



NATIONAL RESEARCH UNIVERSITY  
HIGHER SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS

*Ronald Inglehart, Roberto Foa, Eduard Ponarin,  
Christian Welzel*

# **UNDERSTANDING THE RUSSIAN MALAISE: THE COLLAPSE AND RECOVERY OF SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING IN POST-COMMUNIST RUSSIA**

BASIC RESEARCH PROGRAM

WORKING PAPERS

SERIES: SOCIOLOGY  
WP BRP 32/SOC/2013

This Working Paper is an output of a research project implemented at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE). Any opinions or claims contained in this Working Paper do not necessarily reflect the views of HSE.

## **UNDERSTANDING THE RUSSIAN MALAISE: THE COLLAPSE AND RECOVERY OF SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING IN POST-COMMUNIST RUSSIA**

This article analyzes the decline of subjective well-being and a sense of national self-esteem among the Russian people that was linked with the collapse of the communist economic, political and social systems in the 1990s—and a subsequent recovery of subjective well-being that began more recently. Subjective well-being is closely linked with economic development, democracy and physical health. The people of rich countries tend show higher levels than those of poor countries, but already in 1982, the Russia people ranked lower on happiness and life satisfaction than the people of much poorer countries such as Nigeria or India; external signs of this malaise were rising alcoholism and declining male life expectancy. But after the collapse of the Soviet Union, subjective well-being in Russia fell to levels never seen before, reaching a low point in 1995 when most Russians described themselves as unhappy and dissatisfied with their lives as a whole. Since 2000, this trend has been reversing itself, but in 2011 Russia still ranked slightly lower than its level in 1981.

Keywords: World Values Survey, Russia, happiness, subjective well-being

JEL Classification: E11

---

<sup>1</sup> University of Michigan and Laboratory for Comparative Social Research, Higher School of Economics, St Petersburg, Russia; contact information: [rfi@umich.edu](mailto:rfi@umich.edu), 2626 Geddes Avenue, Ann Arbor, Michigan USA 48104

<sup>2</sup> Harvard University email [foa@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:foa@fas.harvard.edu)

<sup>3</sup> Laboratory for Comparative Social Research, Higher School of Economics, [eponarin@hse.spb.ru](mailto:eponarin@hse.spb.ru)

<sup>4</sup> University of Leuphana and Laboratory for Comparative Social Research, Higher School of Economics, St Petersburg, Russia, [cwelzel@gmail.com](mailto:cwelzel@gmail.com)

The collapse of a sense of well-being in Russia did not simply reflect economic decline. It was also linked with the collapse of a belief system that had provided a sense of meaning and purpose to many people-- but that was eroding by 1982 and had collapsed by 1990. Since 2000, economic recovery has contributed to rising subjective well-being, but a resurgence of religion and a recovering sense of national pride have also helped fill the ideological vacuum left by the collapse of Marxist faith. As the World Values Survey data demonstrate, Russia and other ex-communist countries have shown the strongest resurgence of religion of any group of countries in the world, and religion contributes almost as much as prosperity does to a sense of well-being.

Subjective well-being is an important variable, closely linked with economic development, and with a country's level of democracy. Moreover, subjective well-being is closely linked with various indicators of physical health. It is also linked with modernization, a syndrome of social changes linked with industrialization. Once set in motion, it tends to bring occupational specialization, urbanization, rising educational levels, rising life expectancy, and rapid economic growth. These create a self-reinforcing process that transforms social life and political institutions, bringing rising mass participation in politics, growing gender equality, changing work motivations, changing attitudes toward authority and—in the long run—making democratic political institutions increasingly likely. It even has a significant impact on both life expectancy and subjective well-being. Today, we have a clearer idea than ever before of why and how this process happens.

For most of human history, technological progress was extremely slow, and new developments in food production were offset by population increases – trapping agrarian economies in a steady-state equilibrium with no growth in living standards. The situation began to change with the Industrial Revolution and the advent of sustained economic growth – which led to both the capitalist and communist visions of modernization. Although the ideologies competed fiercely, they were similarly committed to economic growth and social progress and brought mass participation in politics. And both sides believed that the developing nations of the Third World would follow a certain path to modernization.

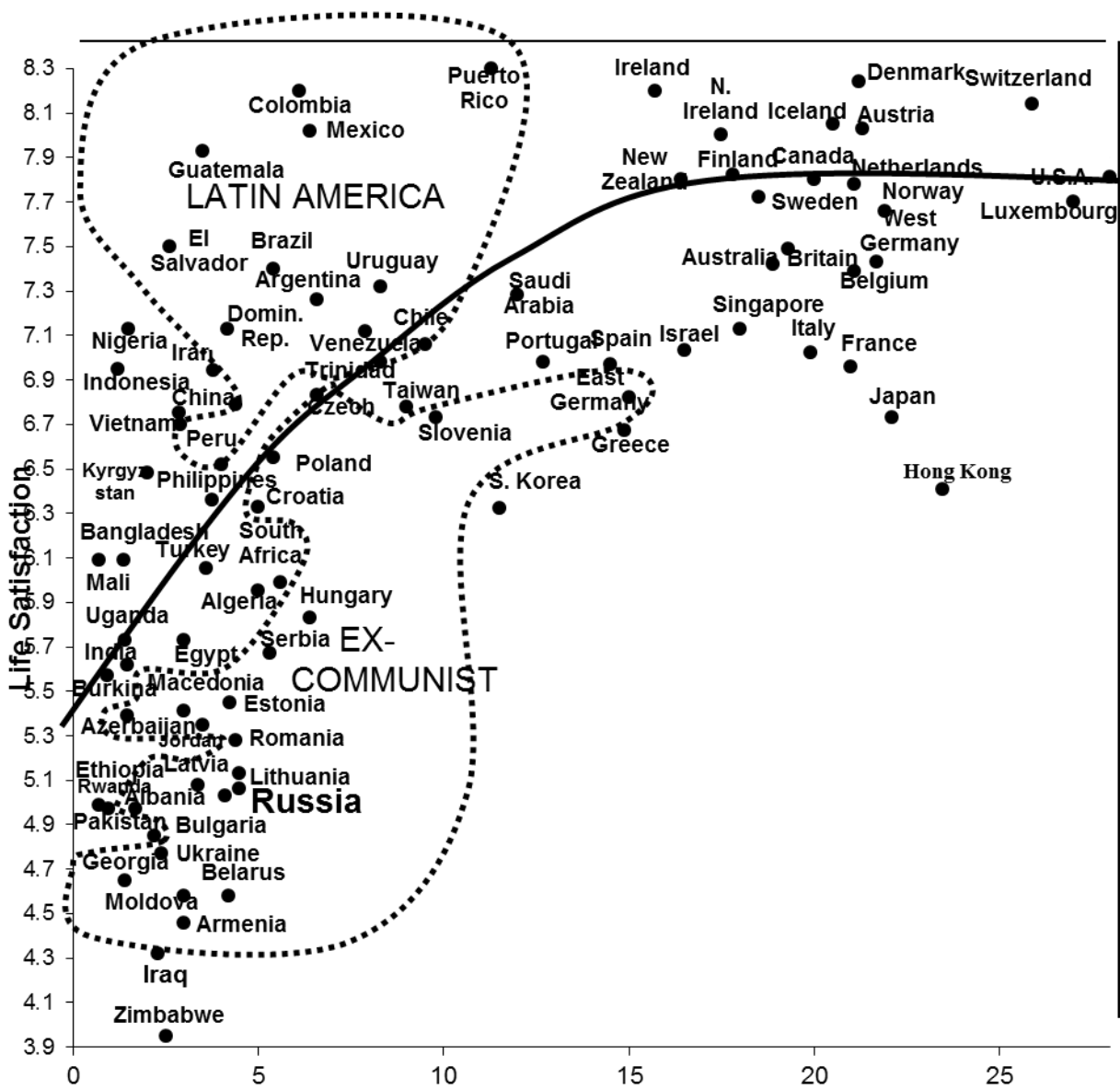
In retrospect, it is obvious that early versions of modernization theory were wrong on several points. Today, virtually nobody expects a revolution of the proletariat that will abolish private property, bringing a new era free from exploitation and conflict. Nor does anyone expect that industrialization will automatically bring democratic institutions. Nonetheless, a massive

body of evidence suggests that modernization theory's central premise was correct: economic development does tend to bring important, roughly predictable, changes in society, culture and politics. A large body of evidence from the Values Surveys demonstrates that economic development is strongly linked with pervasive changes in people's beliefs and motivations, and these changes are reshaping the role of religion, job motivations, human fertility rates, gender roles, and sexual norms. Moreover, modernization tends to bring rising levels of subjective well-being.

