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Love for Allah and love for self: exploring the connection between religious affect and self-esteem among Muslim adolescents in England

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ABSTRACT

The connection between religious affect and self-esteem has been supported by a series of studies conducted among Christian or post-Christian samples. The present study extends this research tradition among a sample of 919 self-identified Muslim adolescents (between the ages of 11 and 14 years) attending schools in England. The data demonstrated that, after controlling for personal factors (age and sex) and for psychological factors (extraversion, neuroticism, and psychoticism), there was a significant positive association between the two core variables (religious affect and self-esteem). From the perspective of the empirical psychology of religion this study confirms among a Muslim sample a finding previously recorded among Christian or post-Christian samples.

KEYWORDS

Junior Eysenck Impulsiveness Inventory; Junior Eysenck Personality Questionnaire Revised; Astley-Francis Scale of Attitude towards Theistic Faith; Muslim students

Introduction

The major Abrahamic religious traditions place considerable store on linking love for God with love for other human beings and with love for self. In this sense love for self is not conceptualised in selfish or narcissistic terms. Rather love for self is conceptualised as appropriate respect for a creature created in the divine image, and love for self and love for others are placed on a level footing.

Within the Christian tradition this emphasis is aptly encapsulated in Jesus' summary of the law as expressed in Mark 12: 29–31 when Jesus responded to the taunting question, 'What is the first commandment of all?' with the following memorable words:

The first commandment of all the commandments is: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength'. This is the first commandment. And the second, is this: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself'. There is no commandment greater than these.

Within the Christian tradition this emphasis is also exemplified by the Lucan parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15: 11–32). Here the father welcomes back and accepts without reservation the younger son who had behaved both thoughtlessly and irresponsibly

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towards his father. Here is the image of God as all loving and all accepting. From this starting point, Bahr and Martin (1983) argued that Christians should respond to such love by displaying similarly unreserved love for others and for themselves. On this account it is reasonable to hypothesise a positive correlation between love for God and good self-esteem. The more people love God, the more confidence they have in themselves.

Within the Islamic tradition the Qur'an 95:4 affirms that Allah creates man 'in the best of moulds'. It is this that makes human beings preferred over other creatures. Qur'an 15: 28–30 affirms that:

Thy Sustainer says unto the angels: 'Behold, I am about to create mortal man out of sounding clay, from mud moulded into shape; and when I have formed him fully and breathed into him my spirit, fall down (you angels) before him in prostration. Thereupon the angels prostrated themselves, all of them together.

These verses indicate that human beings have a dignity in Allah's sight and that such dignity should command respect.

Current literature on the Qur'an and self-esteem emphasises the importance of self-esteem in Islam and the impact of self-esteem on human flourishing. In her review of the evidence to support this position, Ghorati (2016) identifies three core themes. The first theme maintains that people's self-esteem and dignity is grounded in trust and reliance on God. Trust and reliance on God results in more self-confidence. The second theme concerns seeking help from God. Seeking help from God reduces depression and anxiety and builds self-confidence. The third theme maintains that trust in God results in better control of physical disorder, such as eating and digestive disorders. This in turn promotes self-confidence. According to this reading of the evidence within the Qur'an, it is reasonable to hypothesise a positive correlation between love of Allah and good self-esteem. The more people love Allah and trust the revelation of Allah in the Qur'an, the more confidence they have in themselves.

Exploring the evidence

In an initial attempt to sift through the evidence from empirical studies exploring the connection between various measures of religiosity and various measures of self-esteem, Jones and Francis (1996) identified three groups of studies: those that identified a positive correlation (Strunk 1958b; McAllister 1982; Krause and van Tran 1989; Forst and Healy 1990), those that identified a negative correlation (Beit-Hallahmi and Nevo 1987; Watson et al. 1985), and those that identified no correlation (Strunk 1958a; Hanawalt 1963; Heintzleman and Fehr 1976; Fehr and Heintzleman 1977; Bahr and Martin 1983; Aycock and Noaker 1985; Gill and Thornton 1989; Frankel and Hewitt 1994). A review of subsequent studies published before 2012 by Penny and Francis (2014) confirmed that this pattern of diverse findings had continued to persist.

In their initial review of the contradictory initial findings, Jones and Francis (1996) suggested that the problem may have been exacerbated, at least in part, by the wide range of conceptualisations and operationalisations of religiosity employed in existing studies. They proposed testing what may emerge from a series of studies that agreed on using a common measure of religious affect, the Francis Scale of Attitude towards

Christianity as originally proposed by Francis (1978a, 1978b) and tested by Francis (1989) and Francis et al. (1995a). The scale consists of 24 Likert-type items which include positively and negatively phrased items. The items relate to five visible features of Christianity which transcend denominational differences and gain equal recognition among children, young people and adults. The five features are identified as: God, Jesus, the Bible, prayer, and Church. Each item is assessed on a five-point scale (agree strongly, agree, not certain, disagree, disagree strongly), producing a range of scores from 24 to 120.

