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The Religious Shaping of Feeling

Implications of Affect Valuation Theory

Jeanne L. Tsai, Birgit Koopmann-Holm,
Masako Miyazaki, and Camaron Ochs

Over 80% of the world population identifies with a specific religion (Adherents.com, 2007; Central Intelligence Agency, 2011). For some individuals, this religion structures and shapes every dimension of their daily lives: what they wear, with whom they spend time, where they go, and what they eat. As important, but perhaps less overt, is how religion shapes people's psyches. Indeed, one of the major functions of religion is to provide followers with a way of understanding and coping with their life circumstances (see Pargament, Falb, Ano, & Wachholtz, Chapter 28, this volume; Park, 2005). Another is to provide a guide or map for how to lead a good life (in this volume, see Donahue & Nielsen, Chapter 16, and Park, Chapter 18). A central part of coping with life and leading a good life is regulating one's emotions. Indeed, several religious scholars have written about the centrality of emotion in religious experience (see Emmons, 2005a, for an excellent history of religion and emotion). For instance, two fundamental "truths" or tenets of Buddhism are that life is full of suffering, sorrow, and grief, and that the way to end this suffering is to relinquish one's attachments to the material world and achieve "enlightenment" (Smith, 1991). In this chapter, we explore several ways in which religion may shape people's *emotional* lives, specifically their emotional goals, using the framework of affect valuation theory (AVT; Tsai, 2007). But first, we discuss our approach to religion.

RELIGION AS A CULTURAL SYSTEM

According to Pargament and his colleagues (Pargament, Magyar-Russell, & Murray-Swank, 2005), religion is the "search for significance in ways related to the sacred"

(p. 667). By “sacred,” these authors refer to things that are perceived as “holy, ‘set apart’ from the ordinary, and worthy of veneration and respect” (p. 668).

Following the footsteps of Geertz (1973) and other scholars (Cohen & Hall, 2009; Cohen & Hill, 2007), we assume a “religious culture perspective” (Cohen, 2009; Cohen, Malka, Rozin, & Cherfas, 2006; see Saroglou & Cohen, Chapter 17, this volume). In other words, we view religions as cultural systems (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952) because they comprise historically derived and socially transmitted ideas (specifically related to “the sacred” or supernatural) that are instantiated in rituals (e.g., services and ceremonies), practices (e.g., prayer and meditation, singing), and products (e.g., texts, icons). Religious cultures are both products and producers of human action: Religious experts write texts that reflect that religion’s core beliefs, and these texts in turn influence practitioners who read those texts. Religious ideas and practices provide meaning, or a way of understanding one’s own and others’ actions, thoughts, and feelings (Emmons, 2005b; Park, 2005). This view of religion is somewhat different from (but not opposed to) an approach that focuses more on the psychological and social functions of religious institutions in general (e.g., religious communities as sources of social support).

Religious cultures resemble national cultures in several ways. First, they contain smaller subcultures (e.g., sects and denominations) that exist within the larger dominant culture. Second, individuals within the same national or religious culture may vary in their responses to the dominant ideas and practices of their culture. For example, whereas one Buddhist practitioner may approach the Four Noble Truths with skepticism and doubt, another practitioner may approach them with unquestioning acceptance. As a result, any one religious group (e.g., Buddhists) may be simultaneously homogeneous (i.e., individuals are all exposed to the same set of religious ideas) *and* heterogeneous (i.e., individuals may respond to the same set of religious ideas in different ways). Third, religious cultures encompass multiple domains of daily life (e.g., home, work). Fourth, religious and national cultural ideas and practices are transmitted through similar paths, including parental and peer socialization, media representations, and engagement in rituals and practices. Finally, like national cultures, although there are core ideas and practices that remain intact over time, religious ideas and practices are also dynamic and changing (e.g., Wolfe, 2003).

Religious cultures, however, also differ from national cultures in important ways. Whereas national cultures typically involve a variety of ideas and practices that may or may not cohere with each other, religious ideas and practices are usually unified by fundamental themes related to death and suffering (Atran & Norenzayan, 2004) and to balancing one’s own needs against others’ needs (Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007). Religions also include beliefs about supernatural agents who “transcend death, deception, and illusion” and provide comfort during times when people feel uncertain, anxious (Atran & Norenzayan, 2004; Kay, Gaucher, McGregor, & Nash, 2010), and other culturally undesirable states. Third, and perhaps most importantly, religious cultures speak specifically to what people perceive to be “sacred” and “divine” and, therefore, refer to phenomena that are, from an empirical perspective, largely unknowable (McCullough & Willoughby, 2009).

