

**RELIGION, DIVERSITY AND ECONOMIC WELL-BEING: A STUDY ON THE  
UNDERSTANDING OF THE INCONSISTENCIES**

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, we explore the relationship between subjective religiosity and socio-economic variables of subjective well-being like happiness, tolerance to diversity, gender parity by segregating 149 countries from The World Values Survey, Wave 6, 2014 into the low, middle, and high-income countries. We note the correlation between various variables against the self-reported subjective religiosity of individuals and also make use of The World Peace Index (2011-14) and Human Freedom Index (2011-14). We hypothesize the existence of a positive correlation between religiosity and tolerance due to both of their individual positive correlations with happiness and, in turn, with the standard of living. The data and literature reflect a discrepancy between the expected relationship. Though higher religiosity leads to individuals reporting higher levels of happiness, we fail to find a coherent relationship between religiosity and other variables like gender parity, tolerance towards LGBTQ+ communities, political orientation, etc. The inconsistencies highlight the need for further investigation into the complex relationship between religiosity, economic status, and economic well-being.

Key words: Subjective Well-being; Happiness; Standard of Living; World Value Survey; Religiosity; Tolerance; Gender; Diversity

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Extensive literature exists which explores the relations between religion, economic development, happiness, and subjective well being (Steiner, Lasse, Leinert, Lisa, Frey, Bruno, 2010; Marshall, 2019; Campante and Yanagizawa-Drott, 2015; McCleary and Barro, 2006; Witter, Stock, Okun and Haring, 1985). Religion has been shown to be positively correlated with happiness (Steiner, Lasse; Leinert, Lisa; Frey, Bruno S., 2010) as it provides certain benefits like social groups with regular participation (Pew Research Centre, 2019). Moreover, evidence shows that religion enhances subjective well-being (Witter, Stock, Okun, and Haring, 1985). Moreover, subjective well-being should be higher if people have access to higher levels of freedoms and access to equal opportunities. Thus, we see an interlinkage: happiness should lead to better well-being; and better opportunities, freedom and egalitarian society should also lead to better well-being, and in turn to higher levels of happiness . Having set this context, we are interested in exploring whether religion is also associated with higher well-being and other traits contributing to higher well-being.

States in modern, neoliberal and progressive societies have certain desirable traits, including gender parity, liberty to citizens (choice and freedom of expression, and equality ), and a higher level of tolerance to diversity (Corneo & Jeanne, 2009). These traits are much needed to ensure a better standard of living and well-being. In fact, the evidence suggests that the freer and egalitarian societies ensure better standards of living as well. These traits may stand in agonistic relation with the conservative religious ideals. To explore this, we engage in testing if highly religious societies are also highly tolerant to diversity, gender equality and provide more freedom or not. If the answer is a 'no', then it leads to some troubles and inconsistencies. As mentioned above, evidence suggests that religion contributes to happiness. Also, better living standards contribute to happiness (Centre for Bhutan Studies and GNH). Similarly, we expect freedom and equality to contribute to happiness and better living standards. If religion is not leading to more equality and liberty, but leading to happiness, then their relationship might be inconsistent.

## **RELIGION AND ECONOMIC GROWTH**

Religion interacts with the economy in two ways. One, when religion is considered to be endogenous, and would get influenced by different aspects of economic development. Second, when religion is considered exogenous, and exerts its influence on the economy by affecting individual characteristics such as integrity, work ethic, trust etc. (McCleary and Barro, 2003; Chiswick, 2010) This paper focuses on the latter way of interaction as an attempt to understand religion's impact on well-being.

Religious beliefs play a key role in stimulating investments and economic growth by promoting traits like honesty, charity, hospitality, etc., and therefore promoting trust between economic agents. A link between religiosity and the probability of salvation has also been established as a key feature in the application of the rational choice approach to the demand of religion (Azzi and Ehrenberg, 1975). On a microeconomic level, religion must compete with other goods (Nurrachmi and Rininta, 2016). Religion has been viewed as a time-intensive activity, and religious participation would therefore vary with the opportunity cost of the time lost. People with a lesser economic value of time would be more involved in religious activities, for example:- retired persons. Religion, therefore, also plays a role in performance when it can exert its influence on political preferences, human capital, and work ethic (Wang & Lin, 2014).

