Religion as a Natural Laboratory for Understanding Human Behavior

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Abstract

What do we gain from the scientific study of religion? One possibility is that religious contexts are unique, and cognition within these contexts is worth understanding. Another possibility is that religion can be viewed as a laboratory for understanding psychology and culture more broadly. Rather than limiting the study of religion to a single context, I argue that the study of religion is useful precisely because it illuminates secular psychological and cultural processes. I first outline my practical approach to psychology and religion, focusing on how people use religion to advance mundane goals. I then discuss several domains in which studying religion has led to important insights, including culture, prejudice, and cognition. This article is an extended version of an Early Career Award address given at the International Association for the Psychology of Religion meeting in 2023 in Groningen, Netherlands.

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Religion as a Natural Laboratory for Understanding Human Behavior

Most researchers who study religion are especially interested in belief: Why do people hold certain types of beliefs about deities? What are the consequences of these beliefs? How do people engage with sacred concepts? And how are these sacred concepts different from the secular?

It is perhaps intuitive to think that, for religion to be an important topic of study, it must offer something wholly unique—religious cognition should look in some way distinct from anything we see in secular contexts, or the powerful combinations of emotions religions evoke must be somehow exceptional. Some researchers have used the specialness of religion as justification for why religion is important (Pargament, 2002); similarly, some who view religion as simply reflecting mundane mechanisms agree with the premise that if religion is not special, then it is not worth studying (Funder, 2002).

With my collaborators, I recently became interested in exploring this question of whether religion is special. We considered the extent to which the effects of supernatural beliefs (and their accompanying cultures) might be considered to have effects that cannot be replicated otherwise. In one paper (Moon et al., 2023), we reviewed a few domains where it seems people have made such claims—in health and well-being, morality, meaning in life, etc.

Working on this question made it apparent that there are differing opinions in our field that are rarely acknowledged. Because researchers rarely specify whether they think religion is unique or whether it is simply a demonstration of secular mechanisms, it is difficult to gauge how prevalent these specialness beliefs are in the field. I have been to meetings where speakers (to enthusiastic audiences) have gone on at length about how religion *must* be special, and that anyone who really understands religion knows this. Conversely, many colleagues with whom I

have discussed these ideas have been incredulous that *anyone* thinks religion is more than combinations of mundane psychological processes. Clearly, there is not a consensus, and many researchers are unaware that there is much disagreement at all.

Whatever the prevalence of these beliefs in our field, these issues raise a bigger question: What should be the goal of the psychology of religion? Do we understand more about the human condition by focusing our efforts on understanding religion *per se*? Or are we better off viewing religion as an interesting context in which to examine ordinary psychological phenomena, including social processes, cognition, and cultural transmission? A collaborator of mine, who shares an enthusiasm for evolutionary approaches to religion, once told me she is only interested in evolutionary social science to the extent it can tell her something new or inspire new hypotheses about religion. My approach has typically been the opposite—though I find religion to be fascinating, I am most excited about studying it because I view it as an interesting context in which to examine the more general phenomena that interest me. Said otherwise, is it our goal to understand religion *per se*? Or do we view religion as a springboard to understand more general psychological and social processes?

Neither of these approaches or goals are wrong, but they do lead us to ask different questions and to create different models. If religion is a wholly unique domain of human psychology and sociality, then understanding it tells us about how people act in religious (vs. non-religious) contexts. However, if religion is a manifestation of the quotidian processes that dominate our daily lives, religions sometimes provide contexts akin to experimental manipulations that would be impossible to run in a laboratory. One can ask questions that would otherwise be impractical or difficult to answer, such as "What would happen if some people were convinced that another human had super-human abilities?" Here, I describe how people use

religion to fulfill some of their most mundane goals, then give several examples (with a focus on my own work) of insights about human nature gained through the scientific study of religion. My goal is to describe how viewing religion as a laboratory in which to observe secular phenomena can be a useful way to generate hypotheses and models in the psychology of religion and can maximize the utility of our field.

