

Religious moral righteousness over care: a review and a meta-analysis

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Does religion enhance an ‘extended’ morality? We review research on religiousness and Schwartz’s values, Haidt’s moral foundations (through a meta-analysis of 45 studies), and deontology versus consequentialism (a review of 27 studies). Instead of equally encompassing prosocial (care for others) and other values (duties to the self, the community, and the sacred), religiosity implies a restrictive morality: endorsement of values denoting social order (conservation, loyalty, and authority), self-control (low autonomy and self-expansion), and purity more strongly than care; and, furthermore, a deontological, non-consequentialist, righteous orientation, that could result in harm to (significant) others. Religious moral righteousness is highest in fundamentalism and weakens in secular countries. Only spirituality reflects an extended morality (care, fairness, and the binding foundations). Evolutionarily, religious morality seems to be more coalitional and ‘hygienic’ than caring.

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Religion does *not create* morality: children’s development of a moral sense is in part independent of religious, parental, and other authorities [1], and adults’ moral conviction is partly independent from religious conviction [2]. However, religion *orients* morality by extending the moral sphere to many issues and domains, including ones that are not universally considered moral, and by promoting a certain meta-ethical perspective that implies specific moral preferences.

We will demonstrate the above by reviewing recent research relative to three major models in moral psychology: Schwartz’s values, Haidt’s moral foundations, and the deontological versus consequentialist moral

orientation. We will show first that religiousness appears to extend morality beyond interpersonal care (duties to others), to duties to the self, the group, and God, through values that are restrictive of personal autonomy. Second, we will show that, instead of simply extending morality, religiousness overemphasizes righteous morality over the care for others. Third, when the two moralities are in conflict, religion often privileges a deontological, rule-based, righteous morality at the detriment of a consequentialist and interpersonal care-oriented morality. Note that, for the purpose of this article, we consider ‘morality’, ‘values’, ‘moral foundations’, and ‘moral orientation’ as overlapping concepts: they all denote long-term, broad principles that guide people’s evaluation of what is right, and thus desirable, or the opposite.

Religious extended but restrictive morality

Major theorists (Kohlberg, Gilligan, Turiel, and Haidt) and related research in moral psychology posit that prosocial values and behavior (i.e. no harm, care for others and justice among equals) are considered universally moral across individuals and cultures. Other values and norms are more variable across individuals and cultures: they can be seen as moral, irrelevant to moral judgment, or even immoral.

Religiousness, across cultures, is positively associated with *prosocial values* and, when results are significant, prosocial behavior. In traditional religiosity, these tendencies most often apply to the ingroup—only spirituality involves extended prosociality [3]. However, religiousness also implies the endorsement of additional values [4,5] and moral foundations [6,7]. These denote first *duties to the self*, in terms of self-restriction rather than self-enhancement: high security, low autonomy, stimulation, and hedonism, and not highly valuing power and achievement. Second, religiousness implies the endorsement of values and moral foundations that reflect *duties to the community*, the latter being the ingroup rather than the world: high loyalty, conformity, and respect for authority and tradition—but not high universalism. Finally, religiousness entails *duties to the sacred* and the natural order of the world, that is, endorsement of the moral foundation of purity/sanctity.

This research appears to confirm the idea that religion endorses an *extended* morality: it encompasses both (a) prosocial, interpersonal, other-oriented morality and (b) the righteous morality that implies duties to the self, the community, and the sacred [8]. However, as shown by the

studies using Schwartz’s model of values, the qualification of ‘extended’ seems misleading. Religious morality is rather *restrictive* of the self: it focuses on moral concerns for self-control, the preservation of social order, and the respect of religious norms—not on autonomy and self-expansion. Similarly, religious morality restricts care and benevolence to targets that are proximal and does not necessarily extend these values to the whole world. Finally, a question arises concerning prosocial and righteous moralities: does religion promote a preference for one of these moralities over the other?

