Personality and Spirituality: Christian Prayer and Eastern Meditation Are Not the Same

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A random sample of 1,033 adults in an Australian community survey completed a form containing the abbreviated Revised Eysenck Personality Questionnaire together with questions about the practice of prayer and Eastern meditation. While prayer was associated with low psychoticism scores, Eastern meditation was associated with high psychoticism scores.

KEY WORDS: personality; spirituality; prayer; meditation; Eysenck.

INTRODUCTION

During the 1980s several commentators in the psychology of religion drew attention to the lack of recent relevant research into Christian prayer (Capps, 1982; Finney and Malony, 1985). Renewed interest in this field of research during the 1990s has been clearly documented by reviews like *The Human Side of Prayer* (Brown, 1994) and *Psychological Perspectives on Prayer* (Francis and Astley, 2000).

As part of this regeneration of interest in the psychology of prayer, Francis (1996) suggested that Eysenck's dimensional model of personality could generate a rich network of theories capable of explaining individual differences in the practice of prayer. Eysenck's dimensional model of personality has been refined through the development of a series of self-completion measures, including

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the Maudsley Medical Questionnaire (Eysenck, 1952), the Maudsley Personality Inventory (Eysenck, 1959), the Eysenck Personality Inventory (Eysenck and Eysenck, 1964), the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (Eysenck and Eysenck, 1975), the Revised Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (Eysenck, Eysenck and Barrett, 1985) and the Eysenck Personality Scales (Eysenck and Eysenck, 1991). In its most recent form Eysenck's dimensional model of personality proposed that individual differences can be most adequately summarised in terms of the three orthogonal factors of extraversion, neuroticism and psychoticism. Eysenck's operationalisation of these factors also incorporates a lie scale.

Eysenck's neuroticism scales measure emotional lability and over-reactivity and identify the underlying personality traits which at one extreme define neurotic mental disorders. The opposite of neuroticism is emotional stability. The high scorer on the neuroticism scale is characterised by the test manual as an anxious, worrying individual, who is moody and frequently depressed, likely to sleep badly and to suffer from various psychosomatic disorders. Eysenck and Eysenck (1975) suggest that if the high scorer on the neuroticism scale "has to be described in one word, one might say that he was a *worrier*; his main characteristic is a constant preoccupation with things that might go wrong, and with a strong emotional reaction of anxiety to these thoughts" (p.10). Eysenck and Gudjonsson (1989) characterise the high scorer as anxious, depressed, tense, irrational, shy, moody, emotional, suffering from guilt feelings and low self-esteem. The low scorer on this dimension is characterised by the absence of these traits.

Francis (1996) identified several theories capable of linking personal prayer with higher scores on the neuroticism scale. If prayer is conceptualized as a coping mechanism to deal with worries and anxieties, it might be hypothesised that the neurotic individual would be more likely to engage in personal prayer. If prayer is conceptualized as a response to maintain God's favour and goodwill, it might be hypothesised that the neurotic individual would be more anxious to sustain this good relationship. If prayer is conceptualized as an intercessory device to bring before God personal needs, the needs of others, and the needs of the world, it might be hypothesised that the neurotic individual would be more aware of and concerned about such areas of need.

Eysenck's extraversion scales measure sociability and impulsivity. The opposite of extraversion is introversion. The high scorer on the extraversion scale is characterised by the test manual as a sociable individual, who likes parties, has many friends, needs to have people to talk to and prefers meeting people to reading or studying alone. The typical extravert craves excitement, takes chances, acts on the spur of the moment, is carefree, easy-going, optimistic, and likes to 'laugh and be merry.' Eysenck and Gudjonsson (1989) characterise the high scorer as sociable, lively, active, assertive, sensation-seeking, carefree, dominant, surgent and venturesome. The low scorer on this dimension is characterised by the opposite set of traits.

Francis (1996) identified several theories capable of linking personal prayer with low extraversion scores. If personal prayer is conceptualized as a solitary and inward activity, it might be hypothesised that the introverted individual would be more in touch with this inward perspective on life. If personal prayer is conceptualized as conversation with God, it might be hypothesised that the introverted individual would be more likely to wish to talk things through with God as a compensation for fewer social contacts in the extraverted world. If personal prayer demands a disciplined framework of space and time free from the intrusions of other people, social callers and telephone interruptions, it might be hypothesised that the introverted individual would be more likely to benefit from this kind of environmental context.

