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Religious diversity, empathy and God images: perspectives from the psychology of religion
shaping a study among adolescents in the UK

Leslie J. Francis *

University of Warwick, UK

Jennifer S Croft

University of Warwick, UK

Alice Pyke

University of Warwick, UK

Author note:

*Corresponding author:

Leslie J Francis

Warwick Religions & Education Research Unit

Institute of Education

The University of Warwick

Coventry CV4 7AL United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0)24 7652 2539

Fax: +44 (0)24 7657 2638

Email: leslie.francis@warwick.ac.uk

Abstract

Major religious traditions agree in advocating and promoting love of neighbour as well as love of God. Love of neighbour is reflected in altruistic behaviour and empathy stands as a key motivational factor underpinning altruism. This study employs the empathy scale from the Junior Eysenck Impulsiveness Questionnaire to assess the association between empathy and God images among a sample of 5,993 religiously diverse adolescents (between the ages of 13- and 15-years) attending state-maintained schools in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and London. The key psychological theory being tested by these data concerns the linkage between God images and individual differences in empathy. The data demonstrate that religious identity (e.g. whether Christian or Muslim) and religious attendance is less important than the God images held by young people. The image of God as a God of mercy is associated with higher empathy scores; and the image of God as a God of justice is associated with lower empathy scores.

Keywords: psychology of religion, empirical theology, youth, empathy, survey.

Introduction

The *Young People's Attitude to Religious Diversity Project* was established within the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit by Professor Robert Jackson to explore how young people between the ages of 13- and 16-years respond to living in the context of increasing religious diversity within the UK. The project was conceived as employing mixed methods and as drawing on a broad range of theoretical backgrounds. The present study is situated within the quantitative component of the mixed methods project, and draws on perspectives shaped by the psychology of individual differences, and the psychology of religion.

The quantitative component of the project was designed to draw on the responses of at least 10,000 year-nine and year-ten students (13- to 15-years-of age) educated within the state-maintained system of schools within the five 'nations' of the UK: England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and London. The distinctiveness of London justifies special treatment within the context of religious diversity. The present analysis has been conducted on an interim database of nearly 6,000 pupils.

The research problem addressed by the present study arises from an earlier analysis of these interim data that identified empathy as a key psychological construct capable of exploring significant variance in the attitude of young people toward accepting others from diverse religious backgrounds. Given this key role of empathy in equipping young people for life in a religiously diverse context, the present study is designed to examine the connection between empathy and religiosity (broadly conceived) from theoretical and empirical perspectives, and drawing on insights from the psychology of religion and from empirical theology. Major religious traditions agree in advocating and promoting love of neighbour as well as love of God. Love of neighbour is reflected in altruistic behaviour and empathy stands as a key motivational factor underpinning altruism.

Empathy and religion

Within the psychology of religion, empirical research concerned with the connection between empathy and religion can be traced back to Batson's early 'Good Samaritan' experiments (Batson, Schoenrade, & Pych, 1985). Batson and his colleagues argued that the theological account of the relationship between empathy and religion derives from the theory that religion promotes helping behaviour, as exemplified by the Parable of the Good Samaritan, while empathy is understood as fundamental to helping behaviour (Rushton, 1980). On this account, we would hypothesise a positive correlation between belonging to a religious group and empathy. The problem with this theological view is that it appeared to be contradicted by the bulk of the empirical evidence emerging from Batson's early studies within the psychology of religion. The experiments reported by Darley and Batson (1973), Batson (1976), and Batson and Gray (1981) found no support for the notion that religion promotes pro-social or helping behaviour. At the same time, Batson's early work was the subject of a number of methodological criticisms that began to undermine the confidence that could be placed in the conclusions drawn from this strand of experimental research in the psychology of religion.