Religious predominance of righteous morality over care

One way to answer this question is to compare, in terms of effect sizes, the associations of religiousness (a) with prosocial morality and (b) with righteous morality. We will do so through research on religiousness, Schwartz’s values, and Haidt’s moral foundations.

Values and religiousness: trends consistent across cultures

As far as Schwartz’s model of values is concerned, a meta-analysis [4] and two large multi-country (Figure 1) studies [5,9*] totaling 42 independent samples and more than 22 000 participants allow us to observe a striking difference,

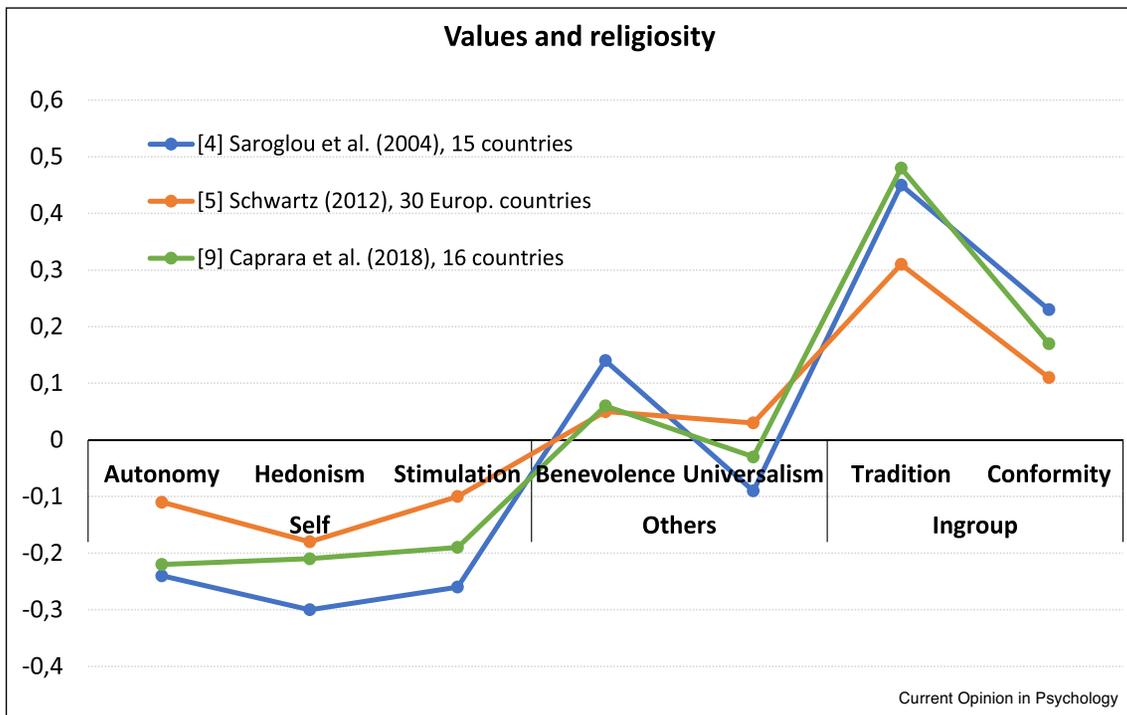
consistent across these studies. Religiousness’ positive associations with conservation values, in particular tradition and conformity, and negative associations with autonomy, stimulation, and hedonism, are much greater (double in magnitude if not higher) than the weak association of religiousness with—the limited—self-transcendence, that is, valuing benevolence, but not universalism (see Figure 1).

The strong negative link between religiousness and valuing hedonism, which is second in magnitude only to the positive association between religion and tradition, points to other research showing that moral concerns regarding sex, mating, and marriage are much stronger than prosocial concerns (Moon, this volume). This denotes a religious preference for ‘hygienic’ over prosocial morality [10**], possibly resulting from evolutionary concerns related to the need to avoid pathogens and diseases [11].

