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Feeling good, but lacking autonomy:

Closed-mindedness on social and moral issues in New Religious Movements

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Abstract

According to previous research, New Religious Movements (NRMs) seem to have a positive effect on the mental health of members who join NRMs with some previous affective, cognitive or other vulnerabilities. The present study investigates the other, less positive, side of the psychology of NRMs, i.e. elements that may be an obstacle to optimal development, such as rigidity and low autonomy. In comparison to non-NRM members, members of various NRMs in Belgium ($N = 120$) were found to be low in quest religious orientation (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992), to privilege conservation values to the detriment of openness to change values (Schwartz, 1992), to show submissiveness to authority in hypothetical situations (projective measure), and to highly moralize judgments of transgression relative to conventional domains (Turiel, 1983). Discussion points out the idea that rigidity and restriction of autonomy may be the price to be paid for the structuring role NRMs play with regard to previous vulnerabilities.

Key words

New Religious Movements, optimal development, submissiveness, moral judgment.

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Contrary to public perception in the mass media, general audience books, or the discourse of anti-cult movements, empirical research has rather systematically concluded that a) people who join NRMs (small and marginal groups, which are often radical and socially contested as cult-like movements) are not mentally ill; and b) belonging to NRMs is beneficial rather than detrimental to the mental health and well-being of members. More precisely, people who join NRMs are not characterized by psychopathologies but by the presence of some vulnerabilities, especially affective and relational ones; and NRM membership seems to be beneficial with regard to these vulnerabilities and to a variety of parameters relative to mental health such as stress and anxiety, purpose in life, drug consumption, interpersonal relationships, and social support (Aronoff, Lynn, & Malinosky, 2000; Galanter, 1999; Lilliston & Shepherd, 1999; Richardson, 1995; Saliba, 2004).

Studies from a research project carried out recently in Belgium confirm this general pattern. People who are currently members of NRMs (Buxant, Saroglou, Casalfiore, & Christians, 2007) or have been NRM members in the past (Buxant & Saroglou, in press) report high insecurity in parental attachment, high need for closure, and depressive tendencies in the period preceding entrance to the NRM. However, becoming a member of a NRM seems to be followed by security in current adult attachment, positive outlook on the world, absence of depressive tendencies, and optimism for the future (Buxant et al., 2007). This pattern suggesting a positive role of NRM membership in the structuring of mental health with regard to previous vulnerabilities is in line with what Galanter (1999) has called the “relief effect” of belonging to NRMs.

However, the positive and structuring effect of belonging to NRMs on mental health may have significant limitations. First, as a previous study of ex-members of NRMs indicated,

the positive effects of belonging may be strictly dependent on the often fragile adherence to these movements and so quick to disappear once people decide to leave them (Buxant & Saroglou, in press). Belonging to NRMs then may be only a "prosthesis" for the mental health and well-being of members.

Second, and this will be the objective of the present study, belonging to NRMs may have other consequences or at least reflect other realities (in terms of members' personal characteristics) that are not positive for optimal personal development, autonomy, and open-mindedness. NRMs may attract people who are rigid on religious and socio-moral issues, submissive and conformist. Similarly, they may have an impact on the maintenance of submissiveness and rigidity because of their structure, belief system, and practices. We will detail below the four specific hypotheses we made and the corresponding arguments we advanced in the present study in order to investigate this possible threat for optimal development of belonging to NRMs.

*Questioning religious beliefs*

NRMs have been described as providing simple, clear, quick, and easy answers to religious and existential questions people have about the important issues of life (Wilson, 1970). In addition, NRMs – as new, radical, and marginalized groups – are prone to underline the absolute character of their truth, and the non-negotiable character of their ideas, beliefs, and practices. On the contrary, the Churches are accustomed to making compromises that allow them to survive and to remain dominant within society at large (Spilka, Hood, Hunsberger, & Gorsuch, 2003). This distinction originates from Troeltsch's (1912/1931) distinction between the large inclusive "churches" and the dissenting "sects" which tend to be more exclusive. Finally, one can reasonably assume that the maintenance of absolute truth can be enhanced through an unquestionable way of approaching and holding religious beliefs and

ideas, possibly by privileging a simplistic interpretation of the religious texts over a more complex one.

