

Religiousness: Antecedents, Functions, Outcomes, and Diversity

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From a psychological point of view, we can define *religion* as people's beliefs, affects, behavior, and community in reference to an entity perceived as transcending humans and the world [1]. Correspondingly, *religiousness* means individual differences in the above psychological elements, analogously to people differing from each other in their interest and investment in other domains of human activity such as art, politics, or uncommon beliefs. These domains, religion included, are not unanimously considered as vital and critical to survive and flourish [but see 2], unlike, for instance, identity, self-esteem, or group belonging, but are invested in by several or many humans in the world, to a various extent across societies and individuals.

1. Recent developments in the psychological study of religion

Some interest in religion and religiousness has always been present in psychological theory and research throughout the 20th century [3] but this interest has importantly intensified over the last twenty years. Moving from a peripheral and marginal subject of investigation, religion has become a legitimate and, to some extent, mainstream topic across the major subfields of psychology: developmental, clinical, personality, social, cross-cultural, and cognitive psychology [4, 5]. In recent years, several special issues have been published in major journals of these subdisciplines [6-13], and chapters on religion have been included in some flagship handbooks of these subdisciplines [developmental: 14, 15; clinical: 16, 17; personality: 18, 19; moral and evolutionary: 20, 21; and cross-cultural: 22, 23], not to mention chapters on religion in major contemporary handbooks on applied areas and specific themes, such as attachment, personality development, aging, self-regulation, emotion regulation, positive psychology, terror management theory and existential psychology, sexuality, family, parenting, sport and exercise, learning and school psychology, morality, prejudice, prosocial behavior, and consumer behavior (see the Supplementary Material for references).

These developments may be due to external factors, i.e. specific events and situations such as a resurgence of religious radicalism across the world, but also to internal developments in psychological sciences. Indeed, psychologists have today widened the scope of their research by also studying less central, and less pressing for answers, aspects of human functioning such as leisure, the emotion of awe, or media psychology. Moreover, researchers have become progressively aware of the importance for psychology to identifying both universals and cultural specifics in human functioning. Psychology cannot be reduced to the study of Western, rather secularized, individuals and must thus integrate the cultural dimensions of human functioning, which include religion (or irreligion) [24, 25].

1.1. Methodologically and theoretically stronger, cumulative, and more culturally sensitive research

Psychological research on religion in recent years has progressively integrated most if not all major research methods and techniques in psychological sciences: surveys, lab and online experiments, genetic studies, physiological measures and neuroimaging, priming, implicit and behavioral measures, cross-cultural comparisons, longitudinal studies, and content analysis of material such as tweets, websites, or books. These nomothetic approaches are complemented by idiographic approaches most often using interviews, case studies, or naturalistic observation.

As a consequence of the above, the psychological fields' knowledge of religion, including spirituality and atheism, has become increasingly more cumulative, and less merely impressionistic. For several key issues, the evidence today comes from research that is multiple in methods, theoretical paradigms, laboratories, and countries of study. This is clearly the case, for instance, with research on religion and attachment ([Cherniak, Mikulincer, Shaver and Granqvist](#)), personality ([Ashton and Lee](#)), self-control ([Marcus and McCullough](#)), and death anxiety ([Jong](#)). Moreover, psychological knowledge of religion is consolidated

today by several meta-analyses, and this issue offers two new ones ([Kandler](#), on genetic influences; [Saroglou and Craninx](#), on moral righteousness).

Subsequently, psychological knowledge on religion has become more nuanced and subtle (see, for example, research on religion and morality: [Abrams, Jackson and Gray](#); and [Tsang, Al-Kire and Ratchford](#)), thus less suspected to be tainted by researchers' own ideological preferences. Similarly, this research has become progressively cross-culturally and cross-religiously sensitive and no longer relies exclusively on North American participants of Western Christian heritage (see, e.g., [Clobert](#); and [Gebauer and Sedikides](#)).