A second strand of empirical research within the psychology of religion has involved examining the direct relationship between psychometric measures of empathy and measures of religion. Examples of this strand of research are provided by Watson, Hood, Morris, and Hall (1984), Watson, Hood, and Morris (1985), Francis and Pearson (1987), Duriez (2004a, 2004b), Furrow, King, and White (2004), Khan, Watson, and Habib (2005), Paek (2006), and Markstrom, Huey, Stilos, and Krause (2010). The main conclusion from these studies is that the relationship between empathy and religion varies according to the conceptualisation and operationalisation of religiosity employed.

Watson, Hood, Morris and Hall (1984) administered the scales of intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity developed by Allport and Ross (1967) together with the Questionnaire Measure of Emotional Empathy (Mehrabian and Epstein, 1972) and the Hogan Empathy Scale (Hogan, 1969) to a sample of 180 undergraduate students. They found a positive correlation between empathy and intrinsic religiosity, but a negative correlation between empathy and extrinsic religiosity. A second study reported by Watson, Hood and Morris (1985) conducted among 215 undergraduate volunteers from an introductory psychology class, employing the intrinsic and extrinsic scales developed by Allport and Ross (1967) and the Interpersonal Reactivity Index developed by Davis (1983), confirmed a positive correlation between intrinsic religiosity and empathic concern and a negative correlation between extrinsic religiosity and empathic concern. Clearly religious orientation is a matter of importance in this debate.

Somewhat different findings concerning the connection between religious orientation and empathy were reported in two studies by Khan, Watson, and Habib (2005), and Paek (2006). In the first of these studies, Khan, Watson and Habib (2005) found a positive association between empathy and intrinsic religiosity in a study conducted among 168 Muslim students in Pakistan who completed the extrinsic and intrinsic measures proposed by Gorsuch and Venable (1983), and a three-item measure of empathic concern extracted from the seven-item measure proposed by Davis (1983). In the second study, further support for the association between Davis' measure of empathic concern and intrinsic religiosity but not extrinsic religiosity was provided by Paek (2006) among 148 Christian churchgoers.

Francis and Pearson (1987) administered the Junior Eysenck Impulsiveness Inventory (Eysenck, Easting and Pearson, 1984) together with the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity (Francis and Stubbs, 1987) to a sample of 569 school pupils between the ages of 11 and 17 years. They found a positive correlation between empathy and religiosity, after

controlling for age and sex. In the light of the study by Watson, Hood, Morris and Hall (1984) this finding is consistent with the view that the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity assesses a form of intrinsic religiosity (Francis and Orchard, 1999; Hills and Francis, 2003).

Duriez (2004a) administered to a sample of 375 first-year psychology students a Dutch translation of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1983) together with the Post-Critical Belief Scale (Duriez, Fontaine and Hutsebaut, 2000). The strength of this measure is that it distinguishes between two aspects of religiosity: being religious or not (exclusion versus inclusion of transcendence) and the way in which religious contents are processed (literal versus symbolic). Duriez (2004a) found no relationship between empathy and the index of being religious or not, and a positive relationship between empathy and higher scores in the direction of processing religious content in a symbolic way. This finding was subsequently replicated by Duriez (2004b) using the same instruments, among two further samples: 1,133 university students following an introductory course in psychology, and 397 adults. Among the third sample, comprising 338 secondary school pupils (mean age = 16 years, $SD = 0.93$), reported in the same paper, a positive correlation was found between empathy and being religious (a tendency to include transcendence) as well as between empathy and processing religious content in a symbolic way.

Furrow, King and White (2004) investigated the connection between religious identity and prosocial concerns among a sample of 801 urban public high school students ranging in age from 13 to 21 years, employing the 56-item Prosocial Personality Battery (Penner, Fritzsche, Craiger, & Freifield, 1995). They reported positive correlations between three components of religious identity (active in church life, committed to religiously-informed ethical standards, and holding traditional beliefs) and three aspects of empathy (affective empathy, cognitive empathy, and self-oriented empathy).

