The Relationship of Religiosity, Atheism, Belief and Intelligence

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Abstract
There are many contributing factors that relate to religious belief and disbelief. A brief review of current literature indicates a recurring theme in support of the negative relationship between intelligence and religiosity. These studies show that higher Intelligence Quotient's (IQ) correlate with lower religious belief and atheism. To gain a greater understanding of that relationship, studies on curiosity and emotional intelligence, belief and evolutionary theory were considered. Directionality is indicated in some studies, which suggest that increased cognitive abilities lead to a decrease in religious belief. Evolutionary theory also supports directionality in that it suggests that belief in the divine is an ancestral behavior and atheism is the later novel behavior (Bertsch & Pesta, 2009). Additionally the way beliefs are valued and attributed can determine the strength of our beliefs. The depth of our core beliefs can contribute to our willingness to change or alter them. Curiosity and emotional intelligence can lead to questioning and changing beliefs (Canna, Calhouna, Tedeschia, Kilmera, Gil-Rivasa, Vishnevskya, and Danhauerb, 2010). The current research provides hints to the links between the contributing factors of why some people change their beliefs and why others do not (Leonard, Harvey, 2007)

Introduction
Religious belief has served humanity in a myriad of ways. It would seem that any question that could not be answered within the context of man’s current intellectual capacity would be deferred to a higher power. Any explanation of humanities existence that was beyond man’s grasp was equated to the divine. While today the answers to the mysteries of life still escapes us, the questions we ask are less inhibited by the restrictions of such religious dogma. Blind faith, while still practiced, is not a practical approach to resolving the complex problems of modern society. Humankind has evolved, and in growing numbers, people no longer fear challenging religious ideology or even putting religious practice completely aside as atheism is more widely accepted as a viable alternative to religiosity. The following literature review will show that there is a negative relationship between intelligence and religious belief and further, attempt to explain the transition from a position of religious faith to that of a nonbeliever by looking at how a belief is acquired, what happens when it is challenged and what is required for a belief to be changed.

Secular rises in IQ scores are occurring worldwide. One explanation is that our current understanding of the world and the need for realistic explanations for our day-to-day experiences are in direct conflict with ancient religious teachings (Bertsch & Pesta, 2009). IQ increases are a good place to start looking for clarification as to why religiosity is questioned to begin with. A study of 137 countries shows a 0.60 correlation between National IQ’s and disbelief in God (Lynn, Harvey & Nyborg, 2009). In support of these findings, atheists are shown to score consistently higher on IQ tests in comparison to those who are considered to be highly religious (Bertsch & Pesta, 2009). Intellectual elites are shown to have a higher percentage of non-religious beliefs as compared to the general population (Lynn, Harvey & Nyborg, 2009).

Additionally, there is also evidence that shows a decline in religious belief from adolescence to adulthood. The decline is attributed to the increase in cognitive ability during this important developmental transition (Lynn, Harvey & Nyborg, 2009). Further, the National Longitudinal Study of Youth, which measured nearly 7000 American Children between the ages of 12 and 17 in religious belief and psychometric g, the general factor in intelligence, and found that atheists scored 6 g IQ points higher than the combined groups of students who followed a particular faith (Moore, Pedlow, Krishnamurty & Wolter, 1997). In a study conducted by Lewis (2011) on the relationship between intelligence and multiple domains of religious belief, the personality trait of openness to new experiences is controlled as both religious belief and intelligence, are correlated with this trait as defined by the theory of the Big Five (Lewis, Ritchie, & Bates, 2011). Openness was viewed as a potential confound because nonbelievers may have simply been open to the experience of alternative explanations of religion as opposed to having higher intelligence. Six religious domains ranging from Mindfulness, a less rigid religious perspective, to Fundamentalism and a strict adherence to religious doctrine were measured against intelligence and cognitive ability. The study found that five of the six measures negatively associated with intelligence, with Fundamentalism having the strongest negative association of B -.13 and removing education from this measure increased it to B -.25. Openness did in fact predict for the less strict religious domains however the relationship was opposite for fundamentalism (Lewis, Ritchie, Bates, 2011). Intellectual conflict with scriptures is also a consideration in this study as the author theorizes that increased cognitive and intellectual ability directs such individuals (Lewis, Ritchie & Bates, 2011).

