

Perception of Freedom, Religion, and Life Satisfaction:  
A comparison of religion and happiness in China, Finland, and the United States of America  
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## I. Abstract

This research paper uses data from the World Value Survey to examine the relationship between life satisfactions, perception of freedom, and religious affiliation in The People's Republic of China, the Republic of Finland, and the United State of America. The paper looks to compare three different countries with vastly different population size, geographic location in the world, political systems, and public attitudes towards religion in an attempt to understand the role religion plays in people's general life satisfaction. More specifically, the paper attempts to answer a set of questions regarding the relationship between the variables. Are people who are more religious happier than those who are not? Do people who are affiliated with a religion and its community believe they are free to make their own choices more so than those who are not? And are people with a high perception of freedom happier than those who are not, regardless of religious affiliation?

The study is set out with the belief that people who categorize themselves as religious in general have a lower feeling of freedom but a higher feeling of life satisfaction, as religious practices and communities limit their choice of action but grants purpose and meaning to their lives. The paper will use raw data from the World Value Survey and processes it through a statistics program to get comparable data for critical analysis. Each country will be statistically analyzed individually, and the independent variable will be religious affiliation, while the independent variables will be life satisfaction and perception of freedom. The study will not look at the degree of freedom, life satisfaction, and religious affiliation, but look at the variables in absolute terms (yes/no, happy/not happy, etc.) The paper will conclude by drawing parallels between the countries, attempt to support or falsify the hypotheses, and draw up policy implications from the results.

## I. Introduction

When trying to understand human beings, attempt to make sense of the most basic elements of human identity is of vital importance. It is my belief that religion, perception of individual freedom, and life satisfaction all fall into this category, and is something that is worth studying to understand general populations and make appropriate policies and political approaches to these people. For many years, research has been conducted in the separate fields of religion, perception of freedom, and life satisfaction; however, little research has combined the three variables and attempted to make sense of their relationship to each other. Seeing as all three are social and individual measurements, they can be difficult to research accurately, and care has to be taken when analyzing their relationship, as correlation does not always mean causation. Most literature written about these issues explore one or two of the variables only, and although it is an incomplete exploration of the issue, it gives a foundation for understanding of the different core areas. This paper aims at answering three questions about perception of freedom, religion, and life satisfaction: Are people who are more religious happier than those who are not? Do people who are affiliated with a religion and its community believe they are free to make their own choices more so than those who are not? And are people with a high perception of freedom happier than those who are not, regardless of religious affiliation?

Although these themes are important to explore independently, they are an understudied component of politics, and should receive a larger focus within this context. A large percentage of the world's population identify themselves as religious, and understanding their perception about their own freedom can be of vital importance when it comes to targeting this group with for instance voter policies or different social programs.

If a majority of the religious population in the world believes they have little individual freedom, their participation in political groups and organization might be low, as they will fail to understand the difference they can make in these areas. It is also important for understanding voter turnouts from the religious population, and to try to understand how they might react to different policies and social programs.

Understanding how religion can contribute to life satisfaction is also important, as it can serve as empirical evidence either in favor of or against the freedom of religion within countries, and can encourage governments to adjust national policies accordingly.

Understanding how religion impacts people's everyday lives should also be taken into consideration when allocating state budgets and funds, and when considering government support for religious programs and activities within different nations.

Although it is difficult to get an accurate understanding of this relationship in every country in the world, it is possible to focus on a few different countries to gain some understanding of the issue. This paper in particular looks at the results from three countries: Finland, China, and the United States of America. This is to get broader understanding of the issues at hand, as it examines countries with vastly different population sizes, historical background, political systems, attitudes towards religion, etc.

## II. Literature Review

The study of life satisfaction and religion is an old field of study, and one in which scholars have a hard time agreeing on the results (Hadaway, 1978). According to Hadaway (1978), studies often shows that religious people are more satisfied with their lives than nonreligious people. Investigation and research on this has been done on both a community and individual level, and the jump between the two makes the results inconsistent (Hadaway, 1978). Reanalyzing data, Hadaway is able to conclude that stronger religious faith has a strong relationship with greater feelings of personal wellbeing (Hadaway, 1978). By looking at four measures of religiosity and four indicators of life satisfaction in a study of 2,164 interviews, he concludes that the relationship between the two variables is indeed existent and statistically significant, although it does not say anything about *why* the relationship exists (Hadaway, 1978). He argues that religion often functions more as a resource than as compensation, and along with other scholars, he believes that religion brings much to a persons life: “Religion is traditionally seen as giving hope, meaning, security, and optimism to the individual (...)” (Hadaway, 1978).

