A Motivational Systems Theory Approach to the Relation Between Religious Experiences and Religious Motives

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This study used motivational systems theory (MST; Ford, 1992) to clarify a number of ambiguities surrounding conceptualizations and measures of religious experience and motivation. These ambiguities refer to the differences between numinous and mystical religious experience, extrovertive and introvertive mystic religious experience, and intrinsic and extrinsic religious experience. On the basis of the assumption that personal goals and affective processes are central and relatively independent components of motivation, this investigation explores the relation between a multidimensional measure of religious motives recently developed by Lazar, Kravetz and Frederich-Kedem (2002) and Hood's (1975) multidimensional measure of religious experience. Correlation analysis of the responses of 164 young adult male Jewish orthodox students of Jewish parochial schools to the previously mentioned measures lead to a number of speculations about the ambiguities concerning religious experience and motives.

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According to Paloutzian (1996), Glock and Stark’s (1965) typology of religious phenomena provides a comprehensive conceptual map for the psychological study of religion. This map consists of the five following dimensions: ritualistic, ideological, consequential, intellectual, and experiential. Since James’ (1902) classic psychological analysis of religious experience, a limited number of studies of religious experience have been carried out (Jakobsen, 1999; Nelson, 1997; Wuthnow, 1978). This typology also makes no mention of religious motivation although the consequential dimension may be linked to religious motivation. This study explores the possibility of using motivational systems theory (MST; Ford, 1992) to clarify a number of major ambiguities connected with religious experience and motivation.

The previously mentioned studies of religious experience include psychometric efforts to delineate facets of religious experience. Hood’s (1975) development of the Mysticism Scale (M-Scale) is an example of research that has produced relatively stable psychometric findings. Analysis of Hood’s M-Scale originally produced two factors. Hood, Morris, and Watson (1993) later uncovered an alternative three-factor structure for the M-Scale. In this structure, one factor was similar to the factor that Hood labeled religious interpretation because it conveyed more traditionally defined positive religious experiences, which include such experiences as a source of knowledge and a feeling of a holy presence. A general mysticism factor decomposed into two separate factors: introvertive mysticism, defined as an experience of self-loss, and extrovertive mysticism, defined as the experience of unity with all. This three-factor structure has been confirmed in more recent investigations on samples of Americans and Iranians (Hood et al., 2001) and Israeli Jews (Lazar & Kravetz, this issue).

However, even given this measure, a great deal of ambiguity still surrounds the psychological meaning of religious experience. Major sources of this ambiguity are two conceptual and empirical dichotomies that are thought to underlie the factor structure of the M-Scale. One of these dichotomies distinguishes between numinous religious experience and mystical religious experience whereas the other dichotomy disassociates extrovertive mystical religious experience from introvertive mystical religious experience.

According to Hood, Spilka, Hunsberger, and Gorsuch (1996), numinous religious experience and mystical religious experience can be considered the two poles of religion (p. 226). Hood et al. also suggested that the interpretive factor of the M-Scale represents numinous religious experience whereas the introvertive and extrovertive factors refer to mystical religious experience. Despite these claims that numinous religious experience and mystical experience are conceptually and operationally distinguishable, the terms used to differentiate between them appear somewhat contradictory. On one hand, Hood et al. tie numinous religious consciousness to the transcendental characteristics of religion and mystical religious experience to the immanent characteristics of religion. On the other hand, these theoreticians consider numinous religion experience to be personal and mys-
tical religious experiences to be impersonal. This use of religious descriptors imply that the transpersonal experiences often associated with institutional religion are personal whereas immanent religious experience, often considered highly subjective, is impersonal.

As previously mentioned, recent factor analyses of the M-Scale has produced two relatively independent factors, one of which is considered a measure of introvertive mystical religious experience whereas the other is considered to be a measure of extrovertive mystical religious experience. However, here too, the very terms used to disassociate these two kinds of experience sometimes obfuscate rather than clarify. Thus, although unity is a central component of the term used to describe both kinds of experience (Hood et al., 1996, p. 225), the manner in which extrovertive differs from introvertive is not quite clear.

