

Fr Jock writes: 'This article appeared just before Christmas in the Financial Times and was given me by an agnostic family member who was struck by it...the author, Camilla Cavendish, is also not a believer but she is aware of some of the 'benefits' in church going of which many of us 'regulars' perhaps are not...

The restorative power of ritual must not be underestimated

You don't have to believe in the afterlife to feel the beneficial effects of a religious service.

By Camilla Cavendish

Something strange but awesome happened last week in Columbia Road, east London. Seven thousand people, who'd seen the street's annual Christmas carol service on TikTok, turned up to join in. This shows the remarkable power of social media: the event was overwhelmed and had to be cancelled. But I like to think it also shows a rather heartening hunger for song and community.

Modern societies are awash with angst. We download mindfulness apps, set daily intentions, keep gratitude journals and seek talking therapies to ward off depression. We do gym classes, increasingly with a meditative twist. I recently went to a spin session that was hypnotic - we chanted as we pedalled.

We could get quite a lot of this, of course, by simply going to a church, mosque, temple or synagogue. **There is overwhelming evidence that religious faith bolsters mental health.**

Not long ago I went to a Sunday service in a village church at which there was a three-piece band behind the altar, with the whole thing being broadcast on YouTube. It was packed, with people of all ages singing and waving their arms to folksy versions of old hymns.

Humans have long sought the same thing: community and a sense of something bigger than ourselves.

"*Oh Lord give me the Book of Common Prayer,*" muttered my teenage son, aghast. But I loved it - it reminded me of the gospel churches I used to visit in Washington DC, albeit transplanted to the English countryside.

What was the congregation after? Perhaps the same thing that humans have sought for centuries: ritual, music, a feeling of community and a sense of something bigger than ourselves. That's what the world's major religions, in their different ways, provide. And at a **time when we worry about a mental health crisis, the striking evidence that religious observance helps wellbeing demands attention.**

In Britain, the Institute for the Impact of Faith in Life finds that those with declared religious affiliations (Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist) report significantly higher psychological wellbeing than atheists: 70 per cent to 49 per cent. They are also more optimistic about the future, in a similar ratio.

In the US, a wealth of evidence shows the same thing. Americans who attend a weekly religious service are even more likely to say they are very satisfied with their lives, than are those who earn over \$100,000 a year. They rate their lives more positively, are less likely to have ever been diagnosed with depression, and are even less likely to smoke or eat junk food, than those who don't.

These are staggeringly big effects. The question is how they come about. Work in the US by Chaeyoon Lim, a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, suggests **that the biggest single contributor to churchgoer happiness is the network of friends they make there, which presumably contributes to a sense of security and belonging.**

Certainly, people who feel greater trust in their neighbourhoods tend to report feeling happier. Yet you can't necessarily replicate this by making friends in other spheres - **there seems to be something unique about friends made through faith.**

One study of depression among older Europeans found that joining a church, synagogue or mosque was more effective in improving their mental health than participating in volunteering, sport or political clubs, despite the fact that these activities also provide a sense of purpose and a chance to meet other people.

Much as it makes us rationalists uneasy, there is an unavoidable point here about spirituality. I don't mean just belief in an afterlife. Comforting as that no doubt is, I know many people who like going to church who don't subscribe to the heaven part. I don't either. But I do sometimes get, in the glimmer of a candle or a soaring plainchant under ancient arches, a sense of connection to something other.

Do happier people go to church, or does going to church make people happier? It seems to be the latter. Why would churchgoing improve our mood, when most faiths dwell on our flaws? Religions tend to do less hell and damnation these days. Nevertheless, they rarely miss a chance to tell us that we are imperfect, that life is hard and that what matters is trying to be honest, and kind. On the other hand, unlike the wellness bloggers and the style gurus, they're not selling a utopia that is bound to disappoint.

One of the other fascinating findings is how much healthier religious observants can be. Seventh-day Adventists in America are some of the longest-lived people in the world. Many are vegetarian and teetotal and do a lot of walking together. Mormons, who don't smoke or even drink coffee, also tend to live longer.

You might think that draconian rules governing what you can and cannot do - or even imbibe - would be miserable. But it's possible that members of these religious groups are shielded from the ever-growing consumer choices which, to many of us, are a mental burden. After all, the rich who can afford to buy so much of what is on offer are increasingly looking for rules to restrict what they eat, drink and do.

Whatever void we are seeking to fill, the answer certainly isn't the "bucket list" of things to do before we die. Avidly monetised by the travel industry, the bucket list is perhaps the epitome of soulless modernity.

This Christmas, I am not going to ditch the mindfulness. But I will welcome the chance to go to a church where I can put away my phone, reflect on the weeks past, get my thoughts in order and think about people beyond myself. Oh, and sing.