A Mundane Approach to Religion

My own work has tended to view religion as a mundane tool by which people can fulfill their goals (Moon, 2021). For much of the world, religion is practical—it helps them find friends, mates, food, and social support. They are generally not worried about doctrinal consistency or careful to adhere to theologically correct beliefs (Barlev et al., 2017; Slone, 2004). Indeed, for much of history, beliefs have often been optional—the political power of leaders was more than enough to inspire obedience among adherents (Seabright, 2020).

There are many practical reasons someone might be drawn to religion. Many religions seem especially to provide benefits to married individuals and parents (Moon, 2021). This can come in the form of help raising children (Shaver et al., 2020), a shared set of values that facilitates marriage satisfaction (Mahoney et al., 2001) and deterrents against sexually promiscuous lifestyles (Adamczyk & Hayes, 2012; Hone et al., 2021; Pazhoohi & Hosseinchari, 2014). Not surprisingly, then, people who seek this kind of long-term, committed relationship tend to be more religious (Moon et al., 2019; Weeden, 2015; Weeden et al., 2008), religious people have a strong preference to marry someone within their religion (Fieder & Huber, 2016; Jackson et al., 2015), and people who have children often become more religious (Blekesaune & Skirbekk, 2022; McCullough et al., 2005).

This seems to lead to real benefits, as religious individuals tend to have more children, and even more when they marry within their own religion (Fieder & Huber, 2016). Further, religion might reduce risk of one's partner being unfaithful (Burdette et al., 2007; Buss & Shackelford, 1997; Strassmann et al., 2012), which makes parenting a less "risky" strategy (Moon, 2021).

Why the Mundane Is Important

Psychologists of religion are often interested how appealing certain types of beliefs might be (Barrett, 2000; Boyer, 2001) or how beliefs and emotional states are related (Johnson et al., 2019; Van Cappellen et al., 2021). Focusing simply on beliefs might explain individual differences based on, for example, intuitive thinking (but see Farias et al., 2017; Gervais et al., 2018), but leaves much to be explained; for instance, why are people who lack resources or who are lonely especially drawn to religious beliefs? Is it because their minds work in different ways? Or is it because they find religion more useful in fulfilling their goals?

To illustrate, consider what is effective for missionaries, whose job it is to seek new members for a religion. In just one example, LDS ("Mormon") missionaries focus on several potential attractors; the lessons they teach are designed to explain their religion in a logical manner that also taps into listeners' emotions—indeed, their principal aim is to encourage people to pray and receive a strong spiritual experience leading to belief (Jensen, 1974).

However, a focus on beliefs or emotions would miss out on much of what makes people attracted to religion. Missionaries tend to know that certain individuals will be less interested in their message, and that they will have more success seeking out people who are lonely, have recently suffered a loss, have few friends, or have recently married or had a child (Jensen, 1974).

When prospective members attend services, they are often matched with members of the local congregation who have similar backgrounds or interests.

Perhaps the most practical strategy for convincing someone to join any religion is romance. Some even have a name for this phenomenon when used as a strategy: "flirt to convert." I suspect many people—especially young people and perhaps especially young men—would have had very little interest in theology were it not for a strong romantic opportunity. Some of them have remained devout even long after the romantic opportunity was gone, suggesting their conversion—even if motivated by love—was sincere.

Without a focus on the mundane goals that drive religious participation, it would be difficult to account for several patterns, such as why religious conversion is more attractive to people with fewer resources, people who are lonely, people who become parents (Blekesaune & Skirbekk, 2022; Kerry et al., 2023), or people who experience genuine conversion as a result of romantic opportunities. It would also fail to explain why some of the most consistent relations with religious variables tend to be attitudes about family, sexuality, etc. (Jacquet et al., 2021; Moon et al., 2019; Weeden & Kurzban, 2013). It is not the case that the beliefs have become more plausible or attractive, but rather the individual's goals have changed, and the religious beliefs are now more consistent with those goals.

Lessons Learned by Studying Religion

How Do People Interact with Culture?

