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Is religiousness a form of variation in personality, or in culture, or neither? Conceptual issues and empirical indications

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Abstract

It has become widely recognized that religiousness has a predictable pattern of small associations with Big Five personality dimensions, and has some intersections with cultural psychology. But just how large are those culture-religiosity intersections, and are there additional associations with personality when one extends beyond the restricted spectrum represented by Big Five traits? Moreover, do the answers to these questions depend on how religiousness is defined and measured? I argue that, both conceptually and empirically, religiousness itself meets the criteria for a personality dimension (including stability, heritability, and other grounds), and is simultaneously for the most part a cultural phenomenon reflecting often widely shared sets of beliefs, values, worldviews, and norms. The patterns of modest associations with other personality dimensions, from the Big Five and beyond, are consistent with both arguments. A distributive model of culture, under which culture is aggregated personalities (and especially mindsets) helps make sense of these relations. Tradition-oriented religiousness tends to have a prominent position in enduring-order (as contrasted with evolving-order) cultures, which helps account for its occasional expressions in political religion. In contrast, mystical spirituality is more prone to manifest as a sub-cultural phenomenon peripheral to mainstream culture. But for either conception—religiousness or spirituality—the same personality-and-culture propositions appear to hold. Nonetheless, religiousness seems not totally reducible to a variable for personality or cultural psychology, and considerations are introduced regarding what that irreducible element is most likely to be.

Keywords

Cultural psychology, personality, religion, religiosity, spirituality

Empirical aspects of religiousness are of interest both to personality psychology and cultural psychology. Is religiousness a form of variation in personality, or in culture, or neither? Here, I will argue that religiousness can be seen as a major phenomenon of personality, but simultaneously can

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be seen as a major phenomenon of culture. And I will draw on empirical research to support this argument.

If it's true that religiousness can be seen as personality, or culture, or both, this might seem to make for a confusing situation. What then is distinct about the psychology of religion? Does this mean a potential identity crisis for the psychology of religion? There is, however, a model for personality-culture relations that reduces the confusion. Moreover, aspects of religiousness and spirituality might be decomposed into those more reducible to personality, or reducible to culture, as well as perhaps some aspects reducible to neither. So there may be no need for identity crisis.

Religiousness and personality

The most classic finding on religiousness and personality is that first presented by Saroglou (2002). It draws on the well-known Big Five personality model (e.g. De Raad, 2000), which posits five basic dimensions of Extraversion, Emotional Stability, Intellect (or Imagination or Openness), Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness. In Saroglou's meta-analysis, religiousness showed positive associations—of small effect size—with Big Five Agreeableness and Conscientiousness dimensions. The meta-analysis showed Big Five "Openness" to be little associated with religiousness, but to have (medium-size) associations positively with spirituality, and negatively with fundamentalism.

One can, however, question just how inevitable or basic the Big Five dimensions are. De Raad (2000) pointed out the origins of the Big Five in selections of (by contemporary standards) very small numbers of variables made by Cattell, Fiske, Norman, and others. Appearing to counteract this original problem, the most classic (and highly cited) finding regarding the Big Five involves the work of Goldberg (1990). It found that factor analysis of very large (540- to 1710-term), arguably representative, sets of English-language personality-descriptive adjectives led predictably to recognizable Big Five factors, regardless of which method of factor extraction or rotation one uses.

Still, Goldberg's findings have the obvious limitations that they focus only on adjective descriptors, and only from one language (English). Moreover, recent re-analyses of Goldberg's data-sets (Saucier & Iurino, 2019), find even more significant limitations, revealing a distinct method-dependence in the classic results. These re-analyses show that four-factor structures are more replicable than five, and structures with three and two factors even more so. Even more surprisingly, there are structures with far more than five factors that have a reasonably high level of robustness (i.e. replicability, stability), provided that one does not adhere to the particular method (in Goldberg, 1990) of analyzing just 75–100 clusters with reliance on ipsatized (row-standardized) data and varimax rotation. That is, if one analyzes single terms and examines also results with original data and other factor-rotation methods (oblimin, equamax).