Eysenck's psychoticism scales identify the underlying personality traits which at one extreme define psychotic mental disorders. The opposite of psychotic is normal personality. The high scorer on the psychoticism scale is characterised by Eysenck and Eysenck (1976), in their study of psychoticism as a dimension of personality, as being cold, impersonal, hostile, lacking in sympathy, unfriendly, untrustful, odd, unemotional, unhelpful, lacking in insight, strange, with paranoid ideas that people were against him. In the test manual Eysenck and Eysenck (1975) draw particular attention to the characteristic absence of certain emotions from high scorers on the psychoticism scale: "empathy, feelings of guilt, sensitivity to other people are notions which are strange and unfamiliar to them" (p.11). The low scorers are empathic, unselfish, altruistic, warm, peaceful and generally more pleasant, although possibly less socially decisive individuals. Eysenck styles the high scorer on the psychoticism scale as tough-minded and the low scorer on the psychoticism scale as tender-minded.

Francis (1996) identified several theories capable of linking personal prayer with low psychoticism scores. If personal prayer is conceptualized as a response of unworthiness or guilt in the presence of the deity, it might be hypothesised that the tough-minded individual would be less concerned with such feelings. If personal prayer is conceptualized as an empathic response to the needs of others, it might be hypothesised that the tough-minded individual would be less aware of such needs. If personal prayer is conceptualised as the expression of an intimate relationship with God, it might be hypothesised that the tough-minded individual would be less capable of forming and sustaining such a relationship.

Lie scales were originally introduced into personality measures to detect the tendency of some respondents to 'fake good' and so to distort the resultant personality scores (O'Donovan, 1969). The notion of the lie scale has not, however, remained as simple as that, and this continued use has resulted in them being interpreted as a personality measure in their own right (McCrae and Costa, 1983; Furnham, 1986). There is considerable controversy, however, regarding the psychological significance of the dimension of personality being assessed. According to one prominent account, the lie scale measures social acquiescence or

conformity (Finlayson, 1972; Massey, 1980). According to a second account, the lie scale measures lack of self-insight and immaturity (Crookes and Buckley, 1976; Kirton, 1977). According to a third account, the lie scale paradoxically measures greater honesty and truthfulness (Loo, 1980; O'Hagan and Edmunds, 1982).

Francis (1996) identified several theories capable of linking personal prayer with high lie scale scores. If the regular practice of personal prayer is conceptualized as conformity to the expectations of church teaching, it might be hypothesised that individuals who score high on the lie scale would be more likely to engage in personal prayer as a consequence of social acquiescence and conformity. If personal prayer is conceptualised as an immature response of dependency, it might be hypothesised that individuals who score high on the lie scale would display greater lack of immaturity and have more need to pray. If prayer is conceptualized as an expression of a good and holy life, it might be hypothesised that individuals who score high on the lie scale display more signs of truthfulness and of holiness.

In an attempt to test these theories, Francis (1996) employed data from a sample of 885 Anglican churchgoers. No significant correlations emerged in these data between personality and prayer. This finding was replicated in two subsequent studies among Anglican and Pentecostal churchgoers (Francis and Astley, 1996) and among Methodist churchgoers (Francis and Daniel, 1997). The problem with all three of these studies is that they were based on churchgoers among whom individual differences both in personality and in the practice of prayer may be more restricted than in the population at large.

