

Can Religiousness be Associated with Religious and Spiritual Struggles?

Yonathan Aditya^a, Riryn Sani^b, Ihan Martoyo^c, and Rudi Pramono^d

^a*Department of Psychology, Universitas Pelita Harapan, Tangerang, Indonesia;*

^b*Department of Psychology, Universitas Pelita Harapan, Tangerang, Indonesia;* ^c*Electrical Engineering Department, Universitas Pelita Harapan, Tangerang, Indonesia;* ^d*School of Tourism and Hospitality, Universitas Pelita Harapan, Tangerang, Indonesia*

*Corresponding author:

Yonathan Aditya

Department of Psychology, Universitas Pelita Harapan

Jl. M. H. Thamrin Boulevard 1100

Lippo Village, Tangerang 15811 - Indonesia

Tel.: +62 21 5460901 / 5470901

Email address: yonathan.aditya@uph.edu

Can Religiousness be Associated with Religious and Spiritual Struggles?

Abstract— Religiousness has been shown to have a positive effect on both physical and mental health. However, several studies found that religiousness can be linked to religious and spiritual struggles that have negative effects on physical and mental health. The purpose of this study is to explore the effect of religiousness on religious and spiritual struggles, if any. A quantitative, non-experimental, correlational, cross-sectional design was used. The Four Basic Dimensions of Religiousness Scale (4-BDRS) and The Religious and Spiritual Struggles Scale (R/SS) were administered to 160 college students from several cities in Indonesia through an online survey. A multiple regression test found that three dimensions of 4-BDRS had a significant effect on religious and spiritual struggles. Behaving had a significant positive effect ($\beta = .2, p < .05$), while Believing ($\beta = -.25, p < .05$) and Bonding ($\beta = -.25, p < .05$) had a significant negative effect. Belonging did not have a significant effect. This study sheds light on the potential dark side that religiousness might have. While total religiousness can minimize religious and spiritual struggles as can some of its dimensions, in this study, focusing only on Behaving dimensions increased religious and spiritual struggles. Hence, the four components of religiousness need to be cultivated for the positive effects of religiousness to appear. Otherwise, religiousness might be the source of the problem. Implications and applications of this study are also discussed.

Keywords: religiousness, religious and spiritual struggles, dark side of religiousness.

Introduction

A Gallup survey showed that 99% of Indonesian people say religion is an important part of their lives (Gallup International, 2016). They hold religion in high regard and let it influence their daily life. This is good news because much previous research showed that religiousness has positive benefits such as better mental and spiritual health (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Ysseldyk, Matheson, & Anisman, 2010). However, lately some researchers have found that there is a dark side of religion. For example, religion can cause distress (Abu-Raiya, Pargament, & Magyar-Russell, 2016). Exline, Pargament, Grubbs, and Yali (2014) called this phenomenon religious and spiritual (R/S) struggle. R/S struggles occur when one or more aspects of belief, practice, or religious/spiritual experiences become the source of negative emotion/thought, anxiety, or conflict (Exline & Rose, 2013).

Many people experience R/S struggle (Exline et al., 2014). College students in particular are prone to this type of struggle. They are in an emerging adulthood stage that is marked by instability because they are still exploring their identity, including in religiosity and spirituality. Therefore, a large proportion of this group experience R/S struggles (Johnson & Hayes, 2003). If R/S struggles are not solved, they can lead to problems such as psychological stress and reduced well-being (Ellison, Bradshaw, Storch, Marcum, & Hill, 2011; Trevino & McConnell, 2014; Abu-Raiya et al., 2016). College students who suffer R/S struggles are prone to have problems in adaptation, physical and mental health, and risky behaviors (Bryant & Astin, 2008; Wortmann, Park, & Edmondson, 2012).

Several studies have investigated the effect of religiousness on R/S struggles. Some found that religiousness buffered this struggle, while others did not. The findings depended on which aspect of religiousness was studied because only some aspects of religiousness might be beneficial (Exline, 2013). Therefore, it is important to use a multidimensional measure of religiousness to study the effect of each important aspect of religiousness on R/S struggle. Saroglou and Cohen (2013) wrote that the impact of religiousness is influenced by culture. Therefore, the effect of religiousness on R/S struggle in Indonesia may be different from the results described above, because Indonesia has a distinct culture. Indonesia is the largest Muslim country in the world, and freedom of religion is guaranteed by the constitution. To fill the gap in the existing literature, this research will analyze the effect of religiousness on R/S struggles of college students in Indonesia, given that Indonesia is one of the most religious countries in the world and yet few studies have explored the effect of religiousness on R/S struggles in the Indonesian context (Gallup International, 2016). The focus is on the interplay among the four dimensions of religiousness (Believing, Bonding, Behaving and Belonging) and R/S struggles.