Markstrom, Huey, Stiles, and Krause (2010) investigated the connection between two measures of religiosity (frequency of religious attendance and importance of spiritual or religious beliefs), two measures of empathy (empathic concern and perspective taking accessed by Davis, 1983), among 428 students in grade ten and grade eleven. They reported a positive connection between both measures of empathy and importance of belief, but no connection between these measures of empathy and frequency of religious attendance.

Within empirical theology, empirical research concerned with the connection between empathy and religion can be traced back to the more recent work of Francis (2007). Francis argued that the ways in which individuals feel about themselves and feel about other people is connected with the way in which they imagine that God feels about them. In other words, Francis posits a correlation between God images and images of self and images of others. According to this theory, images of God as the God of mercy may be reflected in a more positive self-concept and in higher levels of empathy with and for others, while images of God as the God of justice may be reflected in less positive self-concept and in lower levels of empathy with and for others.

This theologically-drive theory linking images of God with individual differences in self-concept connects with and helps to interpret findings from early research reported by Benson and Spilka (1973) and by Spilka, Addison and Rosensohn (1975). Both studies assessed self-esteem by means of a modified form of the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (Coopersmith, 1967). In the first study, conducted among 128 male students attending a Catholic high school who regarded religion as personally important, Benson and Spilka (1973) found that self-esteem scores were positively correlated with loving God images, but negatively correlated with rejecting, impersonal, vindictive and controlling God images. In the second study, conducted among 116 male and 82 female sixteen-year-olds attending three Catholic high schools, Spilka, Addison and Rosensohn (1975) found that among male

students self-esteem was negatively related to a wrathful God image. Among female students they found that self-esteem was negatively related to a deistic God image and positively related to a loving God image, to a traditional God image, and to a kind God image.

Benson and Spilka's (1973) findings are consistent with the findings of several other studies working within different traditions. For example, Chartier and Goehner (1976) employed form B of the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (Coopersmith, 1967) alongside the loving God semantic differential measure developed by Benson and Spilka (1973) among 84 male and female tenth and eleventh grade pupils enrolled at Western Christian High School in Glendora, California. This study found that self-esteem scores were positively correlated with loving God images. Buri and Mueller (1993) employed the Tennessee Self Concept Scale (Fitts, 1965) alongside eight bipolar adjectives from Gorsuch's (1968) primary factors of the wrathfulness and kindness of God among 213 Catholic college students from the University of St Thomas. A strong positive correlation was found between self-esteem and more loving, comforting and nurturing God images. Other studies, however, provide only partial confirmation of the findings, with varying outcomes according to the populations studied and the instruments employed (Chartier and Goehner, 1976; Potvin, 1977; Jolley and Taulbee, 1986; and Greenway, Milne and Clarke, 2003).

The relationship between God images and other aspects of personal well-being and psychological adjustment have been explored by Schwab and Petersen (1990), Schaefer and Gorsuch (1991), Brokaw and Edwards (1994), Tisdale, Key, Edwards, Brokaw and Kemperman (1997), Francis, Gibson and Robbins (2001), Francis (2001), and Schaap-Jonker, Eurelings-Bontekoe, Verhagen and Zock (2002). For example, Francis, Gibson and Robbins (2001) explored the relationship between God images and self-worth among a sample of 866 young people between the ages of 12 and 15 in Scotland. In this study, self-worth was assessed by an eight-item index which included items like 'I feel my life has a sense of

purpose', 'I feel I am in control of my life', I often feel depressed, and 'I have sometimes considered taking my own life'. The data demonstrated a positive relationship between self-worth and images of God as loving and forgiving, and a negative relationship between self-worth and images of God as cruel and punishing. Francis (2001) explored the relationship between God images and personal well-being among a sample of 26,733 young people between the ages of 13 and 15 in England and Wales. In this study personal well-being was assessed by a nine-item index which included items like 'I find life really worth living', 'I feel I am not worth much as a person', 'I am worried about how I get on with other people', and 'Sometimes I have considered taking my own life'. The data demonstrated a negative correlation between a punishing image of God and good personal well-being.