Moral foundations and religiousness: a meta-analysis

As far as Haidt’s model of moral foundations is concerned, we carried out, for the purposes of the present article, a meta-analysis of studies having investigated in the 2010s the links between individual religiousness and the endorsement of the five moral foundations. We included 45 published studies, mostly from the US,

Figure 1



Mean correlations between religiousness and Schwartz’s values, after three large multi-country studies. Notes. For Refs. [4,5], and [9*], respectively: total Ns = 8551, 5940, and 7760; and statistic indicators = weighted mean *r* (meta-analysis) for 21 samples, unweighted mean *r* for five religious groups (adolescents) across 30 European countries, and unweighted mean *r* for 16 countries from five continents (computed here, after z-transformations of the *rs*). Data are independent across the three multi-country studies.

Table 1
Meta-analysis of 45 studies on religiousness and moral foundations

Religiousness	<i>k</i>	Total <i>N</i>	Mean <i>r</i> [95% CI]				
			Care	Fairness	Loyalty	Authority	Purity
Religiosity	44	41 023	.09	−.02	.26	.31	.51
			[.06, .12]	[−.05, .01]	[.22, .31]	[.27, .36]	[.46, .55]
USA	32	37 476	.08	−.03	.28	.35	.55
			[.04, .12]	[−.07, .01]	[.22, .33]	[.30, .39]	[.49, .60]
Other Western	11	3054	.13	.03	.19	.16	.37
			[.06, .19]	[−.04, .11]	[.12, .26]	[.09, .23]	[.31, .42]
Turkey	1	493	.10	−.08	.47	.58	.62
			[.01, .19]	[−.17, .01]	[.40, .54]	[.52, .64]	[.56, .67]
Fundamentalism (10 USA + 2 NL)	12	4453	.00	−.13	.29	.38	.62
			[−.12, .11]	[−.21, −.04]	[.18, .41]	[.28, .48]	[.50, .71]
Spirituality (USA)	3	1855	.30	.19	.18	.13	.37
			[.17, .42]	[.01, .35]	[.04, .31]	[−.16, .41]	[−.02, .66]

Note. *k* = number of studies. Mean *r*s for religiosity, fundamentalism, and spirituality (all relevant studies) are in bold. Confidence intervals (CI) are in italics when the differences are clear for one cultural group with respect to the others because of fully distinct CIs.

but also from some other Western countries and Turkey [7,12–16,17*,18–28,29**,30*,31–35,36*,37–41]. The list of studies and more information on methodology are provided in the Supplementary Material. In line with [42], we computed three series of meta-analyses, respectively for general religiosity, fundamentalism, and spirituality. For each set of associations, we computed the mean effects and the confidence intervals (see Table 1), heterogeneity statistics, and, for the associations of religiosity, prediction intervals and moderation analyses for age and gender (see Supplementary Material). Given previous evidence for differences in the size of the associations of religiosity with psychological constructs between the US and Europe [42], and between religious and secular countries (Gebauer and Sedikides, this volume), we also compared the US studies with the other Western studies (see Table 1 for the mean effects and the confidence intervals, and Supplementary Material for the comparisons).

As detailed in Table 1 (see also Figure 2), in contrast to the idea of extended religious morality, but in line with studies having used Schwartz's model of values, the mean association between religiosity and the moral foundation of *care* was positive, but weak in size (.09). The association was even, albeit non-significantly, negative in five out of the 44 studies. The association between care and religious fundamentalism was null (.00) but became positive, and of non-negligible size, as a function of spirituality (.30).

