COMPARING RELIGIOUS AND MORAL SOCIALISATION: 
EXPERIENCES OF DUTCH YOUTHS

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Abstract
As part of a large-scale inquiry into the religious and moral orientations of Dutch secondary 
school students, they were questioned about their religious and moral socialisation at home. More 
specifically the students were asked how important their religious and moral socialisation is/was 
to their parents. On the basis of the data thus acquired this paper explores differences in the 
importance attached to religious and moral socialisation by children in religious and nonreli-
gious families and in churchgoing and non-churchgoing families. As expected, in both religious 
and churchgoing families the religious socialisation of children is deemed more important than 
in nonreligious and non-churchgoing families. Two rather unexpected results were that, firstly, 
moral socialisation was deemed more important in religious and churchgoing families than in 
their secular counterparts; and, secondly, religious and churchgoing parents considered certain 
aspects of their children’s moral socialisation more important than related aspects of their reli-
gious socialisation. Apparently, children’s moral socialisation is not only rated more highly in 
religious and church-affiliated than in secular environments, but in the former it is rated above 
their religious socialisation. This is a remarkable finding, which is discussed from the perspec-
tive of cognitive and evolutionary psychology in the final section of this paper.

Key Words: youths, religious and moral socialisation, evolution

1 INTRODUCTION

It is fairly commonly accepted these days that the bond between religion 
and morality is loosening, a conviction based mainly on sociological 
research and theory-building. Well-known and very influential in this 
respect is Weber’s verstehende Soziologie, in which he tries to unravel the 
motivational force of religion in human conduct. This scientific endeavour 
culminated in his famous Protestant ethic, which laid bare the moral moti-
vational roots of modern capitalism. He traced these roots to certain 
branches of Protestantism, namely Puritanism and its idea of labour as 
a calling. But, as Weber’s analyses show, as soon as capitalism was well 
established religion lost its motivational force. That is to say, as soon 
as capitalism developed into a self-sufficient system aimed at profit 
maximisation by way of purposive rationality, it no longer needed a moral, 
let alone a religious foundation. Thus, at the end of the Protestant ethic,
Weber sighs: “The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so” (Weber, 1985, p. 181).

Following Weber, more recent scholars like Schluchter (1979) and Habermas (1985) also stress that in modern society religion has lost much of its motivational force. Applying Weber’s notion of rationality to the moral domain, they indicate a transformation of the religious ethic (Gesinnungsethik) into a procedural and universal ‘ethic of responsibility’ (Verantwortungsethik), according to which individuals are responsible and self-conscious beings, who make rational, moral choices autonomously and in increasingly complex situations. This leaves no room for religion, for that would contradict the autonomous and reflexive character of the moral decision-making process. Thus Schluchter and Habermas perceive a kind of ‘secularisation’ of the moral domain or, put differently, a growing divergence between religion and morality. The same picture emerges from the recent European Value Study. In this regard Halman (1991; cf. also Halman & Riis, 2003), documenting changes or developments in the moral consciousness of the Dutch population, found, that the Dutch, and especially Dutch youths, no longer abide by the morality of the Decalogue and are becoming increasingly permissive, especially in what is known as private morality (i.e. issues relating to sexual and bio-ethical behaviour like adultery, prostitution, euthanasia, abortion, etc.), although this does not result in moral decadence, as Halman’s study also reveals. Greater sexual liberty, for example, does not result in sexual lawlessness, as most Dutch people still reject the idea that sex should be absolutely free and purely a matter of personal preference. Apparently most people in the Netherlands still lead morally respectable lives without religion as a moral source. In other words, while the data of the European Value Study clearly demonstrate overall religious decline, there are no signs that such a decline leads to an ethic of ‘anything goes’ (Halman & Riis, 2003, p. 14). Still, in the perspective of the moral domain it seems justified to say that the bond between religion and morality is loosening.