Religion shows its significance when people choose their marital partner and make decisions about divorce, marriage, etc., and, thus, the concept of correlating religion and development has also been linked to religion's impact on fertility rate (Eum, 2011). It has also been hypothesized that the existence of multiple religions in a country might cause internal disturbances to economic development (Eum, 2011). The process of polarization has been linked closely to the generation of social unrest, rebellion and revolt (Esteban and Ray, 1994). However, Montalvo and Reynal-Querol (2002) have shown that it is religious polarization rather than fragmentation that poses a negative change on the growth rate. In another study by Campante and Drott (2015), which focuses on the impact of Ramadan fasting on economic growth and happiness, notes that longer fasting durations negatively impact the economy due to the overall lower levels of energy. However, the happiness from such dedicated religious practices can positively impact the subjective well-being of individuals. Religion also behaves as a club good on occasions, where an intensely religious and demanding practice

might have the effect of crowding out less dedicated individuals and help get rid of free riders. On the other hand, Noland (2002), in his hypothesis, has claimed that religious affiliation and performance are uncorrelated. Clearly, there is a lack of common consensus amongst economists over the impact of religion on economic growth.

## **RELIGION, HAPPINESS AND WELFARE**

The Easterlin Paradox states that happiness might initially vary with income levels, within economies and across them, but later does not move upward concurrently with rising levels of income (Easterlin, 1974). This might have been the first attempt by an economist to study happiness and give empirical evidence for its varying relationship with income level instead of as expected by people. This led to a spur of investigations by economists into the field of happiness economics and what actually is relevant to it and what is not.

With the current interventions, happiness has been negatively correlated with some other factors such as the working conditions, the socio-economic factors, and the environmental factors; for example- the average number of hours worked, environmental degradation, crime, openness to trade (Di Tella and MacCulloch, 2007). Work has also been done to study the relationship between happiness, unemployment & mental health. (Murphy and Athanassou, 1999), marriage and divorce and therefore poverty levels (Veenhoven, 1988), suicide rates and resulting loss of output (Koivumaa-Honkanen et al., 2001), crime and social unrest (Myers, 2000).

Clearly, a lot of work has been done, and an attempt has been made to understand happiness. Researchers, following this, have also ventured into understanding the correlation between religion and happiness (Campante and Yanagizawa-Drott, 2015; Marshall, 2019; Mookerjee and Beron, 2003). Not only do the above-mentioned factors affecting happiness get influenced by religion (Eum, 2011; Berman and Laitin, 2008), but it has also been noted that a direct correlation does exist between religion and happiness. In their paper studying the impact of religion on economic growth and happiness (evidence from Ramadan), Filipe Campante and David Yanagizawa-Drott (2015) show that increased fasting requirements have led individuals to report higher levels of happiness and life satisfaction. Another study by Joey Marshall (Pew Research Centre) has shown that actively religious people are more likely to report higher levels of subjective happiness.

Researchers Chaeyoon Lim of the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Robert Putnam of Harvard University have found that religion impacted happiness strongly for those members of the congregations who had multiple friends. The similar cannot be stated for those with fewer friends in the congregation. Religion presents itself in the form of a *Social Capital* and serves as a major source of happiness due to the interactions it provides on occasions such as daily prayers, church services, sabbath dinners, etc., with individuals belonging to the same community. It can be thus summed up that the sense of belonging that people find with religious participation influences their Subjective Well-being (SWB) and in turn, their happiness. We also make note, based on the pre-existing literature, that people with high religious participation are expected to be happier than those reporting high subjective religiosity but lesser religious participation.

