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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Free-lance spiritual seekers: self-growth or compensatory motives?

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People attending various spirituality and self-development conferences outside the framework of organised religious groups ($N=204$) were compared to norms from the general population and to members of New Religious Movements (NRMs) on the following measures: attachment to parents in childhood, adult attachment, need for closure, need for cognition, openness to experience, and quest religious orientation. Results indicated that these people, in comparison to the general population, share with NRM members similar cognitive (need for closure) and affective (insecure attachment in childhood) needs that seem to be addressed by spirituality. However, in comparison to NRM members, participants scored higher on measures reflecting self-growth, that is openness to experience and quest religious orientation, and lower on need for closure. These findings may be interpreted as indicating a desire to seek spirituality but to preserve autonomy. These people were called free-lance spiritual seekers.

Keywords: spirituality; attachment; need for closure; quest religious orientation; openness to experience

Introduction

The religious scene has greatly evolved in the past 20 years. The religious options available to individuals are broader and vaster than ever before and can truly be seen by sociologists as a real market (e.g. McCleary & Barro, 2006; Sengers, 2007). Even economists are now discussing the potential of religion as a market (e.g. Gruber, 2005; Iannaccone, 1991). The religious market is undoubtedly correlated with secularisation (Norris & Inglehart, 2004; Stark & Bainbridge, 1985). As a consequence of secularisation in many European Western countries, it is now clear that, for many people, religion at an institutional level is no longer relevant. However, this does not mean that people are no longer religious (Dobbelaere, 2002). At the individual level, it only indicates that faith has taken another form and is now largely a private affair. Similar to this phenomenon, in the United States, it has been shown that a growing proportion of people report a “personal religion” (Roof, 2001; Smith, 2002).

The current religious and spiritual scenery and behaviours pose many new questions when psychologists of religion are trying to outline the attraction to religion and spirituality motives. It makes clear that some classical theories are not challenged and need to be re-examined.

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First, traditional religions are no longer the only answers to needs for security and/or for meaning. The development of New Religious Movements (NRMs), New Age philosophies, and many forms of different spiritual or quasi-religious movements has expanded the religious field. Nowadays, for example, psychotherapies are considered as competitors in the therapeutic and experiential marketplace (Epstein, 2006; Robbins & Anthony, 1982).

Second, within this new religious environment, faith and religious behaviours can no longer be merely conceived as intrinsically linked to processes of transmission, socialisation, continuity, and preservation of familial symbolic heritage and of the social order in general. When religious traditions are not taken for granted as they used to be, people must orientate themselves in a pluralist and complex world; they need to find a sense symbolic coherence on their own (Willaime, 1998). People are thus seen as more active and more self-oriented in their religious/spiritual choices. Some sociologists talk about the rational choice theory (see Iannaccone, Stark, & Finke, 1998) claiming that religion is a rational response to human needs.

Third, if religion is now a private affair, people can choose which aspects of religion they want. They are thus not obligated to adhere to a whole set of a specific religious tradition, as was the case in the past. One can speak today about a religious bricolage or a “religion à la carte” (see Christians & Servais, 2005). This is an aspect of individual secularisation; people autonomously choose their own mixture from a menu of possible beliefs and behaviours (Dobbelaere, 2002).

Consequently, this religious scenery leads one to conceptualise religion as a cultural product or commodity (e.g. a set of ideas, beliefs, behaviours, rituals, institutions, and social networks) and a trajectory of religious development during adulthood as a temporal pattern of consumption (e.g. attending services, thinking about God, praying, reading scripture or other religious literature, and purchasing tangible religious goods) of this product. Religion can be a simple consumer good (McCullough, Enders, & Brion, 2005). As a consequence of the expanding religious market (and borders), many people interested in religious/spiritual topics now have the option to be spiritual or religious seekers without any affiliation to a group and to address their religious/spiritual needs with a broader supply (conferences, discussion groups, seminars, etc.).

Can the trajectory of these people be interpreted through classic theories of religious socialisation? Are they really free from any membership of a religious group? Are they characterised by other psychological needs than members of NRMs?