Although several scholars have argued that the religious culture perspective is an important part of understanding what impact religion has on psychological functioning (Cohen & Hill, 2007), few have actually used this approach to understand the influence

of religion on *emotional* functioning. By viewing religions as cultural systems, scholars can begin to address two main limitations of the existing literature on religion and emotion: (1) the focus on Christian contexts and (2) the lack of theory regarding how religion shapes feeling. In this chapter, we illustrate how AVT (Tsai, 2007)—a theory that directly predicts how culture shapes emotion—not only addresses these gaps in the literature but raises new questions about the religious shaping of feeling.

AFFECT VALUATION THEORY

AVT is a theoretical framework that attempts to integrate people's affective ideals and goals into current models of emotion. Its main argument is that people's emotional experiences not only involve what people "actually" feel in the moment but also what people ideally want to feel in the moment and more generally in life. We focus on "affect," or feeling states that can be described in terms of two dimensions: (1) arousal and (2) valence (Barrett & Russell, 1999; Larsen & Diener, 1992; Thayer, 1989; Watson & Tellegen, 1985). For example, enthusiastic, excited, and elated are emotional states that differ from each other, but they are all high-arousal, positive states (what we refer to as "HAP" states). Similarly, calm, relaxed, and peaceful are emotional states that differ from each other in various ways, but they are all low-arousal positive states (what we refer to as "LAP" states). Affective states involve multiple components, including subjective experience (e.g., "I feel good"), physiological responses (e.g., increases in heart rate), and behavioral responses (e.g., smiling) (Barrett, Mesquita, Ochsner, & Gross, 2007; Levenson, 1994).

We began our work on affect because research suggests that across different languages and cultures, emotional states are classified in terms of the arousal and valence dimensions, suggesting that affect can be compared across cultures (Russell, Lewicka, & Nitt, 1989). AVT, however, can also be applied to discrete emotional states such as anger, sadness, and disgust as well as more complex emotional states that have been associated with religion, such as compassion, forgiveness, and hope.

AVT was first developed as a way of reconciling the mixed findings regarding cultural similarities and differences in emotion. On the one hand, a body of literature—mostly but not exclusively anthropological—suggested more differences than similarities in emotion across cultures (e.g., Kleinman & Good, 1985; Lutz, 1988). For example, in her ethnography of the Ifaluk, Lutz (1988) described the emotion of *fago*, a combination of sadness, pity, love, and compassion, which she argues does not exist in American culture. On the other hand, another body of literature—mostly but not exclusively psychological—suggested more similarities than differences in emotion across cultures (e.g., Breugelmans et al., 2005; Scherer, 1997). For example, in one of our own studies, we compared the autonomic (e.g., electrodermal activity) and subjective responses of European Americans and Hmong Americans when they were reliving different emotional episodes from their lives. Although we found some differences in expressive behavior (e.g., Hmong Americans smiled less than European Americans while reliving positive emotions), European Americans and Hmong Americans showed strikingly similar electrodermal responses and reported experiencing various positive and negative emotions at similar levels of intensity (Tsai, Chentsova-Dutton, Friere-Bebau, & Przyms, 2002).

Ideal Affect Differs from Actual Affect

In order to reconcile these different literatures, we began to consider the possibility that they were describing *different* affective phenomena. One literature seemed to be examining more the affective states that people actually feel (“actual affect”), whereas the other seemed to be examining more the affective states that people ideally want to feel (“ideal affect”). Whereas actual affect is a response to an event, ideal affect is a goal and a desired outcome. Both are important in emotional life but serve different functions: Actual affect tells the individual how he or she is doing, while ideal affect provides a way of interpreting that feeling (e.g., “Am I feeling how I want to feel?” “Is this a good feeling that I am having?”). In addition, ideal affect serves motivational functions: People engage in specific behaviors in order to feel how they ideally want to feel (e.g., drinking coffee to feel alert and energized, getting a massage to feel relaxed and calm). The distinction between actual and ideal affect is the first premise of AVT.

Consistent with this premise, when we ask people to rate how much they *actually* feel a variety of feelings and then how much they *ideally want to* feel those same states on average, we find that participants can easily differentiate between the two. More specifically, people report wanting to feel more positive than negative emotions, and wanting to feel *more* positive and *less* negative than they actually feel. This pattern holds across a variety of North American and East Asian (Tsai, Knutson, & Fung, 2006) as well as Christian and Buddhist (Tsai, Miao, & Seppala, 2007) contexts. Current research in our lab suggests that ideal affect and actual affect can be distinguished in terms of neural activity as well (Chim, Sims, Samanez-Larkin, Tsai, & Knutson, 2011).

