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The Roots of Religion

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Integrative Science Symposium: Religion Past and Present



For as long as modern human beings have existed, ritual has played a part in the development and promotion of group life. Such rituals include hunting, gathering, waging war, creating artwork, and more. To these activities, psychological scientists at the inaugural International Convention of Psychological Science in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, added another category: religious and spiritual rituals.

Evolutionary psychology researcher Pascal R. Boyer (Washington University in St. Louis) argued that, for most of human existence, spiritual pursuits have comprised several distinct phenomena rather than one group of behaviors: “Religion is like trees. ... If you’re a landscape designer or if you are a lover of nature, the category ‘tree’ is useful. But if you’re a biologist, ‘trees’ are not a useful category. There is no such thing as ‘trees,’” but rather subsets of trees that differ markedly from one another, he said.

Although religious behaviors at first might seem less essential than rituals that ensure people’s survival, they often fulfill pragmatic needs.

Oftentimes, people engage in religious practices for practical purposes, Boyer said. “It’s because someone is sick, or to make sure someone doesn’t fall sick, or [to ensure] that crops are good and abundant.”

Such spiritual endeavors historically took the form of paying obeisance to superhuman beings or supernatural concepts, he continued. However, “there are lots of possible conceptual combinations that are supernatural and of great interest to human beings, but only some of them ‘make it,’ as it were, in cultural transmission.” Floating islands, for example, are found in some cultures’ mythologies but are not commonly recognized worldwide; fairies and ghosts, on the other hand, are widespread and well-known.

Superhuman beings compose another such subset of religious beliefs, the psychological scientist said. Involvement with such beings includes ancestor worship, spiritual connection through designated people such as shamans or voodoo priests, and consultation of individual specialists who focus on one area of life or death.

Boyer said the monolithic religion of today's society, which largely is composed of specific guilds and organizations (e.g., priesthood and branches of Christianity), is a relatively recent development. Unlike the rituals and sacrifices of the past, doctrines that emerge from these enterprises "link personal intuitive morality — a sense of what is fair and unfair — to cosmic features; that is, the world is supposed to be fair and governed by gods that are fair. This is the kind of religion that we're familiar with, but again, we have to remember that it is exceptional."

Personality Variations

Social/personality psychologist Vassilis Saroglou, who directs the Centre for Psychology of Religion at the Catholic University of Louvain, Belgium, reports a consistent connection between religiosity and personality — specifically, two of the so-called Big Five personality traits: agreeableness and conscientiousness. The strongest religious roots likely are present in individuals who are both agreeable and conscientious and also are raised in religious households, he said. In contrast, individuals who are both agreeable and conscientious but grow up in secular families are less likely to be traditionally religious but "will find other ways to express [their] personality tendencies — for instance, by becoming secular humanitarian[s]."

The variation in personality, Saroglou continued, can be seen as an adaptive mechanism. He cited three major theories that support this argument: the frequency-dependence hypothesis, which hinges on the advantages of behavioral variation; the fluctuating-optimum hypothesis, which suggests that there are ideal levels of personality variations in society, but that these levels vary across times and locations; and the trait-contingency hypothesis, which posits that one trait becomes more salient as a function of other, copresent traits — in this instance, that agreeableness is heightened in the context of coexisting conscientiousness in an individual.

Saroglou suggested these theories can be applied to individual differences in religiosity, too.

"We perhaps need both believers and nonbelievers, and that is what is adaptive," he said.

The advantages of being a believer might include "personal stability, social compliance, and a kind of moral self-transcendence in terms of self-control and in-group prosociality," but costs involve "rigidity in ideas, values, and strong in-group identification," which can lead to intergroup conflict and prejudice, he remarked.

Nonbelievers, on the other hand, may benefit society in terms of their "autonomy, creativity, the capacity to contest the social order and the social norms, and the capacity for plasticity," he said.

The disadvantages of being an atheist, he noted, might include “too much materialism in society, individualism, a kind of temporary social disorder, and, to some extent, lower subjective well-being.”

Whether religion is adaptive or maladaptive may depend on the type of society in which it exists, Saroglou said.

“Religiosity may be more adaptive and more useful in dysfunctional societies, and atheism is perhaps more useful and more adaptive in successful societies,” he said. “Indirect evidence in favor of this idea comes from international data showing that mean levels of religiosity by country are higher in societies that are dysfunctional in terms of lower democracy, lower social security, and lower income equality as well as higher rates of diseases, mortality, suicide, poverty, and unemployment.”

Because of this societal-level data, a promising area of interdisciplinary research might be an examination of the combined effects of personality, family socialization, and environment on religiosity or lack thereof, Saroglou suggested.

Ritual

Harvey Whitehouse (University of Oxford, United Kingdom) advises dividing religion into its myriad component features, “each of which may be underpinned by quite different psychological mechanisms with different evolutionary histories associated with them.”

