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The Holy Trinity: Religion, Well-being, and Purpose in Life

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts (Psychology).

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Abstract

Almost exclusively, literature that concerns itself with the psychology of religion and health holds the orthodox position of the existence of a positive (albeit small) relationship between religion and psychological well-being. Put simply, the literature supports the hypothesis that individuals who are religious have a greater level of well-being than those who are not. Methodologically, there are a number of issues with this research. The most important of which are the failure to include a sample of non-religious individuals in the studies and the attribution, to religion, of effects on well-being that occur via indirect secular pathways. This study explores the hypothesis that because religious beliefs are only special, unique and peculiar in relation to their central tenet, the belief in supernatural agency, and that because any behaviours associated with them are also available to non-religious individuals in some secular form or other, there is no rationale for any empirical relationship, no matter how small, between an individual's religiosity and their well-being. Rather, as suggested elsewhere in the literature, well-being is better explained by other factors that individuals, including those who are religious, may be able to access. The factors of particular interest to this study are the presence of meaning in a person's life, and a theorised facet of meaning – purpose. Accordingly, the design of this research is that of 'value

added' as opposed to the 'web of causality' approach generally exemplified within the literature. It utilises a large general health survey, the New Zealand Longitudinal Study of Ageing, which emphasises older adults, includes a significant number of non-religious individuals and enables the exploration of the relationship between religiosity and well-being as well as the manner in which religious belief and practice are changing in an increasingly ageing and secular society.

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