Saucier and Iurino (2019) found the most robust high-dimensionality structure to have 20 factors, what might be called the "lexical 20" or Lex-20. This structure tended to arise predictably not only from Goldberg's data-sets but also a non-US adjective-based data-set from Lee and Ashton (2008). And it was shown to be both substantially more comprehensive and more predictive of useful criterion variables than the Big Five. The 20 factors include some that look very much like narrow versions of Big Five factors (Anxiety, Talkativeness, Creativity/Imagination, Politeness, Order/Efficiency), others that could be considered as variant aspects of the Big Five though in fact being relatively independent of the first five (Emotionality/Soft-heartedness, Enthusiasm, Intellect/Knowledge, Patience vs Irritability, Dependability), and yet others that are but distantly assimilable to a Big Five model (Fear-proneness, Directness/Decisiveness, Reflectiveness, Humility vs Egotism, Thrift/Practicality). The remaining five factors are the most remote from the Big Five. These include Truthfulness (vs Deceit), Cunning, Sophistication, and Prejudice/Bigotry. And, they include a factor appearing as either Traditionalism OR Spirituality/Religiousness, which form this

factor takes is rather dependent on variable selection, but in either form it is highly relevant to the psychology of religion. And the relative independence of such a factor from other personality factors, such as the Big Five, has been noted by others (e.g. Piedmont, 1999).

A strong claim for the importance of the Big Five has been its basis in patterns of semantic representation in language. One can easily make a semantic-richness argument for the importance of personality attributes associated with religiousness. Consider, for example, this list of such adjective-descriptors sedimented in the English language, able to be plucked from a dictionary: Devout, Evangelistic, God-fearing, Mystical, Pious, Prayerful, Preachy, Prophetic, Puritanical, Religious, Reverent, Saintly, Spiritual, Ultrareligious, Ultraspiritual, and Worshipful. That list leaves out the many other descriptors relevant to non-religiousness: Blasphemous, Godless, Heretical, Impious, Irreligious, Irreverent, Nonreligious, Nonspiritual, Undevout, Unreligious, Unsaintly, and Unspiritual. It is little surprise, then, that serious analysis of English-language personality-descriptive adjectives could lead to a religiousness-related dimension.

How might one reconcile such a high-dimensionality structure of personality with the classic finding of Saroglou (2002)? Recall that there Agreeableness, Conscientiousness showed small levels of associations with religiousness (and each other). In a Lex-20 model, these small-effect associations translate into three (or more) distinct factors. The prediction from the model would be that religiousness will have large-effect relations with none of the other 19 personality factors in the Lex-20. As for what Saroglou (as many others) labeled the "Openness to Experience" factor, there has never been an exact factor of this sort isolated in studies of the natural language of personality, and moreover has demonstrated some problems with cultural bias and cross-cultural replicability, making for a complex topic not appropriate to this discussion.

One might object to the notion that religiousness (or even traditionalism) is a personality variable. But personality is typically defined in terms of patterns of behavior, feeling, and thinking that characterize individuals (e.g. Funder, 2013, p. 5) with considerable stability across time (and situations). Religiousness certainly represents patterns of thinking (and associated behavior and feeling) that characterize individuals. Measures of religiousness show cross-time stability as high as (if not higher than) that for personality traits; Saucier (2008) found a 4-year stability of .85 for tradition-oriented religiousness, and Saucier and Skrzypińska (2006) found that the single adjective "Religious" had a stability approaching .80 across 3- or 9-year spans. Moreover, religiousness descriptors fit into adjective sentence-frames just as smoothly as personality terms (e.g. Jan is very extraverted, and calm and modest . . . and religious!).