In a religious perspective, however, the divergence between the religious and moral domains is not at all self-evident. Research among religious samples in the Netherlands reveals a positive relationship between people’s religious beliefs and their moral beliefs concerning issues of life and death, the family, politics and economics (Ter Voert, 1994). Among our sample of Dutch secondary school students we found a weak though positive relationship between religious belief, including church attendance, and teleological moral orientations (Vermeer & Van der Ven, 2003; cf. also Vermeer & Van der Ven, 2002). Hence for people who are still in one way or another
committed to religion, their religious background has moral implications. From a religious perspective this is quite understandable, since, as Geertz (1973) already showed, religion not only explains what the world is like (model of reality) but also what the world should be like (model for reality). Theologians often relate this normative orientation to the divine-human relationship as the essence of religious faith, for, as Fraas (2000) emphasises, a personal relationship with God not only is indicative of human life (“You are redeemed”), but at the same time entails an imperative to live accordingly (“Act as a redeemed human being”). From a theological perspective, therefore, praxis of the Christian faith necessarily has a moral dimension, because the divine-human relationship can only be realised through people’s relationships with their fellow humans and other creatures (Fraas, 2000, p. 110).

To sum up: when it comes to the bond between religion and morality one can adopt one of two positions, depending on one’s perspective. From a moral perspective it seems plausible to maintain that the bond between religion and morality is indeed loosening, a phenomenon one may call ‘secularisation’ of the moral domain. From a religious perspective, on the other hand, it seems that morality is integral to religion and thus in one way or another ‘should’ still relate to it. With due regard to this difference, in this article we take the second position and study the relationship between religion and morality from a religious perspective. In so doing our general interest is to find out how religion and morality interrelate in the religious domain and to clarify how the religious milieu differs from the secular milieu in this respect. This interest is still too broad to be satisfied in a single article, which is why we limit our aim to a study of the religious and moral socialisation of children in the religious milieu when compared with the secular milieu. The limitation is justified, we believe, if one considers the importance of socialisation processes for the spread and transmission of both religious and moral values.

Our comparison between the religious and secular domains from the angle of religious and moral socialisation is based on the aforementioned empirical research conducted among Dutch secondary school students, since a small section of the questionnaire we used in our study specifically inquired into these youths’ religious and moral socialisation in their homes, according to their own accounts. Their experience will be used to answer the following three research questions. First, what importance do the students’ parents attach to religious and moral socialisation, irrespective of their religious background? Second, what importance do religious parents attach to religious and moral socialisation compared with nonreligious parents? And third, what importance do religious parents attach to religious socialisation
compared with the importance they attach to moral socialisation? Thus our general inquiry into the relationship between religion and morality in the religious domain takes the form of a more focussed inquiry into the relative importance that parents, according to their children, attach to religious and moral socialisation.

Our article is structured as follows. We commence by discussing the socio-psychological understanding of religious and moral socialisation underlying the measuring instrument we used (section 2), after which we present the measuring instrument itself (section 3). Next, we report on the empirical research we conducted by presenting our major research findings on the aforementioned three research questions (section 4). The research report is followed by a discussion of the specific relationship, according to our findings, between children’s religious and moral socialisation from the perspective of evolutionary psychology (section 5).

2 Socialisation

As mentioned already, the aim in this section is to elucidate the socio-psychological understanding of socialisation on which our measuring instrument is based. First we discuss the concept of socialisation as such (2.1), after which we deal with religious and moral socialisation as specific instances of socialisation (2.2).

2.1 The socialisation process

Socialisation can be defined very briefly as a process in which specific convictions, notions, beliefs, practices, values, norms, et cetera (i.e. ‘knowledge’ present in the dominant culture) are transmitted to future generations to enable them to participate in the prevailing social life. Through such processes of socialisation the individual – who, according to Berger and Luckmann (1991, p. 149) is only born with a predisposition towards sociality and is not yet a member of society – is gradually integrated with society. This very broad description of socialisation as the transmission of cultural knowledge can be made more specific by focussing on the following aspects: the addressees, aims, modes and conditions of socialisation (Drehsen & Mette, 2001).

