

Hangovers, debts may last longer than holiday happiness

by [Daniel Burke](#)

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(RNS) 'Tis the season ... for Black Friday, Cyber Monday, consumer spending reports, and large doses of Christmas spirits -- often of the alcoholic, not good-cheer variety.

But before you rush off to the mall or join the office holiday party, some A-list religious leaders want you to know one thing: The happiness derived from tearing open a coveted gift or downing a tasty beverage will fade before the final stanza of "Auld Lang Syne."

And all you'll be left with in the New Year is an empty wallet and a hangover.

In fact, the consumer-driven culture whose engine revs this time of year is likely "the most efficient system yet devised for the manufacture and distribution of un-happiness," says Lord Jonathan Sacks, Britain's chief rabbi.

"The consumer society is constantly tempting us to spend money we don't have, to buy things we don't need, for the sake of a happiness that won't last," warns Sacks.

So, if iPods and eggnog won't do the trick, what will make us happy?

Sacks was one of four prominent religious leaders invited by Emory University in Atlanta earlier this year to answer that eternal question. "The Pursuit of Happiness Conference," organized by Emory's Center for the Study of Law and Religion, also included the Dalai Lama, Episcopal Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, a noted Muslim scholar at George Washington University.

As might be expected, the four religious leaders disagreed about how to define happiness. Buddhism, after all, doesn't even posit an all-controlling God who guides the way to a presumably blissful afterlife.

But they concurred in warning that the heedless pursuit of pleasure leads down a spiritual dead end.

In a nutshell, their common advice might be dubbed the "happiness paradox": the more you give, the happier you get. In that way, Sacks said, spiritual happiness is the "greatest source of renewable energy we have."

"If I have a certain amount of money and I give some to you, I have less," Sacks said. "But if I have a certain amount of friendship or love or trust and I give it to you, I don't have less, I have more."

There are two basic levels of happiness, the Dalai Lama said: mental and physical. In recent centuries, humans have become expert at satisfying our physical desires, but our spiritual skills have not kept pace, he said.

"A rich family, their physical comforts reach a very high standard," said the exiled Tibetan Buddhist leader. "But that is no guarantee of reaching the same standards in peace of mind." Instead, material wealth often leads to "more worry, more anxiety, perhaps more jealousy and more fear."

The Dalai Lama, forced from his Tibetan homeland by Chinese forces in 1959, held himself up as an example of how lasting happiness can be found -- even in spite of hardship -- by cultivating inner resources such as compassion and equanimity.

Jefferts Schori agreed that "we find much greater happiness when we are not in the center of things." The first woman in the nearly 400-year history of Anglicanism to lead a national church, Jefferts Schori presides over one of the wealthiest denominations in the U.S. But while worldly goods are an element of happiness, the presiding bishop warned against the temptation to put Mammon before God.

"If we equate happiness solely with external or material goods, we lapse into hedonism, and in a biblical sense, commit idolatry," she said. "In the Christian understanding, locating human happiness in anything which does not include and acknowledge the divine represents major error."

Nasr, a prominent Islamic philosopher, said Muslims believe in a "hierarchy of happiness," from the quenching satisfaction of a cool glass of water on a hot day, to the spiritual high of realizing a divine truth.

All too often, consumer culture fools people into trading the higher forms of pleasure for the lower, said the Iranian-born intellectual. But the fact that physical happiness doesn't last is proof that our souls are made to reach for loftier goals, Nasr said.

In fact, he said, the highest wisdom may be to stop desiring anything at all. "Once it was asked of a great Sufi master: What do you want?," Nasr recalled. "I want not to want," the master replied.

Sacks agreed that sometimes the best way to find happiness is to stop pursuing it. In the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses says living in the Promised Land will prove a more difficult test of faith for the Jews than any trial faced during 40 years of wandering the desert.

"The difficult part is affluence, because that's when you forget where you came from, and you forget why you are here," the rabbi said. "Affluence makes you forget to give thanks, and when a society forgets to give thanks it loses the art of happiness."