



Religiousness and environmental concern: A multilevel and multi-country analysis of the role of life satisfaction and indulgence^{☆, ☆ ☆}

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Religiousness
Environmental concern
Life satisfaction
World values survey
Single items
Multi-level modeling
Sustainable consumption
Indulgence

ABSTRACT

Religion influences a wide variety of consumer attitudes and behaviors. However, existing research on the relationship between religion and environmental concern (EC) remains fragmented, typically concentrating on one or very few national cultures, and frequently focuses on religious affiliation rather than religiousness. The current research addresses the relationship between religiousness and EC through the analysis of data from 47,130 individuals residing in 34 countries. Using multilevel analysis, the results reveal an overall positive relationship between religiousness and EC. The respondents' life satisfaction and indulgence (measured at the country level) moderate this relationship. Taken collectively, the results suggest that marketers and public policy makers interested in promoting environmentally-friendly practices may leverage religiousness and related values as agents of pro-environmental change.

1. Introduction

Religion establishes social norms, guides individual behavior, and serves as a basis for societal structures, morals, and laws (Cohen, 2009). An estimated 68% of people worldwide indicate that religion is important in their daily lives (Diener, Tay, & Myers, 2011). It is therefore not surprising that substantial research efforts have focused on the relationship between religion and consumption (Mathras, Cohen, Mandel, & Mick, 2016). For example, previous research investigates how religion and trust affect advertising (Minton, 2015) and how religious labels influence purchase intent (Rauschnabel, Herz, Schlegelmilch, & Ivens, 2015; Schlegelmilch, Khan, & Hair Jr., 2016). Further, researchers from different fields have become particularly interested in how religion relates to pro-environmental behavior. For example, a special topic section of the *Journal of Business Research* (Engelland, 2014) explores how religion relates to humanism, marketing, and the consumption of socially responsible products, services, and ideas.

Notwithstanding the advances made in investigating the role of religion in consumer behavior in general, and in pro-environmental behavior in particular, findings on the relationship between religion

and environmental concern (EC) remain fragmented and contradictory (see, for example, Minton, Kahle, & Kim, 2015; White, 1967). Extant research concentrates on one or very few national cultures (Felix & Braunsberger, 2016; Martin & Bateman, 2014; Minton et al., 2015; Ramasamy, Yeung, & Au, 2010) or focuses on religious affiliation (for example, being Catholic, Protestant, or Muslim) rather than an individual's religiousness, i.e. the presence and/or strength of religious beliefs (Brammer, Williams, & Zinkin, 2007). Further, additional research is needed to address potentially important boundary conditions that may affect this relationship. This patchwork approach is regrettable, considering the urgent need to expand both EC and environmentally responsible consumer behavior (Bamossy & Englis, 2010). Understanding how religiousness (i.e., the perception of oneself as religious or not) connects to EC along with the boundary conditions governing this relationship will allow policy makers and managers to leverage religiousness as an agent for pro-environmental change.

Drawing on the greening of religion (Tucker & Grim, 2001) and religious role expectation theory (Weaver & Agle, 2002), our paper contributes to the ongoing conversation on White's (1967) thesis that Western religion stands contrary to pro-environmental values. We

[☆] No conflicts of interest.

^{☆☆} This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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extend existing studies methodologically, theoretically, and practically. First, we combine 47,130 individual-level responses from 34 countries regarding religiousness and EC from the World Values Survey (WVS) with individual-level (life satisfaction) and country-level (indulgence) measures. Due to the nested data structure of the study, we employ multilevel analysis (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002) to test the cross-interactions of individual and country-level predictor variables (Garson, 2013). This design contributes to an emerging stream of research that uses secondary data in a multilevel context (Griffith & Rubera, 2014). To this end, multilevel analysis provides an avenue to avoid the ecological fallacy (i.e., the inaccurate inference that characteristics at the aggregate level mirror those at lower hierarchical levels; Taras, Kirkman, & Steel, 2010).

Second, we draw on post-materialist value change theory (Inglehart, 1981; Kidd & Lee, 1997) to predict the relationship between religiousness and EC through the moderation of life satisfaction and indulgence. We hypothesize that at low levels of life satisfaction, non-religious individuals will display low levels of EC as their lower-order needs are unmet (Veenhoven, 2005). Conversely, religious individuals with low levels of life satisfaction will show higher levels of EC because concern for others is dictated by religious doctrine, even when lower order needs are unmet. At high levels of life satisfaction, this difference disappears because non-religious individuals have their basic needs fulfilled, which frees them to focus on higher-order needs related to EC. Congruent with conflicting values theory (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002), we suggest that the value of allowing or promoting gratification in highly indulgent societies may conflict with religious doctrines that advocate restraint. However, this conflict does not develop in low indulgence economies. Whereas life satisfaction represents a predominantly cognitive assessment (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985), indulgence is primarily affect-driven (Wilcox, Kramer, & Sen, 2011). Thus, our moderation analyses explore how cognition and affect interact with religiousness in assessing EC.

