

Health, Wealth or Wisdom? Religion and the Paradox of Prosperity¹

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Abstract

The so-called ‘happiness hypothesis’, associated with the work of the economist Richard Layard, has attracted much public debate over recent years. Its main contention is that despite rising levels of material prosperity in the west, incidence of recorded happiness and greater quality of life has not increased accordingly. In considering the major contributory factors to happiness and well-being, however, Layard is not alone in identifying the significance of religious values and participation in religion for positive and enduring levels of happiness. In response, this article critiques some of the evidence correlating religion and well-being, as well as considering the broader and much more vexed question of how far public policy is capable of incorporating questions of belief and value into its indicators of happiness and the good life. Drawing on traditions of virtue ethics as the cultivation of ‘the life well-lived’, I ask whether specifically Christian accounts of human flourishing and the good life still have any bearing in the wider public domain, and what ‘rules of engagement’ might need to be articulated in any dialogue between Christian values and the discourse of theology and a pluralist society.

Keywords

happiness, well-being, Richard Layard, virtue ethics, public policy

Growing prosperity since 1945 in developed economies is now being shared increasingly by developing economies. Yet experience and research widely recognize that above certain income levels, greater prosperity is not matched by greater happiness, but is accompanied instead by greater social and individual distress, manifested for example in increasing crime and ill-health, such as

¹ This article was originally delivered as the 2008 School of Theology lecture, University of Auckland, New Zealand.

depression. Much evidence now also suggests that such trends are exacerbated by high levels of inequality in society.

This so-called ‘happiness hypothesis’ is explored across a range of disciplines in a field of ‘overlapping literatures’ from the 1990s onwards.² They all confirm that increasing economic prosperity in western economies is not matched by greater levels of recorded happiness. These literatures serve as a multi-disciplinary ‘entry-point’ for the excavation of further layers of debate about the relationship between global economic change, social capital, human behaviour and political institutions, as well as their ethical and religious aspects. It is notable that the various literatures on well-being are mindful of these latter dimensions, and increasingly are focusing on the importance of values and beliefs in human satisfaction or quality of life.

Alongside these developments has been the re-emergence of religion globally, including into public life, and more recently matched by the growing interest, especially in the west, in the religious contribution to ‘social capital’, or the capacity to build social networks within and across various parts of civil society. It is the potential link between this latter development and the growing concern over the paradox of prosperity for human well-being which forms the basis of this lecture, which will focus on interacting this so-called ‘happiness hypothesis’ with a consideration of the potential role and contribution of religious values and organizations. It has further resonances with emerging interest in faith-based economics and ethical aspects of development, debt relief and poverty reduction: with the morality of the market and the question of values, not just in terms of informing the ‘moral compass’³ of individuals as they chart their course through life, but raising questions about the very purposes and ends to which political economy as a whole should be directed.

If the question of happiness and well-being (especially in relation to economic prosperity) is multi-disciplinary and multi-dimensional, then the question of religion emerges as one, not insignificant, element of that. Given that such a broad-based debate opens up questions of meaning and value, this opens new doors for theological input, and there are significant overlaps between philosophical thinking about the good life, particularly around virtue

² John R. Atherton, *Transcending Capitalism: An Enquiry into Religion and Global Change* (London: SCM Press, 2008).

³ See Gordon Brown, “I will not let Britain down”, *The Guardian* (25 September 2007), <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/frontpage/story/0,,2176532,00.html>> [accessed 30 September 2007]; for a critique of the term, see Francis Davis, Elizabeth Paulhus and Andrew Bradstock, *Moral, But No Compass: Government, Church and the Future of Welfare* (London: Matthew James Publishing, 2008), p. 13.

ethics and moral theology. My intention in this article is to trace these convergences and offer some ways forward.

Following a brief introduction to the literature on happiness and well-being, spearheaded by scholars such as Richard Layard, I will examine the possible contribution of religion, and Christian theology in particular, to the debate. I wish to ask what Christianity has to contribute to the current debate about well-being, and in particular to focus on specific aspects of religious social capital and virtue ethics in terms of what they might have to say. Yet, the associated question must also be whether such demonstrations and accounts of human flourishing and the good life still have any bearing in the wider public domain; and what ‘rules of engagement’ might need to be articulated in any dialogue between religious visions of happiness, health and well-being and those of a pluralist society.

The Paradox of Prosperity

There is no doubt that the past 250 years of economic growth associated with market capitalism and industrialism has been of great benefit to the west, relieving many from poverty. Yet, as John Atherton comments, ‘the price of that liberation, so epochal for well-being, has been the progressive inability of increasing income to deliver corresponding increases in happiness. Indeed, some argue that these economic processes, in the form of the market economy, themselves generate obstacles to happiness’.⁴

Since 1945 western economies have become more prosperous, as measured by indices such as Gross Domestic Product. All the indications are that material wealth has been matched by better quality of life, as measured by levels of participation in education, public health and indices of mortality and morbidity. Evidence suggests that above a minimum threshold, increasing income is (at best) weakly correlated with greater reported levels of contentment, satisfaction and well-being. The research is complex and quite contested, but there is significant convergence in this respect.⁵ Yet people’s sense of well-being has stagnated, in what we might term the ‘paradox of prosperity’.

