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Why Does Religiosity Persist?

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Constantine Sedikides¹

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An enduring legacy of Darwinian theory, beside the small detail of offering a mechanism for how living things evolve (i.e., natural selection), is that there is no reason to advocate a designer to explain the complexity of living things (Darwin, 1859). Not only does the demand for a designer beg the question “who designed the designer,” it also overlooks the fact that systemic elements, given time, form on their own a complex structure (Dennett, 1995). A superfluity of empirical findings has established that evolution is an irrefutable fact. An avalanche of scientific discoveries, from the laws of physics to the principles of astronomy, have been consistent with the idea of a universe evolved over billions of years rather than a universe created less than 10,000 years ago (Dawkins, 2009). There is seemingly no purpose to the universe, intercessory prayer is no more effective than chance, and religions—at least in their popular form—are, it has been argued, irrational, contradictory, pathological, illusory, exploitative, and potentially dangerous (Dawkins, 2006; Freud, 1927/1961b; Harris, 2004; Hitchens, 2007; Leuba, 1925; Marx, 1843; Skinner, 1953).

Yet organized religion and religiosity (i.e., beliefs and practices related to a supernatural agent) are prevalent. Worldwide, 85% of people report having at least some form of religious belief (Zuckerman, 2005), and 82% report that religion constitutes an important part of their daily life (Crabtree, 2009). In the United States, 94% of respondents express a belief in God, 82% state that religion is at least fairly important to them, and 76% consider the Bible the actual or inspired word of God (Gallup, 2009). In contrast, only 15% worldwide describe themselves as nonreligious, agnostics, or atheists (Zuckerman, 2005). If anything, atheists are strong and frequent targets of prejudice (Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2006).

Why, then, does religion persist in the face of Darwinian theory and evidence, scientific facts, secular arguments, and name-calling? Biologists, sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, philosophers, historians, and journalists have taken turns in answering this question (Atran, 2002; Bering, 2006; Blackmore, 1999; Bloom, 2005; Boyer, 2001, 2008;

Burkert, 1960; Dawkins, 2006; Dennett, 2006; Durkheim, 1912/1995; Hinde, 1999; Sloan-Wilson, 2002). However, despite early interest in the topic (Allport, 1950; G. S. Hall, 1917; James, 1902; Leuba, 1925; Skinner, 1953; Starbuck, 1899), an increasing presence (Emmons & Palouzian, 2003; Exline, 2002; Kirkpatrick, 2004; Smith, McCullough, & Poll, 2003), and calls to take the study of religion seriously (Baumeister, 2002; Emmons, 1999; Gorsuch, 1988), mainstream psychology has been conspicuously absent from the party.

There are at least four reasons for this absenteeism. In classical psychoanalytic theory, religion was regarded as an expression of neurosis and a defense mechanism against anxiety (Freud, 1927/1961b, 1930/1961a). As such, religion was not deemed worthy of inclusion in major theories of personality (Koltko-Rivera, 2006). Also, academic psychology (unlike most other disciplines) has assigned high prestige to the study of processes or mental entities (e.g., perception, learning, memory) and has denigrated the study of life domains (e.g., sex, food, work; Rozin, 2006). Religion qualifies as a life domain rather than a process and has thus been frowned on, if not shunned from inquiry, by the discipline in general and by leading psychology academic departments in particular. Moreover, academics are largely nonreligious, a pattern anticipated by the negative correlation between education and religiosity (Glaeser & Sacerdote, 2008). Being exposed to like-minded colleagues, academics may form the false impression that religion is a rather rare and marginal phenomenon (Stark & Bainbridge, 1985). The final reason smacks of a minor conspiracy theory. Academics may have perceived religiosity as a private matter, one that defines people with strong and passionate feelings either in favor of or against it. Thus, the majority of academics may have left

¹University of Southampton

Corresponding Author:

Constantine Sedikides, University of Southampton, Center for Research on Self and Identity, School of Psychology, Southampton, England, UK
Email: cs2@soton.ac.uk

this topic to the discretion of those few highly religious or highly antireligious researchers. This pattern, in turn, may have tainted the study of religion and religiosity as potentially biased and as jeopardizing the objectivity of scientific scrutiny (Stark & Bainbridge, 1985).

In the past few years, however, there have been clear signs that psychology, and in particular social and personality psychology, is abandoning this somewhat insular attitude. Now, an increasing number of researchers are conducting cutting-edge research on religiosity. Recent world events (e.g., 9/11), the positive psychology movement, and the intensification of the age-long debate between religious and secular circles have all contributed to this change of hearts. Religiosity—an orientation, behavioral set, and lifestyle considered important by the large majority of people worldwide—cannot be neglected by social and personality psychology any longer.

This special issue attempts to capture the zeitgeist of this explosion of interest in religiosity by providing a vibrant forum for an exchange of ideas and, thus, greater participation of social and personality psychology in an ongoing and societally relevant debate. The special issue explores the potential of social and personality psychology theories to account for the phenomenon of religiosity (including, but not limited to, belief in supernatural agency). Social and personality psychologists have a reputation as theory builders. What is it that all those years of powerful theorizing have to offer? What do the data have to say? The objective of the special issue, then, is to use existing and well-established theory, coupled with supportive empirical evidence, to explain the phenomenon of religiosity in all its complexity and heterogeneity. All aspects of religiosity (e.g., different religions as practiced by different cultures) are fair targets for dispassionate analysis, debate, and inclusion.

