Religiosity and spirituality play a significant role in the development of personal values, which influence moral reasoning. Consequently, many philosophers and psychologists have theorized about the relationships between religiosity, spirituality, and moral reasoning.

Kohlberg (1981) proposed his theory of moral development. He presented people with moral dilemmas and observed how they decided upon solutions. He categorized people’s strategies into three levels—preconventional, conventional, and postconventional—with two stages in each level. Kohlberg claimed that people move through the stages as they develop, with higher levels of reasoning marking moral maturity. There are several criticisms to this theory. Notably, Gilligan (1982) argued that Kohlberg’s theory overemphasizes justice and excludes other important values, such as caring. There are also claims that Kohlberg’s theory is not gender-egalitarian.

Kohlberg’s theory focuses on moral reasoning in terms of development and maturity, it may not be the most useful classification for adults. More recently, Forsyth (1980) proposed a model of moral reasoning based on the extent to which people use moral rules. Religious people are more likely to determine rules and reject exceptions to their own behavior. Individuals who follow universal rules are open to exceptions based on actions’ consequences. This reasoning style is consistent with the utilitarian perspective of moral reasoning, which holds that there are different ways to view morality. Meanwhile, idealists and relativists are more likely to achieve the highest levels of moral reasoning.

Forsyth (1980) used the combination of relativism and individualism to describe four styles of moral reasoning: situationist, relativism, absolutism, and exceptionists. Situationists have low idealism and low relativism. They follow universal rules, but are open to exceptions based on actions’ consequences. This reasoning style is consistent with the utilitarian perspective of moral reasoning, which holds that there are different ways to view morality. Meanwhile, idealists and relativists are more likely to achieve the highest levels of moral reasoning.

The overall aim of this study was to investigate the role of religiosity and spirituality in moral reasoning. Indeed, religiosity and spirituality are central to moral decision-making. This study aimed to explore how religiosity and spirituality influence moral reasoning.

First, results suggest that religious people tend to be idealistic but not relativistic. This means that, in comparison to less-religious people, highly religious people may be more likely to believe that the best outcome can be achieved, and be more likely to be guided by moral rules when making moral decisions. Forsyth (1989) classified this combination of idealism and relativism as “absolutism.” Based on Forsyth’s research (1980), these correlations may suggest that religious individuals may have more extreme views on contemporary moral issues, make more negative judgments on others’ behavior, and view themselves more negatively when they behave immorally.

Second, there were no significant differences between religious groups on either idealism or relativism. However, there were few participants from non-Christian religious groups, which may have affected this finding. The fact that most participants were led to the first page of the survey, if they performed any other action, then they were directed away from the survey. After the procedure, participants were classified into three groups—highly religious, moderately religious, and non-religious. The highly religious group consisted of participants who reported being religious and/or spiritual, 51.2% of participants reported being religious, while 22.4% reported being spiritual. This line of research suggests that highly religious and spiritual people may experience more self-condemnation, while spiritual people may experience more self-compassion. This indicates that spirituality influences moral reasoning in a positive way.

Based on the subscale scores, participants are classified into three groups—highly religious, moderately religious, and non-religious. The highly religious group consisted of participants who reported being religious and/or spiritual, 51.2% of participants reported being religious, while 22.4% reported being spiritual. This line of research suggests that highly religious and spiritual people may experience more self-condemnation, while spiritual people may experience more self-compassion. This indicates that spirituality influences moral reasoning in a positive way.

The current study used a combination of religiosity, spirituality, and moral reasoning to explore the relationships between religiosity and spirituality in moral reasoning. The study found that there were no significant differences between religious groups on either idealism or relativism. However, there were few participants from non-Christian religious groups, which may have affected this finding. The fact that most participants were led to the first page of the survey, if they performed any other action, then they were directed away from the survey. After the procedure, participants were classified into three groups—highly religious, moderately religious, and non-religious. The highly religious group consisted of participants who reported being religious and/or spiritual, 51.2% of participants reported being religious, while 22.4% reported being spiritual. This line of research suggests that highly religious and spiritual people may experience more self-condemnation, while spiritual people may experience more self-compassion. This indicates that spirituality influences moral reasoning in a positive way.

Participants

The sample included 1037 undergraduate students from a southeastern university who were enrolled in at least one psychology course. Participants were not paid, nor were they asked to participate in research studies in order to earn extra credit in their psychology course(s). After the procedure, participants were classified into three groups—highly religious, moderately religious, and non-religious. The high religious group consisted of participants who reported being religious and/or spiritual, 51.2% of participants reported being religious, while 22.4% reported being spiritual. This line of research suggests that highly religious and spiritual people may experience more self-condemnation, while spiritual people may experience more self-compassion. This indicates that spirituality influences moral reasoning in a positive way.

Methods

Participants were recruited through the psychology department. The sample was stratified into three groups—highly religious, moderately religious, and non-religious. The highly religious group consisted of participants who reported being religious and/or spiritual, 51.2% of participants reported being religious, while 22.4% reported being spiritual. This line of research suggests that highly religious and spiritual people may experience more self-condemnation, while spiritual people may experience more self-compassion. This indicates that spirituality influences moral reasoning in a positive way.

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Results

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Discussion

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