The bulk of the research on emotion in general and on religion and emotion more specifically, however, has focused on actual affect (Emmons, 2005a). For example, in the religion and emotion literature, common questions include:

1. Does being religious improve emotional health and well-being?
2. Are religious people more likely to experience compassion, gratitude, and other prosocial emotions?
3. Are there “religious emotions,” or emotions that only religious people experience?

On the basis of AVT, we argue that in order to answer any of these questions about religion and actual affect, we have to first understand how religion shapes ideal affect.

Culture Shapes Ideal Affect More Than Actual Affect

“I’m excited about my future!” Start speaking those kinds of words, and before long, you will rise to a new level of well-being, success, and victory.

—JOEL OSTEEN (2004, p. 123)

[The 14th Dalai Lama] . . . has pointed out that a happy life is built on a foundation of a calm, stable state of mind.

—HIS HOLINESS THE DALAI LAMA and HOWARD C. CUTLER (1998, p. 311)

The second premise of AVT is that cultural ideas and practices shape how people ideally want to feel. As demonstrated by studies that document cross-national differences

in values (Schwartz, 1992), culture teaches people what is good, moral, and virtuous (Shweder, 2003). In AVT, this idea is applied to emotions and other feeling states. Cross-religion differences in values have also been documented (Saroglou & Dupuis, 2006; Schwartz & Huisman, 1995). For example, in a comparison of Jewish, Protestant, Catholic, and Greek Orthodox practitioners, Schwartz and Huisman (1995) observed similarities across the four religions in practitioners' endorsement of benevolence (caring about the welfare of close others), tradition (respect for norms and practices), conformity (restraint of actions), and security (safety) values. However, the degree to which religiosity was correlated with these values varied across religious traditions. Only a handful of studies, however, have examined how religion shapes *emotional* values, despite the fact that religious cultures teach people which *feelings* are good, virtuous, moral, and desirable to feel (Emmons, 2005a; Silberman, 2005; Snibbe & Markus, 2002).

We tested this hypothesis in two studies (Tsai et al., 2007) by comparing the affective states that readers are encouraged to feel by Christian and Buddhist texts. We were specifically interested in high-arousal positive (HAP) states such as excitement and enthusiasm, and low-arousal positive (LAP) states such as calm and peacefulness, because our previous work found that North American culture values HAP states more and LAP states less than East Asian cultures, and Christianity and Buddhism are dominant religions in these two contexts, respectively. In one study, we compared different translations of the Gospels of the New Testament with different translations of popular Buddhist sutras (e.g., Diamond Sutra, Heart Sutra). We used the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count program (Pennebaker, Francis, & Booth, 2001) to identify the HAP and LAP words in each text, and then trained coders to read the passages in which the words appeared and determine whether readers were being (1) encouraged to feel the state, (2) discouraged from feeling the state, or (3) neither encouraged to nor discouraged from feeling the state. Interestingly, there were no differences in the frequency of HAP and LAP terms in the Christian and Buddhist classical texts. However, Christian texts endorsed HAP more than Buddhist texts did.

To look at more contemporary texts, we compared the frequency and endorsement of HAP and LAP states in best selling Christian and Buddhist self-help books, using a method similar to the one just described. Again, consistent with findings for the classical texts, there were no differences in the frequency of HAP words. Buddhist contemporary self-help books, however, had a greater frequency of LAP words than did Christian ones. Also consistent with our hypotheses, Christian best selling self-help books endorsed HAP states more and LAP states less than did Buddhist best selling self-help books, as illustrated by the prior quotes, even when controlling for differences in the frequency of LAP words. Although texts are just one form of codified religion, these findings provide evidence that religious cultures differ in their ideal affect, or the states that they teach their practitioners to want to feel.

More recently, Kim-Prieto and Diener (2009) reported religious differences in the desirability of various discrete emotions. For example, Christians reported viewing love as more desirable than did Muslims and Buddhists, whereas Muslims reported viewing sadness and shame as more desirable than did Christians and Buddhists.

Several studies have found that people place higher priority on goals that are deemed "sacred" (Emmons, 2005b) and that sanctified goals generate greater commitment, confidence, and investment of time and energy than do nonsanctified goals (Mahoney et

al., 2005). Other research suggests that people who are religious score higher on social desirability, suggesting that being a good person or meeting religious ideals may be particularly important and motivating (Sedikides & Gebauer, 2010). Thus, affective ideals may play an even greater role in people's lives if they are sanctioned by their religious traditions, especially during times of anxiety and uncertainty (Kay et al., 2010).

