East vs. West:

Psychology of religion in East Asian cultures

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Abstract

Despite advancements in psychology of religion, most of what we know is derived from studies in Western Christian cultures. We review recent research investigating the impact of religion on various outcomes in East Asian cultural and religious contexts (vs. Western Christian) including: religiosity components and measurement, health, personality, cognition and emotion, morality and values, and intergroup attitudes and behavior. While religion sometimes has similar effects across contexts (e.g., increased health, prosociality, and traditional values), the associations observed in Western contexts are often weaker or inexistent, especially in the moral domain. In some occasions, opposite effects of religion in East Asian contexts are observed (e.g., decreased prejudice). These observations suggest an interaction between religious and cultural factors.

Keywords: East Asia; Buddhism; Taoism; Folk beliefs; psychology of religion

Highlights

- Most of findings in psychology of religion are derived from Western Christian contexts
- Recent research investigating the impact of religion on various outcomes in East Asian contexts is systematically reviewed
- The effect of religion is often weaker or inexistent, especially in the moral domain in East Asia
- Opposite effects of religion in East Asia are observed such as decreased prejudice
- The dimension of individualism-collectivism provides avenues to understand the interplay between religion and culture

1. Introduction

Over the last decades, researchers have shown increasing interest in the impact of religion on individuals' cognition, attitudes, and behavior [1-2]. Despite advancements in psychology of religion, most of what we know is derived from theories and studies elaborated in Western Christian cultures. Only recently have psychologists begun to question the cross-cultural generalizability of their findings. While some scholars have theorized that religion should impact individuals similarly regardless of culture, others have argued that cross-religious differences mirror cross-cultural differences. Although both views received empirical support, the idea of an interaction between cultural and religious influences has gained popularity [3-4]. Religion, as a guardian of morality, self-control, and collective interests may indeed be less meaningful in collectivistic societies where cultural norms already fulfill these roles. We will review recent research investigating the impact of religion on various psychological outcomes in East Asian cultural and religious contexts (vs. Western Christian). East Asian cultures and religions include countries of the Sinosphere, historically influenced by China, and share traditions derived from Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, as well as typically East Asian religions such as Buddhism, Taoism, Shintoism, or Folk beliefs. Six themes will be covered: religiosity components and measurement, health, personality, cognition and emotion, morality and values, and intergroup attitudes and behavior.

2. Religiosity components and measurement

The East Asian religious landscape appears markedly different from that of Western Christianity. Many deities coexist under the same roof and individuals often practice a mixture of Chinese traditional religions: folk beliefs, Buddhism, Taoism (or Shintoism), and ancestor worship [5]. Even in China, where people are not willing to talk about religion and declare themselves to be nonbelievers, numerous individuals believe and engage in religious-like activities [6-7]. Religion in East Asia often appears to be more diffuse, less organized, but still very influential within society [6-8]. In this polytheistic-like context, traditional forced-choice approaches to measure religiosity may not be suitable. For instance, when asked to choose only one religious affiliation, Taiwanese often experience difficulties,

and are willing to select multiple denominations. Following Gries and colleagues [5], positive sum approaches used to assess beliefs in different traditions are better suited in East Asian societies.

Most often, studies in East Asian contexts use Western measurement tools or materials [e.g., 9], single items [e.g., 10-11], or uniquely adapted [e.g.,12] or created tools [e.g., 5, 13] which makes any comparison between cultural contexts difficult. Recently, an attempt was made to cross-culturally validate a multidimensional scale of religiosity [14]. While four main dimensions (i.e., social, cognitive, moral, and emotional) of religiosity are clearly identifiable in Western (i.e., Europe and U.S.) and East Asian contexts (i.e., Taiwan), these dimensions are less interrelated in East Asia [14]. The different aspects of religion seem to be less integrated in Eastern contexts [15]. Furthermore, in Taiwan, similarly to secular Europe, the cognitive and emotional dimensions of religion are preferred, while in religious Catholic countries (e.g., Poland, Italy) and the United States, the moral dimension is equally important [14]. These differences reflect the idea that East Asian religions are used to a lesser degree as a source of personal control [16] and moral order [17].