*We thus hypothesized that NRM members would be low in quest religious orientation*. Quest religion has been defined as the inclusion of uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity in religious and existential beliefs, 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). Indeed, quest religious orientation has been found to reflect highly integrative complexity of thought on religious and existential issues (Batson & Raynor-Prince, 1983), low intolerance of others' religious beliefs and values (Hunsberger & Jackson, 2005, for review), and exploration in personal identity (Fulton, 1997; Klaassen & McDonald, 2002). Finally, if NRM members are high in need for cognitive closure, as found in previous studies (Buxant et al., 2007; Buxant & Saroglou, in press), it is reasonable to expect them to be low in quest religiosity: people high in need for closure desire answers instead of keeping questions open, and tend to be intolerant of ambiguity and to reject opinions diverging from their own (Webster & Kruglanski, 1998).

*Conservation versus Openness to change values*

A key-feature of the doctrine of many NRMs is that the truth they possess is not only the unique one but also the most authentic and faithful to an authority – text, group, leader – that often comes from the past (institutional dimension) or is perceived to be in perfect accordance with the original experience (charismatic dimension). In addition, NRMs are characterized by a tendency for high interdependence between beliefs, ideas, practices, norms and everyday rules, a situation that makes the need for maintaining and not challenging the social order very important.

Recent theory and research has established a model of values that encompasses all main human values and has received extensive cross-cultural and behavioral validation (Schwartz, 1992; see also Schwartz & Boehnke, 2004). Inherent links between these values, taken as a set, have been found repeatedly: each value is closer to some other values while at the same time in opposition with others. Schwartz's model distinguishes thus between two almost orthogonal and bipolar axes. The first one opposes conservation values (Tradition, Conformity, and Security) to openness to change values (Self-direction and Stimulation), whereas the second axis opposes self-enhancement (Power and Achievement) versus self-transcendent (Benevolence and Universalism) values. A final value, i.e. Hedonism, is located between the self-enhancement and the openness to change poles. As indicated by previous research, the conservation versus openness to change axis of values predicts low inclination for contact with the out-group (Sagiv & Schwartz, 1995), traditional behaviors (e.g., "observing traditional customs on holidays", "obeying my parents") versus autonomy-related behaviors (e.g., "examining the ideas behind rules and regulations before obeying them") (Bardi & Schwartz, 2003), and preference for center-right versus center-left political parties (in Italy: Caprara, Schwartz, Capanna, Vecchione, & Barbaranelli, 2006).

It is meaningful then to *hypothesize that people who have joined NRMs attribute more importance, in comparison to general population, to values reflecting conservation and less importance to values reflecting openness to change*. Emphasizing one's own independent thoughts, goals, and actions (Self-direction), as well as excitement and challenge in life (Stimulation) would not be part of the values privileged within NRMs. On the contrary, conservation values that refer to submission to external expectations and to personal and social security (Tradition, Conformity, and Security) would be emphasized instead.

*Submissiveness*

Valuing or devaluing the social order and autonomy through a values survey is a self-reported and self-controlled information. We thus investigated whether NRM members would be found to be submissive by using less explicit and in fact projective measures. *We hypothesized that, in comparison to the general population, NRM members would have a tendency to be spontaneously more accepting, obedient, and compliant, and less critical and challenging* with respect to instructions, recommendations, and requests that are meaningless, unjustified, or absurd. Hence, we created a measure that, similarly to the projective nature of Rosenzweig's Picture-Frustration Study (1948), presents a variety of hypothetical everyday life situations where one may be faced with these kinds of instructions, recommendations, or requests (see below in the Method section, for more details).

