

Religiosity, moral attitudes and moral competence

A research note on the relation between Religiosity and Morality

BY BART DURIEZ

Abstract

The present research investigates the relation between the religiosity dimensions which Wulff (1991; 1997) described (Exclusion vs. Inclusion of Transcendence and Literal vs. Symbolic) and both moral attitudes and moral competence. The Post-Critical Belief scale (Duriez et al., 2000) was used as a measure of Wulff's religiosity dimensions, and the Moral Judgment Test (Lind, 1998) was used to measure both moral attitudes and moral competence. Results from an adolescent sample (N = 138), a student sample (N = 372) and a sample of adults affiliated to the Roman Catholic Church (N = 294) suggest, that, whereas the Literal vs. Symbolic dimension shows substantial relations with moral attitudes and moral competence, the Exclusion vs. Inclusion of Transcendence dimension is unrelated to both of them. This suggests that there is no intrinsic relationship between religiosity and morality. However, results also suggest that religiously affiliated persons, in general, exhibit low moral competence. The content of the moral dilemmas that were presented cannot account for this.

Recently, Fontaine et al. (2001a) have shown that the religiosity dimensions which Wulff (1991; 1997) described (Exclusion vs. Inclusion of Transcendence and Literal vs. Symbolic) can be adequately captured via the Post-Critical Belief scale (Duriez, Fontaine & Hutsebaut, 2000; Fontaine et al., 2002a). This allows for a nuanced study of the religiosity-morality issue, in which the effect of being religious as such is separated from the effect of the way in which one is dealing with the religious realm. This is the aim of the present study. First, the theory of Wulff will be summarized, followed by a brief presentation of the Post-Critical Belief scale. Second, the difference between moral attitudes and moral competence will be highlighted, followed by a brief presentation of the Moral Judgment Test. Third, hypotheses regarding the relation between the religiosity dimensions and moral attitudes and moral competence will be formulated. Finally, results of the present study will be presented and discussed.

The theory of Wulff

According to Wulff (1991; 1997), all possible approaches to religion can be summarized along two bipolar dimensions. The Exclusion vs. Inclusion of Transcendence dimension specifies whether the objects of religious interest are granted participation in a transcendent reality. The Literal vs. Symbolic dimension indicates whether religious expressions are interpreted literally or symbolically. These dimensions define four basic attitudes toward religion. Literal Affirmation represents a position in which the literal existence of religious objects is affirmed. Lit-

eral Disaffirmation represents a position in which one neither believes in the literal meaning of religious words nor in the possibility that these words can have a symbolic meaning. Reductive Interpretation represents a position in which one denies reality to the transcendent referent of religious language and claims a privileged perspective on the true meaning of religion's myths and rituals. Restorative Interpretation represents a position in which one posits the transcendent realm as real, but in which one searches for the symbolical meaning instead.

Building further on this, Duriez et al. (2000) constructed the Post-Critical Belief scale in order to capture four approaches to Roman Catholic religion that map onto Wulff's scheme: Orthodoxy, External Critique, Relativism and Second Nativité. These four approaches provide measures of Literal Affirmation, Literal Disaffirmation, Reductive Interpretation and Restorative Interpretation, respectively. Recently, however, Fontaine et al. (2002a) have argued that the Post-Critical Belief scale also provides direct measures of Exclusion vs. Inclusion of Transcendence and Literal vs. Symbolic. An individual's position in Wulff's scheme can then be identified on the basis of these measures. In this way, the effects of being religious or not (Exclusion vs. Inclusion of Transcendence) can be disentangled from the way in which religion and religious contents are approached (either in a literal or in a symbolical way).