### **RELIGION, GENDER AND TOLERANCE**

As diversity increases within any state, it becomes necessary for individuals to become increasingly tolerant towards cultures, practices, and behaviours outside of their own religion. Intolerance might pose a threat to the peaceful coexistence of these diverse groups. Minorities also might struggle in intolerant states, whereas a tolerant state might promote better democratic rights (Corneo and Jeanne, 2008). It can be clearly argued that a more tolerant society will be one with better democratic rights, lesser violence, and gender parity. We have attempted to note the trends of tolerance across low-income, middle income and high income countries by using the Human Freedom Index as a proxy for Tolerance (IEP).

As has been brought to attention by feminists, gender inequality has been ingrained into cultures, workplaces, religions, marriages, and even the economies (Lorber, 2001). Sexism is not a new concept and finds its roots in human history, especially in most of religious history (Haggard, Kaelen, Saroglou, Klein, and Rowatt, 2019). Most religious organisations have been noted to subtly approve of sexist practices. This research paper also makes an attempt to note how much perceived religiosity seems to impact gender parity across economies.

The gender roles in a society vary from culture to culture. A few important aspects influencing sexual conduct regulation, sexual behaviour encouraged, tolerated, and

prohibited. A very close connection, therefore, exists between gender roles, marital status, social norms. As opposed to economic growth, a common consensus can be seen to exist among economists over the kind of influence religion exerts on gender. It has been noted so far that despite different religions promoting different practices and behaviours, what is common to all of them is the lack of gender parity. It is also necessary to make note that political institutions or educational institutions do not majorly influence the education and rights of women. These institutions do not discriminate when it comes to matters such as education; rather culture and religion primarily influence gender parity rates and instill deeply sexist ideas (Cooray and Potrafke, 2011). In an analysis by Hooghe, Claes, Harell, Quintelier & Dejaeghere (2010), it was indicated that hostility towards the LGBT rights was prominent among boys. Even though factors like socio-economic status and parenting seemed to have a limited role, religious denominations proved to have a significant negative impact on tolerance. In another study by Bettina, John, Martin and Lysann (2018) took note of the New Year's Eve 2015 assaults in Germany, which led to a debate about the religion of most of the perpetrators being from certain religions and whether the religious association also had a significant impact on violence against women. They argue that it is the extent of religious affiliation i.e., the religiosity rather than the affiliation itself, which influenced most of the sexist behaviours and violence against women.

## **DATA AND METHODOLOGY**

To understand and establish a relationship between religiosity and welfare, we make use of socio-economic variables like Human Peace Index, Human Freedom Index, freedom of religion. By comparing these variables against subjective religiosity, we have attempted to establish a correlation to discern whether the relationships between happiness and religion, and subjective well being and religion are in tandem with our ultimate findings about the relationship between indicators of SWB like freedom, happiness, health, gender parity etc.

The Wave six of World Values Survey for 2011-2014 has been used to obtain data on subjective religiosity and other variables like subjective health, church attendance, belief in hell, confidence in women's organisations, tolerance towards members of other religions and of the LGBT+ community, etc. The chosen 149 countries from The World Values Survey,

Wave 6, 2014 are divided into 28 low income, 72 middle income, and 49 rich income countries (Jill Suttie, 2020), according to data from the World Bank. This has been done because of two reasons. Firstly, to better quantify and assort data for the 182 countries presented and make better use of the large amounts of data for World Peace Index, Human Freedom Index, Freedom of Religion and other socio-economic variables. Secondly, it has been largely noted that a country's existing economic conditions influence the relationship people of the country have with religion. To ensure much similarity and also make note of how religiosity increased or decreased with varying levels of income, we have made this segregation. In the World Values Survey, we use eight variables to note how tolerance, women empowerment, health etc. vary with increasing levels of religiosity. We have done so by finding out the spearman's rank coefficient of all these variables against subjective religiosity. The ordinal nature of our data allowed us to use Spearman rank correlation to find the directional relation between the variables.

