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Religion and Culture

Abstract

This is an article about culture and religion. First, I discuss how social psychologists usually teach culture in their Social Psychology classes, focusing on east-west differences in individualism and collectivism. Then I propose that religious groups are cultures, because they have all of the defining features of cultures (such as beliefs and values). I then describe some studies I have done on moral judgment differences across religious cultures. If a married man thinks about having an affair, Christians consider this adultery, and Jews do not. Through mediation analyses and multiple experiments, I show this is because of differences between Jewish and Christian theology – specifically, that Christians agree more than Jews do that thoughts are as morally important as actions. Similar effects show up for a person who does not like his parents (but acts as though he does), and for a person thinking about poisoning a professor’s dog to retaliate for a bad grade. Last, I talk about why this work matters for understanding culture. I propose that religions shape cultures, that results like these can help us understand cultural universals and culturally specific beliefs and practices, and I consider how religion relates to other forms of cultural differences (like east-west differences in individualism and collectivism).

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Introduction

When I teach Social Psychology to ASU undergraduates, I start off by presenting our textbook's good and canonical definition of culture: Culture consists of "Beliefs, customs, habits, & language shared by people living in particular time & place" (Kenrick, Neuberg, & Cialdini, 2009). Then I spend a class session covering the classic material in culture that probably every undergrad psychology major has learned – that Eastern cultures are collectivistic, and Western cultures are individualistic (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Next, as an example of how broad reaching these differences in culture are, I go through University of British Columbia cultural psychologist Steven Heine's classic work on self-esteem and motivation. Heine randomly assigned Japanese and North American students to get good or bad feedback on the Remote Associates Test, a task in which you have to decide which word goes with a set of other words (e.g., "dream", "snore", and "bed" would go with "sleep").

Japanese students who get false feedback that they are uncreative and terrible performers on the Remote Associates Test work harder to improve themselves. This is the opposite of what North Americans do; when they get feedback they've done poorly, they give up. North Americans, who want to feel good about themselves, only persist when they've been told they are creative and top performers (Heine, et al., 2001).

This is a pretty fair and standard introduction to the existing psychology of culture, but then I take another class session to go in a different direction. I first ask students to call out their cultural identities, and, indeed, most will name an ethnicity ("I'm Latino") or a nationality ("I'm Chinese"). Then, I ask them what is important about their cultural identities, and this is where it gets interesting. People will say things like norms (ways that people act, or ways you should or shouldn't act), and values. Cultures tell us how to behave, and what is right and wrong. When I ask them where people derive their norms and values, many name religion. But they mostly haven't named religion before when we talked about their cultural identities. This is striking to me given that religions (like nationalities and like ethnicities) have all the hallmarks of culture – norms, practices, identities, values, roles, institutions, and more (Cohen, 2009; for additional discussion about culture and religion, see Saroglou & Cohen, 2011, which is an introduction to a special issue on culture and religion at the *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*).

One of my main interests as a cultural social psychologist has been to document the ways that religions function like cultures. In this essay I will review my work on religion and moral judgment, areas in which religious groups are both similar to and different from each other. Then I will talk about why this matters in a psychology of culture.

Religion and Moral Judgment

David Duchovny, of X-Files and more recently Californication fame, has been rumored to struggle with sexual addiction. People magazine wrote "Duchovny emphasized that for a married man, experiencing lustful feelings for other women is harmless – if they remain

just feelings. "There's nothing wrong with acknowledging the panoply of life's rich experience," he said. "You can't control your mind. Why would you want to? You can't feel guilty about being alive, about being a man, about feeling attracted. You can only control your actions." (see Nudd, 2008).

I ask my students, when a married man thinks lustfully about women other than his wife, is he doing something wrong? Is he an adulterer, or does he have nothing to feel guilty over, as Mr. Duchovny claims? Some of my students think such thoughts are natural and harmless, and others think they are every bit as wrong as actually having sex with another woman. I then go on to claim to my students that one of their cultural identities – their religion – largely determines their viewpoints on this question. I show them series of studies documenting that Christians consider such thoughts to be adulterous, but Jewish people consider lustful thoughts to be much less important than actions. I also show them evidence that these cultural differences emerge because of how Jewish versus Christian theology views thoughts versus actions. As it happens, Mr. Duchovny is Jewish.