This investigation was an attempt to reduce these specified ambiguities as to the substance and function of religious experience. To do this, it examined, within the context of MST (Ford, 1992), the relation between Hood’s (1975) measure of religious experience and a multidimensional measure of religious motives recently developed by Lazar et al. (2002). MST posits personal goals and correlative affective-cognitive experiences as core components of human motivation. In accordance with this conceptual framework, Lazar et al.’s multidimensional measure of religious motives could be considered a representation of the personal goals that individuals report they are pursuing when they perform religious rituals. In addition, within the MST framework, the measure of religious experience could be postulated to be an assessment of the affective-cognitive experiential component of religious motivation, although religious experience encompasses additional aspects as well. According to Ford’s framework, these two constructs refer to relatively independent phenomena. However, because “the subjective experience of an emotion reveals the degree of success, failures, or problems a person is experiencing—or anticipates experiencing—in the pursuit of currently active personal goals” (Ford, 1992, p. 140), the pattern of the relations between these constructs could provide some insight into the psychological meaning of both phenomena.

The multidimensional measure of religious motives (Lazar et al., 2002), whose relation to religious experience was the focus of this study, differentiates between five motives for religious behavior—belief-in-divine-order, ethnic identity, family, social, and upbringing. Although this measure was a by-product of an attempt to test Allport’s (Allport & Ross, 1967) intrinsic–extrinsic dichotomy of religious motivation, confirmatory factor analysis of responses of 323 orthodox, traditional, and secular Israeli Jews to 111 reasons for carrying out rituals did not support a number of versions of this dichotomy (Lazar, 1999).

Four motives for religious behavior appear to be extrinsic because they refer to such goals as enhancing ethnic identity (e.g., “a feeling of belonging to the Jewish people”); fulfilling interpersonal and social based needs (e.g., “in order to be esteemed by others”); to strengthen and maintain the immediate family (e.g., “because
it unifies my family”); and to maintain a relation with past family experiences and upbringing (e.g., “since I was educated to do so”). However, the belief-in-divine-order motive for religious behavior refers to such intrinsic religious goals for performing religious rituals as a desire to be close to God as well as such apparently extrinsic goals as an attempt to avoid divine punishment. Thus, this motive suggests that the boundary between intrinsic and extrinsic religious motivation may be relatively fuzzy (see Hunt & King, 1971, for conceptual critiques of Allport’s (Allport & Ross, 1967) intrinsic–extrinsic religious motivation dichotomy). This investigation of the relation between kinds of religious experiences, which would seem to be an inherently intrinsic phenomenon because they are essentially subjective, and kinds of religious motives, which have been shown to be mainly extrinsic, might shed light on how Allport’s classic intrinsic–extrinsic dichotomy is expressed by specific and concrete personal religious goals.

In summary, this investigation attempts to answer the following research question: In what way do the relations between the measures of religious experience and the measures of religious motives reduce the specified ambiguities surrounding religious experience and motives?

**METHOD**

**Research Participants**

This study’s sample consisted of 164 male participants enrolled in five yeshivas (religious parochial schools) centrally located in Israel. All of these participants identified themselves as orthodox Jews. The age of the participants ranged from 17 to 28, with an average age of 20.6 years and a standard deviation of 2.5 years.

**Measures**

*M-Scale.* This 32-item measure of religious experience was developed by Hood (1975). Respondents are requested to indicate the extent to which each statement is true of her or his own experiences. The final scoring of each item is from 1 (*definitely not true*) to 5 (*definitely true*), with the response category, “I cannot decide,” scored as 3. These items are grouped into eight four-item groups: positive affect (e.g., “I have experienced profound joy”), religious holiness (e.g., “I have had an experience which seemed holy to me”), noetic quality (e.g., “I have had an experience in which a new view of reality was revealed to me”), ineffability (e.g., “I have had an experience that is impossible to communicate”), unity in diversity (e.g., “I have had an experience in which I realized the oneness of myself with all things”), inner subjectivity (e.g., “I have had an experience in which all things seemed to be conscious”), unity of ego (e.g., “I have had an experience in which something greater
than myself seemed to absorb me”), timelessness and spacelessness (e.g., “I have had an experience which was both timeless and spaceless”).

On the basis of confirmatory factor analyses for an Israeli Jewish sample (Lazar & Kravetz, this issue) these groups of items were combined into three scales of religious experience: interpretive, which includes the first four groups of items, extrovertive, which includes the following two groups of items, and introvertive, which includes the final two groups. This grouping is similar to that used by Hood (Hood & Williamson, 2000; Hood et al., 2001). Cronbach alpha reliability coefficients for these measures were .72 for the introvertive factor, .84 for the extrovertive factor, and .72 for the interpretive scale and are comparable to those reported by Hood et al. (2001) for an Iranian sample and for an American sample.

