

TRANSCRIPT

CNN STORY READING:

Despite the devastating events of the last 12 months and the resulting decline in mental health in a number of destinations, there's been no change at the top spot when it comes to ranking the happiest country in the world.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

The annual World Happiness Report issued by the UN's Sustainable Development Solutions Network makes headlines every year with its rankings of the happiest countries in the world. And that was producer Kaley reading the beginning of a CNN story about the 2021 report.

The findings are based on data about six areas of life, levels of GDP, the gross domestic product, basically how wealthy a country is, life expectancy, generosity, social support, freedom, and corruption. And the winner is...

CNN STORY READING:

For the fourth year running, Finland has come out on top in the annual list powered by data from the Gallup World Poll with Iceland, Denmark, Switzerland, and the Netherlands following in second, third, fourth, and fifth positions respectively.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

I've got to admit, I find that hard to believe. I've been to Finland, and happy isn't quite the word that comes to mind. Certainly calm, polite, generous, open-hearted, but happy? In 2019, VICE Magazine sent a journo to Finland to find out if the Fins really were happier than the rest of us. It is, after all, really, really cold there. In winter, Fins in the south only get about six hours of sun a day, and in the north, they get nothing. How can they be happy?

VICE NEWS FILM CLIP:

We visited the reigning champions of joy to see what makes them so happy. Are you happy?

Street interviewee:

Well-

Interviewer:

Did you see this story?

Street interviewee:

Yes, I've seen it many times, and I also am wondering why actually.

Interviewer:

I'm literally about to kill myself standing in this square for 20 minutes.

Street interviewee:

It's a hard country, especially in autumn and winter. It takes a lot of something, inner spirit, to be able to live here.

Interviewer:

This is not working out, literally.

Voiceover:

The masses might seem sullen, but Finnish happiness researcher Frank Martela thinks the country's top ranking makes a certain amount of sense.

Frank Martela, Finnish Happiness Researcher:

Their mission, life satisfaction and win over ratios like the factors like how wealthy the country is and how broad the social network system is, and how much people trust in the institutions, what is the situation with the democratic. These factors are things that tend to predict high life satisfaction.

Voiceover:

Countries that scored high on income, life expectancy, and social support always contribute to one's sense of well-being have topped the list for several years running. In other words, if you live in a Nordic welfare state, the UN suspects you're probably happy.

Frank Martela:

One way of defining measuring happiness about life satisfaction, how satisfied are you with your life on the whole? That kind of measures, Finland seems to be on the top. But then when you measure happiness with positive emotions like joyfulness and how much do you smile every day and so forth.

Interviewer:

Where is Finland on that scale?

Frank Martela:

Not close to the top at all.

Voiceover:

So, after spending some time in Finland, I've determined that the UN is partially right. This country is not particularly happy. The weather's pretty grim. But while they're probably not the

happiest people on the planet, I think they're the most content people on the planet. That's what Finland is. It's not happy. This is not a word. It's a bad translation. Right?

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

Right. That makes more sense. We are living in an age where the pursuit of happiness is an obsession. Globalization has meant that more people are experiencing more political freedom and a reasonable chance of financial resources. We are, as a global community, more wealthy, and therefore, many of us have moved beyond the daily struggle to meet our most basic needs.

Reflecting on the impact of the industrial revolution, 20th century British philosopher and historian Bertrand Russell said, "For the first time in history, it is now possible to create a world where everybody shall have a reasonable chance of happiness."

You're now more able than ever to consider whether we are living a happy life. It's part of the self-consciousness of our culture. The self-help aisle of your local bookstore is testament to that. But one of our guests today, the great Miroslav Volf, reminds us that there is a difference between life going well, which triggers those feelings of happiness, and living life well.

Quoting the ancient philosopher Seneca, Volf put it rather well, I think. "Pleasure," he said, "can be thin. It can be laid on as a coating, a surface feeling that makes you forget what's going on underneath."

So, what is true happiness if that's even the right word? And how do we get it?

I'm John Dickson, and this is Undeceptions.

Undeceptions is brought to you by Zondervan's new book *Why I Trust the Bible* by William Mounce. Bill is great. Every episode of Undeceptions, we explore some aspect of life, faith, history, culture, or ethics that's either much misunderstood or mostly forgotten. With the help of people who know what they're talking about, we're trying to undeceive ourselves and let the truth out.

And we're celebrating our 500,000th download this month. Half a million. And so with the help of our major sponsor Zondervan, we're giving away a book pack of five of Zondervan's newest titles. And we'll throw in a copy of my new *Bullies and Saints*, and an Undeceptions t-shirt. How do you win? Well, all you have to do is leave us a review on Apple Podcasts or what used to be called iTunes. Take a picture of the review and send it to us. All the details are in the show notes. Producer Kaley will pick the best written review on October 25, and I mean best written, not necessarily most glowing. So, be quick. You've got two weeks. All right, on with the show.