My conclusion, based on the foregoing considerations, is that religiousness (and spirituality, and other related attributes) is, at least in good part, a personality variable. It is a disposition, a stable-across-time individual-differences characteristic that reflects a recurrent pattern of thinking (maybe a pattern of behavior and emotions as well). Moreover, it constitutes a personality variable that is virtually independent of a large number of other personality dimensions. But, going farther, it is more than just a personality variable.

Religiousness and culture

"Culture' can be defined in diverse ways. But common features of prominent definitions of culture—particularly those found in cultural anthropology (e.g. Hill, 2009)—depict culture as various mental-psychological tendencies (held as values, beliefs, worldviews, norms, rules, etc.) that are shared between individuals within a population, and are passed on to a new generation of some kind. Based on this definition, it is easy to think of a religion as a package of cultural contents, as a broad model or blueprint of what a whole culture might be (if everyone adhered to the religion). And it is easy to think of religiousness as a broad psychological tendency to adhere to some set of

beliefs, values, views about the world, and norms or rules for behavior, whatever such set or sets are considered most conventional for a given society.

Indeed, religiousness is a topic within cultural psychology as typically currently taught. Prominent examples of religiousness-related content in cultural psychology would include moral ethics distinct to the religious, such as Shweder's (1991) "divinity ethic" and Haidt's "moral foundation" of purity or sanctity (Haidt & Joseph, 2008). They would include Cohen's research on the morality of thoughts, that is, work indicating how religion affects whether it is considered a significant sin to have a bad thought.

Another example, which speaks to a particularly important place for religiousness within cultural psychology, comes from research by my own group (Saucier et al., 2015), based on a "Survey of World Views" administered in 2012 in 33 countries. The prime research question was "on which kinds of (potentially) psychological variables do societies differ most—presumably in a 'cultural' way?" Questionnaire data were collected online from 8883 individuals (almost entirely college students, based on local publicizing efforts), of whom about 90% provided analyzable data. The countries were selected based in large part on high population, so that the population of the 33 countries involved, when totaled, constitutes over 2/3 of the world's population. Participants were paid via Amazon or Western Union. They responded to 281 items drawn from measures of nearly 50 culturally relevant variables, such as values, collectivism/individualism, tightness/looseness, social norms, social axioms, moral foundations, social attitudes (isms dimensions), violence-prone ideology, and self-ascriptions of personality (see Saucier et al., 2015 for further details). Also included was a measure of religious involvement and commitment (using the Duke Religion Index; Koenig et al., 1997). To identify the degree to which each variable showed cultural differences, we examined two related statistics capturing the portion of the total variance in an item that is due to country differences: eta-squared and intraclass correlation (ICC(1))[1] these being calculated both in original and ipsatized (row/subject-standardized) data, the latter enabling some control for differences in use of the response scale (i.e. acquiescence, extreme or middle responding).

Anyone familiar with major aspects of the research literature would predict what should occur in the way of results. The most substantial differences between countries (presumably cultures) should arise with popular, conventional variables in cross-cultural psychology: collectivism and individualism, tight versus loose culture, Schwartz values (e.g. Self-Transcendence, Conservation; S. H. Schwartz, 1992), and social axioms. But these popular variables showed only modest (medium effect-size) differences. Instead, the largest differences were on items associated with religious practice and belief. Secondarily, there were fairly large differences in ethnonationalism, and regularity norms involving either family living arrangements (might be called "family collectivism"), or belief in ancestor spirits, spirit possession, trance, and sorcery or witchcraft. Values regarding family roles—valuing what might be called father-dominance, patri-centered, or "patriarchal" family organization—also showed fairly large country differences. These latter variables also tend to have an at least indirect connection to religiousness.

