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**Understanding the psychology of religion:
The contribution of Self Determination Theory**

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In this chapter we analyze how Self Determination Theory contributed to the advancement of the psychology of religion. Since psychology of religion started to grow in the last decades and enlarged its interest to cover not only clinical and counseling psychology, but also all the other subfields including basic ones (see Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003), scholars became aware of the risks of studying religiosity as a monolithic phenomenon and started to approach it in a more articulated manner, with more complex questions (Pargament, 2002). In fact, religiosity can have both positive and negative impact on people lives, depending on the way it is endorsed, and a theory of human motivation such as Self Determination Theory can help to disentangle the different forms of religiosity and their implications.

The core concepts of Self Determination Theory

Self Determination Theory (SDT, Ryan & Deci, 2000) offered a specific conceptualization of the different ways in which values are endorsed and behaviors regulated, investigating the question of "why" a person engages in a certain activity. The motivation for performing an activity or a behavior or for endorsing a certain belief can vary to different degrees of autonomy in a continuum from a superficial and conditional reason depending on circumstances and social pressures ('heteronomy') to a personal and independent, more self-determined reason ('autonomy') (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In the first pole of the continuum, we can find amotivation. On the opposite, we can find intrinsic motivation, that refers to the engagement in an activity because it is inherently interesting, enjoying and satisfying: an activity is undertaken simply for its own sake and, hence, does not require any external reinforcements. Between the two poles are a variety of extrinsic motivations: external regulation (based on external rewards and punishments), introjected

regulation (based on self-control, internal rewards and punishments), identified regulation (based on personal importance and conscious valuing), and integrated regulation (based on congruence and synthesis with self). These different steps correspond to differences in internalization: when the reason for performing a certain behavior is internalized (as in identified regulation, integrated regulation and intrinsic regulation), people will also perceive a sense of psychological freedom and volition and will engage in the behavior spontaneously. For example, a religious behavior can be performed under external pressures (e.g. adolescents forced by parents to go to church), or internal pressures (e.g. feelings of guilt and shame, or feeling that one is supposed to do something), or for a full identification (e.g. an individual who goes to church because he/she feels this is a very important part of his/her life). In the case of identification, the behavior is endorsed because of personal valuing. It is enacted in a more autonomous way and it is coherent with one's ideals and self-image.

An important part of this theoretical framework is the explanation of how it is possible to promote a more autonomous (self-determined) motivation and an identified or integrated internalization of values. In particular, research demonstrated that there are two main types of behaviors which can affect the internalization of values: autonomy and control. A wide body of research in the field of Self Determination Theory proved that the internalization of behaviors is strongly connected with autonomy supporting versus controlling interpersonal relationships (Grolnick, Deci, & Ryan, 1997; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Soenens & Beyers, 2012). This idea refers in particular to the family context, where autonomy supporting practices, as encouraging others to choose in accordance with their personal values, or allowing the possibility to choose between different options, promote a more self-determined internalization (Grolnick, Deci, & Ryan, 1997; Soenens, & Beyers, 2012). As an example, Vansteenkiste, Zhou, Lens, and Soenens (2005) showed that perceived parental autonomy support was related to an autonomous motivation to study. On the other side, a controlling interpersonal style hinders autonomous regulation of behaviors by putting pressure on others to think or act in a desired way, or by conditioning their choice by giving rewards or punishments (Grolnick, Deci, & Ryan, 1997; Assor, Roth, & Deci, 2004). This strategy can also be more subtle and manipulative, for example when people use conditional regard, i.e. withholding love when others do not behave as desired or trying to induce guilt or shame (Barber, 1996; Roth, Assor, Niemiec, Ryan, & Deci, 2009). Research showed that conditional regard leads to introjected internalization and poor well-being in different domains (Assor, Roth, & Deci, 2004).

How Self Determination Theory helps us understand different forms of religiosity

Within a Self Determination Theory perspective, Ryan, Rigby and King (1993) described

two types of internalization of religious values that vary in their relative autonomy: *introjected internalization* and *identified internalization*. The former represents religious beliefs and behaviors that are predominantly based on social pressures, i.e. a partial internalization of religious beliefs and values, associated with the seeking of approval from oneself and from others. The latter represents adoption of beliefs as personal convictions and the enactment of religious behaviors that are personally chosen and valued, i.e. a more autonomous and self-determined form of religiosity. Introjected and identified internalization are measured with the Christian Religious Internalization Scale (CRIS), in which respondents indicate the reasons why they should engage in a certain religious behavior. Example items are: "One reason I think it's important to actively share my faith with others is because God is important to me and I'd like other people to know about Him too" and "When I turn to God, I most often do it because I enjoy spending time with Him" (identified items); "An important reason why I attend church is because one is supposed to go to church" and "A reason I think praying by myself is important is because if I don't, God will disapprove me" (introjected items) (Ryan, Rigby & King, 1993).