The World Values Survey and the European Values Study have carried out six waves of representative national surveys from 1981 to 2013, in scores of countries, containing almost 90 percent of the world's population. The results show large cross-national differences in what people believe and value. In some countries, 95 percent of the people say that God is very important in their lives; in others, only 3 percent do. In some societies, 90 percent of the people believe that men have more right to a job than women do; in others, only 8 percent think so. These cross-national differences are robust and enduring, and they are closely correlated with a society's level of economic development: people in low-income societies are much likelier to emphasize religion and traditional gender roles than are people in rich countries. And people in low-income countries tend to show much lower levels of happiness and life satisfaction than the publics of high-income countries—but economic development is not the only factor that plays a major role in shaping subjective well-being.

### **The declining sense of well-being in Russia**

Economic development is strongly linked with subjective well-being, with the people of rich countries tending to be happier than the people of poor countries. But empirical evidence indicates that as early as 1982, the Russia people already ranked lower on happiness and life satisfaction than the publics of much poorer countries such as Nigeria or India. Already in 1982, the Russian people were suffering from a malaise linked with the era of stagnation; external signs of this malaise, such as rising alcoholism and declining male life expectancy, were evident. But in subsequent years, with the collapse of the Soviet Union-- and the collapse of the communist belief system-- subjective well-being in Russia fell to levels never seen before. Thus, by 1990, Russia (with a few other countries such as Belarus, Ukraine, Bulgaria and Romania) showed the world's lowest levels of subjective well-being-- in fact, the lowest levels ever recorded. This was linked with falling birth rates and life expectancy. By 1995, subjective well-being in Russia had fallen to an extremely low level, as Figure 1 indicates.



**Life Satisfaction by economic development**  
 (1= very dissatisfied, 10= very satisfied)  
 GNP per capita in thousands, 5 years before mean survey (PPP estimates)  
 Life Satisfaction based on combined results from 1995 - 2007 WVS  
 (cubic curve plotted,  $r = .69$ )

**Figure 1. Subjective well-being, per capita GDP in different types of society.**

**Russia's level in 1995 is shown, combined data from 1995-2007 are used for other countries**

Figure 1 shows the relationship between economic development and subjective well-being in 88 countries containing almost 90 per cent of the world's population. To maximize reliability, this figure is based on data from all surveys carried out in a given country from 1995 to 2007, except in the case of Russia. We used per capita GDP five years before a country's mean survey, to reflect the time lag between reaching a given level of prosperity and its impact on subjective well-being. The solid curve on Figure 1 depicts the cubic regression line for the relationship between per capita GDP and subjective well-being. If a society's subjective well-being were wholly determined by its level of economic development, it would fall on this line. Happiness and life satisfaction rise steeply as one moves from subsistence-level poverty to a modest level of economic security, and then level off. Among the richest societies, further increases in income are only weakly linked with higher levels of subjective well-being.

As Figure 1 indicates, the aggregate subjective well-being of nations is closely related to economic development ( $r = .62$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The people of high-income countries are much happier and satisfied with life than are the people of low-income countries, and the differences are substantial. In Denmark, 52 per cent of the public indicated that they were highly satisfied with their lives (placing themselves at 9 or 10 on a ten-point scale), and 45 per cent said they were very happy. In Armenia, only 5 per cent were highly satisfied with their lives, and just 6 per cent were very happy. In contrast to the small income-linked differences usually found *within* most countries, the cross-national differences are extremely large.

The relationship between subjective well-being and economic development is curvilinear, explaining why it is widely believed that economic development has no impact on subjective well-being. Previous longitudinal studies relied heavily on U. S. data, and the United States long ago made the transition from subsistence-level poverty to middle-income status. Among higher-income nations, further gains in income bring relatively little change in well-being (Frey & Stutzer, 2002; Inglehart, 1990, 1997).

Figure 1 makes another important point. Quite apart from their level of economic development, some types of societies do a better job of maximizing their citizens' subjective well-being than others. All twelve of the Latin American countries for which there were data showed higher levels of subjective well-being than their economic levels would predict. Conversely, although they are about as rich as Latin America, almost all of the ex-communist

societies showed lower levels of subjective well-being than their economic levels would predict. Indeed, Russia and other ex-Soviet states showed lower levels than much poorer countries such as India, Bangladesh, Nigeria, Mali, and Ethiopia.

Life satisfaction and happiness showed similar patterns, with the Latin American societies being over-achievers and the ex-communist societies under-achievers on both indicators of subjective well-being. Across the Latin American countries, 45per cent of the population described themselves as very happy, and 42per cent rated themselves as very satisfied with their lives as a whole. In the ex-communist countries, only 12per cent described themselves as very happy, and only 14 per cent were very satisfied. Though their economic levels are fairly similar, Latin Americans were three to four times as likely to have high levels of subjective well-being.

Communist rule is not necessarily linked with low levels of subjective well-being: China and Vietnam—still ruled by communist parties and currently enjoying high rates of economic growth—showed much higher levels of well-being than the Soviet successor states. The collapse of their political, economic, and belief systems seem to have sharply reduced subjective well-being in the ex-communist societies. Many of them have a damaged national myth. The Soviet Union and Yugoslavia once played prominent roles in the world, which may have brought feelings of pride and satisfaction to many of their citizens. Today, they have splintered into 21 diminished successor states.

Although religion has long been weak in these countries, communist ideology may once have played a role comparable to that of religion. For many decades, communism seemed to be the wave of the future. The belief that they were building a better society may have given a sense of purpose to the lives of many people. It is difficult to understand the rise to power of the communist movements in Russia, China, and Vietnam without recognizing the motivating power of a belief system that once gave meaning to many people's lives and made them willing to sacrifice their lives for the cause. In Latin America, traditional beliefs in God and country remain strong; but in the ex-communist countries, the collapse of communism left a spiritual vacuum.

The striking contrast between the subjective well-being levels of Latin America and the ex-communist countries suggests that some types of society are more conducive to high levels of subjective well-being than others, quite apart from economic factors. Accordingly, dummy variables for Latin American and ex-communist countries explain a large share of the cross-national variance in SWB, even controlling for economic variables. But this does not explain *why* these countries show distinctive levels of SWB.

The following regression analyses probe more deeply. To provide complementary perspectives on the factors contributing to changes in SWB, we first analyzed societal-level factors, using OLS panel regression with data from the 52 countries from which substantial time series data are available. Cases were weighted according to the length of time elapsed between surveys, so countries for which the full 26-year time series was available have 2.6 times the weight of countries with a ten-year series. We then examined interactions between societal-level factors and individual-level factors, using hierarchical linear modeling (HLM).



**Table 1. Predicting Subjective Well-being: Time-series regression model.**

	Dependent variable			
	SWB Index		Happiness	Life Satisfaction
Independent Variables:	Model 1	Model 2		
Subjective well-being index in first available survey	.577 (.107)***	.627 (.081)***	—	—
Happiness in first available survey	—	—	.751 (.088)***	—
Life Satisfaction in first available survey	—	—	—	.501 (.094)***
GDP/capita (PPP in thousands) in first available survey	.058 (.027)*	.055 (.026)*	.005 (.005)	.045 (.019)*
Strength of religiosity in first available survey	.196 (.074)*	.201 (.066)**	.027 (.012)*	.138 (.047)**
Tolerance of outgroups in first available survey	.297 (.126)*	.288 (.119)*	.022 (.024)	.225 (.089)*
Level of national pride in first available survey	.031 (.524)	—	—	—
Level of democracy in first available survey	-.290 (.133)*	-.114 (.041)**	-.018 (.007)*	-.073 (.031)*
Sense of free choice in life, first available survey	.149 (.210)	—	—	—
Constant	-1.545 (1.958)	-.679 (.578)	-.542 (.279)	2.094 (.523)***
Adjusted R-squared	.84	.84	.84	.75
N =	41	41	41	41

Cell entry is unstandardized regression coefficient (standard error in parentheses)

Significance levels: \*\*\* p < .001; \*\* p < .01; \* p < .05

Source: attitudinal variables from 1981-2007 World Values Surveys; economic data from the World Bank, *World Development Indicators*. Measure of democracy from *Polity*.

