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Religious Bricolage as a Psychological Reality: Limits, Structures and Dynamics

The contemporary proliferation in sociology of religion of terms such as “religious bricolage” or “religion à la carte” as reflecting clear tendencies in modern religious and spiritual expressions leaves the psychologist of religion somewhat perplexed. Although no empirical studies of such phenomena exist from a psychological perspective, related theory and research from other psychological domains can provide material that allows us to question the extent and depth of the reality of the so-called “religious bricolage”. This will be the main point of the present article. In addition, we will emphasize the need to go beyond descriptive case studies and look for general structures and “laws” capable of explaining the rationale and the dynamics (e.g. cognitive, emotional, and motivational) of this phenomenon, at least, as the latter appears today in Western countries.

Key words: *creativity · emotional instability · globalization · post-formal thinking · religious identity*

La prolifération en sociologie de la religion de termes tels que “bricolage religieux” ou “religion à la carte”, censés refléter des tendances claires des expressions religieuses et spirituelles modernes, laisse le psychologue de la religion quelque peu perplexé. Bien qu’il n’existe pas d’études empiriques de ce phénomène effectuées dans une perspective psychologique, le recours à certaines théories et aux résultats d’études menées dans d’autres domaines psychologiques connexes permettraient de mieux appréhender l’étendue et la profondeur de la réalité du dit “bricolage religieux”. Ce sera le but de cet article. En outre, l’auteur met l’accent sur la nécessité d’aller au-delà des études de cas descriptives et de chercher des structures générales et des “lois” capables d’expliquer la logique et les dynamiques—cognitives, émotionnelles et motivationnelles—de ce phénomène, du moins tel qu’il apparaît aujourd’hui dans les pays occidentaux.

Mots-clés: *créativité · globalisation · identité religieuse · instabilité émotionnelle · pensée postformelle*

Religious identity traditionally constitutes a major component of religiousness. Although differences in the emphasis placed on one or other of the specific dimensions of religious identification can exist (e.g. emotional, cultural,

ethical, communitarian; see Hervieu-Léger, 1999), belonging to a filial line of believers can even be considered as *defining* individuals and groups as religious (Hervieu-Léger, 1993). Moreover, as I have argued elsewhere (Saroglou, 2003a) religiousness is associated with a certain “orthodoxy” (see, e.g., Deconchy, 1980), be it only a minimal one in some cases.

Empirical studies of the past decade have consistently shown (across samples, religious denominations, and countries) that religious people, even young ones, tend to value order and structure in their lives, cognitive closure, and conservation values, and do not necessarily value autonomy and self-expansion (Saroglou, in press). Even when we shift from traditional religiosity to modern spirituality, the decrease in conservative values is not replaced by an increase in autonomy and individual values (Saroglou, 2003b; Saroglou et al., 2004). Consequently, since religious bricolage is thought of as an expression of modern individuality regarding belief, it is doubtful whether the extent of such *religious* bricolage will be as great as bricolage in other domains (e.g., collective identities, world-views, ethical positions).

Similarly, it is to be expected that people who are active in religious bricolage should be high in creativity: either they create original and new responses, ideas or rituals, or they proceed to a new structuring of pre-existing religious elements. Interestingly, though, the psychology of creative personality suggests several realities that seem to be in opposition to what we know of the psychology of religious personality. For instance, creativity accompanies tolerance of ambiguity, impulsivity, low conscientiousness, low agreeableness and low conformity (Feist, 1999; Simonton, 1999). On the contrary, religiousness is usually associated with intolerance of ambiguity, conservatism (both political and socio-moral), and low impulsivity; in addition, the two “typical” traits of religious personality are high agreeableness and high conscientiousness (Spilka et al., 2003; Saroglou, in press). Such a contrast suggests, first, that creativity in religious bricolage will not be as high as creativity in domains other than religion. Second, within a religious context, religious people who tend to be more active in religious bricolage may be those who do not score as high in agreeableness and conscientiousness or simply those who are somewhat less religious than others.