Extending this earlier research from exploring the connection between God images and self-related concepts, Francis (2007) examined the relationship between empathy, as assessed by the empathy scale of the Junior Eysenck Impulsiveness Questionnaire (Eysenck, Easting and Pearson, 1984), and God images, as assessed in terms of unidimensional semantic space ranging from negative affect to positive affect (Francis, Robbins and Gibson, 2006), among a sample of 1,826 secondary school pupils in England. After controlling for sex, school year and individual differences in personality, as assessed by the short-form Revised Junior Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (Corulla, 1990), the data demonstrated a significant link between high levels of empathy and positive God images and a significant link between low levels of empathy and negative God images.

Research question

Against this background, the aim of the present study is to test the connection between empathy and God images after allowing for the effect of other personal, psychological, and religious factors to be taken into account. First, however, it is important to clarify the research background to the key constructs being employed.

The understanding and measurement of *empathy* employed by the present study was pioneered by Mehrabian and Epstein (1972) in their Questionnaire Measure of Emotional Empathy. Their understanding of empathy focuses on the ability to experience vicariously the feelings of another and emphasises the empathic emotional response, in contrast to the Hogan Empathy Scale (Hogan, 1969) which focuses on a cognitive view of empathy as the ability to take another's viewpoint (see, Chlopan, McCain, Carbonell and Hagen, 1985). The empirical components of empathy within Mehrabian and Epstein's measure are defined as follows: susceptibility to emotional contagion, appreciation of the feelings of unfamiliar and distant others, extreme emotional responsiveness, tendency to be moved by others' positive emotional experiences, tendency to be moved by others' negative emotional experiences, sympathetic tendency, and willingness to be in contact with others who have problems.

The Mehrabian and Epstein scale was adopted by Eysenck and Eysenck (1978) and adapted by Eysenck and Eysenck (1980) to form a junior measure of empathy. Further refinement by Eysenck (1981), Saklofske and Eysenck (1983) and Eysenck, Easting and Pearson (1984) led to the development of a 23-item measure of emotional empathy for use among adolescents. It is reasonable to assume that the junior version of the scale measures the same psychological dimension as the adult version. It is this instrument that is employed in the present study. Two example items from the Eysenckian junior measure of empathy are: 'Would you feel sorry for a lonely stranger in a crowd?' and 'Do you often get very interested in your friends' problems?'

The understanding and measurement of *God images* employed by the present study was pioneered by Benson and Spilka (1973) who employed a ten-item semantic differential grid which they claimed to generate two indices assessing a loving God image and a controlling God image. This instrument known as the Loving and Controlling God Scales, has been employed effectively in a number of subsequent studies, including Spilka, Addison

and Rosensohn (1975), Chartier and Goehner (1976), Jolley and Taulbee (1986), Gabbard, Howard and Tageson (1986), Bowman, Coons, Jones and Oldstrom (1987), Kirkpatrick and Shaver (1990, 1992), Park and Cohen (1993), Brokaw and Edwards (1994), Pritt (1998), Kirkpatrick (1998), and Rowatt and Kirkpatrick (2002).

Francis, Robbins and Gibson (2006) proposed a revised form of Benson and Spilka's (1973) instrument because they found that the factor structure of the original instrument was not recoverable among school pupils who were less theologically educated than the group among whom the scales were originally constructed, namely a homogeneous religious sample of Catholic school pupils who had been a member of a Catholic parish for at least ten years. Among their less theologically educated group of pupils, Francis, Robbins and Gibson (2006) found that the deletion of two items resulted in an improved eight-item unidimensional index, defining semantic space related to God images ranging from negative affect to positive affect.

A further refinement of the semantic differential grid assessment of God images proposed by Benson and Spilka (1973) and modified by Francis, Robbins, and Gibson (2006) was advanced by Francis (under review). The core constructs employed in the semantic differential grid were re-presented for scoring on a conventional five-point Likert scale (agree strongly, agree, not certain, disagree, and disagree strongly), in order to allow the God image items to be absorbed unobtrusively among a range of other items. It is this instrument that is employed in the present study. Two example items from Francis' New Index of God Images are: 'I think of God as loving' and 'I think of God as strict'.