Moral Attitudes vs. Moral Competence

Within the Kohlbergian research tradition (i.e., Colby et al., 1983; 1987; Kohlberg, 1969, 1976, 1981, 1984; Rest, 1974; 1979, 1997), the concept of moral reasoning is defined as the individual's socio-moral perspective: the characteristic point of view from which the individual formulates moral judgments. In this line of research, participants are usually offered moral dilemmas. What is characteristic of this kind of dilemma is that there is no easy way out. There is a conflict between different moral principles, and each possible solution is doomed to conflict with some of these moral principles. Participants are asked to argue, either freely (as is the case in Kohlberg's Moral Judgment Interview) or via forced choice (as is the case in Rest's Defining Issues Test) why it would be justified to chose a certain outcome. On the basis of this kind of research, and drawing on Piagetian assumptions concerning stagewise cognitive development, Kohlberg (1984) proposed a six stage model to describe moral development. These six stages are divided, two by two, in three distinctive levels. The pre-conventional level has been described as a self-perspective. Social norms are either not comprehended or ignored, and hence fail to enter into the process of moral reasoning. The guiding moral principle is to avoid punishment (stage 1) and to satisfy one's needs (stage 2). At the conventional level, social norms as such guide the process of moral reasoning. Of central importance are being a nice person (stage 3) and conforming to and obeying, as well as trying to maintain, the social order (stage 4). Finally, at the post-conventional level, one no longer relies upon the social norms, but rather on the moral principles upon which these norms

are based. There is a focus on the legal viewpoint, including the possibility to change the law when it is at odds with rational considerations of social utility (stage 5) and on abstract ethical principles, such as equality and respect for the dignity of human beings, which appeal to logical comprehensiveness and universality (stage 6). When there is a conflict between conventions and moral principles, a conventional reasoner is expected to judge by convention rather than by moral principle, whereas a post-conventional reasoner is expected to judge by moral principle rather than by convention. However, this does not imply that individuals at the post-conventional level are also more moral. As Wagner (1990) has noted, a higher level of moral development is not defined by the "correctness" of one's moral conclusions, but by the concepts and reasons employed in arriving at these conclusions. Individuals who have reached higher moral development levels have a repertoire of concepts and justifications which allows them to comprehend the moral reasoning of persons at lower levels. Conversely, persons at lower moral development levels are unable to fully understand and appreciate the justifications used by those who have reached higher moral development levels. The Kohlbergian tradition thus presupposes an affective-cognitive parallelism in moral development (e.g., Kohlberg, 1969, p. 349). A preference for higher stages (the affective component) is supposed to develop simultaneously with the ability to use the underlying perspective in a consistent and differentiated manner (the cognitive component).

But as Lind (1985) has noted, although this affective-cognitive parallelism is one of the core assumptions of Kohlberg's theory, this hypothesis had not been dealt with adequately in the design of research methods, and hence, was never empirically assessed. To render it possible to empirically test this hypothesis, a new research design was needed. For this purpose, Lind (e.g., 1978; 1995; 1998; Lind & Wakenhut, 1985) constructed the Moral Judgment Test (MJT), which allows empirical investigation of this supposed affective-cognitive parallelism. According to Lind (1995), it is insufficient and even theoretically invalid to focus exclusively on the moral principles someone pursues (= the affective aspect). One should also look at how competently or how consistently a person applies these principles in the decision making process (= the cognitive aspect). A child may hold high moral principles, such as justice and keeping one's promises, but will lack the competence to apply these principles in a consistent but differentiated manner to everyday decision-making. Thus, according to Lind (1995), a consistent moral judgment can only be expected in highly morally developed subjects. But this consistency must be defined with respect to a well-reasoned criterion. The criterion Lind puts forward is that people should appreciate a moral principle independently of whether the resulting arguments are in line with personal opinion on a particular issue.

The MJT confronts people with two moral dilemmas: The worker's dilemma and the mercy-killing dilemma. For each dilemma, a person has to indicate to what degree he or she agrees or disagrees with the solution chosen by the main character. Next, this person is confronted with six arguments pro and six arguments contra his or her own opinion on how to solve the dilemma. Each of these arguments represents one of Kohlberg's (1958; 1984) stages of moral reasoning.