Special issue articles share four commonalities. First, they ask “why” questions. Why is religiosity so important to so many people? Why is religiosity important to some people and not to others? What are the functions that religiosity serves? Second, they take a theoretical approach. Contributions draw from established theories to understand and explain diverse aspects of religiosity. Third, they focus on social and personality psychological approaches to religiosity. Finally, they try to accomplish several specific tasks: (a) to outline the theory that underlies their argument, (b) to provide selected empirical demonstrations of the theory’s veracity from the social/personality psychological literature, (c) importantly, to discuss empirical findings that are directly linked to the phenomenon of religiosity, and (d) to draw implications for future empirical pursuits.

Gray and Wegner (*IN PRESS*) open up by examining perceptions of a supernatural agency. They argue that people perceive God as possessing agency but not experience. God is seen as the ultimate moral agent, the entity that people blame for their misfortunes and praise for their fortune. Their theoretical analysis explains such curious phenomena as

strengthening one’s faith in God in the presence of suffering.

The next five articles take a functional approach to religiosity. They argue in favor of specific motive or need driving religious belief and practice. Sedikides and Gebauer (*IN PRESS*) meta-analytically test the idea that the self-enhancement motive underlies religiosity (intrinsic, extrinsic, religion-as-quest). They show that both macro-level culture (countries varying in religiosity) and micro-level culture (U.S. universities varying in religiosity) moderate the self-enhancement–religiosity link. The positive relation between self-enhancement and intrinsic religiosity is stronger, and the low or negative relation between self-enhancement and extrinsic religiosity or religion-as-quest is stronger (i.e., more negative), the higher the culture is on religiosity. Kay, Gaucher, McGregor, and Nash (*IN PRESS*) zero in on the motive for control. They propose that religion serves as a means for preserving the belief in an orderly world, especially when other relevant structures fail to satisfy the motive for control. They demonstrate that experimentally induced low levels of personal control elevate belief in God or spiritual forces. They also review evidence showing that, when the stability of external control structures (e.g., government) is threatened, religious belief increases. Granqvist, Mikulincer, and Shaver (*IN PRESS*) maintain that religious beliefs satisfy relational concerns and in particular attachment needs. The relationship with God is an attachment relationship and is especially beneficial to individuals who are insecurely attached. Ysseldyk, Matheson, and Hymie (*IN PRESS*) and Hogg, Adelman, and Blagg (*IN PRESS*) view religion as a group phenomenon. Ysseldyk et al. propose the motive for a positive social identity as an explanation for religiosity. Identification with social groups entails benefits but also costs, as when it is threatened by intergroup conflict. Hogg et al. posit that uncertainty reduction not only underpins religiosity but also influences conformity with religious leaders, which may culminate in immoral behavior. Vail et al. (*IN PRESS*) emphasize the terror management functions of religiosity. It reduces death anxiety, as it serves to provide people with psychological equanimity in the face of death awareness.

Koole, McCullough, Kuhl, and Roelofsma (*IN PRESS*) grapple with a paradox. How can religious persons have relatively high levels of emotional well-being when they often endure aversive experiences or forsake pleasurable ones? Their answer is that religion facilitates an implicit form of self-regulation that allows both striving for high standards and maintaining emotional well-being. Their theoretical framework and empirical evidence address a related paradox, namely, the tenacity of irrational aspects of religion. This irrationality, though, is more seeming than real, as it confers vital psychological benefits in promoting implicit self-regulation.

In a meta-analysis and a narrative review, Saroglou (*IN PRESS*) sketches the religious personality: Religious individuals are high on Agreeableness and Conscientiousness but low

on Openness to Experience. These findings contextualize the contributions by D. Hall, Matz, and Wood (**IN PRESS**) and Graham and Haidt (**IN PRESS**). In a meta-analysis, Hall et al. show that religious individuals are racist to the extent that the belief systems of religiosity and racism share the values of social conformity and respect for tradition. Graham and Haidt highlight the social side of religiosity by suggesting that religion is mainly founded on the group-focused values of in-group or loyalty, authority or respect, and purity or sanctity. Their theoretical proposals can explain such rather puzzling phenomena as why most people are religious worldwide, why religious persons are more charitable than nonreligious ones, and why religious individuals are happier than nonreligious ones.

Religiosity is a complex, multiply determined phenomenon. Capitalizing on social and personality psychology theory, the special issue offers a nonexhaustive but fairly representative portrait of the landscape featuring social and personality psychology and religiosity. The special issue emphasizes process-oriented explanations of religiosity that take into account individual differences. This emphasis promises to strengthen the coherence of theorizing and research on religiosity. It is hoped that the special issue will elucidate the phenomenon of religiosity per se, challenge and expand social and personality psychology theories in novel ways, bring social and personality psychology to the forefront of explanations for religiosity, and build bridges and a healthy dialogue between social and personality psychology perspectives and other approaches to religiosity. The ultimate hope is that each article will prove generative, provide fodder for future empirical directions, and spark research on religiosity.

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