

PERSONAL GOALS: A NEW APPROACH IN STUDYING RELIGIOUS MOTIVATION

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ABSTRACT. *In order to understand what makes people engage in religious beliefs and behaviors, it is necessary to study their religious motivation. As there are many controversies concerning the intrinsic-extrinsic religious orientation, alternative ways of studying religious motivation need to be developed. The present research investigates the possibility of studying religious motivation through an appraisal of personal religious goals. Using a mixed methodology, a taxonomy of religious goals is constructed, which includes: personal development goals, relinquishment / fasting goals, goals regarding one’s relation to God, and goals oriented towards others. A positive correlation between the number of personal religious goals and intrinsic religious orientation is highlighted by the results of the present research. Also, our research points out a significant correlation between intrinsic and extrinsic religious orientations. This finding suggests that the two dimensions are not mutually exclusive, as initially assumed by Allport (1950, 1966).*

Key words: *religious motivation, personal goals, religious goals, daily religious experience, meaning*

Introduction

In everyday life, as well as in long-term development, humans need to find coherence and meaning in everything they do. Lack of meaning in life can lead to certain disorders coined as existential neurosis (*noogene neurosis*) by Viktor Frankl (2008). As stated by Emmons (2005), although humans share almost 98% of their DNA with their closest phylogenetic cousins, they are the only “meaning seeking” species on Earth.

From the perspective of neuropsychology, researchers try to explain how evolution led to changes in the brain structures that make spiritual and religious

experiences possible (Newberg & Newberg, 2005). Studies from the psychology of religion try to investigate more profoundly the way religion can be considered a meaning system, which contributes to the improvement of human life. Most of the studies are conducted in the health domain, pointing out a higher quality of life in the case of religious people as compared to non-religious ones (Emmons, Cheung, & Tehrani 1998; Emmons 2005; Paloutzian & Park 2005). It seems that religious motivation should be taken into account in explaining why people get involved in religious behaviors, even though sometimes there are costs involved (Karabenick & Maehr 2005).

In this study we attempt to find adequate means to assess religious motivation. Therefore we analyze two ways of evaluating religious motivation, according to specific theoretical approaches. We relate these measures to daily religious experience, which has been proven to positively correlate with quality of life (Underwood & Teresi 2002).

Religious motivation and the spiritual experience

The study of religious motivation is quite dispersed and reduced. Thus, a search on Psych Info realized by Neyrinck, Lens, and Vansteenkiste (2005) using the key words “motivation”, “religion” and “motivation and religion” returns 15,552 entries for the first term, 4997 for the second term, and only 120 references for both terms taken together.

One important line of research in studying religious motivation was defined by Allport's theory and research concerning religious orientation (Gorsuch și Venable 1983; Kirkpatrick & Hood 1990, 1991; Masters 1991; Neyrinck et al. 2005). According to Allport's theory (1950, 1966), people can have an intrinsic or an extrinsic religious orientation. An intrinsic oriented person considers religion as the most important aspect of his life, giving him meaning and influencing all other aspects of his life. For such a person, religious beliefs and values are internalized without reserve (Neyrinck et al. 2005). For an extrinsic oriented person religion is something rather peripheral, and constitutes a means to other ends (Neyrinck et al. 2005). In other words, an intrinsic oriented person lives through religion, while an extrinsic oriented person rather uses religion.

Based on this theory, Allport and Ross (1967) developed a religious orientation assessment instrument, which was later adapted by Gorsuch and Venable (1983) in order to be adequately used for children and teenagers as well. According to the authors, the newly resulted questionnaire, the age universal I-E scale, can be used starting with fifth grade (Gorsuch & Venable 1983).

Following this line of research, several studies investigated the relationship between religious orientation and different aspects of personality such as anxiety, prejudice, fear of death, well-being, pro-social behavior, locus of control, self control, sociability, responsibility, tolerance, etc. (Gorsuch &

Venable 1983; Kirkpatrick & Hood 1990, 1991; Masters 1991). The relationship between the extrinsic and the intrinsic orientations was also extensively investigated. Many controversies still exist in this field of research. One problem could consist in the fact that the two scales do not represent orthogonal factors. Therefore, they are not mutually exclusive, and it is possible that the two scales correlate positively. This would indicate that people who believe and live their religion, might also use it (Kirkpatrick & Hood 1990, 1991; Masters 1991).