SEASON 5: GOOD LIFE (EP 50)



INTERVIEW BEGINS

John Dickson:

Hello, Miroslav, how are you?

Miroslav Volf:

Well hello, I'm doing really well. So good to see you. My goodness, you don't change.

John Dickson:

Ah, one line a year. Hey here's a lovely piece of serendipity. It was seven years ago today-

Miroslav Volf:

Wow.

John Dickson:

... that you and I were out on this boat at Sydney Harbor.

Miroslav Volf:

Oh my goodness, what memories. I love that.

John Dickson:

And you see that photo?

Miroslav Volf:

I remember that. I remember it so well.

John Dickson:

Oh, that was great.

JOHN DICKSON INTRODUCES MIROSLAV VOLF

John Dickson:

I'm chatting to the renowned Miroslav Volf. He's the Henry B. Wright Professor of Theology at Yale Divinity School, one of the 12 graduate and professional schools of the prestigious Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut. Miroslav is also the Founder and Director of the Yale Center for Faith and Culture.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES

John Dickson:

You are considered one of the great theologians of our day, and your teacher, in deed, Jurgen Moltmann, was one of the great theologians of the 20th century. But to some of my listeners, Miroslav, that's not a compliment because theology, it's not even a discipline. If we don't even know if God exists, how could the study of God be a valid, academic discipline. Do you have a defense of theology for us?

Miroslav Volf:

Well, it's not just some of your listeners. If I talk to some of my colleagues here at Yale, I think they would roughly have the same opinion as your listeners. Yale Divinity School is up on a hill, and it's sometimes called God Hill, and folks don't quite know what we up on the God Hill do, and why we are there.

Indeed, I remember talking to the then President of Harvard. He was interviewing me for some position, and then he told me, "Do you know, Miroslav, that if Harvard were to be founded today, it would not have a divinity?" Which seems to me patently obvious because some of the great universities of today may have religious studies departments, they will study religion in various domains of what research is done at universities, but they wouldn't have a divinity school.

So why the question of God? Well, for someone like me as well as for many people today, the existence of God seemed to be a plausible alternative in the contest of worldviews. And it seemed that also has had historically, when I think about Jewish monotheism, profound cultural impact so that we can't even think about our modern world today without reference to the belief in God.

So, I'm interested in God both because I believe God exists, and if God exists, God then concerns me in an ultimate way, but I'm also interested in the cultural history of what we did with the belief in God. And that's why I'm a theologian. In some ways, it's centered on reflection on God, but with the view of what it means for our flourishing.

John Dickson:

Flourishing. It's a word some people hate. Too airy fairy, self-absorbed, and humanistic even. But Miroslav actually likes the word. It comes from the Latin for flower, and of course, in our context since at least the 16th century, it means to live life to the fullest expression of our humanity.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

In his book titled *Flourishing*, Miroslav describes it as "the life that is lived well, the life that goes well, and the life that feels good, all three together inextricably intertwined." It's the good life, and the life worth living.

Professor Volf uses a passage in the Bible's book of Psalms to describe this more vividly. It's like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in its season, and its leaves do not wither. Like the tree that flowers, humans flourish when we're living into our human and personal fullness. It's the opposite of languishing, a word and feeling many of us have become familiar with in our second year of COVID.

Miroslav started a course at Yale called Life Worth Living, attempting to fill a gap that has opened up in our academic institutions. We no longer discuss what it means to live the good life.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES

Miroslav Volf:

And one of the reasons for that, main reason for that course is that this question used to be the most important question that universities were seeking to answer. This was why the great universities of the past have been founded. But gradually, especially in the 20th century, already in the 19th in many ways, the gradual secularization occurred, but not just secularization, but marginalization of the question of the good life from the concern of the university.

And the reason is relatively simple. And that is that we couldn't agree on what the good life is or even that that's a reasonable question to pursue. Therefore, we privatized the question of the good life and ended up simply trying to live a good life as each of us best sees fit.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

Perhaps part of the reason any discussion of the good life is out of favor in the academy is that religion is out of favor. And it is religions, or at least metaphysics, that have offered some of the most powerful conceptions of the good life throughout history.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES

John Dickson:

Religions in general, and Christianity in particular, are viewed by many as hindrances to the good life to human flourishing. Are you fighting an uphill battle in this task of communicating these ideas?