⁴ Atherton, *Transcending Capitalism*, p. 110.

⁵ R. Wilkinson, *The Impact of Inequality: How to make Sick Societies Healthier* (London: Routledge, 2005); Richard Layard, ‘Happiness and Public Policy: A Challenge to the Professions’, *The Economic Journal*, 116 (2006), 24–33; J. Helliwell, ‘How’s Life? Combining Individual and National Variables to Explain Subjective Well-Being’, *Economic Modelling*, 20 (2003), 331–60.

In contemporary terms the happiness hypothesis is associated most with the economist Richard Layard, although he draws many of his concepts from the psychologist Jonathan Haidt and acknowledges that his own statistical and quantitative work in economics must be complemented with data from human psychology. Layard puts it in these stark terms: ‘There is a paradox at the heart of our lives. Most people want more income and strive for it. Yet as western societies have got richer, their people have become no happier’.⁶

Clearly, when we ask whether a human life is happy, or people are satisfied with their lives, we enter a problematic area in terms of what kind of evidence might inform such a view. We have to ask whether we are reliant on subjective evidence, in which people report changing degrees of satisfaction; or whether it is possible to construct more objective measures that are in some way independent of the subjects themselves.

Certainly, evidence in relation to the hypothesis that rested exclusively on subjective data would be vulnerable in two respects: first, it would depend on people reporting a subjective state of mind; secondly, it would rely on their being able to give a reliable account of comparative feelings, in terms of how levels of happiness have changed over time.⁷ But inevitably, however, any marginal increase in quality of life is likely to engender higher expectations and desires, with the automatic probability of their not being met.⁸ Or as Offer puts it, ‘The paradox of affluence and its challenge is that the flow of new rewards can undermine the capacity to enjoy them’.⁹ Yet one of the advantages of the multi-disciplinarity of the field is that some of the ‘softer’ evidence can be complemented by more objective data, such as measures of income inequality, rates of mortality, health inequality and so on.

We need to consider how measurements of the relationship between economic growth and well-being have been approached. Emphasis on Gross Domestic Product by nation and per capita has obvious limitations, since it focuses on quantitative measures at the neglect of qualitative ones, such as levels of crime (or perhaps more significantly fear of crime) or mental health; neither does it embrace as an index of productivity such activities as caring for dependent relatives or family, or the impact on the environment of manufacturing and a consumer society. Other alternative indices have therefore devel-

⁶ Richard Layard, *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science* (London: Allen Lane, 2005), p. 3.

⁷ Layard, ‘Happiness and Public Policy’.

⁸ A. Kenny and C. Kenny, *Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Utility: Happiness in Philosophical and Economic Thought* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2006), p. 187.

⁹ Avner Offer, *The Challenge of Affluence: Self-Control and Well-Being in the United States and Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 2.

oped: the Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare, which incorporates factors such as environmental indicators; the United Nations Development Programme Human Development Index, which takes account of life expectancy, infant mortality, educational attainment, access to basic facilities—and in some versions, matters such as the ‘digital divide’ in terms of distribution of Information and Communication Technologies between and within national economies.¹⁰ A third system goes furthest in terms of integrating psychological indicators and subjective measures, which are acknowledged as external to the market, and reflect the importance of relationships, emotional well-being, social mobility and other normative factors. What also characterizes such studies are that they are at pains to moderate the effects of changes over time, such as the distorting effects of rising expectations; and the results of such surveys record remarkably consistent results over a period of more than forty years.¹¹

A major feature of many advanced economies after 1945 is of course the increase in welfare expenditure and the concomitant effects on quality of life, in terms of increased access to healthcare, pensions, unemployment and sickness benefit, greater job security and fringe benefits, not to mention the psychological benefits of freedom from anxiety about the prospect of poverty or destitution in old age, disability or loss of employment. Yet equally, indices of mental illness, addiction, crime and family breakdown have also risen, all of which exert a ‘steady downward pressure on the average level of happiness’.¹²

Some commentators note trends towards what Oliver James terms ‘selfish capitalism’ with growing differentials between rich and poor, resistance to high taxation, privatization of utilities and less political sympathy towards social democratic solutions of state intervention and fiscal measures of redistribution (statistics for the UK suggesting that people deplore the fact that divisions between rich and poor are as wide as ever, but resist the idea that the government should intervene). In particular, Offer’s title, *The Challenge of Affluence* or James’ *Affluenza*, reflect the perception that prosperity has come to be perceived as a problem, a disease or disorder threatening social cohesion and inhibiting human fulfilment.

A number of conclusions arise from this cumulative research. Combinations of qualitative and quantitative data from economists, psychologists and

¹⁰ Pippa Norris, *Digital Divide: Civic Engagement, Information Poverty and the Internet Worldwide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

¹¹ Atherton, *Transcending Capitalism*, p. 115.