The pooled time series regression results in Table 1 predicted the level of subjective well-being found in the latest survey from each country, controlling for the initial level of SWB. Models 1.1. and 1.2 use the SWB index as the dependent variable and Models 1.3 and 1.4 analyze changes in this index's two components, happiness and life satisfaction respectively. High levels of religiosity and tolerance of outgroups predicted relatively high future levels of subjective well-being. Especially under conditions of low economic security, religion provides a sense of predictability and security (Norris & Inglehart, 2004). Until recently, communist ideology filled this function for many people. The collapse of communist ideology, however, left a vacuum in many societies, contributing to a declining sense of well-being. To some extent, growing emphasis on religion has helped fill this void, with a significant impact on SWB.

The extent to which people live in a tolerant society may also shape SWB. Intolerant social norms can narrowly restrict people's life choices, reducing subjective well-being. Tolerance of gender equality, gays and lesbians, people of other religions, foreigners and other groups, tends to be strongly correlated with each other; and at this point in history the most sensitive indicator of overall tolerance is tolerance of homosexuals, the least-liked group in most societies. This indicator has a significant impact on SWB. It is not just that being tolerant oneself makes one happy—living in a tolerant social environment is conducive to happiness for everyone.

Although national pride had a strong zero-order correlation with SWB, it was closely linked with strong emphasis on religion, so when religiosity was included in the regression, national pride did not have an independent impact. Both religion and national pride were stronger in less developed societies than in developed ones, which helps explain why some low-income societies had relatively high levels of SWB. Thus, the contrast between the Latin American societies and the ex-communist societies shown in Figure 1 may be due in part to the fact that virtually all of the Latin American publics were strongly religious and had strong national pride, whereas the ex-communist nations did not: The proportion saying that “God is very important in my life” (placing themselves the top of a 10-point scale) was 76per cent in the Latin American countries and only 27per cent in the ex-communist countries. The figure in the remaining countries was 42per cent. The proportion saying that they are “very proud” of their nationality is 77per cent in the Latin American countries and only 39per cent in the ex-communist societies. The figure in the remaining countries was 57per cent.

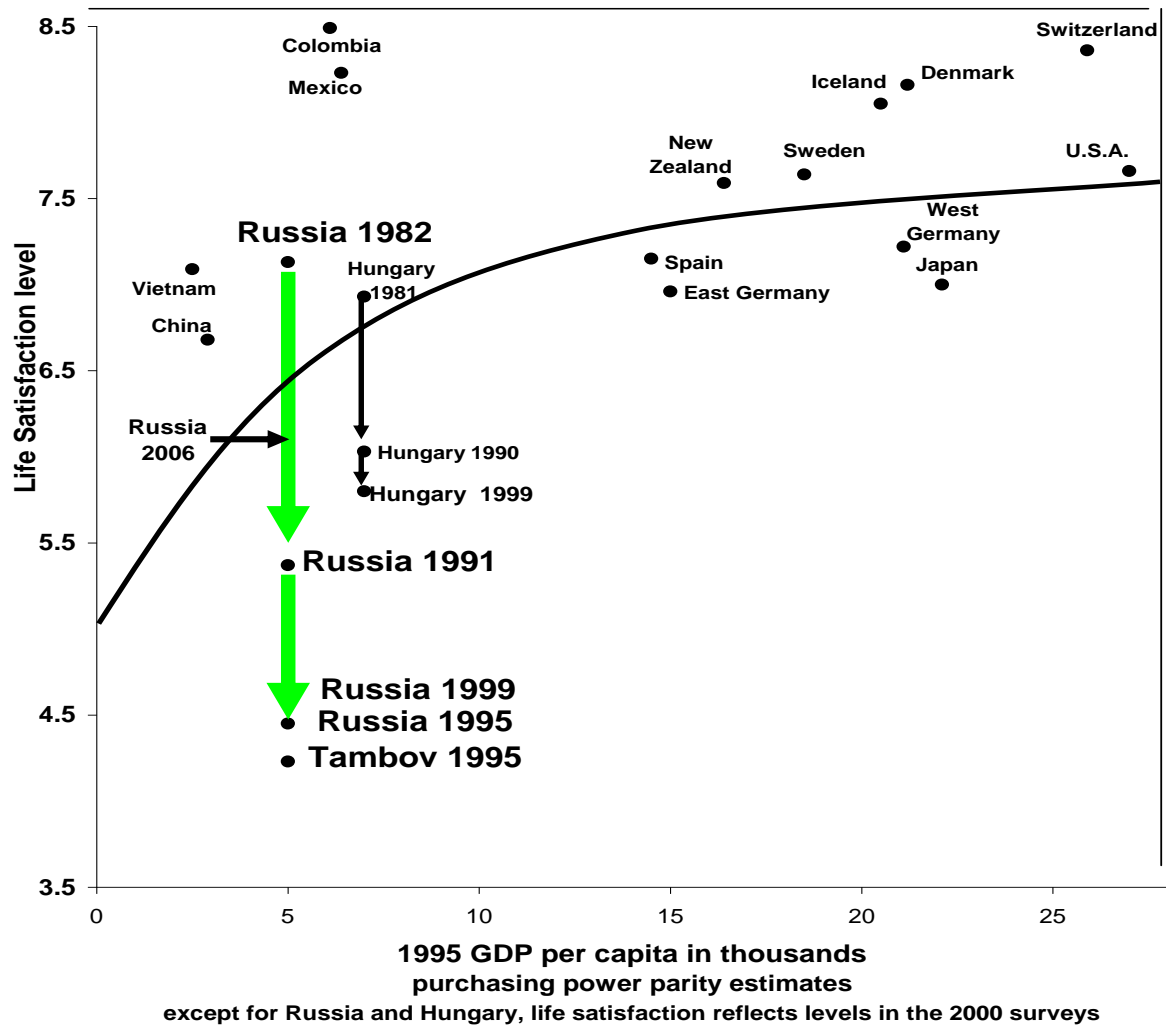
High levels of prosperity had a significant impact on subsequent levels of SWB and life satisfaction, but not on happiness. A society's level of life satisfaction seems more strongly influenced by economic conditions than is happiness. Although they experienced democratization, in most of the ex-communist countries, the transition to democracy and a market economy was accompanied by severe economic decline. In Russia, for example, real income fell to less than half its pre-transition level, and life expectancy declined by several years. Consequently, in many of the ex-communist countries, happiness rose, but life satisfaction fell. High levels of democracy at the time of the first survey had a significant negative relationship with subsequent SWB. At first glance this seems counter-intuitive because the citizens of democracies tend to be happier than those of authoritarian societies: Our SWB index showed a .74 correlation with democracy as measured in 1987, just before the recent wave of democratization. The fact that a large number of unhappy societies suddenly shifted toward democracy reduced the correlation between SWB and democracy, because SWB is relatively stable. The correlation between SWB and democracy fell to about .4 by 1993 and remained at that level through 2006.

But countries scoring low on SWB were much likelier to *shift* toward democracy than those that ranked high: The correlation between happiness and democratization (as measured by the amount of change in political rights and civil liberties scores) was -.59. Thus, countries that were democratic and happy at the start of the time series showed little or no change. Conversely, countries that initially ranked low on both subjective well-being and democracy were far more likely to shift toward democracy and thus were more likely to show increases in subjective well-being.

During the period analyzed here, many ex-communist countries experienced democratization that was accompanied by economic collapse—with the result that happiness rose, while life satisfaction fell. Russia is a striking example. In the years since 1981, Russia experienced both political liberalization and economic trauma—and while happiness levels rose, life satisfaction fell sharply. It was not possible to carry out the World Values Survey throughout Russia in 1981, but our Soviet colleagues were able to do so in Tambov oblast, a Russian district that they claimed was representative of Russia as a whole. To verify this claim, we surveyed Tambov oblast again in 1995, together with the Russian republic as a whole. The 1995 results from Tambov and Russia were very similar, with Russia ranking 61st and Tambov ranking 62nd

on subjective well-being among 65 societies covered. Our colleagues' belief that Tambov tracks Russia as a whole seems justified.