If orthodoxy is a key feature of the way religious people regulate their cognitions, feelings, and actions in accordance with the religious authority (Deconchy, 1980), one would expect this to be particularly the case in people belonging to small, often radical and marginalized groups such as NRMs, where the religious leader is supposed to be a highly authoritative figure, and where a strict adherence to the groups' beliefs and rules is requested. Note that research from social psychology indicates that people with a high need for closure have a tendency to search for homogeneous and self-resembling groups (Kruglanski, Shah, Pierro, & Mannetti, 2002) as well as to be attached to autocratic leadership and centralized forms of power (Pierro, Mannetti, De Grada, Livi, & Kruglanski, 2003).

*Socio-moral judgments*

Development of research in moral judgment led Turiel (1983) to advance his theory on socio-moral domains where people distinguish between three domains of social transgression and make corresponding judgments: (a) *moral* judgments, which refer to judging

transgressions of universal moral norms, not depending on social authorities ("we can not act in such a way, even if there is no rule prohibiting this behavior"); (b) *conventional* judgments, which depend on conformity to social norms and conventions varying according to the context ("we can't do it if a rule prohibits it, otherwise we can do it"); and (c) *personal* judgments, which refer to decisions based only on personal choice and freedom ("it is not an issue of wrong or right, it just depends on individual choice or preference"). Examples of corresponding situations or transgressions are: lying, stealing, breaking promises, hitting (moral domain); calling parents by their first names, eating with elbows on the table, cursing (conventional domain); not choosing one's own clothes, hobbies, friends, or musical tastes (personal domain).

Previous sociological research emphasized how NRMs or radical religious groups are heavily dualistic in that they classify everything (groups, persons, ideas, practices) into good and evil (e.g., Marty & Appleby, 1995). Overall, the group's world is perceived as good whereas the "external" world is perceived as bad. This means a high moralization of the many domains that constitute people's everyday life. *We thus hypothesized that NRM members have the tendency not to distinguish between the three socio-moral domains, but to excessively moralize all decisions*: moral judgments would be used then, whether the transgression to be judged belonged to the moral, the conventional, or the personal domain ("this is wrong or right universally and independently of personal choices or social conventions"). Interestingly, in a previous study of orthodox religious people (Orthodox Jews and Amish), Nucci and Turiel (1993) found that these people (a) are somewhat aware of the distinction between the three domains (by acknowledging that other people may think differently and so may consider as conventional what they themselves consider as belonging to the moral domain) but (b) apply moral judgments on themselves to a high degree, regardless of the domain of transgression concerned (moral, conventional, or personal).

## Method

*Participants and procedure*

Participants were members of religious groups that are rather new and small in size, somewhat marginal, and often contested by parts of Belgian society. Some of these groups are Christian, and others not, but it is the above-mentioned characteristics that allowed us to consider them as a whole. We first sent a letter to the head(s) of these groups explaining in general terms the study's objectives ("finding individual and situational psychological mechanisms that are related to strong involvement in religiousness and spirituality as they are experienced within specific groups"). Afterwards, we met with the head of each group and specified that our aim was not to do a study on the group itself, but to collect data on the psychological parameters of religiousness among people with strong religious involvement within specific groups. The heads distributed the questionnaires to the members of their groups. They promised not to be selective in the distribution. Those NRM members who accepted to participate filled in the questionnaire anonymously and sent it directly to the researchers at the expense of the latter. The leaders of the groups, later on, received a summary of the results, which they could communicate to their members if they wished to do so. Individual participants who requested a summary of the results also received one.

In total, 437 questionnaires were given to the heads of the NRMs and 120 (27%) were returned. Participants came from the Belgium Center of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON; $n$ = 19), Charismatic Catholic groups ($n$ = 27), Evangelical Protestant congregations ($n$ = 55), and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons; $n$ = 19). Two groups to whom we addressed our request did not accept to collaborate: the Church of Scientology and the Catholic movement Opus Dei. Finally, we

have to specify that the present study was part of a larger one and that the present sample was totally independent from the one of a previously published study (Buxant et al., 2007).

Mean, minimum, and maximum age were respectively 45 (*SD* = 16.54), 18, and 84. Gender was distributed as follows: 54 men and 56 women (10 did not specify their gender). Most of participants were married (*N* = 65), 35 were single and only 5 were divorced. Five were widowed and 10 didn't mention their social status. Most participants were "first generation" members: only 19% of participants were born into the group or joined it before age 18. This rate nearly falls to zero among members of Charismatic Catholic groups and Mormons.

