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Love for Allah and love for others: Exploring the connection between religious affect
and empathy among Muslim adolescents in England

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Abstract

The study explores the connection between love for Allah (conceptualised as religious affect) and love for others (conceptualised as empathy) 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 empathy). 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. From the perspective of empirical theology this study confirms that the aspiration expressed in Qur'anic scriptures is reflected in the lives of young Muslims attending schools in England.

Keywords: Junior Eysenck Impulsiveness Inventory, Junior Eysenck Personality

Questionnaire Revised, Astley-Francis Scale of Attitude toward 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 on underpinning such linkages with theological analysis and reflection. 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 is, 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength'. The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself'. There is no commandment greater than these. (New Revised Standard Version)

According to Luke 10: 30-37 Jesus exemplified the significance of this second commandment through the Parable of the Good Samaritan. In this exemplification the love of neighbour was demonstrated by the travelling foreigner (the Samaritan) who stopped to offer succour to his fellow wounded traveller who had fallen victim to bandits and left abandoned, robbed, stripped, and half dead by the roadside. The Johannine community of writers theologise the connection between love of God and love of others in a more profound way, as illustrated in the First Letter of John, 4: 7-8.

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. (New Revised Standard Version)

Although the precise theological nuances are somewhat different, the connection between love for God and love for neighbour is rooted within the Islamic tradition. Both the

Qur'an and Hadith emphasise altruism and doing good at the heart of Islamic ethics. For example, the Qur'an says of the pious that:

They give food despite their love for it
to the poor and the orphans, and the captives,
[Saying], 'We feed you for the sake of God alone.

We seek neither recompense nor thanks from you.' (Qur'an 76: 8-9, Khan, 2011)

The Qur'an says to those who serve God:

Be good to your parents, to relatives,
to orphans, to the needy,
and the neighbour who is kinsman,
the neighbour who is not related to you,
and your companions, and the wayfarers. (Qur'an 4: 36, Khan, 2011)

A Hadith expresses the ultimate reward that comes from altruistic behaviour:

Verily, Allah would say on the Day of Resurrection: where are those who have
mutual love for My Glory's sake? Today I shall shelter them in my shadow when
there is no other shadow but the shadow of Mine. (Sahih Muslim, 2566)¹

Two further Hadiths say, 'None of you truly believes until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself' (40 Hadith Nawawi 13)²; and 'He who is not merciful to mankind, God will not be merciful to him' (Sahih al-Bukhari, 7376)³.

Exploring the evidence

The empirical psychology of religion has long been fascinated by testing the evidential basis for linking love for God with love for other human beings. Within this

¹ Sahih Muslim, 2566. Sunnah.com. Retrieved 8 July, 2020, from <https://sunnah.com/muslim/45/46>

² 40 Hadith Nawawi 13. Sunnah.com. Retrieved 20 July, 2020, from <https://sunnah.com/nawawi40/13>.

³ Sahih al-Bukhari, 7376. Sunnah.com. Retrieved 20 July, 2020, from <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/97/6>.

literature seminal efforts were made by C. D. Batson to explore the visible connections between religion, altruistic behaviour, and the underlying psychological construct of empathy (see 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 within both the New Testament and the Qur'an, while empathy is understood as fundamental to helping and pro-social behaviour (Rushton, 1980; Batson & Shaw, 1991; Roth, 2017; Silke, Brady, Boylan, & Dolan, 2018). 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 in a Christian context. 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 or spirituality. 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 (2004), Furrow, King, and White (2004), Khan, Watson, and Habib (2005), Paek (2006), Francis (2007), Markstrom, Huey, Stilos, and Kraus (2010), Francis, Croft, and Pyke (2012), Hardy, Walker, Rackham, and Olsen (2012), Huber and MacDonald (2012), Ayten (2013), Glaz (2015), Rashidi, Mousavi, and Esmaeili (2016), Damiano et al. (2017), Francis, Lewis, and McKenna (2017), Roth (2017), Lowicki and Zajenkowska (2017), Ward and King

(2018), Stewart, Lawrence, and Burg (2019) and Stewart and Lawrence (2020). Taken together these studies demonstrate that the relationship between religiosity and empathy may vary according to the conceptualisation and operationalisation of religiosity employed and according to the conceptualisation and operationalisation of empathy employed. However, there is also consistent evidence of a positive association between measures of emotional empathy derived from Mehrabian and Epstein (1972) and intrinsic religiosity, positive religious affect, and loving God images.