The most problematic aspect refers to the fact that although studies emphasize the differences between empiric results and the theoretical conceptualization, a change of Allport's theory never took place (Kirkpatrick & Hood 1990, 1991; Masters 1991). Nevertheless, the religious orientation scale is one of the most widely used instruments in the psychology of religion.

Another direction of studying religious motivation, rapidly developing in recent years, consists in the assessment of personal goals (Emmons et al. 1998; Emmons 2005). This line of research focused primarily on understanding how personal goals relate to long term levels of happiness and life satisfaction. They also aimed to investigate how such empiric results could be used in order to increase the subjective well-being of people and which goals contribute the most to individual well-being (Emmons 2005). People spend a great part of their daily life reflecting upon, deciding between, and following the realization of their important and significant goals structuring their lives. Klinger (1998) sustains that our preoccupations and emotions are linked to the nature and the status of our goals (Emmons 2005). Attaining our goals is a key element in experiencing well-being.

Research based on the investigation of a heterogeneous population has outlined a taxonomy of life meaning, including the following categories (Emmons 2005): (a) achievement / work; (b) relationship / intimacy, (c) religion / spirituality, and (d) self-transcendence / generativity. The *achievement / work* category refers to one's commitment towards personal work, beliefs related to personal worth, and the pleasure of challenge. *Relationships and intimacy* includes "relating well to others, trusting others, being altruistic and helpful" (Emmons 2005: 735). The *religion / spirituality* category refers to goals about "having a personal relationship with God, believing in an afterlife, and contributing to a faith community" (Emmons, 2005: 735). *Self-transcendence / generativity* includes goals and beliefs related to self-transcendence of personal interest in order to contribute to the well-being of the society, leaving a personal legacy. It appears that goals related to spirituality, intimacy, and generativity are significantly related to well-being (Emmons 2005).

Several research studies are dedicated to the study of the relationship between spiritual / religious experiences and physical and mental health, as well as quality of life (Paloutzian & Park 2005). Underwood and her collaborators (Underwood & Teresi 2002; Underwood 2006) focus on spiritual and religious

experiences which represent an important part of people's daily life. A multidimensional assessment instrument was developed in order to evaluate several aspects related to the religious aspects of people's lives, including social religious support, meaning offered by religion, private and public religious practices, commitment and religious values (Underwood 2006). The daily spiritual experience scale tries to capture the common, day by day, spiritual and religious experience, rather than to focus on particular beliefs and behaviors (Underwood & Teresi 2002). The authors assume that some daily spiritual experiences "can contribute positively to health and that can be defined broadly to include spiritual, psychological and social well-being as well as physical health" (Underwood & Teresi 2002: 24).

Research in health psychology as well as in the psychology of religion emphasize a positive relationship between spiritual / religious experiences and goals and an improved quality of life, well-being, physical and mental health.

Methods

Objectives and hypothesis. Considering the controversies concerning the assessment of religious motivation through the I-E approach proposed by Allport (1950, 1966) and his followers (Gorsuch & Venable 1983; Kirkpatrick & Hood 1990, 1991; Masters 1991; Neyrinck et al. 2005), we aim to find alternative ways of evaluating this concept. Based on Emmons' work on personal goals (Emmons et al. 1998; Emmons 2005), we try to identify a taxonomy of religious goals. Another aim of this study is to investigate the relationship between the religious motivation and daily spiritual experiences as captured by the instrument proposed by Underwood and colleagues (Underwood & Teresi 2002; Underwood 2006).

Our main hypothesis regards the possibility of establishing a taxonomy of religious personal goals. Another hypothesis tested in this study refers to the assumption that there is a correlation between intrinsic and extrinsic religious orientations, contrary to the initial model of Allport (1950, 1966). We also aim at highlighting the existence of a correlation between religious motivation and daily religious experiences.