*Comparison samples*

There is no unique sample of Belgian adults from the general population, and particularly from the French-speaking part of the country, where one can find data on all the measures we used in the present study. Thus, in order to make comparisons between NRM members and the general population possible, 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 reward. To compare the *religiousness* of our participants to the general population, we used a sample of 216 adults (mean age = 38, age range = 30-50, 41% men) from Saroglou (2003). Comparison data used for the *Quest scale* came from Saroglou (2002), a sample of 72 Belgian young adults (mean age = 23, age range = 18-60, 25% men). For the *submissiveness scale*, since previous data were not available, we collected data from 48 Belgian adults (mean age = 40, age range = 18-61, 46 % men). Data concerning the *values priorities* were compared to data from Roviscanec and Saroglou (2007), *N* = 122 (mean age = 40, age range = 18-83, 36% men). Finally, for *social desirability*, we considered Saroglou, Pichon, Trompette,

Verschueren, and Dernelle (2005, Study 4) carried out on 109 adults (mean age = 33, age range = 17-68, 33% men).

*Measures*

*Quest Orientation Scale*. Altemeyer and Hunsberger's (1992) revised version of the 16-item version of the Quest scale (Batson & Schoenrade, 1991) was used. Respondents rated the extent to which they agreed with the 16 sentences 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). Reliability was satisfactory ($\alpha = .73$).

*Schwartz Value Survey* (Schwartz, 1992). This questionnaire assesses the importance (on a 9 point-scale ranging from –1, *opposite to my values*, to 7, *of supreme importance*) of 56 single-value items as guiding principles in life. These 56 items represent 10 distinct value constructs organized in two somewhat orthogonal axes. As mentioned in the Introduction, the first axis opposes self-enhancement values (Power, Achievement, Hedonism) to self-transcendence ones (Benevolence, Universalism), whereas the second one opposes conservation values (Tradition, Conformity, Security) to values of openness to change (Self-direction, Stimulation) (Schwartz, 1992; Schwartz & Boehnke, 2004). Scores on these 10 value types are computed by averaging the each time corresponding single values. For instance, Self-direction is measured as the average of five distinct single value items: independent, curious, choosing own goals, freedom, and creativity. Conformity is measured as the average of the following single values: self-discipline, obedient, politeness, honoring parents and elders. We computed Tradition without the item "devout" in order to avoid an overlap of this value with religion (see also Saroglou & Galand, 2004). Since the leaders of

ISKCON and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints asked for a significant reduction in the length of the protocol, we did not administer the Schwartz Value Survey to these groups; only the Charismatic Catholics and the Evangelical Protestants received it.

*Submissiveness*. Inspired by the pictures and the rationale of the *Rozenzweig Picture Frustration Study* (Rozenzweig, 1948), an instrument that measures aggression as a response to frustration that arises from a variety of depicted situations, we created a projective measure of submissiveness-compliance. Participants were presented 15 pictures depicting social interactions from everyday life between two protagonists linked by an asymmetric relation (i.e. teacher-student, mother-daughter, boss-employee, or sales assistant-customer). The higher status person made an unusual, unjustified or absurd request, recommendation or prohibition. Five additional pictures and corresponding situations not implying asymmetric relations and recommendations or instructions were used as distractors. Participants were invited to imagine and write down (in the empty balloon corresponding to the second protagonist) in one sentence how they would react in the situations depicted.