Why Religion Is a Useful Context`

People interact with many types of culture—they select between different types of moral judgments, technology and tools, and cultural products such as music or stories. Religion is a particularly useful context because people and societies tend to know their religious history, and

there are data available on many surveys (including longitudinal surveys), even when religion is not a focus of the researchers. There are also historical data at the society-level. This means researchers can often use existing data to conduct longitudinal studies within individuals and to explore how religions spread across time and space. It would be difficult to imagine other cultural products that are so carefully recorded and remembered, making it much easier to explore how people engage with religion than with many other cultural products.

What Can Religion Teach Us?

My own work in this area has been influenced by the rational choice model of religiousness (Iannaccone, 1995; McCullough et al., 2005; Sherkat & Wilson, 1995), which assumes that people are more drawn toward religious beliefs when these beliefs are in line with their goals. Many of these goals seem to revolve around sexual behavior and the construction of families. Weeden and colleagues (2008) introduced the Reproductive-Religiosity Model, which suggests that, rather than religious participation causing arbitrary shifts in people's attitudes about sexuality (leading to unnecessary feelings of shame or harsh moral judgments), that people who are interested in long-term, high-investment relationships (what I will refer to as a *committed reproductive strategy*) are drawn toward religious participation because it helps benefit their lifestyle.

Religions can benefit these high-investment reproductive strategies in several ways (Moon, 2021): First, people who follow these reproductive strategies essentially "put all of their eggs in one basket," meaning it would be more costly for them to lose their partner, or for their partner to be unfaithful. Religious norms that place high costs on infidelity, then, are beneficial to such individuals, as it makes it less likely that their partner will be unfaithful. Indeed, there is some evidence that rates of infidelity are lower among religious individuals, including across

cultures (Burdette et al., 2007; Buss & Shackelford, 1997; Strassmann et al., 2012), and that the presence or salience of religion can push people toward a more restricted sexuality (Adamczyk & Hayes, 2012; Hone et al., 2021). Second, religious cultures typically provide benefits for parents, such as pooling resources for childcare, which allows more efficient use of parenting resources (Shaver et al., 2019, 2020). Given these benefits, and norms for larger families, it is not surprising that religiousness is positively correlated with fertility across most of the world (Blume, 2009; Frejka & Westoff, 2008; Rowthorn, 2011; Zhang, 2008).

What evidence is there that people are more likely to engage with religion when it is consistent with their goals? First, there is correlational evidence—religious morality seems to be much more about "hygienic" morality rather than about enhancing well-being *per se* (Saroglou & Craninx, 2021). Religious variables tend especially to correlate strongly with "reproductive morality"—moral opposition to behaviors like sex behavior marriage or casual sex (Baumard & Chevallier, 2015; Jacquet et al., 2021; Moon et al., 2019; Rowatt & Schmitt, 2003; Schmitt & Fuller, 2015; Weeden et al., 2008; Weeden & Kurzban, 2013). Further, when controlling for reproductive morality, many of the correlations between religious variables and other variables tend to shrink or become non-significant, including personality variables, gender, etc. (Moon et al., 2019; Weeden et al., 2008; Weeden & Kurzban, 2013), suggesting that reproductive morality is perhaps especially central in motivating religious participation.

Second, there is longitudinal and cross-cultural evidence. People tend to become more religious after having children or marrying, but not after cohabiting (Blekesaune & Skirbekk, 2022). Thus, not all relationships increase religiousness, but only those for which religion can serve some benefit. McCullough et al. (2005) found that, for many people, religiousness across the lifespan peaks during one's childrearing years, when parents can benefit from religious

resources. Finally, Weeden (2015) examined the religious trajectories of young adults, finding that their religiousness does not necessarily reflect their upbringing, but is closely tied to lifestyle variables, such as number of sexual partners. To summarize, ". . . parents are often in situations in which religious participation is useful to their lives, while young adults [who are not parents] are typically in situations in which it is not useful" (Weeden, 2015, p. 91). Thus, if we want to know how religious people are likely to be, a good place to start is by looking at the kind of lifestyle they want—if they are interested in a long-term, traditionalist lifestyle, there is a good chance they will be amenable to religion.

