Muslim Experiential Religiousness and Muslim Attitudes toward Religion: Dissociation of Experiential and Attitudinal Aspects of Religiosity in Iran

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Abstract
Investigations into Muslim psychology sometimes rely on measures emphasizing religious attitudes, with the Muslim Attitudes toward Religion (MAR) scale being an example. To capture the experiential aspects of Islamic religiosity, a recently developed Muslim Experiential Religiousness (MER) scale recorded an experienced submission to, love of, and closeness to God that define an ideal in Muslim religious consciousness. In a sample of 299 students from the University of Tehran and the Qom Islamic Seminary School, this study administered the MAR and MER, along with scales assessing mysticism, religious orientations, depression, anxiety, and satisfaction with life. Results demonstrated incremental validity of the MER over the MAR in predicting most of these religious and psychological adjustment variables. The MER also mediated and moderated some MAR relationships with religious and psychological outcomes. These data pointed toward a dissociation of the attitudinal and experiential features of Muslim psychology and confirmed the MER as a valuable index of Muslim religious experience.

Key words: Muslim Experiential Religiousness, Religious Attitude, Spirituality, Iran, Psychological Adjustment

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Empirical studies of Muslim psychology benefit from properly developed measures which capture the uniqueness of Islamic life. Among early endeavors along this line, the Muslim Attitudes toward Religion (MAR) scale recorded a personal embrace of Muslim beliefs and practices. As suggested by its name, the MAR puts an emphasis on the attitudinal aspects of Muslim religiousness. Its items record participation in central Muslim practices (e.g., “I fast the whole month of Ramadan”), adherence to a Muslim worldview (e.g., “I think the Qur’an is relevant and applicable to modern days”), and belief in the positive impact of being a Muslim (e.g., “Islam helps me lead a better life”). These attitudes in fact predict higher levels of religious commitment in both Iran and Pakistan.

As a measure of relevant attitudes, the MAR did not focus on the experiential foundations of Islamic belief. With Islam, as with other religious traditions, the ideal is to make faith a personal experiential reality. That reality for Muslims begins with a sense of surrender or submission. “Whose way is better than that of the man who has submitted to God, and does good, and who follows the creed of Abraham the upright?” asks the Qur’an (4: 125). With surrender, a Muslim attempts to open up to the closeness and love of God. The Quran proclaims, “Say: ‘If you love God then follow me that God may love you and forgive your faults; for God is forgiving and kind” (3:31). This should be a powerful and awe-inspired love. “Only they are true believers whose hearts fill up with awe when the name of God is mentioned” (Qur’an, 8:2). In short, intentional surrender, pursuit of closeness, and awe-filled love define an experiential ideal of Muslim faith.

The Muslim Experiential Religiousness (MER) scale recently operationalized the submission to, love of, and attempt to get close to God that defines this ideal in Muslim religious consciousness (Ghorbani, Watson, Ghramayepour, & Chen, 2013b). With a strong emphasis on experience, MER items captured submission to God (e.g., “Experiences of submitting to God cause me to feel more vital and motivated”), love of God (e.g., “When I look deeply within myself, I understand that the experience of loving God is worth any effort in my life”), and experienced closeness to God (e.g., “I have understood how my passion to be closer to God has liberated me internally in contrast to the enslavement produced by the other passions in my life”). Previous findings have demonstrated its validity in predicting an array of psychological and religious outcomes in Iranian Muslims.

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4 N. Ghorbani, P.J. Watson, S.Ghramayepour, and Z. Chen, Muslim experiential religiousness in Iran: Relationships with religious orientation, Muslim attitudes toward religion, and psychological adjustment (manuscript submitted for publication).
5 E.g. ibidem.
In a previous study, the correlation between the MER and the MAR proved to be substantial at \( r = .58 \). Statistical analyses, nevertheless, revealed that the MER did account for variance in at least some other measures beyond that explained by the MAR. In other words, the MER displayed incremental validity over the MAR, but the strong relationship between these two constructs made it clear that further research needs to examine the relative roles of religious attitudes and experience within the Muslim psychology of religion. The current study addressed that need by investigating the incremental validity and the mediation and moderation effects of the MER relative to the MAR in predicting religious and psychological variables involving mystical experience, religious orientations, depression, anxiety, and satisfaction with life.

The Hood Mysticism Scale\(^7\) assesses mystical experience across religious traditions. Mystical experience essentially involves a sense of transcendent unity, and the Hood scale operationalizes different aspects of that sense as described by Stace\(^8\). Factor analysis identifies three dimensions of mystical experience within this instrument, and this factor structure has been confirmed in Iran\(^9\). With introvertive mysticism, mystical experience involves consciousness of a timeless and spaceless ultimate void. Extrovertive mysticism reflects an experienced unity with all things. The interpretation factor measures tendencies to find religious meaning in mystical experience. All three mysticism factors predict greater spirituality in Iran\(^10\).

Religious orientations assessed basic motivations for being religious\(^11\). The intrinsic orientation theoretically operates as the master motive in a believer’s life. The extrinsic personal orientation involves the use of religion to achieve a sense of personal well-being. The extrinsic social orientation involves the use of religion to attain desired social results. Research in Iran and Pakistan establishes the intrinsic and especially the extrinsic personal motivations as clear predictors of Muslim religious and psychological adjustment, but the extrinsic social orientation has more ambiguous implications for these populations\(^12\).

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\(^6\) N. Ghorbani, P.J. Watson, N. Aghababaei, and Z. Chen, Transliminality and Mystical Experience: Common Thread Hypothesis, Religious Commitment, and Psychological Adjustment in Iran (manuscript submitted for publication).


\(^12\) N. Ghorbani, P.J. Watson, and Z. Khan, Theoretical, empirical, and potential ideological dimensions of using Western conceptualizations to measure Muslim religious commitments, “Journal of Muslim Mental Health” 2007, No. 2, p. 113–131.