The present study

The aim of this study is to focus on these people who are interested in spirituality¹ but not necessarily members of any religious/spiritual group in order to understand their specific motives in terms of personality and cognitive, affective, and spiritual needs. We decided to examine people who attend the conferences on topics related to spirituality. Because these people are attracted to spirituality without necessarily being members of any religious or spiritual groups we decided to designate them as “free-lance spiritual seekers.” This study takes place in a larger research project aiming to explore the attraction to religion and spirituality motives among a variety of religious (and less religious) people and groups (members and ex-members of NRMs and converts to mainstream religions, see Buxant & Saroglou, 2008a, 2008b; Buxant, Saroglou, Casalfiore, & Christians, 2007; Buxant, Saroglou, & Scheuer, 2009). Two key research questions are addressed by this study.

First, classic theories of religious behaviour highlight the defensive character of religious/spiritual motives and the compensating role of religion in the presence of vulnerabilities such as frustration, crises, insecurity, and uncertainty (Freud, 1927/1961; Glock, 1964; Marx, 1843/1979). Series of empirical findings confirm this compensational view of religiosity for both cognitive (e.g. lack of meaning) and affective (e.g. insecure attachment) needs (Spilka, Hood, Hunsberger, & Gorsuch, 2003). Religion's compensation of previous cognitive and affective vulnerabilities seems also to be found among people who join NRMs (Aronoff, Lynn, & Malinoski, 2000; Murken & Namini, 2007; Namini & Murken, 2009). The question thus arises as to whether defensive needs are also present among people attending the conferences on spiritual topics. Alternatively, one can expect that people are also characterised by self-growth and self-actualisation needs (e.g. Maslow's, 1970, distinction between deficiency needs and growth needs). In the Batson and Stocks (2004) adaptation of Maslow's theory of religious motivation (proposing that religion in its various forms can address each of the needs described in the Maslow's theory), self-growth needs (termed self-actualisation needs) are thought to be more easily addressed by spirituality than by more traditional religions.

Second, other people who also search for religious and spiritual answers outside the mainstream religious traditions sometimes join groups that are known as NRMs. What distinguishes "free-lance spiritual seekers" from the members of these religious groups? Could the distinction between compensatory motives and self-growth motives be useful with regard to this question? For instance, if compensation motives are also present among spiritual seekers, can self-growth motives help us to understand why these people remain free-lance and not attached to any specific religious group?

In order to investigate these two research questions, we collected data on people who attend conferences on topics related to spirituality and who are not necessarily members of religious groups. We included measures of individual differences reflecting cognitive and affective deficiency needs as well as self-growth motives and we made comparisons with two kinds of groups, pertinent for examining our research questions, and for which data on the same constructs were available: members of the general population and members of NRMs. The specific constructs studied are detailed below.

Compensatory motives

Need for affective security

At the affective level, insecurity in attachment to parents in childhood or in adult romantic relationships is linked to religion in terms of a compensatory process (God being considered as a "surrogate attachment figure"; Kirkpatrick, 2005). Previous research has found a great deal of support for this affective-emotional compensatory function of religion (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2008, for review). We thus hypothesised that "free-lance spiritual seekers" would have an insecure attachment to parents in childhood, which has also been observed among New Age seekers (Farias & Granqvist, 2007; Granqvist & Hagekull, 2002; Granqvist, Ivarsson, Broberg, & Hagekull, 2007) and NRM members (Buxant et al., 2007; Murken & Namini, 2007). Concerning attachment to one's adult romantic partner, we hypothesised that "free-lance spiritual seekers" would also evidence insecurity in romantic attachment. First, previous research has shown that people attracted by spirituality and esotericism books report insecurity in their adult attachment relationships (Saroglou, Kempeneers, & Seynhaeve, 2003). Second, in a previous study (Buxant et al., 2007), it was found that members of NRMs, although they have a history of insecure attachment with parents in childhood, report a secure romantic attachment,

which the authors interpreted as a sign of a compensation effect. The free-lance aspect of our target population would thus not allow participants to benefit from this membership effect.

Need for cognitive closure

Need for cognitive closure denotes the preference for knowledge and answers, rather than keeping questions open and unanswered, and reflects people's need for order, structure, and predictability in their internal and external world (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994). Religious people score high on need for cognitive closure (Duriez, 2003; Saroglou, 2002; Saroglou et al., 2003); this has also been found among NRM members (Buxant et al., 2007). If one focuses on the fact that "free-lance spiritual seekers" move freely outside mainstream religious groups to satisfy their spiritual interests, one could expect them not to be high in need for closure. However, since the need for order and structure seems to be a key characteristic of cognitive needs within religion and spirituality (see also Ladd et al., 2007), we expected our target participants to be higher in need for closure in comparison to a normative sample from the general population.

