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## RELIGIOUS PLURALISM, RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY, AND RELIGIOUS COPING

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### ABSTRACT

*This study examined religious pluralism, religious activity, and religious coping with participants consisting of 97 female students from a Southwestern state university. We administered a series of questions concerning attitudes toward religion and God, demographic questions, and the Ways of Religious Coping Scale (WORCS). On the basis of the responses participants gave to the attitudes toward God and religion questions, the researchers divided the participants into an Exclusionist group, a Neutral group, and a Pluralistic group. We found that Exclusionists were more apt to use religion as a coping device and were more actively involved in their religion than were the Pluralists.*

### INTRODUCTION

In Western nations religious pluralism increasingly becomes an issue due to the varieties of approaches to religion/non-religion that exists within them. Kosim, Mayer, and Keysar (2001) reported that in the USA the number of people who self-report Christianity as their religion has dropped from 86.2% in 1990 to 76.5% in 2001; other religions have grown from 3.3% to 3.7% over the same period of time. The largest increase has been in those who report no religion or refuse to participate: from 10.5% to 19.5%. With Christians representing over a three-quarters majority (76.5%, see above) some would argue with the notion that the USA is truly pluralistic (e.g., Beaman, 2003). However, the groups that call themselves Christian also vary quite widely. In the data Kosim et al. (2001) reported, Catholic (24.5%) and Baptist (16.3%) made up the largest

groups, and one could argue that these two religious denominations represent two rather different approaches to religion. Furthermore, within the Christian group there were also Mormons (1.3%), Pentecostal (2.1%), Jehovah's Witness (.6%) and many others, all rather different groups.

Pluralism is supported by the underlying social system within the United States and most of the Western democracies. With freedom being one of the dominant principles, there is recognition within the system that many approaches to religion have legitimacy. The official American position in the US Constitution emphasizes tolerance of varying religious systems, and the courts have made serious effort to defend individual liberty in the exercise of religious convictions and practice (Gill, 2003).

In societies where a number of religious orientations co-exist, tolerance or oppression and conflict seem to be the choices for those societies. If the dominant group considers the other groups to be illegitimate and attempts to convert them into the dominant system, ill feelings may arise at the least, but too often the results are open violent conflict seen in many parts of the world today.

One can define pluralism, however, in more than one way. "Although traditionally pluralism stood for belief in more than one ultimate principle and opposed monism, the belief in one ultimate principle, the modern use of the term does not necessarily imply a denial of one ultimate reality: God" (Cooper, 1986, p. 824). In effect, the original notion of pluralism referred to the acceptance of many gods. Today the idea leans toward the toleration of a wide variety of religious orientations such as varying forms of Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, etc. "Civility" is a word that people sometimes use to define the process required of a complex civilized society. It is as Kingwell (2000) put it, "Indeed, understood as an awareness of others' interests and views, civility is an essential element of any defensible political order, that is, one founded on the values of pluralism and tolerance and tending toward justice" (p. 117).

In the sociological research literature, experts usually measure pluralism or diversity by assessing the availability of differing approaches to religion within a given community (Voas, Olson, & Crockett, 2002). People treat religion as any other marketplace phenomenon with concepts such as market share, majority/minority religious groups, etc. In the literature from this perspective, researchers debate over the effect of pluralism on religious participation. Berger (1967) saw a decline in religious participation as a natural consequence to increased religious pluralism within a society. Finke and Stark (1988), on the other hand taking a marketplace approach, viewed the increased numbers of religious groups as competing for market share and, therefore, increasing participation. Voas et al. (2002) from their analysis concluded that the method of comparing population data of religious groups with population rates of participation to be flawed. So the question of whether or not religious pluralism from this perspective enhances or diminishes religious involvement is an important issue in the research literature (Beaman, 2003; Olson, 1999; Olson & Hadaway, 1999; Voas et al., 2002) with differing results.