Taking the Francis Scale of Attitude towards Christianity as a parent instrument, a number of international studies have continued to develop the attitudinal dimension as an empirical measure of religiosity within the traditions of Islam, Judaism and Hinduism through the design and implementation of the Sahin-Francis Scale of Attitude towards Islam (Sahin and Francis 2002), the Katz-Francis Scale of Attitude towards Judaism (Francis and Katz 2007), the Santosh-Francis Scale of Attitude towards Hinduism (Francis et al. 2008), and the Athwal-Francis Scale of Attitude towards Sikhism (Francis, Athwal, and McKenna 2020). The Astley-Francis Scale of Attitude towards Theistic Faith (Astley, Francis, and Robbins 2012) represents another contribution to this family of attitude scales, and was designed to be more widely inclusive of theistic traditions than the other scales in the group (which focus on an affective response to particular faith traditions). This was achieved by adapting items from the short-form Francis Scale of Attitude towards Christianity (Francis et al. 1995b) to focus less on key features of the Christian faith, such as rephrasing items to speak of God rather than Jesus, and modifying items concerned with church to speak of places of worship in general.

In their initial attempt to explore the connection between religious affect (assessed by the Francis Scale of Attitude towards Christianity) and self-esteem, Jones and Francis (1996) conducted studies among three samples of young people: 642 15- to 16-year-old secondary school students in England (study one), 755 13- to 14-year-old secondary school students in Wales (study two), and 166 8- to 11-year-old primary school students in England (study three). In study one, self-esteem was assessed by the Lipsitt Self-Concept Scale (Lipsitt 1958). In studies two and three, self-esteem was assessed by the short form of the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (Coopersmith 1981). In all three samples, after controlling for sex differences, the data demonstrated a positive correlation between good self-esteem and a favourable attitude towards Christianity. Jones and Francis (1996) concluded that replication studies are required to examine if this pattern of relationship exists among other age groups, in other cultural contexts, and within studies employing different indices of self-esteem.

Penny and Francis (2014) tested whether the positive relationship between religious affect and self-esteem persists when self-esteem is assessed according to the measure proposed by Rosenberg (1965) and when attitude towards religion is assessed by the Astley-Francis Scale of Attitude towards Theistic Faith (Astley, Francis, and Robbins 2012) among a sample of 10,792 13- to 15-year-old students attending secondary schools in England and Wales. After taking into account personal differences (age and sex) and psychological differences (Eysenck's three dimensional model of personality), their data demonstrate that attitude towards theistic faith adds additional prediction to enhanced

levels of self-esteem. Their data also highlight a close relationship between self-esteem and personality, where low neuroticism scores are shown to make the strongest contribution in predicting levels of self-esteem among young people.

Francis and Lewis (2018) tested the relationship between religious affect and self-esteem using the Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale (Rosenberg 1965) alongside the short form of the Francis Scale of Attitude towards Christianity (Francis et al. 1995b) among a sample of 522 10- to 12-year-old students attending a summer holiday programme. Their data demonstrated a significant positive correlation between religious affect and self-esteem, after controlling for sex and age difference.

Control variables

Empirical studies exploring the connections between religion and self-esteem need to take two main control variables into account. The first main control variable is sex. In his pioneering review of empirical studies within the psychology of religion, Argyle (1958) concluded that the most secure finding was that women were more religious than men. More recent reviews have confirmed that, within Christian and post-Christian cultures, this finding has remained secure in relation to a number of indices of religious practice, religious beliefs, and religious attitudes (Francis 1997; Francis and Penny 2014). Women also record lower scores of self-esteem on the Coopersmith measures as evidenced by Marron and Kayson (1984), Joubert (1991), and Jones and Francis (1996).

The second main control variable is personality. A model of personality that has proved to be particularly fertile within the empirical psychology of religion is the three dimensional model proposed by Hans Eysenck and his associates and operationalised in a series of self-completion instruments for application both among adults, including the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (Eysenck and Eysenck 1975) and the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire Revised (Eysenck, Eysenck, and Barrett 1985), and among young people, including the Junior Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (Eysenck and Eysenck 1975) and the Junior Eysenck Questionnaire Revised (Corulla 1990). Eysenck's dimensional model of personality proposes that individual differences in personality can be most economically and adequately summarised in terms of three orthogonal higher order factors: extraversion, neuroticism, and psychoticism. Studies have demonstrated that higher levels of religiosity are especially associated with lower psychoticism scores (Francis 1992; Francis and Hermans 2009; Lewis and Francis 2014), and that higher levels of self-esteem are especially associated with higher extraversion scores and lower neuroticism scores (Karanci, Dirik, and Yorulmaz 2007; Aluja et al. 2008; Meleddu and Scalas 2009).

