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## **RELIGIOUS PEOPLE ARE HAPPIER (BUT MORE REACTIONARY) THAN ATHEISTS**

Religious people across Britain and Europe are likely to be happier than atheists or agnostics. That is one of the findings of new research by Professor **Andrew Clark** and Dr **Orsolya Lelkes** to be presented at this year's Royal Economic Society conference.

What's more, many religious people are better able to weather such disappointments as becoming unemployed or getting divorced. They also appear to become even happier the more often they attend church and the more often they pray.

But the study also finds that religious people can be more socially conservative and against government intervention in the labour market. On average, religious people are anti-divorce and against job creation programmes for the unemployed. Countries with more religious electorates tend to have lower unemployment benefits (relative to wages) than countries that are less religious.

The report uses data from across Europe, including the UK, to investigate the effect of being religious on life satisfaction and attitudes towards different government policies. It finds that:

- Religious people enjoy higher levels of life satisfaction than non-religious people.
- Religious people suffer less psychological harm from unemployment than the non-religious.
- Both Catholics and Protestants are less hurt by marital separation. But while Protestants suffer less from being divorced, Catholics respond worse to it.
- Religious people are both anti-divorce and anti-job creation programmes for the unemployed.
- Unemployed people who are religious are less likely to look for work actively.
- The ratio of unemployment benefits to wages across Europe is lower in more religious countries.

Focusing specifically on the UK (using data from the British Household Panel Survey, a nationally representative panel of 5,500 UK families interviewed annually since 1991), the report finds that:

- Less than a sixth (16%) of churchgoers agree with the statement that 'It is better to divorce than to continue an unhappy marriage' compared with more than a quarter (29%) of non-churchgoers
- Only two in five (40%) male churchgoers agree with the statement that 'It is the government's responsibility to provide a job for everyone who wants one'

compared with almost half of male non-churchgoers (47%). (The difference for women is smaller but still significant)

The study asks whether religion acts as a form of 'insurance', buffering the impact on people's wellbeing of stressful life events, such as unemployment or divorce. The study also examines how religion changes people's views about economic and social issues – and whether this is reflected in policy.

Of course, after a stressful event it is possible that people will become religious. But the evidence from the British Household Panel Survey indicates that this is limited: that religion is determined by other factors, and that it does act to help people through many stressful times.

In addition, the report finds that religious people are even happier the more often they attend church and the more often they pray.

The authors comment:

'Over and above denomination, churchgoing and prayer are also associated with greater satisfaction. Religion tempers the impact of adverse life events: it has current as opposed to after-life rewards.'

They add:

'Religious norms have a sharp impact on people's quality of life. These psychological effects may help explain why different institutions have arisen in different countries.'

'Changes in a society's religiosity may lead to changing support for different types of social redistribution, and eventually lie behind the evolution of economic and social institutions.'

ENDS

**Notes for editors:** 'Deliver Us From Evil: Religion as Insurance' by Andrew Clark and Orsolya Lelkes will be presented at the Royal Economic Society's annual conference, 17-19 March 2008.

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