Of course, not all religious goals are centered around reproduction. People can similarly engage with religion as a tool to encourage others to be cooperative (Fitouchi et al., 2023; Fitouchi & Singh, 2022) or to fulfill any host of practical benefits throughout one's life (Reynolds & Tanner, 1995). Religions often must compete for adherents, and they typically do this by tailoring their services to cater to people's real needs (Seabright, forthcoming).

Tracking religiousness by considering *who* benefits from religious practice can lead to even more nuanced hypotheses. For example, women are typically more religious than men, people typically become more religious as they age, people with lower SES are generally more religious, etc. Because not all people share the same incentives or benefit from the same arrangements, religion is sometimes more useful for some groups than others—this can explain patterns of religiousness as a function of social standing, environmental challenges, age, parent status, and gender (Blake et al., 2018; Botero et al., 2014; CaiRangDongZhi et al., 2023; Kerry et al., 2023; Moon et al., 2022; Pazhoohi & Kingstone, 2020).

Applications Outside of Religion

Some of these principles have helped guide research on how people interact with other types of culture. Like research on religion, cultural evolution has also tended to focus on the selection of cultural variants that are more intuitive or memorable, yet it is clear that people also subjectively evaluate how useful cultural variants can be for advancing their goals (Singh, 2022).

Morality, for example, has often been supposed to rely on beliefs in abstract principles like "purity" (Gray et al., 2023) that guide judgments. Just like a focus on abstract principles misses out on some important patterns in religion, this focus misses out on important patterns in moral judgments (Beal, 2020), and these patterns are likely to reflect people's goals and beliefs about the world.

Consider why people moralize harmless behaviors, like wearing revealing clothing or indulging in sexual pleasure. People tend to view these types of behavior as relevant to social life (Fitouchi et al., in press) and assume that indulging in bodily pleasures such as sex or alcohol will decrease their self-control and, in turn, cooperation (Fitouchi et al., 2022). People's beliefs about others' capabilities also matter—those who think male observers lack the ability to control their sexual urges tend to be more opposed to behaviors such as public breastfeeding or revealing clothing (Moon, Wongsomboon, et al., 2021).

In sum, just as people engage with religion in self-interested ways, they also are more likely to adopt moral judgments that reflect their own interests—people tend to adopt the kinds of moral judgments that mitigate their vulnerabilities (Moon, in press; Petersen, 2013; Pitesa & Thau, 2014) or because they perceive these norms as better at advancing their goals (Singh et al., 2017). A scientific approach to religion has played a prominent role in demonstrating these phenomena, and in at least some cases, has led to these additional lines of research.

How Do People Perceive and Make Inferences about Others?

Why Religion Is a Useful Context

Religion provides an opportunity to examine social perception in a unique context. Religion is an important aspect of social identity that is sometimes visible (e.g., through religious garb), but many religious people can decide whether or not to make their affiliation obvious. Additionally, because many religions span across many populations, it is possible to examine the effects of many different combinations: How does being a religious minority vs. majority affect social perception? How does religion interact with race? How does religion interact with SES? It is difficult to think of other social identities that span across so many diverse groups and environments, allowing such comparisons to be made.

What Can Religion Teach Us?

There are often many positive perceptions and stereotypes about religious individuals—some work has claimed that there was a "halo effect," such that religious people were viewed more positively in nearly every way (Bailey & Doriot, 1985). Lists of stereotypes about atheists similarly leave one with the impression that people rarely view atheists in a positive light (Dubendorff & Luchner, 2016; Franks & Scherr, 2014; Gervais et al., 2011; Grove et al., 2019; Harper, 2007).

One interesting development has been the finding that these effects often transcend group membership. In contrast to social psychological perspectives that focus on group identification (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1979), it seems that people often perceive religious individuals as more trustworthy, even to perceivers of different faiths (Hall et al., 2015; McCullough et al., 2016). Apparently, there is something about religion that—at least in some ways—allows people to overcome their ingroup preferences.