When Jesus was giving the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew chapter 5), he famously equated thoughts with actions "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart." (Remember President Carter admitting committing adultery in his heart?). This view pretty radically departs from the Jewish theological viewpoint that mostly what is diagnostic about a person's morality is their actions, not their thoughts.

In fact sometimes in Judaism it is better to act against your inner thoughts, to show that obeying God is more important than your personal feelings (Cohen, Hall, Koenig, & Meador, 2005). To me, one really interesting example of this concerns the Jewish commandment not to eat pork. This is a commandment I (as a Jewish person) happen to adhere to, but have trouble with – pork is very tempting to me. I remember sitting cross from a colleague at a psychology conference, who was having bacon with his breakfast. That bacon looked and smelled very tasty, so much so that I woke up the next morning having been dreaming about eating bacon. I was in that sort of half-asleep, sort of awake state, and it took me a moment to figure out if I had been dreaming or if I had really just (God forbid) eaten bacon. From a Jewish perspective, does my temptation to eat bacon (even though I don't do it), make me a virtuous Jew or a hypocritical Jew?

In fact, the theological answer in Judaism does not make me feel like a hypocrite. Jewish philosophy and law takes up the question, what should one's attitude be in not eating pork? One could say "I don't eat pork because pork is disgusting." But the Jewish attitude is that it is better to override your temptations out of obedience to God. True virtue is doing what God says even if you don't internally want to. So the appropriate stance in avoiding pork according to traditional Jewish sources is to say "I really want to eat pork, but I can't, because my father in heaven (God) forbade it."

Such differences in theology, I predict and test in my research, ultimately shape different cultures among Jews and Protestants, evident in the moral judgments that contemporary Jews and Christians make.

Figure 1. I hypothesize that Charlie Brown is Christian, not Jewish

To illustrate this, I take my students through several studies I've done comparing Jews' and Christians' moral judgments of various thoughts and actions, both to substantiate the point about culture and religion, and to introduce them to how knowledge progresses in a sustained program of research.

In a first study (Cohen & Rozin, 2001), I wanted to see if differences between Jewish and Christian theology regarding the morality of thoughts would actually affect how Jews and Christians make moral judgments. So, I described to Jewish and Christian university students a man – Mr. B. – who was married but who sometimes consciously thinks about having an affair with an attractive colleague. I asked my participants how those thoughts affected their judgments of his character, how much control he had over the thoughts, whether they thought he was likely to have an affair, and whether they agreed or disagreed that thoughts about an immoral action are as bad as actions. I also asked them how bad it would be to actually have an affair.

Jewish and Christian participants thought it was equally bad to have an affair (cultures are not always different from each other). Nevertheless, the Christian participants had a worse moral impression of Mr. B. than Jews did. Not only did Christians think that Mr. B. had poorer character than Jews did, but they also thought he was more likely to act on his thoughts, had more control over his thoughts, and agreed that thoughts are as bad as actions.

With these results in hand, I next set out to understand the process by which religious group (Jewish or Christian) affected moral judgments. I wanted to know what religion leads to, which ultimately leads to moral judgment. Put another way, I wanted to know what variable is in the middle of religion and moral judgment – hence I conducted “mediation” analyses to try to discover what variable explains the effect of religion on moral

judgment (see Figure 2). By statistically controlling for each one of these variables while looking at the effect of religious group on moral judgment, I found that the best single reason why Christians had a worse impression of Mr. B. than did Jews was not so much because they thought he had control over the thoughts or would act on them, but because they agreed that thoughts are as bad as actions. This was because when I knew how much people agreed that thoughts were as bad as actions, there was no longer a significant effect of religious group on moral judgment (see Baron & Kenny, 1986; MacKinnon, 2008, for discussions of mediation analyses).

Figure 2. Mediation model; IV-independent variable; DV-dependent variable.

These results were interesting and informative, but they hardly settled the entire issue of religion and moral judgment. For one thing, I wondered how general of a tendency it is for Christians to judge thoughts. The Christian Bible says lustful thoughts equal adultery. Do Christians judge all kinds of thoughts, or just adulterous ones? For a while, I had trouble coming up with what next study to do. I wanted to use a thought about an immoral action that would not necessarily immediately evoke the Sermon on the Mount in Christians' minds (not lust, not anger in your heart, as Jesus equated that with murder), but be serious enough that there was the potential for those thoughts to be judged as immoral. But, the thoughts could not be so serious (thinking about being a serial killer) that even Jews would certainly judge them, too. While trying to figure this out, I was sitting in the office of my Ph.D. advisor, Dr. Paul Rozin (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Dr. Paul Rozin, Professor of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania

Paul has incredible strengths as an advisor. He is one of the most creative psychologists who has ever lived, and is unfailingly supportive of his students wanting to study just about any topic they are interested in (even religion). But his taste in pets leaves something to be desired. Paul loves his dog, Pandy, very much, and brings him to work every day. So I would be sitting in Paul's office tossing ideas around about religion and moral judgment, and Pandy would come over to get a cookie. Then, Pandy would snap at me and bite me for no reason. In a second study, I presented Jewish and Christian participants with a story about a student who (because he is angry about a grade) is thinking about poisoning his professor's dog.

Figure 4. Pandy Rozin

I then asked them the same kinds of questions as in the prior study, like whether they thought Mr. B had good or bad character, whether they thought he would actually poison the dog, whether he could control his thoughts, and whether they believed that thoughts are as bad as actions.

I found largely the same results as before. Even when it's thoughts about poisoning a dog, Christians thought worse of Mr. B. than Jews did, and this seemed mostly because Christians again agreed more than Jews did that thoughts are as bad as actions (via mediation analyses). And, there were not large differences between Jews and Christians in how bad it would be to actually poison a dog. In fact, even though Christians thought worse of Mr. B. for being tempted to poison the dog, Jews said that actually poisoning a dog would be a little worse than Christians did. Like the prior study, Christians also again said that Mr. B. was likely to act on his thoughts, more so than Jews did.

So far, I found in two studies that Christians were more morally swayed by thoughts than Jews were, Christians also agreed thoughts were as bad as actions, and Christians also considering those thoughts more likely to be acted on. In a third study (Cohen, 2003), I tried to find out whether Christians were really more moved by the thoughts because of agreement that thoughts are as important as actions, or because they believe thoughts to lead to actions (both of which I found consistently in the prior studies). Thus, I presented Jewish and Christian participants with a scenario in which Mr B. was fantasizing not about someone he knows and could have an affair with, but Julia Roberts—someone he will never meet. Again, Christians considered these thoughts to be worse than Jews did. This really suggested that differences in theology (are thoughts as bad as actions), and not some other reason (likelihood of acting on the thoughts, controllability of the thoughts) drives the Jewish-Christian differences in moral judgment I was seeing again and again in my studies.

One last study I will mention shows that it's not just thoughts about immoral actions that Jews and Christians look at differently. Imagine a son, Mr. K., who does not like his parents very much, because they have very different personalities from him. That son can either pretend to like his parents, or he can ignore and neglect them. If he doesn't like his parents inside, does it mean anything for him to behave nicely toward them? Again, Jews and Christians differ. For Christians, there is no difference if you behave "sincerely" toward them in such a case (conveying that you don't like them) or if you "pretend" to like them. Honoring your parents, for Christians, means liking them internally. However, for Jews, as long as you act nicely toward your parents, you are honoring them, whether you like them or not (Cohen & Rozin, 2001). Jews and Christians see Mr. K the same if he both inwardly dislikes his parents and behaviorally neglects them, but Jews – in contrast to Christians – give him much more credit for having good character if he pretends to like them. This pattern of results indicates a statistical interaction between experimental condition (pretend vs. sincere) and religious group (Jewish vs. Christian) (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Jews and Christians differ in what it means to honor your parents.

Why Religion Matters for a Psychology of Culture

As much as we've learned about culture in psychology, I like to think that the study of religions as cultures has the potential to expand our views. Here are three examples of why.

Religion shapes cultures' development

One is the question, where does culture come from? Culture researchers often don't have a lot to say about this, but there have been some theories proposed. Some point to ancient philosophies, like Greek philosophy shaping thinking styles in the West and Confucian philosophy shaping thinking in the East (Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001). An emerging and exciting direction is work that shows how ecologies shape culture, like different ways of subsisting promoting different styles of thinking, or even the extent to which an environment contains biological disease threats causing cultures to be shaped in certain ways (Schaller & Murray, 2008; Uskul, Kitayama, & Nisbett, 2008).