R/S struggles happen when religion or spirituality becomes a source of distress. This struggle may or may not be the result of a stressor. Struggle that occurs after facing a major stressor is the result of negative religious coping (Pargament, Smith, Koenig, & Perez, 1998). However, R/S struggles may occur even though there is no major crisis. For example, someone may question the existence of God and become distressed (Abu-Raiya & Pargament, 2016; Abu-Raiya et al., 2016). The focus of this study is the latter type of struggle, as study participants are mainly university students and previous studies found a large proportion of college students face R/S struggles even though they do not experience a major stressor (Johnson & Hayes, 2003).

Pargament et al. (2005) argued that R/S struggles can be classified into three groups: supernatural, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. Supernatural struggle is caused by a belief/relationship with God or other supernatural beings. For example, someone may be angry with God for letting bad things happen or may blame the devil as the source of his/her problems. Interpersonal struggle happens when someone has a conflict with a religious/spiritual group or individual. Intrapersonal struggle is an internal conflict in someone's thinking or behaviors.

R/S struggles are related to many factors (Exline, 2013). One of these is religiousness. Religiousness is religious attitudes or behaviors about God/gods or something that someone regards as sacred (Saroglou, 2013). As religion is multidimensional (Koenig, 2018), religiousness is multidimensional as well. Saroglou (2011) argued that religiousness consists of four dimensions: believing, bonding, behaving, and belonging. Believing is a cognitive part of religiousness. It consists of a set of beliefs or ideas about God/gods or other transcendent entities. Bonding is an emotional part of religiousness that consists of uniting someone to external transcendence through prayer/ritual. Behaving is the moral part that focuses on adherence to norms, regulations, and performances. Belonging is the social aspect of religiousness. Belonging refers to cohesion with others based on holding the same beliefs.

Many studies found a relationship between different aspects of religiousness and R/S struggles. The beliefs that people have about God affect their experiences of R/S struggle. For instance, people who think of God as cruel (Exline, Park, Smyth, & Carey, 2011) or intangible (Magyar & Mahoney, 2005) have a higher level of R/S struggle compared to those who think of God as loving. Hall and Edwards (2002) found that people with higher extrinsic religiosity and lower intrinsic religiosity have a higher degree of R/S struggle. Support from a religious community also plays a role in the degree of R/S struggle. Those with strong social support have lower levels of R/S struggle compared to their counterparts with weak social support (McConnell, Pargament, Ellison, & Flannelly, 2006).

Based on the previous studies described above, this study hypothesizes that believing, bonding, and belonging will have significant negative effect on R/S struggles but behaving will have a significant positive effect.

Method

A. *Participants*

Data were taken from 160 respondents through an online questionnaire. However, the data from six questionnaire responses were not used because they were incomplete. Most of the respondents (88%) were 18–22 years old, 8% of them were 23–24 years old, and the rest were 17 years old. Eighty-two percent of the respondents were female. The ethnic distribution was 57% Chinese, 17% Javanese, 9% Batak, and 8% Manadonese, with the remaining participants from different ethnic groups of Indonesia. The religious distribution was 8% Muslim, 6% Buddhist, 18% Roman Catholic, and 68% Christians from various denominations.

B. *Measures*

Two scales were used: The Four Basic Dimensions of Religiousness (4-BDRS) and the Religious and Spiritual Struggles Scale (RSS). Both scales were originally written in English. For this study, they were translated into Indonesian using the back-translation method. The 4-BDRS was developed by Saroglou to assess four dimensions of religiousness (Believing, Bonding, Behaving, and Belonging). Each dimension was measured with three items on a seven-point Likert scale. The sum of these four dimensions would result in total religiousness. In this study, the internal reliability measured with Cronbach's coefficient alpha was .89.

The RSS was developed by Exline to assess R/S struggles. It has 26 items assessed on a five-point Likert scale and six dimensions (divine, demonic, interpersonal, moral struggle, meaning, and doubt). However, in this study only the total score was used. The internal reliability measured with Cronbach's coefficient alpha was .91. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics.

