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Psychology of Culture and Religion: An Introduction

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Abstract

In introducing this Special Issue we first consider six ways of thinking about how culture and religion relate to each other: Religion may be part of culture, constitute culture, include and transcend culture, be influenced by culture, shape culture, or interact with culture in influencing cognitions, emotions, and actions. Second, we present the major current trends of relevant research from cross-cultural psychology, social and cultural psychology, and comparative psychology of religion. Although diverging in methodologies, theoretical traditions, and research focus, these approaches complement each other in increasing our psychological understanding of the cultural determinants of religious expressions. Finally, we present the selected papers of this special issue that offer theoretical advances, test new research hypotheses, and provide empirical evidence showing how cultural-level dimensions (from ecology and biology to ethnicity, family practices, and socio-economic factors) shape religion's functioning at the individual and/or collective level with regard to key life domains.

Psychology of Culture and Religion: An Introduction

The relations between culture and religion are complex and thus fascinating, and we feel privileged to comment on this in the present special issue. We first consider possible ways of thinking about how culture and religion relate to each other. We then highlight some important research trends on culture and religion, and introduce the particular set of diverse articles that will constitute the special issue. We close with some final thoughts.

Relationships Between Culture and Religion

How should we think about religion and culture? There are several possibilities, each important and interesting in different ways. Religion may (a) be part of culture, (b) constitute culture, (c) include and transcend culture, (d) be influenced by culture, (e) shape culture, or (f) interact with culture in influencing cognitions, emotions, and actions.

Let us present here these possibilities. First, religion is often--but not always--an element that--in combination to descent, language, territory, and/or common history--contributes to defining cultural entities, i.e. ethnic, national groups (Kivisto, 2007) or civilizational zones (Inglehart & Baker, 2000). Judaism for Israelis, Orthodox Christianity in Balkan countries, Islam in the Arab world, Buddhism and Hinduism in Asia, and Catholicism in Latin America are just few examples.

Second, religion, as a socially sustained system of transmitted beliefs, values, norms, symbols, and practices, can be conceived as itself constituting culture, i.e. a form of culture, in the same way that ethnicity, region, and socioeconomic status define distinct cultural systems with each time their own beliefs, values, norms, symbols, and practices (Cohen, 2009). An American citizen may thus, for instance, be part of various cultures: American nation, Jewish religion, an urban environment, and high socioeconomic status.

Third, religion, by its social dimension, certainly includes cultural elements (e.g., integration of local practices and traditions) and the relation to a cultural group that validates human practices as being religious expressions (Vergote, 1997/1984). However, religion is also conceived as having, like art, philosophy, or morality, its own psychological dynamics, especially regarding the individual's connection with what he/she perceives to be a transcendent reality (James, 1902/1985). Not surprisingly thus, religion often "transcends" culture, strictly defined by group barriers. This is especially the case with the major world religions and spirituality, i.e. individuals' reference to transcendence in life that may be independent from religious institutions.

The fourth and fifth possibilities imply bidirectional influences between religion and culture. On the one hand, cultural elements (for instance, cultural specifics in cognition, emotion, self-concept, morality, personality, and social behavior) shape religions and religious experience. As far as these cultural influences are universal they may explain why, to some extent, religion seems to function in similar ways across cultural contexts, i.e. result from universal motivations and lead to some universal consequences regarding intra-individual functioning and interpersonal and intergroup relations (Saroglou & Cohen, in press). As far as these cultural elements are different across cultural contexts, they lead to religious differences, i.e. group differences in religious expressions. These may be differences between religions, denominations, or cultural groups of the same religion, as well as differences within religious groups across history. Documenting and then explaining on cultural bases such universals and differences is a fascinating agenda for cross-cultural psychological research. To give one simple example, why are Mediterranean people (Catholics, Orthodox, and Muslims) more religious and traditional in their religiosity compared to Western Europeans? A large number of cultural factors going from climate to economy may be candidate for explaining these differences.

On the other hand, religion shapes culture, or to state it in different terms, shapes other than religious elements of culture. For instance, a content analysis of the fundamental texts of Christianity and Buddhism (written thousands years ago) showed differences that correspond to contemporary Christians' and Buddhists' differences in their ideal affects (Tsai, Miao, & Seppala, 2007); and these differences are the same as the ones between Westerners and East Asians (Tsai, Knutson, & Fung, 2006). The shaping of culture by religion can also take a universalistic stand. Some psychologists, often working from an evolutionary perspective, tend to show how religion has favored cultural evolution involving, for instance, cooperation among unrelated people (Norenzayan & Shariff, 2008), large coalitions and power structures (Kirkpatrick, 2005), or disgust-based but culturally extended moral sensitivities (Rozin, Haidt, & McCauley, 2008).