The understanding of *personal factors* employed in the present study concern sex and age (measured in terms of school year). These two personal factors are taken into account because of their key role in predicting individual differences in religiosity (Kay & Francis, 1996) and in empathy (Francis & Pearson, 1987).

The understanding of *psychological factors* employed in the present study is rooted in Eysenck's dimensional model of personality (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1991). This model of personality is taken into account since two different strands of research have demonstrated the power of this model to predict individual differences in both religiosity and empathy. On the one hand, a number of studies has drawn attention to the consistent relationship between psychoticism scores and religious attitudes in general (Francis, 1992; Fearn, Lewis and Francis, 2003) and to God images in particular (Francis, 2005). On the other hand, a number of studies has drawn attention to the consistent relationship between both psychoticism and neuroticism scores and empathy (Eysenck and Eysenck, 1980; Eysenck and McGurk, 1980; Eysenck, 1981). According to Eysenck's dimensional model of personality, individual differences can be most adequately and economically summarised in terms of the three higher order factors of extraversion, neuroticism and psychoticism.

Eysenck's three dimensional model of personality has been operationalised for use among adults by the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1975) and by the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire Revised (Eysenck, Eysenck, & Barrett, 1985) and for use among young people by the Junior Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1975) and by the Junior Eysenck Personality Questionnaire Revised (Corulla, 1990). Both the junior and the adult forms of the revised instruments are available in the full form and in the short form of 48 items. It is the short form of the Junior Eysenck Personality Questionnaire Revised that is employed in the present study. In respect of this instrument, two example items from the extraversion scale are: 'Can you get a party going?' and 'Do you like going out a lot?' Two example items from the neuroticism scale are: 'Do you find it hard to get to sleep at night because you are worrying about things?' and 'Are your feelings rather easily hurt?' Two example items from the psychoticism scale are: 'Would you enjoy practical jokes that could sometimes harm people?' and 'Do you sometimes like teasing animals?'

Two example items from the lie scale are: ‘Have you ever said anything bad or nasty about anyone?’ and ‘Did you every take anything (even a sweet) that belonged to someone else?’

The understanding of additional *religious factors* employed in the present study sets alongside God images two well established sociological measures of religiosity, self-assigned religious affiliation and self-reported religious attendance. Both measures have also been routinely employed within the psychology of religion. The inclusion of these measures in the study enables the predictive power of God images to be tested against the power of more conventionally employed measures of religiosity.

Method

Procedure

The Young People’s Attitude to Religious Diversity Project set out to obtain response from at least 2,000 year-nine and year-ten students attending state-maintained schools in each of the five nations of the UK: England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and London. In each nation half of the pupils were recruited from schools with a religious character (Anglican, Catholic, or joint Anglican and Catholic) and half from schools without a religious character. Within the participating schools questionnaires were administered by the religious education teachers within examination-like conditions. Students were assured of anonymity and confidentiality and given the option not to participate in the project.

Measures

Empathy was assessed by the empathy scale of the Junior Eysenck Impulsiveness Questionnaire (JIVE: Eysenck, Easting and Pearson, 1984). This instrument contains 23 empathy-related items developed from the adult measure of emotional empathy proposed by Mehrabian and Epstein (1972). Each item is assessed on a dichotomous scale: *yes* and *no*.

God images was assessed by the New Index of God Images (NIGI) proposed by Francis (under review). This instrument contains three positive images (reflecting the God of

mercy) and three negative images (reflecting the God of justice) derived from the original conceptualisation proposed by Benson and Spilka (1973). These items are posed so that they can be addressed both by those who believe in God and by those who do not believe in God. Each item is assessed on a five-point scale: *agree strongly*, *agree*, *not certain*, *disagree* and *disagree strongly*.

