

PSYCHOLOGISTS AND RELIGION:
PROFESSIONAL FACTORS AND PERSONAL BELIEF

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Review of Religious Research, Vol. 21, No. 2 (Spring, 1980): 208-217.

Research has shown that scientists in areas which treat religion as an object of study are less likely to be religious. It has been suggested that similar relationships might exist between different specializations within psychology, but, paradoxically, that individual psychologists who consider religion in the course of their work would be more religious than others. A 2 percent random sample of all members of the American Psychological Association was sent a questionnaire requesting information about personal religiosity, type of work as a psychologist, scholarly values, and related attitudes. The final response rate was 71 percent of the original sample (N = 555). The first hypothesis was not confirmed. Psychologists in areas which study religion were no more, nor less, religious than those in areas which do not study religion. The second hypothesis was confirmed. Psychologists who considered religious phenomena in the course of their professional activity were more likely to be religious than those who did not. The overall level of religiosity among psychologists was much lower than that of the general population and academicians in general, which confirmed previous findings.

Previous surveys have shown that scientists are less religious than the general population and that psychologists are the least religious among scientists (Argyle and Beit-Hallahmi, 1975). Within this general finding, several significant group differences have been identified. Leuba (1916) found that more eminent scientists were less likely to espouse a religious world-view than were their less renowned colleagues. He stated, "I do not see any way to avoid the conclusion that disbelief in a personal God and in personal immortality is directly proportional to abilities making for success in the sciences . . ." (Leuba, 1916: 279).

In the same survey, psychologists were less religious than any other professional group. Several commentators have observed a "truce" between religion and natural science, but not between religion and social science (e.g., Long 1971; Friedrichs, 1974). As early as 1931, it was observed that natural scientists and social scientists had different orientations toward religion. Lehman and Witty (1931) found that physicists were much more likely to perceive church membership as important than were psychologists. They suggested that psychologists were less religiously committed than physicists because psychologists were more likely to study religion as an aspect of human behavior. Furthermore, it seemed that psychologists were inclined to deny the mysterious element in natural phenomena more than physicists. Physicists, on the other hand, were more likely to welcome religious explanations when baffled by the complexity of nature. Lehman and Witty (1931) portrayed psychologists as believing that their science

eventually could explain most phenomena and that physical science could explain the remainder.

Leuba's (1934) investigations provided further data supporting the thesis that religiosity is higher among natural scientists. He also offered the hypothesis that social scientists withhold belief because religion is a topic of study requiring scientific objectivity. Approaching religion from the perspective of scientific and scholarly values was viewed as incompatible with an approach based on personal commitment.

Lehman has used the term "scholarly distance from religion" to denote "the extent to which a discipline's institutionalized activity includes scholarly study of religion." In a study of faculty members at a large university, Lehman and Shriver (1968) found support for the scholarly distance hypothesis: scholarly distance from religion was positively correlated with personal religiosity. Those who were the least likely to study religion (e.g., natural scientists) were more religious than those most likely to study religion (e.g., social scientists). Much of the data on the religiosity of students reflects similar differences among major fields. Hoge (1974) found that social science and humanities majors generally were lower in religiosity than natural science and engineering majors.

Beit-Hallahmi (1977) suggested that the scholarly distance hypothesis might hold true for the sub-disciplines of psychology, just as it does among general academic fields. Psychologists in areas which study religion might be less religious than those in areas which do not. This distinction is similar to that between social and natural sciences, especially when one contrasts the work of the social psychologist and that of the physiological psychologist, for example. Beit-Hallahmi (1977) predicted that social psychologists would be more likely to study religious behavior and, thus, treat it objectively, while they would withhold personal belief regarding religion. Somewhat paradoxically, he also predicted that individual psychologists who personally study religion would be more religious than others. This is based on observations regarding the current status of the psychology of religion. He noted that most psychologists who study religion seem to be religious. Indeed, there are psychologists who hold theological degrees and probably more who, at one time, had aspirations toward the ministry. Personal religiosity may motivate some psychologists to study religious behavior.

This study set out to test three hypotheses: (1) that psychologists would be less religious than the general population; (2) that psychologists in subspecialties which do not study religion would be more religious compared to other psychologists (i.e., "experimentalists" would be more religious than colleagues in "personality and social psychology"); and (3) that psychologists who actually study religion would be more religious than those who do not.