Results

Table I. Descriptive Statistics

No.	Variable	M	SD
1	RSS	2.1	.62
2	4-BDRS	5.55	.88
3	Believing	5.91	.95
4	Bonding	5.57	1.07
5	Behaving	5.58	1.02
6	Belonging	5.14	1.22

The results in Table I indicate that the level of R/S struggles was low (2.1 out of 5) and the level of religiousness and its four dimensions were high (5.14–5.91 out of 7). Among the four dimensions of religiousness, Believing had the highest level, while Belonging had the lowest.

The results of multiple regressions revealed religiousness explained 23% of the variance of R/S struggles ($F(3,149) = 10.9, p < .05$). However, only three dimensions of 4-BDRS had a significant effect on struggle. Belonging did not have a significant effect ($\beta = -.12, p > .05$) on R/S struggles. Behaving had a positive significant effect ($\beta = .38, p < .05$), while Bonding ($\beta = -.34, p < .05$) and Believing ($\beta = -.29, p < .05$) had a significant negative effect on R/S struggles.

Discussions

Table 1 shows that the participants had a high level of religiousness and low level of R/S struggle. This is consistent with the results of the Gallup survey (2010), which found that almost all Indonesians were very religious (Gallup International, 2016). Most previous studies found a low level of R/S struggle as well (Abu-Raiya et al., 2016). This means that, as in other countries, the Indonesian participants in this study experienced R/S struggles, even though the level was not high.

Given that most of the respondents were female (82%), Indonesian-born Chinese (57%), and Christian (68%), the explanation below may not be applicable to others with different characteristics. In this study, religiousness was beneficial to protect against R/S struggles, and the higher the level of religiousness, the lower the level of R/S struggle. However, further analysis revealed that not all dimensions of religiousness were beneficial in reducing R/S struggle. Only Believing and Bonding decreased R/S struggle, while Behaving increased it. This means focusing only on the Behaving part of religiousness increased R/S struggle. This finding is similar to that of Hall and Edwards (2002), who found that people with low intrinsic religiosity and high extrinsic religiosity experienced greater R/S struggle. Believing and Bonding are dimensions of 4-BDRS that represent intrinsic religiosity, while Behaving represents extrinsic religiosity (Saroglou, 2011). People with a strong intrinsic orientation tend to internalize the doctrines of their religion and live them out. They use religion as an aim. In times of trouble, they do not easily become disappointed with their religion. On the other hand, people with a strong extrinsic orientation tend to use religion as a means to obtain what they want, such as security or popularity (Allport & Ross, 1966). Therefore, when they do not

receive what they want, or worse, they encounter problems stemming from religion, they become disappointed, which can lead to R/S struggle.

College students are more likely to experience problems with religion. College students are in the young adulthood stage, in which they start questioning their current worldviews and exploring other worldviews (Arnett, 2000). Therefore, it is common for college students to question the faith they learned from their parents. Their cognitive capacity is more developed as well. Their thinking becomes more practical, flexible, and dialectic. They realize that life is complex, and they are not satisfied with black and white answers. If their religious understanding cannot give satisfactory answers to their questions, they are likely to leave their religion. This is consistent with the results of a survey by LifeWay Research (2007), which indicated that most college students leave the church because they think the teachings of the church are not valuable. In other words, having a religious understanding (believing) is important for college students. Students with a high level of Believing have a better cognitive understanding (doctrines) of their religion. A good understanding of doctrines may help them to have answers about life questions and may give them anchors during times of struggle. Without a strong level of Believing, they may feel confused when they encounter problems or phenomena that seem to contradict their beliefs. For example, studies about theodicies found that certain beliefs about suffering help to answer difficult life questions, so one's relationship with God is not deteriorated when one experiences suffering. However, others' belief about suffering cannot yield satisfactory answers, so their relationship with God suffers when they encounter suffering (Wilt et al., 2016, 2017). Believing that God is cruel or intangible increases struggles as well (Magyar & Mahoney, 2005; Exline et al., 2011).

This is one of the reasons that behaving increases struggles. During R/S struggles, doing religious rituals and following the moral laws of a religion without understanding why and without emotional bonding with God or a higher being may make people more frustrated. As a result, their level of struggle increases. College students are mature enough in their cognitive development that they need reasons and not just instruction (Lukoff, Lu, & Turner, 1998; Johnson & Hayes, 2003).