Finally, in addition to the bidirectional links of influence between religion and culture, one can expect that the two domains interact in influencing human cognition, emotions, identity, morality, and behavior. For instance, individual religiosity seems to predict diverging outcomes relative to well-being when one compares African-Americans, Latino-Americans, and European Americans (Bierman, 2006; Lee, Czaja, & Schulz, 2010) or American Jews with American Catholics or Protestants (Cohen, 2002; Cohen & Hall, 2009). The same is true for cognition (holistic versus detail-focused perception), when one compares Italian Catholics and Israeli Jews with Dutch Calvinists (Colzato et al., 2010).

Obviously, the variety and complexity of links between religion and culture partly depend on the way one defines these two terms. Given the eternal debates on such definitions, prudence (we do not know if it is modesty or self-interest) prevents us from hoping that we can impose here our own systematic and indisputable definitions. Instead, the above description of the six ways with which religion and culture can be conceived as

interconnected constitutes, in our opinion, a sufficient argument in favor of the idea that studying religion within cultural and cross-cultural psychology is of interest.

Nevertheless, an important precaution is to avoid two extreme situations where definitions may become non-operational and thus counter-productive. The first is to have too narrow definitions. A definition of religion that is too much confined to a specific culture and religious tradition (for instance, an overemphasis on Western Protestantism-inspired intrinsic motivation to believe in God) implies the risk of disqualifying other religions (e.g., community- and/or practice-based ones; Cohen, Hall, Koenig, & Meador, 2005) or simply neglecting other religious expressions (e.g., Buddhist beliefs and practices). The same is true for culture, if for instance this term is restricted to ethnicity and differences between ethnic groups (Cohen, 2009).

The second extreme situation to avoid is to have too large definitions of culture and religion that encompass everything. For instance, defining religion (or, more broadly, spirituality) as “search for meaning” is in some ways not specific enough to religion: meaning-making is a universal psychological process, whereas religion implies several particularities with regard to search of meaning (Saroglou, 2002; Saroglou, 2011, this issue); and thus many people are not religious and several people are neither religious nor spiritual. Similarly, culture is not just a term for all shared human activities.

Consequently, religion does not equate culture, and culture does not necessarily include religion. If key distinctive features are needed, we could say that religion refers to all kinds of behaviors humans do in reference to what they think to be a transcendent reality; culture refers to all psychological characteristics that distinguish natural (non-experimental) groups. Obviously, religion and culture are distinct concepts, but point out to partially overlapping human activities, i.e. socially sustained sets of cognitions, emotions, identities, norms, and social behaviors. Psychology of culture and psychology of religion have thus

mutual interests. If a psychologist wants to fully understand how culture with its various components functions in people's lives, as well as cultural similarities and differences, then religion is part of the factors to be included. If a psychologist wants to fully understand how religion works in people's life, as well as religious similarities and differences across groups, then other than religion components of culture are necessary to also be studied.

Research Trends in Culture and Religion

Organizing a special issue on religion in the *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* may be seen as timely. Indeed, there are several lines of research developments going on in parallel in distinct, "territorially" speaking, fields that converge on the increasing interest on the psychological understanding of the interplay between culture and religion.

First, cross-cultural psychologists or researchers working on personality and culture have tended to include (individual differences on) religiousness and/or spirituality in their models of values (Schwartz, 1992), social axioms (Leung & Bond, 2004), ideologies and social attitudes (Ashton, 2007; Saucier, 2000), or personality dimensions (Piedmont, 1999). Several issues have been empirically investigated and are still, to some extent, open to discussion. These concern in particular the exact status of religiousness and spirituality within the broad framework of individual differences as well as the degree of their relation with and independence from personality, values, and social attitudes.

Evidence and theory are in favor of the idea that religiousness/spirituality is, strictly speaking, a *sui generis* individual differences construct, but if one has to choose, it is closer to values and social attitudes than personality (Saroglou, 2010). A related issue is the universal across cultures character of religiousness and spirituality. Not surprisingly, the way one defines the construct under study influences the results. For instance, the way Schwartz (1992) defined the value of spirituality may be responsible of the fact that this value was not

consistently independent from other values across all cultural groups and was, depending on the cultural group, related to conservation values, benevolence, or universalism (Schwartz, 1992; see also Schwartz, 2006). In fact, traditional religiosity and modern spirituality share commonalities and differences in the way they relate to personality traits and values (Saroglou & Munoz-Garcia, 2008; Saucier & Skrzypińska, 2006).

