

SPIRITUAL WELL-BEING AND HUMAN
FLOURISHING

Conceptual, Causal, and Policy Relations

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Introduction

The present paper will discuss various conceptual and causal relations between temporal flourishing in this life and what might be understood as spiritual well-being from a theological perspective. The discussion of these relations is motivated by the question: Does religion contribute to human flourishing? To attempt to answer this question, different notions of flourishing or well-being should be distinguished. The paper will consider relevant distinctions and the different levels at which this question of the role of religion in human flourishing might be addressed. Discussion will be given to how competing notions of the good and the final end of the human person might come into play in considering this question, how these differing notions can also give rise to religious conflict, and how such conflicts might be navigated. The paper considers some policy implications of the discussion and, in light of the relevant distinctions, returns to the question: Does religion contribute to human flourishing?

Religion and Individual Flourishing

At the individual level, with regard to how participation in religion generally, and religious communities specifically, shapes numerous aspects of human flourishing, the data and research have become increasingly clear. Religious community contributes profoundly to numerous aspects of human flourishing. I have elsewhere discussed at greater length the evidence from rigorous longitudinal studies concerning the effects of religious service attendance on health and well-being.¹ The existing evidence suggests substantial effects on numerous health and well-being outcomes. In particular, large well-designed longitudinal research studies have indicated that religious service attendance is associated with greater longevity, less depression, less suicide, less smoking, less substance abuse, better cancer and cardiovascular disease survival, less divorce, greater social support, greater meaning and purpose in life, greater life satisfaction, more charitable giving, less crime, more volunteering, more prosocial behavior, and greater civic engagement.² While some of the early studies on this topic were methodologically weak, the study and research designs have become stronger and stronger, and for many of these outcomes, the associations are now considered well established. Religious service attendance powerfully affects health and well-being.

Participation in religious community contributes to this wide range of outcomes. But does this long list of outcomes constitute human flourishing? I have elsewhere provided some discussion of different domains of human flourishing around which I think there would be broad consensus as to their importance, consensus across different conceptions of flourishing. These domains include: happiness and life satisfaction, mental and physical health, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, and close social relationships.³ The argument here is not that these domains fully constitute human flourishing, but rather that, however human flourishing might be conceived and in whatever else it might consist, there would be broad consensus that it includes these domains as well. Each of these domains arguably constitutes an end in and of itself and is nearly universally desired. The existing empirical evidence suggests that participation in religious community has important effects on each of these domains. The existing evidence is stronger for certain of these domains than others,⁴ and at least some further rigorous empirical research might still be desired. There is also a need to better understand the extent to which the magnitude of these effects on these outcomes varies across cultural contexts, demographic factors, and religious traditions. Certainly, participation in religious

community does not contribute positively to every individual in each of these domains. However, the evidence has become increasingly clear that, in the West at least, where the vast majority of this research has been conducted, the effects on average are positive, substantial, and profound. Religious community often contributes in important ways to human flourishing in this life.

Religion and Spiritual Well-Being

At another level, we might also consider how religion contributes to the final end of the human person, what might be thought of as the completion of human flourishing. Conceptions of the final end of the human person, or whether there is anything beyond death and extinction, are likely to be yet more diverse. Discussion of these matters is then more straightforward, and perhaps only possible, within the context of the understanding of a specific religious or philosophical tradition.

Within the understanding of any given religious tradition, religion itself will in general contribute to the fulfillment of human flourishing, at least as that religious tradition conceives of it; that is its orientation and purpose. Religion itself might be conceived of as the communal attempt to come to communion with the divine or transcendent. The stated end of many religious traditions is constituted by a communion with the divine or transcendent. This communion is seen as the final end of the human person. Certainly this is so with many of the central traditions within Christianity.⁵ Many religious practices themselves are fundamentally oriented to the attainment of that end of communion with the divine or transcendent. Religion's focus is often on these transcendent ends.

In many ways, then, the effects of religious practice on temporal flourishing are, if not incidental, at least secondary, and it is perhaps remarkable, given the focus of religion on the transcendent, that participation in religious community affects so many human flourishing outcomes in this life as well. However, that the final end of the human person may not coincide simply with human flourishing in this life raises questions of the conceptual and causal relations between temporal flourishing in this life and such final well-being. Of course, these relations will likewise vary by religious tradition, and here I will briefly consider the question, and the potentially relevant concepts, within the context of the Christian tradition.