Religions also identify undesirable feelings and acts that should be avoided, such as betrayal and deception, and other forms of "sinful" behavior. For example, in Schwartz and Huismans (1995), the more religious that Jews, Protestants, Catholics, and Greek Orthodox were, the less they valued hedonism (pursuing pleasure in life), achievement (personal accomplishment), stimulation (novelty and change in life), and self-direction (being independent). Saroglou, Delpierre, and Dernelle (2004) observed similar patterns among Muslims as well.

Since our first work describing the distinction between actual and ideal affect, we have also begun to examine cultural variation in how people want to avoid feeling ("avoided affect") (Koopmann-Holm & Tsai, 2013b). Although related, avoided affect is different from ideal affect and from actual affect. Not surprisingly, people want to avoid feeling negative states more than positive states, and they want to avoid feeling more negative and less positive than they actually feel (Koopmann-Holm & Tsai, 2013a). Although we have only begun to examine religious differences in avoided affect, our preliminary findings suggest that Catholics want to avoid high arousal negative states (e.g. fearfulness, hostility, nervousness) more than do Protestants and Buddhists. This is in line with what Hutchinson, Patock-Peckham, Cheong, and Nagoshi (1998) propose, namely that Catholicism is driven more by guilt (which is often associated with anxiety) than Protestantism. Thus, religious ideas and practices may also shape "affective anti-goals."

As suggested previously, religions teach us how to feel (or not feel) through religious *products*: texts, icons, and relics. Although no empirical work has yet compared religious relics in terms of their emotional content, Kieschnick (2008) argues that religious statues, paintings, art, and architecture are designed to trigger emotion. We believe that they may play an even greater role in modeling ideal affective states. For example, as much as the image of Buddha may elicit calm, it may also remind Buddhists that calm is the ideal way to feel. Indeed, practitioners may turn to religious relics and icons to remind themselves about how they should feel, especially during times of deep anxiety and uncertainty (McCullough & Willoughby, 2009).

AVT also predicts that whereas cultural ideas and practices shape how people actually feel, they shape how people want to feel even more. Whether or not people are able to achieve their ideal states depends on a host of factors, such as temperament, ability to regulate emotions, cultural engagement, or a combination of these factors. This may seem obvious, but in everyday life people are often surprised when a clergyman, monk, or any other devoutly religious person is accused or convicted of some morally reprehensible crime. This may be because we expect devoutly religious people, especially religious leaders, to think, behave, and *feel* in ways that are consistent with their religious ideals. However, as predicted by AVT, religious cultures may shape how people want to feel more than how they actually feel.

We recently conducted a series of studies in the United States to test this hypothesis with Buddhist-inspired meditation (Koopmann-Holm, Sze, Ochs, & Tsai, 2013a). In one study, Buddhist meditators who had been meditating for approximately 4 years reported

wanting to feel LAP states more and HAP states less than nonmeditators. Consistent with AVT, there were no differences in how much Buddhist meditators and nonmeditators actually felt those states. To rule out the possibility that these findings were due to selection effects (i.e., people who value LAP states more and HAP states less may be more likely to practice meditation), we conducted another study in which we randomly assigned participants to an 8-week Buddhist-inspired meditation class (mindfulness or compassion), an 8-week improvisational theater class (class-control), and a no-class control. After 8 weeks, participants in both meditation classes showed greater increases in ideal LAP than did participants in the two control classes. There were no changes in ideal HAP across any of the conditions, perhaps because ideal HAP (i.e., mainstream American culture) is difficult to change in a culture that values HAP. Again, there were no significant changes in actual HAP or LAP, suggesting that although short engagement in a religious practice changes how people want to feel, much more religious practice may be needed to change how people actually feel. In another study, we demonstrated that these changes in ideal affect were not due to experimenter demand. Although more studies are needed, this work supports our prediction that meditation as a religious practice shapes how calm people ideally want to feel, perhaps even more than how calm they actually feel, at least initially.

If culture shapes ideal more than actual affect, are there factors that shape actual more than ideal affect? AVT predicts that *temperamental* factors shape actual affect more than they do ideal affect. By temperamental factors, we are referring to genetic predispositions to experience specific feelings. This premise is based on decades of research demonstrating that temperament accounts for up to 50% of the variance in actual affect (Diener & Lucas, 1999; Lykken & Tellegen, 1996). For example, extraversion is highly correlated with the experience of high-arousal positive states, and neuroticism is highly correlated with the experience of high-arousal negative states (Costa & McCrae, 1980; Gross, Sutton, & Ketelaar, 1998; Schimmack, Radhakrishnan, Oishi, Dzokoto, & Ahadi, 2002). Indeed, in both college and community samples, we have found that cultural variables account for a greater percentage of the variance in ideal affect compared with actual affect, whereas temperamental variables account for a greater percentage of the variance in actual affect compared with ideal affect (Tsai et al., 2006).