Self-growth motives

Openness to experience

"Free-lance spiritual seekers" could probably be considered prototypical of the New Age movement and spirituality seekers outside mainstream religious tradition. Consequently, one can expect that they are more open to new ways of understanding reality. As Wink, Dillon, and Fay (2005) point out, self-investment within the context of spirituality may "not derive from vulnerability but from openness to new experiences and an interest in personal growth" (p. 145). Moreover, openness to experience, in contrast with traditional religiosity, is linked to mature religion and spirituality (Saroglou, 2002; Saucier & Skrzypińska, 2006; Wink, Ciciolla, Dillon, & Tracy, 2007). This is especially the case with openness to aesthetics, fantasy, and feelings (Saroglou & Muñoz-García, 2008). We thus expected high levels of openness to experience among the "free-lance spiritual seekers."

Quest religious orientation

Being high in quest orientation refers to the inclusion of uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity in one's religious and existential beliefs. It also indicates the acceptance of doubt with regard to religious faith, self-criticism with regard to one's own religion, and openness to the possibility of change with regard to religious beliefs (Batson, Schoenrade, & Ventis, 1993). Quest religious orientation has been found to reflect high integrative complexity of thought on religious and existential issues (Batson & Raynor-Prince, 1983), tolerance of others' religious beliefs and values (Hunsberger & Jackson, 2005, for review), and exploration in personal identity (Fulton, 1997; Klaassen & McDonald, 2002). Since spiritual seekers seem to be characterised by a quest to discover new aspects of the self (Wink et al., 2005) and religious-spiritual ideas that are new, varied, and not necessarily coherent with each other or in conformity with religious traditions, we hypothesised that they would evidence a high level of quest religious orientation.

Need for cognition

By definition, “free-lance spiritual seekers,” especially those who attend conferences, are people who are seeking. They ought to enjoy effortful cognitive activities more than other people and they should thus be characterised by a high need for cognition (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982). This construct reflects people’s propensities for deliberative cognitive activity. Need for cognition is positively associated with the tendency to generate complex attributions for human behaviour and with openness to experience (Sadowski & Cogburn, 1997) and negatively associated with dogmatism and intolerance of ambiguity (Cacioppo, Petty, Feinstein, & Jarvis, 1996). Curiosity and motivation for cognitive development (need for cognition), along with relativism, complexity, and openness to religious and spiritual beliefs (quest), as well as openness to experience as a general personality trait may reasonably be considered as important components of the dynamics of self-growth.

Method

Procedure

To find “free-lance spiritual seekers,” we used a free monthly Belgian magazine that announces events in the broad domains of well-being, alternative medicines, spirituality, and personal development. We selected conferences focused on spirituality-related topics and taking place in the largest French-speaking cities in Belgium. We called organisers of each of these conferences and explained them the objectives of this study. With their permission, we went to the conference site, informed the audience, and invited participants to take a questionnaire packet we distributed at the end of the conference. Those who agreed to participate filled in the questionnaire anonymously at home and sent it directly to the researchers at the expense of the latter.

Participants

A total of 204 attendees completed the questionnaire. They ranged in age from 21 to 80 years ($M = 49.84$, $SD = 13.18$). Participants were predominantly females (75%). Nearly half of the participants were married ($N = 97$), 43 single, 50 divorced, and 11 widowed (three did not mention their marital status). Most of them were “free-lancers.” Indeed, only a minority ($N = 35$) reported an affiliation with a specific religion (Catholicism, $n = 13$; Orthodoxy, $n = 2$; Protestantism, $n = 1$) or with a mainstream spirituality (Buddhism, $n = 19$). The educational level of participants was high: the vast majority reached university ($n = 71$) or high school level ($n = 67$).