I have elsewhere suggested that *human flourishing* be understood as a state in which all aspects of a person's life are good.⁶ *Eternal*

flourishing, or *perfect well-being*, may be understood, within the Christian tradition, as final and complete communion with God. *Spiritual well-being* in this life might then be understood as a state in which one's life is oriented toward eternal flourishing, or as a state in which all aspects of a person's life are good with respect to his or her final end in God. *Temporal well-being* or *temporal flourishing* might be understood as those aspects of human flourishing that pertain to the goods in this life, thus inclusive of happiness and life satisfaction, mental and physical health, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, and close social relationships. A Christian would thus understand human flourishing as encompassing both spiritual and temporal well-being, with spiritual well-being being the component that is most central, that which brings a person to his or her final end in God.

Relations between Temporal Flourishing and Spiritual Well-Being

It has long been understood in the Christian tradition that temporal flourishing and spiritual well-being, while often mutually supportive, can come into conflict: "What does it profit a man to gain the whole world but lose his soul?" (Mark 8:36). The potential conflict is perhaps seen most clearly in Christian understandings of suffering. While suffering, as an experience of the loss of some temporal good, is to be understood as a deprivation, it can also be the source of transformation, of change and growth, of purification of desires, of reorientation to one's final end in God.⁷ Saint Paul writes, "We even boast of our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, and endurance, proven character, and proven character, hope, and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts" (Rom 5:3-5). When temporal goods and the spiritual life come into conflict, the latter is to be given priority as it constitutes the person's orientation to his or her final end in God.

In understanding the relations between spiritual well-being and temporal flourishing, an analogy might be drawn with childhood development. When considering the flourishing of a child, this might be understood both with respect to the child's present state but also with respect to the child's development. Whether the child is happy and healthy and has good relationships is undoubtedly important, but for the child's growth and development into a responsible adult, some degree of instruction, formation, and discipline will be necessary, even if this makes the child temporarily unhappy and strains relationships.

Likewise, within a Christian understanding, a person's temporal flourishing, including their health and happiness, is not irrelevant—the created order was shaped by God to be good. However, for a person in the fallen order of the world to attain his or her final end in God, some giving up of aspects of temporal flourishing may be necessary for the sake of a greater spiritual well-being.

However, often spiritual well-being and temporal flourishing will be consonant. Health of the body and mind, a certain peace and rest and satisfaction, a set of supportive relationships, and a strength of character will facilitate the religious practices, prayer, communal life, service, and reflection that promote and constitute spiritual well-being. Likewise, these religious practices can contribute to temporal flourishing by developing community, facilitating mental health, shaping character, and giving one a sense of understanding, meaning, purpose, and satisfaction.

Furthermore, the center of spiritual life, charity (theologically understood as a love of or a friendship with God), includes also a profound love of neighbor, the seeking of the good of the other.⁸ When practiced, this contributes not only to the good of the person loving⁹ but also to those who are loved, and these good actions are furthermore likely to spread.¹⁰ Again the spiritual life facilitates temporal flourishing. The focus on transcendence and on love for God and neighbor has perhaps often been the inspiration of religion's contributions to the development of hospitals, universities, economic systems, the arts, human rights, law, science, and the preservation of learning.¹¹ The reunification of temporal flourishing and spiritual well-being, both for an individual and for society, may be understood as part of the task of redemption. For the individual, a complete orientation to God in charity, a seeing of each circumstance, even those seemingly adverse, as an opportunity for faith and hope and love, can at least partially accomplish this reconciliation between spiritual well-being and at least certain aspects of temporal flourishing. Spiritual well-being does not eliminate, but rather relativizes, and ultimately transforms, the importance of temporal flourishing.

It is, however, in part, in the potential conflict between spiritual well-being and certain temporal goods or aspects of temporal flourishing that the perception can arise that religion suppresses human flourishing. Religious teachings can conflict with the desires for certain pleasures in certain contexts, can conflict with what are perceived to be as certain freedoms, and may be in tension with desires oriented principally toward

the self rather than toward others and God. But, within a Christian understanding, when conflict arises, deference is to be given to spiritual well-being. Temporal goods and aspects of temporal flourishing may be suppressed.

Oppression of, or discrimination against, those who do not defer to a religious teaching can yet further detract from temporal flourishing. However, this way by which religion may detract from temporal flourishing is arguably not inherent to religious practice itself and is also arguably often contradicted by an ethic of charity and love. However, the conflict between spiritual well-being and temporal goods, discussed above, is intrinsic, in the world as it stands.

Religious Conflict and Human Flourishing

Further conflicts between spiritual well-being and temporal flourishing can arise also when considering not one, but several, religious traditions, and here there are of course tensions between different notions of spiritual well-being as well.¹² Such tensions will be present at the level of understanding and conception, but will also be present with respect to institutions and to competition. The presence of Christianity may be seen as inimical to the advancement of spiritual well-being from a Muslim perspective; and likewise, the presence of Islam adverse to the realization of spiritual well-being from a Christian perspective. Such conflicts have certainly played out, at times with devastating consequences, in human history. Religious wars and conflicts are often perceived as one of the central means by which religion detracts from human flourishing. While such wars have often had political motivations as well,¹³ it seems clear that competing notions of spiritual well-being have likewise played a role. Can such conflicts be navigated?