Motivation for Religious Behavior Questionnaire–Form A (MRBQ–A). Lazar et al. (2002) developed this 58-item measure of motives for religious behavior. Each of this scale’s items refers to a reason for performing religious rituals. Before filling out this measure, respondents select those religious rituals that they perform from a list of popular religious rituals. They then indicate their motives for performing these rituals by choosing one of five response categories for each of the 58 items. These response categories range from 1 (not at all important) to 5 (very important). The MRBQ–A consists of the following five scales of religious motives: belief-in-divine-order (e.g., “fear of transgression,” “contact with God”), ethnic identity (e.g., “it gives me a feeling of belonging to the Jewish people”), social (e.g., “in order to be esteemed by others”), family (e.g., “because it unifies my family”) and upbringing (e.g., “since I was educated to do so”). The Cronbach reliability coefficients for these scales were .92, .84, .89, .93, and .79, respectively, and are comparable to those reported by Lazar et al. (2002).

Demographic questions. The research participants responded to questions regarding their age, gender, and religious and ethnic background.

Procedure

This study was part of a comprehensive investigation of aspects of religious experience of Jewish persons living in Israel. After receiving permission to conduct the study in various yeshivas, a research assistant approached a senior student in each yeshiva and asked him to recruit students who were willing to participate in a study of various aspects of religion. Approximately 30 students in each yeshiva agreed to participate in the study. The questionnaires were distributed to these research participants and collected over the next few days by the research assistant.
RESULTS

Scores were calculated separately for the measures of religious experience and for the measures of religious motives by dividing the sum of scores on each measure by the number of items for each measure for each research participant. Thus, the potential range for each measure was from 1 to 5. The intercorrelations for these measures are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 indicates that the relations between the three measures of religious experience are positive, moderately high, and statistically significant. With the exception of the correlation between belief-in-divine-order scale and the social scale, the relations between the five measures of religious motives are also positive, moderately high, and statistically significant. However, of the 15 correlations between the measures of religious experience and religious motives, only 8 of these correlations are statistically significant. All of these correlations are low to moderate and only 5 are positive.

DISCUSSION

This study attempted to use MST (Ford, 1992) to clarify a number of ambiguities surrounding conceptualizations and measures of religious experience and motives. A principal assumption of this study was that a multidimensional measure of religious motives recently developed by Lazar et al. (2002) is related to the personal goal component of MST and that Hood’s (1975) multidimensional measure of religious experience is related to the emotion component of this theory of human motivation. On the basis of this assumption, we explored the possibility that the relation between these two sets of measures might shed light on the substance of the different kinds of religious motives and experience.

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*p < .05. **p < .01.
The relatively high and pervasive correlations within each set of measures and the relatively sparse correlations between the two sets of measures indicate that these two constructs represent relatively independent phenomena with specific areas of overlap. To some extent, these areas of overlap between the measure of human motives for religious behavior and the measure of religious and mystic experience adds substantive meaning to the different kinds of religious experience and different kinds of religious motives.

The patterns of correlations between the measures of religious motives and the measures of religious experiences leads to the following conclusions about the ambiguities concerning religious experience and motives delineated in the introduction. One of these ambiguities referred to how Allport and Ross’s (1967) classic intrinsic–extrinsic dichotomy is expressed by specific and concrete religious goals represented by the measures of religious motives.

As noted in the introduction to this study, the belief-in-divine-order motive for religious behavior refers to such goals for performing religious rituals as a desire to be close to God, which seem to reflect intrinsic motivation, as well as such goals as an attempt to avoid divine punishment, which appears to reflect extrinsic motivation. Viewing this motive as reflecting the extent to which an individual’s religious behavior is guided by his or her intention to adhere to the norms of institutional and organized religion could somewhat resolve this discrepancy. According to this interpretation, the belief-in-divine-order motive would represent a culturally pervasive form of extrinsic religious motivation. However, the relatively high relations between the three kinds of religious experience and the belief-in-divine-order motive supports the notion that this motive has epistemological, ontological, and experiential roots. Whereas the epistemological and ontological roots may be, in part, an extrinsic outgrowth of social and cultural norms, the experiential roots would seem to be inherently intrinsic. Thus, this motive and the religious experiences associated with it suggest that statements associated with institutionalized religion such as those pertaining to divine retribution may symbolize a belief in divine justice. Accordingly, such a belief may be one component of the terminal goals of the religious domain and, thus, may be considered intrinsic to this domain.

