Religious Problem-Solving Styles within an American Religious Ideological Surround

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Abstract

In a previous Iranian investigation, comparative rationality analysis procedures associated with the ideological surround model of psychology and religion examined the influence of Muslim religious rationalities on responding to religious problem-solving style scales. This study extended the analysis to 306 mostly Christian American university students. As in Iran, the collaborative problem-solving style was consistent with, and the self-directing style was inconsistent with, religious commitments and psychological adjustment. The deferring style had ambiguous implications in Iran, and the same was true in the United States, albeit in different ways. Religious rationalities mediated problem-solving style relationships with other variables in a manner documenting the complexity of American religious perspectives. Most generally, these data suggested that empirical attention to the incommensurable rationalities of religions and the social sciences can promote deeper insights into both.

Keywords

Ideological Surround Model – incommensurable rationalities – religious and psychological adjustment – religious problem-solving styles – United States

Both conceptually and empirically, an ideological surround model (ISM) has for decades advanced the argument that at least some social scientific research

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into religion should acknowledge and then move beyond the challenges of postmodernism (Watson, 1993, 2011, 2014; Andrews, Watson, Chen, & Morris, 2016). Postmodernism rests upon a realization that no social rationality can command universal acceptance as objective. The ISM most basically assumes that this postmodern relativism is a cultural reality that a fully relevant social science should ‘objectively’ address.

**Incommensurable Rationalities and Postmodernism**

Social rationalities organize communal life relative to a shared ultimate standard (Taylor, 2007). For theistic religious communities, that standard will be some vision of God. For social scientific communities, the standard instead will typically be some reading of nature. Both communities will approach greater rationality to the extent that their thought and practice approach the normative demands of their standards. Such progress can occur through advancements in the conduct of communal life or through deeper insights into the standard. Supernatural religious and naturalistic social scientific rationalities can, but need not always be incompatible in their implications. They, nevertheless, will always be incommensurable. Rationalities are incommensurable when they lack a common metric of evaluation (MacIntyre, 1988). Ultimate standards are ‘ultimate,’ and thus cannot be held accountable to a higher ‘more ultimate’ standard. The absence of a shared standard for judging ultimate standards means that religious and social scientific rationalities will necessarily operate within a surround of incommensurable ideological assumptions.

Incommensurability as a problem can remain hidden and seem unimportant when religious and social scientific rationalities seem to agree. Both may agree, for instance, that committed marriages are a social good. They, nevertheless, will agree for different reasons. Within at least some Christian ideological surrounds, those reasons will have foundations in verses from Genesis, but within the social sciences, rationality may rest instead upon some nature-based form of functionalism. Agreement between incommensurable rationalities, therefore, will occur at the level of inferences derived from ultimate standards, rather than at the level of the ultimate standards themselves (Ghorbani, Watson, Amirbeigi, & Chen, 2016).

That agreement in derivative inferences should not obscure the challenges of incommensurability becomes clearer with the addition of an adjective to the conclusion about committed marriages. The claim that committed homosexual marriages are a social good can produce sometimes acrimonious