For example, in terms of intrinsic religiosity, 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 developed by Mehrabian and Epstein (1972) 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. Francis and Pearson (1987) administered the empathy scale derived from Mehrabian and Epstein (1972) included within the Junior Eysenck Impulsiveness Inventory (Eysenck, Easting, & Pearson, 1984) together with the Francis Sale of Attitude toward Christianity (Francis, Lewis, Philipchalk, Brown, & Lester, 1995) to a sample of 569 11- to 17-year-old students. They found a positive correlation between empathy and religiosity, after controlling for sex and age.

In terms of God images, Francis (2007) administered the empathy scale from the Junior Eysenck Impulsiveness Inventory (Eysenck, Easting, & Pearson, 1984) together with the semantic differential God Images Scale developed by Francis, Robbins, and Gibson (2006) to a sample of 1,826 secondary school students in England. After controlling for sex, age, and personality, they found a significant link between higher levels of empathy and positive God images and a significant link between lower levels of empathy and negative God images. The study reported by Francis (2007) was subsequently replicated among a

sample of 258 secondary school students in South Africa by Robbins, Francis, and Kerr (2006) with similar findings. Francis, Croft, and Pyke (2012) administered the empathy scale from the Junior Eysenck Impulsiveness Inventory (Eysenck, Easting, & Pearson, 1984) together with a modified form of the measure of God images proposed by Francis, Robbins, and Gibson (2006) developed for that study to a sample of 5,993 13- to 15-year-old students. After controlling for sex, age, and personality, they found positive God images to be associated with higher empathy scores, and negative God images to be associated with lower empathy scores. Francis, Lewis, and McKenna (2017) reported on the administration of the empathy scale from the Junior Eysenck Impulsiveness Inventory (Eysenck, Easting, & Pearson, 1984) together with a single-item measure of self-assessment of spirituality to a sample of 3,860 students who claimed no affiliation with a religious group. After controlling for sex, age, and personality, they found a significant link between higher levels of self-assessed spirituality and higher empathy scores. Francis, Holdsworth, and McKenna (under review) reported on the administration of the empathy scale from the Junior Eysenck Impulsiveness Inventory (Eysenck, Easting, & Pearson, 1984) together with the New Indices of God Images (that distinguish between the God of Grace and the God of Law) to a sample of 5,269 students who professed belief in God. After controlling for sex, age, and personality, they found a positive correlation between empathy and scores recorded on the Index of God of Grace, and a negative correlation between empathy and scores recorded on the Index of God of Law.

Control variables

Empirical studies exploring the connections between religion and empathy 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 & Penny, 2014). Women also record higher scores of empathy on measures derived from Mehrabian and Epstein (1972), as evidenced by Francis and Pearson (1987), Gudjonsson, Einarsson, Bragason, and Sigurdsson (2006), and Francis, Croft, and Pyke (2012).

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 & Eysenck, 1975) and the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire Revised (Eysenck, Eysenck, & Barrett, 1985), and among young people, including the Junior Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (Eysenck & 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. Recent studies have demonstrated that higher levels of religiosity are especially associated with lower psychoticism scores (Francis, 1992; Francis & Hermans, 2009; Lewis & Francis, 2014), and that higher levels of empathy are especially associated with higher levels of neuroticism scores (Gudjonsson, Einarsson, Bragason, & Sigurdsson, 2006; Francis, Croft, & Pyke, 2012).

Research question

A major limitation with the studies so far conducted within the empirical psychology of religion designed to explore the connection between religion and empathy is that they have been carried out mainly among participants shaped by Christian or post-Christian cultures,

apart from the study reported by Ayten (2013) among Turkish Muslims. 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 toward Theistic Faith (Astley, Francis, & Robbins, 2012) which has been designed to measure religious affect among religiously unaffiliated, Christian, and Muslim youth (see Francis & Lewis, 2016) and thus appropriate for harvesting data from young Muslims attending school in the UK alongside Christian and religiously unaffiliated peers; and the empathy scale of the Junior Eysenck Impulsiveness Questionnaire (Eysenck, Easting, & Pearson, 1984) which has already been well-established in the literature exploring the connection between religion and empathy among young people (see Francis & Pearson, 1987; Francis, 2007; Francis, Croft, & Pyke, 2012; Francis, Lewis, & McKenna, 2017).

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 under examination conditions 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. Ethics approval for this project was granted by Centre for Education Studies, University of Warwick (01.12.2016).