Two independent judges evaluated responses as submissive (1) or non-submissive (0). We established the following criteria to code the answers. Sentences where the participants accepted and obeyed the request, recommendation or prohibition, or apologized and made excuses were coded as submissive. Sentences implying a refusal to obey, a protest, or an attempt to negotiate, question or challenge (including through humor and irony) the first protagonist's words were coded as non-submissive. Here are two examples of the situations depicted and corresponding answers. In one situation, at a cash desk, the cashier says to the customer: "I can't give you your change, I don't have any change". Participants had the customer answer by saying: (a) "Ah, OK, no problem", "Wait a minute, I will get some change for you" (submissive), or (b) "You'll have to find a solution; it is my money", "That's unbelievable. Where is your boss?" (non-submissive). In another situation, a teacher makes

the following request to a student: “Rewrite your exam because my dog has damaged it”. Representative answers are: (a) “I’ll do it”, “I guess I don’t have a choice” (submissive), or (b) “If you apologize, I might rewrite it” or “It’s your fault, I don’t have time to lose rewriting it. Just make sure you read it carefully” (non-submissive). Finally, from the 15 pictures, one was removed because of weak reliability between judges. In total, 14 pictures were considered (Cohen’s K = .71).

*Social-moral judgments*. Twelve items corresponding to 12 patterns of behavior related to three different domains of possible transgression (moral, conventional, personal) were presented to participants as common conflicts arising in families between adolescents and their parents. We based ourselves on patterns of behavior and items from a study on adolescents by Smetana and Asquith (1994). The 12 hypothetical transgressions were: breaking a promise, hitting or insulting someone, not paying back the money that somebody lent to him, stealing something from someone (*moral domain*); eating a meal seated in an armchair in the living room, leaving his belongings lying about everywhere and not tidying up his things, not greeting someone who is entering the room, speaking spontaneously in an informal or impolite manner to an older person or an authority figure (*conventional domain*); choosing one’s clothes or hairstyle, choosing which subject he will study or the career path he will take, deciding the recreational activities he will take part in, choosing what to read, what music to listen to, or what program to watch on television (*personal domain*). Participants had to judge each of these 12 patterns of behavior by choosing one proposition among the following three: “Always wrong, whether or not there is a rule” (*moral judgment*); “Wrong only if there is a rule prohibiting it; otherwise you can do it” (*conventional judgment*); “Not an issue of right or wrong; it depends on individual choice or preference” (*personal judgment*). We followed Smetana and Asquith (1994) and computed the percentage of each kind of judgment for each kind of transgression domain. Normally, a high correspondence is

to be observed between type of judgment and type of domain: for instance, patterns of behavior from the moral domain should mostly be judged morally.

*Social desirability.* In order to control for possible social desirability bias in participants' answers we included the sub-scale of impression management from the *Social Desirability Scale* (Tournois, Mesnil, & Kop, 2000). This is a French validated scale measuring the two classic dimensions of social desirability, i.e. *impression management* and *self-deception*, similarly to Paulhus' (1991) *Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding*. We included 10 items (7-point Likert format scale) from the impression management sub-scale by selecting the ones that had the best loadings to the appropriate factor in a previous study on 250 young adults (Saroglou & Galand, 2004). Reliability was satisfactory ($\alpha$ = .75). Here are two sample items: "I always speak well about others", "I always listen carefully when others are speaking to me".

*Religiousness.* Finally, three religious indexes (7-point scales) were administered asking for the importance of God, the importance of religion, and the importance of spirituality in life. These questions were asked twice, once for the present and once for the period before joining the group. Although multi-dimensional and multi-item religious scales are in general to be preferred, single- or few-item religious indexes may be similarly efficient in tapping a general, personal pro-religious and pro-spiritual attitude if time of participants is limited (see, e.g., Gorsuch & McFarland, 1972; Schwartz & Huismans, 1995). In addition, our three religious indexes have been found to correlate strongly with intrinsic religious orientation (Saroglou & Mathijsen, 2007).

## Results

The sample size of each group being small – although not negligible, given the difficulty of gaining access to these populations – we treated all participants as a whole (*N* =

120) when comparing them to samples from the general population. Table 1 provides detailed information on the descriptive statistics for religious measures, submissiveness, and values, both for NRM members and comparison samples, as well as information on results for t-tests and effect sizes.

*Religiousness.* Participants were highly religious, much more so than non-NRM members. In comparison to the present, they were less religious before they joined the group (*M*s = 5.50, 4.62, 4.90, respectively for importance of God, religion, and spirituality; all *F*s were significant, *p*s < .01), but still more religious than the general population (all *t*-tests significant at *p*s < .05). Thus, as our sample was particularly religious, we could not use the religious dimension as a continuous variable for computing correlations.