Miroslav Volf:

I think the way I present the course to them is I say these traditions have spent centuries of intense reflection about that very question. If for no other reason, it is important for you to attend to the wisdom of the centuries about what kind of life is truly a life that we ought to pursue.

And so, you can pursue it as just this informative issue, but what we say to our students is each of these traditions makes claim to be true. We recognize that all of them cannot be true, but each of them claims to be true. Now what we want you to do is for the moment that you're in class with us and read, treat them as if they were true, as if their claims makes some sense, and wrestle with it. Give them the benefit of the doubt, and ask yourself how life would look if you were to inhabit it and you were to start living it, so that, in a sense, you imaginatively try out how the life feels.

And I think that's the way to approach questions of the good life. Reasons are not sufficient. Practices are important. That's why saints are important in many traditions and exemplars. In many philosophical traditions, think of Socrates and his importance in philosophical tradition.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

Reasons aren't sufficient. Practices are also important. A conversation about the good life can't end in just the philosophy. As important and lovely as the philosophy is, it really is a practical question. How are we to live? It's an active question.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES

John Dickson:

So let's talk specifically about Christianity. What is flourishing within the Christian vision of the good life?

Miroslav Volf:

I think it's probably best summarized in the statement the Apostle Paul makes about what is or what isn't the kingdom of God. He said kingdom of God is not food and drink. I think he meant to say it's not merely food or drink. It's not primarily food and drink. That is to say a satisfaction of immediate needs cannot be made to be your guide and guiding principle of the entire life.

What kingdom of God is is righteousness, it's peace, and it's joy. And righteousness is right acting. It addresses our agency. Peace is right set of circumstances in which we are to live and in which we can flourish. And joy is a kind of pinnacle of the emotional attunement with the world, and I think that good life, on any account, will have these three components: right living, right set of circumstances in which we as finite and fragile beings can thrive, and a kind of emotionally positive tonality to it. And then the discussion becomes what's the relationship between those, and what's the content of each of these aspects?

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

Those are the three formal components that make up the good life. Your circumstances make you feel that life is going well. You have agency to make decisions that you think are the right ones. And life feels right. That's the emotional element.

And Miroslav argues that all three of these components work together. They intertwine and inform one another to make the good life. And as Miroslav points out, the Christian tradition uses words like peace, righteousness, and joy to give expression to these three components.

Now it might sound strange to some that Christianity concerns itself with living a good life here on Earth. There is, after all, a lot of talk in the Bible about denying yourself and taking up your cross, sacrificing, following the way of Jesus. This might seem to work against flourishing.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES

John Dickson:

But wasn't Jesus, and Paul for that matter, rather ascetic in their approach, life denying, which seems the opposite of flourishing?

Miroslav Volf:

Now I might counter the question is what do you have against asceticism?

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

Asceticism comes from the Greek *askeō*, meaning "to train". It's the practice of discipline basically in pursuit of a higher life, so denying sensual pleasures like food, sex, and entertainment in order to achieve some greater good. The word came to be associated in the West anyway with nuns and monks who renounced everything for Jesus.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES

Miroslav Volf:

... But a famous critique by Nietzsche was of the entirety of the religious tradition, monotheist traditions, all the traditions which operate with this two-worlds account of reality, transcendent and imminent, are basically life denying.

And I think the response to that would be just look at the foundational event in the history of monotheism, Jewish monotheism. It's the liberation of the children of Israel from the slavery in Egypt. It's very hard to think of the more life-giving event than that. And I think that event has shaped the trajectory of the entirety of the Western tradition. It shaped also Christianity, and-

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

The exodus from Egypt is perhaps the biggest event in Old Testament history. And if you're interested in that, we did a whole episode on it last season. The Israelites were a slave nation within the tyrannical Egypt sometime between the 15th and 13th century BC. And they experience the opposite of flourishing. God intervenes, says the Old Testament book of Exodus, and brought down judgment on the Egyptians. He freed Israel, and led them to their own promised land, a land flowing with milk and honey, as the Bible puts it. And so the people of God entered into what the Hebrew Bible calls Shalom, a word often translated simply as peace. And today, in modern Hebrew, it's basically just how you say g'day.

But the word really means peace, welfare, health, and prosperity rolled into one. We might even say flourishing. So, back to Miroslav.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES:

Miroslav Volf:

And in fact, Christian faith is in no way life denying, but it's life enhancing, and it leads into what one might describe the fullness of life. The Gospel of John uses the word life abundant.

John Dickson:

I'd love my listeners to hear you unpack the idea of experiencing life and the world as a gift. What do you mean by that, and what difference would it make?