Are we saying that people never experience their ideal states? No. Indeed, there may be particular circumstances when people's actual affect is in line with how they want to feel, and specific religious settings (e.g., religious services, rituals, and ceremonies) and practices may increase the likelihood that people attain their ideal feelings. In addition, there may be particular people who are better able to reach their ideals than others. For example, it may be that less neurotic (or more emotionally stable) individuals benefit more from meditation in terms of increasing their actual LAP. Similarly, a review by Saroglou (2010) suggests that people who are more agreeable and conscientious are more likely to be religious. Being agreeable and conscientious may not only make people more likely to seek religion, but may make them more likely to comply with religious practices and traditions and, therefore, more likely to benefit from them. And this may help them achieve their ideal affect.

Manifestations of Ideal Affect in Daily Life

The third premise of AVT is that people's ideal affect has various psychological, social, and behavioral consequences. Ideal affect acts as a "measuring stick," or a reference point

for people's emotions, as well as a guide for future behavior (Tsai, 2007). Indeed, in our current research, we find that above and beyond actual affect, ideal affect influences how people present themselves and perceive others (Moon, Chim, Tsai, Ho, & Fung, 2011), how people conceive of mental health and illness (Hong, Moon, & Tsai, 2013), what types of things they do to feel good (and stop feeling bad) (Tsai, Knutson, & Rothman, 2013), and even what kinds of consumer decisions they make (Sims, Tsai, Koopmann-Holm, Thomas, & Goldstein, 2013). For example, the more people value HAP, the more likely they are to perceive an excited (vs. calm) person as friendly, the more likely they are to define well-being in terms of excitement, and the more likely they are to choose exciting and energizing (vs. calm and soothing) gums and lotions. Again, these findings held after we controlled for actual affect, suggesting that ideal affect exerts an independent influence on these processes. Although we have not collected data specifically on different religious groups, based on our previous work, we predict that religious differences in ideal affect would result in religious differences in each of these domains. In other words, through ideal affect, religious orientation may shape aspects of people's lives that may not be overtly or explicitly religious (e.g., choice of consumer products).

It is through the lenses of AVT and the religious culture perspective that we now discuss the existing literature on religion and emotion.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH ON RELIGION AND EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING

Dear Father in Heaven, I'm not a praying man, but if you're up there and you can hear me . . . show me the way . . . show me the way.

—GEORGE BAILEY, in *It's a Wonderful Life* (Capra, 1946)

As this quote from the Frank Capra (1946) film *It's a Wonderful Life* illustrates, a popular trope in American movies is that of the agnostic or atheist praying to God as a last hope. Norenzayan and Hansen (2006) observed that when people were primed with death cues, they were more likely to believe in a supernatural agent, even if they were not religious. One of the primary roles of most religions is to provide comfort during times of deep anxiety, despair, and desperation (Atran & Norenzayan, 2004; Kay et al., 2010). Therefore, it should not be surprising that one of the major scientific questions has been whether people who are religious actually experience *more* positive affect (e.g., joy, happiness, comfort, contentment) and *less* negative affect (e.g., sadness, anger, fear) than those who are not. One of the main assumptions of this literature is that people experience a variety of ups and downs in life, and therefore, individuals who are religious should be happier (and less unhappy) on average than those who are not because their religious affiliations afford them social, material, and psychological resources to cope with life's challenges (McCullough & Willoughby, 2009).

Although mixed, most of the existing literature *does* suggest a positive association between being religious (in the traditions studied) and being emotionally healthy. Overall, the more individuals report being religious (i.e., having religious beliefs and engaging in religious practices), the more satisfied they report being with their lives, the happier they report being overall, and the more positive feelings they report experiencing on a daily basis (e.g., Koenig, 2001; Koenig, George, & Titus, 2004). Religious individuals also report being more hopeful and optimistic and having greater purpose and meaning in life. Conversely, the more religious people report being, the *less* likely they are

to experience a depressive episode, the fewer depressive symptoms they report having, and the less anxiety they report feeling (Koenig, 2001; Koenig et al., 2004; see also in this volume Masters & Hooker, Chapter 26; Park & Slattery, Chapter 27; Shafranske, Chapter 30).

Although most studies of religion and well-being use self-report measures, which are vulnerable to various biases (e.g., social desirability), several have employed physiological measures to overcome this limitation. For example, in a recently published study (Inzlicht & Tullett, 2010), the authors examined levels of defensive arousal in response to making an error by using event-related potentials (ERPs). They found that when Christian believers were primed with religious icons, they showed less defensive arousal when they made errors than did nonbelievers. These findings suggest that when believers are thinking about their religion, they are less anxious during threat than nonbelievers. Other studies using physiological measures suggest that people who have undergone meditation interventions show neural changes related to the increased experience of positive, approach-related emotions compared with wait-list controls (Davidson et al., 2003). These studies suggest that even when assessed by physiological measures, religious practice may promote well-being.

