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Happiness is a Warm Conservative

Ken Briggs | Jul. 9, 2012 NCR Today

One of those survey-based confections on the New York Times op-ed page tells us that liberals are sad sacks compared to conservatives.

The town cryer is Arthur C. Brooks, who is at the helm of one of conservatism's citadels, the American Enterprise Institute. His sources are the omniscent and omnipresent Pew and the Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey.

Chasing "happiness," of course, has become a futile but productive academic pursuit. There is no possibility whatever of nailing it down or quantifying it, but no matter. It's become the stuff of Harvard courses and earnest seminars for budding exectives. The surveys purport to document it.

Brooks draws his claim from the self-reported results that show conservatives practically giddy compared to moppy liberals. Reasons? They're more often married and far more religious.

Get married, stay married and keep the faith and support it and your chances of being happy improve markedly, Brooks announces with a note of triumph and a pinch of whimsy.

He includes the critics who say the reason for the disparity is that conservatives think only of themselves and shut their eyes to the sufferings of the world. The counter argument is that conservatives care about values that endure.

For the sake of argument, let's assume the happiness gap exists. If so, perhaps it reveals a remarkable theological turnaround.

In the past, conservatives, especially the Protestant variety, took a pessimistic, Calvinistic, view of human nature. It counseled restraint, caution and restrictions to hold back the tide of sinfulness. It wasn't very happy, to say the least.

Liberals were the ones dancing to the tune of human potential whereby the world could be transformed and improved. Nothing dour about that. It glowed with optimism.

What if a theological transformation has taken place, casting liberals in the role of wary doubters and giving conservatives a surge of confidence in human nature.

If so, why do you think it happened? Have liberals become so discouraged with the human technological, digitized, transnational project that they see little hope and plenty to suspect? And that conservatibves feel both vindicated and pleased with the latest stages of modernism? Are things turning out more to their liking?

But all of this rests on a premise grounded in a bowl of jello. Perhaps you're happy but don't know it by survey definition or unhappy underneath the false front. In what category do you put self-deception?

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