Psychology of creativity also provides material for reflection about another issue. Though not necessarily the case, creativity often arrives as an adaptive effort to face problems and address emotional instability, the latter possibly originating in childhood and in problematic relations with parental figures (Simonton, 1999). Interestingly, in psychology of religion, many studies using different theoretical and methodological perspectives converge in that personal crises and problematic child–parent relationships may be some of the determining factors of later religious conversion (Ullman, 1987; Paloutzian et al., 1999). Although the reality of religious bricolage is different from that of conversion, the question arises whether, from an individual (rather than social) perspective, the reality, depth, and extent of religious bricolage are merely a consequence of societal changes (e.g. globalization, crumbling of religious institutions) or whether they may be especially significant in the context of personal crises, emotional instability, and problematic relationships with parents. Among other motivations

behind religious bricolage, one can find willingness to put some distance between oneself and everything coming from and representing the family world, or the willingness to embrace wholeness—what constitutes, according to most scholars, the essence of religious experience—through religious ideas and practices. Whereas a flavor of emotional instability is obvious in the first motivation, the second motivation may in some cases be more subtle or defensive, i.e. unease with accepting a globalized modern world where obviously no religious tradition can claim to have privileged access to truth and wholeness.

It is of course also likely that the propensity for religious bricolage is not an expression of some affective needs based on emotional instability. Alternatively, religious bricolage could be seen as an expression of cognitive development and evolution in religious ideas. From a psychology of cognitive development perspective, theories and empirical studies that tended to apply the Piagetian model to religious cognitive development converge on the existence of a dynamic movement going from a literal, concrete, and orthodox religious thinking to a symbolic, abstract, and relativistic religious thinking (Reich, 1992; Hutsebaut, 2000). In addition, more recent neo-Piagetian models point out the existence of a post-formal stage in cognitive development characterized by: (1) the effort to hold contradictions together; (2) integrative complexity of thought (both increasing differentiation and integration); (3) importance of contextualization and relativism; and (4) the need for a certain harmony between cognitions, feelings, and actions (see Vandenplas-Holper, 1998). From such a cognitive development perspective, religious maturity can be seen as a post-formal stage of religious thinking, a thinking style that combines the maximum of flexibility with some coherence and integration, thus overcoming an orthodox or fundamentalist thinking, the latter being more similar to “formal” (in Piaget’s terms) thought (Saroglou, 1999).

Religious bricolage could thus be considered an expression of such a development both at the individual and collective level since it implies: (1) the holding together of religious ideas and practices coming from different if not opposite religious traditions; (2) the contextualization, and thus relativization, of these ideas and practices; and (3) a high flexibility together with some integration when dealing with various and divergent religious beliefs and practices. Similarly, I have argued elsewhere (Saroglou, 2003b) that, if we adopt an evolutionary perspective in the history of religious ideas, the modern emphasis by non-traditionally religious spirituality on a kind of impersonal transcendence rather than a personal God could also be conceived as a new stage in the development of religious cognition leaving out, for instance, previous forms of anthropomorphic gods.

Religious bricolage could further be studied in terms not only of related cognitive structures but also of its underlying motivations. A first hypothesis could be that such autonomy in (re)building religious ideas and practices may parallel the contemporary syncretism in several other domains: hobbies, play, sport, gastronomy, collective identities, multiple societal roles, or moral opinions. Such a “hedonistic” motivation could also be understood as a strategy to maximize the likelihood of symbolic benefits regarding spiritual

needs. In a context where the absolute character of religious truth is relativized, such a syncretistic attitude towards materials coming from a variety of religious traditions and sources may be a way of increasing one's chances of obtaining symbolic profits through the partial attachment to initially different or even opposite religious elements.

If this hypothesis of a "hedonistic" motivation corresponds to reality, this could help us understand why (somewhat contrary to what was stated above), from many perspectives, some contemporary forms of spirituality may even be indifferent to rationality and compatibility with scientific knowledge. It is not surprising then that in some studies spirituality was found to predict openness to paranormal beliefs and irrational thinking (e.g. MacDonald, 2000; MacDonald and Holland, 2002). Indeed, the idea of religious and other kinds of bricolage could imply that the search for coherence and integration is not necessary. Choosing and combining bits of religious ideas, emotions, and practices may not have as a basis any concern for legitimacy (e.g. tradition or rationality) other than the individual's personal preferences varying as a function of time, mood, and context.