One of the main implications of AVT and findings from our own work, however, is that because self-reports of actual and ideal affect are moderately correlated, researchers should distinguish between actual and ideal affect in order to ensure that differences in actual affect are not due to differences in ideal affect and vice versa. A second implication is that the links between religion and well-being may be due to temperamental, self-regulatory, or other factors rather than religion per se. For instance, research suggests that agreeableness in adolescence and adulthood and extraversion in adulthood are positively correlated with religiosity (Saroglou, 2010), and other work suggests that both agreeableness and extraversion are directly and indirectly related to higher well-being. For example, agreeableness is associated with higher relationship satisfaction and peer acceptance, and extraversion is associated with greater experience of positive emotions (Ozer & Benet-Martinez, 2006). Higher relationship satisfaction, greater peer acceptance, and greater experience of positive emotions are all associated with higher well-being (Oishi & Schimmack, 2010).

The links among religiosity, temperamental factors, and well-being may also vary as a function of national context. For example, Sasaki, Kim, and Xu (2011) observed that for individuals with the G/G genotype of the oxytocin receptor gene (associated with being more socially oriented) religiosity was positively associated with well-being in Korea (where religion involves social affiliation more), but was negatively associated with well-being in North American contexts (where religion involves social affiliation less). Thus, in addition to including a broader variety of affective states, and a broader variety of religions, studies of religion and emotion need to consider other factors related to emotion to examine how they may interact with religious ideas and practices to shape emotional experience.

The third and perhaps most important implication of AVT is that not all religions have the same ideal affect; therefore, what it means to “be well” should vary across religious cultures. In other words, before asking “How does religion impact emotional health?” one has to ask how a particular religion *defines* emotional health. This becomes particularly important when researchers broaden their studies to include other religions

and other national cultures, which may have different ideal or desired states. For example, based on the work described earlier, excitement, enthusiasm, and other HAP states may be more appropriate measurements of emotional well-being in Christian than in Buddhist contexts.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH ON RELIGION AND PROSOCIAL EMOTIONS

In affective science, there has been a resurgence of interest in prosocial or interpersonally oriented emotions such as compassion, sympathy, empathy, forgiveness, and gratitude (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006; Condon & DeSteno, 2010; Decety & Chaminade, 2003). As stated above, because one of the unique characteristics of religion is its explicit focus on treating others well, it should come as no surprise that many of these emotions are well-elaborated in religious texts (Watts, Dutton, & Guilliford, 2006). But do religious people actually experience more pro-social emotions?

Despite the emphasis on pro-social emotions in many religions, evidence for the link between religion and the experience of pro-social emotions is surprisingly weak (Mullet et al., 2003). For example, Duriez (2004) found that religiosity among Flemish students was not significantly related to empathy. Although religiosity is associated with self-reported forgiveness in general (McCullough & Worthington, 1999; Poloma & Gallup, 1991; see also Worthington et al., Chapter 24, this volume), when asked about specific transgressions, depth of religiosity (among a primarily Christian and Jewish sample) was not related to forgiveness (McCullough & Worthington, 1999; Tsang, McCullough, & Hoyt, 2005). One reason for the weak link between religion and prosocial emotions may be that religion is also associated with antisocial emotions. For example, Bushman, Ridge, Das, Key, and Busath (2007) found when subjects read biblical passages of God condoning violence, their aggression against another participant increased. In another study, certain religious primes (e.g., heaven, spirituality) increased aggression toward another participant when participants were encouraged to act in a vengeful way by the experimenter (Saroglou, Corneille, & Van Cappellen, 2009).

Gratitude, however, seems to be one feeling that *is* associated with religiosity. On the basis of both self- and peer ratings, McCullough, Emmons, and Tsang (2002) found that religiosity was associated with a grateful disposition. Indeed, different religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam value gratitude and view it as important for living a good life (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000). For example, one sample of Catholic nuns and priests reported that gratitude was one of the emotions they most commonly felt toward God (Samuels & Lester, 1985). Similarly, Kim-Prieto and Diener (2009) found no differences in the desirability of gratitude among Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and Jews. However, as mentioned previously, the direction of this relationship remains unclear; it is possible that people with more grateful dispositions are more likely to become religious.