Our first variable measured against subjective religiosity is the World Peace Index. We make use of the Data by Institute of Peace and Economics' Vision of Humanity report on Global Peace Index from 2011-2014 (WPI 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014). This is put to use by taking the average separately for high-income, middle income, and low-income countries. These average indices are then compared against each other and also studied with regard to their correlation with religiosity in respective high-income, middle income, and low-income countries. Other than this, we also make use of the Human Freedom Index by The Fraser Institute. The Human Freedom Index is used in a similar manner as The World Peace Index. As noted in above sections, religion exerts its influence on subjective well-being, happiness, and gender equality through various other socio-economic factors. Keeping this in mind, this study focuses on the pattern of change of peace and freedom across different income countries to ultimately note how the well-being of people is being affected.

## **HYPOTHESIS**

Though this research paper ventures into multiple correlations between religion and variables of well-being, our main hypothesis rests on the claim that if higher religiosity leads to higher levels of happiness then other variables such as peace, freedom, gender parity or otherwise proxies for happiness should also similarly be affected by religion. The pre-existing literature

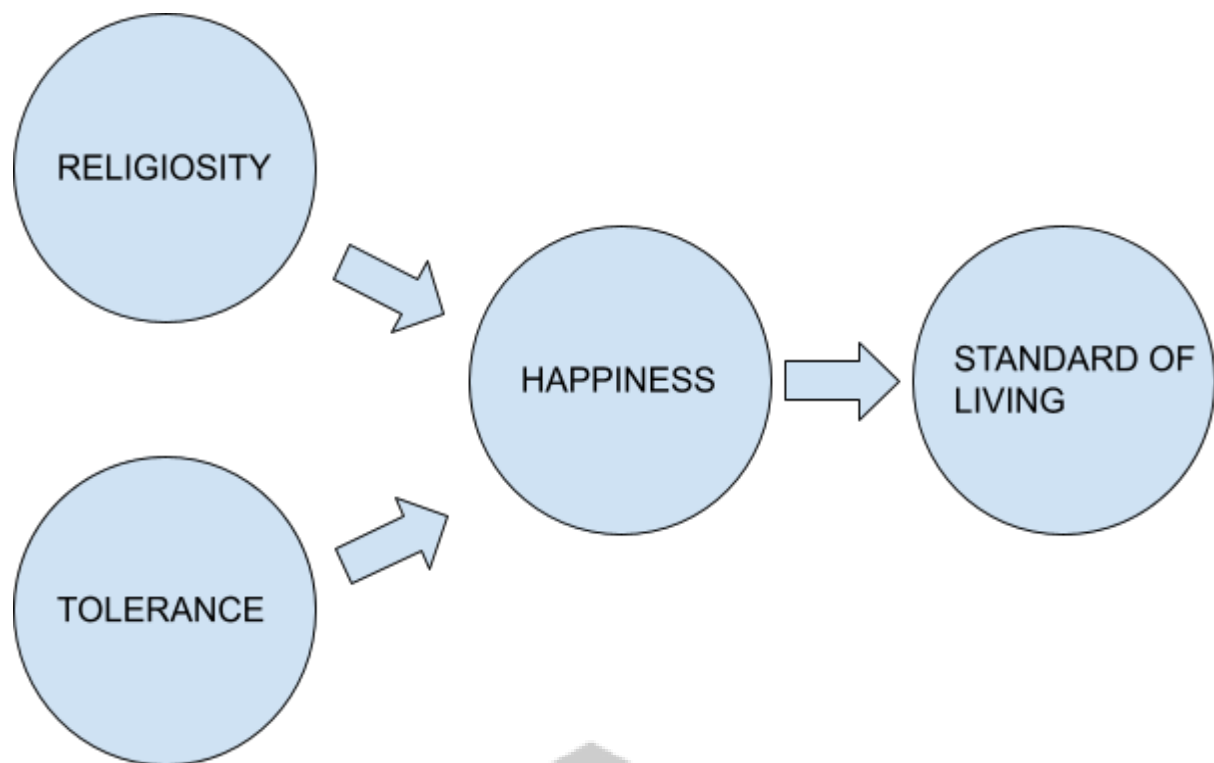


presents us with a discrepancy showing that despite leading to higher levels of happiness in most cases, religion happens to negatively impact the freedom and gender parity levels. What is more interesting is that, especially in cases of sexism and gender inequality, religion has a negative causal relationship. This research paper attempts also to study whether the same trends follow across low-income, middle-income and high-income countries. We further suspect that rich countries, despite their seemingly progressive propaganda, are quite regressive (as reflected in the data) when discussing issues like LGBTQ+ rights, gender equality, and tolerance towards other religions. Though it has been seen in the past literature that it appears that different economic conditions impact religious faiths. Religion, as observed, thus becomes more important to people who live in countries with low economic development, low freedom of choice and low democracy and face issues like power abuse, gender inequality, and majoritarianism; we note that the middle income countries, against our expectations, are the outliers for most of the variables. (Suttie, 2020). This, we believe, is mostly because of the greater religious segregation that exists in middle-income countries, leading to a different trend across most middle-income countries.

Furthermore, taking into account the Human Freedom Index, we expect, according to the pre-existing literature, a negative correlation to exist between religiosity and freedom levels. This, despite not being in tandem with positive correlation between religiosity and happiness, expresses the common observation and the general consensus amongst sociologists. A similar kind of behaviour is hypothesized to exist between World Peace Index and religiosity. Higher religiosity would mean lesser peace. This has also been seen prior, particularly in the case of violence against women:- The extent of religious participation influences the tolerant or violent behaviour individuals will exhibit.