These two different forms of internalization of religious values showed to be associated with different outcomes: religious introjection is connected with lower levels of psychological adjustment and well-being, whereas religious identification is linked with more personal well-being (Ryan, Rigby & King, 1993). Several studies deepened the investigation of the association of the different motivations for engaging in religious behaviors with different ways of approaching religiosity and with various outcomes: we consider them later in this chapter.

Self Determination Theory's perspective compared with other conceptualizations about religiosity

Self Determination Theory's view about religious motivation has been compared with other explanations of religious behaviors. The most important comparison is with the well-known and massively used concept of religious orientation introduced by Allport (Allport, 1950, 1966; Allport & Ross, 1967; Gorsuch & McPherson, 1989). This concept distinguishes between intrinsically oriented individuals, who consider religion as an end in itself and totally adhere to religious beliefs and values, and extrinsically oriented individuals, who approach religion in an instrumental way, using it to attain other ends, such as sociability, status and social support. Example items of the scale measuring religious orientation are: "My religious beliefs are what really lie behind my whole approach to life" (intrinsic orientation), "Though I believe in my religion, I feel there are many more important things in my life" (extrinsic orientation). Intrinsic orientation is similar to an autonomous form of motivation (as formulated in SDT), but distinct: both are integrated into one's

self-structure, but Allport's intrinsic orientation refers to the internalization of religious *content* (e.g. a true belief in religious values), whereas autonomous motivation refers to religious *behaviors* (e.g. going to church because it is perceived as important) (Neyrinck et al., 2010). On the other side, extrinsic orientation, especially in its social sub-component (Gorsuch & McPherson, 1989; Neyrinck et al., 2010) was found to correlate both with intrinsic motivation and controlled motivation, suggesting that "the pursuit of social contact through religion might be undergirded by several quite different reasons" (Neyrinck et al., 2010, p.436). Interestingly, Flere and Lavric (2008) critique the intrinsic-extrinsic orientation distinction as a "culturally specific American Protestant concept " and they invite to consider the possible "authenticity of non-intrinsic religious orientation, including social extrinsic orientation not just as sociability, but as a legitimate path for achieving grace and salvation" (Flere & Lavric, 2008, p. 529). A deeper analysis of Allport's operationalization of extrinsic orientation (Neyrinck et al., 2005; Neyrinck et al., 2010) noted that Allport's operationalization fails in distinguishing the motivations for religious behaviors from the goals of religious behaviors and thus needs to be refined and relabeled in light of the more recent theoretical evolutions in the field of motivational psychology¹.

Different religious motivations correspond to different ways of approaching religious contents

Neyrinck et al. (2006) investigated the relationship between different religious motivations and the way in which believers approach religious contents. They showed, in their research with a Roman Catholic sample, that a more autonomous regulation of religious activities (i.e. when one feels the personal relevance of religious activities) leads individuals to approach their religion in a more open-minded, symbolic manner, also open to other interpretations, whereas a more extrinsic motivation (i.e. people who perform their religious behaviors mainly to avoid feelings of anxiety and guilt) is associated with individuals being likely to endorse religion in a closed-minded, unreflective, literal way.

Different degrees of autonomy have been reported also in relation to the conception of God, which can be perceived as controlling or as autonomy supportive. For example, a perception of God as autonomy supportive is positively related to a symbolic approach to religion, and a perception of God as controlling is negatively related to a symbolic approach (Soenens et al., 2012).

These two opposite ideas about God can also lead to different psychological outcomes:

¹ Neyrinck et al. (2010) also compared SDT motivational framework with Batson's Quest orientation (Batson 1976; Batson & Schoenrade, 1991; Batson, Schoenrade, & Ventis, 1993), concluding that Quest orientation is unrelated to SDT concepts in that it represents a measure of cognitive style and not a motivational construct.

