Faith in a Higher Power: The Study of Religion in Psychology

February 27, 2011

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Michael Inzlicht, University of Toronto, opened the “Toward a Cognitive Science of Religion: Insights From Personality and Social Psychology” symposium in a somewhat unorthodox fashion: “By show of hands, who in this room would say they have a personal belief in God or religious affiliation.” After noting that roughly 10 â€“ 20 percent of the standing-room-only crowd had raised their hands, he commented, “That’s about right in terms of degree of religious belief among psychologists.”

Although religious belief is a cornerstone for roughly 85 percent of the world’s population, it has never been the most popular subject of study among psychologists. However, there has been a surge of interest in religion within the past two years, and the symposium, held at the APS 21st Annual Convention, highlighted recent research on this topic.

Inzlicht and Kristin Laurin, University of Waterloo (presenting on behalf of Aaron C. Kay) discussed their findings on how religion affects people’s daily lives. A basic finding is that religion supports people’s need to feel personal control over events in their lives and reduces anxiety in the face of events that are out of their control or that simply do not meet their expectations. But there’s more to it than that.Â Laurin’s presentation centered around Kay’s compensatory control model, which holds that “it’s not only the belief in personal control that helps protect people against feelings of randomness, disorder, and chaos, but also the belief that the world is under control andâ€¦under the control of God.” Thus, a belief in a controlling God may be interchangeable with a sense of personal control and helps one to deal with events that are genuinely beyond their control. Inzlicht’s research found a more direct neurophysiological effect: “Believers” showed lower activity in their anterior cingulate cortex than did “nonbelievers” after making an error in a Stroop task, suggesting they were less anxious and distressed about their mistakes. Religion, it was suggested, could buffer people from the affective consequences of their own errors.

What are the origins of religion and what are its broader effects on culture? Azim Shariff, University of British Columbia, argues that religion originally evolved as a tool for group coordination and that it fostered cooperation among strangers. It was certainly successful in this aspect, as religious cultures have historically outcompeted nonreligious cultures. However, religion’s effect goes beyond its presence or absence in a culture — specific beliefs also make a direct impact on social mores. In a study using students with various religious beliefs, Shariff found that those who described God in harsh, strict terms were less likely to cheat on a task than were those who described a more forgiving God. Further exploring the links between religion and culture, Adam B. Cohen, Arizona State University, examined how religion may play a role in the development of individualistic or collectivistic cultures. Specifically, he noted how individualist nature in the United States is reflected by Protestantism (the religion of many of the country’s original settlers) — in which public, communal displays are unnecessary and one’s faith is regarded as a “personal relationship with God.”

Religion is central to the lives of many people, and psychology has been relatively quiet on the issue. Inzlicht hopes that will change: “To the extent that psychology should care what people believe in, we should be studying religion.”