Figure 2 below shows the trajectory of subjective well-being in Russia from 1982 to 1995, using Tambov oblast as a stand-in for Russia in 1982. At the start of this period, the subjective well-being of the Russian people was about where it currently is in China and Vietnam—two societies where communism did not collapse. We suspect that in the 1960s and 1970s, Russia's level of well-being was even higher, but by 1982 Russia already was experiencing rising alcoholism, absenteeism, and other symptoms of demoralization, and its subjective well-being level was comparable to that of low-income countries such as India and Bangladesh. After 1982, Russian subjective well-being fell sharply, and by 1991 over half of the population said they were dissatisfied with their lives as a whole—a previously unprecedented finding. In December, 1991 (after our survey was completed) the communist system collapsed, and the Soviet Union broke up into fifteen successor states. Life satisfaction continued to fall, and in 1995 an overwhelming majority of the Russians said they were dissatisfied with their lives. Since 2000, Russia has enjoyed an economic boom. Life satisfaction levels have responded, rising to 6.09 in 2006—still well below the level where Tambov (and presumably Russia) were in 1982, but about on a level with India—and well above the level found in the 1991 Russian survey. The decline of life satisfaction in Russia was far from transient, extending across two decades.



**Figure 2. The collapse of communism and falling life satisfaction in Russia and Hungary since 1982**

Hungary is the only other communist society where it was possible to carry out the Values Surveys before the collapse of communism. Hungary's transition from communism to market democracy was not nearly as severe as Russia's. Economic decline and the breakdown of civil order were milder, and Hungary retained its national identity while the Soviet Union split into 15 successor states. By 2003, Hungary was sufficiently prosperous and democratic that it

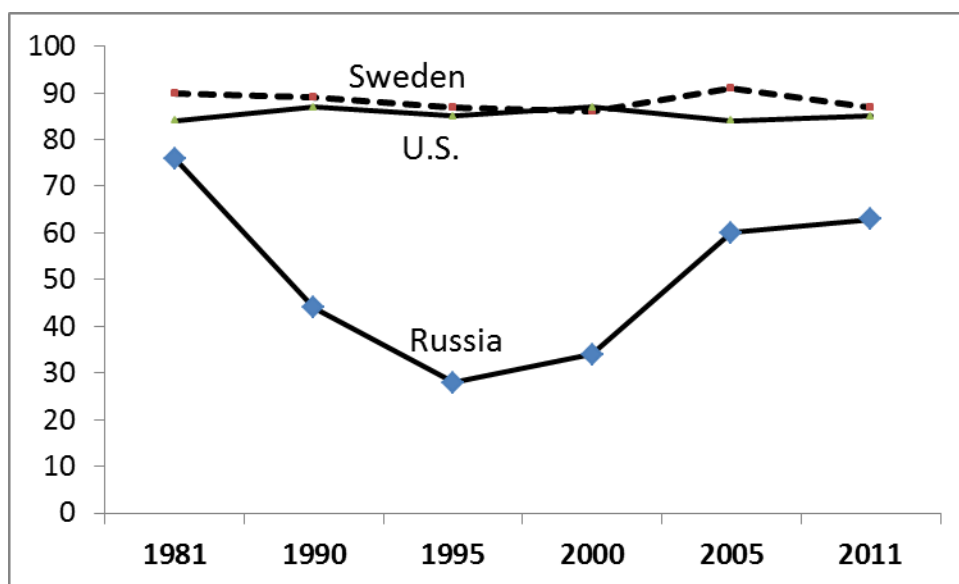
was admitted to the European Union. Nevertheless, the collapse of communism was also linked with a sharp decline of life satisfaction in Hungary. In the 1982 survey, the Hungarians showed a mean life satisfaction score of 6.93 – close to Tambov’s level at that time, and well above that of China. But with the collapse of communism, the Hungarian life satisfaction level declined to 6.03 in 1991 and continued to fall, dropping to 5.69 in 1999 (no more recent survey is available for Hungary). The Russian and Hungarian publics experienced democratization, but their economic systems declined. In both cases, happiness rose but life satisfaction fell.

Before 1990, the Values Surveys were not possible in the other ex-communist societies, so we lack the before-and-after data that would be needed to demonstrate that the collapse of communism was linked with declining life satisfaction. But let us note that Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Georgia, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Moldova, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Ukraine all show much lower levels of subjective well-being than their economic levels would predict. It seems unlikely that this is due to some fixed cultural predisposition for people in this culturally and linguistically diverse set of countries to say they are dissatisfied. We suspect that these low levels reflect the traumatic experiences linked with the collapse of communism.

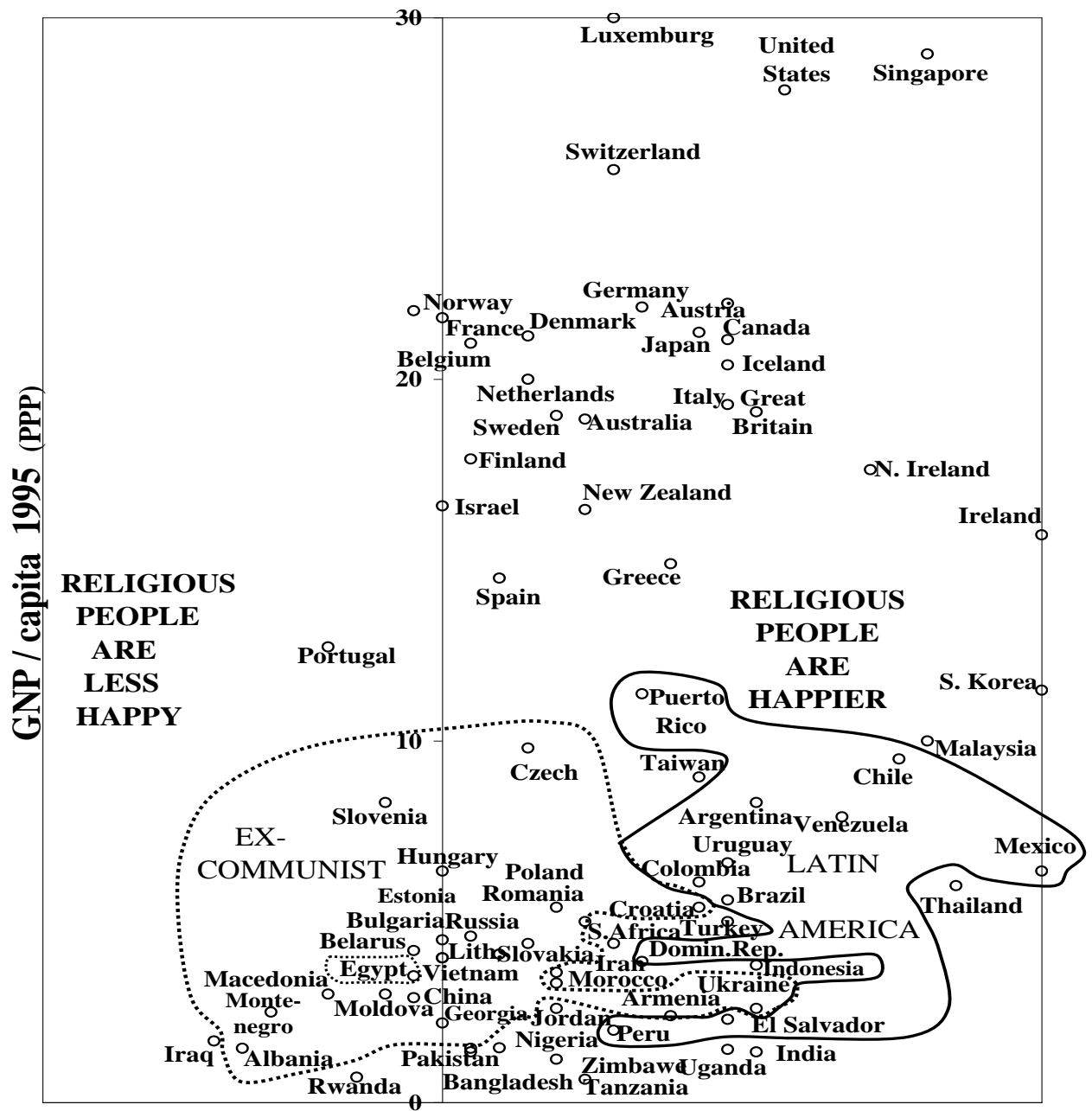
Similarly, we have no time series data from Iraq and Zimbabwe, so we cannot prove that their publics have not *always* had the extremely low levels of subjective well-being shown on Figure 2, but it seems implausible. Both societies are currently in the throes of economic, social and political collapse. Perhaps the Iraqis and Zimbabweans are among the world’s unhappiest people because they have unique cultural understandings of what happiness means. But it seems likelier that they are unhappy because life in their countries has become nasty, brutish and short.

