Moral foundation priorities reflect U.S. Christians' individual differences in religiosity☆

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ABSTRACT

The moral domains of loyalty, authority, and purity have been linked with both religion and conservatism in Moral Foundations Theory. Yet there are important individual differences in religiosity. We sought to provide a more nuanced understanding of the relations between religiosity, conservatism, and the moral foundations identified in MFT. Participants were 450 Christians who completed an online survey assessing outreaching faith, religious commitment, belief in an authoritarian God, Biblical literalism, and the prioritization of each of the five moral foundations. Conservatism and religious commitment were significant positive predictors of Loyalty. Controlling for conservatism and religious commitment, we found that Fairness was predicted by outreaching faith; Care was positively predicted by outreaching faith and negatively predicted by belief in an authoritarian God; Authority was predicted by literalism; and Purity was predicted by literalism and authoritarian God representations. Our results highlight the need to consider individual differences in religious beliefs in theorizing about moral foundations.

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1. Introduction

Social scientists and the media have devoted considerable attention to the links between religion, conservatism, and morality, especially regarding U.S. Christians (Brint & Abrutyn, 2010; Ludeke, Johnson, & Bouchard, 2013; Piazza & Sousa, 2014; Young, Willer, & Keltner, 2013). Much of this research has focused on religious conservatives, a strategy that may neglect the religious diversity that exists among Christians.

Like other monotheistic groups, Christians generally base their religious beliefs on scripture, but they vary in how they approach and interpret scripture (e.g., viewing scripture literally or not; Porter & Robinson, 2011). Some Christians are highly committed to their religious group whereas others are not (Pew Research, 2012). Christians also vary in their endorsement of redistributive policies and social justice (Hook & Davis, 2012; Sandage & Morgan, 2013). There is also variability in the extent to which Christians think of God as wrathful (Froese & Bader, 2010; Johnson, Okun, & Cohen, 2015; Wood et al., 2010).

Religious beliefs and religious group commitments may be especially influential in shaping moral foundation priorities because religion involves basic beliefs about what exists, what can be known, and the purpose of life (Johnson, Hill, & Cohen, 2011; Jost et al., 2014). In the present research, we investigate whether individual differences in religious beliefs are associated with variability in the endorsement of five moral foundations posited by Moral Foundations Theory (MFT).

1.1. Moral foundations theory

Haidt, Graham, and their colleagues (Graham et al., 2011; Haidt, 2013) have argued that morality involves at least five moral foundations. These moral foundations involve systems of values, virtues, psychological mechanisms, and social norms that function in concert to suppress selfishness and facilitate social interactions. The foundation of fairness/cheating (Fairness) helps individuals form mutually beneficial and cooperative alliances with others. Fairness has been linked with a desire for social justice and egalitarianism (Graham et al., 2011). The care/harm (Care) foundation involves empathy and compassion toward others. Those who prioritize Care are attuned to the suffering, distress, and needs of others. Thus, Care has been linked with empathy, generosity, and pacifism (Graham et al., 2011). Together Fairness and Care are referred to as individualizing moral foundations because they focus on the individual.

A second group of moral foundations comprise the so-called binding moral foundations because they facilitate group cohesion. The loyalty/

betrayal (Loyalty) foundation helps individuals form strong alliances with others and Loyalty has been shown to be associated with a desire for national and family security (Graham et al., 2011). The authority/subversion (Authority) foundation regulates hierarchies in groups and has been linked with obedience, respect for tradition, honoring one's parents, a desire for social order, and approval of corporal punishment (Graham et al., 2011). Purity/degradation (Purity) borrows from the disgust response that evolved to help individuals avoid physical contamination and disease (Graham & Haidt, 2010). Purity has been linked with religious attendance; values associated with cleanliness, self-discipline, and negative attitudes toward homosexuals and casual sex (Graham et al., 2011).

1.2. Individual differences in moral foundation priorities

Although most humans share concerns about these five moral domains, they endorse and rely upon them differently (Haidt, 2013). Differences in conservatives' versus liberals' moral priorities, across the five moral foundations, have been the focus of considerable theorizing and research (Frimer, Gaucher, & Schaefer, 2014; Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Koleva, Graham, Iyer, Ditto, & Haidt, 2012). For example, liberals tend to prioritize moral foundations that focus on protecting individuals from harm (high Care) and injustice (high Fairness) and providing individual freedoms (low Authority) (Graham et al., 2011). In contrast, conservatives tend to have more moderate scores on Fairness and Care, but tend to score higher than liberals on the three "binding" moral foundations, prioritizing group Loyalty, obedience to Authority, and maintaining the ideological and physical Purity of the community (Graham et al., 2011; Haidt & Graham, 2007).

Conservatism is often linked with religiosity (e.g., Graham et al., 2009; Piazza & Sousa, 2014), and religious individuals in the U.S. often endorse conservative ideologies (Jost et al., 2014). It is understandable, therefore, that MFT posits that religious individuals will prioritize the binding moral foundations that also tend to be important to conservatives (i.e., Loyalty, Authority, and Purity; Graham & Haidt, 2010). This claim is partly supported in that one outcome of religion is binding people into cooperative groups (Durkheim, 1995/1912; Norenzayan, 2013).

