The connection between religion and prosociality has long been debated. From the ancient Greeks to modern philosophers, scholars have often pondered whether morality can exist without religion. One of the best-known ancient texts dealing with this question is Plato’s (427–347 BCE) *Euthyphro*, which dates back to the fourth century BCE. In this dialogue, Socrates (470–399 BCE) asks Euthyphro: “Is an action morally good because the gods command it, or do the gods command it because it is morally good?” In other words, is acting justly in our nature, or do we need religion to tell us what to do? Socrates did not get a satisfactory answer from Euthyphro, and the question has continued to be debated throughout the centuries.

Some of the founders of contemporary social science described religion as a motivational force that binds groups together, deters immoral conduct, and promotes altruistic behavior. For example, Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) saw religion as the “social glue” that holds society together. Auguste Comte (1798–1857) established the “religion of humanity,” so that secular societies could still continue to function harmoniously in the absence of traditional forms of worship. And in his *Letter Concerning Toleration*, John Locke (1632–1704) excluded atheists from the right to be tolerated, as he thought they could not be trusted to behave morally: “Lastly, those are not at all to be tolerated who deny the being of a God. Promises, covenants, and oaths, which are the bonds of human society, can have no hold upon an atheist. The taking away of God, though but even in thought, dissolves all” (Locke 1689, II, ii2).

Before proceeding any further, it is important to note some of the intrinsic complexities and problems with studying religious prosociality. The very terms *religion* and *religiosity* are notoriously hard to define, let alone quantify with any precision. It is often said that there are as many definitions of religion as there are scholars of religion. Indeed, religion lacks a universally accepted definition, and different researchers use the term in different ways. Moreover, because most researchers come from Western countries, their understanding of religion is often tied to Judeo-Christian ideas that might not be applicable to other religions (Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan 2010). The way a religiosity questionnaire is constructed...
The difference between zero and one is probably not equidistant to that between any other two consecutive points on that scale. In other words, a difference in degree of religiosity is qualitatively not the same as the difference between being a believer and being an atheist. Clarifying this conceptual problem might lead to a better methodological treatment of the issue of measurement.

The second issue, that is, the need for more contextualization, recently has received attention as various scholars have raised criticism of the way psychological research is conducted. The vast majority of psychological experiments is conducted with samples consisting of Western undergraduate students. In “The Weirdest People in the World?” (2010), Joseph Henrich, Steven J. Heine, and Ara Norenzayan showed that while researchers typically take those samples to be representative of the global population as a whole, in fact they are often outliers in many domains of cognition and behavior. Clearly, this has severe implications on the potential replicability and generalizability of psychological research.

To address this problem, we need cross-cultural, interdisciplinary research, which will move beyond sterilized laboratory settings, into the real-world contexts in which religion actually takes place to increase the ecological validity of the findings. This requires a synergy among anthropology, psychology, and other related disciplines that traditionally have studied religion in isolation and without interaction with one another.

The third issue, that is, the interaction between religious belief and practice, is particularly complex and requires systematic research. Although the connection between doctrine and ritual is observed worldwide, there is no particular theoretical reason why the two should always co-occur. After all, in the secular domain, there are plenty of ideologies without rituals and rituals without belief systems. In the religious domain, the two are intricately related and interacting in complicated ways.

To get a better understanding of religion’s link to morality, we need to be able to account for the effects of beliefs and practices both independently and cumulatively. This requires implementing a systematic division of labor while at the same time maintaining a cohesive bird’s-eye view. Although this is certainly easier said than done, being able to isolate these factors will give us a better understanding of what makes religion so successful.

Summary

As we have seen, the relationship between religion and morality is far more complicated than one might expect. The challenges of defining, operationalizing, and measuring both religion and morality require a fractionating approach. This approach involves examining various aspects of the problem separately and then trying to put the pieces of the puzzle together to look at the broader picture rather than relying on isolated studies. Furthermore, the observed discrepancy between self-reported and actual behavior demonstrates additional problems with measuring socially desirable traits like religion and morality.

A careful look at the available evidence shows that religious people are no more or less moral than non-believers, despite what they often report, and in the face of widespread popular assumptions and stereotypes. Although religious disposition plays little role in moral behavior, religious situation can exert significant influence on it. Religious concepts, contexts, and practices can independently influence social conduct, and their interaction can
make religion a powerful social force. This force can be used for better or for worse, either directed toward building cohesive communities and increasing in-group cooperation or producing hostility and suspicion toward out-groups.

Chapter 8: Prosociality and Religion

Bibliography


Plato. Euthyphro. Originally published c. 395 BCE.


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