METHODS

Subjects

The population studied was the membership of the American Psychological Association (APA). A 2 percent random sample of the APA membership was drawn from the membership list of the APA's 1975

Biographical Directory (American Psychological Association, 1975). The 2 percent sample resulted in an N of 783. The number of usable questionnaires returned after the two mailings was 522 (67 percent). Attempts were made to interview 25 percent of the nonrespondents over the telephone. Of these 60 persons, 33 were so interviewed or chose to return the completed questionnaire. All subsequent analyses were performed on the combined data that represented a response rate of 71 percent (N = 555).

An examination of the final sample of 555 psychologists revealed that the distributions of age, sex, and geographical location were very similar to those of doctoral psychologists in the APA generally, (Boneau and Cuca, 1974). The distributions are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
COMPARISON OF POPULATION AND SAMPLE ON AGE, GENDER, AND
GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION^a
(Percent)

	Sample	Total Population
Age	(N=373) ^b	(N=20,797)
25-29	4.6	7.6
30-34	20.9	19.1
35-39	15.3	16.5
40-44	12.9	17.2
45-49	17.7	15.2
50-54	12.9	10.5
55-59	7.5	6.5
60-64	4.8	3.9
65-69	1.6	2.0
70 or more	1.9	1.9
Gender	(N=555)	(N=20,797)
Male	80	81.1
Female	20	18.9
Geographical Location	(N=555)	(N=20,405) ^c
East	41.8	45.8
South	20.7	18.2
Midwest	16.9	15.3
West	20.5	20.3

^aFigures for the Population come from Boneau and Cuca (1974).

^bAge was available for only part of the subjects, since many persons apparently chose to omit this information from the biographical directory.

^cThe N here is different because it is based on a sample of members who chose to disclose their income in the Boneau and Cuca study.

Instruments

Data were gathered with a questionnaire requesting information about personal religiosity, type of work as a psychologist, scholarly values, and related attitudes. The questionnaire was brief to ensure a higher rate of returns from a sample which did not volunteer its participation in advance. Most of the items had been used previously by Lehman and Shriver (1968) and Lehman (1971, 1972, 1974). This part of the questionnaire dealt with commitment to the "scholarly perspective." Lehman found that the scholarly perspective scale was valid and reliable in distinguishing wide differences in commitment to the scholarly perspective, which was defined as holding to values such as objectivity, independence of thought, and skepticism about traditional sacred values.

Another part of the questionnaire, adapted from Thalheimer (1973), dealt with perceptions of the relationship between respondents' work and their religious beliefs.

The measure of religiosity, developed by Lehman (1972), dealt with involvement in four dimensions of traditional Judeo-Christian religion. Lehman constructed the four ordinal scales to deal with Glock and Stark's (1965) ideological, ritualistic, experiential, and cognitive dimensions. The reliability of the religiosity measures was supported by their demonstrated consistency with other variables and within varying populations (Lehman and Shriver, 1968; Lehman, 1972, 1974).

RESULTS

Psychologists were less religious than the general academic population, when compared with Lehman's (1972) sample of university faculty. On the ideological dimension, most psychologists were much less orthodox than the general academic population (see Table 2). Lehman (1972) found that 23 percent of academicians in general chose the ideological alternative that totally denies the existence of God. In comparison, 34 percent of the present sample of psychologists selected that alternative. This supports the atheistic stereotype of psychologists, especially when compared to the portion of the general U.S. population that denies the existence of God (only 2 percent; see Argyle and Beit-Hallahmi, 1975).

On the ritual dimension, fewer psychologists had any involvement with the church, though those who did attend seemed to be quite involved rather than irregular in attendance. Both psychologists in this study and the general academic populations studied by Lehman reported few of the religious experiences measured by the questionnaire; but again, psychologists were lower than academicians in general. On the cognitive dimension, the distributions were weighted toward the lower levels, with psychologists and academicians in general being quite similar in religious knowledge.