1.2. Original, challenging, or renewed questions and evidence

Furthermore, a significant trend in these developments may have been a shift from a traditional psychological study of religion from an inside perspective to research from the perspective of the main psychological subdisciplines. These disciplines are focused on cognitions, emotions, attitudes, motivations, intraindividual functioning, interpersonal and intergroup relationships, social behavior, human development, genetics, biology, and cultural dynamics in general, and are thus also interested in how the former are shaped by or affect religion and religiousness.

On the one hand, the above shift may have lessened the psychological investigation of specific religious phenomena, such as specific rituals, concrete beliefs, ministers, saints, mystics, and organizations—but, for some interesting exceptions, see articles on religion and food ([Cohen](#)), Gods ([Johnson](#)), rituals ([Stein, Hobson and Schroeder](#)), and radicalization ([de Graaf and van den Bos](#)).

On the other hand, this shift has contributed to the development of original research programs that sometimes challenge previous theorization and research. Significant examples are research on religion and: (a) self-enhancement ([Sedikides and Gebauer](#)), instead of only studying religion and humility; (b) positive emotions and adaptive emotional coping ([Van](#)

Cappellen, Edwards and Fredrickson; and Vishkin), instead of exclusively focusing on religion as resulting from vulnerability or pathology; and (c) environmental concerns (Preston and Baimel), going beyond the traditional interest in prosocial versus antisocial behavior when studying religious morality. More emphasis has also been given to phenomena resulting from or intensified by secularization, such as (d) nonbelief and atheism, no longer seen as merely the low scores on religious measures (Uzarevic and Coleman), and (e) modern spirituality that partly distances itself from traditional religiosity (Wixwat and Saucier).

These developments may have pushed psychology of religion a bit further from the humanities, to make more fruitful connections with other social and behavioral sciences, such as biology (Sasaki and Kim), cognitive sciences (Yilmaz), or evolutionary sciences (Moon; and White, Baimel and Norenzayan). Nevertheless, some classic themes of psychological research on religion continue to remain vibrant. Among others, we can mention: (a) religion and ethnoreligious (Rowatt and Al-Kire) and sexual (Etengoff and Lefevor) prejudice; (b) children's beliefs compared to adults' beliefs (Harris and Corriveau), and adult beliefs compared to delusional ideas (McKay and Ross); (c) religion's role in the development and health of adolescents (Schnitker, Medenwaldt and Williams); and (d) adults' changes of religious trajectories, including deconversion (Streib).

2. The articles of the special issue

The present issue gathered experienced, high quality scholars, often accompanied by their younger promising collaborators, who have made significant theoretical and empirical advances in recent years on key questions that have greatly widened and improved our understanding of the psychological functioning of religiousness. More precisely, these questions concern religiousness' (a) antecedents, characteristics, functions, and various forms, (b) moral, social, and health outcomes, (c) developmental and cultural aspects; and also

include (d) a focus on a few selected religious phenomena. Table 1 presents the set of the 30 articles of this special issue organized following this structure.

In gathering these articles, we made our best effort to combine the highest quality of authors and their research with the broadest diversity possible in terms of laboratories, countries differing in their religious and/or secular heritage, and, finally, the psychological subdisciplines involved: personality and social psychology, but also (cross)cultural, moral, developmental, and emotions and health psychology. Of course, given the space restriction, this list of articles does not presume to be an exhaustive collection of all original and significant research over the last years in the field. Below, we introduce the special issue's articles and the unique contribution of each of them.

2.1. Religiousness: Antecedents, functions, and individual differences

Society, but also scholars from various disciplines, may think that faith and religious practice, or their absence, result mostly from individual free choices and/or (family) socialization. Moreover, society and scholars, including psychologists of religion, possibly influenced by Western Protestantism, also consider that, broadly speaking, the most central function of religion is meaning making [4]. Whereas the above are not false, they only partly depict the reality and thus, if taken alone, may be misleading.

In this special issue, the first ever meta-analytic evidence is provided, confirming and clarifying the role, beyond family socialization, of genetic influences and extra-familial environmental influences on religiousness, especially in adulthood ([Kandler](#)). Furthermore, evidence is reviewed indicating that religiousness, as a cultural environmental force, interacts with genetic predispositions and biological tendencies in predicting specific psychological outcomes, suggesting religion's role in weakening the impact of one's internal drive, for the service of sociality ([Sasaki and Kim](#)).

