R

Religion

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Synonyms

Atheism; Beliefs; Fundamentalism; Religiosity; Spirituality

Introduction

In interaction with family, environmental, cultural, and life factors, personality traits the meaning is that PT and ID, in interaction w. FEC&L factors, and individual differences in cognition, emotion, and morality may help us to understand why and how people, within and across societies, differ on their attitudes and trajectories regarding faith, spirituality, and atheism, and how these differences may affect various life domains of individuals, groups, and societies.

Continuous and Accumulative Research on Personality and Religion

In the early beginnings of psychology, William James, in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*, has already distinguished between a "sick soul" and a "healthy-minded" religiosity. Since then, psychological research on religion, personality traits, and other individual differences has been ongoing, systematic, accumulative, and productive of a nice and coherent set of results (Piedmont and Wilkins 2013; Saroglou 2015; Miller and Worthington 2012).

Like personality psychology in general, this research has historically been focused rather on Western cultural contexts of Christian traditions, mostly Protestant and Catholic, but has more recently been extended to other cultural and religious contexts – almost the whole world. This research has often been based on cross-sectional studies and self-reported measures, but more recently has also used alternative sources of information and more modern methodological designs and statistical analyses: peer ratings, life data, and quantitative content analyses; implicit, behavioral, physiological, and neuropsychological measures; experimental, longitudinal, genetic, and international studies; multilevel analyses, cross-cultural comparisons, and meta-analyses (Saroglou 2014).

All major taxonomies of personality traits have been taken into consideration, with a particular emphasis in the last thirty years on the (Big) five-factor model of personality and the Eysenck PEN Model of personality, without excluding the HEXACO model or investigation of psychological types rather than traits. Beyond research on religion and personality traits, strictly speaking, and related cognitive, emotional, and behavioral

tendencies, as well as underlying explanatory processes, existing research has also investigated how religion interferes with other personality-related psychological constructs. These include motivations, needs, values, social attitudes, and vocational interests; intelligence and mental and emotional abilities; and personality's life outcomes at the individual and the group level (Saroglou 2014, 2015).

Research Questions and Definitional Issues

Several theoretical, descriptive, and explanatory questions have been of interest. Is religiosity (or spirituality) a personality dimension? How does it integrate into personality theory? Do religious believers overall differ in their personality from those low in religiosity and the non-believers? Does personality, alone or in interaction with contextual factors, predict religiosity or does religion impact personality? May personality explain genetic influences on religiosity? Moreover, are there personality specifics of different forms of religiosity (religious believing/practicing, fundamentalism, nonreligious spirituality, intrinsic vs. extrinsic religiosity) and various forms of irreligion (atheists, agnostics, "nones," religiously indifferent)? Similarly, can personality explain distinct religious trajectories (religiosity by socialization, conversion, de-conversion/apostasy) and religious vocational "careers" (clergy, mystics, saints)? How do age, gender, and culture moderate the religion-personality links? Finally, the personality characteristics of religiosity may help us to theorize about the psychological, including the evolutionary, functions of religion, and related individual differences. A concise synthesis of what we know today on *some* of the above questions will be presented below.

Some have argued that spirituality is itself a personality dimension, probably a basic and universal one, in addition to the basic personality traits (Piedmont and Wilkins 2013). Many personality psychologists however prefer a more prudent consideration of spirituality as a specific way – rather, a specific combination of ways, all including a reference to some kind of transcendence external to humans – to deal with universal existential questions, ultimate concerns and life goals, moral issues and values hierarchies, and personal and group identities. (Religiosity is thus conceived as one particular, historically dominant, form of spirituality as integrated into religious institutions – alternatively, modern spirituality can be conceived as a new form of traditional religiosity.) If anything, theoretically and empirically, spirituality/religiosity is better conceived as a sui generis dimension of individual differences, much closer to values and social attitudes rather than to personality traits, strictly speaking (Saroglou 2015).

Not surprisingly thus, the links of religiosity with personality traits are typically weak on size. However, what is remarkable is the high consistency of (a) the links with certain traits and (b) the absence of links with other traits.

Prosocial, Tenderminded, and Affiliative Dispositions

Overall, across both genders, all age periods, all world regions, all major personality models and measures, all major religions and religious forms, including fundamentalism, and respective measures, religious people are characterized by *prosocial, tenderminded, and affiliative tendencies at the interpersonal sphere*, at least in contexts where the in/outgroup distinction is not activated. These tendencies include (a) agreeableness, as in the five-factor and the HEXACO models, (b) low psychoticism, as in the Eysenck's model, (c) preference of the feeling over the thinking dimension in the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, as well as (d) valuing benevolence, conformity, and tradition in Schwartz's model of values (Saroglou 2010, 2015).