When questions of final, ultimate, and supernatural ends and goods are at play, it seems clear that the potential for conflict, even violence, is substantial. It seems unlikely that it will be eliminated entirely. While religious teachings, properly framed, and exhortations to love and seek the good of the other may help reduce the potential for conflict, the potential is not eliminated. History has shown that the human actors in worldly affairs will often deviate from proper action and religious teachings, and perhaps especially so when the stakes seem so high. This will likely be so, even if religious teachings, properly interpreted, were capable, if followed, of preventing violence. Certainly the topic of interreligious dialogue and relations is a complex one, well beyond the

scope of this already broad essay. However, several considerations should perhaps come into play and may be helpful in reflecting upon how to mitigate religious conflict from detracting from human flourishing.¹⁴

First, this problem of religious conflict detracting from human flourishing is a problem to be contended with; it is not one that can be avoided or ignored with the hope that religion will eventually decline. Eighty-four percent of the world's population identify with a religious tradition; the vast majority consider religion an important part of life. While religious affiliation is declining in certain pockets of the Western world, it is much less clear that this is the picture worldwide. Projections from the Pew Forum suggest even higher rates of religious affiliation worldwide by the year 2050. Religion will not be going away. The potential for conflict is one that is to be addressed, not neglected in the hope that religion itself will eventually pass. It will not. Second, interreligious dialogue holds at least some potential to help members of different religious groups understand what is held in common and what is distinctive about each tradition, potentially facilitating a greater understanding and mutual respect. A free exchange of ideas concerning theological beliefs and competing notions of spiritual well-being can allow religious adherents to make a case for their own particular religious understanding to others while, if carried out respectfully, hopefully also avoiding animosity and violence. Third, from certain Christian perspectives at least, spiritual well-being and communion with God require the free consent of the will.¹⁵ The forcing of religion through violence cannot accomplish that; it cannot bring spiritual well-being. Policies that facilitate free practice of religion and also free exchange of ideas are more likely to bring about the spiritual well-being and the free conversion of the will that may be sought. Fourth, we must acknowledge that, for many who practice the various of the world's religions, some notion of spiritual well-being will likely be the central goal and priority. To neglect this is to misunderstand the nature of religious beliefs and their central place in notions of well-being for much of the world's population. This point will be developed somewhat further in the next section, and the possibility of the world's religions supporting their common ends will be discussed in the section following.

Measures of Tradition-Specific Spiritual Well-Being

Related to the importance of spiritual well-being to much of the world's population, in order to facilitate recognition of the spiritual ends of specific religious communities it may be good and helpful to begin

to collect data on various tradition-specific notions of spiritual well-being. While certain generic measures of spiritual well-being have been put forward¹⁶ and may be useful for some purposes, they are arguably not sufficiently generic to apply to nonmonotheistic or nontheistic religions, nor sufficiently specific to be of principal interest to most practicing religious communities. Other, even more generic, measures of spiritual well-being have been criticized on the grounds of assessing principally psychological well-being rather than spiritual well-being.¹⁷ Tradition-specific measures would better allow for the assessment of more particular notions of spiritual well-being. For example, within the Christian tradition, measurement could be focused on various practices, beliefs, community life, service, prayer, character, and virtues, as being important in spiritual well-being in this life, and the means to the final end of communion with God. There, of course, must be acknowledgment of what can and cannot be measured; but simply because certain facets of spiritual well-being—the presence and operation of God’s grace—cannot be measured, this does not mean that no progress can be made at all. A recent initial attempt at a measure of specifically Christian spiritual well-being is proposed elsewhere.¹⁸ Measures could likewise potentially be developed across different religious traditions.

The development of new measures of tradition-specific spiritual well-being may facilitate an understanding and tracking of how various religious communities are faring and whether they perceive themselves as making progress toward attaining those ends they deem most important. The idea would not be to compare spiritual well-being across groups—indeed with different tradition-specific measures this would not be possible—nor to combine these measures with those of temporal flourishing. Rather, the hope of such measurement would be to acknowledge the importance of these ends of spiritual well-being to various religious communities, to provide a way to assess progress toward these ends or lack thereof, and to facilitate the capacity of bringing an empirically informed case for promoting these ends into policy discussions. Such advocacy would need to likewise acknowledge competing interests and ends of other communities, but this is the nature of political life. However, the use of such measures may help religious communities themselves in the discernment of how various government policies do, or do not, affect these communities’ principal priorities. It may be the case that some forms of religiously motivated political efforts arise from the desire to shape political life in accord with religious beliefs, while not being able to bring the principal concerns of

spiritual well-being into discussion because it is considered inadmissible or because no empirical data is available upon which to make a case.

