



St Anne's Church Wandsworth

SO WHAT MAKES US HAPPY?

We are not trying here to answer the whole question but to look at one particular aspect, and not even a particularly Christian one at that! Social scientists have noticed that, even though we enjoy a prosperity that previous generations could only dream of, the population is no happier than it was fifty years ago. So what is going wrong?

The answer roughly is that, all too often, people are chasing after the wrong thing. Once we have our basic needs taken care of, extra money does not bring extra happiness. Instead all too easily it becomes a kind of slippery slope on which the more we have, the more we want, and the more we envy those who have more than us. If we want to be happy we need to take control of our lives and concentrate on family and friends, protect our leisure and support things of emotional, moral and spiritual value.

This is nothing new for most religions, and certainly is familiar stuff in the Bible and the Christian tradition, and indeed can be read in the teachings of Jesus himself. Christians would want to add other factors as paths to happiness: the importance of self-giving love in the model of Jesus; the essential role of forgiveness as a key to human relationships; the servant as a model for those in positions of authority... But there is no doubt that Christianity looks for people to be happy if that is possible in this world, and offers wisdom in advising us how to avoid unhappiness.

'Beer is proof that God loves us and wants us to be happy.' *Benjamin Franklin*

'Do not worry, saying, "What will we eat?" or "What will we wear?" For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.' *Matthew 6.31-33.*

'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.' *John 10.10*

From the journal, The Psychologist

American psychologist Tim Kasser unleashed an evidence-based attack on Western materialism in December. Speaking at the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufacturing and Commerce in London, Kasser echoed the words of Martin Luther King, calling for a revolution of values, a shift from a thing-centred to a person-centred society.

Our slide into materialism has reached new lows, Kasser said, especially in America. ... But according to Kasser, Associate Professor of Psychology at Knox College, numerous studies show this focus on material wealth carries psychological, social and ecological costs. Materialistic people, from children to pensioners, are less satisfied with life, lack vitality, and suffer more anxiety, depression and addiction problems. Materialistic values make people more antisocial, less empathetic, more competitive and less cooperative. ..

We should champion the idea of 'voluntary simplicity' – down-shifting, finding inner richness, while choosing to work, earn and consume less.

One study of 200 people who'd chosen voluntary simplicity showed they were happier and more ecologically responsible than 200 typical Americans, even though they earned an average of 60 per cent less.

Statistical analysis revealed their greater happiness was entirely explained by their endorsement of intrinsic values.

Another approach is to alert people to the rewards of time affluence. A study in press with the *Journal of Business Ethics* found that 145 people with more time on their hands showed greater subjective well-being thanks largely to the opportunity to engage in intrinsic pursuits.

While the GDP (how much money is turned over) of America, the UK and other developed nations has soared over the last 50 years, genuine progress in terms of happiness and well-being has flatlined. But still we continue to measure the progress of nations using GDP. 'We need a revolution of values,' Kasser concluded. 'Our current approach is leading to unhappiness, destroying social connections and harming the environment.'

Extracts taken from The Psychologist, vol.21 no.2, February 2008

According to **Daniel Nettle** in *Happiness: the Science behind your smile* (OUP 2005), some things, both good and bad, have only a short effect on our happiness and we quickly take them for granted. Other things have a real lasting effect. 'Basic threats to the safety of the individual – chronic cold, food shortage, or excessive environmental noise, are things that you would never get used to. Serious health problems can leave a lasting mark. The lack of autonomy in life is an enduring negative, leading ultimately not just to unhappiness but to poor health. On the other hand, income and material goods are quickly and completely adapted to, and so as economic growth ploughs on, people will not necessarily get any happier, depending on how that growth is used in terms of quality of life. Aptly intermediate between noise and money is marriage. This produces a large deviation in the short to medium term, but significant adaptation in the end.'

Some things are 'positional' – our pleasure in them derives from comparing with what other people have. We are satisfied (or not) with our income, houses, cars, holidays by comparison with what we see around us. This leads to constant competition – keeping up with the Joneses – but no long-term happiness. On the other hand, health, autonomy, friendships, and the quality of the environment are real sources of happiness.

'Human motivation is driven by wanting rather than by liking. People who work part-time, control their own lives, join community organisations, or get involved in active leisure are happier than those who do not. Yet the vast majority of people do not make these choices. Instead, their positional psychology drives them to work harder and harder to amass a greatly increased range of material goods. All the evidence is that such goods do nothing to increase their happiness, but the urge to keep up with the Joneses is very strong.'

Is happiness what we really want and value?

Some great creative people – writers, artists, scientists – have achieved wonderful things only at great personal cost with anxiety, stress and failure. And we admire them – so what does that say about our priorities?

In *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley happiness is guaranteed by social engineering, entertainment and drugs. All pleasures are met with little effort or possibility of failure. But in the story a man (the “Savage”) rebels:

‘But I don’t want comfort. I want God, I want poetry, I want real danger, I want freedom, I want goodness, I want sin.’

‘In fact’, said the controller, ‘you’re claiming the right to be unhappy.’

‘All right, then,’ said the Savage defiantly, ‘I’m claiming the right to be unhappy.’

The best route for happiness is not to chase after it!

‘Consider the thoughts of one of the great philosophers of happiness, John Stuart Mill. He wrote an autobiography, which includes profound reflections on happiness. After a period of serious depression, he concluded: “Those only are happy (I thought) who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness; on the happiness of others, on the improvement of mankind, even on some art or pursuit followed not as a means, but as itself an ideal end. Aiming thus at something else, they find happiness by the way”. Happiness depends on not making yourself the centre of attention. Mill’s point is not a moralistic one, that we should be less selfish. It is more interesting than that. Mill is saying that for human beings, the good life requires a sense of transcendence – a desire for that which takes us beyond our personal concerns to something that we can give ourselves to.’ Mark Vernon, *Church Times* 5 September 2008

‘Happiness is a butterfly, which, when pursued, is always beyond our grasp, but which, if you will sit down quietly, may alight upon you.’
Nathaniel Hawthorne