Personality was measured by the short-form Revised Junior Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (JEPQR-S: Corulla, 1990). This instrument proposes three 12-item measures of extraversion, neuroticism, and psychoticism, together with a 12-item lie scale. Each item is assessed on a dichotomous scale: *yes* and *no*.

Religious attendance was assessed by the question ‘Apart from special occasions (like weddings) how often do you attend a religious worship service (e.g. in a church, mosque or synagogue)? Responses were recorded on a seven point scale: never, sometimes, at least once a year, at least six times a year, at least once a month, nearly every week, and several times a week.

Religious affiliation was recorded by a check list of world faiths and Christian denominations in response to the question ‘What is your religion?’ For the current analyses two dummy variables were constructed from the responses to the question: one identifying the students who self-assigned as Christian and the other identifying the students who self-assigned as Muslim. In order to allow these two dummy variables to be compared with students of no religious affiliation, those affiliated with other world faiths were omitted from the analyses.

Sex and school year were both recorded as dichotomous variables: male = 1, female = 2; year-nine = 1, year-ten = 2.

Sample

The present analyses were conducted on the interim database when the responses of the first 5,993 students were available. The sample included 3,564 students who described themselves as Christians, 107 who described themselves as Muslims, and 2,122 who described themselves as religiously unaffiliated. The remaining 200 students who identified with other faith traditions were omitted from the analyses. Of the total sample 54% claimed never to attend religious services; 48% were male and 52% were female; 45% were in year nine and 55% were in year ten.

Results

Table 1 presents the scale properties of the six measures employed in the study: God image, empathy, extraversion, neuroticism, psychoticism, and the lie scale. The alpha coefficients demonstrate that four of the indices (God image, empathy, extraversion and neuroticism) reached the threshold of .65 proposed by DeVellis (2003) for acceptable internal consistency reliability. The lower alpha coefficient recorded by the psychoticism scale is consistent with the difficulties associated with measuring this dimension of personality (Frances, Brown, & Philipchalk, 1992). The poor performance of the lie scale deserves closer investigation.

In view of the centrality and novelty of the measure of God image employed in the present study, table 2 examines the properties of the measure in greater detail. For this analysis the negative items were reverse coded so that a high scale score indicated a positive God image and a low scale score indicated a negative God image. The item rest-of-test correlations confirm the unidimensionality and homogeneity of the construct being assessed.

Table 3 presents the bi-variate Pearson correlations between empathy, God image, sex, school year (age), extraversion, neuroticism, psychoticism, lie scale, religious attendance, self-assigned religious affiliation as Christian, and self-assigned religious

affiliation as Muslim. Three main features of these data are of particular relevance to the present study.

First, God image scores are significantly correlated with some personal factors (sex), some psychological factors (neuroticism and psychoticism) and some religious factors (religious attendance and self-assigned religious affiliation), but neither with school year nor extraversion. A more positive God image (as operationalised by the New index of God Images) is associated with being female, with tendermindedness (lower psychoticism scores), with greater emotionality (higher neuroticism scores), with higher levels of religious attendance, and with self-assigned religious affiliation as Christian or as Muslim.

Second, empathy scores are significantly correlated with personal factors (sex and school year), with personality factors (extraversion, neuroticism, and psychoticism), and religious factors (religious attendance and self-assigned religious affiliation as Christian). Greater empathic capacity (as operationalised by the Eysenckian empathy measure) is associated with being female, being older, with greater emotionality (higher neuroticism scores), with tendermindedness (lower psychoticism scores), with extraversion (higher extraversion scores), with higher levels of religious attendance, and with self-assigned affiliation as Christian (although not as Muslim).

Third, in terms of the key research question posed by the present study, there is significant correlation between God image and empathy scores. Greater empathic capacity is associated with a more positive God image.