Like Hadaway, Rakrachakarn, Moschis, Sim Ong, and Shannon (2013) state that religion and life satisfaction are strongly related. They credit this to the fact that “religiosity is positively related to one’s emotional state of mind, because religious beliefs can help people reduce stress and lead to a happier life” (Rakrachakarn et al, 2013). The facts they present shows strong and statistically significant relationships between the dependent variable life satisfaction and the independent variable religiosity (Rakrachakarn et al, 2013). Other scholars have also emphasized the important role religion can play in contributing to life satisfaction through the significance role it can play in physical and

mental health (Koivumaa-Honkanen, Honkanen, Viinamäki, Heikkilä, Kaprio & Koskenvuo, 2000).

In the study of life satisfaction, the concept of subjective well-being, SWB, is often brought up, and represents how people themselves feel about their lives compared to the standards they themselves have (Diener & Diener, 1995; Sinnewe et al, 2014). According to a study regarding religion and life satisfaction, using Germany as an example, religion usually has a positive impact on peoples SWB due to: a) the like-minded individual religious organizations provide; and b) the personal and inner dimension religion offers (Sinnewe et al, 2014). The study again makes an effort to point out how the relationship between religion and life-satisfaction is difficult to understand from quantitative data, but suggests models to explain this. The number one factor that influences the positive relationship between religion and SWB, according to this study, is the *attendance* of religious services and participation in religious activities, controlling for the impact of close friendships and frequency of social gatherings (Sinnewe et al, 2014). This reading is basis for my second hypothesis, which aims and exploring the relationship between life satisfaction and religion.

Although much research has been done on freedom of religion, little has been done on the perception of freedom and religion. What this paper aims at is exploring this field further, and see if there are any correlation between how people perceive their own freedom and whether they categorize themselves as religious or not. As stated by Hadaway (1978): "(...) religion is rarely connected with the ability to plan ahead and to control the direction of one's life." This research lays the groundwork for my first hypothesis, about

religion and perception of freedom, and will be explored further with data from the World Value Survey.

### **III. Hypotheses**

In this paper, three hypotheses will be explored:

1. People who categorize themselves as religious have a lower perception of individual freedom than those who do not categorize themselves as religious.
2. People who categorize themselves as religious have a higher feeling of life satisfaction than those who do not categorize themselves as religious.
3. People in Finland have a higher feeling of life satisfaction and perception of freedom than both China and the United States.

### **IV. Data and Methods**

All data used in the paper comes from the World Value Survey, which covers over 60 countries and looks at values over a vast number of topics, such as good and evil, attitudes regarding technology, and religious affiliation. The purpose of the survey is to provide factual data from many different countries and regions of the world for researchers to better understand how values differ between countries. The World Value Survey is the only academic study that covers so many countries in the world, and which most accurately reflects the values of most people in different regions of the world. All the relevant information has been gathered through face-to-face interviews, and has been randomly

sampled to most accurately represent the different countries participating in the survey.

The data has been analyzed and organized using the statistics software SPSS.

## V. Empirical Findings

The three tables above show the data relevant to this paper for Finland. The first table shows that 61.6% of the Finnish population consider themselves to be religious, while 28.3% consider themselves to be non-religious. The category “a convinced atheist” will continue to appear in tables throughout this paper, but will not be taken into consideration. The next table shows that 89.9% of Finland’s population are satisfied with their lives, using all responses from the number 6 and up as “satisfied” for the remainder of the study. The measurement of rank order 6 and up is also used to identify a feeling of personal freedom, which, through the third table, is 85.5% for Finland.

**RELIGIOUS PERSON for Finland**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	A religious person	640	61.6	66.6	66.6
	Not a religious person	293	28.3	30.5	97.1
	A convinced atheist	28	2.7	2.9	100.0
	Total	961	92.6	100.0	
Missing	No answer	11	1.1		
	Don't know	66	6.4		
	Total	77	7.4		
Total		1038	100.0		



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### HOW SATISFIED ARE YOU WITH YOUR LIFE for Finland

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Dissatisfied	4	.3	.3	.3
	2	13	1.3	1.3	1.6
	3	12	1.1	1.1	2.8
	4	26	2.5	2.5	5.3
	5	52	5.0	5.0	10.2
	6	56	5.4	5.4	15.7
	7	121	11.6	11.7	27.3
	8	345	33.2	33.4	60.7
	9	292	28.1	28.3	89.0
	Satisfied	114	11.0	11.0	100.0
Total		1033	99.5	100.0	
Missing	No answer	4	.4		
	Don't know	1	.1		
	Total	5	.5		
Total		1038	100.0		

