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Why Christianity Works: An Emotions-Focused Phenomenological Account

[Christian Smith](#)

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Abstract

Why has Christianity as a religious tradition survived for two millennia? What makes Christianity “work”? Many social scientific answers to related

questions focus on structural forces shaping religion and on factors that explain variance across belief and practice. This article takes a different approach, seeking to explain the ongoing existence of the phenomenon itself before analyzing variance within it. The idea is to address basic causes of what exists as distinct from more superficial causes of variation within it. To do so, I take a phenomenological approach that focuses particularly on emotions, seeking to explicate the recurrent, characteristic, and subjective experiences of many Christians that help to explain their ongoing commitment to and involvement in the faith. I also reflect the subjective focus on emotions in the tone of the article, which introduces a strong sense of subjective experience and affect. By complementing typical sociological analyses of religious variance with this kind of causal analysis of its existence, this article seeks to expand our range of explanation and understanding in the sociology of religion.

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