Another aspect of religiosity’s relationship to intelligence that should be considered is the behavior of questioning and when it is deployed to acquire knowledge, as opposed to when one chooses to act without question. In a study done by Nancy Leonard and Michael Harvey (2007), curiosity is shown to be a
predictor of emotional intelligence. The trait of curiosity is the willingness to expose oneself to new information and a motivation resulting in exploratory behavior. Emotional intelligence is defined as the ability to monitor one’s own and others emotions and to use them to guide one’s thinking and actions (Leonard & Harvey, 2007). These traits applied to religious belief have some interesting implications. Curiosity seems to be at odds with rigid fundamentalist dogma as questioning such deeply seated beliefs is forbidden. Emotional intelligence differs somewhat from general intelligence in that it is centered on emotional ability as opposed to cognitive processing, though emotional intelligence still involves cognitive skill in the use of emotion. Such exploratory behavior or questioning of religious belief can be an emotional, and potentially frightening, notion to the faithful considering the possible repercussions for questioning the existence of God. With this thought in mind, the following study looks at anxiety as it relates to religious belief. Toburen & Meier (2010) did a study, which showed that priming God related concepts increased anxiety and task persistence. Toburen’s study showed that participant’s anxiety increased when presented with unsolvable word scrambles that contained God related verbiage. The anxiety was equated to the participants fear that God was watching them and thus pressured them to perform with increased persistence without ever questioning the insolubility of the task (Toburen & Meier, 2010). Why then do people choose to question one situation over another? The process of acquiring a set of beliefs is intricate and complicated; though once we have acquired a set of beliefs it may be even more difficult to change them. Core beliefs are foundational. When people are faced with conflicting information that involves foundational beliefs, they must consider that there may be a great undertaking that follows as not only does the change of their core belief need to be accommodated, but the cascade of all subsequent beliefs must also be adjusted (Canna, Calhoun, Tedeschi, Kilmer, Gil-Rivas & Vishnevsky, 2010). The process by which people make these decisions is shown to lie in our evaluation or in the value we place on our beliefs. In a study done by Jesse Preston and Nicholas Epley (2005), the explanatory power of valuable beliefs was explored. The study showed that belief is not just a perceived truth; it also holds a perceived value. When a belief was applied as an explanation to a cherished religious belief, it was shown to hold more value as compared to a one that could be easily explained (Preston & Epley, 2005). In other words, the greater the mystery of a belief, the more value that belief held. When beliefs have a great deal of strength or value, it is not surprising they are not questioned. However, if one is curious, has emotional intelligence and is motivated to question such beliefs he may hypothetically fall into the category of people who move beyond their own core belief system and into a realm that may allow them to consider intellectual pursuits that had previously been beyond their reach, due to the limitations of religious dogma and ultimately achieving greater intelligence.

Finally, evolutionary psychology offers its own theorem, which further supports the relationship between intelligence and religiosity through the Savanna-IQ Interaction Hypothesis, which explains how intelligence represents a direct link to novel ancestral behaviors. The Savanna Principle is founded in the theory that what is known as general intelligence today, evolved from what was once novel adaptive behavior (Kanazawa, 2010). In application of this theory, the evolutionary value of intelligence finds its roots in novel non-recurrent ancestral problem resolution. According to this theory, religiosity is considered historically ancestral there by resolving atheism to being the novel adaptive and intelligent behavior, which may in future generations be considered a mainstream value (Kanazawa, 2010). The theory further suggests directionality in that religiosity came first and was followed by the novel behavior of atheism.

