Religious Identity, Mystical Experience, and Psychopathology: A Study among Secular, Christian, and Muslim Youth in England and Wales

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Abstract

This study addressed two research questions among three samples of 14- to 18-year-old adolescents: 203 Muslims, 477 Christians, and 378 religiously unaffiliated young people in England and Wales. The first question examined the comparative extent to which the religiously unaffiliated reported mystical experience. The second question examined the association between mystical experience and psychopathology as defined by the psychoticism and neuroticism scales within Eysenck’s dimensional model of personality. The data found a lower level of reported mystical experience among the religiously unaffiliated, although such experiences were reported by between a quarter and a third of this group. The data found no association between reported mystical experience and psychopathology among the Christians, the Muslims, or the religiously unaffiliated.

Keywords

Mysticism – personality – psychology – religion – Muslim – Christian

The notion of mystical experience has been a topic of central interest to the empirical psychology of religion from the early days of the discipline. In his foundational study, The Varieties of Religious Experience, James (1902/1985,
p. 301) referred to mysticism as “the root and center of religion.” Within the broader field of religious studies Hick (1989) maintained that mysticism is integral to all faith traditions. This clear and repeated connection between mystical experience and religious traditions raises a question concerning the continuing prevalence of the underlying experience among three groups of young people: those shaped by the Christian tradition, those shaped by the Muslim tradition, and those growing up outside a living religious tradition.

**Researching Mystical Experience**

Step one in addressing this first research question concerns clarifying how research traditions within the empirical psychology of religion have conceptualized and operationalized assessment of mystical experience. Within the quantitative tradition, two main methods have been employed. The first method has employed single well-defined survey questions. Four questions of this nature have attracted repeated use. Glock and Stark (1965) framed their question: “Have you ever as an adult had the feeling that you were somehow in the presence of God?” Back and Bourque (1970) framed their question: “Would you say that you have ever had a ‘religious or mystical experience’ – that is, a moment of sudden religious awakening or insight?” Greeley (1974) framed his question, “Have you ever felt as though you were close to a powerful spiritual force that seemed to lift you out of yourself?” Working within the tradition of Hardy (1979), Hay and Morisy (1978) framed their question, “Have you ever been aware of or influenced by a presence or power, whether you call it God or not, which is different from your everyday self?” Two of these classic questions contain the word *God*, one *religious*, and one *spiritual*. Such questions may elicit a higher level of response among people for whom such vocabulary carries saliency.

The second method has employed multi-item scales of known psychometric properties. Two scales of this nature have attracted multiple usage. In the mid 1970s, Hood, Jr. published the M Scale (Hood, 1975), drawing on the conceptual model of mysticism proposed by Stace (1960). The M Scale consists of 32 items (16 positively worded items and 16 negatively worded items). Several investigations have identified two factors within the M Scale (Caird, 1988; Hood, 1975; Reinert & Stifter, 1993). Factor one draws together items expressing an experience of unity; factor two draws together items referring to interpretation of these experiences. Other investigations of the M Scale (Hood et al., 2001; Hood & Williamson, 2000) have distinguished between two expressions of the experience of unity that can be either introvertive (an experience of pure consciousness) or extrovertive (an experience of unity in diversity). This distinction has