychology for giving voice to this important practice and for giving scientific credence to its efficacy.

Mindfulness, not only in psychological therapeutic contexts, but also in religion/spirituality facilitates within the practitioner a greater self-awareness, improved self-regulation and an avenue for self-transcendence (otherwise translated as Maslow’s self-actualization). By being an instrument that enhances attention and emotion regulation, “mindfulness practice can improve automatic forms of regulation like homeostasis in the face of emotional or physical stress by protecting the internal milieu from the harmful effects of the stressor” (Vago and David 2012, p. 19). This means that the person can find a ‘safe space’, a moment to breathe, whether it be through prayer, meditation, contemplation, or Mindfulness-based therapy.

Garland and Frederickson have shown that individuals who regularly partake in these activities show improved characteristics of awe, compassion, elevation, gratitude, and love (Garland and Frederickson 2019, p. 186). This cycle, when repeated, leads to an upward spiral of the sense of emotional well-being and regulation (Garland and Frederickson 2019),

translating into a sense of selfless happiness (Garland and Frederickson 2019). Not only do adherents become happier in themselves, but this happiness starts to find expression beyond themselves.

To get back to Maslow, a sign of self-actualization is that of altruism (Papaleontiou-Louca et al. 2022, p. 334). It appears counterintuitive as self-actualization seems to suggest an emphasis on self, and not others. This is not, however, what self-actualization translates into. In Maslow's model, self-actualization is not a permanent state but individuals find that they experience 'peak-moments' of self-actualization and then need to 'return' to attend to their own lower-level needs. In Maslow's model, self-actualizers are shown to display greater empathy (Papaleontiou-Louca et al. 2022, p. 335; Maslow et al. 1993, p. 279), moving from self-centeredness to altruism; therefore, not only attending to their own lower-level needs, but becoming cognizant of the lower-level needs of others.

Religion/spirituality can therefore be the facilitators of holding in tension on the one hand, addressing material needs (immanence) and, on the other, the ideals of transcendence, by 'grounding' adherents through religious/spiritual practices that allow for perspective-gaining. This perspective-gaining translates into a personal sense of well-being, but then also spills over into altruism, which extends beyond the self into the greater context in which the adherents find themselves. Altruism leads to prosocial behavior. Prosocial behavior enhances both an intrapersonal sense of hope, and fosters positive influences in cooperation in prosocial activities as an interpersonal, altruistic outcome (Van Kleef and Lelieveld 2022, p. 81). Self-transcendence in prosocial behavior creates a sense of the smallness of self, shifting the focus from self to others and hence increases within the person a greater willingness to engage in prosocial behavior (Van Kleef and Lelieveld 2022, pp. 81–82). It is interesting that in the Kleef and Lelieveld's study, the opposite of well-being and eudemonic happiness, namely distress and anxiety, inhibits the individual's perception of the world around them and does not naturally lead to prosocial behaviors (Van Kleef and Lelieveld 2022, pp. 83–86).

What is the bottom-line of this argument? First, we find that people who are happy in themselves tend to be people who are in touch with themselves and have a healthy perspective of their contexts, however challenging it may be. Secondly, people who tend to be happy in themselves tend to be more empathetic and altruistic, leading to prosocial behavior that assists in the meeting of needs, which to those around them may lead to hedonistic forms of happiness. Eudemonic and hedonistic happiness therefore intertwine. This is made possible by religion/spiritual practices that allow to hold in tension the immanent and transcendental aspects of both belief and what a person needs to express happiness.

Happiness is therefore more than having a smile on one's face. It is, but it is also more than the meeting of material needs of finding physical pleasure. It finds lasting value when expressed as a way of life, characterized by notions, such as empathy, compassion, forgiveness, grace, and love. This can be achieved through finding oneself gaining perspective of one's context and navigating life's challenges (immanent) with a sense of meaning and purpose (transcendent).

## 5. Conclusions

In this article, it was argued that the notion of happiness is complex. Although it is something that every person strives for, different forms of happiness may manifest in one's life. Broad distinctions between immediate, subjective forms of happiness, and happiness created by a sense of meaning and purpose were made.

This article then focused on religion/spirituality, showing that which constitutes happiness in religion/spirituality, although divergent also follows the immediate and more general states of well-being. These were then defined in terms of immanent and transcendental aspects of religion/spirituality, arguing that happiness is not to be found exclusively in either, but becomes manifest when these are held in tension in experiential reality.

Principles in religion/spirituality were then identified that can promote a greater sense of happiness or well-being. These include:

- Religion/spirituality's recognition of the role it can play in promoting happiness/well-being;
- Avoiding a message which is either immanent- or transcendent-centered, which can create greater distress;
- Offering a space where immanence and transcendence is held in tension by 'grounding' adherents through spiritual practices, such as meditation, prayer and contemplation;
- These Mindfulness-based practices can lead to greater self-awareness and self-regulation, translating into an increased sense of personal well-being (happiness);
- When practiced repeatedly, adherents are more likely to display empathy, altruism, and prosocial behavior, increasing both the occurrence of hedonistic happiness as well as eudemonic happiness.

Happiness is therefore found in both the meeting of basic needs as well as in the peaks of self-actualization. It is my argument that instead of being used as oppressive tools, religion/spirituality can contribute towards greater well-being and the experience of subjective and general forms of happiness.

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