The association is weak in size, with the mean r of the religiosity-agreeableness correlations being of .16 to .19. This means that the non-believers have still 41% of chance to also be agreeable. This effect also may, to some extent, be amplified – but not fully explained – by impression management and positive self-perception biases (Sedikides and

Gebauer 2010). Nevertheless, the prosocial quality of the religious personality is impressively consistent across studies; is often confirmed by various kinds of peers, not necessarily family members; and is reflected in several subtler constructs, such as valuing forgiveness and compassion, not appreciating aggressive music and aggressive humor, or not endorsing a social dominance orientation. Finally, and more importantly, it is often, but not necessarily (see the personality-behavior partial discrepancy), translated into behaviors of volunteering, generosity, and helping of peers in need (Saroglou 2015).

Nevertheless, probably because religiosity, in addition to agreeableness, is also related to conscientiousness and globally unrelated to openness to experience (see below), overall, religious prosociality, when it comes to behavior, is often *minimal*, that is, restricted to actions with low costs, *conditional* to other "moral" principles (e.g., purity, loyalty, authority) potentially conflicting with care and justice, and *limited* in scope, since it does not extend to value-threatening outgroup members. Furthermore, as recent evidence from international studies suggests, the cultural context importantly moderates the above, though not in highly coherent way across studies. The association between religiosity and agreeableness attenuates when one shifts from religious to secular countries, probably because the conformity component of agreeableness pushes people having grown in religious countries and families to adhere to the normative religious worldviews (Gebauer et al. 2014). It may also be that, in secular contexts, agreeable people can find alternative to religious, secular humanitarian ways to express their prosocial aspirations. However, and somehow on the contrary, prosocial and moral behavior of religious people turns out to be more pronounced in secular compared to religious countries, probably because in the former contexts religiosity is more intrinsic in motivation (Saroglou 2017).

Finally, the association between religion and prosocial personality tendencies is so pervasive that it has become part of people's stereotypes and meta-stereotypes, as well as part of social cognition that can be automatically activated through priming. Believers are usually perceived as prosocial, whereas atheists are perceived as less moral and less prosocial, and both groups know that they are perceived in such a way. Moreover, supraliminal and subliminal activation of religious (Christian, Muslim, or Buddhist) ideas and symbols have often been found to nonconsciously increase accessibility of prosocial ideas and values and amplify behavioral prosocial tendencies (Saroglou 2010, 2014).

Dispositions Toward Personal, Moral, and Social Order and Stability

In addition to agreeableness and the related to it constructs, religiosity, most often, is also related to the broad personality factor of conscientiousness and several respective subtler traits and constructs concerning cognitive styles, emotion management and regulation, and moral preferences and values but also social attitudes and global cultural preferences, all of them reflecting *need for order, structure, control, stability, and social harmony.* Across many studies, this is very often the case for (a) low impulsivity, which is part of psychoticism in the Eysenck's model, (b) honesty-humility, as measured in the HEXACO model, (c) need for closure, (d) ideological and moral conservatism, (e) preference for prevention over promotion focus, and (f) collectivism, be it in individualistic or collectivistic countries.

The positive association between religiosity and conscientiousness is slightly weaker than the one between religiousness and agreeableness (mean effect sizes from .13 to .16). As for agreeableness, the religiosity-conscientiousness link may also be, to some extent, amplified – but not eliminated – by self-positivity biases such as appearing as morally integer to others and to the self. This has led to some interesting studies documenting religious moral hypocrisy or at least discrepancy between beliefs and acts, for instance, regarding honesty, forgiving, and the distinction between persons and acts when judging homosexuality. Nevertheless, peer ratings, associations of religiosity with typical life

outcomes of conscientiousness, and behavioral evidence overall confirm the meaningfulness and pervasiveness of the religion-conscientiousness link. Furthermore, priming religious ideas has been found to enhance behavioral honesty as well as self-control, especially when the latter was previously threatened (Saroglou 2010, 2015).

The above findings help us to understand religiosity's affinities with specific psychological functioning in various life domains: beliefs (high endorsement of just world beliefs, which postulate the existence of order in the universe, as well as anthropomorphic biases in perception), thinking styles and reasoning (preference for holistic and intuitive rather than analytic thinking), values (low endorsement of hedonism and self-direction), sexuality and marriage (low sexual promiscuity and disapproving of attitudes and acts reflecting disengagement and "fun for fun" motives), living styles (low alcohol and substance use, low risk-taking), work (endorsing the so-called "Protestant work ethic," even by non-Christian religionists), and politics (some preference for right over left wing parties, while avoiding the extreme right wing) (Saroglou 2014).

Note that, overall, the above pattern of findings holds well for monotheistic religious contexts, that is, for people and world regions of Christian, Muslim, and Jewish traditions. At this moment, it is unclear whether this pattern also applies or not, and if yes, to what extent, to Eastern religious contexts. Several recent studies – surveys, international data analyses, and lab experiments – converge to the idea that conscientiousness and the related needs for control, order, coherence, and stability are less or no typical of Eastern religions and religiosity, or at least are not extended so pervasively across all life domains (Saroglou 2017).