Measures

Attachment to parents in childhood (Hazan & Shaver, 1987)

We used the retrospective descriptions of attachment to parents (separately for father and mother) established by Hazan and Shaver (1987) in order to measure attachment styles, that is secure, anxious/ambivalent, and avoidant attachment. As other studies usually do, participants provided an evaluation on each of the six (two parents \times three styles) paragraphs in a Likert-type format (7-point scales), a method that provides finer assessment of attachment than the categorical measure. In order to simplify the presentation of results (two rather than six variables), following Granqvist (2002),

we created two indices of global insecurity (by summing the scores on the two insecurity items and the inverted scores of the security item), one for the mother ($\alpha=0.84$) and one for the father ($\alpha=0.74$). The two scores were weakly intercorrelated, $r=0.24$, $p < 0.001$.

The Experiences in Close Relationships Scale-revised (Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000; our French translation)

This is a 7-point Likert-format scale of 36 items measuring the two orthogonal dimensions of adult attachment, that is Anxiety (e.g. “I often worry that my partner will not want to stay with me”) and Avoidance (e.g. “I am nervous when partners get too close to me”). The scale is based on analyses of previous attachment scales and taps the underlying structure of these measures corresponding to two orthogonal axes: anxiety about abandonment and discomfort with closeness and intimacy with others. It has higher psychometric qualities in comparison to previous multi-item attachment scales (Fraley et al., 2000). The two-factor structure in our French translation was replicated in a previous study (Saroglou et al., 2003). Reliabilities were satisfactory, $\alpha_s = 0.91$ for Anxiety and 0.92 for Avoidance.

Need for Cognitive Closure Scale (NFCS; Webster & Kruglanski, 1994; French translation by Caroff, Berjot, Fievet, & Drozda, 2003)

People high on need for cognitive closure seek definite answers to questions as opposed to being comfortable with confusion or ambiguity. In this study, in order to reduce the length of the questionnaire (42 items), we only used the subscales of Preference for Order (10 items) and Preference for Predictability (8 items). These two subscales explain a substantial part of the total variance of the scale and constitute its most representative dimensions (De Dreu, Koole, & Oldersma, 1999). The subscales are in a 7-point Likert-type format. Reliabilities in our data were 0.75 and 0.82. Representative items are: “I think that having clear rules and order at work is essential for success” (order); “I hate to change my plans at the last minute” (predictability).

Need for Cognition Scale (NFC; Cacioppo, Petty, & Kao, 1984)

This scale refers to an individual’s tendency to engage in and enjoy effortful cognitive endeavors. This 18-item scale ($\alpha=0.89$) consists of statements (5-point Likert format scale) such as, “I prefer complex to simple problems,” and “I try to anticipate and avoid situations where there is a likely chance I will have to think in depth about something” (reverse-scored).

Quest Orientation Scale (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992)

The revised version of the 16-item Quest scale from Batson and Schoenrade (1991) was used. Respondents rated the extent to which they agreed with the 16 statements on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Examples of the scale items are as follows: “It might be said that I value my religious doubts and uncertainties”; “My religious beliefs are far too important for me to jeopardize them by exposing them to frequent skepticism and critical examination” (reverse-scored). Reliability was satisfactory ($\alpha = 0.77$).

Openness to Experience (NEO Personality Inventory-Revised; Costa & McCrae, 1992)

Openness to Experience, the fifth personality factor in the Big Five personality theory, has been defined by Costa and McCrae (1992) as involving active imagination, aesthetic sensitivity, attentiveness to inner feelings, preference for variety, and intellectual curiosity. Three out of the six facets were considered as more relevant for this study: Aesthetics (the tendency to appreciate art, music, and poetry, $\alpha=0.76$), Feelings (being receptive to inner emotional states and valuing emotional experience, $\alpha=0.61$), and Fantasy (the tendency towards a vivid imagination and fantasy life, $\alpha=0.79$). One item was removed from the openness to feelings subscale in order to improve reliability ($\alpha=0.75$)

Spiritual Transcendence Scale (Piedmont, 1999; our French translation)

This 24-item scale measures spirituality as the tendency to orient oneself towards a larger transcendent reality that binds all things into a unified and harmonious entity. It reflects the personal search for connection with a larger sacredness. The scale consists of three subscales: Universality (a belief in the unity and purpose of life; 9 items), Connectedness (a sense of connection and commitment to others and humanity as a whole; 6 items), and Prayer Fulfillment (an experience of feeling of joy and commitment that results from prayer and/or meditation; 9 items). As in this study we were interested in a measure of spirituality that is clearly distinct from religion, we used the first two subscales. Indeed, the third one, that is Prayer Fulfillment, has an explicitly religious content (reference to God and religious practice such as prayer) and has been found to relate positively to traditional religious attitudes and behaviours (Piedmont, 1999). Sample items are: "There is an order to the universe that transcends human thinking" (Universality); "I still have strong emotional ties with someone who has died" (Connectedness). Reliabilities were satisfactory ($\alpha=0.86$ for Universality and 0.68 for Connectedness).