Miroslav Volf:

Yeah, to me that's a really fundamental question. I think one of the great problems of our time is what... I think leaning on Karl Marx, George Lukacs, a Hungarian Marxist philosopher, has called reification where relationships that we have, indeed, you can extend it to make an argument as some sociologists have, all relationships in which we find ourselves have increasingly become reified. We treat everything that's around us as a mere thing to be made serviceable to our needs.

And I think one of the great ways to counter this is to think of everything that we encounter as a gift, and if you think of it as God's creation. And once you start thinking of creation as a gift or particular things in creation as gifts, you suddenly realize how much alive they are and how much resonance there is between you and things.

I give an example of simple gifts that people who you love give to you. My example is obviously my father's ink pen. And it's not a particularly great pen. One of those Pelican, relatively inexpensive, Pelican gold nib ink pens. And there are much better ink pens to be had, and I can buy them for myself. And yet, I love that pen. When I see that pen, when I take that pen, this is my Dad. Right? There's a kind of he hovers over that pen.

And I think this is how creation can be for those of us who believe in God. When you add to that that people are gifts to us as well, then suddenly you realize what people give you and how they give themselves to you are gifts that are laden with deeper meaning. And I think in a

deeper joy that is not reducible, and that's really important for me, that's not reducible to the kind of thingness of them.

So that, for instance, like this pen, it has a quality beyond artistic or material value that it has. And it's that quality that makes it possible for us to live in the world as home, to be grateful for that world, to have this resonant relationship with it, and delight in it in a very deep way.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

Andrew Wilson, back in episode 47, *Everyday Sacred*, had some really cool things to say about the theological leaning of things like pens and pencils. You might like to check that out.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES

John Dickson:

An atheist might respond, Miroslav, by saying, "But I experience joy and wonder just in the thing. In a way, you are denying the thing by saying it has to have this transcendent, miraculous valuation of the thing. I just love the thing, and all there are are things."

Miroslav Volf:

Well, it may be that from certain perspective all there are are things. Certainly, I can think that there are enjoyments to be had in quiet things. My argument would be two-fold. One, well let's argue about the existence of God and presupposition for the whole thing, but let's on the other hand, bracket that for the moment and then simply ask a phenomenological experience of the world.

And once you ask that question, I think that it becomes clear that if you have this dimension of the presence of a beloved other in things that you encounter, the things acquire deeper value for you because you are bound to things through people, and you're bound to people through things, which are a bridge between the two of you. To me, that is a wonderful thing.

The other example that I give, if I eat my mother's chocolate cake made by a recipe that I make it, and I eat it on the table where she sat, and follow the recipe and eat it with my friends and family who have known her, I enjoy that cake even though it is inferior in quality to anything that a great chef might produce and make. There's no contest in that. So the whole idea is that the thing can have an added value. So we can enjoy things obviously, but we can enjoy them more.

John Dickson:

Transcendence doesn't make the thing less, you would argue, it makes it more. Can we flourish alone? Some people are just pursuing self-help, fitness, good food, maybe a small circle of friends, but basically I can have individual flourishing.

Miroslav Volf:

Yes, people try that, and to a certain extent, I suspect people can and people do flourish. Now, for me, the important when this question is raised, important is the question of agency and also responsibility. And I want to say that there's something deficient about my simply slipping into the mode of flourishing while closing my eyes that so many around me are actually deeply languishing.

Now that's a value judgment. That's a value judgment which says, "I ought to be concerned for other people." Now if you share that value judgment, then it would seem that you have to conclude I will not fully flourish until all people are flourishing, which means that for the most part, we all live in a partly false life. And the question is what does it mean to live rightly in the false life? And some people might say, "Well that's just the care. Take care of myself." My own physique, my own health through exercise, the food that is healthy. That's what it means to live true life within the false life.

Or you can say living true life in the false life means both attending to one's own needs but also extending oneself in certain ways in ascetic ways toward those whose needs need to be met. So, a big paradigm for a truly flourishing life is a man by the name of Francis who has prefix St. attached to him, who was married to Lady Poverty, but he exuded this incredible joy, which was all in helping other people come to experience flourishing also under conditions of deprivation.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

Francis of Assisi lived in the 13th century. He belonged to a wealthy Italian family and lived a rather rebellious youth of partying and drinking. He then became a soldier and confronted death on the battlefield. It really affected him. He experienced some kind of post-traumatic stress. It caused him to wonder what life was really all about. And according to his own account, it was facing poor lepers that caused him to reconsider his whole value system.

Once upon a time, he used to mock the local lepers. He'd be with friends, and he'd pinch his nose whenever they passed by, and he'd laugh out loud at them. One day, though, after a period of reflection, he says instead of feeling disgust at this group of lepers that approached him, he was overwhelmed with a feeling of love for them. He couldn't understand why, and he eventually interpreted it as a miracle designed to show him God's love for the unlovely, even for Francis.