Under extreme conditions, a society’s levels of happiness and life satisfaction can show enduring changes. The collapse of the Soviet economic, social, political and beliefs systems brought changes that the strong version of the hedonic treadmill model cannot explain. Socio-economic changes can lastingly reshape the SWB levels of entire societies. Sharp declines in SWB do not occur often, but when they do they can have serious consequences. Though the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 had its own negative effects, it was *preceded* by declining SWB. Similarly, the breakup of the Belgian state in the 1980s and its reorganization into a federation based on ethnic cleavages was *preceded* by a sharp decline in SWB (Inglehart & Klingemann, 2000).

Normally, a country's level of subjective well-being is quite stable, with given societies showing similar levels of happiness and life satisfaction over periods of many decades, which seems to support the hedonic treadmill hypothesis. Massive changes in SWB, such as the Russian public has experienced, are exceptional—but they can and do occur, if a society experiences massive changes. During the decades since 1981, the Russian public experienced traumatic changes in their economic, political and social systems and the collapse of the belief system that had come to dominate the society after 1917. Under these conditions, huge changes occurred in the prevailing levels of subjective-well being, as Figure 3 demonstrates. In order to put Russia's dramatic changes in context, this figure shows the percentages describing themselves as satisfied with their lives as a whole, in two stable democracies, Sweden and the U.S., in comparison with Russia. Throughout the 30-year period from 1981 to 2011, the Swedish and American publics showed stable high levels of life satisfaction, with 80 to 90 percent of the public expressing satisfaction. By contrast, in 1981 76 percent of the Russian public (then represented by Tambov oblast) said they were satisfied with their lives as a whole—with the level dropping dramatically to 44 percent in 1990 (just before the breakup of the Soviet Union), and plummeted to an unprecedented low-point of 28 percent in 1995, followed by a modest recovery to 34 percent in 2000, a sharp recovery to 60 percent in 2005 and a further recovery to 69 percent in the 2011 World Values Survey. This latest reading is still below the 1981 level and somewhat



**Figure 3. Changing levels of Life Satisfaction in Russia, Sweden and the U.S., 1981 -2011.**

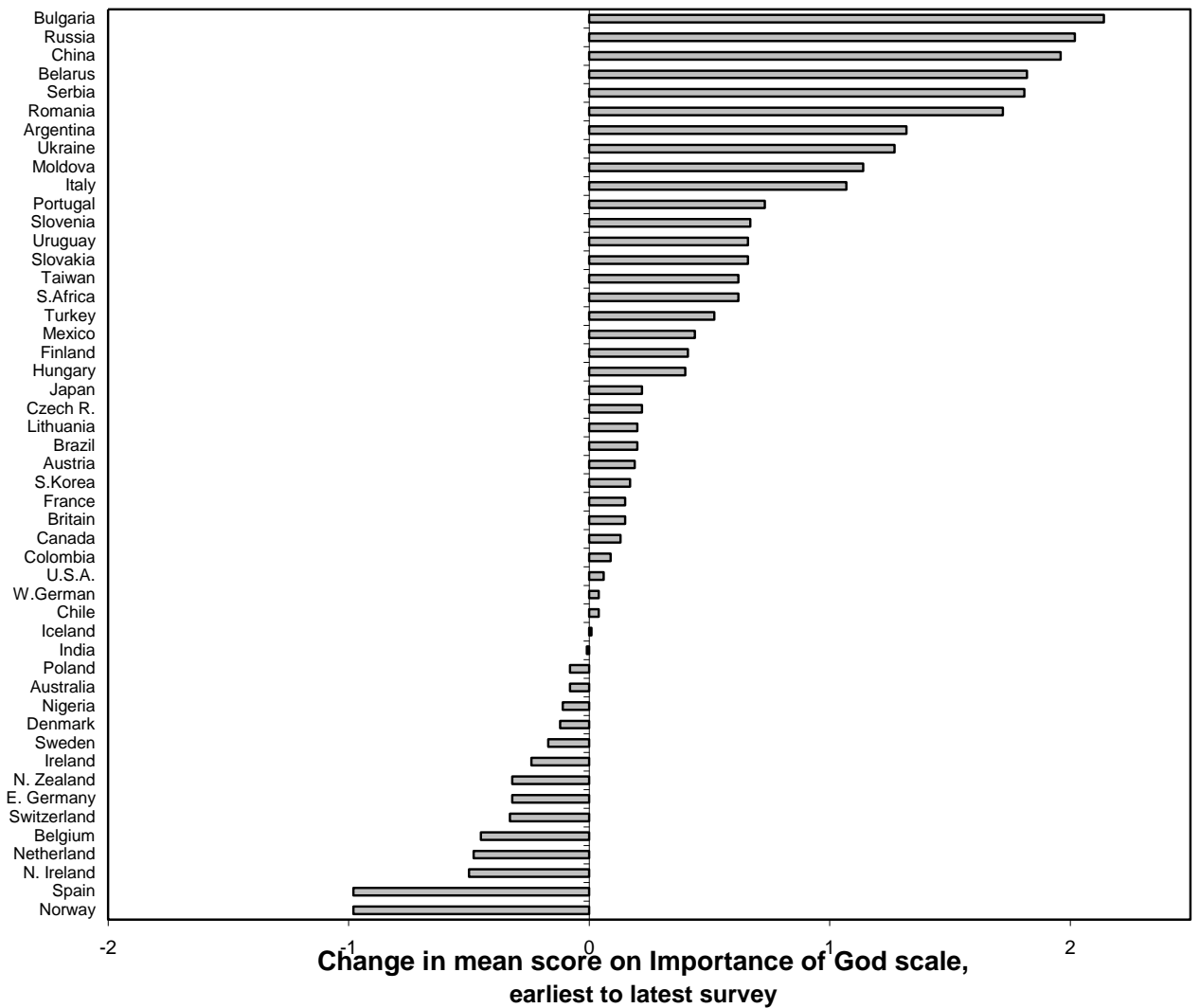


-0.14 Correlation between religiosity and Subjective Well-Being Index

Figure 4. Linkage between Religiosity and Subjective Well-being Index among the Populations of Rich and Poor Countries.



Figure 4 shows the relationship between subjective well-being and religion in countries at different levels of economic development.. The vertical axis shows the zero point where there is no correlation between religiosity and the SWB index. Countries to the right of this line show positive correlations between religion and subjective well-being, while countries to the left of this line show negative correlations. In an overwhelming majority of countries, we find a positive correlation: religious people tend to be happier than those who are not. Virtually all of the high-income countries show positive correlations between religion and subjective well-being. But among the low-income and middle-income countries, we find two groups of countries with roughly equal levels of economic development but contrasting relationships between religion and happiness: an ex-communist cluster and a Latin American cluster. All of the Latin American countries show positive correlations between religion and subjective well-being; but almost all of the ex-communist countries show weak or negative correlations. While the free practice of religion has emerged only recently in the ex-communist societies, most Latin American countries have been strongly religious for centuries and remain so today. This too is consistent with the interpretation that the weak or negative correlations found in ex-communist countries reflect a recent influx of unhappy people who have been turning to religion to fill the ideological void left by the collapse of communism.



**Figure 5. Changes in Emphasis on Religion, 1981 – 2007.**

This explanation depends on the assumption that religion has been growing recently in former communist countries. Figure 5 shows the extent to which the publics of given countries have come to emphasize religion more strongly (or less strongly) since 1981. The graph shows the difference between each country’s mean score on the “Importance of God” scale in the earliest and latest available survey for each country from which we have at least two surveys spanning a substantial period of time (the average number of surveys per country is 3.7 and the mean time span is seventeen years). For example, the mean score of the Bulgarian public (at the top of the graph) increased from 3.56 in the 1990 survey to 5.70 in the 2006 survey—a gain of more than two points on the ten-point scale. Russia rose from 4.00 in 1990 to 6.02 in 2006. And

China started just above the bottom of the scale (point 1.0) in 1990, with a score of 1.62, but showed a large proportional gain, rising to 3.58 in 2007.