3. Health and well-being

Recent evidence suggests that the protective role of religiosity in health documented in Western Christian contexts [18] is cross-culturally valid. For instance, religious attendance among non-Christian Asian Americans is associated with fewer cases of depression [19]. Religious piety in older Taiwanese adults is related to a better quality of life, according to both physical and mental health indicators [20]. Furthermore, being Buddhist is positively associated with life satisfaction in 147 nations, including those in East Asian [21]. In China, Buddhist symbols and religiosity are associated with increased life satisfaction and happiness [22]. In Singapore, religiosity (among Christians, Buddhists and Muslims) is associated with positive emotions and well-being [23]. In addition, beliefs and techniques derived from East Asian religions are used in various health-related domains such as counseling, psychotherapy, or clinical psychology [24]. Buddhist-derived interventions such as mindfulness meditation, compassion-focused interventions, or love and kindness have

many benefits including the reduction of negative emotions (e.g., stress, anxiety), substance abuse, depression, or stress-related diseases. Parallel positive effects have been documented for subjective well-being, pain management, and positive emotions [25-29].

4. Personality and individual differences

Individual religiosity is typically associated with the traits of agreeableness, conscientiousness, and honesty/humility in Western contexts but unrelated to neuroticism, openness to experience (with some negative relations), and extraversion [13-14, 30-31]. Recent studies in East Asian cultures and religious groups show that, while the association between religiosity and agreeableness is cross-culturally valid, the positive relationship with conscientiousness is less pronounced [10, 32]. Furthermore, within East Asian societies of Buddhist, Taoist, and Chinese folk-belief traditions, openness to experience has a slightly positive relationship to individual religiosity [32-33]. Other interesting results show that, although religiosity is associated with paranormal beliefs across cultural contexts, religiosity is positively associated with trust in science among East Asian believers (i.e., South-Korea) while the opposite association holds for Western (i.e., Austria and Denmark) Christians [34]. In addition, while religiosity in Western Christian contexts is positively related to individual differences in closed-minded attitudes such as the need for closure or authoritarianism, Eastern religiosity in both Western and East Asian contexts is not [13-14]. Finally, religiosity is unrelated to individual differences in disgust sensitivity among the Taiwanese while this association is positive (fear of contamination) in Western contexts [35].

5. Cognition and emotion

Several authors have documented evidence of the divergent effects of religion on cognition across cultures. For instance, East Asian religiosity (vs. Christian) and religious concepts are associated with a higher tolerance of contradictions [35]. Furthermore, while exposure to religious concepts or religious coping increases acts of secondary control for European Americans, it does not do so for Koreans [16]. A recent study in Taiwan found that Buddhist (vs. Christian) religiosity is associated with a superior ability to infer others' mental states and a decreased self-serving bias [36]. East Asians also believe, to a greater extent

than Westerners, that fate is negotiable, as exemplified by the many rituals implying offerings in exchange of favors [37-38]. This has cognitive consequences including increased sense-making of surprising outcomes, persistence in goal-pursuit despite failures, and risky choices [37]. Finally, while religiosity is negatively correlated with education at the individual level in both Western and East Asian countries, at the country level, this relationship is moderated by cognitive abilities: In countries with the lowest (Sub-Saharian Africa) and highest (Sweden, Hong-Kong, and South-Korea) average IQs, the education-religiosity link is positive [40].

Although still scarce, researchers have reported some evidence that affective tendencies and experiences differ between Western and East Asian religious groups. Kim-Prieto and Diener [40] investigated the frequency and desirability of different emotions and found that Christians experienced, and wanted to experience, love more frequently than Buddhists, while Buddhists reported fewer peaks or dips in any type of emotion compared to Christians. Moreover, Western Christians placed more value on high-arousal positive states, i.e. excitement, while East Asian Buddhists showed a preference for low-arousal positive states, i.e. calm [41]. More recently, the analysis of social media messages showed that American Buddhists use more cognitive (vs. social) words as well as fewer positive emotional expressions than American Christians [42].

6. Morality and values

Religion shapes individuals' sense of morality and values [43]. Nevertheless, while religiosity is associated with restrictive sexual morality (e.g., disapproval of casual sex, homosexuality, abortion) and cooperative morality (e.g., disapproval of lying, cheating, harm) across countries, this association is weaker or null in East Asian countries [33,44-45]. Furthermore, although religiosity is positively associated with fertility around the globe [43], being Buddhist in East Asia (e.g., Japan) is related to lower fertility [46]. These differences in sociosexuality may be explained by the fact that sexuality in Buddhism is not formally associated with sin [46]. More recent studies have found that, in South-Korea, Buddhist religiosity does not prevent morally deviant behaviors such as delinquency or drinking [47]. The practice of mindfulness also attenuates moral reactions such as repair intentions [48].

Nevertheless, there are some inconsistencies. Buddhists tend, for instance, to have more anti-abortion attitudes than Christians [49]. Other studies conducted with Asians in Western contexts (mostly Christians) suggest that religiosity is associated with restrictive sexuality, low desire, and sexual guilt [50-51]. Moreover, religiosity across cultures is negatively related to short-term mating interests, though only among men in East Asia [33].