This study also attempted to delineate more specifically the differences between introvertive religious experience and extrovertive religious experience. Extrovertive religious experiences were found to be related to different motives for religious behavior than were introvertive religious experiences. Whereas introvertive religious experience had only a low, although statistically significant, positive relation with the belief-in-divine-order motive for religious behavior, extrovertive religious experience also had statistically significant, although low, positive relations with both the family and the ethnic motives for religious behavior. These latter relations may stem from the unity-in-plurality theme that appears common to the different phenomena represented by these measures. Extrovertive religious experience has been described as a feeling of oneness with all things
The family motive for religious behavior is an expression of such personal goals as the desire for family oneness and cohesiveness (i.e., “provides occasions for family gatherings,” “unifies the family”) whereas the ethnic motive for religious behavior is an expression of such personal goals as the desire to be part of an ethnic or cultural entity (i.e., “feeling of belonging to the Jewish people,” “expression of my connection to Judaism”). Apparently, persons for whom religious ritual is a source of family cohesiveness or ethnic or cultural identity find the family or the ethnic group to be a correlate of religious mystical experience. This finding seems to be inconsistent with Kaufmann’s (1972) claim that persons who have mystical experience find the objective correlative of this experience “either beyond nature or in nature as a whole, as opposed to any conjunction of things in nature” (p. 327). If Hood’s measure of extrovertive experience is a valid index of a kind of mysticism, this investigation’s findings suggest that this kind of experience reflects how individuals imbue experiences, usually considered mundane, with a sense of holiness.

The single low, but statistically significant, positive relation between introvertive religious experience and belief-in-a-divine-order goals for religious behavior could be accounted for in a number of ways. It may be linked to the apparent diversity of goals included in the measure of the belief-in-divine-order motive for religious behavior. Goals such as a desire to be together with the Creator seem to reflect more personal and intrinsic motivation whereas other goals, such as the desire to avoid transgression, appear to reflect more institutional and extrinsic motivation. A more fine-grain analysis of this measure along with the addition of items representing more personal and intrinsic motivation may produce a measure of more personal intrinsic religious motivation alongside of a more institutional extrinsic measure. Introvertive religious experience may relate more to the latter measure than to the former. The lack of findings for introvertive religious experience may also be a consequence of the relatively homogeneous sample of persons who participated in this study. All of the participants in the present study identified themselves as religious Jews. A significant number of persons who identify themselves as secular nevertheless profess a belief in God and report that they perform certain rituals (Lazar et al., 2002). The correlation between introvertive religious experience and belief-in-divine-order motive may be higher for persons whose religious identity deemphasizes the highly structured institutional elements of religious Judaism.

Another major concern of this study was the differentiation between numinous and religious experience. The high correlation between the belief-in-divine-order motive for religious behavior and interpretive religious experience appears to confirm Hood et al.’s (1996) suggestion that the interpretive factor of the M-Scale represents numinous religious experience. In terms of this explanation, interpretive religious experience may be indicative of the extent to which an individual’s reli-
gious conduct is consonant with his or her intention to act in accordance with his or her belief in a divine order. The negative relations between interpretive religious experience and both social (i.e., “everybody does it,” “to meet people”), upbringing (i.e., “I was educated to do so,” “habit from home”), and family goals (i.e., “provides occasions for family gatherings,” “unifies the family”) for religious behavior provides further evidence for the proposition that interpretive religious experience guides the desire to adhere to a classic religious framework. Performing religious rituals because they provide an opportunity to meet friends or because they are in keeping with family tradition or because they provide occasions for family gatherings has been categorized as extrinsic-social religious motivation (Gorsuch & McPherson, 1989) and may be considered to be antithetical to numinous religious experiences.

These explanations of this study’s findings generate a number of speculations that should be tested by further research. One speculation is that the intrinsic–extrinsic dichotomy of religious motivation may profitably be conceptualized in terms of the extent to which a religious goal is considered terminal in a domain defined as religious due to its association to religious experience. Another speculation is that certain aspects of mystical experiences differ from numinous experiences and other aspects of religious experience in that the former experiences may serve to transform the mundane into the holy. Research should be conducted to assess these speculations with persons who identify themselves as traditional and secular Jews as well as with persons who belong to other religious traditions.

REFERENCES