Costa et al. (2016) found that the idea of an autonomy-supporting God is related with vitality, via the mediation of needs satisfaction, whereas a controlling God is connected with depression, through the mediational role of frustration. In a similar way, Miner et al. (2013) reported that when God is perceived as meeting needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness, lower symptoms of depression and stress are reported among Christian participants.

Connection between different motivations for religious behaviors and wellbeing and social outcomes

The different reasons for engaging in religious practices, i.e. more or less autonomous motivation, have been investigated in relation to different wellbeing and social outcomes.

O'Connor and Vallerand (1990) described four types of religious motivation, which vary from amotivation ("I don't know why I practice my religion"), to non-self-determined extrinsic motivation ("because I am supposed to do it"), self-determined extrinsic motivation ("I choose to do it for my own good"), and intrinsic motivation ("for the pleasure of doing it"), and showed their different correlations with depression, life satisfaction, self-esteem and meaning in life. As predicted by Self Determination Theory, life satisfaction, self-esteem and meaning in life presented negative correlation with amotivation and non-self-determined extrinsic motivation and significant positive correlation with self-determined extrinsic motivation and intrinsic motivation. Depression showed positive correlation with amotivation and non-self-determined extrinsic motivation and negative correlation with self-determined extrinsic motivation and intrinsic motivation. These findings thus confirm the association between different reasons for engaging in religious behaviors and adjustment and well-being. Kneezel and Ryan (2004) found an association between identified regulation of religiosity and a satisfying relationship with God, which in turn contributed to enhanced well-being. A confirm of these results also comes from the study conducted by Brambilla, Manzi and Regalia (2014), who found that, among a sample of Roman Catholic youths, identified religiosity (measured with the Italian version of the CRIS, e.g.: "An important reason why I attend church is that by going to church I learn new things") has a stronger correlation with satisfaction with life than introjected religiosity (e.g.: "An important reason why I attend church is because one is supposed to go to church").

Moreover, it is possible to state that religious motivations affect not only general well-being and satisfaction with life but also religious well-being and even religious behaviors. The recent study by Brambilla, Manzi and Regalia (2014) found that identified religiosity, compared with introjected religiosity, has a stronger correlation with subjective importance of religion, church attending, religious group attending, and religious well-being. Similarly, Assor et al (2005) reported

a positive association between an internalized regulation of religion and the performance of religious practices in a sample of Jewish individuals. Previous research by Ryan et al. (1993) showed that identified regulation of religiosity positively predicted church attendance, and this finding was replicated by Strahan and Craig (1995) that, in addition, found positive relations between identified regulation and proportion of money donated to churches and frequency of family worship. Also Baard's research (Baard 1994, 2002, Baard & Aridas, 2001) showed that a more identified regulation of religiosity leads to higher frequency of church attendance and more donations to churches.

Another outcome which has been investigated in relation to the different motivations for religious behavior is prejudice. A study by Brambilla, Manzi, Regalia and Verkuyten (2013) showed that, in a sample of Italian Catholics believers, identified and introjected religiosity predict different levels of prejudice toward Muslim immigrants: people with an identified religiosity display lower levels of prejudice compared to people with an introjected religiosity. This particular achievement in this field of research suggests that Self Determination Theory could contribute to solving the thorny issue of the relationship between religiosity and prejudice (see for example Hunsberger & Jackson, 2005).

Given the importance of the different motivations for engaging in religious activities and their influence on a wide variety of outcomes, researchers started to pay attention to the ways in which religious socialization and transmission takes place. In the next section we consider how social environments, such as family and peer groups, can facilitate or hinder the development of an intrinsic motivation.

The antecedents of religious internalization in the family

In the line of research opened by Self Determination Theory, an investigation of the antecedents of religious internalization explored the influence of parental practices that can promote or hinder the internalization of religious values as personal values (i.e. characterized by greater autonomy). Family is the first place where religious socialization takes place and parents' religiosity is likely to influence children's religiosity. For example, Kneezel and Ryan (2004) found an association between mothers' and children's religious identification and between fathers' and children's religious introjection, in a sample of Christian late adolescents.

The findings of subsequent studies confirmed and expanded the known influence of autonomy-supportive versus controlling practices. Cohen et al. (2009) found, with a Jewish sample, that parental support of autonomy, which involves allowing children some latitude in making decisions for themselves regarding religious issues, was associated with greater identification

(where children perceive Jewish studies and Jewish culture to be an important part of their sense of self) versus introjected internalization (where children participate in Jewish studies and Jewish culture because they feel like they “ought to” or because of external pressures).