How to make sense of *religiousness* being such a prime cultural variable? I have argued (Saucier, 2017) that this traces to religiousness being associated with an important cultural continuum, which defines two fundamentally different types of societies, with a large proportion of societies being somewhere between the extremes. On one extreme are "enduring-order" societies, which emphasize shared meaning in a cultural worldview, a constant tradition involving a "sacred" realm of life, with culture being transmitted primarily vertically from the past, with extensive "postfigurative" (Mead, 1970) socialization from elders to youth, and accordingly more 'tribalism' (emphasizing ties of blood and common ancestry). At the other extreme are "evolving-order" societies, which emphasize technological innovation and material security, and transition rather than tradition, focused more on a secular realm, and on evoked culture that emerges from adapting to external

factors; here culture is more "cofigurative" (Mead, 1970), with much peer-to-peer socialization, with more "intertribalism" and emphasis on superordinate (e.g. civic) ties. Religions, after the early stage of convention-busting religious innovation, tend to align with the enduring-order trends in culture, as do other large-effect cultural variables like ethnonationalism, familial collectivism, and patriarchalism.

Religiousness, then, can easily be studied as a cultural variable. But also, by one criterion—what currently shows the largest differences between societies around the world—it is the most important cultural variable. In other words, religiousness tends to show distinctly large differences between countries compared to the degree of differences within countries. This yields a puzzle. Religiousness can be understood as a personality variable, but also as an important cultural variable. Can it really be both? How can something be both personality and culture?

Spirituality and religiousness at the nexus of personality and culture

Similar answers to this question are given by distributive models of culture (Goodenough, 1981; T. Schwartz, 1978; Wallace, 1970), and an epidemiological model of culture (Sperber, 1996). In these sorts of modeling for what culture is, culture is not a group, and is not homogeneous across individuals. Instead culture consists of a pool of representations (ideas, worldviews, values, attitudes, etc.) that vary in how widely distributed they are, and in how enduring they are. That which can be considered the most cultural is that which has the widest distribution across persons and time. Because cultural contents are differentially distributed, a society will tend to be a collection of partially overlapping subcultures. An individual's personality, and especially the thinking components that can be called mind-set, involves a particular constellation of cultural contents. Perhaps the best examples of such culture-personality relations involve dimensions like Sophistication, Prejudice/Bigotry, and Traditionalism or Religiousness. One can readily observe that some subcultures are more urbane and sophisticated, others less, that some have more prejudice and some less, that some are more religious or traditionalistic than others. These are variables that function similarly well in both cultural and personality domains, though other personality dimensions (e.g. creativity, intellect, reflectiveness, politeness, humility, emotionality, directness) also have intriguing applications to cultural difference.

Drawing on a framework from a distributive or epidemiological model of culture, religiousness is simultaneously, in part, both a dimension along which individuals differ, and an important part of [sub]cultural mind-set (shared ideas, beliefs, attitudes, worldview). Thus, religiousness can be seen as culture at the individual level. But is this dual nature equally true of all variants of religiousness? What about, for example, spirituality?

Empirical evidence (e.g. Zinnbauer et al., 1999) indicates more than one dimension in what people consider spirituality. And these reflect empirically evident differences in what people see as a main source of authority and inspiration. Saucier and Skrzypińska (2006) examined the correlates of Tradition-oriented Religiousness (TR) and what they labeled Subjective Spirituality (SS; though it might better be labeled as Spiritism). In data from a large American community sample, TR was distinctly associated with authoritarianism, traditionalism, collectivism, low individualism, and disapproval of evolution, feminism, homosexuality, and drug and alcohol use. SS was distinctly associated with fantasy-proneness, dissociative tendencies, absorption (which is associated with hypnosis-susceptibility), eccentricity, magical ideation, superstitious thinking, and belief in astrology; these are individuals prone to see themselves as spiritual but not religious.