At first blush it may be tempting to attribute these findings to something unique to religion, and indeed researchers have suggested that religious people are trusted precisely because they believe in morally concerned deities (Norenzayan et al., 2016). Yet religious people tend to differ from nonreligious people in ways that might benefit perceptions of trustworthiness—as discussed above, one consistent difference is in how they approach sexuality, marriage, and family (Van Slyke & Szocik, 2020; Weeden et al., 2008).

My colleagues and I decided to test whether people's stereotypes about religious individuals reflect these attitudes and behaviors about family (Moon et al., 2018). We showed participants profiles that were either religious or nonreligious, and replicated prior studies showing that people rated the religious profiles as more trustworthy. However, we also examined several other perceptions of the targets, such as their self-control, whether they came from an affluent background, and extent to which they follow a "committed reproductive strategy," which includes being a caring and invested parent, faithful romantic partner. The largest effect we found was that religious profiles were viewed as especially likely to follow a committed reproductive strategy. Further, mediation analyses suggested that the effect of the target's religion on perceived trustworthiness was largely explained by the inference that they follow a committed reproductive strategy (i.e., they are faithful romantic partners, dedicated parents, etc.). A follow-up experiment provided further evidence for this explanation: when profiles included information about the target's preferred dating strategy (i.e., whether they wanted to settle down and start a family or whether they wanted to keep "playing the field"), people rated the family-oriented profiles as more trustworthy, and the profile's religion no longer significantly influenced trustworthiness. In other words, people use religion as a cue about the kinds of lifestyles others are likely to follow, and accordingly trust religious individuals more. However, when provided

with additional information about others' lifestyles, people tend to trust individuals who are family-oriented, whether or not they are religious.

Follow-up studies have confirmed the value of viewing religion as a social cue to the types of lifestyles one is likely to follow, including the salience of these stereotypes and their central role in anti-atheist prejudice (Moon et al., 2020; Van Slyke, 2021). Additional studies have shown that perceptions about reproductive strategy help explain why people prefer romantic partners who are religious, especially for long-term relationships (Brown, 2022), and why people disapprove of their children marrying atheists (Lambert et al., 2022). It may not be that there is something unique to religion that influences social perception; it is largely a cue to the many behaviors people are interested in predicting about others.

In fact, there is not a universal halo effect around religion in social perception—sometimes irreligion can be a favorable cue. Gervais et al. (2011) found that, even as people distrust atheists, they expressed a marginal preference for an atheist waitress. They speculated that people might view atheists as uninhibited and potentially more fun. Recently, my colleagues and I tested these ideas experimentally. Using the conjunction fallacy—a method that can assess intuitive associations relying on the representativeness heuristic (Gervais et al., 2011, 2017; Tversky & Kahneman, 1983)—we replicated findings showing that people intuitively associate serial murder with atheism, but not with religiousness (Gervais et al., 2017). However, in addition to the serial murder scenario (and a corresponding positive moral vignette about someone who cares about animals and people), we also used vignettes about someone who is a good or bad party host, someone who is open- or closed-minded toward other groups, and someone who is (in)competent in science. Even as people associated serial murder with atheism (and moral goodness with religiousness), the same participants rated the positive versions of the

other vignettes more closely with atheism, and the negative versions with religiousness (Moon, Krems, et al., 2021). These results suggest that people may view atheists as providing some positive opportunities for social interactions—as fun, open-minded, and scientifically competent—even as they are disadvantaged in high-trust domains.

It is tempting to draw a simple conclusion from these results—people think religious individuals follow committed reproductive strategies, and in turn they trust them (but also might view them as somewhat prudish). But these perceptions are complex and nuanced, and surely vary cross-culturally (see, for example, Shaver et al., 2018). Exploring how social perception of religious individuals varies across the world is an exciting avenue for future research.