Furthermore, the mean association between religiosity and the moral foundation of *fairness* was null (−.02); it became clearly negative as a function of fundamentalism (−.13) but turned out to be positive as a function of spirituality (.19). The above results strictly parallel research on religion and Schwartz's values (Section 'Values and religiousness: trends consistent across cultures') showing that religiosity has a weak relationship

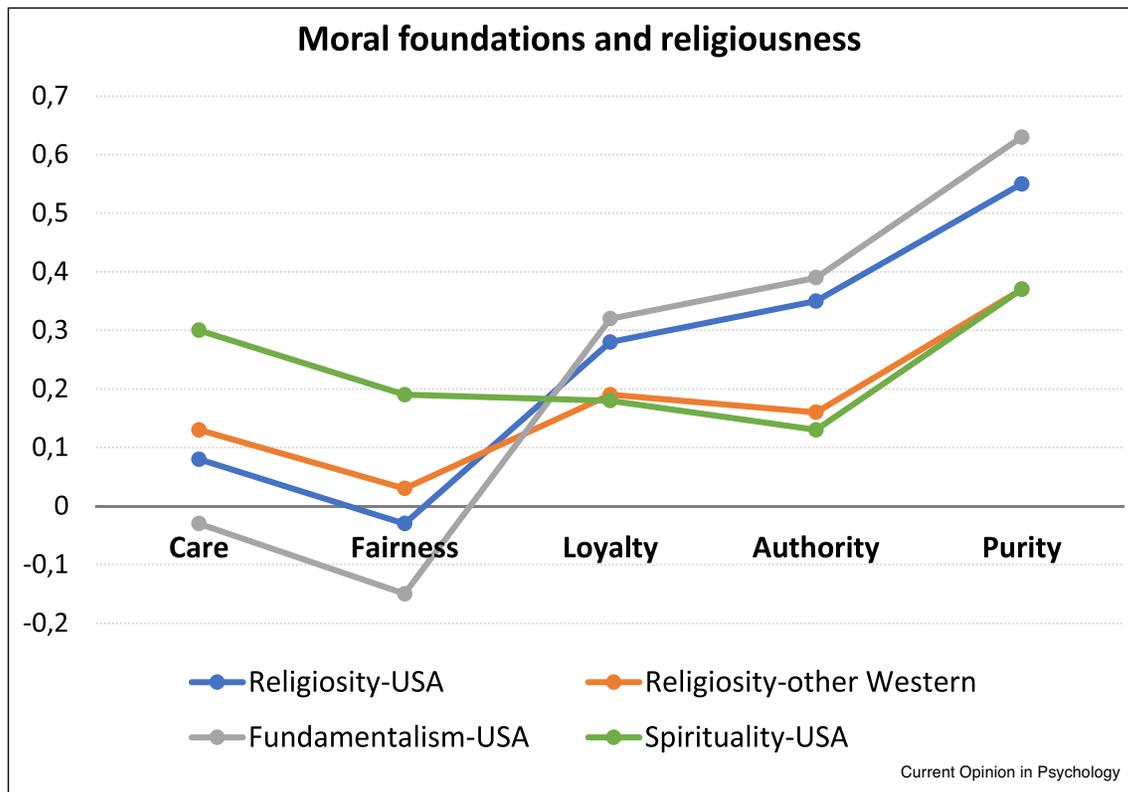
with benevolence and no relationship at all to universalism, whereas fundamentalism versus spirituality denote respectively low versus high universalism—a value that includes justice for all people.

In contrast, the mean associations of religiosity with the three binding foundations, in particular purity, were, consistently across studies, positive and of much greater magnitude—from two to five times as high as religiosity's mean association with care. The mean effects were stronger for fundamentalism than religiosity, but were clearly attenuated as a function of spirituality, becoming comparable to the associations of religiosity with care and fairness. The mean associations of religiosity with the three conservative foundations were stronger in the more religious US compared to the more secular Europe, and in samples with a greater ratio of men to women; and the associations of religiosity with care increased in more predominantly female samples (see Supplementary Material for the analyses).