Researchers have begun to examine whether engagement in specific religious practices increases the experience of prosocial emotions. Although much more work is needed in this area, several studies have linked the practice of meditation to increased empathy (Lutz, Brefczynski-Lewis, Johnstone, & Davidson, 2008; Shapiro, Schwartz, & Bonner, 1998), social connectedness (Hutcherson, Seppala, & Gross, 2008), and hope and

optimism for another (Koopmann-Holm, Sze, Ochs, & Tsai, 2013b). For example, we examined whether Buddhist-inspired meditation would increase feelings toward and about a convicted murderer (Koopmann-Holm et al., in press). Participants were randomly assigned to an 8-week mindfulness meditation class, an 8-week compassion meditation class, a class control condition (i.e., an improvisational theater class), or a no-class control condition. At the end of the 8 weeks, participants were presented with a letter by a convicted murderer, who admitted to killing his friend in a “blind fit of rage.” In the letter, the murderer describes his life in prison and asks readers to write him. Participants were asked questions about the letter, and then told that the study was over. They were then given the opportunity to write a letter to the prisoner, even though “they were under no obligation to do so.” Among participants who wrote, participants in the compassion meditation class did not differ from those in the other conditions in terms of how empathetic or forgiving their letters were. However, they wrote more hopeful and encouraging letters (e.g., “It’s going to be okay”), suggesting that compassion meditation does have an effect on how people feel about and affectively respond to others.

Despite suggestions that religion might alter the actual experience of prosocial emotions, we propose that religion may shape the desirability of prosocial emotions even more. Consistent with this idea, across different religions, scholars have found that religious people valued being forgiving more than nonreligious people (Rokeach, 1973), and Cohen and colleagues (2006) found that Jews and Protestants differed in their beliefs about forgiveness but not in their actual experience of forgiveness. Similarly, we would argue that religion cultivates a value placed on gratitude. Interestingly, in their discussions of gratitude, McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, and Larson (2001) argue that gratitude functions as a “barometer” and has “motivational value,” which is very similar to our argument that ideal affect is a “measuring stick” and a “guide for future behavior” (Tsai, 2007).

AVT also asks what a desirable “prosocial” response is, and raises the possibility that religions (like national cultures) differ in what constitutes an ideal “prosocial” response. For example, although there are clearly common elements across religious traditions, compassion is described differently by Christian and Buddhist perspectives. From a Buddhist perspective, in order to feel compassion toward others, one must not only have the insight that all people are suffering but also the desire to reduce that suffering (Davidson & Harrington, 2002). Ideally, this compassion is felt as strongly for one’s mother as for someone who has committed heinous crimes. These notions are less central in the Christian view of compassion and, therefore, are missing in studies of compassion conducted in Christian contexts. However, when examining whether Buddhist-inspired meditation (and other practices) actually produces more compassionate responses, these elements must be included in assessments of compassion.

Similarly, the meaning of forgiveness also shows some religious variation (Cohen et al., 2006). In a series of studies, Cohen and colleagues demonstrate differences between Jewish and Protestant views of unforgivable offenses that directly stem from differences between these two religious traditions. More specifically, Jews are more likely to believe that certain offenses (e.g., rape and murder, plagiarism) are unforgivable than are Protestant Christians. These religious group differences are mediated by specific beliefs about whether some offenses are too severe to forgive and whether an individual has a right to forgive.

In addition, religious contexts may differ in terms of what constitutes an appropriate affective response to someone's suffering. Here, too, there appear to be important national cultural differences. In a comparison of American and German sympathy cards (Koopmann-Holm & Tsai, 2013b), we find that whereas American sympathy cards are more positive and optimistic than German cards (e.g., "May you find comfort"), German sympathy cards are more negative than American cards (e.g., "I hope these words show how much I share your pain"), perhaps reflecting cultural differences in beliefs about how one should respond affectively to death, loss, and other negative events. Indeed, we find that Americans want to avoid negative emotion more than Germans do. Furthermore, the more people want to avoid negative emotion, the less comfortable they report being with expressions of sympathy that only mention negative feelings. Although preliminary, these findings suggest that whereas in American contexts an appropriate response to suffering is to find a "silver lining" to that suffering, in German contexts an appropriate response is to acknowledge the experience of pain and suffering. It is possible that religious differences in responses to suffering exist along these lines as well. For example, one of the tenets of Buddhism is that life is suffering; this acceptance of suffering may influence how people respond to their own and others' suffering.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH ON "RELIGIOUS EMOTIONS"