We remain skeptical, however, how such a situation could still represent a religious reality. Unless we radically change our paradigms of understanding religion, it seems clear that religious beliefs do not function like any other kind of belief which may be limited in their scope, intensity, and mobilizing force: in the life of a religious individual, such beliefs are distinguished by their centrality, intensity and integration of many dimensions of human existence (Hinde, 1999). To go even further, one wonders whether such religious bricolage can last since what pragmatically constitutes the interest of symbolic benefits of religious beliefs, ideas, and practices, is precisely their centrality, intensity, and integrative character.

Another hypothesis regarding motivational forces possibly explaining religious bricolage could be the need to deal with the increasing plurality of ethical points of view within a globalized society. Although, as recent research indicates, some ethical norms seem to be established very early in human development (approximately at the age of 3) and be universally shared (Turiel, 1998), there is a large variety of anthropological, philosophical, religious, and other conceptions that attempt to explain the world and human existence. This variety explains why individuals or cultural groups differ in their ethical considerations, although they share the same basic universal ethical norms: justice, equality in rights, and respect of others' well-being (Turiel and Neff, 2000). If we take into account the fact that religion and spirituality have the power to provide motivations for ethical actions that are not only principled (Saroglou, 2003b), the modern religious bricolage can be seen as an attempt to bring together bits of world-views, myths, symbols, religious practices and rituals that allow the creation of a flexible variety of ethical attitudes covering a wide spectrum of realities where the few universal ethical norms will be applied.

The regulation that religious bricolage may exert between universalism and particularism in moral and other domains can lead to an apparent paradox. On the one hand, it can easily be imagined that the autonomy of individuals and the variety of contexts will lead to an explosion of different configura-

tions of religious bricolage across individuals and across communities and groups. On the other, it may be that the more forms of religious bricolage are varied, the more these forms will also share some common structures that may even claim universality. Here are two examples. First, there is increasing evidence of a universalism in the pattern of values privileged as a function of religiousness. Beyond some minor differences between Christian denominations or between the three monotheistic traditions (e.g. Inglehart and Baker, 2000; Guiso et al., 2003), high or low importance attributed to specific values is similar across these groups, at least in the context of Western countries (Bréchon, 2003; Saroglou et al., 2004). Second, when one examines the variety of contemporary secular forms of rituals celebrating events such as marriage or death, the similarity in the structure, symbols used, and associated emotional experiences is more than striking. Going even further, we can speculate that insofar as religious bricolage exists as a specifically modern phenomenon, it may contribute to some structural uniformization of religion in a globalized world. Similarly, sociologists of religion have hypothesized that globalization may lead not to an accentuation of between-religion differences but to some uniformity, especially when religions have to keep their distinctiveness from a-religiosity and atheism in a secularized society (Halman and Pettersson, 2003).

To summarize, there is reason to be skeptical about whether “religious bricolage” is such a widespread reality today as the proliferation of this term in social sciences of religion would lead us to believe. Several arguments from psychology of creativity, cross-cultural psychology, and the psychology of religious identity and religious personality call for prudence before the unconditional adoption of the term and before transforming it into an established object of scientific study. Second, to the extent that people combine religious elements (ideas, beliefs, symbols, practices) from a variety of sources and traditions and to the extent that modern individuation and de-institutionalization contribute to this phenomenon, there is a need to go further and study the cognitive, emotional, and social mechanisms that allow people to combine these elements into structured wholes, as well as to study the motivations that impel them to do so and the ways the apparent variety of forms may hide some universality in the structure. It is interesting to bear in mind that religions have an extraordinary power to claim they produce something new by always doing the same thing, and at the same time to innovate by claiming continuity and faithfulness.

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