¹² Layard, *Happiness*, p. 79.

social statisticians have been consolidated into seven key indicators of well-being as set out by Layard. First, family relationships: marriage and stable relationships contribute positively to happiness; but breakdown of key relationships has a major negative impact. Layard points to the centrality of people's need for love, affirmation and mutuality in their lives. Secondly, income: clearly, at certain transitional points, a marginal increase engenders disproportionately positive results, in terms of a move from absolute poverty to relative affluence, but data suggests it can happen equally powerfully in the other direction, in terms of negative impact of fall in income. Thirdly, work: not just as provider of financial security, but as source of relationships, meaning and self-worth. We have known since the 1930s about the psychological effects of long-term unemployment, and research suggests that the loss of one's job has an effect on one's happiness in much more than purely financial terms. The fourth indicator is networks of community and friends as important sources of good social capital. Fifthly, health, if not a major contributor to well-being is certainly a source of negative effects, especially if it is a symptom of other forms of inequality. The sixth indicator is personal freedom, in terms of opportunities to participate in decision-making, to take part in community activities, and the seventh indicator is personal values and philosophy of life.

A further significant dimension is added by the work of Amartya Sen, who challenges the predominance of growth-driven models for developing economies.¹³ He focuses instead on developing criteria for economic growth based on the enhancement of human capital. This has led many economists to question whether the market economy on its own can deliver sustained and comprehensive improvement in human happiness. Further intervention in terms of political economy may be required, and there is a vigorous debate as to whether measures to improve income distribution, increase equality of opportunity and promote civil rights are actually necessary in order to deliver sustained outcomes around life chances, life expectancy and quality of life.

Sen's argument is that our overriding concern is, or should be, with human flourishing, in which all, rich and poor, have a stake, and that now involves addressing the whole of the spectrum of inequality, since evidence suggests that happiness and satisfaction are affected by people's perceptions of their status relative to others, and that well-being is greater in societies with smaller income differentials. This has led some commentators to argue for government interventions to modify the economy, since the market alone appears not automatically to guarantee both growth and greater equity. This argument

¹³ Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

has gained greater strength in terms of environmental factors in relation to efficiency and sustainability. As Joseph Stiglitz argues:

In short, the debate should not be centred on whether one is in favour of growth or against it. The question should be, are there policies that can promote what might be called moral growth—growth that is sustainable, that increases living standards not just today but for future generations as well, and that leads to a more tolerant, open society... to ensure that the benefits of growth are shared equitably, creating a society with more social justice and solidarity rather than one with deep rifts and cleavages.¹⁴

All these literatures are equally in agreement that without major reform of the market economy human well-being will not be achieved and certainly not in a sustainable way. Such reform requires, among other things, addressing economic behaviour through a reformulated understanding of the human.

Religion and the Pursuit of Happiness

So far we have focused on the importance of ‘valuing values’ in relation to happiness and well-being, and the need to incorporate into economic reckonings of prosperity a ‘thick’ account of human flourishing that acknowledges emotional, familial and spiritual factors, and is capable of understanding how religious values might contribute to well-being. What the literature on well-being acknowledges time after time is the significance of a philosophy of life, although this is not identical with organized religion—even though Layard at one point does indeed declare that ‘people who believe in God are happier’.¹⁵

The Center for Spirituality, Theology and Health at Duke University in the United States publishes digests of research in this area, and reports on a series of clinical studies which suggest, amongst other things: improved rates of recovery for cancer patients who report involvement in faith communities; enhanced longevity amongst those who attend synagogue; slower rates of cognitive decline in those experiencing the onset of dementia and marginal impact on aspects of coping strategies in relation to recovery from serious illness for

¹⁴ Joseph Stiglitz, ‘The Ethical Economist’, *Foreign Affairs* (November–December 2005), <<http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20051101fareviewessay84612/joseph-e-stiglitz/the-ethical-economist.html>> [accessed 15 June 2008].

¹⁵ Layard, *Happiness*, p. 72.

religious people.¹⁶ The evidence is varied, but rich, although clearly such research raises important questions of method and interpretation. For example, is the incidence of better mental health amongst religious people due to divine influence or human solidarity; do different religious traditions deliver different degrees of well-being; what about religious traditions that stress individual practices, such as meditation, in comparison with more corporate ones; what is the relationship between ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality’, that is between organizational, formal dimensions of observance and a more subtle appreciation of existential or transcendent dimensions to life.