A second and larger set of studies, however, conducted among the general population has identified a somewhat different picture. According to these studies there is a consistent lack of correlation between prayer and neuroticism scores and there is a consistent lack of correlation between prayer and extraversion scores. At the same time there is a consistent negative correlation between prayer and psychoticism scores. While some studies find a positive correlation between prayer and lie scale scores, the more general view supports the independence of these two variables. Studies within the tradition include studies among school pupils (Francis and Wilcox, 1994, 1996; Smith, 1996), students (Maltby, 1995; Lewis and Maltby, 1996; Francis, 1997), school teachers (Francis and Johnson, 1999) and senior citizens (Francis and Bolger, 1997). The conclusion to emerge from these studies is that psychoticism is the dimension of personality fundamental to individual differences in prayer. Eysenck's wider theory on the relationship between personality and religiosity (Eysenck, 1998) is able to account for this finding in terms of conditioning into tender-minded social attitudes. According to this theory religion belongs to the domain of tender-minded social attitudes. Tender-minded social attitudes are a function of conditioning and individuals who record low scores on the dimension of psychoticism condition more readily.

Against this background, the intention of the present study is to examine the relationship between personality and two very different expressions of spirituality, traditional prayer and Eastern meditation, among a general population survey. It is

hypothesized that, while low psychoticism scores and conditionability may be key predispositions to prayer, the very opposite may be the case in respect of attraction to the less socially established expression of Eastern meditation.

METHOD

Sample

The Australian Community Survey was carried out in 1998 in Australia by NCLS Research and Edith Cowan University. A series of questionnaires were mailed to a random sample of the adult population. The questionnaires were completed anonymously by around 50% of the recipients. A random sample of 1,033 adults in Australia completed a form of the survey which included the abbreviated Revised Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (EPQR-A: Francis, Brown and Philipchalk, 1992). Frequency of prayer was assessed on a five point scale from never to daily. Frequency of Eastern meditation was assessed on a four point scale from never to often. The data base was weighted to map onto the Australian population. In the weighted database the respondents were equally divided between males (50%) and females (50%); 24% were aged 15–29; 21% in were in their thirties, 18% in their forties; 15% in their fifties; 10% in their sixties and 13% were over the age of seventy.

RESULTS

The four scales of the abbreviated Revised Eysenck Personality Questionnaire produced the following alpha coefficients: extraversion, 0.82; neuroticism, 0.74; psychoticism, 0.49; lie scale, 0.64. These figures are broadly in line with the way in which the Eysenckian family of scales behave (Francis, Philipchalk and Brown, 1991).

Less than half of the sample (44%) said that they never or hardly ever prayed, while nine out of ten (89%) said that they never practised Eastern meditation. Table 1 presents the partial correlations, controlling for age and sex, between personality and both prayer and Eastern meditation. While prayer and Eastern meditation are both independent of extraversion and neuroticism, prayer is correlated

Table 1. Partial Correlations Controlling for Age and Sex

	E	N	P	L
Prayer	+0.06	−0.05	−0.11***	−0.06
Eastern meditation	+0.04	+0.05	+0.17***	−0.03

*** $P < .001$.

negatively with psychoticism while Eastern meditation is correlated positively with psychoticism.

CONCLUSION

Three main conclusions emerge from this study.

First, the data provide further support for the established findings that prayer is independent of both neuroticism and extraversion. According to the data Eastern meditation is also independent of these dimensions of personality. There is, therefore, no support for the view that prayer and meditation are a response to neurotic anxiety or that prayer and meditation lead to greater emotional stability. There is no support for the view that introverts turn to prayer and meditate as an alternative form of communication to the social interaction preferred by extraverts.

Second, the data provide further support for the established finding that there is an inverse relationship between the practice of prayer and psychoticism scores. This finding is consistent with the broader theory which locates traditional religiosity within the domain of tender-minded social attitudes as conceived within Eysenck's three dimensional model of personality (Eysenck, 1998). This broader theory hinges on the notion of conditioning into acceptance of those social and religious values generally approved by wider society.

Third, the data indicate that the practice of Eastern meditation is not related to psychoticism scores in the same way as the practice of prayer is related to psychoticism scores. Instead of a negative relationship there is a positive relationship. The practice of Eastern meditation is located within the domain of tough-minded social attitudes rather than tender-minded social attitudes. According to the broader Eysenckian theory Eastern meditation appears to provide an alternative spirituality for individuals who seek a spiritual dimension to life but who are more likely to resist conditioning into acceptance of those social and religious values more generally approved of by wider society.

From this intriguing start further research is needed to clarify precisely which aspects of spirituality are related to low psychoticism scores and which are related to high psychoticism scores.

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