*Quest.* The mean score of NRM members in quest religious orientation was significantly lower than in non-NRM member adults. However, this result could simply be an artefact due to the particularly high religiousness observed in our sample in comparison to the general population, which is quite moderate in religiousness. Participants were thus compared to religious people from the general population (i.e. people who scored higher than 4 on the 7-point Likert item measuring the importance of God). It turned out that our sample of NRM members scored lower in quest than these religious people ($M$ = 64.73; $SD$ = 10.91), $t(139)$ = 3.47, $d$ = 0.73.

*Submissiveness.* Our projective measure of submissiveness allowed us to observe sufficient individual variability: minimum and maximum scores among the NRM members were 0 and 0.80 ($M$ = 0.37, $SD$ = 0.17). A significant difference was found between NRM members and comparison norms: our participants provided more submissive answers to the hypothetical situations than the comparison group.

*Values.* The importance NRM members attributed to the series of different values presents moderate similarity with the value hierarchy of the general population (Kendall's $\tau$ =

.64, $p < .01$) (as mentioned above only members of the Charismatic Catholic groups and Evangelical Protestant congregations answered this scale). However, some differences were observed between NRM members and the comparison sample on the mean importance of values. Indeed, the conservation values of Conformity, Tradition, and Benevolence were considered more important by our participants than by the comparison population. At the opposite end of the spectrum, the two values reflecting openness to change (i.e. Self-direction and Stimulation) as well as Hedonism were less valued by our participants when compared with norms.

*Social-moral judgments.* Figure 1 details the percentage of moral, conventional, and personal judgments for each socio-moral domain. We performed three ANOVA analyses, one for each domain, with (moral, conventional, and personal) judgments as a within-subjects factor. For the moral and personal domains, a high correspondence between type of judgment and domain was observed. In more detail, when judging transgressions of the *moral* domain, moral judgments were applied much more (mean percentage: 94.54%) than conventional (3.18%) or personal (1.83%) judgments, $F(2, 108) = 2432.35$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .96$. Similarly, *personal* issues were mainly judged with personal judgment (86.81%) rather than with moral (2.75%) or conventional (8.02%) ones, $F(2,107) = 513.04$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .83$. There were also differences between judgments made for transgressions typical of the *conventional* domain, $F(2,106) = 16.13$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .13$. However, conventional issues were more equivocally judged: moral and personal judgments were mostly applied (respectively, 43.81 and 34.95%), whereas the use of conventional judgments was the lowest (20.13%). Further, this was found to be the case quite significantly when post-hoc comparisons were performed using the Bonferroni adjustment for multiple comparisons ($p < .001$).

*Social desirability.* NRM members did not differ in impression management when compared with data from an adult population of non-NRM members. Computing correlations

revealed a negative link between impression management and Quest ($r = -.39$, $p < .001$), and a positive association with submissiveness ($r = .26$, $p < .05$). Finally, partial correlations with the 10 values were computed, controlling (as recommended by Schwartz, 1992) for mean importance attributed to all values. Impression management was correlated with the values of Conformity (.59, $p < .001$), Power (−.31, $p = .05$), and Stimulation (−.38, $p < .05$).

## Discussion

In line with our expectations, we found that people who have joined NRMs tend to be less prone to question their religious beliefs than the general population, and this difference persists when comparing to religious people who are not NRM members. NRM members are also: less prone to value autonomy and more prone to endorse values reflecting social order; and more submissive to authority, indeed more submissive to unjustified and meaningless requests and recommendations. In addition, they tend to moralize, i.e. qualify as highly moral or immoral, decisions and transgressions that usually belong to the domain of conventional rules. In sum, as is often assumed, NMR membership seems to imply rigidity in religious and moral issues as well as low autonomy both in terms of explicit values and spontaneous, although still projective, behavior. Interestingly, being submissive, valuing conservation values, and being reluctant to question religious and existential beliefs seem to constitute socially desirable characteristics for the participants of our study (positive correlations with impression management). This is in continuity with a previous finding that NRM members' high need for closure is positively related to social desirability (Buxant et al., 2007). Finally, the strong emphasis NRM members put on the value of Benevolence and the weak emphasis they put on Hedonism can easily be understood as referring to their high level of religiousness (see Saroglou, Delpierre, & Dernelle, 2004; Schwartz & Huismans, 1995).