A comparison of the four different measures revealed that ritualistic behavior and religious experience were less characteristic of psychologists than traditional belief and knowledge of religious material. This suggests a de-emphasis on overt religious behavior (e.g., attending church, confessing to divine intervention in one's life) that does not necessarily preclude covert behaviors of a more traditional type (e.g., belief in a personal God,

Table 2
 COMPARISON OF DISTRIBUTIONS ON FOUR MEASURES OF RELIGIOSITY
 FOR PSYCHOLOGISTS AND ACADEMICIANS IN GENERAL
 (Percent)

	Academicians	Psychologists
<u>Ideological^a</u>		
1. Humanist	25	34
2.	13	23
3.	18	26
4. Orthodox	47	17
<u>Ritualistic</u>		
1. Uninvolved	28	52
2.	8	14
3.	4	7
4.	5	6
5.	32	12
6. Very Involved	23	9
<u>Experiential</u>		
1. Few Experiences	35	50
2.	20	21
3.	13	10
4.	10	8
5.	13	4
6.	5	3
7.	5	2
8.	1	0.4
9. Many Experiences	0.1	0.4
<u>Cognitive</u>		
1. Little Knowledge	31	29
2.	13	16
3.	12	13
4.	9	13
5.	8	12
6.	7	5
7.	6	5
8.	5	2
9. Much Knowledge	11	6

^aFrom Lehman (1972)

or knowledge of religious literature). The general conclusion, then, is that psychologists are much lower than others in religiosity.

Nevertheless, one cannot predict that any given psychologist will be an atheist. Thirty-four percent of the sample was atheistic in orientation, but the combined response for two alternatives clearly affirming a transcendent deity was 43 percent. In one sense, a mere affirmation of belief may not

be a salient aspect of religiosity, since it does not necessitate any overt behaviors. Involvement with religious institutions, however, is more likely to be a salient behavior. Forty-seven percent of the respondents were at least infrequent church attenders. Again, this portion is much less than one would find in the general population. However, a closer look at the data revealed that 27 percent of the psychologists attended half of the time or more, and 9 percent held leadership positions in their congregation. Of those who reported a religious affiliation, 51 percent were Protestants (compared to 69 percent in the population at large), 19 percent were Jewish (compared to 3 percent in the general population), and 15 percent were Catholic (compared to 24.5 percent in the general population). Thus, psychologists are lower in religiosity than individuals chosen at random from the general population. On the other hand, the assumption that rejection of the supernatural is a professional standard for psychologists is unsupported.

Turning to our second hypothesis, there were no distinct differences in the religiosity of persons working in different areas of psychology. Overall, the relationship between subdiscipline and religiosity was measured with Cramer's V, a statistic suitable for use with nominal data. There was a significant association between subdiscipline and ideological religiosity (Cramer's V = .20, p = .001), but not between subdiscipline and the other three dimensions of religiosity. Table 3 presents the rank of the twelve disciplines on the ideological variable.

Table 3

RANK-ORDER OF TWELVE AREAS OF PSYCHOLOGY ON TRADITIONAL
IDEOLOGICAL RELIGIOSITY FROM HIGHEST TO LOWEST

Area	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Counseling	38	2.94	1.12
Personality	5	2.60	0.80
Educational	38	2.50	1.11
Differential	12	2.41	0.86
Industrial	38	2.39	1.03
Clinical	244	2.29	1.05
Teaching	6	2.16	1.21
Social	38	2.05	1.12
Community	6	2.00	1.15
Developmental	46	1.89	1.00
Experimental	63	1.88	1.11
Others	7	1.85	0.83
	(541)	(2.26)	(1.10)

Thus, psychologists who specialize in areas that are more likely to study religious behavior are no more, nor less, likely to be religious than are those with other specializations. The science of psychology, then, does not constitute a microcosm of the academic world discovered by Lehman and Shriver (1968). Psychologists certainly are not all alike in religiosity, but their differences do not relate to the area of psychology in which they work. The differences in psychologists' religiosity apparently are present within subdisciplines, not between them. Two clinicians, for example, are almost as likely to be different in religiosity as either of them is likely to differ from an industrial psychologist.

Finally, psychologists who personally considered religious phenomena in the course of their work were much more likely to be religious than were those who did not (gamma coefficients ranged from $-.25$ to $-.29$; $p < .01$ for all dimensions of religiosity). It would seem inappropriate to think of religiosity as the dependent variable here. Rather, those who are religious are more likely to see such behaviors as important issues in relation to their field of expertise.

Another variable investigated was the degree to which psychologists adhered to scholarly values. The more they affirmed scholarly values, the less they held to a traditional ideological religious position. (gamma = $-.25$; $p < .01$). The negative correlation suggests that religious and scholarly values conflict when they are expressed as guiding principles or beliefs. This is consistent with Leuba's (1916) finding that the more eminent psychologists were less likely to believe in God. However, the relationships were not as strong for psychologists as they were for a general academic population, and were significant only for the ideological dimension of religiosity. Therefore, among psychologists, the conflict of scholarship and religion appears to be limited to belief issues.