Religion and Common Ends

While notions of spiritual well-being will vary across religious traditions, there are still many common ends concerning temporal flourishing upon which the various world religious traditions can arguably attain agreement. I have argued above and elsewhere¹⁹ that among these ends are the following: happiness and life satisfaction, mental and physical health, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, and close social relationships. Policies can continue to aim to enhance these ends, even in the face of diverse religious traditions and competing notions of spiritual well-being. To the extent that these aspects of temporal flourishing contribute to spiritual well-being, as above, such policies will often also then promote spiritual well-being as well, and may do so across traditions. Policies aimed at facilitating and protecting the free practice of religious communities will, as noted at the beginning of this essay, also make substantial contributions to numerous aspects of temporal health and well-being. Even if there is lack of consensus on the nature of spiritual well-being, the protecting of the presence and practices of religious communities can itself contribute to temporal flourishing, as the now abundant evidence does indeed indicate.²⁰

Conclusion

Does religion contribute to human flourishing? Within the understanding of specific religious traditions, undoubtedly religion contributes to the completion of human flourishing, to the attainment of final communion with God. Does religion contribute to temporal flourishing? The evidence strongly suggests that participation in religious communities promotes numerous aspects of individual flourishing, including happiness and life satisfaction, mental and physical health, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, and close social relationships. Does the presence of multiple religions and the potential conflict inherent therein necessarily inhibit human flourishing? Such conflict is arguably the greatest threat whereby religion may suppress human flourishing. These concerns must be acknowledged and addressed; they cannot be avoided. The goal would be a set of interreligious relations that would allow for a free exchange of understandings of competing notions of spiritual well-being, and for preventing conflicts to the extent possible, while allowing religious communities to pursue their own

ends, to contribute to human flourishing in the numerous ways that they already do, and to seek, as best as possible, the final fulfillment of human flourishing, a communion with the transcendent and divine.

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- 1 VanderWeele 2017a, 2017b, 2018.
- 2 VanderWeele 2017a, 2017b, 2018; Koenig, King, and Carson 2012; Idler 2014; Iannaccone 1998; Wilcox and Wolfinger 2016; Johnson 2011; Johnson et al. 2001; Krause 2012; Strawbridge et al. 1997; Li et al. 2016a, 2016b; Fruehwirth, Iver, and Zhang 2018; VanderWeele et al. 2016; Hummer et al. 1999; Chida, Steptoe, and Powell 2009; Putnam and Campbell 2012; Shariff et al. 2016; Lim and Putnam 2010; Chen and VanderWeele 2018.
- 3 VanderWeele 2017c.
- 4 VanderWeele 2017a, 2017b.
- 5 Aquinas 1948; Vatican 2000; Westminster 2014. Here and throughout I will speak mostly in reference to Christianity, but many of the remarks, I believe, may be more broadly applicable.
- 6 VanderWeele 2017c. Flourishing, as an abstract verbal noun, might be understood as “the state in which all aspects of a person’s life are good”; flourishing, as a gerund or present participle, might be understood as “living in a state in which all aspects of a person’s life are good.”
- 7 John Paul II 1984.
- 8 Aquinas 1948.
- 9 Aquinas 1948; Vatican 2000; Curry et al. 2018.
- 10 Fowler and Christakis 2010.
- 11 Carroll and Shiflett 2001; C. Schmidt 1885; A. J. Schmidt 2001; Woods and Canizares 2012.
- 12 Cohen and Johnson 2017.
- 13 Cavanaugh 2009.
- 14 Volf 2015; Goodman 2014.
- 15 Aquinas 1948; Vatican 2000.
- 16 Paloutzian and Ellison 1982.
- 17 Peterman et al. 2002; Koenig 2008.
- 18 VanderWeele, Long, and Balboni, in press.
- 19 VanderWeele 2017c.
- 20 VanderWeele 2017a, 2017b, 2018; Koenig, King, and Carson 2012; Idler 2014; Iannaccone 1998; Wilcox and Wolfinger 2016; Johnson 2011; Johnson et al. 2001; Krause 2012; Strawbridge et al. 1997; Li et al. 2016a, 2016b; Fruehwirth, Iver, and Zhang 2018; VanderWeele et al. 2016; Hummer et al. 1999; Chida, Steptoe, and Powell 2009; Putnam and Campbell 2012; Shariff et al. 2016; Lim and Putnam 2010; Chen and VanderWeele 2018.