In terms of explaining the correlation between religion and well-being, however, the consensus seems to be that there is powerful ‘added value’ in religion.¹⁷ It appears to be down to a combination of factors, amongst which social support and membership of a faith-community is pre-eminent, but which extends to other forms of religious practice, such as prayer, reading one’s sacred Scriptures, a sense of meaning, an existential belief system and a well-articulated moral code. Whilst other (secular) activities might provide some of these elements, commentators such as Richard Eckersley, argue that religion ‘packages’ these components effectively and accessibly.¹⁸

More specifically, John Swinton postulates various tangible mechanisms by which religious affiliation might contribute to greater mental and emotional well-being including: regulation of lifestyle and behaviour, such as restriction of intake of alcohol; provision of resources, such as social support and networks; promotion of positive self-esteem; acquisition of specific life-skills and coping resources, such as a framework of understanding illness, stress or loss; generation of positive emotions, cultivation of disposition towards forgiveness, hope and transformation.¹⁹ Eckersley states: ‘All in all, well-being comes from being connected and engaged, from being suspended in a web of relationships and interests. This gives meaning to people’s lives’.²⁰

¹⁶ ‘Latest Religion and Health Research Outside Duke (2000–2007)’, <<http://www.dukespiritualityandhealth.org/resources/pdfs/Research%20-%20latest%20outside%20Duke.pdf>> [accessed 8 July 2008].

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Richard M. Eckersley, ‘Culture, Spirituality, Religion and Health: Looking at the Big Picture’, *Medical Journal of Australia*, 186:10 (suppl.), 54–6.

¹⁹ John Swinton, ‘Researching Spirituality and Mental Health’, in M. E. Coyte, P. Gilbert and V. Nicholls, eds, *Spirituality, Values and Mental Health* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2007), pp. 292–305.

²⁰ Eckersley, 54.

These claims veer towards the territory of religion as a form of ‘social capital’. The danger of all of this, however, is to fall into a narrowly functionalist account, in which religion ‘delivers’ certain social goods to wider society. This is certainly one of the ways in which the ‘social capital’ thesis can be adopted, but it seems to me that there are broader, critical and normative factors that need to be considered: perhaps more a theological critique or reflection on the nature of human well-being.

Social Capital, Religion and Well-Being

The theory of ‘social capital’ tries to understand the sources of social solidarity and what motivates people to participate actively in social and political networks, locally, nationally and globally. The political scientist Robert Putnam is credited for generating much of the current interest in the term following the publication of his book *Bowling Alone* in which he notes the decline in many voluntary and leisure societies in the US and contemplates the deleterious effects of this on matters such as democratic participation.²¹ Definitions of social capital vary, but it is best summarized in John Field’s simple phrase, that ‘relationships matter’.²² He states:

By making connections with one another, and keeping them going over time, people are able to work together to achieve things that they either could not achieve by themselves, or could only achieve with great difficulty. People connect through a series of networks and they tend to share common values... To the extent that these networks constitute a resource, they can be seen as forming a kind of capital.²³

The World Bank describes social capital as ‘the institutions, relationships and norms that shape the quality and quantity of a society’s social interactions’,²⁴ and Putnam highlights its purposeful or functional dimensions, in terms of the ‘features of social life—networks, norms, and trust—that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives... Social

²¹ Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

²² John Field, *Social Capital* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 1.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ The World Bank, ‘What is Social Capital?’, *PovertyNet* (1999), <<http://www.worldbank.org/poverty/scapital/whatsc.htm>> [accessed 13 October 2008].

capital, in short, refers to social connections and the attendant norms and trust'.²⁵

What is interesting is how much of the social capital literature intersects with the literature on happiness, in terms of offering insights into the devices by which individuals are able to feel a greater connection to the wider community; in other words, the very kinds of networks which seem to engender better quality of life. So, one policy document identifies some of the positive benefits of strong social capital: high GDP; higher educational attainment; lower levels of crime (as a result of strong social norms and levels of trust); better health; more effective institutions of democratic participation, in terms of linking citizens with government. If we look at those alongside Layard's 'big seven', we see an interesting degree of correlation.

A further dimension is the significance of religion for engendering forms of social capital. Putnam has probably led the way in charting how religious values and organizations serve as rich sources of social capital, which foster precisely those networks and relationships that seem to contribute most decisively to healthy social networks and thus to our quality of life. As Putnam reports, churchgoers are 'substantially more likely to be involved in secular organizations, to vote and participate politically in other ways and to have deeper informal social connections'.²⁶ The distinctiveness of churchgoers' values and attitudes—the theological well-spring of their motivations—is variously described as 'faithful' or 'spiritual' capital.²⁷ The Commission on Urban Life and Faith use this term to describe the quantitative and qualitative effect of churches on the life of their neighbourhoods. It is intended to link the sense of strong values that guide and inform activism.

Research from the William Temple Foundation (WTF) in Manchester distinguishes between two dimensions of religion as social capital. Religious capital is what religion contributes, in terms of tangible outcomes and social goods; 'spiritual capital' is, by contrast, the why of the religious contribution: 'the motivating basis of faith, belief and values (sometimes expressed in... worship, credal statements and articles of faith, or more intangibly as one's own 'spirituality') that shapes the actions of faith communities'.²⁸

²⁵ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

²⁷ Commission on Urban Life and Faith, *Faithful Cities: A Call for Celebration, Vision and Justice* (London: Methodist Publishing House, 2006). I would defend the term 'faithful capital' against its critics because of its ability to hold together in synthesis dimensions of the religious (practice-based outcomes) and the spiritual (values or beliefs).