The only unexpected finding was that judgments related to transgressions typical of the conventional domain were not only highly moralized (as expected) but also strongly related to the personal domain, i.e. to the legitimacy based on personal choice and preference. One possible interpretation, taking also into account the above-mentioned moralization effect, is that belonging to a NRM may imply an emphasis on anti-conventional judgment and thinking when decisions have to be made: most decisions should be morally qualified as good or bad (dualism in moral thinking) and the remaining ones should be considered as a product of personal choice and responsibility, i.e. not as a pure product of chance, randomness and relativism inherent to conventional norms and rules that may differ and change across cultures, societies, and contexts. In other words, moral rigidity may also include the imperative of making a judgment on everything rather than being sometimes “relaxed” and adopting, for some non-moral issues, the conventional rules of the surrounding society.

Overall, our results point out that NRM membership is a double sided psychological issue. On the one hand, as indicated in the previous empirical literature reviewed in the Introduction, belonging to a NRM – which implies belonging to a community providing social support, meaning, and mechanisms helpful for self-esteem and self-control – seems to be beneficial in compensating for affective, cognitive and other previous vulnerabilities; and it may thus increase mental health and well-being. On the other hand, on the basis of the present study, belonging to a NRM – which means belonging to a new, marginal, and often radical and socially contested group – does not guarantee a welcoming and supportive attitude towards people’s autonomy and flexibility; rather, the opposite seems to be the case. Consequently, optimal development – or optimal well-being, if autonomy and flexibility are conceived as contributing to optimal well-being – seems to be at risk.

These two characteristics may to some degree be inherently interconnected. It is reasonable to hypothesize – and this could be an exciting question for future research – that

lack of autonomy and flexibility is the price to be paid for re-establishing quality in relationships, order and structure in meaning, equilibrium in mood, and optimism for the future against depressive tendencies. Interestingly, the results of the present study combined with the ones from previous studies seem to give new and promising evidence in line with the conclusion Gartner, Larson, and Allen (1991) drew when they reviewed studies on mental health and religion in general. If religion seems to offer a variety of means that allow people to rediscover a sense of control (after facing problems of "*under-control*" such as alcohol and drug use), it is through the same dynamics that religion is associated with problems of "o*ver-control*" (e.g., rigidity, authoritarianism, and dogmatism).

The present study has some obvious limitations. First, given the difficulty of obtaining a high number of participants from various groups, we treated participants of all groups together. We were thus unable to make specific observations depending on the specific character of each group. This may be an interesting area of investigation for future research given the variety that characterizes the beliefs, practices, and organization of different NRMs. Second, the results come from a rather small sample in one country and need replication in other cultural and religious contexts before any generalization is possible. This is particularly important when one takes into account the fact that Belgium (like most of the European countries) is a society characterized by a mono-religious tradition, Catholicism having been the dominant traditional religion. It would be intriguing to investigate the same research questions in societies and countries marked by bi-religious or multi-religious traditions. Third, the cross-sectional design of the study does not allow for any causal inference. It could be that submissiveness and rigidity are personal predispositions of NRM members, but it is a somewhat independent question whether the group welcomes, comforts, amplifies or decreases these predispositions. However, the hypothesis of a correspondence between supply

and demand seems pertinent for religion in general (Batson & Stocks, 2004) and NRMs in particular (Dawson, 2006; Murken & Namini, 2003).

In conclusion, and in full awareness of the risk of overstatement, we think that the present study may allow us to reopen an old, classical psychological and ethical question (see, e.g., Freud, 1927/1961): while it is quite clear that religion helps people to find faith in themselves and in others, it is also possible that the price to be paid for this implies some sacrifice on the level of intellect, critical thinking, autonomy, and maturity.

