

Are religious people nicer people? Taking a closer look at the religion–empathy relationship

BART DURIEZ

Department of Psychology, K.U. Leuven, Belgium

ABSTRACT *It has been argued that an empathically mediated, kin-specific, altruistic impulse is part of the human genetic heritage, and that one of the functions of religion is to extend the range of this impulse beyond the kinship circle. However, it is clear that religion does not always succeed in this. The present study reconsiders the religiosity–empathy relation in a Flemish student sample (n = 375), using the Post-Critical Belief Scale, which allows to distinguish between being religious or not (Exclusion versus Inclusion of Transcendence) from the way in which religious contents are processed (Literal versus Symbolic). It is argued that the religiosity–empathy relation should be understood in terms of how people process religious contents rather than in terms of whether or not people are religious. In line with this reasoning, results show that, whereas empathy is unrelated to being religious, it is positively related to processing religious contents in a symbolic way. Social desirability did not influence these relationships.*

Introduction

Batson (1983) has argued that an empathically mediated, kin-specific, altruistic impulse is part of the human genetic heritage, and that one of the functions of religion is to extend the range of this altruistic impulse far beyond the kinship circle. Religion achieves this goal through the use of kinship language and imagery: by teaching that we are all children of God, religion enhances an altruistic impulse that is already present, extending it from the kinship circle to human kind in general. However, it is clear that religion does not always succeed in this. History is littered with moments in which religion has been used as a justification for, or has given cause to, atrocities directed towards people from a different religion, a different race, culture or sexual orientation. A number of historians and theologians concluded from this that religion should be considered as a catalyst for prejudice and intolerance, and a lot of psychological and sociological research has been carried out to investigate whether this is true.

Correspondence to: Bart Duriez, Department of Psychology, K.U. Leuven, Tiensestraat 102, B-3000 Leuven, Belgium. E-mail: Bart.Duriez@psy.kuleuven.ac.be

In this respect, Duriez (in press) has shown that the key to understanding the religion–racism relation is not so much whether and what people believe but how they process religious contents. In a similar vein, I will argue that the religiosity–empathy relation, which remains unclear to date (Batson & Gray, 1981; Darley & Batson, 1973; Donahue, 1981; Francis & Pearson, 1987; Greenwald, 1975; Watson *et al.*, 1984), should also be understood in terms of how people process religious contents rather than in terms of whether and what people believe. In short, I predict that empathy will be unrelated to being religious or not as such, but will be clearly related to how people process religious contents. Empathy was focussed upon since it is considered fundamental to altruism and helping behaviour (Batson, 1991a, b; Batson & Oleson, 1991; Batson *et al.*, 1995; Hoffman, 1976; Krebs, 1975; Rushton, 1980).

Method

Sample

Participants were 375 first-year psychology students from a Belgian university, ranging in age from 17 to 31 with a mean age of 18 (80% female). All participants were Flemish-speaking and of Belgian nationality. Participation was obligatory and participants received course credit. Anonymity was guaranteed.

Measures

Religiosity. Participants completed the Post-Critical Belief Scale (PCBS; Duriez *et al.*, 2000; 33 items). Fontaine *et al.* (in press) have shown that this scale provides measures of the religiosity dimensions of Exclusion versus Inclusion of Transcendence and Literal versus Symbolic (Wulff, 1991, 1997). In this way, the effects of being religious or not (Exclusion versus Inclusion of Transcendence) can be disentangled from the way in which religious contents are processed (either literally or symbolically). The items were scored on a seven-point Likert scale. As in the paper by Fontaine and colleagues (in press), a level of acquiescence estimation was subtracted from the raw scores, after which a Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was carried out. A scree test pointed to a two-componential solution. However, since PCA allows freedom of rotation, the componential structures obtained in different samples cannot be compared straightforwardly. Therefore, this structure was subjected to an orthogonal Procrustes rotation towards the average structure reported by Fontaine and colleagues (in press). Tucker's Phi indices were above 0.90 for both components, suggesting good congruence (Bentler & Bonett, 1980; Van de Vijver & Leung, 1997). Hence, these components could be interpreted as Exclusion versus Inclusion of Transcendence and Literal versus Symbolic. Estimates of internal consistency (theta; Armor, 1974) were 0.91 for Exclusion versus Inclusion of

Transcendence and 0.81 for Literal versus Symbolic. A high score on Exclusion versus Inclusion of Transcendence indicates a tendency to include transcendence. A high score on Literal versus Symbolic indicates a tendency to deal with religion in a symbolic way.