²⁸ C. R. Baker and H. Skinner, *Faith in Action: The Dynamic Connection between Spiritual and*

This WTF research identifies the following seven dimensions of spiritual capital: emphasis on transformation, personal and corporate engagement; valuing personal experience and narrative around monitoring impact of social change, such as regeneration; belief that God is at work in social change; acknowledging affective dimensions of political activism; values of vulnerability, forgiveness, risk, learning, transformation; unconditional acceptance of everyone; cultivating people's inner resources.²⁹

If religion is one of the most potent sources of strong values and principles that appear to make the difference as people steer their way through the world, then this is precisely because it represents a powerful synthesis of belief and action. We might term this 'performative' faithful capital: belief and practice are indivisible; this is encapsulated well in understandings of 'praxis', as value-driven, value-directed action and in the term 'phronesis' or practical wisdom.

However, this only serves to highlight the question of the relationship between values and practices: the literature on religious/social capital, or faithful capital, is increasingly converging on the impossibility of separating the two. It resists, therefore, a straightforwardly functionalist reading of the contribution of religion to wider society whereby faith merely 'delivers' social goods and should be evaluated on its efficiency or effectiveness in so doing, as with any other organization.

As Atherton argues, this establishes a continuum between ethics and religion, or between market economics and welfare economics. It also resonates powerfully with other literatures on the foundations of healthy social capital, and especially the role of religion in nurturing bonding, bridging and linking the social relationships and networks that appear to be so crucial in fostering well-being.³⁰

This takes us further into the territory of virtue ethics and teleology, because they form part of the realization within the happiness and well-being literature of the centrality of people's goals and values. It is about being able to establish some basic criteria of human flourishing—of what actually constitutes a life well lived—in order to be able to make some judgements about what is good for us. In so far as virtue ethics represents different accounts of the 'good life', especially in theologically-derived virtue ethics, the idea that the good is related to the ends for which humans are believed to have been created, occupies a prominent position.

Religious Capital (Manchester: William Temple Foundation, 2006), p. 9, available at <<http://www.wtf.org.uk/documents/faith-in-action.pdf>>.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 20–21.

³⁰ Atherton, *Transcending Capitalism*, p. 131.

In Aristotle's thought, the good life is defined in terms of the pursuit of happiness, or *eudaimonia*. This entails the achievement of one's ultimate goal, or *telos*, which is essentially about shaping one's life according to the virtues of excellence, learning and pleasure. Christian theologians such as Augustine and Aquinas put it that in a Christian framework, in which virtue is about conforming to God's purposes, a goal that can only be fulfilled in the afterlife, adapted in later medieval times to conformity to the precepts of natural law. So there is an ontological as well as a moral dimension to the normative basis of happiness and well-being: we are most fulfilled when becoming and attaining our highest calling and our most authentic being, which in traditional Christian theology is to become what God has created us to be, by practising the virtues of faith, hope, love and charity with the assistance of divine grace.

Eudaimonia is traditionally translated as happiness, although Elizabeth Anscombe prefers the term 'flourishing', a concept that has recently re-entered moral discourse with the work of Grace Jantzen, who explicitly contrasts it and the world-view it embodies with the language and terminology of 'salvation'.³¹ The aim of the 'good life' in virtue terms for Jantzen is not to seek rescue from a fallen and corrupt world, but to promote the values of new life, creativity and justice in ways that propel us towards 'becoming divine'.³² Other philosophers and theologians have emphasized the importance of moral agency and choice: the good is something that has to be chosen, there has to be an element of freedom, it is not about simply following a pre-destined life-course, or following prescribed rules. Arguably, what makes any action moral is the necessity of choosing between conflicting goods or even lesser evils. In that respect, we return to a useful strand in virtue ethics, which is about how one cultivates the gifts of moral discernment: seeking and attaining the good and our own well-being and that of the planet is not only about following a path, but acquiring the map-reading skills by which one navigates one's course through life.

The life which cultivates virtue is preferable for many to alternative traditions of moral reasoning, such as Kantian deontology or utilitarian/consequentialist theories. The alternative of 'right action' versus 'good consequences'

³¹ Grace M. Jantzen, 'The Gendered Politics of Flourishing and Salvation', in Vincent Brümmer and Marcel Sarot, eds, *Happiness, Well-Being and the Meaning of Life* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1996), pp. 58–75.

³² *Ibid.*, p.6; Grace M. Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Toward a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998.), pp. 156–70.

can be resolved by an emphasis on the qualities of the moral agent, but we cannot escape the question of what nurtures and sustains the practical wisdom of that moral individual; nor to consider whether in fact it is not about individual virtue but an ecology of virtue in which the individual's participation in a community's shared ethos is what cultivates the practical wisdom of discernment.