Religiosity across cultural and religious groups fosters similar values such as tradition, conformity, and benevolence while devaluing hedonism, power, and achievement [13,52]. Across religions and nations, religiosity is further associated with honesty, loyalty, concern for the environment and sustainable behavior, and intrinsic work values reflecting self-actualization at work [53-58]. The endorsement of Confucianism is positively correlated with a protestant work ethic (valuing and admiring hard work, 59) but the protestant work ethic is not related to prejudice against minorities in East Asian (vs. Western) societies [60]. Finally, at the country level, historically Protestant countries place greater value on private ownership than countries with Confucian traditions, and value competition more than historically Buddhist countries [43]. However, contrary to Western Christianity, Buddhist religiosity is not related to security, low direction and stimulation, but is positively associated with the value of universalism [13].

7. intergroup attitudes and behavior

It has been established that religious concepts and religiosity promote prosocial attitudes and behaviors such as helping or generosity [1]. Recently, several authors have confirmed this association in East Asian and Buddhist contexts. Religiosity and spirituality among East Asians (e.g., Chinese) of various affiliations are indeed associated with prosocial traits, attitudes, and behaviors such as compassionate love, helping, or generosity [61-62]. Exposure to Buddhist concepts increases the mental accessibility of prosocial concepts [63] as well as prosocial attitudes and behaviors in various populations including Westerners of Christian tradition [64] and East Asians of Buddhist/Taoist tradition [35,63]. Nevertheless, other authors have failed to find an effect of religious priming on prosociality among

Japanese [9] and Mongolians [65] possibly because of the priming method (i.e., religious words not adapted) or cultural interferences (i.e., nomadic generosity norms in Mongolia).

Religion in Western contexts has also been associated with prejudice [1]. Recent studies, however, show that East Asian religiosity is associated with lower prejudice (e.g., IAT) against various religious and ethnic groups [35,66]. These effects are partially explained by a greater tolerance of contradictions [35]. East Asian religious tolerance does not fully extend to moral outgroups such as homosexuals and atheists [66-67]. Several studies also suggest that priming Buddhist concepts decreases prejudice in various samples including Westerners of Christian tradition [68], Western Buddhists [64], and East Asians [68]. These effects are partially explained by a greater compassion and tolerance of contradictions. The use of Buddhist elements in advertisements against HIV/AIDS-related discrimination increases compassion, anti-prejudicial attitudes and interaction intentions among East Asian Buddhists [69]. Additionally, Buddhist inspired meditation techniques reduce age and racial bias [70] as well as discrimination [71]. However, these positive effects are not unequivocal. In 18 nations, coalitional rigidity was associated with intergroup hostility in every religious group, including Buddhists [72]. Furthermore, priming Buddhist concepts increased anti-gay prejudice in two studies among Western Christians [73] as well as for Christian and Buddhist Singaporeans [74]. Finally, when East Asians represent a minority group in a Western context, religiosity is associated with prejudice against other minorities [52].

8. Conclusion

While religion sometimes has similar effects across contexts, such as promoting health, prosocial traits and attitudes, and traditional values, the classic associations observed in Western cultural contexts are often weaker or inexistent, especially in the moral domain (e.g., restrictive sexuality, delinquency). In some instances, opposite effects of religion in East Asian contexts have even been observed, such as for intergroup prejudice, cognitive tendencies (e.g., inclusion of contradictions, theory of mind) or the valuation of specific affective states. Given that religion fulfill some basic needs (e.g., self-transcendence or buffer toward death-anxiety), it is not surprising that similar effects of religion can be observed

around the globe [3-4]. In the same vein, religion and culture having co-evolved, it is natural that similar cross-religious and cross-cultural differences occur (i.e., emotions). Nevertheless, interactions between religious and cultural factors suggest more complexity. It seems that religion in individualistic or collectivistic contexts has different roles or effects [4]. In collectivistic societies, were individuals are encouraged to adapt to others' needs, to cultivate strong in-group ties, and to follow binding moral obligations, there is no need for religion to be a warrant of morality or control. Although the individualism-collectivism dimension is not unequivocal, they may provide some interesting future avenues to understand the interplay between religion and culture [4].

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The authors show that religiosity among non-Christian East Asians (vs. Westerners) relates to lower prejudice against various ethnic and religious groups. This positive effect of East Asian religiosity on prejudice is mediated by higher tolerance toward contradictions. This

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