The Roles of Religiosity and Spirituality in Moral Reasoning

Rachel Baumsteiger

Tiffany Chenneville
cennevi@mail.usf.edu

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Religious and spirituality play a significant role in the development of personal values, which influence moral reasoning. Consequently, many social scientists and philosophers have theorized about the relationships between religion, spirituality, and moral reasoning.

Forsyth (1980) proposed a taxonomy of ethical ideologies. The central issue of the taxonomy is whether the best possible outcomes can be achieved. This is consistent with Fletcher’s situational ethics (1966), which says that morality is based on which action is most fitting rather than which action is most right. Situationalists are highly relativistic and idealistic. They believe that moral behavior depends upon each individual’s personal values. This is in line with ethical egoism, which argues that moral standards depend upon individual self-interest (Forsyth, 1980). Situationalists are also likely to make exceptions to rules based on consequences. This reasoning style is consistent with deontology, which emphasizes using natural law or rationality to make moral judgments. Meanwhile, absolutists have high idealism and low relativism. They believe that moral absolutes can be identified and that each action in each situation. This is consistent with Fitcher’s situational ethics (1966), which says that morality is based on which action is most fitting rather than which action is most right. Absolutists have high idealism and low relativism (Forsyth, 1980). They believe that the best possible outcomes can always be achieved. This is consistent with a strong form of deontology (Forsyth, 1980), which says that actions should produce the best result for the most people.

In the current study, participants were led to the first page of the survey. If they performed any other action, then they were directed away from the survey. After participants completed the background survey, they were randomly assigned to one of the four religious conditions. First, results suggest that religious people tend to be idealistic but not relativistic. This means that, in comparison to less-religious people, religious people are more likely to believe that the best outcome can be achieved, and be more likely to make decisions by considering the consequences of their actions. Forsyth (1980) describes this classification as an “idealism and relativism as ‘absolutism.’” Based on Forsyth’s (1980) research, these correlations may suggest that religious individuals may have more extreme views on contemporary moral issues, make no moral judgments on others’ behavior, and view themselves more negatively when they behave immorally. Interestingly, there were no significant differences between religious groups on either idealism or relativism. However, there were two participants from non-Christian religious groups, which may have affected this finding. The fact that most participants were led as a service in this study because the nature of Christianity may differ significantly from other religious groups, which may have led to different results. Thus, the proportion of religious affiliations within this sample reflects the general U.S. population, it would be beneficial for future researchers to study non-Christian religious people to determine whether the same results are generalizable to other religious groups.

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