### HOW MUCH FREEDOM YOU FEEL for Finland

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Not at all	7	.7	.7	.7
	2	10	1.0	1.0	1.7
	3	25	2.4	2.4	4.1
	4	33	3.1	3.2	7.3
	5	73	7.1	7.1	14.5
	6	81	7.8	7.9	22.3
	7	186	18.0	18.2	40.5
	8	342	33.0	33.4	74.0
	9	169	16.3	16.5	90.4
	A great deal	98	9.4	9.6	100.0
Total		1025	98.7	100.0	
Missing	No answer	2	.2		
	Don't know	12	1.1		

Total	13	1.3		
Total	1038	100.0		

Examining the same data for China yields very different results than those found for Finland. Using the same measurements, the three tables below show how the religious population of China accounts for 13.7% of the total, that life satisfaction is at 67.6%, and that 74.5% of the population see themselves as free. The Chinese population is much less religious than the Finish population, but the people are in general less satisfied with their lives and see themselves as less free.

**RELIGIOUS PERSON for China**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	A religious person	137	13.7	14.7	14.7
	Not a religious person	553	55.3	59.5	74.2
	A convinced atheist	240	24.0	25.8	100.0
	Total	930	93.0	100.0	
Missing	No answer	2	.2		
	Don't know	68	6.8		
	Total	70	7.0		
Total		1000	100.0		

**HOW SATISFIED ARE YOU WITH YOUR LIFE for China**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Dissatisfied	34	3.4	3.4	3.4
	2	49	4.9	4.9	8.4
	3	59	5.9	6.0	14.3
	4	45	4.5	4.5	18.9
	5	134	13.4	13.5	32.4
	6	141	14.1	14.2	46.6
	7	131	13.1	13.2	59.8
	8	174	17.4	17.6	77.4

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	9	83	8.3	8.4	85.8
	Satisfied	141	14.1	14.2	100.0
	Total	991	99.1	100.0	
Missing	Don't know	9	.9		
	Total	1000	100.0		

**HOW MUCH FREEDOM YOU FEEL for China**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Not at all	25	2.5	2.7	2.7
	2	26	2.6	2.8	5.5
	3	64	6.4	6.8	12.3
	4	35	3.5	3.7	16.0
	5	88	8.8	9.4	25.5
	6	97	9.7	10.4	35.8
	7	119	11.9	12.7	48.6
	8	153	15.3	16.4	64.9
	9	84	8.4	9.0	73.9
	A great deal	244	24.4	26.1	100.0
	Total	935	93.5	100.0	
Missing	No answer	1	.1		
	Don't know	64	6.4		
	Total	65	6.5		
	Total	1000	100.0		

From the United States, the results shows that the country is much more similar to its western counterpart than it is to China. For the United States, the percentage of religious people is 81.2%, which is higher than both Finland and China; the percentage of people who are satisfied with their lives is 87.0%, which is slightly lower than Finland; and the percentage of people who consider themselves to be free is 89%, which is marginally higher than Finland.

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### RELIGIOUS PERSON for the United States

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	A religious person	974	81.2	82.5	82.5
	Not a religious person	189	15.8	16.0	98.6
	A convinced atheist	17	1.4	1.4	100.0
	Total	1180	98.3	100.0	
Missing	Don't know	20	1.7		
	Total	1200	100.0		

### HOW SATISFIED ARE YOU WITH YOUR LIFE for the United States

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Dissatisfied	11	.9	.9	.9
	2	6	.5	.5	1.4
	3	23	1.9	1.9	3.3
	4	31	2.6	2.6	5.9
	5	86	7.1	7.1	13.0
	6	100	8.3	8.3	21.3
	7	220	18.3	18.3	39.7
	8	302	25.2	25.2	64.9
	9	231	19.3	19.3	84.1
	Satisfied	191	15.9	15.9	100.0
Total		1200	100.0	100.0	

### HOW MUCH FREEDOM YOU FEEL for the United States

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Not at all	5	.4	.4	.4
	2	11	1.0	1.0	1.4
	3	18	1.5	1.5	2.9
	4	18	1.5	1.5	4.4
	5	80	6.7	6.7	11.0
	6	85	7.1	7.1	18.2
	7	161	13.5	13.5	31.6
	8	297	24.7	24.7	56.4
	9	229	19.1	19.1	75.5

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	A great deal	294	24.5	24.5	100.0
	Total	1199	99.9	100.0	
Missing	Don't know	1	.1		
	Total	1200	100.0		

*Hypothesis 1: People who categorize themselves as religious have a lower perception of individual freedom than those who do not categorize themselves as religious.*

Starting with Finland, the table below shows the perception of freedom for religious persons, not religious persons, and convinced atheists in absolute term. From basic percentage calculations, the number of people who score themselves as a 6 or above in terms of perception of freedom are 85.96%, 86.64%, and 78.57% respectively. All of the data is statistically significant, and the chi-squared tests supports this.