Assor, Cohen-Malayev, Kaplan and Friedman (2005) found that religious introjection is predicted by parental controlling behaviors and in particular by conditional regard: perceived maternal and paternal conditional regard was positively correlated with introjection but not with identification, and it was unrelated to religious observance (Assor, Cohen-Malayev, Kaplan, & Friedman, 2005). On the other side, religious identification is predicted by parents' autonomy supporting behaviors, which include not only the classic concept of autonomy support - e.g. providing choice, asking children's opinion, allowing them to choose, etc. – but also other aspects (Assor, 2012a). In particular, Assor (2012a) highlighted the importance of a behavior defined as intrinsic value demonstration (see also Assor, 2012b). This parental practice is similar to the concept of modeling, but it represents “a convincing modeling, [...] that naturally conveys the sense of satisfaction and growth that accompanies engagement in a behavior. Adults are likely to be convincing models of a given behavior to the extent that they do indeed fully identify with the behavior and feel content and fulfilled when engaged in the action” (Assor, Cohen-Malayev, Kaplan, & Friedman, 2005, p.111). Similarly, Vermeer, Janssen, and Scheepers (2012) found evidence that the strongest source of influence on juvenile church attendance is parents' church attendance.

When children become adolescents and young adults, their need for autonomy could change and the role of parents may lose influence to the role of peers and religious leaders (Kneezel & Emmons, 2006; Schwartz, 2006; Schwartz, Bukowski, & Aoki, 2006). A recent study by Brambilla, Assor et al. (2015) applied Self Determination Theory framework in testing and confronting the contribution of parents, peers and religious leaders in religious internalization in a sample of Italian Catholic youth. Results confirmed the expected association between autonomy supporting practices and religious identification both in the family and in the group context. In particular, parents' behaviors reflecting basic autonomy support (for example, behaviors involving perspective taking, choice-provision, and control-minimization, e.g.: “My mother/father is usually willing to consider things from my point of view” “My mother/father, whenever possible, allows me to choose what to do” and “My mother/father insists upon my doing things her way” (reversed)) and intrinsic value demonstration (e.g.: “My mother/father invests time in religious activities”, “My mother/father enjoys increasing her/his knowledge and understanding in religious matters”) predicted identified internalization, whereas parents' conditional regard (e.g.: “My mother would give me more warmth and appreciation if I will take my religious duties seriously” and “If I change my religion, my father

would be very disappointed with me”) predicted introjected internalization. In the group context, the autonomy support provided by the group leader (e.g.: “The leader of my religious group listens to how I would like to do things” and “The leader of my religious group has provided me choices and options”) and the intrinsic value demonstration provided by group peers (e.g. “People in my religious group are consistent in how they live their faith”) predicted identified internalization. Intrinsic value demonstration by peers was the strongest factor in predicting youth's religious identification, followed by intrinsic value demonstration by parents, group leaders autonomy support and, last, parents' autonomy support. The results of this study, thus, add the importance of peers and not only parents in the internalization of religious values and indicate that religious leaders could promote a more autonomous religious identity by applying autonomy supporting practices in their groups.

How larger social context could predict self-determined religiosity

When analyzing the influence of social context in predicting different types of religious internalization, it is worth considering also larger society and culture outside of the family's home. It is likely that general culture, the degree of secularization, or other macro factors could also influence individual's religiosity.

A study by Sheldon (2006) investigated the possible influence of different religious denominations on the way people endorse religiosity, comparing Catholics' and Protestants' religious motivation. The study found mixed results, with introjected motivation that was relatively low in all groups, compared to identified and intrinsic motivations.

Other scholars evoked the possible influence of a cultural characterization of certain religious denominations on personal religiosity (see also Cohen, Siegel & Rozin, 2003; Hall, Meador & Koenig, 2008; Cohen, Hall, Koenig & Meador, 2005), arguing that the importance of social aspects in religion can depend on the emphasis on communitarian aspects (praying together, feeling a sense of belonging) versus individual aspects (e.g. beliefs, conversion, personal prayer) posed by different religious denominations.

A recent study by Brambilla, Manzi, Regalia, Becker and Vignoles (2016) compared the self-categorization of personal religious identity in six countries and found that self-perception of religiosity was significantly different between countries: European participants perceived it as a social identity, whereas nonwestern participants perceived it as an individual identity. This result confirms the idea that cultural context can influence the way in which people endorse religious beliefs and values.