Religiousness and spirituality

Finally, three indexes (7-point scales) were administered asking about the importance of God, the importance of religion, and the importance of spirituality in life. Although multi-dimensional and multi-item religious scales are in general preferable, single- or few-item religious indexes present an effective and efficient way to tap a general, personal pro-religious and pro-spiritual attitude if participants' time is limited (see, e.g. Gorsuch & McFarland, 1972; Schwartz & Huismans, 1995).

Comparison samples

There is no single sample of Belgian adults from the general population where one can find data on all the measures used in this study. Thus, in order to make comparisons between our participants and the general population, we used data collected in a variety of previous studies cited below. In all these studies, participants were Belgian adults from the same linguistic (French-speaking) community who volunteered to participate in the study without any compensation. For religiousness, we used a sample of 216 adults from Saroglou (2003). For the attachment to parents in childhood, we combined two samples coming from Buxant's (2002) and Saroglou, Delpierre, and Kempeneers's (2002) studies, with 320 adults and 120 adults, respectively. To compare the romantic attachment with one's partner, we used the sample of 181 adults from Saroglou et al. (2003) (people who had just left large general-interest bookstores) and 196 married adults recruited

by Lacour (2002). The sample of 181 Belgian people from Saroglou et al. (2003) was also used for comparison on need for closure. Comparison data used for the Quest scale came from Saroglou (2002), a sample of 72 Belgian young adults. For the need for cognition and spiritual transcendence scales, data were especially collected for this study as no previous data existed. One hundred and seven persons filled in this scale (mean age=35, range=18–65; 41% men). Finally, for the openness to experience measure, data from 122 young adults from Saroglou and Fiasse (2003) were used.

For most of these constructs (except for the spiritual transcendence and the need for cognition scales), we also had data available for comparison with NRM members from two previous studies carried out in Belgium (Buxant et al., 2007; Buxant & Saroglou, 2008a). Participants came from the Belgium Center of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, different charismatic Catholic groups, Protestant Evangelical congregations, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and some other groups of Protestant inspiration. One hundred and thirteen NRM members participated in the first study and 120 other NRM members in the second study.

Results

Means and standard deviations for all measures for the target participants and the two comparison groups, as well as *t*-tests are detailed in Table 1. In comparison with a normative population, as expected, participants gave significantly more importance to God and to spirituality but lower importance to religion in their life. Moreover, means on the Connectedness and Universality subscales of spirituality were lower than these normative data. Participants reported higher insecurity in attachment with both the father and the mother and higher Avoidance in their current relationship with their partner (but they did not differ on the Anxiety dimension). They reported higher needs for both Order and Predictability than the normative population. Since high Need for Closure (especially order) seems to be typical of religious people in general (Saroglou, 2002; Saroglou et al., 2003; see also Duriez, 2003), we thus compared our results with those of highly spiritual people from the above-mentioned comparison sample of Belgian adults (Saroglou et al., 2003), that is people having scored 6 or 7 on the 7-point scale of importance of spirituality in life. People attending these conferences reported the same levels of Need for Order and for Predictability when compared with the higher spiritual people (but who are not necessarily people seeking for spirituality) from the same normative population ($M_s = 3.18, 2.81$; $SD_s = 0.69, 0.80$; $t_s(302) = 1.13, -0.21$; ns). Participants did not differ from the normative population on the Need for Cognition nor on the Quest scales. Finally, on each of the three Openness to Experience subscales, they reported higher scores than the normative population.

In comparison with NRM members, our participants were less religious on each of the three indicators. God, religion, and even spirituality were less important for people attending the spirituality conferences than for NRM members. Insecurity with the mother was higher than that reported by NRM members but there was no difference on attachment to father. Participants reported higher levels of Avoidance and Anxiety in their current romantic relationship. They also reported higher scores on the Quest dimension. They were characterised by lower Needs for Order and Predictability, and they evidenced higher scores on each of the three Openness to Experience subscales.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and comparisons between “free-lance spiritual seekers,” NRM members, and the comparison group.