Note that the religiosity-purity link is amplified by, but not due to, one item referring to God in the 30-item Moral Foundations Questionnaire. In our own studies, when this item is excluded, the association, $r = .45$ [16] decreases but remains non-negligible, $r = .32$ [15,17*]; see also [4], for a similar observation on the item 'devout' included in Schwartz's value of tradition. Moreover, at least in our own studies, the low consideration by religious people—possibly due to their high anthropocentrism—of hurting a defenseless animal as 'one of the worst things', undermines but does not explain the link between religiousness and care. Without this item, religiosity's association with care is still much weaker (.09 or .20) than its association with purity.

In sum, general religiosity primarily denotes righteous—coalitional and 'hygienic', purity-oriented—morality, and only secondarily and weakly denotes a morality of care

Figure 2



Mean correlations between religiousness and moral foundations (meta-analysis of 45 studies).

oriented to proximal others. Fundamentalism reflects exclusively righteous morality. Only spirituality implies an extended morality, equally encompassing both the binding and the individualizing foundations, with care being extended to the concern for justice for all people.

Religion and non-consequentialist, non-caring, deontology

Going further, one may wonder what religious people do in situations of conflict between meta-ethical ways of considering values, or when the conflict opposes the two moralities of righteousness and care. To address this, research in the 2010s investigated religion's role in: (a) self-reported meta-ethical style, that is, rule-based absolutist morality versus outcome-based contextual morality; (b) moral conflict between deontology and consequentialism in studies focused on instrumental harm (harming one person to save many); and (c) moral conflict between righteous deontology and care (harmless moral transgressions to protect and save concrete others). We identified 27 studies [16,35,43–45,46*,47–51,52**,53–57] (see the list in Supplementary Material Table S3), conducted half in the US and half in other, Western and non-Western, contexts, providing findings consistent across studies, methods, and countries.

Self-reported meta-ethical orientation

Research based on explicit self-assessments of moral styles shows that religious people tend to highly endorse absolutist, rule-based, normative morality and/or to not endorse relativist, outcome-based, contextual, and practical, morality. This is the case in Anglo-Saxon countries of Christian tradition [44,47,50,51,53], two countries of Islamic tradition, Indonesia and Turkey [44,57] and among US Hindus but not Jews—possibly because Jewish affiliation may primarily denote ethnicity rather than high religiosity [51]. In the former moral orientation, values and principles are an end themselves and have to be followed independently of the specific context and outcomes. The distinction between right and wrong looks clear. In the latter moral orientation, values and principles take into account the context and possible outcomes, may be a means to a greater end, and may be transgressed to achieve a more important good. The distinction between right and wrong is more complex.

Conflict between deontology and instrumental harm

To investigate in a less explicit way the above link between religion and non-consequentialist deontology, several studies have used moral dilemmas similar to the well-known 'trolley dilemma' which exemplifies the

instrumental harm problem: is it allowed, or even should I, harm or kill one person for a greater good such as saving more people? Consistently across these studies, religiosity was associated with more deontological choices. This was the case when the deontology versus consequentialism conflict was measured as a bipolar continuum [43,46*,55], but also when the two were dissociated: religiosity was associated with both high deontology (49) and low consequentialism [47,52**].

The deontological orientation of religious people implies an opposition to instrumental harm, be it directly (killing a person) or indirectly (having the person be killed) [46*], and neglects, as outcomes, both the hope of a greater good and the risk of more extended immorality [54]. This role of religiosity seems unique, not able to be reduced to cognitive inflexibility or sociomoral conservatism [35,53]. Experimental evidence suggests bidirectional links, with religious priming increasing deontological responses, and with activation of moral subjectivity diminishing one's belief in God [57]. Other research suggests that the deontological responses of religious people may result from reflection rather than being the result of automatic intuitive responses [52**]. There is even neuropsychological evidence that religionists (Catholics), but not atheists, experience the activation of different brain areas when dealing with deontological scenarios versus utilitarian scenarios [48].