Not surprisingly then, recent research based on meta-analytic evidence and analyses of large international data clarifies the positive associations between religiousness and (pro)sociality-oriented personality traits (agreeableness, conscientiousness, honesty-humility) and facets, but also suggests important cultural moderations and additional personality characteristics of closed- versus open-minded forms of religiousness ([Ashton and Lee](#)). Among the latter, modern spirituality, distinct from traditional religiosity in the post-Christian West, seems to incorporate specific and diverse beliefs and to reflect personality tendencies toward openness to values, ideas, and experience, including openness to the paranormal, but also some emotional and parental relational instability ([Wixwat and Saucier](#)).

In addition to personality characteristics, slight differences in reasoning (intuitive rather than analytic thinking), cognitive biases (anthropomorphism, teleology, agency detection), and epistemically suspect beliefs (e.g., conspiracy theories) often distinguish religious believers from nonbelievers--but paranormal beliefs are equally not endorsed by nonbelievers and the very religious ([Yilmaz](#)). Furthermore, psychological research on nonbelievers in general and atheists in particular has recently expanded: by considering them as a distinct group and not simply the psychological opposite of religionists, this research has investigated nonbelievers' beliefs, values, worldviews, health, and open-mindedness, as well as their propensity for some prejudice toward their ideological opponents, i.e. the religious ([Uzarevic and Coleman](#)).

The motives and functions of religiousness may be cognitive, emotional, moral, and social, related to religion's four dimensions of (a) believing, (b) bonding, (c) behaving, and (d) belonging [1]. For the present special issue, we selected reviews of the most cutting-edge recent research on very focused functions of religion, related to the above-mentioned dimensions. These are, respectively, (a) dealing with death anxiety through the belief in (literal) immortality (Jong), (b) enjoying attachment security through attachment to God

(Cherniak et al.), (c) enhancing self-control in general (Marcus and McCullough) and in particular by controlling sexuality and orienting it toward reproductive goals (Moon), and (d) fostering one's self-enhancement as being distinctive and superior to others (Sedikides and Gebauer).

Regarding the above functions, the reader will find several interesting, even intriguing, theoretical and/or empirical updates. First, the role of religion in calming death anxiety is surprisingly not so evident (Jong), religion's effect in boosting self-control is more attestable in the long- rather than the short-term (Marcus and McCullough), and the causal relationships between attachment to God and well-being seem to be bi-directional (Cherniak et al.). Moreover, religions can make parenting a relatively safer strategy by increasing paternal certainty and thus parental investment, and alloparenting, which reduces offspring mortality rates (Moon). Finally, Christians appear to self-enhance broadly, i.e. certainly more than nonbelievers in domains and contexts that are important for their religious identity, but still not less than nonbelievers in secular domains and contexts (Sedikides and Gebauer).

2.2. Social, moral, and health outcomes of religion

Religious beliefs, practices, and communities are often assumed to have positive moral, social, and health-related outcomes. Is it the case? Opponents to religion are more than skeptical regarding this, and previous research suggests that the evidence is complex and nuanced. In this special issue we selectively focused on recent research that has made key empirical advances on these classic questions, and/or investigated theoretically original questions.

Since the revival in the 2000s of research interest on religion's role on prosociality [26, 27], an impressive series of scholars have investigated, through a large array of methodologies, religion's role in (im)morality in general and its prosocial or antisocial nature in particular. A broad inspection of that research leads Abrams et al. to propose the idea that

the complexity of religion is responsible for (a) morality, (b) ambiguous and hypocritical morality, or (c) immorality, as encouraging, respectively, sacrificing self-interest to benefit others, using religion to justify selfish behavior and reduce blame, and harming outgroups to bolster their own religious ingroups. [Tsang et al.](#) review recent studies that confirm the idea that religious prosociality is often real, and not a pure self-perception or stereotype, but is limited to ingroups rather than universally extended. These studies also indicate that religious prosociality is more clearly observed when facing a needier recipient or threat to self-image. Finally, [Saroglou and Craninx](#), through a review of large international studies on Schwartz's values and religiosity, a meta-analysis of 45 studies on Haidt's moral foundation and religion, and a review of 27 studies on religion and deontology versus consequentialism, conclude that religious morality is primarily righteous in that it prioritizes coalitional and "hygienic" concerns over interpersonal care and justice.

