ALTERNATIVE SPIRITUALITIES: DIFFERENT PERSONALITIES? AN ENQUIRY CONCERNING PARANORMAL BELIEFS AND TRADITIONAL RELIGIOSITY

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Abstract
The present study examined whether belief in the paranormal serves the same psychological functions as traditional religiosity in terms of occupying the same personality space. A sample of 659 14- to 16-year-old secondary school pupils attending four schools in England completed the short-form Junior Eysenck Personality Questionnaire together with indices of paranormal belief and of traditional religiosity. The data demonstrated that, while traditional religiosity was associated with lower psychoticism scores (tendermindedness) and higher lie scale scores (greater social conformity), paranormal belief was associated with higher psychoticism scores (toughmindedness) and lower lie scale scores (lower social conformity). These findings suggest that paranormal beliefs may be serving a somewhat different psychological function in comparison to traditional religiosity.

Keywords: Personality, religion, paranormal belief, adolescents, Eysenck.

Varying accounts continue to flourish regarding the religious and spiritual climate of England and Wales. What is not in doubt is the highly visible decline in public church attendance, as charted, for example, in a series of reports by Brierley (1997, 1999, 2001, 2003, 2005) and as celebrated in startling titles like The Making of Post-Christian Britain (Gilbert, 1980) and The Death of Christian Britain (Brown, 2001). There is much less agreement, however, regarding what has taken the place of traditional religiosity in the lives (and souls) of those living during the twenty-first century in England and Wales. For some commentators, traditional religiosity has given way to growing secularism (Bruce, 2002), while for others disappearing explicit religiosity has opened the way for implicit religion (Bailey, 1997).

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One intriguing and important perspective on the changing religious and spiritual landscape of England has been provided by Heelas and Woodhead (2005) in their study *The Spiritual Revolution* examining expressions of contemporary spirituality in the town of Kendal, near the Lake District in the north-west region of England. Heelas and Woodhead distinguished between what might be described as traditional religiosity (defined as ‘the congregational domain’) and what might be described as emerging or alternative spiritualities (defined as ‘forms of holistic milieu activities’). The holistic milieu activities include both associational activities and the activities of spiritual one-on-one practitioners. The combined list of these activities presented in appendix three (pp. 156–157) included a wide range of physical therapies (acupuncture, chiropractice, homeopathy, osteopathy), therapeutic techniques (aromatherapy, art therapy, counselling, flower essence therapy, nutritional therapy, play therapy, rebirthing), relaxation techniques (massage, relaxation therapy), self-help networks (Cancer Care), faith-based groups (Buddhist, inter-faith, Iona, Sea of Faith, Taizé), recreational pursuits (circle dancing, yoga), and paranormal phenomena (astrology, pagan activities, palm readings, psychotherapy, tarot card reading).

An important question is raised for the psychology of religion by the insight offered by *The Spiritual Revolution*: do these emerging and alternative spiritualities fulfil the same or similar psychological functions to those fulfilled by traditional religiosity? In other words, are alternative spiritualities fulfilling a vacuum left void by the disappearance of traditional religiosity, or are they serving a somewhat different function? One powerful way of conceptualising and operationalising this question is provided by personality theory.

The relationship between individual differences in traditional religiosity and personality has been of long-standing interest within the psychology of religion, but any idea of consensus has only begun to emerge in this field with the past decade. In their classic review of empirical research within the social psychology of religion, published in the mid-1970s, Argyle and Beit-Hallahmi (1975) concluded that existing empirical evidence was insufficient to support any consistent or stable linkage between personality and traditional religiosity. However, reviewing the empirical evidence two decades later, Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle (1997) revised and reversed their conclusion in light of the findings of a series of independent studies which had located various indicators of traditional (Christian) religiosity within the personality space defined by Eysenck’s three dimensional model of personality.