**HOW MUCH FREEDOM YOU FEEL \* RELIGIOUS PERSON for Finland**

Count		RELIGIOUS PERSON			Total
		A religious person	Not a religious person	A convinced atheist	
HOW MUCH FREEDOM YOU FEEL	Not at all	6	1	0	7
	2	9	1	1	11
	3	14	8	0	22
	4	17	9	3	29
	5	43	20	2	65
	6	45	29	3	77
	7	119	50	4	173
	8	222	90	10	322
	9	103	53	2	158
	A greet deal	56	31	3	90
Total		634	292	28	954

**Chi-Square Tests**

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	17.846 <sup>a</sup>	18	.466
Likelihood Ratio	17.095	18	.517
Linear-by-Linear Association	.007	1	.933
N of Valid Cases	954		

a. 11 cells (36.7%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .21.

We can explore the data for China in a similar matter, and find a similar type of relationship as in Finland. We can see how, in China, 72.86% of religious people feel that they are free as individuals, as compared to the 77.32% of the non-religious people who feel the same way. Although the difference is not very large, only at 4.46% difference, both numbers are statistically significant and show that there is indeed a relationship present.

**HOW MUCH FREEDOM YOU FEEL \* RELIGIOUS PERSON for China**

Count		RELIGIOUS PERSON			Total
		A religious person	Not a religious person	A convinced atheist	
HOW MUCH FREEDOM YOU FEEL	Not at all	4	11	10	25
	2	2	16	7	25
	3	10	27	22	59
	4	6	17	6	29
	5	13	46	20	79
	6	18	50	25	93
	7	16	68	30	114
	8	23	97	30	150
	9	14	47	17	78
	A great deal	23	137	70	230
Total		129	516	237	882

**Chi-Square Tests**

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	20.438 <sup>a</sup>	18	.309
Likelihood Ratio	20.760	18	.292
Linear-by-Linear Association	.016	1	.900

N of Valid Cases	882		
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a. 3 cells (10.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 3.66.

For the United States, we see for the first time how the relationship is reversed as compared to Finland and China. While 89.20 % of religious people in the United States are satisfied with their lives, only 86.17% of non-religious people are, which differs from the case of Finland and China. This data is also statistically significant, and the relationship is of particular interest as it differs from the relationships in the other two cases.

**HOW MUCH FREEDOM YOU FEEL \* RELIGIOUS PERSON for the United States**

Count

		RELIGIOUS PERSON			Total
		A religious person	Not a religious person	A convinced atheist	
HOW MUCH FREEDOM YOU FEEL	Not at all	3	2	0	5
	2	9	2	0	11
	3	13	4	1	18
	4	12	6	0	18
	5	68	12	0	80
	6	69	13	1	83
	7	127	24	2	153
	8	241	50	1	292
	9	195	30	1	226
	A great deal	236	45	10	291
Total		973	188	16	1177

**Chi-Square Tests**

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	25.418 <sup>a</sup>	18	.114
Likelihood Ratio	23.361	18	.177
Linear-by-Linear Association	.124	1	.725
N of Valid Cases	1177		



a. 15 cells (50.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .07.

Overall, the data gathered cannot clearly prove or falsify hypothesis 1, as the relationships differs only in small amounts and in reversed directions. The data from these three countries cannot overall prove that people who categorize themselves as religious have a lower perception of individual freedom than those who do not categorize themselves as religious, although it fails to prove this hypothesis wrong as well. This hypothesis has thus not been proved or falsified by the data put forward in this paper.

*Hypothesis 2: People who categorize themselves as religious have a higher feeling of life satisfaction than those who do not categorize themselves as religious.*

To examine this hypothesis, the two variables “How satisfied are you with your life” and “religious person” are compared in an attempt to draw a conclusion between their relationship. Again starting with Finland, the table below shows statistically significant data where 91.9% of religious people are satisfied with their lives as compared to 89.7% of non-religious people. Although there is a relationship between the two variables, it is small, only accounting to 2.2% difference.