And as a result, he devoted himself from that moment on to the practical spiritual life of preaching and caring for the unlovely. His father freaked out and tried to force him back into the family business, but Francis wouldn't have it. He'd experienced a divine human love, and it filled his heart with joy. The trivial happiness of mere wealth or pleasure or status actually became disgusting to him and life-sapping, the way he used to think of leprosy.

The famous Franciscan vow of poverty that he later developed for the brothers and sisters in his religious order was actually designed to embody his original conversion experience, that mercy and love, not wealth and pleasure, are the real stuff of life.

The near contemporary sources we have for Francis make clear that he was not a dour, severe, ascetic in that cliched sense. He exuded a joy that was infectious. Go figure.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES

John Dickson:

This is precisely what I wanted to ask you next is all talk about flourishing ignore the sadness and evil of the world. In other words, is this journey you've been on to articulate flourishing, is it really just a middle-class luxury?

Miroslav Volf:

It can be that, and I think for many people it ends up being that. And I think any account of flourishing that forgets that we live in a false life is a false account of flourishing, which is to say, my flourishing consists not simply myself thriving, but in my... This is the tangential side of flourishing. In my having the kind of agency that can work toward transformation of this world, and then my life gets certain kind of weight rather than superficial pleasures where one jumps from one to the next, and they're never satisfied because they don't mean very much. So that even under conditions of suffering, other people suffering and often our own suffering, it's possible to taste something of the flourishing life in hope for the future consummation.

John Dickson:

Michel Onfray, the famous French philosopher, a fan of Nietzsche, wrote these words, and I want you to respond as a theologian of hope. Onfray wrote, "Religion's glorification of a fictional beyond prevents full enjoyment of the real here below. They establish death on Earth for the sake of eternity in heaven and seek to promote self-hatred to the detriment of the body." I'm sure it sounds better even in French, but it's powerful.

Miroslav Volf:

Yes, and as you say, you can recognize a partly Marxian, partly Nietzschean kinds of themes depending on where he wants to go with this. One can simply say let's look at the lives that people truly live and the kinds of enjoyment that they might have and kinds of significance that their lives might have and see whether that thesis actually follows. And certainly it wouldn't be the case if you look at some of the great founders of religious traditions, and certainly it wouldn't look so if you were to look at Jesus.

Now, I say this, and I realize that from the talk about what flourishing is, it's always perspectival talk. If you were a Nietzschean, that means that you have a particular table of values, and you

have a supreme value that determines what else is valuable to you. And for Nietzsche, that would be something like power, certain kind of power.

Now from that vantage point, obviously the life of Christ is a failed life, and that must be not just admitted, but that must be embraced and respected. That's how things look for you crucified for Dionysus, you choose Dionysus?

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

Ha, Miroslav expects you all to know that Dionysus is the ancient Greek god equivalent to the Roman god Bacchus, who's basically the champion of abundance, wine, partying, and ecstasy. He's the polar opposite of the ascetic.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES

Miroslav Volf:

That's how things look for you, crucified or Dionysus, you choose Dionysus? I will have to choose the crucified. Or the Apostle Paul speaks about people whose god is belly, so certain forms of pleasures. And if that's your ultimate value, obviously the way Francis lived would seem to you utterly implausible. It would be life denying kind of life, and if you'd talk to Francis, Francis would say with stigmata and everything else, this is the best of lives that I could possibly live. And he's infectious joy about just that kind of life is a testimony to its power.

So, some of this is a matter of perspective, and they would have to put them side by side, compare, and also live with the idea that not all people will share the same ultimate account of what's truly valuable. Tables of values differ.

John Dickson:

With so much difference in these values, is it possible to develop an idea of human flourishing that crosses religious and cultural divides? Our next guest is trying to do just that. After the break.

SPONSOR BREAK: ZONDERVAN

John Dickson:

This Undeceptions is brought to you by Zondervan's new book *Why I Trust the Bible* by William (Bill) Mounce. This is a back to basics book for the skeptic among us. Mounce is a highly-esteemed biblical scholar, and he goes through all of the questions we might have about the believability or otherwise of the Bible, and he answers them in a reasonable and gentle way. And believe it or not, people are still asking the question did Jesus actually live? Now that boggles my mind, but people are still asking it. And Mounce does a great job of laying out the simple evidence. Some of the other questions answered in this short, accessible book are did

the writers of the Bible just make stuff up? Why should we trust the Bible when there are so many different and contradictory translations of it these days? How do we know what we're reading now is actually what was written down thousands of years ago? And how was the Bible put together, canon and all that?