However, Bonding may help to buffer struggles. Bonding is the emotional dimension of religiousness. The higher the bonding that individuals have, the closer they are to God. Individuals who are close to God tend to have a secure relationship with God and will likely run to God in times of trouble. Kelley and Chan (2012) found that people who have a secure relationship with God tend to use positive spiritual coping to buffer them from R/S struggles.

This study revealed that Belonging did not have a significant effect on struggles. Belonging is the relational part of religiousness. People with a high level of Belonging tend to have good relationships with others in their religious community. This is like a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it can give social support, which can buffer against struggle (McConnell et al., 2006). On the other hand, the closer someone is to his or her religious community, the greater the chance is of feeling disappointed. No one is perfect, including the religious leader. Once they are close to their religious leader or other members of the religious organization, they will

come to know the limitations of their friends or leader. If they cannot manage this disappointment, it can lead to R/S struggle. This mixed effect explains why Belonging did not have a significant effect on R/S struggles.

This study sheds some light on the mixed results of the previous research concerning the effect of religiousness on R/S struggles. Using a multidimensional measure of religiousness, this study revealed that different dimensions of religiousness have different effects on R/S struggles. As many previous studies did not use a multidimensional measure of religiousness, their results may have been different if they had based their measure on different dimensions of religiousness.

Conclusions

This study confirms previous research that religiousness may prevent R/S struggles. However, religiousness needs to be holistic. Focusing only on the Behaving part of religiousness may even create more R/S struggles.

Future studies should include participants from religions other than Christianity and an equal number of men and women, as each religion is unique. The effect of religiousness on R/S struggle may vary by religion or gender.

Acknowledgement

This research is supported by the Indonesian Ministry of Research and Higher Education No: 021/KM/PNT/2018, March 6, 2018; Kontrak Penelitian Dasar Unggulan Perguruan Tinggi No: 147/LPPM-UPH/IV/2018.

References

- Abu-Raiya, H., Pargament, K. I., & Krause N. (2016). Religion as problem, religion as solution: Religion buffers of the links between religious/spiritual struggles and well-being/mental health. *Quality of Life Research*, 25(5), 1265-1274. doi:10.1007/s11136-015-1163-8
- Abu-Raiya, H. & Pargament, K. I. (2016). Religious coping among diverse religions: Commonalities and divergences. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 7(1), 24-33. doi:10.1037/a0037652
- Allport, G. W. & Ross, J. M. (1966). Personal religious orientation and prejudice. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 5(4). 432-443.
- Arnett, J. J. (2000). Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *American Psychologist*, 55(5), 469-480. doi:10.1037/0003-066X.55.5.469
- Bryant, A. N. & Astin, H. S. (2008). The Correlates of Spiritual Struggle During the College Years. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 79(1), 1-27. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jhe.2008.0000>
- Diener, E., Suh, E. M., Lucas, R. E., & Smith, H. L. (1999). Subjective well-being: Three decades of progress. *Psychological Bulletin*, 125(2), 276-302. doi:10.1037/0033-2909.125.2.276
- Ellison, C. G., Bradshaw, M., Storch, J., Marcum, J. P., & Hill, T. D. (2011). Religious doubts and sleep quality: Findings from a nationwide study of Presbyterians. *Review of Religious Research*, 53(2), 119-136. doi:10.1007/s13644-011-0019-0