As regards the addressees of socialisation, it is common to distinguish between primary and secondary socialisation. Primary socialisation mainly
entails introducing young children to the surrounding social world or existing social order in order to develop their sociability. Primary socialisation, therefore, usually occurs in primary groups such as the family or the peer group. Secondary socialisation is a subsequent process, which, according to Berger and Luckmann (1991, p. 150), “inducts an already socialised individual into new sectors of the objective world of his society”. Secondary socialisation is not so much concerned with the young child as with the adolescent or adult, who learns to play certain roles in various societal institutions (e.g. by becoming a teacher or a soldier in the army). Thus the addressees of socialisation differ, depending on whether we are dealing with primary or secondary socialisation.

When it comes to the aims of socialisation there is a difference between the classical and the modern understanding of socialisation. Classical theorists like Berger and Luckmann stress that socialisation aims at both transmission of ‘cultural’ knowledge and the internalisation of that knowledge. Hence the aim is both cognitive and affectively attitudinal. The child, for instance, not only needs to learn how to behave at the dinner table or on the playground; it also needs to develop a tendency to actually behave in the expected ways. Thus the knowledge that is transmitted to the child, adolescent or adult must become meaningful to the person: it must be internalised and the individual must identify with it. Socialisation processes, therefore, are also constitutive for identity formation. Berger and Luckmann (1991, p. 153) explain this twofold aim of socialisation with reference to the concept of the ‘generalised other’. In their view, what is decisive in any socialisation process is that the child becomes aware that table manners or playground rules are supported not only by its parents or peers but by everybody in society. Thus the child learns to see itself as part of a generality of others, and in the process acquires a general identity towards others. In terms of Berger and Luckmann one could say that the formation of a generalised other in consciousness is the aim of any socialisation process, especially primary but also secondary socialisation.

Proponents of a modern understanding of socialisation, on the other hand, criticise this overall aim of the formation of a generalised other in consciousness, together with its underlying aims of transmission and internalisation, as unidirectional and not in accordance with our present-day social and cultural predicament (Klaassen, 1991; 1993). For, contrary to what Berger and Luckmann suggest, modern societies no longer have a unified body of cultural knowledge, which can be transmitted from one generation
to the next. Instead our present-day cultural situation is marked by pluralism (Van der Ven, 1998, pp. 91-98). As a result socialisation can no longer be regarded as the younger generation’s passive adaptation to an existing social and cultural system. Contrary to Berger and Luckmann’s emphasis on transmission and internalisation, it is more appropriate, given the modern situation of cultural pluralism, to see the aim of socialisation as the development of a unique and dynamic identity. Klaassen (1993, p. 176) explains the need for such a definition with reference to the concept of individuation. Individuation refers to the polarised needs in modern societies to develop both a dynamic social identity capable of functioning in very diversified social situations, and a unique personal identity on the basis of which one can still be identified as one and the same person. As a result the educator’s role is no longer considered that of unidirectionally transmitting cultural knowledge, although this remains integral to socialisation, but also as facilitating the formation of a dynamic, personal identity.

As far as modes of socialisation are concerned, the most important are observation and conversation. That is to say, the child primarily acquires knowledge about the (social) world by observing the behaviour of a whole range of significant others (parents, peers, teachers, etc.) and the consequences this behaviour has for them. The learning-theoretical principles of learning by observation are explained by Bandura (1971; cf. also Van der Ven, 1998, pp. 99-101) in his well-known Social learning theory. But mere observation is not enough. Conversation is equally important. First of all, casual, everyday conversation confirms the child’s identity against the background of an unproblematic, taken-for-granted world, which is also confirmed in such conversation. And secondly, conversation is necessary to help the child make sense of its observations by explaining some of the behaviours it has actually observed (Berger & Luckmann, 1991, pp. 166-182).

Finally, in regard to the conditions of socialisation there are several important aspects. They relate to both the addressees and the social context in which socialisation takes place. We cannot discuss the conditions in detail, but one can imagine that the child’s mental abilities and mastery of language are influential factors in any socialisation process. In the same way various factors in the social context may also affect the process. In this respect we would like to stress one social aspect that is particularly relevant to religious and moral socialisation. This is the need for a supportive community, which offers a plausibility structure that constantly confirms the child’s developing identity (Berger & Luckmann, 1991, pp. 174-178).
2.2 Religious and moral socialisation

On the basis of the foregoing description we can now explain what is generally understood by religious and moral socialisation. First we look at religious socialisation.