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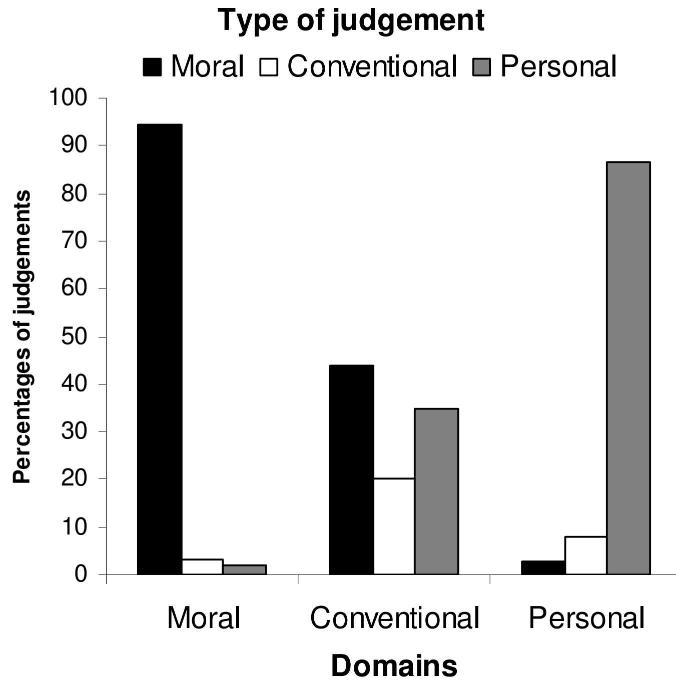
Table 1. Descriptive statistics and comparisons between NRM members and comparison groups.

| | NRM members | | Comparison samples | | Comparisons | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *M* | *SD* | *M* | *SD* | *t*-tests | *d* |
| Religiousness [a] | | | | | | |
| God | 6.92 | 0.27 | 4.11 | 2.34 | 5.34*** | 1.69 |
| Religion | 4.62 | 2.04 | 3.55 | 2.08 | 4.32*** | 0.52 |
| Spirituality | 4.90 | 2.12 | 4.32 | 2.13 | 2.27* | 0.27 |
| Quest religion [b] | 55.52 | 13.99 | 72.14 | 11.61 | –8.31*** | 1.29 |
| Submissiveness [c] | 0.37 | 0.17 | 0.28 | 0.14 | 3.44** | 0.58 |
| Values [d] | | | | | | |
| Power | 1.87 | 1.24 | 1.72 | 1.47 | 0.63 | 0.11 |
| Achievement | 3.19 | 1.10 | 3.12 | 1.26 | 0.38 | 0.06 |
| Hedonism | 3.45 | 1.40 | 3.92 | 1.44 | –2.01* | 0.33 |
| Stimulation | 2.48 | 1.60 | 3.26 | 1.42 | –3.25* | 0.52 |
| Self-direction | 3.78 | 1.05 | 4.34 | 1.16 | –3.14* | 0.51 |
| Universalism | 4.61 | 0.90 | 4.90 | 1.05 | –1.77 | 0.30 |
| Benevolence | 5.43 | 0.74 | 4.94 | 1.26 | 2.64** | 0.47 |
| Tradition | 3.85 | 0.97 | 2.99 | 1.29 | 4.83*** | 0.75 |
| Conformity | 4.70 | 1.11 | 4.14 | 1.26 | 2.85** | 0.47 |
| Security | 4.31 | 1.02 | 4.39 | 1.37 | –0.39 | 0.07 |

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.
*Note*. Data for the comparison samples come from: [a] Saroglou (2003), [b] Saroglou (2002), [c] data specially collected for the present study, [d] Roviscanec and Saroglou (2007).

*Figure caption*

Figure 1. Mean percentages of the types of judgment as a function of domain.


Type of judgement
Moral
Conventional
Personal
Percentages of judgements
100
90
80
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
Moral
Conventional
Personal
Domains