Furthermore, the link between religiosity and conscientiousness importantly attenuates if not disappears in secularized countries. This finding suggests that religiousness, in these contexts, does no more reflect conformity to the societal norms and/or is no more a mean to achieve social cohesion (Gebauer et al. 2014). Similarly, in non-religious countries, the otherwise positive link

between individual religiosity and well-being – whose most relevant personality predictor is conscientiousness – disappears, very likely because religion is no more a socially valued way to compensate, and get self-control when facing with, difficult socioeconomic situations.

Positive Versus Negative Emotionality and High Versus Low Openness

Beyond the role of agreeableness and conscientiousness, two traits thought by some scholars to represent the "character" component of personality, three other basic personality traits seem overall unrelated to religiosity in general. This is the case for the supposedly more heavily "temperamental" traits denoting positive and negative emotionality, that is, (a) extraversion and (b) neuroticism, as well as (c) openness to experience which includes high versus low flexibility and search for novelty and complexity in both the intellectual and experiential domains. This means that, at least when religious worldviews and communities are salient and valued, it is people with prosocial and personal and social order-oriented dispositions who are more likely to be interested and invest on religion, but not necessarily people who are extraverted or introverted, emotionally stable or neurotic, or, finally open-minded or closedminded (Saroglou 2010).

Nevertheless, high or low extraversion, neuroticism, and openness to experience tend to characterize either religiosity in specific cultural and religious contexts or certain specific forms of religiosity. For instance, there is some evidence that religiosity in North America slightly also reflects extraversion, very possibly for cultural (high social desirability of extraversion) and religious (charismatic Protestantism) reasons (Saroglou 2017). Neuroticism-like tendencies, including insecure attachment, also often predispose to religious doubting and exit from religion, at least in social and family contexts where religion is well valued. They are also present among people who join marginal and/or radical religious groups.

More importantly, low openness to experience, which is followed by authoritarianism and

religious and ethnic prejudice, is the most typical personality characteristic of religious fundamentalists, and this across all monotheistic traditions (mean association of .21). Inversely, people scoring high in (often nonreligious) spirituality tend to clearly be high on openness to experience (mean effect size of .18). Preliminary evidence also suggests positive, though extremely weak, associations of religiosity with openness to experience in some European secular contexts of Protestant tradition, as well as in East Asian religions and cultures, what may favor religious and ethnic tolerance instead of prejudice. Finally, there exists some negative association between religiosity and intelligence, but this link seems to be importantly due to socioeconomic and sociocultural factors (Saroglou 2010, 2015, 2017).

Conclusion: Causal Directions Between Personality and Religion

Existing evidence overall disconfirms the intuitive idea that religiosity – which shows an important life span rank-order stability – and changes on it should impact personality (stability) and personality changes, at least if by personality, we refer to the basic global traits. Such changes, for instance, following a conversion, are rather observed at the second and third levels of personality that include goals, values, meaning, and identity. On the contrary, several longitudinal studies have repetitively shown that agreeableness and conscientiousness, measured in childhood or adolescence, can predict later adult religiosity, and decrease on these traits can predict decrease in religiosity. Nevertheless, personality changes alone cannot well explain changes on religiosity. The impact of openness to experience seems stronger, this trait longitudinally predicting and to some extent explaining changes in and increase of spirituality (Saroglou 2010). More complex designs of studies should better investigate how personality dispositions interact with (a) cognitive and social developmental changes, (b) family variables like parents' religious socialization and quality of attachment, (c) cultural factors like the mean level of religiosity versus secularization and

the positive versus negative socioeconomic conditions, and (d) life events that are negative versus positive ones and affect or not the self, in predicting later (ir) religiosity and different trajectories with regard to religion, spirituality, and atheism.

It is yet not fully clear whether personality tendencies, that is, cross-sectional correlates and longitudinal predictors of religiosity and religious trajectories, should be understood as explaining/ mediating genetic and/or environmental influences on religiosity. Or, alternatively, whether both personality and religiosity are outcomes of common genetic – and environmental – influences. (Note also that religious homogamy, that is, the fact that people tend to get married with individuals sharing the same religion and similar attitudes toward religion, may be responsible for strengthening both genetic and shared environmental influences.) Overall, and contrary to what is the case for basic personality traits, shared environmental influences on religiosity are much stronger than genetic influences. Nevertheless, several studies have also confirmed that genetic influences on religiosity, though weak if not absent in childhood and adolescence, become, like for personality traits, stronger in early adulthood, possibly because of the autonomy young adults take from their family. Interestingly, recent studies documented genetic influences on religiosity that are common with the ones on the following personality characteristics: agreeableness and antisocial (low) and altruistic behavior; conscientiousness, existential uncertainty, and community integration; and (low) openness to experience (Kandler and Riemann 2013; Lewis and Bates 2013).

In conclusion, being or becoming a religious believer or an atheist, though importantly due to early socialization and significant life events, also depends on certain personality dispositions. Some of them tend to be universal and some others culture-specific. Both genetic and environmental influences seem responsible for that. Effects of the "religious personality" can be observed across most life domains at the intra-individual, interpersonal, intergroup, and societal levels.

Cross-References

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