Applications Outside of Religion

The research described above is consistent with an affordance management approach (McArthur & Baron, 1983; Neuberg et al., 2010), which assumes that the function of social perception is to manage the threats and affordances that others might pose—perceptions motivate us to avoid people who might be harmful and to treat appropriately people who might pose some potential benefit. However, whether something is a threat or an opportunity depends largely on its relationship with the perceiver—a physically formidable individual might instill fear if his intentions are unclear, but the same person could be viewed as a valuable teammate if he shares the perceiver's interests (Neuberg et al., 2020).

By examining which perceptions of (non)religious people are important, these findings help demonstrate the critical ingredients of social processes like trust. Social perceivers are interested in predicting others' behavior, and often interpret cues such as how much self-control one has, how much they care about their family, or how wealthy they are, as indicative of

trustworthiness and cooperativeness (Keijzer & Corten, 2023; Moon et al., 2018; Righetti & Finkenauer, 2011). Religion can, in some cases, be signals of many of these traits.

Considering how these results vary across cultures is also instructive. Social information such as religion can be a very different cue or signal, depending on the circumstances. In some cultures, perhaps especially in WEIRD societies (Henrich, 2020), people will use these cues (such as religiousness, self-control, etc.) to predict someone's likely behavior. In other cases, group membership may be the primary cue about how someone is likely to behave; this may be why people do not trust religious outgroups in some places (Shaver et al., 2018).

In sum, religion's laboratory allows the observation of social phenomena that would be difficult to explore otherwise. The signals people send about their religion range from obvious (e.g., religious dress or badges) to completely hidden; religious societies range from homogenous to heterogeneous, from extremely religious to extremely secular; religion exist in the poorest and the wealthiest of nations. What religion communicates in each combination of these situations can tell us something about how people make judgments about others, and how context influences these judgments.

How Do People Maintain Their Reputations?

Why Religion Is a Useful Context

Given the effects of religion on social perception (e.g., trustworthiness, prejudice), it is also instructive to consider the opposite side of the coin: how people maintain their reputations. Here, religion is a useful context for many of the same reasons it is useful in social perception—people can often strategically decide whether and how to present their (ir)religiousness to others. If religion can promote perceptions of trustworthiness, one possibility is that people might strategically amplify their religious behavior at times when they need to signal their

trustworthiness. This could be completely outside of their conscious awareness—if it became clear that people were engaging in religion just for the reputational benefits, the process could backfire. It is much safer to believe sincerely, but at the right moments (Kurzban, 2010).

What Can Religion Teach Us?

Though there is much work to be done in this area, there is some evidence people enhance their religious signals in places where they need be perceived in certain ways. In an influential chapter on costly signaling, Irons (2001) described how people use religion to express commitments that serve their self-interest, suggesting that reputational incentives can explain some differing patterns of sex differences in religiousness across cultures. For example, among the Yomut of Northern Iran, men are markedly more religious than women. Yomut men travel frequently, and during their travels they often encounter strangers or distant acquaintances. Religion—especially frequent prayer—provides a quick way for them to signal their trustworthiness to these strangers. Yomut women, in contrast, spend most of their time with kin, where they have little need for powerful signals.

Among the inhabitants of the island of Utila (in the Bay Islands of Honduras), however, women tend to be more religious. Irons attributed this to a different incentive—here, men spend significant amounts of time away from home, and are particularly concerned with finding a faithful mate. They seem to have—as do Americans—a strong stereotype that religious women are more likely to fit this criterion. Women, then, have an incentive to display religious commitment to attract a husband, whereas women show no preference for religious husbands.

Thus, there is some preliminary evidence that people are somewhat strategic in how they present their religious affiliation or practice. I suspect that these patterns will closely reflect the stereotypes described above—someone who wants to emphasize her scientific abilities or throw

the party of the year might downplay her religious commitments (Moon, Krems, et al., 2021). Conversely, someone relying on a stranger for a large favor might not voluntarily mention any spiritual struggles or disbelief (Gervais et al., 2011). Not surprisingly, there is also evidence that atheists similarly downplay or conceal their atheism in places where it is especially costly (Mackey et al., 2020).