Participants. The participants were 98 students aged between 18 and 52 years ($M = 23.16$; $SD = 7.58$); 44 were students in psychology, while 54 were students in theology. The gender distribution of the participants included 44 males, 54 females and one person who did not declare his/her gender. The majority of participants (82.7%) were Orthodox Christians, 14.3% were affiliated to other religions, and 3.1% of participants did not declare their religious affiliation.

Instruments. In order to assess the religious orientation we used the *Age Universal Religious Orientation Scale* adapted by Gorsuch and Venable (1983).

The scale contains 20 items assessing intrinsic religious orientation (9 items) and extrinsic religious orientation (11 items). For the sample included in this study an .76 internal consistency alpha was obtained for the intrinsic religious orientation subscale, while for the extrinsic religious orientation subscale alpha was .62.

The *Daily Spiritual Experience Scale* developed by Underwood and her collaborators was used to assess experiences related to spiritual and religious aspects of daily life (Underwood & Teresi, 2002). The 16 items of the scale refer to constructs such as worship, awe, gratefulness, compassion, connectedness with the transcendent, self-transcendence and the desire to get closer to God. A good consistency of the scale was obtained in the case of our sample ($\alpha = .87$).

A procedure to evaluate personal goals was adapted from Emmons' methodology on the assessment of personal strivings (Emmons et al. 1998; Emmons 2005). This procedure has three stages. First, the participants receive a short description of personal goals. Then they are asked to list eight most representative personal goals they will try to attain in the next six months. In the end they are asked to list three goals related to the religious domain.

Procedure. All participants filled in the instruments at the end of class, on a voluntary basis. Each participant received a brochure containing the assessment procedure of personal and religious goals. After completing this procedure, the participants were asked to complete the religious orientation scale and the daily spiritual experiences scale.

Results

Religious personal goals. For the analysis of religious personal goals we combined quantitative and qualitative procedures. First, we quantified the number of religious goals mentioned by participants in the first list, where they noted personal goals. For this purpose we considered religious goals those making a direct reference to the religious domain. The maximum of religious goals included in the personal goals list was 5; only one person listed this number of religious goals. The results show that 45.9% of participants did not mention any religious goals, 37.8% listed one religious goal among their personal goals, and 9.2% noted two such goals.

In order to establish a taxonomy of religious goals we analyzed and we coded the second list of goals, where participants were asked to list three religious goals. We used an "ad-hoc" taxonomy established by the researchers. After including each goal in the resulted categories, a theologian was consulted in order to check their accuracy and the correct number of goals for each category. Six categories of religious goals were identified:

(1) *personal development goals*: "to go to church more often", "to be a better person", "to read more religious books", "to grow spiritually";

(2) *relinquishment/ fasting goals*: “not to make the same mistakes anymore”, “to reduce my sins”, “to be more humble”, “not to make stupid things any more”;

(3) *professional goals*: “to succeed at my exams”, “to become a religion teacher”;

(4) goals regarding one’s relation to God: “to be close to God”, “to have a closer relationship with the divine”, “not to forget and not to doubt God”;

(5) *goals oriented towards others*: “to help those around me”, “to love and accept my fellows as they are”, “to be a light for those around me”;

(6) *other goals*: “to get to the holy places”, “to attain some conferences”, “to understand the truth”.

After coding the goals and determining the number of goals for each category, a second researcher, with knowledge in theology, checked the coding establishing a similar classification. Table 1 contains the frequencies and percentages for each category of religious goals presented above.

Table 1.