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, $\alpha = .66$; neuroticism, $\alpha = .70$; psychoticism, $\alpha = .61$. Each of these three scales comprises six items rated on a dichotomous scale: yes (1) and no (0). Example items are: extraversion, 'Do you like going out a lot?'; neuroticism, 'Are your feelings rather easily hurt?'; psychoticism, 'Would you enjoy playing practical jokes that could sometimes really hurt people?'

Empathy was assessed by the 23-item empathy scale of the Junior Eysenck Impulsiveness Questionnaire (JIVE: Eysenck, Easting, & Pearson, 1984), an instrument derived from the adult measure of emotional empathy proposed by Mehrabian and Epstein (1972). Eysenck, Easting, and Pearson (1984) reported the following alpha coefficients: for females, $\alpha = .69$; for males, $\alpha = .70$. An example item is: 'Does it affect you very much when one of your friends seems upset?'

Religious affect was assessed by the seven-item Astley-Francis Scale of Attitude toward Theistic Faith proposed by Astley, Francis, and Robbins (2012) who reported the following alpha coefficient, $\alpha = .95$. 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

- insert table 1 about here -

Table 1 presents the scale properties of the five measures employed in the study (religious affect, empathy, 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.

- insert table 2 about here -

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 higher scores on both the empathy scale and the neuroticism scale. At the same time, there is a significant positive correlation between empathy and neuroticism. Second, in terms of age differences, year nine students recorded a higher score on the psychoticism scale and a lower score on the religious affect scale. At the same time, there is a significant negative correlation between psychoticism scores and religious affect scores. Third, there is a complex pattern of relationship between the personality variables and both empathy and religious affect. Higher scores of religious affect are associated with lower neuroticism scores, lower psychoticism scores, and higher extraversion scores. Higher scores of empathy are associated with lower psychoticism scores and higher neuroticism scores. At the same time, there is a significant positive correlation between religious affect and empathy. These three observations confirm the wisdom of exploring the connection between religious affect and empathy within the

environment of a series of regression models, taking empathy 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.

- insert table 3 about here -

Table 3 presents the three steps of the regression model. The increase in R^2 demonstrates that each step in the model accounts for a significant increase in the proportion of variance explained in the dependent variable (empathy). 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 empathy. Higher empathy is associated with higher neuroticism, lower psychoticism, and slightly higher extraversion. In addition to personality, sex also has a significant effect. Higher empathy is associated with being female. The regression model confirms that this sex difference cannot be wholly explained in terms of the different personality profiles of male and female students. Contextual and social factors may also have a part to play in enhancing the empathetic skills of female students. When personal factors and personality factors have been taken into account religious affect remains a significant predictor of individual differences in empathy. It is this finding that is consistent with the hypothesis that religious affect and empathy are significantly connected. In other words, love for Allah goes hand-in-hand with love for others.

Conclusion

The present study was set within the context of a research question posed within the framework of empirical theology and a research strategy situated within the field of the empirical psychology of religion. 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 empathy 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 Qur'anic teaching clearly advocates the connection between love for Allah and love for others. 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 others in term of empathy, 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. 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 empathy, 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 empathy (love for others) 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 & Francis, 2002; Francis & McKenna, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c; Francis & McKenna, 2018; McKenna & Francis, 2019).

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 emotional empathy (the empathy scale included within the Junior Eysenck Impulsiveness Inventory). These limitations can be addressed by future replication studies that extend the range of instruments.

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Table 1

Scale properties

Measures	N items	alpha	Mean	SD	Range	
					LO	HI
Attitude toward Theistic Faith	7	.79	31.84	3.87	7	35
Empathy	23	.74	16.09	3.97	0	23
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
Empathy	.16**	-.05	.17***	-.34***	.26***	.00
Extraversion (Ext)	.06	-.02	.11***	.08*	-.18**	
Neuroticism (Neu)	.12*	.06	-.13***	.15***		
Psychoticism (Psy)	-.05	.12***	-.18***			
Attitude (Att)	-.01	-.14***				
Age	-.05					

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

Table 3

Regression model: Empathy

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
<i>Personal factors</i>			
Sex	.16***	.10***	.10***
School year	-.03	-.01	.01
<i>Psychological factors</i>			
Extraversion		.08*	.06*
Neuroticism		.31***	.32***
Psychoticism		-.38***	-.56***
<i>Religious factors</i>			
Theistic faith			.14***
R ²	.03	.22	.23
Δ	.03***	.19***	.02***

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