Across these studies, religion's opposition to instrumental harm seems to apply to all monotheistic traditions: Judaism, Western and Eastern Christianity, and Islam. Nevertheless, the trolley-like dilemmas of instrumental harm have some limitations: they have weak ecological validity and create conflict between aspects of the same value, that is, care, no harm, not killing. The above results can be interpreted as reflecting religious people's higher empathy and epistemic need for order. Deontological choices reflect empathy and perspective-taking [49,52**], typically present among the religious, whereas utilitarian choices reflect the need for cognition [49]—usually unrelated to religiosity.

Conflict between righteous deontology and caring morality

An alternative examination of religious deontological morality shifts the focus to the conflict between righteous deontology and caring morality: Can I lie in order to not cause irreparable harm to a terminally ill old acquaintance? May I make an exception to an engagement made in order to help a desperate mother? Should I betray my citizen's loyalty and respect of authority to hide a good friend?

In the late 2000s we created nine dilemmas, like the above, which illustrated conflicts between the care for (significant) others (to avoid them being seriously harmed

or killed) and the transgressions of values and principles such as honesty/not lying, loyalty in engagements, respect of the authority, and strict, without exception, respect of equity. In a series of studies in (the secularized) Belgium, we found that (a) rather than religiosity in general, it was authoritarianism among the religious, a proxy of fundamentalism, that was related to harmful, righteous deontological choices (unpublished work by Saroglou and coll. in 2010), and that (b) religious priming increased such choices among authoritarians [56]. Moreover, (c) religiosity predicted these deontological choices when the harmful outcomes were not severe, but not when they were severe; valuing care was a suppressor of the religiosity-deontology link [16]. Thus, non-caring righteous deontology may not be at the very heart of religion in secular contexts, but still reflects the dark side of it, that is, authoritarian religion.

In parallel, work by Piazza in the US [35,54; see also Ref. 47] focused on similar kinds of moral decisions that were harmful to others if principles and values other than care were not transgressed. Consistently across these studies, in the context of the more religious US, general religiosity uniquely predicted the moral orientation for increased righteous deontology *and* decreased consideration of obvious prosocial outcomes. This was, importantly, due to considering God as the unique and exclusive source of normativity and morality.

Conclusion

On the basis of the findings of the various research areas examined in this article, we think it is reasonable to infer that the role of religious (ingroup) prosociality in forming and consolidating large coalitions involving reciprocal interpersonal helping may have been overestimated in the contemporary evolutionary psychology of religion. This role may not reflect the very center of religious morality. Rather, the results of the present review suggest that the evolutionary perspectives of religion focusing on the importance of hygienic and righteous/coalitional morality (avoidance of pathogens, loyalty, group conformity, as well as preservation of personal and social order) may be more central in explaining, from a moral perspective, religions' origin and maintenance. Religious morality seems to imply, above all, ostensible behavior and practices that are self-restrictive, dutiful, and not highly costly (at least less costly than strong prosocial behavior), signaling that a given individual is a safe and devoted, and thus trustworthy, group member.

In conclusion, religious morality appears to be more coalitional than caring. This may help to explain why religionists may accept (non-antireligious) authoritarian regimes, why fundamentalist or simply religious parents may kick their offspring out of the house for being gay or falling in love with a follower of another religion, and why

religious converts may commit suicidal attacks to defend the honor of the community.

Conflict of interest statement

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary material related to this article can be found, in the online version, at doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2020.09.002>.

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In this work, religious people showed both high deontological and low utilitarian responses when dealing with moral dilemmas (harming someone for a greater good) but did so less after cognitive resources diminished. This suggests that religionists deontological choices result from reflection and are not intuitive/automatic. In this work, religious people showed both high deontological and low utilitarian responses when dealing with moral dilemmas (harming someone for a greater good) but did so less after cognitive resources diminished. This suggests that religionists deontological choices result from reflection and are not intuitive/automatic.

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