One should then indicate, on a nine point scale ranging from -4 to $+4$, to what degree these arguments are (un)acceptable. Since each of the stages is represented by four arguments (one pro and one contra argument for each dilemma), the sum of the scores a person obtains for each cluster of arguments indicates the degree to which this person reasons according to the underlying socio-moral perspectives. The C-index, the MJT's main score, measures the degree to which a person's judgments about these pro and contra arguments are consistent. A highly morally consistent or competent person will appreciate all arguments referring to a certain socio-moral perspective, irrespective of whether this argument is a pro or contra argument, and will obtain a C-score close to 100. A person with low moral competence will appreciate the pro arguments referring to a certain socio-moral perspective only, and will obtain a C-score close to 0. A detailed description of how to compute this index can be found in Lind (1998). And although the C-index is logically independent of the moral principles someone pursues, it has been reported that there exists a strongly positive relationship between the C-index and a preference for the highest stages of Kohlberg's model (Lind, 1985). Thus, in general, people obtaining the highest moral competence levels are also the ones preferring the most advanced socio-moral perspectives. These results support Kohlberg's presupposed affective-cognitive parallelism.

Hypotheses

Kohlberg (1981) argued that religiosity and moral reasoning are inherently unrelated because they constitute two distinct areas of human concern. Moral decision making, on the one hand, is grounded in rational arguments of justice and is influenced by level of cognitive development (e.g., education) and exposure to socio-moral experiences (e.g., role taking opportunities; Kohlberg, 1976). Religious reasoning, on the other hand, is based on revelations by religious authorities. Thus, whereas the function of morality is to resolve competing claims among individuals, the primary function of religion is to affirm morality (Kohlberg, 1981, p. 321). In other words, whereas moral reasoning provides moral prescriptions, religious reasoning affirms moral judgment as meaningful (Fernhout & Boyd, 1985).

In spite of Kohlberg's arguments, researchers have attempted to associate both concepts, and have come to the conclusion that religiosity and morality are not unrelated at all. Research has reported that religiously affiliated persons exhibit increased preference for Kohlberg's conventional level (stages 3 and 4) (Siegmund, 1979; Wakenhut, 1981) and decreased preference for principled reasoning (stages 5 and 6) (Deka & Broota, 1988). Moral reasoning was also reported to be negatively related to Allport and Ross's (1967) intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity (Sapp & Gladding, 1989), and positively to Batson's (1976) quest dimension (Glover, 1997; Sapp & Gladding, 1989). Following Kohlberg's presupposition of affective-cognitive parallelism, these findings suggest that religious persons exhibit limited moral development because they lack the cognitive capacity for principled moral

reasoning. However, Ernsberger and Manaster (1981) and Glover (1997) have argued that the moral reasoning of religious persons depends on the seriousness of their religious commitment and on the moral stage which is normative for their religious community. In a religious community whose teachings include principled reasoning, highly religious individuals are likely to show increased preference for this kind of reasoning. In contrast, in a religious community whose teachings do not include principled reasoning, highly religious individuals are likely to exhibit decreased preference for this kind of reasoning. The theological superiority of the conventional moral arguments would then overrule the logical superiority of post-conventional moral arguments. According to Ernsberger and Manaster (1981), the same may apply to non-religious belief systems and ideologies. In a similar vein, Wahrman (1981) argued that the apparent religiosity-morality relation can probably be explained by dogmatism.

In this study, the Post-Critical Belief (PCB) scale and the Moral Judgment Test (MJT) will be used. The PCB scale allows one to disentangle being religious or not (exclusion vs. inclusion of transcendence) from the way in which one approaches religion and religious contents (either in a literal or in a symbolic way). The MJT yields measures of both moral attitudes and moral competence. Therefore, the use of these scales allows for an elaborated study of the religiosity-morality relationship which might make a significant contribution to our understanding of this relationship. The literal vs. symbolic dimension is expected to relate negatively to preference for lower moral stages and positively to preference for higher moral stages and moral competence. Fontaine et al. (2002a) have argued that this dimension relates to role-taking (see also Duriez, 2002a), which was shown to be associated with moral development (e.g., Ernsberger & Manaster, 1981; Kohlberg, 1976). Moreover, this dimension was shown to relate to intolerance of ambiguity and closed-mindedness (Duriez, 2002b) and dualism (Desimpelaere et al., 1999), which are all highly similar to dogmatism. The exclusion vs. inclusion of transcendence dimension is expected to be unrelated to both moral attitudes and moral competence.