The approach taken in the present research follows that of Pargament (1997) who looked at pluralism from a more individualistic perspective. Pluralism refers to a position taken that does not deny the existence of an absolute reality but insists that more than one way exists to find it. Pargament contrasts the Pluralist style with that of the Exclusionist style which "...assumes an absolute reality and a single best way to approach it" (p. 365). In other words, there is only one true religion and all others are necessarily false. The current research question, therefore, approaching pluralism from an individualistic perspective, was: How does religious pluralism vs. religious exclusivism interact with religious coping and religious activity?

## METHOD

### *Participants*

The participants were 97 female college undergraduate students at a Southwestern state university. The students were volunteers from various undergraduate psychology classes who received extra credit for participation. The mean age was 25.46 ( $SD = 8.93$ ), with a range from 18 to 53. The participants were 75.26% White, 11.34% African American, 8.25% Hispanic, and 5.15% other. The indication of religious preference revealed the largest groups to be Catholic (19.59%) and Baptist (14.43%), not greatly different from those reported in the national study (Kosim et al., 2001). The remaining participants indicated some other Christian group (48.45%), no response/agnostic/atheist/no religious preference (16.49), and one person indicated Baja (1.03%).

### *Procedure and Materials*

In a classroom setting, after reading and signing an informed consent document, the participants received a packet of questionnaires and responded individually to the questions. The procedure took approximately 15 minutes to complete. The packet of questionnaires contained demographic questions, two 5-choice Likert-type items, and the Ways of Religious Coping Scale (WORCS) (Boudreaux, Catz, Ryan, Amaral-Melendex, & Brantley, 1995).

The two Likert-type items were (1) an item attempting to measure religious activity. "I actively practice my religion" was one anchor point and "I do not practice my religion," was the other with a 5-point scale between these two points. The (2) other item consisted of the following two anchor points, "I believe in one true religion" and "I do not believe in one true religion," again with a 5-point scale between.

The WORCS is a 40-item self-report measure of religious thoughts and behaviors. The WORCS has an Internal/Private Scale, an External/Social Scale, and a Total Score. The Internal Scale focuses on items such as saying prayers and private scripture reading while the External Scale is oriented toward attendance at religious services and interacting with other persons on religious matters. Boudreaux, et al. reported reliability results with the WORCS using Chronbach alphas to measure internal consistency. For the total score they found a coefficient of .95, for the Internal/Private Scale .97, and for the External/Social Scale .93. Boudreaux, et al. reported correlations in support of the

test's validity, including .57 with self-reported religious service attendance, and .78 with a self-report of life-importance of religion.

## RESULTS

Using the second of the 5-choice Likert-type statements (see above), we divided the participants into three groups. Of the participants, 44.33% indicated agreement or strong agreement with "I believe in one true religion." We classified these persons following Pargament (1997) as the Exclusionist Group ( $N = 43$ ). The Neutral Group ( $N = 21$ , 21.65%) marked the midpoint. The remaining participants, 34.02%, indicated agreement or strong agreement with the statements "I do not believe in one true religion," the Pluralistic Group ( $N = 33$ ). We analyzed these three groups in relation to WORCS scores.

**Table 1**  
**Exclusionist, Neutral, and Pluralistic Means and Standard Deviations.**

<u>Scale</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Standard Deviation</u>
<i><b>Exclusionists</b></i>		
Internal	14.233	10.612
External	42.279	12.717
Total	94.256	30.163
<i><b>Neutrals</b></i>		
Internal	9.524	9.903
External	36.476	13.633
Total	78.333	31.291
<i><b>Pluralists</b></i>		
Internal	7.333	10.766
External	27.000	18.723
Total	60.333	43.176

The religious activity scores were correlated with the religious pluralism scores. The significant correlation was .574 ( $p < .01$ ). Religious activity correlated with all

WORCS scores significantly: Internal ( $r = .419, p < .01$ ), External ( $r = .461, p < .01$ ), and Total ( $r = .514, p < .01$ ).