These are exactly the kinds of questions we try to deal with here on the podcast, so if you like Undeceptions, I'm pretty sure you're going to like this new book too. *Why I Trust the Bible* by William D. Mounce. It's out now.

You can get it at Amazon, of course, or for more information, go to zondervan.com.

SPONSOR BREAK: ANGLICAN AID

John Dickson:

Right now around the world there are 129 million girls who don't go to school, and we know that for every additional year of primary school, a girl's future wage increases by 10-20%. They get married later. They're less vulnerable to violence. There is no doubt then that educating girls saves lives and builds stronger families and communities.

Anglican Aid is committed to ensuring that girls are able to receive a quality education regardless of their economic circumstances. Just in the last 12 months, Anglican Aid has supported 20 projects, either schools or vocational education initiatives around Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. These projects are providing girls with a safe space to learn and grow. They're being given a chance to create a better future. You can help Anglican Aid do more of this essential work. I really trust these guys. I hope you will, as well.

Go to anglicanaid.com.au/donate. That's anglicanaid.com.au/donate.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES

John Dickson:

So, Tyler, tell me about the Harvard Human Flourishing Program. Some might feel it sounds a bit new age-y.

Tyler VanderWeele:

Well, the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard was begun four years ago, and the idea was to bring together scholars of different disciplines to try to study as rigorously as possible, human well-being.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

That's Tyler VanderWeele, and you might be familiar with his cameos across various other

episodes last season. I find him so impressive that we showcased his research right across different episodes.

Tyler is Professor of Epidemiology at Harvard University's School of Public Health, and he's the Director of the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University.

He holds degrees from the University of Oxford, University of Pennsylvania, and Harvard University in mathematics, philosophy, theology, finance, and biostatistics. He's a complete nerd. His empirical research spans psychiatric and social epidemiology, the science of happiness and flourishing, and the study of religion and health.

He's published over 300 papers in peer-reviewed journals and is the author of three major books, his latest being *Measuring Well-Being* with Oxford University Press, and it came out just this year.

All that's to say, he's made it his life's work to study what it takes to flourish and then how to replicate that on a societal scale.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES

Tyler VanderWeele:

We study very well, physical health say or whatever determinants of any common wealth, but other less tangible aspects of well-being like meaning and purpose or character and virtue and trying to be a good person or social relationships. These things, I think, are not as well and as rigorously studied. So we try to both use the most rigorous empirical methodology possible but unite that with the rich traditions on these topics, from philosophy, from theology, from the humanities to try to understand how to bring about human well-being or human flourishing. So that's the motivation, that was the goal of the formation of this program.

John Dickson:

But aren't these topics themselves somewhat subjective? I mean it's one thing to work out heart health. It's another thing to work out meaning health.

Tyler VanderWeele:

Yeah, there is a strong subjective component, say, to having a sense of meaning and purpose in life. And so much of the data that we make use of does rely on self-report. Do you yourself feel that you have a sense of direction and purpose in life or that your life is meaningful or that your activities are meaningful? And there are different nuances to these different sorts of questions.

And then we do try to study what gives rise to that sense of meaning because although it's subjective, it's something people very deeply care about. And believe it or not, we try to do the same things with questions of character. And there could be concerns about self-report.

How well do people really know and understand who they are? And so we do also attempt to study more objective features in addition to the subjective.

So, while we'll ask people questions about character, we'll also ask them how often they volunteer, or do they contribute to various charitable organizations. And I don't think either of these approaches, the objective or the subjective, is on its own entirely adequate, but by bringing the two together, I think we really can gain considerable insight into what the determinants of these aspects of flourishing are and also the consequences long-term for the individuals themselves and for society.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

So, Tyler is trying to figure out the specific things that make humans flourish. And then how you translate that into policy that leaders can use to make societies better. And his approach is very different from that of Miroslav Volf. VanderWeele is looking at the empirical evidence for flourishing more than the philosophy and metaphysics. But the data points in the same direction.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES

Tyler VanderWeele:

The understanding of flourishing that we've been using, our working definitions so to speak, is that flourishing is living in a state in which all aspects of a person's life are good. So it's a very broad, all-encompassing definition, and with something so broad, we might wonder can we really attain consensus on what this is and what this means? How would we ever go about measuring such a thing? The very notion of what good is is going to vary across philosophical and religious and cultural traditions.

And so, what we've tried to do is to say what is common to these different understandings of well-being or of flourishing? What does seem to be universal? And the argument's not that we can completely characterize what flourishing is, but we can try to identify some of the main domains of life, which are included within flourishing.