Large international studies, carried out by cross-cultural psychologists (e.g., Georgas, Berry, van de Vijver, Kagitçibasi, & Poortinga, 2006) or by other social scientists (sociologists or economists; e.g., Guiso, Sapienza, & Zingales, 2003) are starting to gather information that may be useful if it is to address another issue also of importance for cross-cultural psychology: Does religion at the individual level function at the same way than it functions at the collective, cultural level? It is premature to propose any systematic theorization on this issue, but initial findings from this kind of studies suggest the existence of two patterns. Individual religiosity within countries and mean religiosity across countries often function in the same way. For instance, the personality correlates of individual religiosity within countries (Saroglou, 2010, for a meta-analysis) and of mean religiosity across countries/states (Rentfrow, Gosling, & Potter, 2008) seem to be the same (i.e. high agreeableness and conscientiousness). However, with regard to some other domains, the associations between religion and external outcomes differ between the individual and the collective level. For instance, whereas, at the individual level, religiosity is linked to several positive outcomes such as well-being and longevity, marital stability, or low delinquency (Hood, Hill, & Spilka, 2009), the same link becomes negative when one examines the associations between mean country religiosity and indicators of the same outcomes at the country level (Paul, 2009).

A second research development comes from researchers in social and cultural psychology. These researchers have applied social experimental methodology to study how

religion, across different religious-ethnic contexts, affects, or is affected by, other psychological dimensions that are of primary interest for cultural and cross-cultural psychology. Examples of such dimensions studied are death anxiety (Norenzayan & Hansen, 2006), morality (Cohen & Rozin, 2001), work ethic (Sanchez-Burks, 2002), inter-religious prejudice (Rowatt, Franklin, & Cotton, 2005), cognition (Colzato et al., 2010), and sense of control (Sasaki & Kim, in press).

Such research is sometimes influenced by evolutionary psychology. Religion can be seen as an important domain in which to discuss the relationship between evolution and culture. This is a topic of emerging interest in several fields, including cultural and cross-cultural psychology, and evolutionary psychology (e.g., Atran, 2007). Oftentimes, when a practice is universal across cultures, this is taken as evidence for an evolved basis for that behavior; conversely, when a practice varies, it is taken as evidence that culture but not evolution is responsible. Indeed, one of the abiding themes in research on culture is how much cultures are essentially the same versus different (Heine & Norenzayan, 2006; Segall, Lonner, & Berry, 1998; see also Lonner, 2011, for a historical perspective and discussion). Religion provides an interesting domain for discussing whether seemingly different practices actually serve the same function or functions and reflect biologically and culturally evolved strategies.

A third parallel development comes from psychology of religion or from researchers of other psychological fields with interest on religion. On the one hand, in the last ten-fifteen years, there has been an increasing interest in developing measures of religiousness that are either specific to non-Christian religions, especially Islam (Amer & Hood, 2007) and Eastern religions (Shek, 2010), or sensitive for cross-cultural/religious use (e.g., Dy-Liacco, Piedmont, Murray-Swank, Rodgeron, & Sherman, 2009; Fontaine, Duriez, Luyten, & Hutsebaut, 2003). These efforts are however only in their beginnings and researchers would profit substantially from cross-cultural research methods (Matsumoto & Van de Vijver, 2011).

For instance, recent methodological developments (see Fontaine & Fisher, 2011) would be helpful to study not only cultural equivalence of a given religious construct (similarity of the internal structure, at the individual level, across different cultural-religious groups), but also the cultural isomorphism of such construct, i.e. similarity of the internal structure between the individual level and the collective level.

On the other hand, many researchers have been increasingly interested in examining whether established psychological knowledge regarding the way religion relates to personality, cognition, emotions, morality, interpersonal and intergroup relations, as well as human development and mental health, can be generalized in other than Christian and Western contexts (Saroglou & Cohen, in press, for review). For instance, in a series of studies with Muslim Indonesian adolescents, French, Eisenberg and collaborators found that religion functions – including longitudinally – in the same way than for Western adolescents with respect to multiple aspects of social competence (see French, Eisenberg, Purwono, & Sallquist, 2010, for a review). In a meta-analysis of studies on religion and values, Saroglou, Delpierre, and Dernelle (2004) compared Christian, Muslim, and Jewish samples and found similar values hierarchy as a function of individual religiosity across the three religions.