In view of the complex pattern of significant correlation between sex, age, personality, religious attendance, religious affiliation, empathy and God images, table 4 employs multiple regression analysis to take into account the possible contaminating effects of personal factors (sex and school year) and psychological factors (extraversion, neuroticism, psychoticism, and the lie scale) before examining the relationship between God

image and empathy. Then religious factors (religious attendance and religious affiliation) are entered last to examine whether these factors account for additional variance after taking God images into account. In this model, empathy stands as the dependent variable and the predictor variables were entered in the fixed order of sex, school year (the two personal factors), extraversion, neuroticism, psychoticism, the lie scale (the four psychological factors) and God image, followed by religious attendance, Christian affiliation, and Muslim affiliation (the three religious factors). Two main features of these data are of particular relevance to the present study. First, and most importantly, the increase in r^2 demonstrates that a positive God image is a statistically significant predictor of greater empathic capacity, even after controlling for individual differences in sex, school year and personality. Given the significant variance in empathy accounted for by sex and by personality, it is particularly impressive that God images are able to provide significant additional predictive power. After taking God images into account, the additional variance explained by other religious factors (religious attendance and self-assigned religious affiliation) is trivial. Second, the beta weights demonstrate that the three most powerful factors in the model associated with individual differences in empathy are neuroticism (.42), extraversion (.14) and God images (.14).

Conclusion

The present study was designed to build on the findings from the earlier exploration of the data that empathy functioned as a key psychological construct capable of explaining significant variance in the attitude of young people toward accepting others from diverse religious backgrounds. Against this background the present study drew on theoretical perspectives and empirical evidence advanced by both the psychology of religion and empirical theology concerning the contribution of religion to the development of empathic capacity. Three main conclusions emerge from the present study.

The first conclusion is that research concerned with the association between religion and empathy needs to be nested within the broader framework of the individual differences tradition of research. The correlation matrix demonstrated that sex differences are important in shaping empathy, religious attendance and God images; that neuroticism scores are important in shaping empathy, religious attendance and God images; and that psychoticism scores are important in shaping empathy, religious attendance and God images. Such findings are consistent with previous research and serve to underscore the importance of taking such potential contaminants into account before examining the association between religion and empathy.

The second conclusion is that the correlation between empathy and either religious attendance or religious affiliation is quite small compared with the correlations between empathy and sex, neuroticism and extraversion. Such findings are consistent with previous research and suggest that measures of external religiosity like religious attendance and religious affiliation (that may often be the only measures available) may not always be the most effective means of capturing the empirical importance of religion within individual lives.

The third conclusion is that God images serve as a more powerful predictor of individual differences in empathy than religious attendance and religious affiliation. This finding is consistent with the one previous study that has explored the association between God images and empathy reported by Francis (2007). The notion of God images provides a key interface between the psychology of religion and empirical theology. The present findings underscore the value of taking perspectives from empirical theology into account when shaping empirical research exploring the connection between religion and empathy.

The key finding from the present study and from the earlier study reported by Francis (2007) is that there is a positive association between God images and empathic capacity.

Different interpretations of this finding can be given from the perspective of the psychology of religion and from the perspective of empirical theology. Both perspectives will embrace a third construct, self image.

Within the psychology of religion, the three psychological constructs of a positive or loving God image, a positive self-concept or good level of self-esteem, and a well developed capacity for empathy can be linked in two different ways. On the one hand, one strand of psychological theory conceives the direction of causality to emanate from God images. According to this account, how we see ourselves is influenced by how we believe God sees us. Believing that God sees us as lovable and as loved encourages us to see ourselves as lovable as well. In turn, people who accept themselves may have the greater confidence and capacity to show empathy with others. On the other hand, another strand of psychological theory conceives the direction of causality to begin with self-concept. According to this account, based on consistency theory, individuals who have a low regard for themselves cannot reconcile with that low self-evaluation the view that they are acceptable to a loving God. Low self-regard generates a view of God as hostile and unloving. In turn people who perceive God as basically unloving toward them are influenced by this role model to respond to others in an equally unloving and unempathic manner.