What we hypothesize reflects in the figure below as religiosity and tolerance both lead to higher levels of happiness which in turn leads to higher standard of living, but a positive relationship should also exist between tolerance and religiosity, which is what we'll explore in the next section.

Figure 1



## **ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

Working with thirteen different variables measured across religiosity, we took note of how different measures of well being were correlated with religiosity in low income, middle income and high income countries. A few major observations have been given in table 1. As we see that happiness is positively correlated with religiosity, however it is in the poor income countries that religiosity finds the strongest correlation with happiness. As stated earlier, this correlation is suspected because religion represents a source of hope for the lower-income countries struggling with power abuse and violence against minorities (Suttie, 2020); because of this, the low-income countries might rely more heavily on religion as a source of happiness.

Over issues such as tolerance, specifically of homosexuals, all the three income-based segregations showed a similar relationship of lower tolerance against higher religiosity. We study this using two variables. First is when individuals were asked if they would mention that they did not want a homosexual as a neighbour. All the three groups showed a positive

relationship i.e., as religiosity increased, people mentioned it more that they preferred not to have a homosexual as a neighbour. Though it might be interesting to note that rich income and low-income countries both pan out at almost a similar level of correlation. As discussed prior, this reflects a rather regressive state of the richer countries existing very prominently, against popular belief. The second is when respondents were asked whether homosexuality was ever justified or not. Again, as religiosity increased, the belief that homosexuality is *never* justified reflected in the correlations studied.

Taken from the World Values Survey, when the respondents were asked if they would mention

Whether they wanted an individual of a different religion as a neighbour or not, middle income countries came across as the only ones where there was a negative correlation i.e. higher religiosity corresponded to lesser tolerance for individuals of other religions. Higher polarization levels are generally observed in middle-income countries (Alichi, 2016), leading to a general greater intolerance. A similar conclusion is reflected when respondents were asked about their degree of trust in members of other religions. Rich and poor income countries showed a positive correlation i.e. as religiosity increased, their trust in the members of other religions increased as well; however, the middle incomes were the only ones where people of higher religiosity showed a lesser trust in members of other religions.

We attempt to understand the level of tolerance of religious people with respect to women empowerment. The WVS-6 asks individuals how much they agreed with the statement- “When jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women”. The data for this is reflected in table 1.