Empathy. Participants completed a Dutch version of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI; Davis, 1983; 28 items). The translation was done according to the guidelines of the International Test Commission (Hambleton, 1994), using the translation back-translation procedure (Brislin, 1980). A committee of bilingual research assistants decided on the final Dutch version (Van de Vijver & Leung, 1997). The items were scored on a five-point Likert scale. The IRI consists of four subscales (seven items each), each of which assesses a specific empathy aspect. The Fantasy scale measures the tendency to transpose oneself into feelings and actions of fictive characters in books and movies. The Perspective Taking scale measures the tendency to adopt the viewpoint of other people in everyday life. The Personal Distress scale measures one's own feelings of unease and discomfort in reaction to other people's emotions. The Empathic Concern scale measures the tendency to experience compassion and concern for other people. Estimates of internal consistency (Cronbach Alpha's) were 0.82, 0.69, 0.70 and 0.70 respectively. Apart from these scores, an Empathy factor score was also computed. This score was positively related to Fantasy ($r=0.76$, $p<0.0001$), Perspective Taking ($r=0.56$, $p<0.0001$), Personal Distress ($r=0.45$, $p<0.0001$) and Empathic Concern ($r=0.85$, $p<0.0001$).

Social Desirability. Because Batson (1976) pointed out the importance of Social Desirability when studying the relation between religion and prosocial attitudes, a shortened Social Desirability scale (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960; 10 items) was also administered. The translation was done according to the above mentioned procedure.

Results

The relation between the religiosity dimensions and Empathy and its subdimensions was investigated by means of bivariate correlations. Results show that, whereas the correlations between Exclusion versus Inclusion of Transcendence and both Empathy and its subdimensions tended to zero, the Literal versus Symbolic dimension was positively related to Empathy, Fantasy, Perspective Taking, and Empathic Concern. Taking out the effects of Social Desirability hardly changed the correlations (see Table 1).

Discussion

As expected, Empathy as well as all of its subdimensions (apart from Personal Distress) were positively related to the Literal versus Symbolic dimension and

TABLE 1. Bivariate and partial correlations between the religiosity dimensions and the empathy dimensions

	<i>Exclusion versus Inclusion</i>		<i>Literal versus Symbolic</i>	
	<i>Bivariate</i>	<i>Partial</i>	<i>Bivariate</i>	<i>Partial</i>
Empathy	0.00	0.00	0.22**	0.24**
Fantasy	-0.08	-0.08	0.22**	0.22**
Perspective Taking	0.00	0.00	0.24**	0.28**
Personal Distress	0.06	0.07	-0.07	-0.08
Empathic Concern	0.04	0.04	0.16*	0.18*

Note: The partial correlations are corrected for Social Desirability.

* $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.0001$.

unrelated to Exclusion versus Inclusion of Transcendence. These results contribute a great deal to the debate whether religious people, in general, are nicer people, in the sense that they feel more empathy towards their fellow men and, hence, are more likely to provide help to a person in need. The answer is no. The present study shows that, apparently, this debate has its origin in the fact that the religiosity measures that have been used in previous studies confuse being religious or not with the way in which one is approaching religion. When separating both aspects, it becomes apparent that religiosity as such has no connection whatsoever with empathy. In contrast, the way in which religion is approached tells a great deal about whether or not one is likely to experience feelings of empathy and, hence, to expose helping behaviour. These findings are consistent with the results of previous studies relating Wulff's religiosity dimensions to variables such as racism (Duriez, in press-a; Duriez & Hutsebaut, 2000; Duriez *et al.*, 2000, 2002), right-wing authoritarianism and social dominance (Duriez & Van Hiel, 2002), moral competence and moral attitudes (Duriez, in press-b), and value orientations (Duriez *et al.*, 2001; Fontaine *et al.*, 2003). Also consistent with previous studies, the relationships that were obtained between Wulff's religiosity dimensions and external variables were not affected by social desirability (Duriez, 2003; Duriez *et al.*, 2000).

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