Critique

Current research leaves little room for question when it comes to the negative relationship between intelligence and religious belief (Lewis, Ritchie & Bates, 2011) (Lynn, 2009) (Bertsch & Pesta, 2009). There have been many approaches to studying this relationship, though most of them are correlation studies (Lynn, Harvey & Nyborg, 2009) (Lewis, Ritchie & Bates, 2011). Most studies look at religiosity in degrees of practice or depth of belief or non-belief, and then correlate the data with IQ tests (Bertsch & Pesta, 2009) (Lewis, Ritchie & Bates, 2011) (Lynn, Harvey & Nyborg 2009). Some studies have been done on cognitive abilities in association to intelligence, which also show a negative relationship to religious belief (Bertsch & Pesta, 2009). One confounding variable that has been found in nearly all of the studies is the use of college students as participants who are by circumstance, more educated (Lynn, Harvey & Nyborg, 2009). A few studies used a wider range of participants and actually controlled for education levels with good results (Lewis, Ritchie & Bates, 2011). Another confounding variable is that most studies are conducted with a focus on Christianity, and often place participants with non-Christian faiths in with the atheist or agnostic ideologies in the comparison groups (Bertsch & Pesta, 2009) (Lynn, Harvey & Nyborg, 2009) (Toburen & Meier, 2010). A final note on confounding variables in intelligence as it relates to religious belief is that the trait of openness was considered a potential confound (Lewis, Ritchie & Bates, 2011). While openness is accepted as one of the Big Five personality traits, the definition and even the cross-cultural application of the term varies, and thus is a confound in and of itself. Curiosity as a predictor of emotional intelligence as it relates to the motivation to question and explore, has peripheral importance in how higher intelligence may negatively correlate to religious belief (Leonard & Harvey, 2007). However, this is an
area of research that is lacking in terms of studies that relate directly to the subject. More studies that look at curiosity and emotional intelligence as they relate to religious questioning could bare interesting insight into the process of how people make decisions about their religious belief. Further, studies that look at the direction of change in religious belief that range from believer to non-believer or vice-versa are nonexistent. There is a real need to look at the dynamics of the movement from believer to nonbeliever if it is to be proven that curiosity and increased intelligence are the cause. An even more important area of research that is a very big part of that dynamic is the dichotomy of anxiety and courage as it relates to the degree of questioning religious belief. Again, such studies seem to be nonexistent.

Evolutionary theory is said to be difficult to support through direct research because it relies on assumptions of historical events. However, it is common knowledge that only a few hundred years ago, humankind believed that the world was the center of the universe and the earth was flat. The novel idea was that the sun was at the center of our solar system and the earth was round. It is not hard to see how humanity has benefitted from changing our beliefs on these two subjects. Who is to say that religious belief is not on the same course and that studies that show a decrease in religiosity are not early indicators of a shift in mainstream beliefs?

How we value our beliefs and how we attribute them play an important role in our decision to hold onto one belief over another. It seems that the biggest hurdle to overcome when researching subject matter of a religious nature is that it seems to be handled with children’s gloves. Studies on belief in “religion” should not be treated as exclusive. Belief and the process of coming to believe or disbelieve, is only exclusive as a mental process or progression of processes, no more and no less.

Conclusion

Like any other pursuit of knowledge, we should treat the study of religious belief without accommodation. If the subject matter is in contrast with fact, it should be rigorously challenged to the benefit of believers and non-believers alike. The relationship of intelligence and religiosity has been explored since the age of reason. Men of science have been imprisoned and even lost their lives in pursuit of knowledge that conflicted with the church. Not only religious belief, but also the fear of questioning it has evolutionary roots (Kanazawa, 2010). The negative relationship between intelligence and religious belief has been repeatedly reflected in numerous scientific studies (Bertsch & Pesta 2009) (Lewis, Ritchie & Bates, 2011) (Lynn, Harvey & Nyborg, 2009). There have been extensive peripheral studies that tiptoe around the perceived central issue, that being, the very existence of God. As hard as scientists have held that such theological questions are not meant to be answered in the lab, science seems to be heading in that direction.

However, a more accurate description of the research is not so much that science is trying to determine the status of God’s existence as much as it is trying to understand the “belief” or “disbelief” in His existence. In an effort to understand why people choose to believe or not believe in their religious ideology, science must first understand the process through which beliefs are acquired, held or changed. Before a belief can be changed, it must be questioned. Before a belief is questioned, powerful information to the contrary must be presented and acknowledged. Stirring curiosity leads to motivating the individual to explore alternative possibilities. As a result, the mind expands, knowledge increases and a new belief is formed. The process is no different than the process through which a child comes to terms with the non-existence of Santa Clause. As the child’s cognitive abilities expand, he acquires conflicting information. When the conflicting information is overwhelming, the child changes his/her belief.
Works Cited