Table 1: Here is the correlation between subjective religiosity and the response of respondents to the question on a scale 1 to 3 (Agreement to Disagreement)

| WVS Question | Rich | Middle | Poor |
|--------------|------|--------|------|
|--------------|------|--------|------|

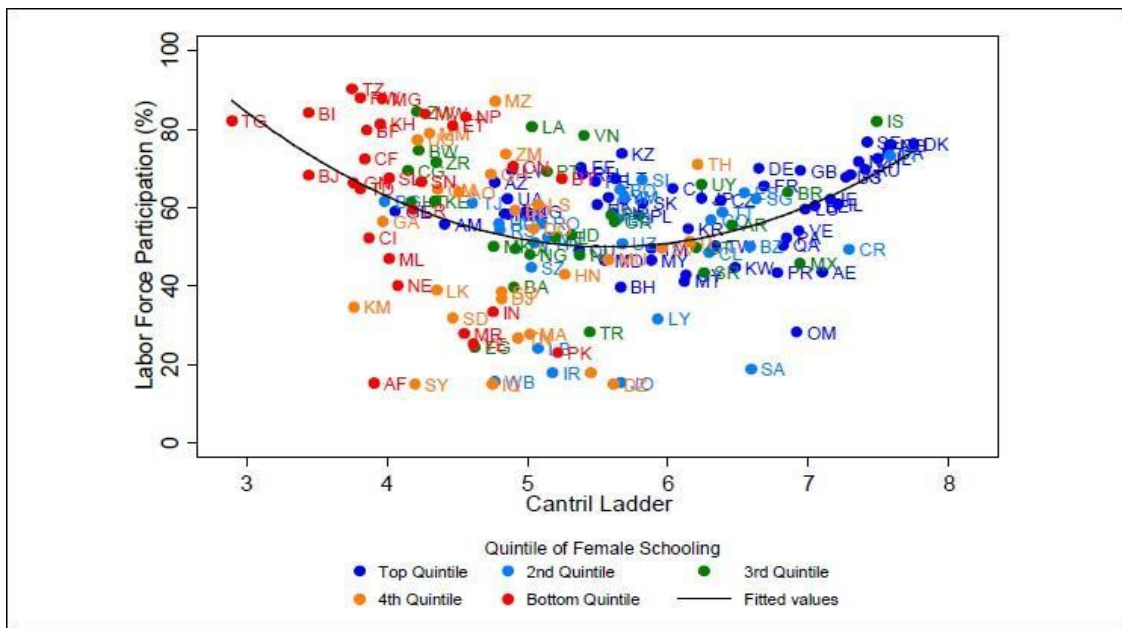
|  |       |        |        |
|--|-------|--------|--------|
| Do you agree or disagree with the statement:- ‘When jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women’ | 0.176 |        | -0.005 |
|  | 7     | 0.1471 | 8      |

Author’s calculations

A positive correlation refers to more agreement with the statement as the subjective religiosity increases. What is interesting to note is that it is *only* the poor income countries that reflect a higher disagreement with the statement as subjective religiosity increases. This correlation can be rationalized in the understanding that it is not the progressive nature of the people in poor income economies that yields such a result, but rather the poor state of these countries that forced the workers to not prioritize the work of one gender over another. Hence, we find favorable conditions for women empowerment in poor countries, whereas the middle and rich income countries reflect unfavourable conditions for women empowerment, especially when employment opportunities are scarce.

A similar trend is reflected in the World Happiness Report, 2015. Though it lies outside of the scope of this study, the figure from WHR 2015 given below shows that the highest level of women participation in the economy does not actually perhaps the best possible or the more desired life by women. This could possibly be because for most of the households in many countries women work only if the men of the family are unable to sustain the family well enough. This needs to be explored in future studies.

Figure 2



Source: WHR (2015)

Poor countries might reflect a better state of being when it comes to women's employment rights in times of unavailability of employment opportunities, whereas a similar direction in correlation is not exhibited when we explored how people felt about women earning higher than the men in the household. Across all the three income-based segregations, people agreed more with the statement, "If a woman earns more money than her husband, it's almost certain to cause problems" as religiosity increased. This indicates lower tolerance of religious people towards economic empowerment of women across the three income classes.