Method

Samples

In total, three different samples were assembled ($N = 822$) in Flanders (Belgium). Sample 1 consisted of adolescents ($N = 145$, 37% male) ranging in age from 14 to 18, with a mean of 16. Questionnaires were distributed in two randomly selected schools. Of the participants in this sample, 10% attended Roman Catholic Church services regularly, while 95% were baptised in the Roman Catholic Church. Sample 2 consisted of first year university students who were following an introductory course in psychology ($N = 376$, 25% male). Participation was obligatory and they received full course credit. Of the participants in this sample,

25% of the participants in this sample attended Roman Catholic Church services regularly, while 92% were baptised in the Roman Catholic Church. Sample 3 was gathered among highly religious subjects, affiliated to the Roman Catholic Church ($N = 301$, 35% male). All participants in this sample attended Roman Catholic Church services regularly. The mean age of the participants in this sample was 45 years ($SD = 12$). Of these participants, 21% had attended university, 40% had obtained a higher education diploma, 31% had obtained a secondary education diploma, while 2% had obtained a primary school diploma only. The 6% remaining subjects failed to give an answer to this question. In all samples, subjects having over three missing values on the Post-Critical Belief scale were excluded from further analyses. In total, only 11 subjects needed to be removed across the samples. For subjects who were not removed, missing values were replaced by the sample-specific mean of the item. In total, 87 missing values ($= 0.3\%$ of the individual score included in this study) were replaced.

Measures

Participants completed the Moral Judgment Test (see above for a more detailed description). The Dutch version of this test was recently validated by Duriez and De Marez (2000), according to the prescriptions of Lind (1998), and can be regarded as a fully fledged translation of the original test. Participants also completed the 33 item Post-Critical Belief scale (Duriez et al., 2000). All items were scored on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = completely opposed, 4 = neutral, 7 = completely in agreement). As in Fontaine et al. (2002a; 2002b), a level of acquiescence estimation was subtracted from the raw scores. For each sample, a Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was then carried out on these corrected scores. A scree test pointed to a two-componential solution for all three samples. However, since PCA allows freedom of rotation, the componential structures of the different samples cannot be compared straightforwardly. Therefore, these structures were subjected to orthogonal Procrustes rotations towards the average structure reported in Fontaine et al. (2002a). In all samples, for both components, Tucker's Phi indices were above the rule-of-thumb recommendation (of .90) provided in the literature (Bentler & Bonett, 1980; Van de Vijver & Leung, 1997). Hence, in all samples, the first component could be interpreted as Exclusion vs. Inclusion of Transcendence and the second as Literal vs. Symbolic. Examples of items measuring Literal Affirmation (Inclusion of Transcendence; Literal) are "Only a priest can give an answer to important religious questions" and "You can only live a meaningful life if you believe". Examples of items measuring Literal Disaffirmation (Exclusion of Transcendence; Literal) are "God is only a name for the inexplicable" and "In the end, faith is nothing more than a safety net for human fears". Examples of items measuring Reductive Interpretation (Exclusion of Transcendence; Symbolic) are "Secular and religious conceptions of the world give valuable answers to important questions about life" and "Each statement about God is a result of the time in

which it was made". Examples of items measuring Restorative Interpretation (Inclusion of Transcendence; Symbolic) are "The Bible holds a deeper truth which can only be revealed by personal reflection" and "Because Jesus is mainly a guiding principle for me, my faith in him would not be effected, if it would appear that he never actually existed as a historical individual".