The revival of virtue ethics in theology could usefully connect with this literature on well-being, therefore, since it offers a way of reconciling the potential conflict between law and grace, whilst offering such a framework into the public domain: a 'more dialogic approach to Christian ethics [which] attempts to maintain the integrity of religious traditions, while drawing out the potential for mutual understanding between them—both within Christianity and between Christianity and other faith or non-faith-based groups'.³³

This takes us into a debate about how questions of value and how notions of the good can be negotiated in pluralist societies, and what role is afforded to any religious traditions; that is, whether religion can be taken seriously as a well-spring of public values, or is it to be seen purely as a sectional, fiduciary language only for the faithful.

The point is, religious people do have a long history of thinking about values, many of which they share across traditions and many of which have actually informed the cultural world-views in which secular people find themselves. So it is that dialectic—the sense that Christian identity, like that of other religious and cultural traditions, has always developed in particular contexts and through constant processes of change and revision, interacting with other world-views, religious and secular—that needs to be affirmed: a convergence of theologically-grounded notions of virtue with those of others.

Yet equally, it may be asked whether Christians should be more wary of having anything to do with a concept as banal and self-seeking as 'happiness'. The strong counter-cultural and eschatological nature of early Christianity would suggest that new life in Christ and the task of entering the Kingdom have little or nothing to do with living happily ever after, with contentment with one's lot or settling for social conformity. The church's memory of Jesus is of one who preached no cheap grace, but rather warned of the hatred, persecution and abuse they would encounter (Mt. 10:24–39). If this is the corporate memory of a persecuted community, then it also reflects the shared conviction that Christian discipleship is a process of constant struggle towards

³³ J. Garnett, M. Grimley, A. Harris, W. Whyte and S. Williams, eds, *Redefining Christian Britain: Post 1945 Perspectives* (London: SCM Press, 2006), p. 201.

the *parousia* that speaks of God's radical intervention in human affairs, rather than the ameliorative gradualism of history, as the ultimate goal to which the faithful should aspire.

The idea is that happiness is to be found in a struggle within a world governed by the dynamics of tragedy rather than comedy, of suffering in the face of overwhelming moral complexity rather than the restoration of order and stability. This is also present in the Aristotelian teleology in which a life virtuously-lived is constantly tested against notions of the good and excellent which involve ends and values that transcend mere self-interest or subsistence. Yet 'being good' is not necessarily synonymous with 'being happy': admittedly, the Aristotelian tradition, later taken up by natural law theory, teaches that virtue and goodness are all about orientating ourselves towards that which will authentically fulfil our true natures. Surely, then, we should be happy if we are becoming truly ourselves; but Christian theology would also teach that if we live in a fallen world in which the limitations and flaws of sin are an ever-present reality, then we can never be complacent about simply following our own desires.

This also propels us towards some of the more communitarian traditions, as found in the work of Stanley Hauerwas for example, in which the emphasis is on inhabiting the *habitus* of a community, which tells the stories by which the good life is to be guided: this again is about cultivating habits of discernment in the context of particular practices of virtue.³⁴ It is through participation in community that we learn to consider and evaluate the lives of others; in communities of faith, there is the (perhaps unique) opportunity to connect with the lives of those in other cultures (by virtue of the global nature of many faiths) as well as across many generations and historical epochs. This constitutes a unique brand of 'cultural capital'. We need communities as schools of virtue, as the places that nurture us. This is characteristic of Hauerwas and other forms of post-liberal Christian ethics. Harriet Harris states:

After all, if being trained in virtue is like learning the skills for practising a craft, or for making and appreciating good music or art, or becoming aware of how to eat healthily, then Christianity can provide teaching, practices and disciplines, mentors and communities in which to be so trained.³⁵

³⁴ Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

³⁵ Harriet Harris, 'Ambivalence over Virtue', in Garnett et al., eds, *Redefining Christian Britain*, pp. 210–21 at p. 210.

This is the strength of the communitarian position: we cannot be schooled in virtue in abstract. These values have to be embodied and located, because essentially virtue, goodness and well-being are performative values. I want to argue that it is the extent to which virtue ethics is not only about a vision of the good, but about cultivating—embodying and practising—ways of life by which the good might be realized. In that respect, it does not need to be heavily prescriptive or abstract but quite concrete. It is about how practices shape our moral selves and build lives well-lived, whether that is framed in terms of a *telos* or life-goal. Yet it also suggests that this needs to be quite a reflective task, in which the twin elements of the vision of the good and the enactment of the life well-lived need to be brought into active correlation. It suggests that virtue and cultivation of virtue also rest on the cultivation of what we might call ‘practical wisdom’—whether this is about theological reflection, or other kinds of moral discernment.