We also point out the discrepancy that exists not only between literature but within the data itself. Despite religiosity being positively correlated with a rather regressive belief about the work rights in poor income and rich income countries, the tolerance towards homosexuality and the pay equality across all divisions, it was observed that when respondents were asked their political inclination, a positive correlation existed between subjective religiosity and left-ist ideology. This shows that even though the people might self-report high levels of left-ism amongst them, ideals such as *equality*, *tolerance*, *freedom*

*etc.*, rarely show up in their other responses. Another discrepancy is observed when the movement of confidence in women's organizations is compared against the movement of religiosity. Analysis of these correlations showed us that as religiosity increased, the confidence of individuals in women's organizations increased; however, when they were asked whether they believed that men make better political leaders than women, all the three income based segregations showed an increasing agreement with the statement as religiosity increased.

The significant observations from our study of the world values survey wave 6 questionnaire, 2011-14 have been presented in table 2.

Table 2:

| WVS Question   | Rich    | Middle | Poor    | Implication of a positive correlation   |
|--|---------|--------|---------|---|
| Do you agree/disagree with the statement- A university education is more important for a boy than for a girl | 0.1052  | 0.0203 | 0.0501  | Higher religiosity correlates with more agreement with the statement.                                       |
| Whether women having the same rights as men is an essential feature of democracy or not                      | 0.1446  | 0.0422 | 0.101   | Higher religiosity correlates with higher belief that equal right is not an essential feature of democracy. |
| Is abortion justified or not?  | 0.4093  | 0.2248 | 0.3065  | Higher religiosity correlates with the belief that abortion is never justified.                             |
| Is it justified for a man to beat his wife justified or not  | -0.0391 | 0.0257 | -0.1197 | Higher religiosity correlated with the belief that a man beating his wife is never justified.               |

Author's calculations

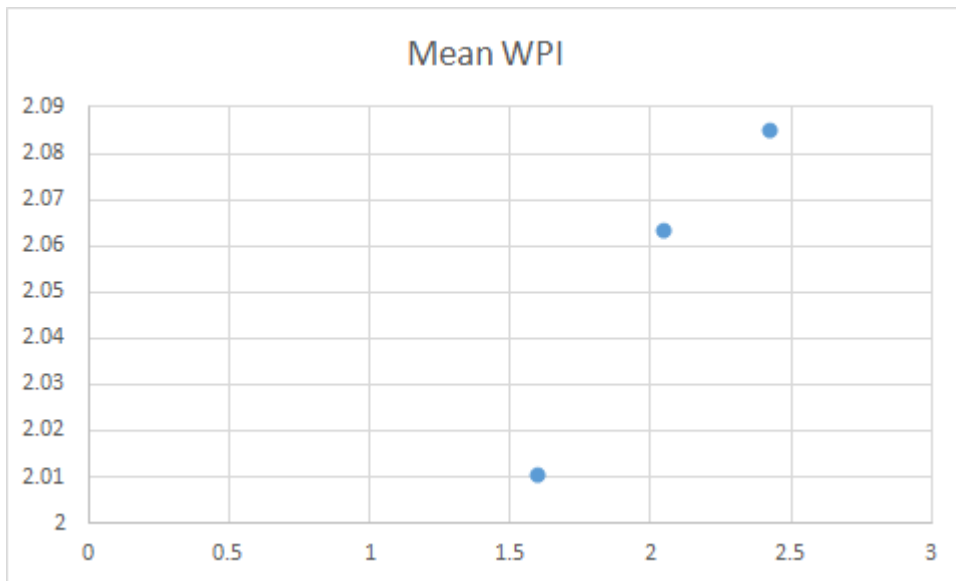
We further move on to analyse the correlations between freedom and religion. This study has used freedom as a valid proxy for tolerance (IEP) and aims to make a note of the correlation between tolerance and subjective religiosity. It is, however, necessary to make note that so far the paper has discussed variables that could be put into either the category of "*Tolerance to Diversity*" which reflects in WVS questions like trust in people of other religions or in the category of "*Tolerance to Gender*" which reflects in WVS questions like whether abortion is justified or not. The Human Freedom Index measured against the subjective religiosity represents a sum total of what tolerance looks like. The data reflects a relatively high correlation between subjective religiosity and freedom. This could be because of the fact that polarization exerts a greater influence on the degree of tolerance across cultures rather than the intensity of religious participation (Wonsub Eum, 2011). A similar explanation makes sense for perhaps such a strong correlation between peace and religiosity as well. We fail to find literature that would reflect or justify such a strong correlation between peace and religiosity.