Results

The relation between the religiosity dimensions on the one hand and moral attitudes and moral competence on the other hand was investigated for each of the samples separately by means of bivariate correlations (see Table 1). In all samples, results show that the Exclusion vs. Inclusion of Transcendence dimension is unrelated to moral attitudes. The Literal vs. Symbolic dimension, however, is not. In all samples, this dimension is significantly negatively related to preference for stage 1, 2 and 3, unrelated to preference for stage 4, and weakly positively related to preference for stage 5 and 6. Results also show that, whereas the Exclusion vs. Inclusion of Transcendence dimension is unrelated to moral competence (the C-index), the Literal vs. Symbolic dimension is strongly positively related to this. This suggests that being religious as such is unrelated to morality. However, Table 2 reveals that the adult participants in sample 3, in general, obtained the lowest scores on almost all of the stages identified by Kohlberg. Moreover, the adults in sample 3 generally obtained significantly lower moral competence scores than the adolescents in sample 1, which, in turn, obtained significantly lower moral competence scores than the students in sample 2.

Lind (2000) argued that it should be taken into account that the mercy-killing dilemma is likely to evoke religious reasoning among Roman Catholics, whereas the worker's dilemma is not, because the Roman Catholic Church takes a clear stance on mercy-killing, but not on the worker's dilemma. If the lowered moral competence scores can be accounted for by the responses to the mercy-killing dilemma, this would suggest that religious persons are capable of exhibiting coherent moral reasoning, but that they just don't when their religion makes certain arguments illegitimate. In contrast, if a lower moral competence score is also observed with respect to the workers dilemma, this would suggest that religious persons, in general, lack the capacity to exhibit coherent moral reasoning. To find out whether these surprisingly low moral competence scores were due to the content of the mercy-killing dilemma, moral competence scores were computed for each dilemma separately. The moral competence score regarding the worker's dilemma is indicated as C-index A and the moral competence score regarding the mercy-killing dilemma is indicated as C-index B (see Table 2). Results show that the adult participants in sample 3 obtained significantly lower moral competence scores with respect to the worker's dilemma than both the adolescents in sample 1 and the student in sample 2. With respect to the mercy-killing dilemma, the adult participants in sample 3 obtained moral competence scores which are highly similar

Table 1: Correlations between moral attitudes and moral competence on the one hand and religiosity dimensions on the other hand

| Morality | Inclusion vs. Exclusion of Transcendence | | |
|-----------|--|----------|----------|
| | Sample 1 | Sample 2 | Sample 3 |
| Stage 1 | .05 | -.03 | .01 |
| Stage 2 | .13 | .02 | -.04 |
| Stage 3 | .15 | .10 | .00 |
| Stage 4 | .08 | -.01 | -.06 |
| Stage 5 | .03 | -.05 | -.07 |
| Stage 6 | .02 | -.02 | -.04 |
| C-Index | -.03 | .06 | -.11 |
| C-Index A | -.10 | .00 | -.17 * |
| C-Index B | .01 | .09 | -.07 |
| Morality | Literal vs. Symbolic | | |
| | Sample 1 | Sample 2 | Sample 3 |
| Stage 1 | -.30* | -.22** | -.26** |
| Stage 2 | -.34** | -.23** | -.28** |
| Stage 3 | -.29* | -.15* | -.27** |
| Stage 4 | -.03 | -.05 | -.10 |
| Stage 5 | .10 | .13 | .15* |
| Stage 6 | .16 | .10 | .19* |
| C-Index | .31* | .21** | .28** |
| C-Index A | .26* | .15* | .03 |
| C-Index B | .26* | .15* | .27** |

* $p < .01$, ** $p < .0001$.

to the moral competence scores obtained by the adolescent in sample 1, and significantly lower than the moral competence scores of the students in sample 2. Table 1 presents the correlations between the moral competence scores and the religiosity dimensions. The moral competence scores were (negatively) related to Exclusion vs. Inclusion of Transcendence in sample 3 only, and only with respect to the worker's dilemma. The moral competence scores were positively related to Literal vs. Symbolic, except for sample 3. In this sample, the moral competence score with respect to the workers dilemma was unrelated to Literal vs. Symbolic.