Third, our research identifies important practical implications. Specifically, demonstrating that higher levels of religiousness are associated with higher levels of EC generates important opportunities for policy makers and environmental organizations who may choose to build alliances with faith communities. Managers may utilize our findings to design activities aimed at fostering pro-environmental attitudes. Further, informed by the moderating effects of life satisfaction and indulgence, policy makers may work to improve living conditions in societies with low levels of life satisfaction (where basic needs are typically not met; Veenhoven, 2005), and marketers can focus on promoting “indulgent” eco-products rather than focusing solely on the functional benefits of pro-environmental behaviors.

2. Theoretical framework

In his provocative thesis, White (1967) argues that Christianity contradicts pro-environmental values through a dogma of human mastery over nature and a fundamentally anthropocentric world-view. Subsequent empirical research has produced some support for this thesis. For example, Leary, Minton, and Mittelstaedt (2016) find that non-religious Americans engage in increased sustainable behavior. On the other hand, recent research suggests that highly religious Judeo-Christian consumers are as likely to engage in pro-environmental behaviors as non-religious consumers (Martin & Bateman, 2014). Minton (2013) finds that religiousness is positively related to sustainable consumption attitudes and behaviors. Minton et al. (2015) also find that both devout Buddhists and devout Christians display higher levels of sustainable behaviors than Buddhists and Christians with lower levels of religiousness, while Felix and Braunsberger (2016) report a positive association between intrinsic religious orientation and pro-environmental attitudes for catholic consumers. In summary, the debate on this topic presents opportunities for refinement.

For the purpose of this research, we define EC as an “individual's

affective evaluation of environmental issues rather than an appraisal of the behaviors that could address those issues” (Newton, Tsarenko, Ferraro, & Sands, 2015, p. 1975). Our expectation for the relationship between religiousness and EC builds on the interplay between the “greening of religion” (Tucker & Grim, 2001) and role expectation theory (Weaver & Agle, 2002). Historically, the world's religions have been slow to respond to environmental challenges, and there is frequently a disjunction between ecologically sensitive religious principles and concrete environmental practices. However, religious leaders across many religious denominations increasingly embrace the principles of sustainability and environmental protection (Hitzhusen & Tucker, 2013; Tucker & Grim, 2001). For Judeo-Christian religions, the greening of religion has been documented since the early 1980s and has recently gained momentum (Cui, Jo, & Velasquez, 2015; Kalamas, Cleveland, & Laroche, 2014). Importantly, a greening of religion has been observed for virtually all major religious denominations (El Jurdi, Batat, & Jafari, 2017). For instance, Rabbi Ishmar Schorsch of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York has frequently spoken on the critical state of the environment, and the Greek Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew has called the environmental destruction in the Black Sea and along the Danube River an ecological sin in several of his seminars. For more than three decades, Seyyed Hossein Nasr has written and spoken widely on the sacred nature of the environment from the Islamic perspective, and the government of Iran and the United Nations Environment Program sponsored conferences in Tehran that focused on Islamic principles and practices for environmental protection (Tucker & Grim, 2001, 2007).

With a firm foundation for a greening of religion, we now draw on role expectation theory from a symbolic interactionist perspective to develop our argument that pro-environmental religious doctrine influences the individual's belief system. Role expectation theory builds on the assumption that religion is a salient driver of a person's self-identity and suggests that “religions offer role expectations that, when internalized through repeated social interaction, contribute to a person's self-identity as an adherent of a specific religion” (Weaver & Agle, 2002, p. 80). This view resonates with Shariff, Norenzayan, and Henrich (2010), who argue that the human capacity for deep commitment plays a major role in solving evolutionary problems associated with cooperative behavior. Thus, religion functions as a cultural adaptation process that allows individuals to adjust to challenges in the environment at much faster rates than genetic evolution. In summary, based on the greening of religious doctrine coupled with adherents' commitment to religious values, we predict a positive relationship between religiousness and EC:

H1. Religiousness is positively related to EC.

As shown above, the extant literature on the relationship between religiousness and EC remains fragmented, and little is known about boundary conditions. We argue that life satisfaction and indulgence, two variables that represent fundamental value perceptions, act as moderators of the religiousness – EC relationship. Life satisfaction is conceptualized as a predominantly cognitive assessment of one's state of affairs (Diener et al., 1985; Diener, Inglehart, & Tay, 2013), whereas indulgence relates to emotional drives and urges (Wilcox et al., 2011). Thus, incorporating life satisfaction and indulgence as moderators allows us to test how cognition and emotion jointly influence the relationship between religiousness and EC. We first comment on the expected interaction effect between religiousness and life satisfaction (hypothesis 2) and then focus on the moderating effect of indulgence (hypothesis 3).

Life satisfaction refers to satisfaction with life as a whole rather than with specific, predefined domains. It has been defined as a global cognitive assessment of how satisfied a person is with his/her present state of affairs based on his/her chosen criteria (Ahuvia & Friedman, 1998; Diener et al., 1985). The extant literature suggests that life satisfaction relates to both religiousness (Zullig, Ward, & Horn, 2006) and

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