We do not find a global resurgence of religion, as some observers have claimed. Most West European countries show *declining* emphasis on religion, as do several other countries. But many countries show increases, and all six of the countries showing the greatest gains are ex-communist: Bulgaria, Russia, China, Belarus, Serbia, and Romania. Overall, the publics of 13 of the 15 ex-communist countries for which we have a substantial time series, increased their emphasis on religion.<sup>5</sup> This is consistent with the hypothesis that religiosity is linked with unhappiness in these countries because those who are religious consist disproportionately of new, relatively unhappy recruits. This hypothesis gains further support from the fact that emphasis on religion increased most in countries with relatively *low* levels of happiness ( $r = 0.5$ ). Unhappy people tend to turn to religion. Conversely, in most countries with a long religious tradition and high levels of subjective well-being, religiosity is linked with happiness.

#### **How much impact does religion have?**

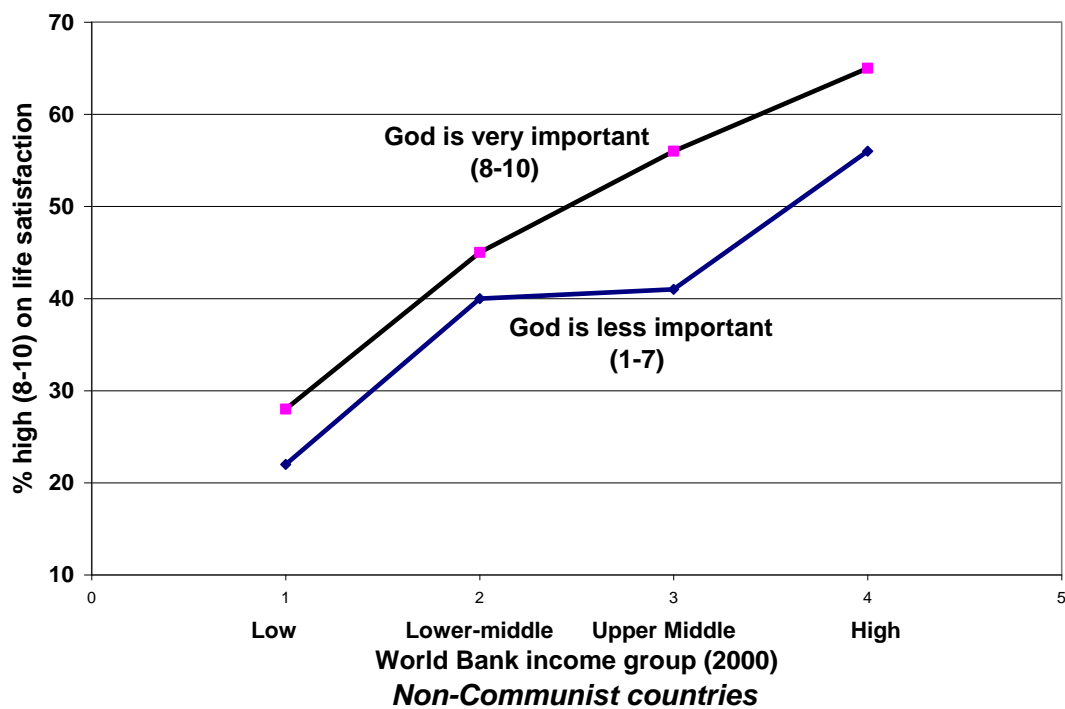
In almost four-fifths of the countries for which we have data, religion is positively correlated with subjective well-being. Several ex-communist countries show negative correlations, but even in the ex-communist world as a whole, the relationship is positive. Sorting out the impact of religion on happiness could involve many variables, but the two most important factors to be controlled are: (1) the society's economic level, and (2) whether it has a history of communist rule. High-income societies show substantially higher levels of subjective well-being than low-income societies, not only because they are richer, but also because they tend to be more democratic and have higher levels of social tolerance. And the relationship between religion and subjective well-being is complicated by the fact that richer countries tend to be happier and less religious than poorer ones— which tends to conceal the fact that religion is linked with happiness. Moreover, religion itself is correlated with a number of other traditional values such as high levels of national pride, that may also have an impact on subjective well-being.

The impact of communist rule also is clearly important: (1) ex-communist societies show markedly lower levels of subjective well-being than other societies; and (2) ex-communist societies show substantially lower levels of religiosity than other societies.

---

<sup>5</sup> Poland is a prominent exception: in reaction to Soviet repression, adherence to the Roman Catholic faith became a symbol of Polish identity, leading to uniquely high levels of religiosity among communist countries. Since regaining independence, Polish religiosity has declined somewhat, but remains high.

The following analysis gives a first approximation to an answer by measuring to what extent religious people are happier than less religious ones when we control for their society's level of per capita GNP, and whether or not it has experienced communist rule. By restricting ourselves to these four variables, the relationships can be shown on a pair of two-dimensional graphs, providing an intuitively clear sense of what matters, and where.<sup>6</sup> Figure 5 shows the two graphs. Each graph compares the life satisfaction levels of those for whom religion is important (those choosing points 8 to 10 on the "importance of God in my life" scale) with those for whom religion is less important (those choosing points 1-7). This dichotomy separates the world's population into two roughly equal groups.

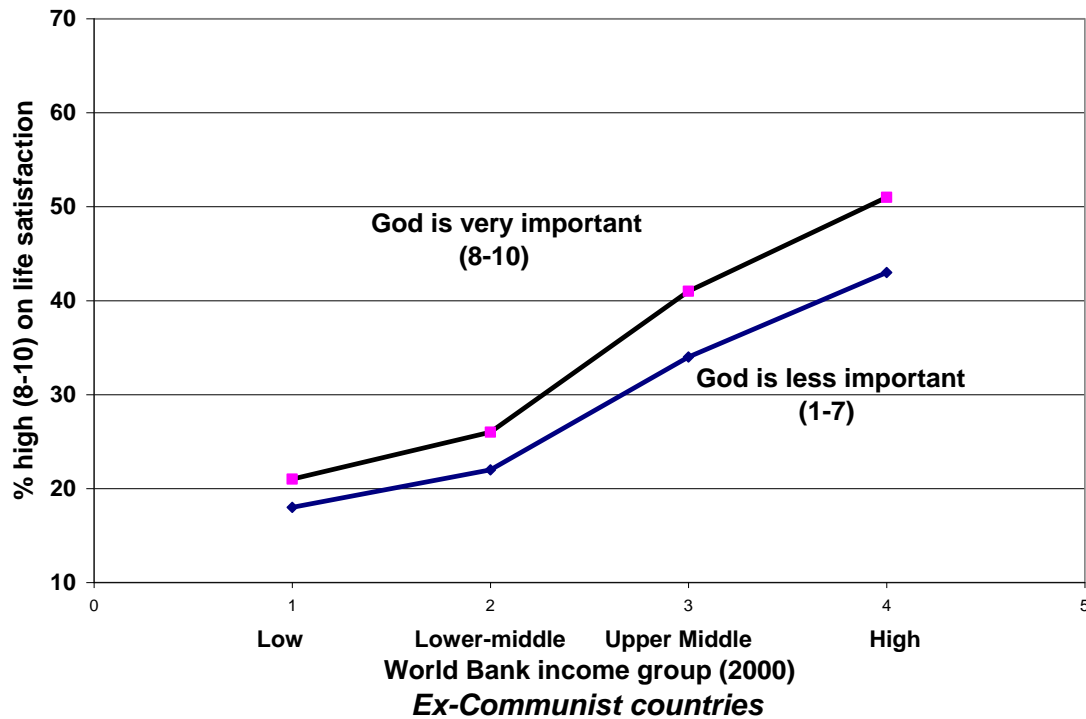


**Figure 6. Life Satisfaction by Importance of God: Non-communist countries**

Figure 6 shows the relationship between religion and life satisfaction in non-communist countries. As it demonstrates, religious people show higher levels of life satisfaction in societies at all levels of economic development, but religion makes even more difference in high-income and upper-middle-income countries than it does in low-income and lower-middle-income

<sup>6</sup> More complex multivariate analyses indicate that these results are in the right ball park.

societies. Averaged across the four types of societies, religious people are likelier to rank “high” on life satisfaction (placing themselves at points 8 to 10 on the ten-point scale) than are non-religious people, by a margin of 9 percentage points.