Research on religion and prejudice, especially ethnic, religious, and sexual prejudice, has been one of the most vibrant areas of investigation within psychology of religion in the last sixty years [28, 29]. In very recent years, this research has made significant advances by identifying various underlying psychological processes and factors (individual dispositions and situational and cultural influences) explaining religious prejudice, and by focusing on targets of religious prejudice that were previously understudied but have recently become salient such as women, immigrants, minority Muslims, and atheists ([Rowatt and Al-Kire](#), for ethnoreligious prejudice; [Etengoff and Lefevor](#), for sexism and sexual prejudice). Furthermore, beyond the social attitudes based on the us-versus-them distinction, contemporary pro-environmental attitudes and behavior emerged as reflecting social concerns for the world as a whole. [Preston and Baimel](#) examine theory and recent studies that suggest diverging, even opposite, influences of religion on care for the natural world, depending on the specific religious tradition and the respective beliefs and worldviews.

As far as the health-related outcomes of religion are concerned, in the special issue we focus on two emerging bodies of research that make a significant step toward furthering our understanding of the psychological mechanisms explaining religion's role on well-being and health. First, contrary to the idea that faith is mainly a defense of the weak, recent studies using a variety of methodologies demonstrate that certain positive emotions, especially those oriented to others and to external stimuli rather than to the self, enhance religious and spiritual inclinations and/or result from religious and spiritual experiences, thus fostering well-being (Van Cappellen et al.). Second, beyond the well-established extensive research on religious coping as a specific among others way of coping [30], there is emerging evidence that, across religious traditions, and with some differences between them, religion fosters emotional regulation through the belief in the controllability of emotions, valorization of certain emotions to be experienced, and adoption of selected strategies of emotional regulation (Vishkin). An additional paper by McKay and Ross revisits the sensitive issue of considering (some) religious beliefs to be similar to, or at least to facilitate, delusional beliefs, and examines the pros and cons of the official psychiatric consideration—based on an excessive culturalist approach--of religious beliefs as not being delusional if they are culturally accepted.

2.3. Religion across ages and cultures; specific religious phenomena

Religiousness presents both common and distinct psychological characteristics across ages and cultures. Harris and Corriveau examine recent studies showing interesting similarities in the ways children and adults justify their beliefs in unobservable religious and scientific entities—mainly through confidence in testimony provided by others—but also showing slight differences between children and adults, and across cultures. Schnitker et al.'s review of recent research on religiosity in adolescence confirms the established pattern of religion's globally positive outcomes on adolescents' development and well-being, in part

through reinforcement of effortful control, but also indicates some risks for sexual development and outgroup tolerance. [Streib](#) inspects the increasing research on young and older adults' various trajectories in distancing themselves from religion, especially in the context of secular societies, and details the personality, cognitive, emotional, and relational factors, antecedents or outcomes, characterizing the trajectories of the deconverts across various cultures.

Recent advances in cultural and cross-cultural psychology of religion have mainly adopted three broad methodological paradigms: cross-cultural/religious comparative research (e.g., between Western and Eastern religions and religiosity), multilevel analyses investigating religious factors at both the individual and collective levels, and a cultural evolutionary psychological perspective. In this special issue, respectively, [Clobert](#) presents cumulative and meaningful evidence in favor of impressive similarities but also non-negligible differences in the psychological determinants, functions, and outcomes (e.g., tolerance versus prejudice) of religiousness between East Asian and Western monotheistic, in particular Christian, cultural contexts. [Gebauer and Sedikides](#) emphasize that, to fully understand religion as psychologists, we need to examine not only individual religiosity, but also cultural religiosity (the mean level and the very nature of religiosity in a given society), which, in people's lives, either has effects that are independent from the ones of the individual religiosity or impacts the size, mere presence, and even direction of individual level religiosity's effects. Finally, [White et al.](#) argue that cultural evolutionary theory provides the basis for a unified explanation for how cognition (individual preferences for mentalizing and intuitive, teleological, and dualistic thinking) and culture (exposure to cultural beliefs and norms) interact to shape religious beliefs, in ways that are uniquely adapted to local ecological pressures.