Applications Outside of Religion

These acts of strategic self-presentation religion also reflect broader phenomena. Certain types of moral judgments (e.g., deontological judgments) are viewed as more indicative of trustworthiness (Everett et al., 2016), and there is some evidence that people adopt these judgments more frequently in countries where it is more difficult to form new relationships, and people thus have stronger incentives to maintain a moral reputation with those they already know (Awad et al., 2020).

Similarly, people seem to have some intuitions about what stereotypes their group faces. Obese people know that people sometimes respond to them with disgust, so they sometimes attempt to mitigate this perception by focusing on their hygiene. Young black men know others sometimes view them as physically threatening, so they might mitigate these perceptions by whistling tunes by Vivaldi or by engaging in other behaviors associated with higher SES (Neel et al., 2013).

Viewing religion as a laboratory allows us to explore many of the nuances in how people decide to present themselves, especially in cases where people can choose whether to disclose their religious beliefs (or disbelief). Do people's self-presentation tactics track closely the stereotypes that others have about their group? Are people strategic about presenting even their

most closely held identities? Does whistling Ave Maria have the same effects as whistling Vivaldi? These are all questions that can be explored in religion's laboratory.

What Leads to Human Flourishing?

Why Religion Is a Useful Context

It is clear that religion is typically associated with human flourishing—quality social relationships, subjective well-being, health, etc. (VanderWeele, 2017). As with social perception, religion's wide reach across cultures allows us to make comparisons that would be difficult to make otherwise. One can explore whether religion has more positive effects in more religious communities (Diener et al., 2011; Ebert et al., 2020; Gebauer et al., 2017; Hoogeveen et al., in press) or can explore which features of religion seem to facilitate well-being, such as identification with one's group (Greenfield & Marks, 2008) or the opportunity to signal one's commitment to one's group (Wood, 2017). All these possibilities have important implications for well-being within and outside of religious contexts.

What Can Religion Teach Us?

In addition to exploring which aspects of religion seem to facilitate human flourishing, or the contexts in which religion has beneficial effects, I suggest two other routes by which studying religion can reveal important insights. First, it is instructive to consider how religion might modulate experiences that are typically negative. My collaborators and I are currently exploring the "paradoxical effects" of religious fasting (Moon & Barlev, 2023)—whereas hunger is typically associated with negative emotions, harsher judgments, impulsiveness, and decreased well-being (Aarøe & Petersen, 2013; Bushman et al., 2014; Huppert et al., 2020), religious fasting is typically associated with positive emotions, more lenient judgments, self-control, and increased well-being (Campante & Yanagizawa-Drott, 2015; Haruvy et al., 2018; Mehmood et

al., 2023). Thus, many of the typical effects of hunger seem to be flipped in a religious fasting context.

One possibility is that there is something truly unique about religion that flips the effects of hunger; we consider it more likely, how, that religion helps foster some types of mindsets, and it is these mindsets (rather than just religion *per se*) that allow people to reinterpret the experience of hunger. For example, shared hardships can increase empathy (Hodges et al., 2010), or practicing fasting may help enhance self-control (Marcus & McCullough, 2021; McCullough & Willoughby, 2009), and these might in turn explain the effects on flourishing. Treating religion as a laboratory, in which we can compare different combinations of cultural ingredients, will lead to an understanding not only of how religions lead to flourishing, but what kinds of cultures or mindsets lead to flourishing in general.

A second approach to well-being and religion might focus on *for whom* religion has benefits. I have suggested that people are drawn to religion partly because it is advantageous for them to do so (McCullough et al., 2005; Moon et al., 2022; Sherkat & Wilson, 1995). If this is the case, one possibility is that the positive effects of religion on happiness will largely reflect its ability to fulfill relevant goals. Religion should be more beneficial to people who would otherwise lack a strong coalition (to the extent that it provides one), and to people who want to start or maintain a family. One might expect religion to improve well-being especially among these people, and that this could be a mechanism to facilitate engagement in religion for these individuals.