Discussion and conclusions

Self Determination Theory has certainly contributed to a better disentanglement of the different ways of being religious in our time. It has shed light on the idea that "true" religiosity can not be stated by evaluating mere practices of adherence to beliefs and dogmas, but it is necessary to go over the surface and investigate reasons, motivations and personal involvement in a relationship with God and the transcendent and with institutionalized religions.

In fact, since humans discovered the upright position and saw the starry sky for the first time, they have to deal with a transcendent dimension of reality (Ries , 2014), with "a passion for infinite" (Tillich, 1957, p.8, cit. In Emmons, 2005), a strive for the sacred (Emmons, 2005). Emmons (2005) describes striving for the sacred as "those personal goals that are concerned with ultimate purpose, ethics, commitment to a higher power, and a seeking for the divine in daily experience. By identifying and committing themselves to spiritual goals, people strive to develop and maintain a relationship with the sacred. In other words, spiritual strivings are strivings that reflect a desire to transcend the self" (Emmons, 2005, p. 736).

Institutionalized religions can facilitate this striving by being faith communities in which traditions have the purpose of enhancing the search for the sacred and teaching sacred narratives (Dollahite, 1998; Emmons, 1999); however, it could happen that they hinder the striving for the sacred. For example, when religions only answer to other needs such as sociability, status, moral guidance or protection against fears (as they are described in Allport's description of the extrinsic religious believer, see Allport and Ross, 1967), they don't promote a more mature religiosity. Consequently, religions risk to suffocate instead of preserve and cultivate religiosity (Petrosino, 2014). Their true function should include to invite people to continue to ask questions, to express doubts, and to continue to search a relationship with the sacred and the transcendent (in this sense, Batson's idea of a "quest" dimension is well-fitting, see Batson, Schoenrade, & Ventis, 1993).

In this context, the role of autonomy support as described in Self Determination Theory seems to properly grasp the aims of religious development: by posing questions and giving freedom and choice, it is possible to promote a personal search for the sacred in individuals' lives, without enclosing the striving for transcendence in a series of rules to follow.

Moreover, we can be sure of the positiveness of allowing such freedom, giving autonomy and fostering intrinsic motivation, by looking at the offspring of it: the analyzed literature says that the outcomes associated with an identified or integrated religiosity are life satisfaction, health, well-being, social ties, lack of prejudice, willingness to contribute to a better world (e.g. care for the environment, interest in social justice, etc.), donations, and altruism.

It is also worthy to note that spiritual striving are, with intimacy and generativity, the major

categories of life meaning which are rated as more important and predict great subjective well-being (Emmons, 2005). In particular, spiritual strivings are the core of personality for a substantial percentage of the population (Emmons, 1999) and they are rated as more important, requiring more effort and engaged in for more intrinsic reasons than nonspiritual strivings, and they promote greater levels of goal integration (Emmons, 2005). The unique nature of personal strivings, with the ultimate goal being intimacy with the divine, implies that they are never fully realized, and this characteristic makes them best able to direct attention and maintain unity in personal life (Emmons, 1999). Another implication of the concept of striving is that it “implies an action-oriented perspective on human motivation” (Emmons, 2005). Thus, it is worthy to continue in the way of studying religiosity in a motivational psychological framework and to enlarge its application in various fields as religious education within and outside the family.

Some practical implications

It is possible to derive some practical implications from the described path. First there are implications for researchers interested in religiosity. It is important to be attentive to the complex nature of religiosity, which can not be only labeled as group belonging or as a personal opinion. Thus, it is not enough to ask research participants which is their religion, or if they are religious or belong to any religious denomination. Instead, it is necessary to choose measures tapping how people live their religiosity. What is their relationship with the institutionalized religion? What are their reasons for endorsing or not endorsing a religious belief or behavior? And finally how do they deal with the striving and search for the sacred?

Second, there are implications for parents, social workers and religious leaders. Research findings invite them to be aware that religious transmission is not a sort of concept teaching, instead it is more like giving a convincing example and letting others be free to choose. It may be scary to have and to give so much freedom but it is the only way to promote a religious faith which is not rigid and closed minded, but open, characterized by continuous striving, improvement and the pursuit of better ways to deal with the sacred part of our lives.

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