**HOW SATISFIED ARE YOU WITH YOUR LIFE \* RELIGIOUS PERSON for Finland**

Count

		RELIGIOUS PERSON			Total
		A religious person	Not a religious person	A convinced atheist	
HOW SATISFIED ARE YOU WITH YOUR LIFE	Dissatisfied	2	0	0	2
	2	10	2	0	12
	3	5	4	2	11
	4	13	10	1	24
	5	21	14	5	40
	6	31	15	2	48
	7	72	39	3	114
	8	194	112	8	314
	9	207	69	5	281
	Satisfied	81	27	2	110
Total	636	292	28	956	

**Chi-Square Tests**

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	42.070 <sup>a</sup>	18	.001
Likelihood Ratio	33.166	18	.016

Linear-by-Linear Association	10.841	1	.001
N of Valid Cases	956		

a. 12 cells (40.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .06.

As for China, the opposite relationship is true. Only 62.77% of religious people in Chinese are satisfied with their lives, while 68.37% of non-religious people are satisfied with their lives. This can have a natural root in the long oppression and ban of religion in China under the communist rule, and although it makes sense historically, this does not support the hypothesis.

**HOW SATISFIED ARE YOU WITH YOUR LIFE \* RELIGIOUS PERSON for China**

Count

		RELIGIOUS PERSON			Total
		A religious person	Not a religious person	A convinced atheist	
HOW SATISFIED ARE YOU WITH YOUR LIFE	Dissatisfied	8	13	9	30
	2	9	29	8	46
	3	6	36	13	55
	4	8	26	11	45
	5	20	69	34	123
	6	17	66	46	129
	7	26	71	26	123
	8	18	103	42	163
	9	12	47	22	81
	Satisfied	13	87	28	128
Total		137	547	239	923

**Chi-Square Tests**

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	25.502 <sup>a</sup>	18	.112

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Likelihood Ratio	24.832	18	.130
Linear-by-Linear Association	.786	1	.375
N of Valid Cases	923		

a. 1 cells (3.3%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 4.45.

The last data for this hypothesis is from the United States, and the results are again very similar to that of Finland. For the United States, the number of religious people who are satisfied with their lives is at 89.20%, while the same is true for 86.17% of the non-religious population.

**HOW MUCH FREEDOM YOU FEEL \* RELIGIOUS PERSON for the United States**

Count

		RELIGIOUS PERSON			Total
		A religious person	Not a religious person	A convinced atheist	
HOW MUCH FREEDOM YOU FEEL	Not at all	3	2	0	5
	2	9	2	0	11
	3	13	4	1	18
	4	12	6	0	18
	5	68	12	0	80
	6	69	13	1	83
	7	127	24	2	153
	8	241	50	1	292
	9	195	30	1	226
	A great deal	236	45	10	291
Total		973	188	16	1177

**Chi-Square Tests**

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Pearson Chi-Square	25.418 <sup>a</sup>	18	.114
Likelihood Ratio	23.361	18	.177
Linear-by-Linear Association	.124	1	.725
N of Valid Cases	1177		

a. 15 cells (50.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .07.

Again, it is difficult to draw a strong conclusion from this data, seeing as the relationships are very close within all the countries, and as the results differ between the countries. Although the numbers all make sense from a cultural and historical perspective, it is not enough to draw a strong argument either for or against the hypothesis.

*Hypothesis 3: People in Finland have a higher feeling of life satisfaction and perception of freedom than both China and the United States.*

Looking at the third hypothesis from the information provided earlier in this paper, the results are once again disappointing. Looking at data presented in numerous tables above, Finland has the highest percentage of people who are satisfied with their lives (89.8% for Finland, 87.0% for the United States, and 67.6% for China), however, a larger percentage of the United States' population believe they have individual freedom (89.0% percent as opposed to 85.5% for Finland). Once again, the hypothesis is supported and not from the data at the same time, and no strong stand can be taken on the hypothesis.

## VI. Conclusion

Interestingly enough, the data analyzed does not appear to strongly support nor discourage any of the three hypotheses put forward in the paper. This does not mean that the hypotheses are invalid or that the data is not consistent; rather, it suggests that too few factors have been taken into consideration, that too few countries have been selected for the study, or that the countries vary too greatly or are not appropriate to compare on this level. I find the results to be surprising, as I expected stronger relationships either supporting or disapproving my hypotheses, while these all contradict each other. It is not possible to draw any strong policy implications or recommendations based on these findings, however, it is clear that the difference between life satisfaction and perception of freedom based on religious affiliation is far less significant than originally anticipated. This does not have any inherent positive or negative effects, but is merely a matter of fact, and should be treated as such.

Overall, the research falls short of proving any type of relationship it set out to study, and needs further information to conclude with any level of certainty.

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