Applications Outside of Religion

Each of these perspectives mirror research done outside of religion. A growing body of literature has explored the effects of rituals, showing that non-religious rituals can have some of

the same effects as religious rituals (Rybanska et al., 2018; Tian et al., 2018). This is still a somewhat open question, and one focus of our current work is to explore how religious contexts might amplify or moderate these effects, or whether the rituals themselves are sufficient (Moon & Barlev, 2023).

The focus on individual differences in the benefits of religion mirrors the approach of viewing self-esteem or subjective well-being as gauges for one's social value or participation in adaptive goals (Ko et al., 2023; Leary, 1995). For example, just as a lack of happiness can signal that one's adaptive goals are not being met, motivating one to change course (Ko et al., 2023), a lack of satisfaction with one's religious participation could motivate one to either change one's goals or to alter how one engages with religious concepts. This could be one proximate mechanism by which those seeking to explore their sexuality become less religious (cf. Weeden, 2015)—they are not likely making a conscious decision to leave because of lifestyle agreements, but might just find religion less interesting or inspiring. It may be the case that this also explains individual differences in the effects of how people interact with a wide range of cultural variants.

Religion as Experimental Manipulation

Many phenomena that interest social scientists are difficult to manipulate within a laboratory. In some cases, religion provides valuable opportunities to treat as quasi-experimental manipulations. For example, many behavioral ecologists and evolutionary psychologists are interested in how people prioritize their mating strategies in different places. Throughout history, most cultures have practiced some degree of polygyny, with men able to have more than one wife, yet normative monogamy has become typical in most of the world (Henrich et al., 2012). It is possible to examine differences between these cultures, but it is difficult to know if a pattern of

behavior is due to polygynous mating systems or to many of the other differences between these cultures.

Historical data provide one opportunity to explore a polygynous culture embedded within a normatively monogamous culture: the 19th century LDS. One study tested a hypothesis about mating effort, showing that men with more resources tend to have more wives and more total children; however, they also tended to have more children per wife, and these children tended to have a higher survival rate (Heath & Hadley, 1998). These data suggest that men with few resources shift their mating strategy toward high-investment in a few offspring, rather than seeking to maximize the number of offspring they have. This comparison would have been relatively difficult to make without this religious context.

Sometimes the religious culture one inherits is nearly random. Henrich (2020) suggests that such a natural experiment occurred in the 16th century at the Peace of Augsburg in 1555. Local rulers within the Holy Roman Empire were tasked to decide whether their population would be Catholic or Protestant. Because these decisions do not seem to track closely other variables, they can be thought of as an experimental induction of Protestantism, with Catholicism as the control group.

It is difficult to think of many examples of a major aspect of a culture being imposed nearly at random. Exploiting these cases in the study of religion can tell us much about human nature, and allow stronger causal inferences than many methods typically used in the psychology of religion.

Conclusion

In this article, I have outlined an approach to religion in which religion *per se* is not the primary end goal in the psychology of religion. I have suggested that viewing religion as a

context in which more prosaic phenomena take place will allow novel insights about both religion and about psychology more broadly.

I gave several examples, mostly related to my own work, about how religion has generated these insights. Outside of my own area of study, I am excited about several additional lines of research that demonstrate broad principles about human nature and explore how cultures spread (Henrich et al., 2019; Jackson et al., 2021; Watts et al., 2015, 2018); how people form beliefs about concepts that are evolutionarily unique (Barlev et al., 2017, 2018); the effects of rituals (Lang, 2019; Lang et al., 2020); and the effects of religious cultures across diverse societies (Singh et al., 2021). These research programs are generating important insights about the human condition that have wide-reaching implications.

Viewing religion as a laboratory for broader phenomena is, of course, not the only useful way to study religion. Indeed, many insights generated by other approaches have been foundational in building my own research program. Nonetheless, I hope these examples will inspire psychologists of religion to interrogate their goals in their research, and consider how the phenomena they are interested in might benefit from considering religion as a laboratory. Religion is one of the most important aspects of the lives of billions of people, and there is so much we have to learn from it.

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