The question of a relationship between religion and psychology also was addressed directly by asking the subjects, "How would you evaluate the relation between your religious convictions and the ideas and findings which you use in your work as a psychologist?" Sixty-four percent saw their beliefs and their work as related, suggesting that few psychologists compartmentalize the two ways of thinking. Regarding the possibility of conflict between religion and psychology, only 15 percent disclosed such a perception, while the remainder were about equally divided in seeing either no conflict or mutual support.

Psychologists who were more religious also were more likely to see a relationship between their faith and their work. In addition, greater religiosity correlated with perceptions of mutual support, rather than conflict between religious convictions and work.

In summary, though the scholarly distance hypothesis has been supported among academic disciplines in general, it has been supported when comparisons were made between specializations *within* the discipline of psychology. Significant differences in religiosity were found, however, and these were associated with differences in the importance psychologists attached to religious phenomena in the course of their work.

DISCUSSION

Beit-Hallahmi's (1971) description of psychologists as socially marginal was partially supported by this investigation. Most psychologists did not hold to traditional patterns of religious belief and practice. This marginality also was reflected in the frequent written criticisms of the questionnaire many subjects offered. Nevertheless, there was a large minority of psychologists who identified with a traditional religious stance. Religion and science seemed to act as competing value systems for those who held to either strongly. However, for those who were moderate in traditional religiosity, and for those who were moderate in "scientific beliefs," there was less likelihood of conflict. Some psychologists were affected by identification with traditional religious values, while a much larger portion was influenced by their nonidentification with the same values. Psychologists who were more religious were much more likely to engage in scientific study, or at least consideration, of religious behavior.

The potential for conflict between religion and psychology probably is greatest for persons whose work is in psychotherapy or the psychology of religion. In those areas, the extent to which religious values influence the psychologist's work may be more obvious than it is in others. The present findings bear on this issue, inasmuch as those who were more religious were more likely to treat religion as a variable that should be considered in explaining behavior. Furthermore, one might well contemplate in terms of traditional ideas about counter-transference, whether many psychotherapists inadvertently consider themselves the standard of appropriate behavior for their clients (Beit-Hallahmi, 1975).

The same problem could arise in academic or experimental psychology. High personal religious commitment, for example, could cause the researcher to carry unspoken assumptions about the impact of belief on behavior. The psychology of religion seems to be greatly influenced by the values of believers. Some psychologists (e.g., Malony, 1976) seem to endorse such trends, while others (e.g., Beit-Hallahmi, 1971) find them questionable from a scientific viewpoint.

Also, the proportion of psychologists who "engage in objective study or consideration of religious phenomena" (47 percent) has been ascertained. But this does not deal specifically with research in religious behavior. The percentage of persons who have an interest in the psychology of religion certainly would be much smaller. Malony (1972) found that 1.1 percent of the American Psychological Association members he sampled listed an interest in religion in their biographical data.

Overall, the low religiosity of psychologists confirms an impression reached in studies sixty years ago. The question now is whether psychology brings about a lessening of religious beliefs, or whether psychologists are recruited from among those who are less religious to begin with. Findings presented elsewhere (Argyle and Beit-Hallahmi, 1975) regarding social scientists in general indicate that their "apostasy" begins in adolescence, and probably is reinforced later by academic training (Stark, 1963). The over-representation of Jews, and the under-representation of Catholics among

psychologists compared to their proportion in the general population, also contributes to lower religiosity, because Jews tend to be the least conforming, and Catholics the most conforming, to their religious training at home (Stark, 1963). These findings bring us a step further in understanding the psychology and sociology of psychologists, their social origins, and their social roles. They also shed some light on the changing historical roles of religion and psychology in this culture. The case may be made for a "functional equivalence" of religion and psychology (Beit-Hallahmi, 1976), which may lead some people to replacing religion with psychology, while leading others to psychologize their religion or "religify" their psychology.

FOOTNOTE

1. This is a revised version of a paper presented at the meeting of the American Psychological Association, Washington, D.C., September, 1976. The authors acknowledge helpful reviews by Donald F. Tweedie, Jr., and Neil C. Warren.

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