Going beyond the analyses in that 2006 article, one might take the concepts of spiritual and religious and with them define three zones that can be statistically identified wherever "spiritual" and

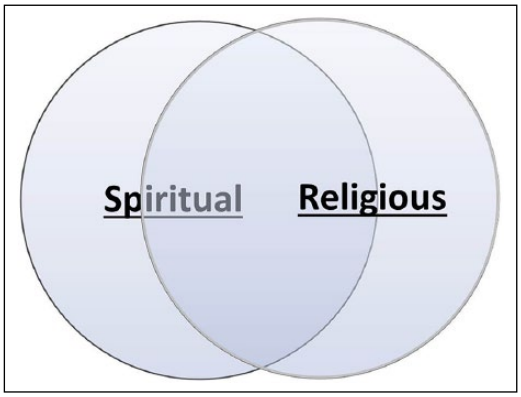

Figure 1. Spiritual and religious as partially overlapping constructs.

"religious" are measured separately. By aggregating or averaging these two variables one can identify those who are both spiritual and religious (versus neither). By partialing religious out of spiritual one can identify the spirituality component independent of religiousness, and by partialing spiritual out of religious one can identify the religiousness component independent of spirituality; by contrasting these two partialed variables one pits spirituality against religiousness as opposites (to whatever, degree they are, in the population). See Figure 1 for an illustration. When this approach is applied to the same community sample data as the 2006 article (a sample recruited under the Mapping Personality Trait Structure and declared exempt by the institutional review board of Oregon Research Institute), it becomes clear that SS tilts decidedly left on spectrum, toward spiritual independent of religious. Tradition-oriented and "attendance-oriented" religiousness (as captured by an item from the Duke Religion Index) tilts right. The difference seems to be between emphasis on private experience, or on public piety and rules/doctrine. When private experience is emphasized, and a worldview is formed more individualistically, aspects of personality can have an outsized influence. On the other hand, when rules, doctrine, and public piety are emphasized, and a worldview is more collectively shared with others, aspects of culture can have an outsized influence.

One might formulate, then, three propositions. (1) Especially where it is individualistic and idiosyncratic, mystical spirituality especially reflects distinct personality tendencies. (2) Though certain personality profiles may be attracted to this variant, a more pious or puritanical or non-spiritual religiousness especially emphasizes cultural aspects of religion. (3) Mixed religiousness/spirituality involves both personality and culture, as more equal contributors. These propositions might be arrived at with a purely conceptual analysis, but they also seem to be in accord with empirical evidence.

In what way is religiousness beyond culture and personality?

To this point, I have indicated that religiousness is a personality variable, but also a cultural variable. And under a distributive or epidemiological model of culture, there is no contradiction in saying it is both. Differentiating spirituality from religiousness, it seems that spirituality is somewhat more prone to reflect the personality aspects, and religiousness more prone to reflect cultural aspects, although each can draw on both. Where does this analysis take us? This analysis might appear to reduce religiousness to being some amalgam of personality and culture, and nothing more. Are any aspects of religiousness—which might be investigated by the psychology of religion—reducible neither to culture nor personality?

I don't have relevant data on this question, but I do have some rational definition-based suggestions regarding where to look for such irreducible elements. Drawing on the definitions of personality and culture referenced above, what is beyond culture would not, in any way, involve shared/transmitted ideas (beliefs, worldviews, etc.) at all. What is beyond personality does not involve thinking (or behavior or emotion), or is not a stable pattern over time. What phenomena would best meet this description?

There are examples of psychological phenomena that are unshared, and either not cognitive/behavioral or not a stable pattern. These phenomena would include out-of-body experiences, momentary mystical phenomenology, some peak self-actualization experiences, initiation experiences, conversion (and de-conversion) experiences, various epiphanies, and near-death experiences. In his classic *Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James (1985) identified transiency and ineffability (an incapacity to be imparted or transmitted to others) as common features of mysticism, and in so doing James seems to be pointing to aspects of religiousness that are beyond personality and culture, and to aspects of the psychology of religion that cannot be assimilated to either personality or cultural psychology.

At the beginning, I raised the central question: Is religiousness a form of variation in personality, or in culture, or neither? Here, I am going to conclude by simply answering YES. To all three questions, simultaneously.

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Note

1. There is more than one variant of the ICC statistic, and the one used here is what is conventionally labeled ICC(1).

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