Research question

A major limitation with the studies so far conducted within the empirical psychology of religion designed to explore the connection between religious affect and self-esteem is that they have been carried out mainly among participants shaped by Christian or post-Christian cultures. The aim of the present study, therefore, is to extend this research tradition among young people living in England who have been shaped by the Islamic tradition and self-identifying as Muslims. This research question will be operationalised by means of: the

Astley-Francis Scale of Attitude towards Theistic Faith (Astley, Francis, and Robbins 2012) which has been designed to measure religious affect among religiously unaffiliated, Christian, and Muslim youth (see Francis and Lewis 2016) and thus appropriate for harvesting data from young Muslims attending school in the UK alongside Christian and religiously unaffiliated peers; and the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (Coopersmith 1981) which has already been well-established in the literature exploring the connection between religion and self-esteem among young people (see Jones and Francis 1996).

Method

Procedure

Secondary schools in several parts of England with significant proportions of Muslim students were invited to take part in the project (from Gloucestershire, Greater Manchester, Lancashire, London, Warwickshire, and West Midlands). Within the participating schools questionnaires were administered by teachers to students throughout the year-seven, year-eight, and year-nine classes (between the ages of 11 and 14 years). Students were assured of anonymity and confidentiality and given the opportunity not to participate in the project.

Measures

Personality was assessed by the abbreviated form of the Junior Eysenck Personality Questionnaire Revised (JEPQR-A) developed by Francis (1996) who reported the following Cronbach alpha coefficients: extraversion = .66; neuroticism = .70; psychoticism = .61. Each of these three scales comprises six items rated on a dichotomous scale: yes (1) and no (0). An example item for extraversion is: Do you like going out a lot?; an example item for neuroticism is: Are your feelings rather easily hurt?; an example item for psychoticism is: Do you sometimes like teasing animals?

Self-esteem was assessed by the 25-item short form of the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (Coopersmith 1981). Each item is rated on a dichotomous scale: yes (1) and no (0). An example item is: I am a lot of fun to be with.

Religious affect was assessed by the seven-item Astley-Francis Scale of Attitude towards Theistic Faith proposed by Astley, Francis, and Robbins (2012). Each item is rated on a five-point Likert scale: agree strongly (5), agree (4), not certain (3), disagree (2), and disagree strongly (1). An example item is: I know that God helps me.

Personal factors were recorded as two variables: male (1) and female (2); and year seven (1), year eight (2), and year nine (3).

Participants

From the 2,388 participants in the survey 919 self-identified as Muslim and completed all the instruments included in the following analyses. Of these 919 self-identified Muslim students, 196 were male, 719 were female, and the remaining four failed to disclose their sex; 386 were in year seven, 285 were in year eight, 246 were in year nine, and the remaining two failed to disclose their year group.

Analysis

The data were analysed by the SPSS package, using the frequencies, correlation, reliability, and regression routine.

Results and discussion

Table 1 presents the scale properties of the five measures employed in the study (religious affect, self-esteem, extraversion, neuroticism, and psychoticism) in terms of the alpha coefficient (Cronbach 1951), the means and standard deviations, and the scale range. These data demonstrate that the scales performed with internal consistency reliability within the expected range. The lower alpha coefficients recorded by the extraversion scale and by the psychoticism scale are acceptable for such short measures.

Table 2 presents the correlation coefficients between the five scales and the two personal factors (sex and age as measured by school year). Three features of these bivariate correlations merit discussion. First, in terms of sex differences female students recorded lower scores on the self-esteem scale and higher scores on the neuroticism scale. Second, in terms of age differences, year ten students recorded a higher score on the psychoticism scale, a lower score on the religious affect scale, and a lower score on the self-esteem scale. Third, there is a complex pattern of relationship between the personality variables and both self-esteem and religious affect. Higher scores of religious affect are associated with lower neuroticism scores, lower psychoticism scores, and higher extraversion scores. Higher scores of self-esteem are associated with lower psychoticism scores, lower neuroticism scores, and higher extraversion scores. At the same time, there is a significant positive correlation between religious affect and self-esteem. These three observations confirm the wisdom of exploring the connection between religious affect and self-esteem within the environment of a series of regression models, taking self-esteem as the dependent variable and religious affect on the third step in a step-wise equation, after entering personal factors as the first step and personality factors as the second step.

Table 1. Scale properties.