	“Free-lance spiritual seekers”		Comparison sample		NRM members		Comparison seekers/ norms	Comparison seekers/ NRM members
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>T</i> -tests	<i>T</i> -tests
Importance of								
God	4.90	2.35	4.11	2.34	6.81	0.78	3.35***	-8.34***
Religion	3.15	2.09	3.55	2.08	6.11	0.78	-1.92*	-12.89***
Spirituality	6.58	0.85	4.32	2.13	6.77	0.70	14.08***	-1.97*
Spiritual transcendence								
Connectedness	3.99	0.60	3.77	0.56	-	-	3.20**	-
Universality	4.42	0.58	3.55	0.63	-	-	11.95***	-
Insecurity in parental attachment								
Mother	2.43	1.14	1.91	1.23	1.98	1.06	5.19***	3.36**
Father	2.72	1.13	2.37	1.38	2.73	1.20	3.37***	-0.06
Adult attachment								
Anxiety	3.77	0.99	3.78	1.18	2.85	1.14	-0.23	10.35***
Avoidance	3.38	0.97	2.53	1.00	2.43	1.03	10.54***	3.48***
Need for closure								
Order	3.27	0.57	2.92	0.75	3.72	0.60	6.04***	-6.61***
Predictability	2.79	0.69	2.66	0.75	3.31	0.81	2.03*	-5.69***
Quest	82.27	12.82	84.16	13.55	55.87	14.70	-1.03	15.65***
Need for cognition	61.89	10.71	63.61	8.47	-	-	-1.53	-
Openness to experience								
Fantasy	27.86	5.73	20.80	6.15	22.85	4.46	10.27***	6.97***
Aesthetics	30.93	5.08	18.66	5.26	26.26	5.34	20.61***	6.79***
Feelings	31.73	4.92	21.86	4.21	26.22	4.92	19.17***	4.92***

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Discussion

Findings of this study are consistent with the idea that people who attend conferences on spiritual topics are highly spiritual, more so than people from a normative population. These conference attendees also give more importance to God. However, they give less importance to religion than the general comparative population, which could be interpreted as negative reaction (or perhaps indifference) towards institutionalised religion. Indeed, only a small minority of our participants were members of an organised religion. People particularly seeking spirituality are thus primarily spiritual and not traditionally religious, which seems in line with literature presenting tradition-oriented religiousness and spirituality as independent dimensions (Saucier & Skrzypińska, 2006; Zinnbauer et al., 1997; Zinnbauer, Pargament, & Scott, 1999).

With regard to our first main question, that is whether spiritual seeking can be understood as motivated by compensation needs or self-growth motives, findings seem to support the compensatory hypothesis explaining traditional religious behaviour. In comparison with normative data, participants reported higher insecurity in attachment with parents in childhood and higher need for cognitive closure. These results are in line with what is often observed in religious people, converted people, and members of religious groups (members and ex-members of NRMs and converts to mainstream religions, see Buxant & Saroglou, 2008a, 2008b; Buxant, Saroglou, Casalfiore, &

Christians, 2007; Buxant, Satoglou, & Scheuer, 2009). The classic compensatory function of religion, for both affective and cognitive needs, seems thus also to apply to interest in spirituality. However, there was also partial support for the self-growth motives hypothesis. Attendees of conferences were not higher or lower than the general population on need for cognition, but they differed in their high level of openness to experience. Apparently, the co-existence of compensation and self-growth motives suggest that one should consider them as not in opposition but as complementary in explaining religious and spiritual trajectories.

