



Vassilis Saroglou

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CHAPTER ABSTRACTS (see [Routledge](#))

Chapter 1. Can we study religion in the lab?

People in general, but scholars too, possibly because of their ideological preferences, may overestimate or underestimate the role of religion in individuals' lives, or find it disrespectful, reductionist, or useless to study religion. However, both past work and today's vibrant psychological research on religion, its basic dimensions, i.e. believing, bonding (through rituals), behaving (righteously), and belonging, and related individual variability (from fundamentalism to atheism, through nonreligious spirituality), shows that the role of religion in human psychological functioning is observable through all of the established research methods. These methods include, among others, elegant ones like behavioral observation in laboratory experiments, the analysis of tweets and other content for emotions, twin comparisons detecting genetic influences, and cross-cultural studies identifying similarities and differences between religions. Religion's role appears to be psychologically meaningful, i.e. partly explicable through cognitive, emotional, relational, moral, and social mechanisms.

Chapter 2. Believers and atheists: What makes the difference?

Are we unable to choose our ethnicity but able to choose our religion? Research shows that being religious or atheist, and belonging to a specific religious denomination, is partly but importantly determined by factors preceding individuals and their religious trajectories. This chapter integrates evidence coming mainly from four research areas: socialization, personality and men/women differences, behavioral genetics, and conversion and de-conversion. It appears that being a believer or an atheist, or a particular kind of believer, and showing life span stability or change in these convictions, results from the interaction of three kinds of factors. These include (1) environmental influences, particularly those coming from the family; (2) personality characteristics, cognitive style, and corresponding genetic influences – with interesting similarities and differences, for instance, between fundamentalists, the nonreligious but spiritual, and paranormal believers; and (3) life events that are central to the self, be they negative and asking for a restoration, or positive and enhancing self-transcendence.

Chapter 3. Theist children, apostate adolescents, bigot late adults?

Are there meaningful effects of age on religiosity? This chapter examines fascinating recent research in several areas of human development, particularly children's beliefs and cognition, attachment theory, personality development, and the effects of detrimental religion on minors. This research shows that the traditional approach based on stage theories has overemphasized, if not misunderstood, the role of cognitive development on religiosity across ages, while neglecting the role of emotional, relational, personality, moral, and social development. Moreover, recent research questions have complemented, or corrected, several ideas. Children are not, strictly speaking, naturally theists; they only believe what esteemed adults present as credible, and several factors may facilitate or impede this. Adolescence is a less sensitive period for spirituality, but is defined rather by exploration, disinhibition, and autonomy. Finally, developmental changes in adulthood and late adulthood may facilitate increased interest in religion, but convictional development is mostly multidirectional and not necessarily oriented toward faith maturity but can also tend toward irreligion.

Chapter 4. Does religion make us more moral?

Common ideas regarding religion and morality are: without God everything is permitted, thus atheists should not be trusted because they lack morals; or, on the contrary, religious people are moral hypocrites and religion promotes violence and love equally. This chapter shows that the previously mentioned are empirically inaccurate. It examines the most recent research, including large international studies that suggest both religious universals and differences in morality, experiments that point to underlying mechanisms, and studies that have used behavioral indicators, which are more reliable than self-reports alone. Most major research traditions and areas of moral psychology are visited: values, moral foundations, socio-moral reasoning, prosocial behavior, moral self-control, moral (in)coherence, deontology versus consequentialism, and the legitimation of prejudice or tolerance. Overall, religiosity predicts both compassionate, other-oriented morality, and personal and social control-oriented morality. The latter type of morality restricts rather than extends the former, leading to religion's preference for a "hygienic" morality and religion's potential "immorality."

Chapter 5. Is religion good for you?

Does religion foster mental and physical health and well-being or, rather, cause psychopathology, with the positive effects being only subjective? This chapter proposes a synthesis of the recent vast research by going beyond the simple idea of positive religion fostering health, while negative religion doing the opposite. Overall, religiosity is unrelated to disorders with ample biological bases. However, religiosity predicts greater well-being across religions and many countries, more clearly when alternative resources are missing. This translates into concrete indicators, which can either be general (higher longevity, lower suicide) or specific to the way people (1) perceive reality and the world (lower anxiety and depression) or (2) control the self and conform to norms (lower impulsivity, antisocial behavior, and substance use). The reciprocal reinforcement of religious beliefs, rituals, norms, and a community helps the many underlying psychological mechanisms, including the "positive illusions," to contribute to mental health. Nevertheless, excessiveness leads to overinterpretation (reality), or overcontrol (self) and over-conformity (norms), with religion facilitating the expression of respective mental vulnerability – schizotypy and delusion, or obsessionality and sexual repression.

Chapter 6. Will religion survive?

There is relative consensus today, from an evolutionary psychology perspective, that religion may have not been necessary, but has served several psychological mechanisms that have been selected and adaptive for the human species. However, since this approach leaves out an evolutionary understanding of atheism, it is proposed here that it is the individual variability in religiosity, i.e. the coexistence of belief and atheism, with the respective costs and benefits of each, that may have been adaptive, rather than religion per se. This variability should continue within societies, beyond a possible decrease of the mean level of religiosity (secularization). Nevertheless, traditional religiosity is about to mutate into modern spirituality, which seems, however, more advantageous if tinted with some religious flavor composed of ritualized experiences and a spirit of heritage.