Table 2: Means scores and standard deviations on the measures of moral attitudes and moral competence

| Morality | Sample 1 | Sample 2 | Sample 3 |
|-----------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Stage 1 | -3.29 (SD = 5.48) ^c | -4.49 (SD = 4.65) ^b | -5.24 (SD = 5.55) ^a |
| Stage 2 | -1.24 (SD = 5.51) ^c | -2.96 (SD = 4.84) ^b | -3.45 (SD = 5.64) ^a |
| Stage 3 | -1.84 (SD = 5.48) ^b | -3.04 (SD = 4.94) ^a | -2.79 (SD = 5.59) ^{ab} |
| Stage 4 | 2.91 (SD = 4.33) ^b | 2.47 (SD = 4.27) ^b | -0.47 (SD = 4.55) ^a |
| Stage 5 | 3.86 (SD = 4.28) ^b | 5.01 (SD = 3.92) ^c | 2.74 (SD = 4.71) ^a |
| Stage 6 | 3.22 (SD = 4.33) ^b | 3.95 (SD = 3.65) ^{bc} | 2.49 (SD = 4.62) ^{ab} |
| C-Index | 24.83 (SD = 18.45) ^b | 31.44 (SD = 16.71) ^c | 20.84 (SD = 16.13) ^a |
| C-Index A | 41.66 (SD = 23.44) ^b | 46.60 (SD = 20.77) ^c | 35.11 (SD = 22.34) ^a |
| C-Index B | 36.98 (SD = 24.23) ^a | 47.05 (SD = 23.41) ^b | 35.61 (SD = 25.79) ^a |

Mean levels with different superscript are significantly different at the .05 level.

Discussion

At first sight, the present results show that, when disentangling the effects of being religious or not (exclusion vs. inclusion of transcendence) from the way in which one approaches religion and religious contents (either in a literal or in a symbolic way), the religiosity-morality relation can be explained by the way in which people approach religion and religious content. In all samples, being religious as such was unrelated to either moral attitudes and moral competence. The results seem to support the ideas of Wahrman (1981) who argued that the apparent religiosity-morality relation can probably be explained by dogmatism, and support the ideas of Kohlberg (1981), who argued that religiosity and morality are inherently unrelated because they are two distinct areas of human concern.

However, when taking a closer look at the present results, the religiously affiliated adults in sample 3 exhibit dramatically low moral competence scores. On average, the moral competence level of these religiously affiliated adults did not even reach the moral competence level of 16-year olds. To examine this in more detail, moral competence scores were computed for each of the two dilemmas separately. In this way, the hypothesis was tested that these low moral competence scores were the result of religious people, for theological reasons, exhibiting low moral competence with respect to the mercy-killing dilemma, on which the Roman Catholic Church takes a strong stance. However, results show that the content of the mercy-killing dilemma cannot account for the low overall moral competence levels exhibited by the religiously affiliated adults. Whereas these adults did exhibit low moral competence scores with respect to the mercy-killing dilemma, on average, these moral competence scores were not significantly lower

than the moral competence scores obtained by the adolescent participants in sample 1. With respect to the worker's dilemma, however, the religiously affiliated adults did obtain moral competence scores which were significantly lower than the adolescent participants in study 1. Since the Roman Catholic Church does not take an explicit stance on this dilemma and, hence, is not rendering certain moral argumentations illegitimate to its members, theological grounds cannot account for this observation. Noteworthy, however, is that the moral competence scores obtained by the religiously affiliated adults are comparably low with respect to both dilemmas. This suggests that it is especially those people with low moral competence levels that tend to respond favorably to the Roman Catholic Church. In other words, it seems that the Roman Catholic Church not only attracts persons that are highly religious (scoring high on the Exclusion vs. Inclusion of Transcendence dimension) but *especially* persons that are highly religious *in a literal way* (scoring high on the Exclusion vs. Inclusion of Transcendence dimension *and* low on the Literal vs. Symbolic dimension). Of course, further research is needed to examine this in more detail; and especially research which compares the moral competence of adults affiliated to the Roman Catholic Church with the moral competence of adults of comparable age and education who are not religiously affiliated is needed. Research focussing on other denominational groups is also needed in order to answer the question of whether the present findings are restricted to Roman Catholics, or whether they can be generalized to religiously affiliated persons in general.

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