**Figure 7. Life Satisfaction by Importance of God: Ex-Communist countries**

Figure 7 shows the impact of religion on life satisfaction in ex-communist countries. The absolute levels are lower than they are in non-communist countries and the difference between religious and non-religious people is somewhat smaller, but the basic pattern is similar: again, religious people show higher levels of life satisfaction in societies at all levels of economic development, and the differences are greater among wealthier countries. The average difference between religious and non-religious people is about 6 percentage points. Averaging out these differences for the world as a whole, those who emphasize religion are about 8 percentage points higher on life satisfaction than those who don’t. This is a modest but significant part of the total cross-national difference. Moreover, religion doesn’t have the same amount of impact among all groups: being religious makes considerably more difference for the intensely religious than it does for those who are lukewarm, as we will see below.

**Happy Atheists**

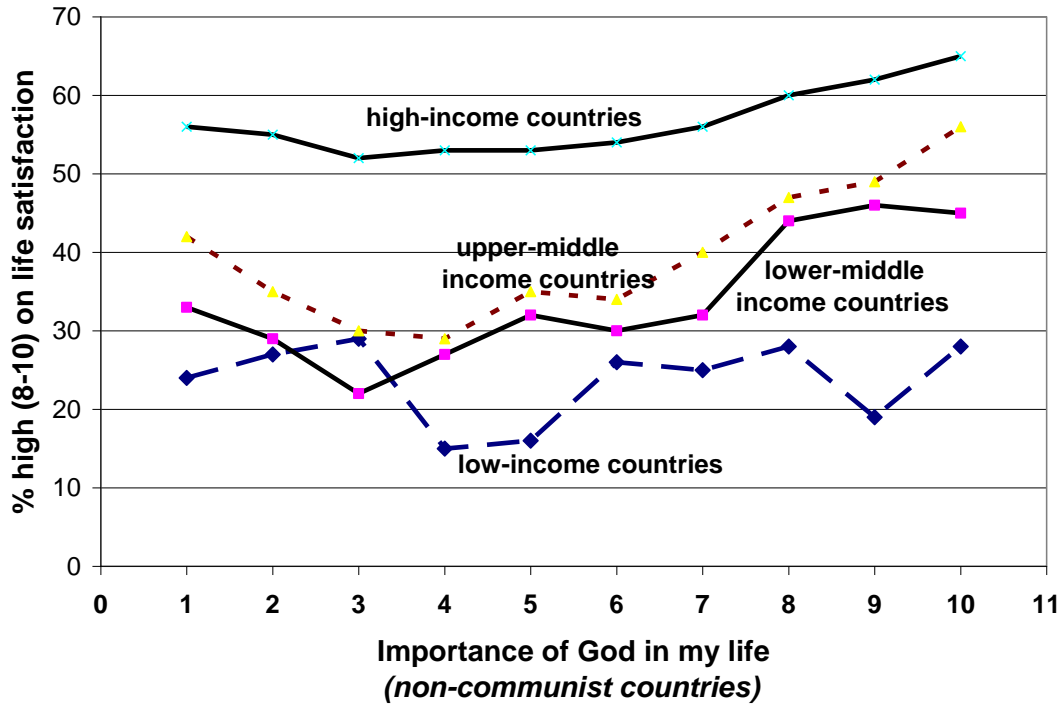
We suggested that religious beliefs might be conducive to subjective well-being insofar as they do the following: (1) they dampen aspirations; (2) they encourage a sense of sharing and solidarity; (3) they provide a sense of certainty in an insecure world; and (4) they provide a sense of meaning and purpose in life. But the last three factors are not unique to religion: they can be provided by any strong belief system—including the militant atheistic world-view espoused by Communism. This implies that we should find a somewhat U-shaped relationship between the strength of religion and subjective well-being: instead of rising steadily from the atheistic end of the scale to its highest level at the religious end of the scale, insofar as an alternative belief system such as Communism is available, we should find relatively high levels of subjective well-being at both ends of the Importance of God scale, with lower levels in between, since strong conviction is registered at both ends of the scale, with relative uncertainty in between.

The data support this expectation, as Figure 8 demonstrates. Even among low-income countries (as classified by the World Bank in 2001), there is a small group (4 percent of the sample) for whom God is completely unimportant (rated “1” on a ten-point scale)—and this group shows a higher level of life satisfaction than those near the middle, ranking only below those at the very top of the scale. Even in low-income countries, religion is not the only route to relatively high subjective well-being. Who are these happy atheists, among the low-income countries? Mostly Vietnamese. Fully 55 percent of the relatively satisfied atheists are from Vietnam; India and Ukraine come next with respectively 15 percent and 10 percent of the group—and among the 14 other low-income countries, satisfied atheists are virtually nonexistent. Similarly, in the 23 lower-middle-income countries for which we have data, the majority of satisfied atheists consist of Chinese (42 percent) and Russians (19 percent). And in the 21 upper-middle-income countries, a majority of the satisfied atheists are Czechs (40 percent), Hungarians (14 percent) and Slovaks (8 percent). Among low-income and middle-income countries, satisfied atheists are mainly found in ex-Communist countries, where a Communist ideology once provided a powerful challenge to religion as a source of meaning, and a sense of security and solidarity among people. This curvilinear pattern suggests that *any* strong belief system is more conducive to well-being than an uncertain outlook. We suspect, that several decades ago, a strong belief in Communism was linked with relatively high levels of subjective well-being. Today, the people of ex-Communist countries show significantly *lower* levels of happiness and life satisfaction than people in non-Communist countries with similar

income levels. But the phenomenon of satisfied atheists persists to some extent—and in low- and middle-income countries, it is mainly linked with Communism.

Figure 8. **Life satisfaction by importance of God, in rich and poor countries.**

**A. Non-Communist countries:**



**B. Ex-Communist countries:**

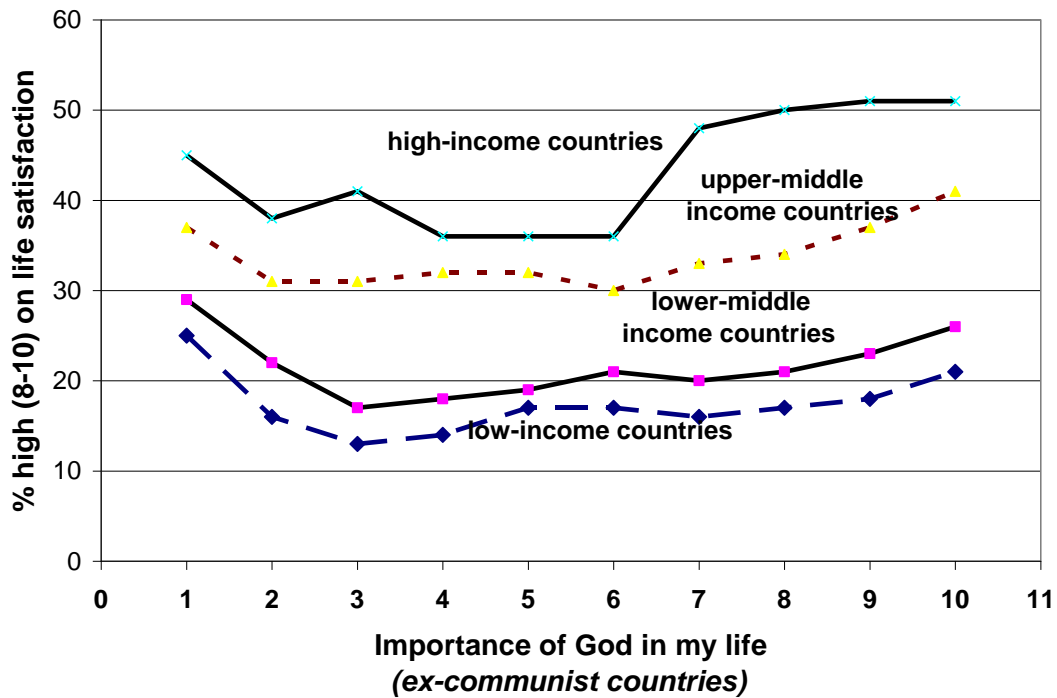


Figure 8 shows the relationship between religiosity and life satisfaction among the people of high-income countries, upper-middle-income countries, lower-middle-income countries, and low-income countries. The upper graph focuses on non-Communist countries, while the lower graph shows the relationship in ex-Communist countries.