Finally, going beyond quantitative and experimental methods in psychological research, one can find in psychology of religion (like in cultural anthropological relativism) advocates of the importance to fully understand and psychologically explain unique religious phenomena as being shaped by proximal cultural and historical factors, thus favoring the use of idiographic instead of nomothetic methods (Belzen, 2010; see Belzen & Lewis, 2010, for a discussion). Despite its interest for case studies, this approach fails to theorize and methodologically verify how one can disentangle between cultural universals and specifics in the psychological aspects of religious expressions. Nevertheless, such an approach may be

interesting for researchers who ideographically look for cultural metaphors and cultural syndromes (see Lonner, 2011).

Overview of the Articles Included in the Special Issue

Each of the articles in this special issue was chosen because it offered some unique combination of theory and methods in understanding culture and religion. Now we will briefly review what each paper in the special issue does and briefly comment on how it contributes to the broad issues we have just discussed.

First, we present the article by Saroglou (2011, this issue) as a certain theoretical overview. On the basis of several prior theories about the dimensions of religion, Saroglou proposes that religion involves believing, bonding, behaving, and belonging, and these four both constitute religion and distinguish religion from other related domains of life (e.g., philosophy or art). When different combinations of them are salient, this yields rather qualitatively different forms of religion (e.g., fundamentalist and exclusive versus an open-minded and inclusive religion). This paper is particularly useful here because it helps to generate a way, in terms of those dimensions, of theorizing about religious consistencies versus uniqueness across contexts. The co-presence of the four dimensions mentioned above, their psychological functions, and the structural variability of religious forms may be consistent across cultural, religious, and historical contexts. However, cultural factors may be responsible for variability in the salience of each dimension, the content of corresponding beliefs, rituals, norms, and groups, and the way these are inter-related to produce a coherent whole or not.

Two papers (Rosner, Gardner, & Hong, 2011, this issue; Güngör, Fleischmann, & Phalet, 2011, this issue) examined issues related to acculturation and religious transmission, speaking to issues in the relations of culture and religion. Rosner et al. (2011, this issue)

examined religion and acculturation among Jews in America who were born in the former Soviet Union or Eastern Europe. They began with theorizing about the natural histories of these groups, their patterns of immigration, and the notion that Judaism is an ethnic as well as a religious identity. Rosner and colleagues examined how the level of centrality of a Jewish identity for Russian Jewish versus Eastern European Jewish participants moderated the perceived distance between having a Jewish identity and either a Russian or Eastern European identity. For Russian Jewish participants, Jewish identity centrality went with less perceived distance between Russian and American identities. However, for American Jewish participants of Eastern European descent, there was not a significant relationship between Jewish identity centrality and perceived distance between Eastern European and American identities. Several things are nice about this article as regards broad issues in relations of culture and religion--the elegant methodology encompassing measurement of bicultural identities, the theorizing about how religion can act as a bridge or a barrier to enculturation, and going deeper into the acculturation experience of particular groups.

Also speaking to relations of culture and religion, Güngör et al. (2011, this issue) examined acculturation and religiosity among Turkish and Moroccan Belgian Muslims in two cities, using adult community samples. Using structural equation modeling techniques, they found that religious transmission occurred effectively for a variety of religious dimensions (identification, beliefs, practices) in their groups under study, but more so in the Turkish group--which they related to the Turkish group's highly collective culture. Religious transmission was strengthened when there was an orientation toward the maintenance of the heritage culture. This paper is important because it examines religious transmission processes in the same country and the same religion, but with people from different countries of origin.

We also discussed above how culture and religion can come together to influence well-being. Sabatier, Mayer, Friedlmeier, Lubiewska, and Trommsdorff (2011, this issue)

researched the relationships between religiosity, family orientation, and life satisfaction. They did this in four countries, each with a Christian tradition—France, Germany, Poland, and the US. They chose these four countries, each with a predominantly Christian history and current religious affiliation, so as to be comparing apples to apples. More specifically, they found that religiosity in all of the countries was associated with adolescents' family orientation, which in turn predicted greater life satisfaction. Importantly, this mediated relationship was significantly stronger in those countries (Poland and the US) which are characterized by relatively greater religiosity. One particular advantage of this article is that it looks at mediation processes often neglected in cultural research on religion. In addition, the article looks at cultural and religious dynamics in four countries.

