

# Ethics and religion

Religion



ABSTRACT. Although it seems that ethics and religion should be related, past research suggests mixed conclusions on the relationship. We argue that such mixed results are mostly due to methodological and conceptual limitations.

We develop hypotheses linking Cornwall et al. s (1986, Review of Religious Research, 27(3): 266–244) religious components to individuals willingness to justify ethically suspect behaviors. Using data on 63, 087 individuals from 44 countries, we find support for three hypotheses: the cognitive, one affective, and the behavioral component of religion are negatively related to thics.

Surprisingly, one aspect of the cognitive component (i. e. , belief in religion) shows no relationship. Implications for research and practice are discussed.

KEY WORDS: religion, ethics, cross-national study Introduction The link

between religion and ethics seems obvious (Tittle and Wlech, 1983; Weaver and Agle, 2002). Religions, through the values they embody, often build the basis for what is considered right and wrong (Turner, 1997). Religion

produces both formal and informal norms and provides people with a freedom/constraint duality by prescribing behaviors ithin some acceptable boundaries (Fararo and Skvoretz, 1986). Such norms, values, and beliefs are

often codified into a religious code such as the Bible or the Koran. In

Christian religions, for instance, the Ten Commandments provide a broad

basis of codified ethical rules that believing Christians must K. Praveen

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He has also served on the faculties of the University of Nebraska, the University of Rhode Island, Waseda and Keio Universities in Japan (as a Fulbright lecturer), and the Catholic University of Lille in France. Professor Cullen is the past president of the Western Academy of Management. Professor Cullen is the author or co-author of four books and over 60 journal articles. His publications have appeared in journals such as Administrative Science Quarterly, Academy of Management Journal, Journal of International Business Studies, Journal of Management, Organizational Studies, Management International

Review, Journal of Vocational Behavior, American Journal of Sociology, Organizational Dynamics, and the Journal of World Business. He currently serves on the editorial board of the Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies and has served on the editorial boards of the Academy of Management Journal and Advances in International Comparative Management Journal. Journal of Business Ethics (2008) 80: 387–398 Springer 2007 DOI 10. 1007/s10551-007-9439-8 follow in order to actualize what they believe in (e. g. , salvation). In turn, through daily exposure to norms, customs, laws, scripts, and practices, religions impart societal members with values and produce expectational bonds or “ reciprocal expectations of predictability” (Field, 1979) that eventually become taken for granted. Such values often provide guides for what are considered ethical behaviors for most of the worlds religions (Fisher, 2001). Furthermore, in societies where one or few religions are dominant, the overarching core values of these religions are likely to be mirrored in secular values of society (codified law or non-codified social norms), which regulate everyday activity and ethical behavior. However, despite the above conceptual tie between religions and ethics, research has provided mixed conclusions on the relationship (Tittle and Welch, 1983; Weaver and Agle, 2002). For instance, some studies have found no difference between religious and non-religious individuals on unethical behaviors such as dishonesty and cheating (e. g. , Hood et al. , 1996; Smith et al. , 1975), while a negative relationship was found between use of illegal substances and individual religiousness (Khavari and Harmon, 1982). The results are no more definitive for studies linking religions to business ethics. For instance, Kidwell et al. (1987) found no relationship between religiosity and ethical judgments of managers while Agle and Van <https://assignbuster.com/ethics-and-religion/>

Buren (1999) found a small positive relationship between religious beliefs and corporate social responsibility. Furthermore, even studies linking marketing ethics with religiousness have found insignificant results (Vitell and Paolillo, 2003), whereby religiosity was found unrelated to consumer ethics. Taken together, the above supports Hood et al.'s (1996: 341) view of research between religion and ethics as “something of a roller coaster ride” and the difficulty to reach definitive conclusions about the relationship (Weaver and Agle, 2002). We, however, believe that the mixed results are mostly due to the following conceptual and methodological issues. First, most studies tend to consider only unidimensional conceptualizations of religion, such as church attendance or religious affiliations (e.g., Agle and Van Buren, 1999; Schwartz and Huisman, 1995). However, De Jong et al.'s (1976) empirical test of the multidimensional view of religion clearly shows that “religion seems far too complex an arena of human behavior - as diverse and heterogeneous as human behavior - not to include many different and unrelated types of variables” (Dittes, 1969: 618). Therefore, it seems important to consider more multidimensional measures of religiosity to get a richer understanding of the relationship between ethics and religiosity. Second, even those studies that have considered multiple dimensions have done so without regard for conceptual support for the choice of their dimensions (e.g., Agle and Van Buren, 1999). In addition, some studies have even included numerous dimensions and chosen those dimensions that fit their results (e.g., Conroy and Emerson, 2004). We believe that it is crucial to consider theoretical models that guide the choice of dimensions. Third, most studies have considered only one religion (e.g., Angelidis and Ibrahim, 2004; Conroy and Emerson, 2004). Given the similarities of what is

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considered ethical behavior by the major world religions (Fisher, 2001), we suggest considering cognitive, affective, and behavioral components of religiosity (rather than specific religious denominations) as predictors of ethics. Fourth, Weaver and Agle (2002) argue that many of the ethical measures have been attitudinal and may thus suffer from social desirability biases. It is therefore important to consider measures that do not elicit socially desirable responses. Finally, many studies have emphasized narrow, and for this subject matter, peculiar samples of undergraduate and MBA students (e. g. , Angelidis and Ibrahim, 2004; Conroy and Emerson, 2004; Kidwell et al. , 1987). Thus, in addition to issues of generalizability to wider populations, Tittle and Welch (1983) have also warned that student samples should be viewed with skepticism given the role of religion at such ages. Research is needed using more comprehensive samples that target representative populations in terms of age and culture. Given the above, we investigate the relationships between multiple dimensions of religion and ethics. We use data from the World Values Survey (WVS) (2000) to examine how specific dimensions of religion (Weaver and Agle, 2002) are related to ethics and thus incorporate multiple religious denominations and multiple facets of the Kidwell, J. M. , R. E. Stevens and A. L. Bethke: 1987, Differences in the Ethical Perceptions Between Male