‘Practical wisdom’ or practical reasoning, has tended to be regarded as inferior to more lofty forms of knowledge, which perhaps reflects a split in the western intellectual tradition between ‘theory’ and ‘practice’. If the former is about generalizable, universalizable knowledge, which models an ideal type or representation of the world, then the latter is the field of action which can certainly be used to test out theories or hypotheses, develop them, find exceptions or even disseminate knowledge, but it is rarely seen as the place which prompts research or generates theory. Hence, there is a sense that practice is the place of ‘application’ of theoretical constructs formulated elsewhere; it is secondary, inert. However, this division or configuration of ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ itself has a history.³⁶

So there has been a return to Aristotle’s definitions in the *Nicomachean Ethics* in which he places *phronesis* (practical wisdom) alongside *Sophia* (wisdom). If *Sophia* is the ability to speculate on universal truths, then *phronesis* is more strategic, as the form of knowledge geared towards achieving specific goods. But this is, for Aristotle, a reflective and deliberative skill, and not just simple technique. More recently, with the revival of ideas of practical wisdom, not least in the training of many professionals, this is strongly linked with notions of virtue and the good, insofar as practical wisdom is concerned with producing right action, ‘bringing about a good end for humans in general and for each unique individual’.³⁷ As some voices in professional education argue,

³⁶ Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht, *The Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

³⁷ W. Lauder, ‘Beyond Reflection: Practical Wisdom and the Practical Syllogism’, *Nurse Education Today*, 14 (1994), 91–8 at 93.

such practical wisdom may not necessarily involve rule-based or Kantian behaviour, but a complex interrelation of thinking and doing—or even being—by which implicit values guide discernment in relation to specific contexts, networks or relationships. According to Lauder: ‘The goal is not some pre-determined end but is instead a result of affirming oneself in spite of the events and circumstances which might prevent an individual achieving their potential or finding some meaning in life-health experience’.³⁸

As Harriet Harris argues, virtue theory always has to transform itself into practice, since it is concerned not with virtue in abstract but particular virtues.³⁹ Similarly, paralleling the literature on happiness and well-being, it is in the context of relationships, ways of life and institutions—in corporate traditions we inhabit and help to form, reflexively, as they are shaping us—that the virtues are forged and demonstrated. She states: ‘Virtuous living is learned by being practised. It is nurtured... in the communities and institutions that shape our lives, especially families, schools, churches, and other religious institutions, colleges, places of work, community groups, and political and charitable organizations’.⁴⁰

In my own research, I have argued that theology could be described as a form of ‘practical wisdom’.⁴¹ Out of the practical, everyday dilemmas come guiding principles, stories, images and values by which faithful action can be directed. The ways in which Christians choose to organize their ways of being in the world, of relating to one another in community, and of enacting ritual, care and spirituality, constitutes the language of authentic identity and represents the ‘practical wisdom’ of the tradition.

This stems from a necessarily incarnational theology. It is my contention that the practical—the human—discloses, embodies and shows forth the theological; for Christians, all human activities of healing, nurturing, sustaining and transforming are, ultimately, varieties of ‘God-talk’ in action and the place where God’s grace is shown forth in human relationships. The primary language of theology is articulated in the practical wisdom of human care; only as a second stage does it find expression in systematic doctrinal propositions. It is amidst the necessarily unsystematic character of human action and relationships that Christians uphold the essentially theological nature of human practical wisdom, informing faithful and transformative practice.

³⁸) *Ibid.*, 95.

³⁹) Harris, ‘Ambivalence over Virtue’, p. 212.

⁴⁰) *Ibid.*, p. 210.

⁴¹) Elaine L. Graham, *Transforming Practice: Pastoral Theology in an Age of Uncertainty*, 2nd edn (London: Mowbray; Eugene: Wipf & Stock, [1996] 2002).

This is not unfamiliar within public theology. Heinrich Bedford-Strohm speaks of ‘bilingualism’; capable of giving an account of its own roots and sources, but capable of addressing a wider audience too.⁴² Yet my point is that such dialogue is not propositional but performative. This notion of the contribution of theology as essentially a form of wisdom that is enacted and communicated in the life of its practitioners, yet accessible to a wider public not by virtue of its ability to understand finer points of doctrine but by its ability to ‘read’ and witness the lived reality of that community: ‘By their fruits shall ye know them’. Such a performative theology, enacted in the practical wisdom of the community is weighty in terms of its value-ladenness, but tangible in the public nature of its demonstration.

I have been considering the extent to which Christians should be called to a self-contained life of virtue that rests exclusively on the narratives of faith and mores of the internal community, and the extent that their inherited values can overlap with those of other worldviews. Ethicists such as Hauerwas claim that ‘Christian social insights cannot be shared with others except with those who participate in the faith from which they come’.⁴³ This underlies a principal fault-line in contemporary public theology today, namely between the communitarian or holiness traditions represented by thinkers such as Hauerwas and John Milbank versus the liberal perspectives of Reinhold Niebuhr, Duncan Forrester and Charles Taylor. The reality is, people draw their concepts of the good life from a variety of sources, Christians being no exception; the point of contention is what aspects of such influences—Scripture, the corporate narrative of tradition, secular reason, experience—should prove ultimately binding. Understandings of happiness are lived out and formed in a variety of settings; and the complexity of modern life is such that any mature adult will inevitably encounter a plethora of such messages in the course of a single day, just by watching a television soap opera, passing advertising billboards, reading a bedtime story to their children or listening to politicians, let alone reading the sacred texts of their tradition (which are not in themselves monolithic in their visions). These are the raw materials out of which practical wisdom is negotiated; but ‘Christ’ and ‘culture’ are to be held in tension, and neither collapsed nor assimilated in the process.