And so, in some of the work that we've published, I've proposed five domains of well-being or flourishing that, I think, are essentially universally desired or nearly universally desired. And the arguments, not that these five constitute the whole of flourishing, but that whatever else flourishing might include, it would include these five as well.

And those five domains are happiness and life satisfaction, physical and mental health, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, and close social relationships. And again, the argument's not that these five exhaust what we mean by flourishing, but that any reasonable conception of flourishing, whatever else it might include would include these five, as well.

I think each of these domains is again, nearly universally desired, and each also constitutes its own end. It's sought for its own sake. It's not simply a means to attain something else. And I

think those two criteria, being nearly universally desired and being an end in itself, can help shape some consensus around what to measure and what to study, even in a pluralistic society like ours.

John Dickson:

I feel I'm going to have to do a little sideways edit in this show on Aristotle and his notion of happiness as an end in itself, so that's something for me to do later.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

Aristotle was the great Greek philosopher, probably the smartest man B.C. He defined happiness as the thing humans seek as an end in itself rather than an instrument to that end. He said, "Wealth isn't happiness because people pursue wealth as an instrument to achieve something beyond wealth." Entertainment isn't happiness because people seek entertainment in order to experience something else. According to Aristotle, that something else is what we call happiness. His word was eudaimonia, or blessedness. It's the end in itself. You don't pursue happiness in order to get something else, it's the thing. It's the goal of life.

And by the way, he reckoned it had to do with experiencing contentment, a life of virtue, a knowledge of the meaning of reality, and he even argued on logical, not religious grounds that true eudaimonia, blessedness, involved knowing God as the source of all life, rationality, and meaning.

Now, I'm not doing a five-minute Jesus in this episode because it's already too long, but if I did, I'd point out that Aristotle's idea of flourishing, eudaimonia, is very similar to that found earlier than Aristotle in the Old Testament, particularly the book of Proverbs where blessedness is participating in the mind of the Creator, living according to his genius or wisdom.

And if I had a little more time, which I don't. I have my director and producer looking at me right now. I'd talk about how Jesus picks up this idea in the Sermon on the Mount, which begins with eight calls to blessed life. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are the peacemakers, and so on. And his point isn't that if you're meek, you'll get a reward. If you work for peace, God will like you. No, Jesus's point is that these things are what an authentic life is really all about.

When you live in these virtues, you are participating in the mind of the maker, and that's the goal of human life. You are living according to the maker's wisdom imprinted on the world. And his wisdom is destined one day in God's kingdom to be the only game in town. Anyway, that's if we had time for a five minute Jesus. Back to Tyler.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES

Tyler VanderWee:

So we've also tried to understand how can we promote flourishing across these different domains. My own discipline is public health, and when we think about public health impact,

when we think about what shapes health at the population level, we often use two criteria. One of which is for a particular exposure or phenomena, how common is it? And then second, how large are its effects on the health outcomes that we care about? If something's very common and has large effects, it's going to powerfully shape population health.

And so, if we look at what shapes physical health through this lens, we end up with things like exercise and good diet and sleeping well and not smoking, and these are important for shaping physical health. But if we broaden our perspective and look at all of these domains of flourishing and ask what affects all of them, the list looks rather different.

So, if we ask what is both common and has strong effects on all of these domains of flourishing, the list we've come up with thus far are the following four. First family and marriage, second education, third work and employment, and lastly religious community. Each of these things worldwide is relatively common, and there's empirical evidence from rigorous studies that each of these has important effects across those five domains of flourishing.

So that if governments were to focus on promoting these different pathways, family, education, work, religious community, that societal well-being would increase. It's not that every one of them is needed for every person to flourish, and there may be other pathways that are important for some individuals but not others. Maybe participating in the arts is very important for one individual but doesn't quite shape flourishing at the societal perspective as powerfully. So there are other pathways, but in terms of what's common and has strong effects, those are the four we've been able to identify and that we've focused a lot of our work.

John Dickson:

Why religious community? Why is that one of the pathways?

Tyler VanderWeele:

Over the last 30 years, there's been a pretty substantial body of evidence indicating that participation in religious community, essentially weekly religious service attendance is associated with better physical, greater longevity. One study suggested that weekly participation was associated over the life course of about seven extra years of life, dramatically lower rates of suicide, five-fold lower, substantial effects on depression, about a 30% reduction in incident of depression, closer relationships, both within religious communities but also outside of religious communities, greater sense of happiness, of life satisfaction, of meaning and purpose, of civic engagement and volunteering.