Table 3

| WPI & HFI   |          |             |          |          |
|-------------|----------|-------------|----------|----------|
| Income      | Variable | Mean        | Mean     | Mean     |
|             | Obs      | Religiosity | WPI      | HFI      |
| Rich        | 28,867   | 2.418506    | 2.085167 | 8.04     |
| Middle      | 49,148   | 1.591906    | 2.010267 | 6.72     |
| Poor        | 6,510    | 2.043011    | 2.063391 | 6.32     |
| Correlation |          |             | 0.983057 | 0.696395 |

Author's calculations

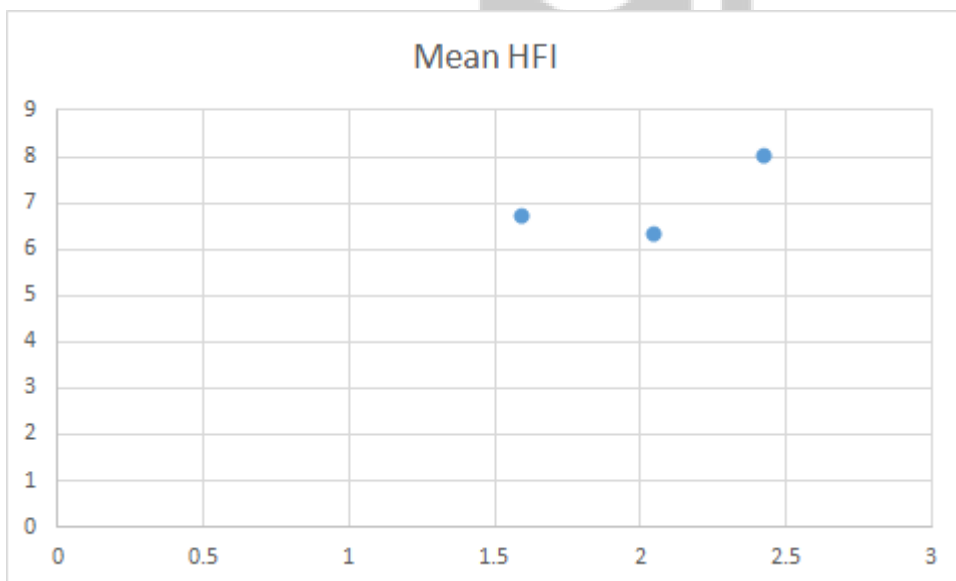
Figure 3



Mean WPI (y-axis) plotted against mean subjective religiosity (x-axis)



Figure 4



Mean HFI (y-axis) plotted against mean subjective religiosity (x-axis)

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## CONCLUSION

This paper makes an attempt at trying to establish a cohesive relationship between various indicators of well-being and religiosity. What we understand after studying the literature and analysing the data is that there is a discrepancy that exists between certain variables like happiness and gender parity. Though we find happiness to be associated with higher levels of subjective religiosity, this finding fails to be in tandem with our other findings about tolerance towards diversity and gender. It has also been established over the course of this research paper that in *most* cases, higher religiosity doesn't align itself positively with many of the indicators of subjective well-being. We suspect this is because religious involvement might be a bigger player in swaying socio-economic behaviour rather than religiosity. Further it is noted that people's behaviour is largely influenced by the state of their economy across varying levels of religiosity indicating a bigger role of economic factors in influencing other socio-economic variables of subjective well-being. What could be explored in further studies is the particularly interesting case of religiosity affects peace as the data reflected something completely against the general observation.



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