I aim for research on religion to contribute to this debate, and argue that religious texts and doctrines shape the way that cultures develop. In the case of thoughts about immoral or moral actions, both the design of my experiments and the mediation analyses described above suggest that it is differences in theology that drive moral judgments. I conclude this because it was Jewish-Christian differences in agreement that thoughts are as important as actions that best explained (mediated) the effects of religious groups on moral judgment, which reflects differences in Jewish and Christian theology. Other ways in which Jews and Christians differed, such as Christians saying that thoughts are

controllable and will be acted upon, did not explain as well (mediate) the religious group differences in moral judgment. Moreover, Christian theology does not say that it is all right to have lustful thoughts about a woman, so long as you will never meet her, like Julia Roberts. And, Christians considered such thoughts to be more immoral than Jews did, as well. All this lead me to believe that differences in religious doctrines cause cultures to develop in certain ways.

Religion helps explaining intracultural similarities and differences

A second broad reason why I think it is important to study religions as cultures concerns the abiding issue in culture research of cultural universals versus specifics. How much of human nature is the same across cultures, and how much is different? It actually can be quite hard to tell because, for example, sometimes cultural practices look different but serve the same underlying function (Norenzayan & Heine, 2005).

Religious differences and similarities present an interesting area in which to consider this issue. In the studies described here, I found some religious similarities (Jews and Christians alike consider adultery or harming an innocent animal to be about equally bad) and some religious differences (Christians consider thoughts more immoral than Jews do). More broadly, religions have a lot of commonalities. Though I've identified some religious differences in bases for moral judgments, we have terms like Judeo-Christian religion, Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) for a reason. Even Eastern religions share a lot of the same basic functions, like providing life with meaning. And all of religions encourage moral behavior (helping others) and discourage immoral behavior (murder and adultery).

But then there are some places where it's hard to decide if a practice is a difference or a commonality. Consider the fact that Muslims and Jews do not eat pork, but Christians do. On the face of it, this seems like an obvious religious difference. However, for members of all of those religions, people are living their lives according to the requirements and expectations that they feel that the Almighty has set down for them—including, for Christians, the notion that regulating specific foods is less important than cultivating an inner spirituality. So, there is a deeper way in which dietary practices can be seen as a broad religious universal.

Religion can explain intercultural similarities

The third reason I think religion can teach us about culture writ large is that it can be theoretically stimulating to think about how cultural differences among religions relate to other cultural differences in psychology. Let's come back to the basic cultural distinction between individualism and collectivism among Easterners and Westerners, which I mentioned above. Does religion have anything to do with this? It might. First of all, consider how moral attention to thoughts might relate to individualism and collectivism. You could say that looking at a person's inner self is an individualistic way of making moral judgments, but looking at a person's public behavior is a collectivistic way of making moral judgments. Thus religions might be relatively individualistic or collectivistic, just as other

kinds of cultures are. On the other hand, religious differences in moral judgment of thoughts do not disappear, if one accounts for measures of independent or interdependent self (Cohen & Rozin, 2001), so such differences could be thought of as a different kind of cultural difference – not related to individualism versus collectivism.

Let's also come back to the work on motivation mentioned above by Steve Heine. North Americans are motivated to feel good about themselves, but Japanese are motivated to work hard and improve themselves. Could these cultural differences be due to religion? Many scholars have drawn a connection between Protestant religion and individualism, including the idea that Protestantism promoted the broad individualism seen in the US (de Tocqueville (1835/1969). Perhaps religions cause national cultures to develop, in part, the ways they do.

On the other hand, cultures are complex, and it is likely that any culture (religion or country) has many messages about a given topic. It's not as if Protestant religion would make people want to feel good about themselves and be lazy. The Protestant work ethic encourages people to focus on achievement and hard work (Weber, 1905/2002). And there is even empirical work that putting certain kinds of Protestants (ones that derive from Calvinist roots) into a work frame of mind makes them work harder and less interpersonally connected (Sanchez-Burks, 2002).

Coming back to religion and culture, of course, there are many other possibilities as well, like the one that it is national cultures that cause religions to develop in certain ways (perhaps Protestantism in the US is individualistic because the US is an individualistic culture). In all, thinking about religion can help us better understanding many aspects of culture.

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Discussion Questions

1. Is it fair to call religions cultures? What are the advantages and disadvantages of such an approach?
2. Why does a researcher perform multiple studies on a topic, instead of just one study?
3. What additional questions about religion and moral judgment would be interesting to study?
4. In what ways do you think religions are similar to each other? In what ways do you think religions are different from each other?
5. Do you think religion causes other cultures to develop or vice-a-versa (culture causes religion)?