Another paper on religion, culture, and well-being is next. Sasaki, Kim, and Xu (2011, this issue) are unique in this special issue for combining biological and cultural approaches. In Koreans and Americans, Sasaki and colleagues examined variation in oxytocin receptor polymorphisms, which are theorized to be related to social-oriented behaviors. They theorized and found that oxytocin receptor genotype moderated the relationship between country and religiousness, such that among people who were genetically predisposed to be socially sensitive (people with the G/G allele), religious Koreans had greater well-being. But, of people with this same genotype, European Americans who were more religious had lower well-being. This article thus shows that the effect of religiousness on well-being interacts with country and with genetic predispositions. The authors theorized that religion may promote well-being primarily to the extent that people's genetic complement and cultural contexts come together to provide the opportunities for social affiliation that are beneficial. This paper shows how biological effects depend on cultural context, and how cultural groups may shape and be shaped by frequencies of genetic variations.

Two papers consider in some ways not only individual psychology but national trends. One of these was empirical (Hayward & Kemmelmeier, 2011, this issue), and the other (Johnson, White, Boyd, & Cohen, 2011, this issue) was theoretical--about cross-cultural and within cultural food practices. Hayward and Kemmelmeier (2011, this issue) combined cross-national panel data with multilevel modeling to examine and update Weber's theorizing about how Protestant religion and culture could promote capitalism. This is important because previous research was inconsistent, and results seemed to a large extent to depend on whether the analysis was at the individual or national level. The authors' results demonstrated the importance of examining questions about culture and religion at multiple levels, because people in nations with Protestant histories were more pro-market in their economic attitudes, but the results were not exactly the same at the individual level. Protestants of varying degrees of religiosity were more pro-market, but for members of other religion, pro-market attitudes increased with religiosity. This article therefore provides an important model for future work on culture and religion, underscoring the point that whatever processes occur at the cultural level may or may not dovetail with processes that occur at the individual level.

Last is a paper on religion, culture, and food. Paul Rozin has said that food is a "quintessentially social substance" (Rozin, 1990, p. 108) and religious adherents in different cultural groups, especially, endorse a wide variety of food taboos (e.g., Kosher laws), food rituals (e.g., Hindu puja), or specialty foods (e.g., Communion). Although anthropologists have had much to say with regard to cataloging and discussing the within-cultural understandings of these diverse beliefs and practices, there is little theory or experimental research regarding the role that food might play in the cross-cultural psychology of religion. Johnson et al. (2011, this issue) provide here a functionalist model, integrating cognitive theories of essentialism and evolutionary theories of fundamental motives such as coalition formation, status seeking, and disease avoided as elaborated by Kenrick and his colleagues

(Kenrick, Li, & Butner, 2003, Kenrick, Griskevicius, Neuberg, & Schaller, 2010). This novel theoretical perspective allows them to make several hypotheses, supported by examples from Hindu, Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and indigenous cultures, about why certain types of food practices originate and, further, why they persist.

Final Thoughts

The idea of preparing this special issue by submitting the project to JCCP and advertising a call for proposals came when the first of us, VS (coming from the Université catholique de Louvain), was in sabbatical stay in 2009 at the department of the second of us, ABC (Arizona State University). This stay was financed by the Belgian National Fund for Scientific Research and a WBI Fellowship of excellence by the Communauté française de Belgique. We are grateful to the editorial team of JCCP that has strongly endorsed the idea and in particular to Walter Lonner, who has been extremely supportive throughout all steps of the whole process. We thank also warmly the many researchers who initially submitted their proposals and in particular the authors who finally contributed with original and interesting work to this special issue. Moreover, this special issue would not have been possible without the generous help of expert reviewers who provided detailed, positive and negative, but always constructive feedback. As a sign of our recognition, we provide here their names: Abdolhossein Abdollahi, Hisham Abu-Rayya, Jüri Allik, Yulia Chentsova-Dutton, Joan Chiao, Andrew Christopher, Timothy Church, Sergej Flere, Johnny Fontaine, Jai Ghorpade, Peter Hill, Gilad Hirschberger, Willy Lens, Kwok Leung, Matthew Newman, Shigehiro Oishi, Raymond Paloutzian, Karen Phalet, Paul Rozin, Andrew Ryder, Mark Schaller, and Colleen Ward.

To conclude, let us express our last feelings. A special issue on a legitimate topic, possibly important, but certainly understudied in the past, is like an aperitif. It opens appetite,

but still the main dish is expected to come. We are confident that psychological research on culture and religion, based on methodology and theory from cultural and cross-cultural psychology as well as on knowledge from psychology of religion, will be increasing in new ideas, challenging research questions, sophisticated methodology, and rigorous and encompassing theorization. Humans are all cultural beings. Some of them are religious and some not; but, for all of them, the way religion or irreligion works has to do with culture. Studying this is also our job as psychologists; in addition, it seems to be tasty.

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