

Truth and Happiness: Are They Compatible?

by
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In the March 4, 1999 issue of the *Dallas Morning News*, Dr. Laura Schlessinger, the famous Orthodox Jewish author and radio talk show hostess, wrote an article about how religion helps people be more optimistic and happy. It was reprinted in the July/August 1999 issue of *Does God Exist?*, a publication of the Donmoyer Avenue Church of Christ. In this article, Dr. Laura quotes University of Pennsylvania professor Martin Seligan as saying:

“In our study, we looked at 11 major religions in America, and how hopeful, and optimistic the adherents were. We looked at the level of optimism in the stories the children were told as well as in the liturgy, and sermons. We found strict Calvinists, Roman Catholics, and Orthodox Jews were the most hopeful and optimistic, while Unitarians and Reformed Jews tended to be more pessimistic. The fundamentalist religions simply seem to offer more hope for a brighter future than do the more liberal, humanistic ones.”

Dr. Laura then goes on to conclude:

Without church and synagogue, people lose the sense of connection and longing that comes from group worship and communal experience. There is sufficient research that finds a positive correlation between worship attendance and mental and physical health, including adequately coping with life's adversities.

As Objectivists, how are we to view such information? Could it actually be true that fundamentalist religions are validated by studies that show their adherents are more hopeful and optimistic than other people? Or, are the studies flawed?

Personally, I do not question the validity of the studies. Based on my observation of people, their beliefs, and their attitudes, I am not surprised by the results. Most people do seem to need hope for the future, and especially the afterlife, to be happy in this life. What I question is the implied validation of fundamentalist religions based on the greater happiness of its followers.

What is the source of happiness? Does happiness only come from believing that which is true or can it also come from believing a lie? I think it is quite obvious that happiness can come from either. My experience tells me that many people *choose* what they want to

believe if it brings happiness to their lives. Whether or not there is sufficient evidence to support their beliefs is irrelevant. Have you ever heard of a person who refused to accept a irrefutable fact because to do so would cause great mental anguish? Have you ever heard of someone letting a dying loved one believe a lie because he did not want that person to die unhappy? And, why do parents lie to their children about the existence of Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny? Isn't it because they believe their children will be happier believing the lie than the truth?

Thus, there is no doubt that lies sometimes bring happiness where the truth brings sadness. So, should a person pursue happiness without regard to truth, or should he pursue the truth without regard to his happiness? I personally prefer the pursuit of truth. However, I also believe that, with the proper perspective, the pursuit of truth can itself bring happiness. Let me explain.

Almost 20 years ago, I became a Christian in a denomination that believed the Bible to be the inerrant word of God. I initially did so out of fear of going to hell. However, as I began to make Christian friends, worshipping with them and sharing meals with them, I realized that being a Christian could be fun. I was very happy.

A few years later, I began studying the Bible in earnest, trying to understand every little part of it in order to increase my faith. I found that there were many inconsistent and irrational passages in the Bible. This troubled me deeply. I had always been led to believe that such things did not exist in the Bible, but they did. So, I was torn. Should I believe that which did not make sense and "play it safe" or should I reject it and accept only that which did make sense? It was a difficult choice. Some people believed that if I accepted the Bible and it was false, I would have lost nothing. But if I rejected it and it was true, I would have lost everything. For a long while, I could see nothing wrong with this argument, but it finally dawned on me. What if God exists and the Bible is not true? How would God judge me for accepting that Jesus was God when in reality he was not? And how would He judge me for accepting the Bible, which He did not write, as God-inspired while refusing to use the rational mind He had given me to discern truth from falsehood? Not very favorably, I suspected.

Therefore, I realized that beliefs and the actions that flowed from them can and do have consequences. Reality was not there for me to accept or reject at my discretion in order to obtain some deluded form of happiness. Reality was just there. It was what it was, and it was up to me to use the tools I had been given to discern fact from fiction. And the better I was able to do this, the better off I would be. Just as I could reject the reality of gravity and jump off the top of a skyscraper to my doom, so could I likewise reject the reality of beliefs having consequences, accept bad ones, and suffer bad consequences.

Once I realized that the world was open to my scrutiny and that I had the tools to discern good and bad, happiness was restored in my life. And this time it has been longer lived.

Objectivism was not included in the Seligan study, only religions were. Had it been included, I believe Objectivism would have ranked high. However, Objectivists'

happiness comes from the knowledge that they are pursuing and can grasp the truth of reality rather than from having to accept a false hope lying outside reality.

So, yes, truth and happiness are compatible. It only takes a commitment to reality.

Randy Finch is an engineer living and working in Alabama. He earned his BS and MS from the University of Louisville. He enjoys creating computer software and writing articles about computer programming. He has had over 60 articles published in magazines, journals, newsletters, and conference proceedings. He also enjoys reading, writing, and discussing philosophy, particularly Objectivism. Interestingly, Randy was born on February 2, 1955, exactly 50 years to the day after Ayn Rand was born. Also, notice that the name Ayn Rand can be created with just the letters in his first name (if the "a" and "n" are used twice). If anyone knows of any significance to these coincidences, please let him know.