**Table 2**

**Various Christian and Non-Christian Means and Standard Deviations.**

<u>Scale</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Standard Deviation</u>
<b><i>Catholic</i></b>		
Internal	11.211	10.623
External	38.632	15.561
Total	82.368	32.743
<b><i>Baptist</i></b>		
Internal	11.929	8.352
External	37.786	14.072
Total	83.929	30.350
<b><i>Other Christian</i></b>		
Internal	14.085	11.525
External	41.915	12.104
Total	94.596	31.795
<b><i>Non-Christian</i></b>		
Internal	.706	1.359
External	14.235	12.637
Total	29.588	21.932

We calculated an analysis of variance for each of the WORCS scores using the three groups: Exclusivist, Neutral, and Pluralistic. The results indicated significant differences between all three scores:  $F_{(2, 94)} = 4.234, p = .017$ ;  $F_{(2, 94)} = 9.453, p < .001$ ;  $F_{(2, 94)} = 8.607, p < .001$  respectively. Table 1 displays the means and standard deviations. The Exclusivists had higher Internal mean scores than did the Neutrals or the Pluralistic Group. They also had higher External mean scores and Total mean scores. Post hoc tests (Tukey throughout) revealed that the Exclusivists and Pluralistic Groups

were significantly different from one another ( $p < .05$ ) but that other differences did not reach statistical significance ( $p > .05$ ) for all three scores: Internal, External, and Total.

One final analysis involved using the two largest groups, (1) Catholic and (2) Baptist, along with the (3) other “Christian” group and with those (4) choosing not to respond/listing none/indicating atheist or agnostic/non-Christian. The one-way ANOVA on these four groups indicated a significant difference on all three WORCS scores (Internal,  $F_{(3, 93)} = 7.718, p < .001$ ; External,  $F_{(3, 93)} = 18.856, p < .001$ ; and Total,  $F_{(3, 93)} = 19.399, p < .001$ ). Table 2 displays the means for Internal, External, and Total scores. The post hoc analysis showed the “non-religious” group to be significantly different ( $p < .02$ ) from the other three groups, but the other groups were not significantly different from one another ( $p > .05$ ).

We calculated Chronbach’s alpha to determine the internal reliability of the WORCS (Total scores) as administered in the present research. The coefficient was .971.

## DISCUSSION

The present research would seem to support the notion that women who see their religion from an exclusivist perspective tend to use religion more often as a means of coping and tend to be more active in expressing their religion. To put the findings another way, women who are active in their religious community tend to describe their religion as the one true religion.

One might state the conclusions from another perspective by saying that these results support the notion that women who are more pluralistic may not be very active in religion and are less likely to use religion as a coping device. One might raise the question: What coping devices are used by those who we defined as pluralistic in this research? The use of some of the more traditional coping scales along with the ones used here might prove to be fertile ground for further research.

The correlations from the present research between WORC scores and religious activity as reported previously (.419, .461, and .514) closely matched those obtained by Boudreaux, et al. (1995) between WORCS total score and religious service attendance (.57). This would seem to reinforce the WORCS as a valid measure for use in the study of religion and religious coping.

The final analysis revealed that the various religious groups did not significantly differ from each other but all were significantly different from the “non-religious” group in terms of WORCS scores. It was of interest, though, that the other “Christian” group was more religious (though not significantly) than either the Baptist or the Catholic groups.

The present research showed results that perhaps one would expect, looking at religion from an individualistic perspective, i.e., exclusivists are more involved in their

religion than those who were more open to varying religious approaches; nevertheless, the present research does affirm the relationship even though it was expected.

The questions used in the current study limited the outcome. Perhaps the use of a more thorough interview of religious views and activity would produce more precise and perhaps different results. The fact that we used only female participants in the analysis above serves as a limiting factor for this research. The population from which we drew the participants was college students, a group not noted for its religiosity. The participants were all persons taking psychology courses, which further limited the generalizability of this research.

Therefore, what is the answer to the current research question: “How does religious pluralism vs. religious exclusivism interact with religious coping and religious activity?” The answer must be that those of an exclusivist orientation are more active and use their religion as a coping device more often than do those not so inclined.

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Notes:

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