Yet religion is not monolithic; there are many facets of religion (Atran & Norenzayan, 2004; Saroglou, 2011) and many ways of being religious. Differences in religiosity are associated with differences in conservatism (Cohen et al., 2009; Woodberry & Smith, 1998) but, we hypothesize that religious variability may also differentially predict moral foundation priorities. Indeed, conflating religiosity and conservatism may have obscured important differences in both constructs and may fail to capture the variability in moral foundation priorities that exists between even highly religious individuals.

There has been some research investigating the effect of general religiosity on the five moral foundations (e.g., Piazza & Landy, 2013; Piazza & Sousa, 2014) and some research investigating the effects of religious variability on what might be construed as a single moral foundation such as Fairness (e.g., Shariff & Norenzayan, 2011) or Care (i.e., Johnson, Cohen, & Okun, 2015; Norenzayan, 2014). Yet, we are aware of only one empirical study (Graham et al., 2009) that has examined how religious variability might differentially predict the range of moral foundation priorities. In their analysis of church sermons taken from theologically liberal and conservative churches, Graham et al. (2009) found that liberal churches used more words related to Care and Fairness relative to the conservative churches; in contrast, the conservative churches used more words related to Authority and Purity. One limitation of this research, however, is that it focused on religious group differences (e.g., comparing sermons from religious groups)—which does not measure how laypersons might perceive and internalize those sermons.

In the present research, we attempt to fill this gap in the literature and also extend previous work by examining the extent to which individual differences in religiosity among Christians might differentially, but predictably, relate to each of the five moral foundations.

1.2.1. Religious commitment

Religion often involves significant costs including time and material goods, and yet also benefits individuals by binding them into communities (Durkheim, 1995/1912). In times of resource scarcity or stress, when it may be particularly important to identify ingroup members, religious groups often develop elaborate rituals or strict social norms (McCann, 1999) that implicitly serve as displays of loyalty to the religious group (Sosis & Alcorta, 2003).

However, individual Christians may vary in the extent to which they feel committed to an organized religious group and many report being unaffiliated with any particular group or denomination (Pew Research, 2012; Roof, 1993). We expected that differences in religious group commitment would predict the priority given to the moral foundation of Loyalty. In accord with MFT, we also expected religious commitment to be a positive predictor of the other binding moral foundations, Authority and Purity.

1.2.2. Outreaching faith

There has been a fair amount of research and theory regarding religious prosociality, whether or not it exists, and whether or not it is circumscribed by an ingroup bias (see Galen, 2012; Norenzayan, 2013; Saroglou, 2012). Despite mixed experimental results, national surveys indicate that religious people are often more likely to care for the needs of others via organized volunteerism than are non-religious individuals (Jackson, Bachmeier, Wood, & Craft, 1995; Ruiter & DeGraaf, 2006). Furthermore, in the latter half of the twentieth century, a number of Christian denominations (e.g., Mainline Protestants) became increasingly concerned about fairness, social justice, civil rights, and the application of Christian ethics to alleviate poverty and economic inequality (Williams, 2002).

One inspiration for religious prosociality may be devotion to God. Jesus taught that the greatest commandment was to love God and the second was to love one's neighbor (Matt 22:35–40), and the scriptures state that devotion to God involves caring for others (I John 4:20). Indeed, in a study of Protestant religious and social attitudes (Effective Christian education, 1990), researchers defined faith maturity as outreaching faith, having both a vertical (i.e., reaching toward God) and a horizontal component (i.e., reaching out to others).

Yet there is substantial variability in outreaching faith, and Christians have differed throughout history as to whether "good works" and concerns about social issues are viewed as important or peripheral dimensions of spirituality (Sandage & Morgan, 2013). We expected that individual differences in outreaching faith would predict the moral foundations of Care and Fairness inasmuch as these foundations are most closely aligned with concern for the well-being of others (Care) including the oppressed or disadvantaged (Fairness).

1.2.3. God representations

Generally, religiosity has been associated with right-wing authoritarianism, aggression toward deviants, and submission to authority (Jost et al., 2014). However, these social attitudes may hinge on belief in a punishing God. Evolutionary theorists have argued people will act more equitably if a supernatural punisher is watching from above (Norenzayan, 2013). Yet reminders of a punishing God have been shown to increase aggression (Bushman, Ridge, Das, Key, & Busath, 2007) and authoritarian God representations are often positively correlated with authoritarian values (Froese & Bader, 2010; Johnson et al., 2015).

Furthermore, there is wide variability in the extent to which people think of God as commanding, punishing, and wrathful (i.e., authoritarian) rather than as a benevolent source of help and forgiveness (Froese & Bader, 2010; Wood et al., 2010). We expected to find that belief in an authoritarian God would be a positive predictor of the moral