Measures	N items	Alpha	Mean	SD	Range	
					LO	HI
Attitude towards Theistic Faith	7	.79	31.84	3.87	7	35
Self-esteem	25	.85	16.24	5.36	0	25
Extraversion	6	.63	4.11	1.64	0	6
Neuroticism	6	.72	2.88	1.89	0	6
Psychoticism	6	.62	0.92	1.26	0	6

Table 2. Correlation matrix.

	Sex	Age	Att	Psy	Neu	Ext
Self-esteem	-.07*	-.10**	.27***	-.15***	-.68***	.39***
Extraversion (Ext)	.06	-.02	.11***	.08*	-.18**	
Neuroticism (Neu)	.12*	.06	-.13***	.15***		
Psychoticism (Psy)	-.05	.12***	-.18***			
Attitude (Att)	-.01	-.14***				
Age	-.05					

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Table 3. Regression model: self-esteem.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
<i>Personal factors</i>			
Sex	-.08*	-.03	-.03
School year	.10**	-.03	-.02
<i>Psychological factors</i>			
Extraversion		.29***	.27***
Neuroticism		-.61***	-.60***
Psychoticism		-.09***	-.06**
<i>Religious factors</i>			
Theistic faith			.14***
R ²	.02	.55	.56
Δ	.02***	.54***	.02***

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Table 3 presents the three steps of the regression model. The increase in R² demonstrates that each step in the model accounts for a significant increase in the proportion of variance explained in the dependent variable (self-esteem). The beta weights in model three explain the relative weight of the six predictor variables. Personality clearly emerges as the most effective predictor of individual differences in self-esteem. Higher self-esteem is associated with lower neuroticism, higher extraversion, and slightly lower psychoticism. After personality has been taken into account, sex ceases to have a significant effect on self-esteem. The regression model suggests that the apparent sex difference can be wholly explained in terms of the different personality profiles of male and female students. When personal factors and personality factors have been taken into account, religious affect remains a significant predictor of individual differences in self-esteem. It is this finding that is consistent with the hypothesis that religious affect and self-esteem are significantly connected. In other words, love for Allah goes hand-in-hand with love for self.

Conclusion

The present study was set within the context of a research strategy situated within the field of the empirical psychology of religion and a research question posed within the framework of empirical theology. The original contribution to scientific knowledge advanced by the present study relates to the way in which it has explored for the first time the connection between religious affect and self-esteem among self-identified young Muslims attending schools in England.

The interest of the research question to the field of empirical theology concerns the way in which Ghorati (2016) maintains that Qur'anic teaching advocates the connection between love for Allah and love for self. Empirical theology recognises the responsibility for theologians to test the outworking of theologically-shaped aspirations within the real experience of human lives. The present study has demonstrated how established research traditions within the psychology of religion can help empirical theologians operationalise such research questions. The empirical psychology of religion introduced three key ideas, concerning the operationalisation of love for Allah in terms of religious affect, concerning the operationalisation of love for self in term of self-esteem, and concerning the

importance of taking into consideration the effect of two sets of control variables: personal factors in terms of age and sex, and psychological factors in terms of extraversion, neuroticism, and psychoticism.

The interest of the research question to the field of the empirical psychology of religion concerns the way an established problem conceptualised by psychologists within a Christian or post-Christian environment has been extended to an Islamic context. This extension brings two benefits to the empirical psychology of religion, one conceptual and one empirical. The conceptual benefit concerns the way in which a problem formulated in a Christian context and documented by reference to biblical scripture has been refined by re-formulation in an Islamic context and documented by reference to Qur'anic scriptures (Ghorati 2016). The empirical psychology of religion is enriched by engagement with multiple religious traditions. The empirical benefit concerns the way in which the present study has added further evidence to a growing body of knowledge regarding the correlation between religious affect and self-esteem, but this time among a distinctive sample of 919 self-identified Muslim students attending schools in England.

The key finding from the present study that Muslim students being educated in England and, who through their Islamic tradition, develop positive religious affect (love for Allah) also display higher levels of self-esteem (love for self) adds to the small but potentially growing body of research on the nature and correlates of religiosity among young Muslims within the UK (see for example, Sahin and Francis 2002; Francis and McKenna 2017a, 2017b, 2017c, 2018; McKenna and Francis 2019; Francis, McKenna, and Sahin 2019, 2020; Erken, Francis, and McKenna 2021).

The two main limitations with the present study concern the nature of the sample and the small number of measures employed. The sample was limited to 919 self-identified Muslims within a restricted age range (year seven, year eight, and year nine) and with the under representation of male students (21%). These limitations can be addressed by future replication studies. The measures were limited to one operationalisation of religious affect (The Astley-Francis Scale of Attitude to Theistic Faith) and to one operationalisation of self-esteem (the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory). These limitations can be addressed by future replication studies that extend the range of instruments.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Ethical approval

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Warwick, Centre for Education Studies (approval 01.12.2016).

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