Within empirical theology the two psychological constructs (a positive self-concept or good level of self-esteem and a well-developed capacity for empathy) and the theological construct of a God of mercy can be linked by the theological concept of love. One Christian line of argument based on the theological concept of love takes the following form. The first point is that the New Testament in general and the Johannine literature in particular argues that God is love (1 John 4:8). The second point is that the human response to encounter with the love of God is love for God: we love God because God first loved us (1 John 4:19). The third point is that the second commandment defines love for others as involving also love for

self: thou shalt love thy neighbour as thy self (Mark 12:31). In this sense, love of self implies positive self-concept or good level of self-esteem. The fourth point is that love for God also entails love for others: if God so loved us, we ought also love one another (1 John 4:11). In this sense, love for one another implies showing empathy. While this theological explanation holds good only within the Christian contexts, similar theological models may be constructed within the context of other faith traditions.

Note

Young People's Attitudes to Religious Diversity Project (AHRC Reference: AH/G014035/1) is a large scale mixed methods research project investigating the attitudes of 13- to 16-year-old students across the United Kingdom. Young people from a variety of socio-economic, cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds from different parts of England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, with the addition of London as a special case, are taking part in the study. Professor Robert Jackson is principal investigator and Professor Leslie J Francis is co-investigator. Together they lead a team of qualitative and quantitative researchers based in the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit, within the Institute of Education at the University of Warwick. The project is part of the AHRC/ESRC Religion and Society Programme, and runs from 2009-12.

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Table 1

Scale properties

Scale	N items	alpha	mean	sd	range	
					low	high
Extraversion	6	.68	4.6	1.6	0	6
Neuroticism	6	.70	3.0	1.8	0	6
Psychoticism	6	.59	1.2	1.4	0	6
Lie scale	6	.50	2.4	1.4	0	6
God image	6	.89	18.7	5.9	6	30
Empathy	23	.78	13.8	4.2	0	23

Table 2

Scale of God images: item rest-of-test correlations

	<i>r</i>
I think of God as loving	.77
I think of God as forgiving	.79
I think of God as accepting	.76
I think of God as strict*	.69
I think of God as disapproving*	.60
I think of God as demanding*	.58

Note: * these items are reversed coded

r indicated that the correlation between the individual item and the sum of the other five items

Table 3

Correlation matrix

	Emp.	Mu	Ch	At	GI	L	P	N	E	Y
Sex	.24***	.02	.04**	.03*	.08***	.05***	-.25***	.26***	.10***	.04**
School year (Y)	.06***	-.01	.04***	.06***	.02	-.09***	.00	.02	.04**	
Extrversion (E)	.20***	-.06***	.02	-.01	-.02	-.20***	.07***	-.06***		
Neuroticism (N)	.49***	-.02	.01	.03*	.10***	-.14***	.03*			
Psychoticism (P)	-.06***	-.02	-.11***	-.13***	-.14***	-.33***				
Lie scale (L)	-.10***	.02	.01	.01	.08***					
God image (GI)	.20***	.08***	.38***	.35***						
Attendance (At)	.09***	.03	.39***							
Christian (Ch)	.06***									
Muslim (Mu)	-.01									

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

Table 4

Regression model

	r^2	increase r^2	F	p <	beta	t	p
sex	.05	.05	234.6	.001	.08	5.7	.001
School year	.05	.00	0.7	NS	.01	0.7	NS
extraversion	.05	.00	18.8	.001	.14	10.7	.001
neuroticism	.22	.16	998.2	.001	.42	31.2	.001
psychoticism	.22	.01	35.6	.001	-.05	-3.8	.001
lie scale	.22	.00	1.9	NS	.01	0.9	NS
God image	.24	.02	132.7	.001	.14	9.9	.001
attendance	.24	.00	4.4	.05	.03	2.2	.05
Christian	.24	.00	0.2	NS	-.01	-0.8	NS
Muslim	.24	.00	1.5	NS	-.02	-1.2	NS