William Cavanaugh provides a helpful metaphor for this when he returns to Augustine’s idea of the ‘city of God’ to examine how Christians are to

⁴² Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, ‘Nurturing Reason: The Public Role of Religion in the Liberal State’, *Ned Geref Teologiese Tydskrif*, 48:1–2 (2007), 25–41.

⁴³ Atherton, *Transcending Capitalism*, p. 7.

manage the balance between religious faith and public reason, the tensions of discipleship and citizenship. He describes the two realms (not separate self-contained worlds) as almost virtual spaces that overlap each other; but they are primarily performative spaces, in which different narratives (in our case narratives of well-being and human fulfilment) are lived out. He states:

Envisioning the two cities as performances helps us to avoid some serious problems with the way the church is imagined. The church as God sees it—the Body of Christ—is not a human institution with well-defined boundaries, clearly distinguishable from the secular body politic. The church is not a *polis*, but a set of practices or performances that participate in the history of salvation that God is unfolding on earth... The church is not a separate enclave, but... it joins with others to perform the city of God.⁴⁴

The church is not preaching to the world or delivering generic moral principles; it is, primarily, demonstrating its distinctive ethic within the world, creating a shared space in which some views of the good life are mutually discovered and celebrated, but also able to create an alternative *oikumene*, or household or political economy, in which different models of human flourishing and unconditional regard—an economy of grace rather than reward—can also be practised. Prompted by Cavanaugh's terminology of space, performance and boundaries, I am inclined to characterize public theology as a liminal discipline, which locates itself at the threshold, which encourages traffic from the sanctuary into the street, fostering the secular vocation of those who need to be articulate in the vernaculars of production, consumption and citizenship as well as the dramas of grace, redemption and sacrifice.

To conclude, the happiness literature stresses the importance of values and plentiful, rich social capital such as networks of friends, intimacy, meaningful and rewarding (in all sense of the word) pursuits. It is also pointing to evidence which suggests that religion and participation in organized religion is effective at fostering that kind of social capital.

But whilst I have been arguing that Christianity may have some distinctive insights to offer, in terms of a particular practical wisdom of human flourishing, this still needs to be accountable and accessible to a wider world. The Christian theological contribution is drawn to some kind of bilingualism, or mediation between the many sources and visions of happiness and goodness

⁴⁴ William T. Cavanaugh, 'From One City to Two: Christian Reimagining of Political Space', *Political Theology*, 7:3 (2006), 299–321 at 318.

on offer. It is a balance of faith and reason, engagement in the world and immersion in tradition, but then as Kathryn Tanner claims, theology has always been dependent on ‘borrowed materials’.⁴⁵ A high theology of creation and incarnation requires that it is within this world, and in the vernacular of human affairs, that effective discipleship is undertaken. There is a tension, but no ultimate contradiction, between the imperatives of ‘citizenship’ and ‘discipleship’.

Similarly, ‘happiness’ being both of this world and beyond this world is a perfectly theologically orthodox perspective, given the Christian dispensation which acknowledges both the promise of the Kingdom in the light of the resurrection and the gifts of the Spirit, at the same time as knowing that such promises remain to be fully inaugurated this side of the eschaton.

This reflects a perennial tradition of living at the threshold between sacred and secular; the ‘now’ and the ‘not yet’ and between the gospel of ‘common grace’ and *metanoia*.⁴⁶ This may permit us to conceive of overlap, if not convergence, of many worldviews and value-commitments, in order that Christians can occupy the same space as others without compromising a theologically robust vision. If Christian faith and practice has anything to teach the world about happiness and the life well-lived, such wealth and wisdom must be offered in the name of a common humanity and a shared concern for its flourishing. For the time being, any firm conclusions remain provisional.

In the words of the Sri Lankan theologian Wesley Ariarajah, ‘At the global level, there is an increasing recognition that the world’s problems are not Christian problems requiring Christian answers, but human problems that must be addressed together by all human beings’.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), pp. 61–92.

⁴⁶ Elaine L. Graham, Heather Walton and Frances Ward, *Theological Reflection: Methods* (London: SCM Press, 2005), pp. 138–69.

⁴⁷ S. Wesley Ariarajah, ‘Wider Ecumenism: A Threat or a Promise?’, *The Ecumenical Review*, 50 (1998), as cited by Ninan Koshy, ‘On the Meaning of ‘Ecumenical’’, in J. de Santa Ana, ed., *Beyond Idealism: A Way Ahead for Ecumenical Social Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), pp. 30–55 at p. 55.