The frequency (f) and the percentage (%) of religious goals for each category

No	1		2		3		4		5		6	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
0	7	7.1	71	72.4	89	90.8	81	82.7	49	50.0	81	82.7
1	29	29.6	24	24.5	6	6.1	14	14.3	35	35.7	12	12.2
2	45	45.9	3	3.1	3	3.1	3	3.1	13	13.3	4	4.1
3	17	17.3	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1.0	1	1.0
Total	98	100.0	98	100.0	98	100.0	98	100.0	98	100.0	98	100.0

We note that a large number of goals can be observed for the category of *personal development goals*, and for the fifth category, *goals oriented towards others*. Only students in theology listed professional goals. It can be observed that 24 participants have one goal related to relinquishment, mostly referring to fast.

These religious goals categories are based on the answers offered by the participants in this study. They are not exhaustive, and may be completed by extensive studies on more heterogeneous populations.

Religious motivation and daily religious experience. In analyzing the relationship between religious motivation and daily religious experience, we focused on two aspects. Firstly, we focused on the relationship between the religious orientations and the religious goals. Secondly, we analyzed the correlation between the two measurements of religious motivation and the score for daily religious experience.

A noteworthy result consists in a positive correlation between the scores of intrinsic and extrinsic religious orientation ($r = .21, p = .03$). Nevertheless, only the intrinsic religious orientation scale significantly correlated with the scores obtained for daily religious experience ($r = .69, p = .00$).

A positive correlation was found between the number of religious goals from the list of personal goals (N1 in the Table 2) and the intrinsic religious orientation ($\rho = .20, p = .04$). A negative significant correlation was obtained for the same number of religious goals and the extrinsic religious orientation ($\rho = .21, p = .03$).

Table 2.

The correlation coefficients for the number of religious goals and daily religious experience, intrinsic and extrinsic religious orientation

		N1	1	2	3	4	5	6
Daily religious experience	<i>rho</i>	.18	-.02	-.17	.05	.09	.12	.02
	<i>p</i>	.06	.81	.08	.62	.33	.24	.84
Intrinsic religious orientation	<i>rho</i>	.20	-.08	-.14	.04	.14	.17	.00
	<i>p</i>	.04	.39	.16	.64	.15	.08	.98
Intrinsic religious orientation	<i>rho</i>	-.21	-.16	-.19	-.04	.18	.00	.15
	<i>p</i>	.03	.10	.06	.63	.07	.99	.13

No significant correlation was found between specific religious goals and religious orientation or daily spiritual experiences. The score on the daily spiritual experience scale did not significantly correlate with intrinsic or extrinsic religious orientation.

Discussions and conclusions

Our results emphasize the current status of research in the field of religious motivation (Gorsuch & Venable 1983; Kirkpatrick & Hood 1990, 1991; Masters 1991). Namely, the use of the intrinsic-extrinsic orientation scale developed by Allport and Ross, (1967) or any of its adapted forms, is a controversial issue. The positive significant correlation between extrinsic and intrinsic religious orientations observed in our study would suggest a non-orthogonal relationship between these dimensions, contrary to Allport's assumptions (Allport 1950, 1966; Gorsuch & Venable 1983; Kirkpatrick & Hood 1990, 1991; Masters 1991). An alternative way of assessing religious motivation needs to be developed or existing theories must be reconsidered.

In this respect, we propose a pioneering procedure adapted from Emmons (Emmons et al. 1998; Emmons 2005) for the evaluation of religious

personal goals. The results show that a taxonomy of religious personal goals is possible. More extensive studies in heterogeneous populations need to be conducted in order to further develop our taxonomy. It is also worth mentioning that the participants in our study were in majority Orthodox Christians. Testing the current taxonomy on other religious denominations is also necessary.

The results of our study emphasize the fact that daily religious experience is directly proportional only with the intrinsic religious orientation, but not with the extrinsic one. Therefore, only people living their religion seem to focus on and capture their daily religious experiences.

The topic of religious and spiritual motivation is a rather complex one and there is no wonder it could become such a controversial issue. Nevertheless, more adequate and ecological assessment procedures could be developed as presented in this paper. Our methodology, based on the assessment of personal religious goals and the proposed taxonomy, need to be further developed and investigated. But the positive health related outcomes of religious and spiritual involvement of people, emphasized by so many research studies, suggest that any effort in understanding religious motivation is worth doing.

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