A third, but less studied, question in the religion and emotion literature is whether there exist religious emotions, or emotions that only occur in the context of religion. Whereas some scholars argue that "religious emotions" are ordinary emotions that simply occur in religious contexts (e.g., shame expressed during Catholic confession is the same as shame expressed at a grocery store), other scholars have argued that emotions that are linked to the divine and sacred (i.e., emotions that occur in religious contexts) are fundamentally different from emotions that are not (Pargament et al., 2005; Watts et al., 2006). Emmons and colleagues (2005a) identify several emotions that are attached to the sacred such as awe/reverence, love, and hope, but empirical studies of the uniqueness of these states to religion are just beginning. For example, awe/reverence is "central to the experience of religion" (Keltner & Haidt, 2003, p. 297), and occurs when a person has perceived vastness but cannot easily integrate this experience into his or her existing knowledge base and, therefore, has to expend effort to do so. To examine whether awe induced by spiritual transformations and awe induced by experiences of profound beauty differed, Cohen, Gruber, and Keltner (2010) asked participants to retrospectively describe examples of such experiences from their own lives. Whereas both contained positive affect, spiritual transformations were associated with greater uncertainty and more negative affect than experiences of profound beauty. Furthermore, spiritual transformations produced longer lasting changes than did experiences of profound beauty. Thus, although much more work is needed, these findings support the notion that there may be something unique about emotions that occur in religious contexts.

However, rather than ask whether some emotions are religious or not, another approach would be to ask what aspects of the larger emotional experience are more or less shaped by religious beliefs. From the perspective of AVT, ideal affect influences the meaning of an emotional event, and this meaning is created before and after as well as

during the emotional event itself. One of the reasons that emotions are so powerful is that they often influence people long before and long after they occur. Indeed, emotions themselves last on the order of seconds, but memories of emotions can last on the order of years, as can the anticipation of an emotional event. Two people, for example, may spend more time feeling excited about their wedding before and after their wedding than they did during it.

We propose that “actual affect” (or how people feel during an event) exists in the larger context of “ideal affect.” Specifically, how people ideally want to feel should shape their predictions of how they will feel during an emotional event and how they remember or recall feeling after the emotional event, perhaps even more than how they actually feel during the event (Chim, Tsai, Lowdermilk, & Fung, 2013). In the prior example, people who value excitement may predict they will experience intense excitement, and will primarily remember the moments of intense excitement during the wedding, even if there were only a few of these moments during the wedding itself. Therefore, although the actual momentary response itself may be the same (e.g., physiology, behavioral expression, even certain levels of subjective experience), there should be religious differences in how the emotional experience is interpreted (and the consequences of that interpretation) as a function of ideal affect. Thus, our prediction is that the anticipation and recall of an emotional event will vary significantly as a function of religion, whereas the online experience may vary less. Work by Scollon, Howard, Caldwell, and Ito (2009) support this prediction. We are currently collecting data to test these predictions.

REMAINING QUESTIONS

This brief review of the literature illustrates that although compelling work has been conducted examining the intersection of religion and emotion, much more work is needed. In addition to the issues raised in this chapter, there are several topics that we believe would be important to explore further. First, it would be important to examine specifically how people use religious ideas, products, and practices to attain their ideal states. Second, future research should examine how religion shapes emotion across the life span. Are religious practices more effective in regulating emotion after years, even decades, of religious faith? Third, although we have talked about similarities between national and religious cultures, we have not discussed how the two intersect (Saroglou & Cohen, 2011). The same religion may be experienced in different ways depending upon the larger national cultural context in which it resides; for example, one study found that European American Christians described Jesus in primarily positive terms (e.g., benevolence, love, amazement), whereas Korean Christians described Jesus in both positive and negative terms (e.g., love, sin, crucified, benevolence) (Oishi, Seol, Koo, & Miao, 2011). These findings suggest that the practice of particular religions varies as a function of the national cultural context; future research should also examine how national cultures are shaped by dominant religious traditions (Sanchez-Burks, 2002). Fourth, given the considerable literature on the temperamental precursors to religion, it would be important to examine how religion and temperament interact to shape emotional functioning. Fifth, because affective responses involve multiple components ranging from neural activity and autonomic responses to subjective experience and complex behavior, a multilevel interdisciplinary

approach to the religious shaping of emotion is severely needed. Last but certainly not least, more research should focus on the specific mechanisms by which specific religious ideas and practices shape affective phenomena.

SUMMARY

Despite the prevalence of religion and its powerful influence on daily life, surprisingly little empirical research has examined how religion shapes the psyche. Given the centrality of emotion to both psychological and religious experience, it is not surprising that much of the work that does exist focuses on religion and emotion. However, to date, the majority of this work has been limited to one religious tradition (Christianity), and has focused primarily on “actual affect” (the feelings that people actually experience). The aim of this chapter has been to illustrate how broadening this work to other religious cultures and to “ideal affect” (the feelings that people ideally want to feel) can significantly advance our understanding of the religious shaping of feeling.

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