Comparisons between our participants and NRM members turned out to provide interesting information with regard to our second main question. Similarities and differences found may help us to understand why our participants, although spiritual seekers like NRM members, were free-lancers, since most of them did not belong to a specific religious group. First, our “free-lance spiritual seekers” differed from NRM members in their higher insecurity in both attachment to mother in childhood and romantic attachment in adulthood. Our participants could perhaps be thought of as too insecure to join an organised religious group. We could think that, given a certain amount of insecurity (both with parents and romantic partner), it becomes difficult to form secure attachments to individuals or groups. Consistent with this idea, Smith, Murphy, and Coats (1999) found associations between attachment insecurity and group identification and commitment. It seems likely that insecure group members will be more ambivalent, uncommitted, or disloyal. An alternative interpretation could be that “free-lance spiritual seekers” may not benefit from the emotional stability – leading to security in adult attachment – that organised religious groups such as NRMs seem to provide to their members to compensate for their original insecurity (see Buxant et al., 2007). Second, NRM members were more religious and spiritual than the “free-lance spiritual seekers”; the former may thus have joined these groups simply because of their stronger religious and spiritual interests. Third, “free-lance spiritual seekers” differed from NRM members in their higher levels of quest. This implies more openness to the inclusion of uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity in religious and existential beliefs and to the possibility of change with regard to these beliefs. Similarly, their need for closure, although higher than in the normative population, was lower than that of NRM members. In addition, “free-lance spiritual seekers” were more open to experience, looking for varieties and diversity of feelings, fantasy and aesthetic experiences to a greater extent than NRM members. It may thus be that free-lance seekers, although motivated by spiritual, cognitive, and relational needs as are NRM members, do not follow the latter in joining groups such as NRM that insist upon the absolute nature of their truth, the non-negotiable nature of their ideas, beliefs, and practices, and the importance of following the authority’s rules and directions (Lewis, 2003). These individual differences do not fit well with quest religious orientation and a personality characterised by high levels of openness to experience. In sum, despite cognitive and affective vulnerabilities common with NRM members, “free-lance spiritual seekers” are probably too independent to join a religious group such as an NRM. Interestingly, autonomy seems to be the price one often pays for the positive and structuring effect of NRM membership on mental health (Buxant & Saroglou, 2008a).

One of our expectations was not confirmed. “Free-lance spiritual seekers” were not higher than the normative population on need for cognition. This can probably be understood by integrating the different results. Indeed, spiritual seekers outside the organised groups seem to be more open to experience and to alternative perceptions of reality than the general population. They are, in addition, more open in their thinking

and cognitive style than NRM members. However, the construction of meaning is not completely without cost: religious–spiritual seeking persons often have heightened needs for internal order and closure, that is obtaining concrete answers instead of leaving all questions open. This need for closure is known to be negatively correlated with need for cognition (Petty & Jarvis, 1996; Webster & Kruglanski, 1994).

By focusing on attendees of conferences on topics related to spirituality, we feel that we have obtained a somewhat representative sample of “free-lance spiritual seekers” in a secularised European country. However, further studies are needed before any generalisation of the results can be made. Moreover, our findings do not claim to cover all the possible motivations and needs explaining interest in spirituality. In particular, with regard to constructs relevant for the self-growth hypothesis, further studies should include other well-known concepts in the positive psychology domain (e.g. curiosity, creativity, flow sensibility, importance of self-transcendence-related values).

This study and the previous ones we have conducted on NRM members lead us to hypothesise that there is a correspondence between supply and demand in the religious marketplace. Further research on this question should more systematically compare characteristics of different kinds of religious/spiritual seekers (both in terms of compensatory and self-growth needs) with characteristics of corresponding religious/spiritual supply (e.g. in terms of entitativity of the religious group, fundamentalism, and emphasis on emotional vs cognitive aspects). Namini, Appel, Jürgensen, and Murken (2009) have already discussed this idea by applying the Person–Environment Fit Theory to the new members of NRM.

This study contributes to our understanding of modern forms of spirituality seeking. Given increasing secularisation and abandonment of organised religion, understanding the antecedents, motivations, and expression of the varieties of religious experiences such as “free-lance spiritual seekers” will be an important task for psychologists of religion in the coming years.

Note

1. We refer, in this paper, to both religion and spirituality. These two constructs share many features but are not identical (Saucier & Skrzypińska, 2006; Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005). There is some consensus that the two constructs share (a) the inclusion of the dimension of the sacred in life, and (b) the experience of being interconnected with other people in the community or the world as a whole. However, whereas religion places greater emphasis on specific religious traditions and institutions, including a specific God, modern spirituality reflects, to some extent, independence from religious traditions and institutions, includes a sense of transcendence, and constitutes an individualized approach to religious, existential, and ethical issues.

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