- Exline, J. J., Park, C. L., Smyth, J. M., & Carey, M. P. (2011). Anger toward God: Social-cognitive predictors, prevalence, and links with adjustment to bereavement and cancer. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 100(1), 129-148. doi:10.1037/a0021716
- Exline, J. J. & Rose, E. D. (2013). Religious and spiritual struggles. In C. L. Paloutzian & R.L. Park (Ed.), *Handbook of the psychology of religion and spirituality* (pp. 379-397). New York: The Guilford Press.
- Exline, J. J. (2013). Religious and spiritual struggles. In K. I. Pargament (Ed.), *APA handbook of psychology, religion, and spirituality (Vol 1): Context, theory, and research* (pp. 459-475). Washington: American Psychological Association. doi:10.1037/14045-025
- Exline, J. J., Pargament, K. I., Grubbs, J. B., & Yali, A. M. (2014). The religious and spiritual struggles scale: Development and initial validation. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 6(3), 208-222. doi:10.1037/a0036465
- Gallup International. (2016). *End of Year 2016: Global report on religion*. Retrieved from <http://gallup.com.pk/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Global-Report-on-Religion-2.pdf>
- Hall, T. W. & Edwards, K. J. (2002). The spiritual assessment inventory: A theistic model and measure for assessing spiritual development. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 41(2), 341-357. doi:10.1111/1468-5906.00121
- Johnson, C. V. & Hayes, J. A. (2003). Troubled spirits: Prevalence of predictors of religious and spiritual concerns among university students and counseling center clients. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 50(4), 409-419. doi:10.1037/0022-0167.50.4.409
- Kelly, M. M. & Chan, K. T. (2012). Assessing the role of attachment to god, meaning and religious coping as mediator in the grief experience. *Death Studies*, 36, 199-227. DOI: 10.1080/07481187.2011.553317.
- Koenig, H. G. (2018). *Religion and mental health: Research and clinical application*. San Diego: Elsevier.
- Lifeway Research. (2007). *Reasons 18- to 22- Year-Olds Drop Out of Church*. Retrieved from <https://lifewayresearch.com/2007/08/07/reasons-18-to-22-year-olds-drop-out-of-church/>.
- Lukoff, D., Lu, F., & Turner, R. (1998). From spiritual emergency to spiritual problem: The transpersonal roots of the new DSM-IV category. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 38, 21-50.
- Magyar, G. M. & Mahoney, A. (2005). Sacrilege: A study of sacred loss and desecration and their implications for health and well-being in a community sample. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 44, 59-78.
- McConnell, K. M., Pargament, K. I., Ellison, C. G., & Flannelly, K. J. (2006). Examining the links between spiritual struggles and symptoms of psychopathology in a national sample. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 62(12), 1469-1484. doi:10.1002/jclp
- Pargament, K. I., Murray-Swank, N. A., Magyar, G. M., Ano, G. G. (2005). Spiritual struggle: A phenomenon of interest to psychology and religion. In W.R. Miller & H.D. Delaney (Eds.), *Judeo-Christian perspective on Psychology: Human nature, motivation, and change* (pp. 245-267). Washington: American Psychological Association.
- Pargament, K. I., Smith, B. W., Koenig, H., & Perez, L. M. (1998). Patterns of positive and negative religious coping with major life stressors. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 37(4), 710-724.
- Raiya, H. A., Pargament, K. I., & Magyar-Russell, G. (2010). When religion goes awry: Religious risk factors for poorer health and well-being. In P. J. Verhagem, H. M. van Praag, J. J. Lpez-Ibor Jr., J. L. Cox, & D. Moussaoui (Eds.), *Religion and Psychiatry: Beyond Boundaries* (pp. 389-412). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Saroglou, V. (2011). Believing, bonding, behaving, and belonging: The big four religious dimensions and cultural variation. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 42(8), 1320-1340. doi:10.1177/0022022111412267
- Saroglou, V. (2013). *Religion Personality and Social Behavior*. New York: Psychology Press.
- Saroglou, V. & Cohen, A. B. (2013). Cultural and cross-cultural psychology of religion. In R. F. Paloutzian & C. L. Park (Eds.), *Handbook of the psychology of religion and spirituality* (pp. 330-353). New York: Guilford Press.
- Trevino, K. M. & McConnell. (2014). Religiosity and religious coping in patients with cardiovascular disease: Change over time and associations with illness adjustment. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 53(6), 1907-1917. doi:10.1007/s10943-014-9897-0
- Wilt, J. A., Exline, J. J., Grubbs, J. B., Park, C. L., & Pargament, K. I. (2016). God's role in suffering: Theodicies, divine struggle, and mental health. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 8(4), 352-362.

- Wilt, J. A., Exline, J. J., Lindberg, M. J., Park, C. L., & Pargament, K. I. (2017). Theological Beliefs About Suffering and Interactions With the Divine. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 9(2), 137-147.
- Wortmann, J. H., Park, C. L., & Edmondson, D. (2012). Spiritual struggle and adjustment to loss in college students: Moderation by denomination. *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 22(4), 303-320. doi:10.1080/10508619.2011.638605
- Ysseldyk, R., Matheson, K., & Anisman, H. (2010). Religiosity as Identity: Toward an understanding of religion from a social identity perspective. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 14(1), 60-71. doi:10.1177/1088868309349693