One of these features, said Whitehouse, is ritual. When individuals in groups perform rituals together, those actions and behaviors create tight-knit bonds. In the case of life-changing, emotionally intense rituals (think of traumatic initiation rites), these can trigger identity fusion — a “visceral sense of oneness with the group. For a highly fused individual, it’s as if, when the group becomes salient, the personal self becomes less so; it’s as if we lose ourselves in the group,” Whitehouse said. Consequently, when the group is threatened, it can feel quite personal, leading to extreme behavior.

Whitehouse described two forms of identity fusion: local (e.g., family, friends) and extended (e.g., country, religion, ethnic group). Interestingly, the language of psychological kinship (e.g., “members of my country are like family to me”) is associated with extended as well as with local fusion.

Whitehouse and his colleagues have been exploring the role of shared dysphoric experiences in triggering identity fusion. Frightening, painful, and stressful occasions “tend to be remembered more enduringly and vividly than other kinds of experiences, to the extent that people reflect on them and come to develop a self-narrative about [how those events have shaped the self],” Whitehouse said. When these experiences are shared, they produce heightened levels of fusion.

At the end of the Arab Spring revolution in Libya in 2011, Whitehouse and his student Brian McQuinn measured fusion in a survey of 179 insurgents in Misrata. In a sample that was composed of both frontline fighters and logistical supporters, they found that all revolutionaries had extremely high levels of fusion with their families and with fellow fighters both within and outside of their own battalions, but almost no fusion with sympathetic noncombatants, who hadn't "faced the horrors of frontline combat" and thus had not shared the dysphoric experiences.

When the researchers compared the fusion levels of logistical supporters with those of the active-duty combatants, they found that nearly half of the fighters who had faced the most traumatic ordeals of frontline combat were more fused with friends in their battalions than with their families, whereas most of those who had faced less extreme experiences in the conflict were significantly more fused with family than with fellow fighters — although it is unclear whether shared dysphoric experiences led to fusion or vice versa. Further studies of fusion levels among US veterans from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, however, suggest that it is indeed dysphoric experiences that produce high levels of fusion, since such veterans have little control over their deployment and therefore over the intensity of exposure to the horrors of frontline combat, Whitehouse said.

Research on fusion could have important implications for resolving conflicts between religious groups, Whitehouse concluded. For example, armed combatants could be subtly primed to reevaluate the transformative power of dysphoric experiences or to question the extent to which they are really shared by others, and civilians could harness the power of fusion to rebuild societies after a war.

Activism and Community

Psychological scientist Jacqueline S. Mattis (University of Michigan) examines the ways and extent to which people "apply ideological systems to a willingness to live well in the world" (e.g., to act morally and compassionately). Her research is based on four major theological themes: faith as a landscape for contemplation of the extraordinary; divine improvisation (the idea that deities can affect change that otherwise would be impossible); deauthorization (the presumption that divine expectations supersede human expectations); and authentic relationships (with oneself and with others in one's community). Religion is both an individual and a cultural experience, especially among African Americans, whose spirituality inherently is connected with slavery and with histories of oppression, she explained. When Africans were brought to the United States as slaves, their religious and spiritual systems were disrupted and they were "Christianized" by force. But eventually, Mattis said, religious faith itself became a mechanism of bonding and community building.

"The history of racism and oppression certainly hasn't gone away in the United States ... [it is] still very much a part of what African Americans have to grapple with in their everyday thinking

about what it means to be people of faith, but also what it means to be people of faith in a system that continues to be oppressive,” she added.

African Americans have taken ownership of that legacy by building strong religious ties and communities on three levels: organizational (e.g., within-church activities), nonorganizational (e.g., prayer, social media interactions, individual ritualistic processes), and subjective religiosity (e.g., the extent to which people say they are religious).

These three domains, Mattis said, are associated with a variety of mental health outcomes including depression, anxiety, stress, emotional and behavioral self-regulation, optimism, pessimism, forgiveness, civic involvement, and altruism. To positively influence these outcomes in the face of racism, most African American churches have adopted “liberationist” themes such as love, justice, and hope.

“In the context of racial injustice, church was a space where people were treated with dignity and compassion,” Mattis explained.

Religiosity also serves as a basis for activism, such as the Black Lives Matter movement that has originated in the wake of accusations of police brutality and police shootings of unarmed Black men, she said. This activism also can be reinforced internally through “expressive supports” such as family and domestic violence counseling, “instrumental supports” such as food and clothing distribution and emergency financial aid, and joint “expressive–instrumental supports” such as education, mentoring, and life-skills training.

Mattis emphasized that the history of religion in African American communities is complex and evolving.

“African American theology becomes a context for thinking about, ‘What is God’s role in this extraordinary historical arc?’” she concluded. “History is an arc of extremes, but those extremes require us to think differently about how faith operates. The same history that includes a legacy of slavery includes a Toni Morrison and a Barack Obama.”