So once again, effects over these different domains. And so one might wonder why is this so? Why are these effects there? And one of the interesting results that have come out of these studies is it really does seem to be the communal forms of religious participation that matter most. Individual spirituality or prayer or private practices can of course be important in one's own understanding and spiritual life and development, but in terms of these other flourishing domains, it really does seem that the communal form that is most important and-

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

Just popping in here to tell you that Tyler spoke quite a lot about how attending religious services like church impacts your mental health back in episode 38 last season. And he spoke about his research on forgiveness and guilt in episode 39. It is so interesting. Please go back and have a listen to those if you haven't already. That's episode 38 and 39.

And if you go way back to episode five in season one, we spoke to an Australian politician and author Andrew Leigh about the benefits of religious community, not just on individuals but on society in general. He's particularly interesting because he's openly an atheist but thinks Christianity and church life is really a backbone of social capital.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES

Tyler VanderWeele:

And it's not just social support. Social support's important, but it only explains a quarter of the effect on physical health and longevity. So while I do think social support is critical, I think there are other aspects of participation in religious community that really do matter. I think having a shared set of values. I think in addition to having the weekly meetings, having that common purpose, having a shared experience of the divine, of the transcendent. And I think all of these things do contribute together along with a shared set of lifestyles and practices and so on. And so I think it's really the coming together of the social with the religious that empowers these communities to have such strong effects on well-being.

One does find effects of other forms of social participation affecting health and well-being also, but the effect sizes are notably smaller than what one finds with religious community. Moreover, in the West, at least, other forms of community life have dramatically declined. Religious community has been declining as well, but not quite as severely as most other forms of communal life.

So once again, going back to those criteria of being common and having strong effects, worldwide at least, religious community or they wouldn't qualify. We have good evidence for this now.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

Being part of a religious community can have a profound effect on your ability to flourish. That's not just a theologian talking, that's an epidemiologist. And the hard data have been published in peer-reviewed journals.

If being religious can impact your health as much as Tyler is telling us, then perhaps it's time to take a second look at the Christian view of flourishing.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES

John Dickson:

What would be missing from a conception of flourishing if God did not live the life in Christ, give the life on the cross, and rise again? What would be lost from the account of flourishing if those things were just not real?

Miroslav Volf:

Those things are just a few that are at the very heart of the Christian faith. Good question. I think what would be lost that we would not have a conception of God as the God who is love, which is to say unconditional love, who in everything God does, God loves, which is a God who we don't need to manipulate in any way to affirm the creation that he has created, but who does so in a powerful way just for the sheer existence of that creation.

Now to me, that's an absolutely stunning idea that somebody is loved just for being who they are, just for being human. Just think of what we do to make ourselves lovable to ourselves and to others, how much energy, how much time, how much anxiety. How many depressions have been triggered by those efforts that are often futile because we live in competitive kinds of environments with others. You always end up losing against somebody.

That seems to be absolutely extraordinary. That would be lost, I think, in many ways. Or what would be lost in terms of hope if there was no resurrection? If I did not believe that God is the one who's the God of the living, rather than simply God of those who will eventually always be dead. Especially during this pandemic over the past year, it has been interesting to observe how receding fate of hope and oscillation between a facile optimism of college students who just want to celebrate and don't think what might happen, or cynical optimism of politicians who manipulate optimism for their own ends, or a kind of despondency that we encounter, an unwillingness to look at reality straight in the face.

I think that's what hope makes possible for us because it's not dependent on the kind of circumstances that are around because it's not extrapolative. It lives out of divine promise. Abraham and Sarah cannot have children. God promises notwithstanding what their bodies tell them. They can hope. And out of that hope, gives you the ability to look at the reality straight in the face. No matter what it is, it doesn't touch the character of your hope. That's, in many ways, what we need. Especially also if things don't quite turn out how your object of hope said that they would.

Hope's character is such that it is open to disappointment if you want, to different fulfillment, so that I can recognize in the good that comes to me, what I truly did hope and was object of my hope. I think that's a miraculous kind of a thing.

John Dickson:

These two things would be enough to make me a Christian. Miroslav, thank you so much.

SEASON 5: GOOD LIFE (EP 50)



JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

If you like what we're doing here at Undeceptions, can I ask you to head to undeceptions.com and hit the donate button? Pretty much every day, I get a little alert here on my phone telling me that one of you has gifted something to the Undeceptions project. God bless you. We're not quite covering costs yet, but with your help, we are making strides in that direction. Anything you can do is hugely appreciated. Thanks so much.

And while you're there, feel free to send us a question, and I'll try and answer it later in the season. Next episode, we're examining the weird, scary, wonderful story of Christianity in China. See you.

CREDITS

Undeceptions is hosted by me, John Dickson. Produced by Kaley Payne and directed by Mark "Happy" Hadley. Editing by Richard Hamwi.

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