Finally, as noted earlier, the recent efforts to study religion and religiosity in general, mostly as an applied field from the perspective of the major psychological subdisciplines, may have, to some extent, marginalized the psychological study of very religious phenomena such as prayer, asceticism, miracles, and religious ministry and organizations. Nevertheless, a final series of articles in this special issue focuses on four selected phenomena: gods, rituals, food practices and restrictions, and religious radicalization.

[Johnson](#) offers an overview of recent psychological theory and research on the belief in God(s) and other supernatural agents across religions, and depicts the important diversity of positive or negative, and abstract or concrete, God representations, as well as the psychological antecedents or outcomes of these representations. [Stein et al.](#) theorize on the role of religious rituals, marked by rigidity, repetition, and continuity across time, in enhancing the religious group's survival, not only by signaling members' external commitment, but also by fostering internal commitment toward the group at the cognitive, affective, and behavioral levels. [Cohen](#) argues that studying the numerous religious norms surrounding food and food restrictions is a precious mean to understand the interplay of religion with various domains of human activity and functioning, such as the very nature of the relationship with God, social hierarchies, worldviews, health, cultural differences, and cultural evolution. Finally, [de Graaf and van den Bos](#) emphasize that theories and research on religious radicalization that identify causal factors at the macro (broad social), meso (contextual), or micro (individual) level should be considered interactively, and should integrate the role of specific religious narratives, such as those on redemption and salvation, in extremist religious beliefs and groups, instead of only adopting an abstract, social psychological framework.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the 30 articles included in this special issue not only attest to the theoretical and empirical vibrancy of today's psychological research on the interaction of basic human motives with religious and spiritual beliefs, experiences, norms, and community, but also, and importantly, provide clear, nuanced, complex, and original insights that go far beyond our common intuitions about religion and irreligion. We are grateful to the authors for having presented the best of their and others' scholarship, and we are optimistic that this collection of articles will be of interest to readers from within and from outside psychology, and especially for future investigators, novices or experienced.

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Table 1. Thematic structure of the special issue articles

Special issue articles		
Editorial <i>Saroglou & Cohen</i>	Individual differences Personality <i>Ashton & Lee</i> Spiritual but not religious <i>Wixwat & Saucier</i> Cognitive styles <i>Yilmaz</i> Nonbelievers <i>Uzarevic & Coleman</i>	Functions Death anxiety <i>Jong</i> Attachment <i>Cherniak et al.</i> Self-control <i>Marcus & McCullough</i> Sexuality <i>Moon</i> Self-enhancement <i>Sedikides & Gebauer</i>
Antecedents Genes and environment <i>Kandler</i> Biology <i>Sasaki & Kim</i>		
Moral outcomes (Im)moralities <i>Abrams et al.</i> Prosociality <i>Tsang et al.</i> Righteousness vs. care <i>Saroglou & Craninx</i>	Social outcomes Ethnoreligious prejudice <i>Rowatt & Al-Kire</i> Sexual prejudice and sexism <i>Etengoff & Lefevor</i> Environmental concerns <i>Preston & Baimel</i>	Health outcomes Positive emotions <i>Van Cappellen et al.</i> Emotional regulation <i>Vishkin</i> Delusion <i>McKay & Ross</i>
Human development Children's & adults' beliefs <i>Harris & Corriveau</i> Adolescence <i>Schnitker</i> Exiting religion <i>Streib</i>	Cultural influences East vs. West <i>Clobert</i> Cultural religiosity <i>Gebauer & Sedikides</i> Cultural learning <i>White et al.</i>	Specific phenomena Gods <i>Johnson</i> Rituals <i>Stein et al.</i> Food restriction <i>Cohen</i> Radicalization <i>de Graaf & van den Boss</i>