As the upper graph indicates, among high-income countries there is only a very faint curvilinear tendency: those for whom God is completely unimportant in their lives have slightly higher levels of life satisfaction than those at points 2 through 6, but life satisfaction rises steadily from that point on, reaching a peak at point 10. The pattern is more strongly curvilinear among the publics of upper-middle-income, lower-middle-income, and low-income countries, with those at the atheist end of the scale showing substantially higher levels of life satisfaction than those closer to the middle of the scale. In both upper- and lower-middle-income countries, the strongly religious people rank much higher on life satisfaction than those at the low end of the scale, but there is no clear trend among the publics of low-income countries.

The lower graph of Figure 8 focuses on the people of ex-Communist countries, and here the curvilinear pattern is much more pronounced than in other countries. Both in high-income and upper-middle income ex-Communist countries, those at the atheist end of the scale show



considerably higher levels of life satisfaction than those at the middle of the scale—though the strongly religious rank highest of all. In richer ex-Communist countries, religion today is more conducive to happiness than is atheism. But in lower-middle-income and low-income ex-Communist countries, we not only find a clear U-shaped pattern, but those at the atheist end of the spectrum rank highest of all. When we recall that the happy atheists in the lower-middle-income countries consist largely of Chinese, and in the low-income countries they consist mainly of Vietnamese, the findings are less surprising. Both China and Vietnam are still governed by Communist regimes and their economies were thriving when these surveys were carried out. Communist ideology has lost its credibility for most people and the state-run economies that were once considered the wave of the future are being abandoned. But pockets of true believers still remain, and for them, atheism is a core element of their beliefs. For most of the world, strong religious beliefs are linked with happiness, but among Communism's remaining true believers, Communism still brings a sense of meaning and certainty, though the next highest level is found among the strongly religious..

In high-income countries, an alternative route to subjective well-being has emerged that is not linked with either religion or Communism. In these countries, people for whom God is totally unimportant are relatively numerous—and many of them show high levels of subjective well-being. Satisfied atheists are concentrated in some countries. Among the 34 high-income countries for which we have data, those with the largest numbers of satisfied atheists are (in this order) Sweden, East Germany, Norway, Netherlands, Denmark, Belgium, France, Britain, West Germany, Spain, Slovenia, and Canada. They are relatively rare in the U.S. and Italy, and almost nonexistent in Ireland, Northern Ireland, Portugal, Cyprus, Greece, and Israel.

The quest for a sense of purpose in life seems to reflect a universal human need, and it has not diminished with economic development—on the contrary, during the past 25 years, a growing share of the population in most countries reports that they spend time thinking about the meaning and purpose of life (Norris and Inglehart, 2004). The happy atheists in high-income countries presumably find a sense of meaning in such causes as environmental protection, which often takes on quasi-religious tones, to a fascination with the majesty and beauty of science that seems to motivate militant atheists such as Richard Dawkins (1998, 2006).

## Conclusion

Throughout history there have been two strategies for reducing unhappiness: the first is to lower one's expectations, and accept the inevitability and dignity of suffering, which is achieved through one's religion and spiritual life. The second is to expand people's range of material, political and social opportunities, a strategy often called *modernization*, which occurs through a profound set of transformations in a society's economic, political, and value systems.

Economic development is conducive to rising subjective well-being, especially insofar as it also tends to bring rising social tolerance and democratic political institutions. Until recently it was widely believed that that neither individuals nor societies can lastingly increase their happiness levels, but recent research indicates that, during the past 25 years, economic development, democratization, and rising social tolerance have led to rising happiness around the world. Since 1981, overall subjective well-being increased in 40 of the 52 countries for which a substantial time series is available. The link between economic development and subjective well-being is complex, and its impact can be concealed by the fact that it is only one of many causal factors, with social tolerance and political freedom playing even more important roles.

Moreover, belief systems also play a crucial role in shaping people's levels of subjective well-being. Evidence from scores of societies containing almost 90 percent of the world's population indicates that, in an overwhelming majority of countries, religious people are happier than non-religious people, even though they tend to have lower incomes. Some ex-Communist countries show negative correlations between religion and subjective well-being. This seems to reflect a recent influx of unhappy people who have turned to religion after the collapse of faith in Communist ideology—which once provided a sense of meaning and certainty for many people, and still does for a small group of true believers. People have an enduring need for a sense of meaning in life, and a strong belief system, whether religious or secular, tends to be linked with relatively high levels of subjective well-being. At this point in history, happy atheists are heavily outnumbered by those who find a sense of meaning in religion.

The evidence indicates that people can attain happiness by optimizing external conditions or by developing a belief system that inculcates a positive response to existing conditions: in other words, by getting what one likes, or by liking what one gets. One approach is linked with modernization and the other with traditional society. At this point in history, the Nordic countries constitute the leading example of successful modernization, maximizing prosperity, social solidarity, and political and personal freedom. Both the Values Surveys and the Gallup World

Poll identify Denmark as the country with the world's highest level of subjective well-being, with Iceland, Sweden, Norway, and Finland also ranking high. But—surprising as it may seem to people with a modern world-view—a group of Latin American countries ranks almost equally high, despite having substantially lower levels of prosperity and good governance. Interestingly, the Nordic countries (and most of the other leading cases of successful modernization) are located in Northern Europe, while all of the highest-ranking Latin American countries are located on or near the Caribbean. And while the Nordic countries are among the world's most secular societies, all of the high-ranking Latin American countries have strongly religious publics.

Successful modernization can bring high levels of prosperity, social solidarity, tolerance, and democracy, producing high levels of subjective well-being. But long before modernization became possible, traditional societies evolved ways of coping with the stresses of human existence and the need for a sense of meaning. Physiological measurements suggest that Buddhist monks attain some of the highest levels of subjective well-being ever recorded.<sup>1</sup> Both faith and freedom can lead to happiness. To some extent they tend to substitute for each other—but there is no reason why a society could not attain both high levels of autonomy and a belief system conducive to happiness.

As we have seen, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, subjective well-being in Russia fell to levels never seen before, reaching a low point in 1995. Since 2000, this trend has been reversing itself, partly due to economic recovery. But a resurgence of religion and a recovering sense of national pride have helped fill the ideological vacuum left by the collapse of Marxist faith. Since 2000, Russia and other ex-communist countries have shown the strongest resurgence of religion of any group of countries in the world. By 2011 the subjective well-being of the Russian people had made a major recovery from the extreme low-point reached in 1995, rising to about where its level of economic development would predict it to be.

## REFERENCES

- Dawkins, R. (1998). *Unweaving the rainbow: Science, delusion and the appetite for wonder*. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin.
- Dawkins, R. (2006). *The god delusion*. New York: Bantam.
- Frey, B., & Stutzer, A. (2000). Happiness prospers in democracy. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 1, 79–102.
- Inglehart, R. (1990). *Culture shift in advanced industrial society*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Inglehart, R. (1997). *Modernization and postmodernization: Cultural, economic and political change in 43 societies*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Inglehart, R., & Klingemann, H.D. (2000). Genes, culture, democracy and happiness. In E. Diener & E. Suh, (Eds.), *Subjective well-being across cultures* (pp. 165–183). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Norris, P., & Inglehart, R. (2004). *Sacred and secular: Religion and politics worldwide*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

### **Ronald Inglehart**

University of Michigan and Laboratory for Comparative Social Research, Higher School of Economics, St Petersburg, Russia; contact information: [rfi@umich.edu](mailto:rfi@umich.edu), 2626 Geddes Avenue, Ann Arbor, Michigan USA 48104

### **Roberto Foa**

Harvard University email [foa@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:foa@fas.harvard.edu)

### **Eduard Ponarin**

Laboratory for Comparative Social Research, Higher School of Economics, [eponarin@hse.spb.ru](mailto:eponarin@hse.spb.ru)

### **Christian Welzel**

University of Leuphana and Laboratory for Comparative Social Research, Higher School of Economics, St Petersburg, Russia, [cwelzel@gmail.com](mailto:cwelzel@gmail.com)

**Any opinions or claims contained in this Working Paper do not necessarily reflect the views of HSE.**

© Ronald Inglehart, Roberto Foa, Eduard Ponarin, Christian Welzel, 2013

---

<sup>1</sup> Using imaging devices to study brain activity, Davidson (2001) finds that a pattern of left prefrontal activation is associated with positive affect. Testing the brain activity of a Buddhist monk, he found a pattern of left prefrontal activation that was more intense than that of any of the other 175 individuals he had ever tested.