We have already referred to the transmission of cultural ‘knowledge’ as a key feature of socialisation. According to this view religious socialisation is often understood primarily as the transmission and internalisation of religious beliefs and practices that are normative in a given culture or religious community. The addressees of religious socialisation are mostly young children, who are duly introduced to the beliefs and practices of a certain religious tradition. Childhood religious socialisation represents an important basis and facilitator for religious commitment in later life (Spilka et al., 2003, p. 107), which makes the role of parents pivotal. Several empirical studies show that, if a child is to follow in its parents’ religious footsteps, it is crucial that the parents are genuinely committed to a religious tradition and openly display this commitment to their children. Secondly, the parents need to be involved in a church or religious community and prayer and Bible reading have to be regular practices in the home (De Hart, 1990, p. 179; cf. also Spilka et al., 2003, pp. 110-113). Of course, this does not mean that religious socialisation is confined to the home. Attending religiously affiliated schools or church catechesis are also helpful, but these activities will have little influence on the child’s religiosity compared with parental influence (Hutsebaut, 1995, pp. 122-126). Parental religiosity remains the most influential factor, which again underscores the importance of parents as role models in terms of Bandura’s social learning theory.

One may wonder whether religious socialisation in the sense of transmission and internalisation is still possible and desirable in Western societies marked by religious and cultural pluralism. Such pluralism seriously obstructs transmission and internalisation of religious beliefs, because it confronts the child with ‘discrepant worlds’, to use a phrase of Berger and Luckmann (1991, pp. 188-191). That is to say, what is transmitted to the child by its significant others at home or in a religious community is no longer plausible in the broader context of society. In view of this supposed lack of a broader plausibility structure, religious pedagogues nowadays tend to see the aim of religious socialisation as facilitating religious maturity rather than the transmission and internalisation of a predefined set of religious beliefs (Andree, 1983; cf. also Vergouwen, 2001, pp. 7-9). Religious maturity in this sense is religious self-determination centring on personal
religious choice, which may or may not result in a reasoned commitment to a particular religious tradition. This view of the aim of religious socialisation does not mean that transmission and internalisation are now considered unimportant. In facilitating religious maturity the child still needs to be introduced at the cognitive level to a body of religious knowledge and be stimulated to internalise this knowledge as a basis for personal faith (Andree, 1983, pp. 74-77). But against the current background of a pluralistic society it is considered crucial to pursue the aims of transmission and internalisation by means of open, reciprocal processes of communication between the child and its parents, religious education teachers, spiritual leaders and so on. In these communication processes the socialisation agents openly discuss the plausibility of their faith and their religious way of life, accepting the possibility that the children eventually will not follow in their religious footsteps (cf. also Alma, 1998, p. 100).

To sum up: given the importance of parental religiosity, religious socialisation is usually part of primary socialisation processes in the family, which means that the addressees are mainly young children. Secondly, transmission and internalisation are important aims of religious socialisation provided these aims are pursued in an open, communicative atmosphere. This accords with observation and conversation as important modes of socialisation. For, as we have seen, parents not only are important role models for the child to observe, but they also have to discuss their faith with their children in order to help them make sense of it. This task is all the more important in pluralistic Western societies that no longer offer a firm plausibility structure for religion as a primary condition for religious socialisation.

Much of what we have said about religious socialisation applies equally to moral socialisation. Like religious socialisation, moral socialisation entails gradually introducing the child, adolescent or adult into an existing body of cultural knowledge and meaning. The only difference is that the body of knowledge involved comprises moral values, norms and principles rather than religious beliefs, convictions, notions, ideas and practices (cf. Van der Ven, 1998, p. 86). In terms of our succinct definition of socialisation, the difference between religious and moral socialisation does not lie in the addressees, aims, modes or conditions of socialisation, but in the specific contents. Moral socialisation, too, is necessary in order to become a member of society, because membership requires familiarity with and commitment to prevailing moral values, norms and conventions. Thus moral socialisation also aims at transmission and internalisation and occurs largely through observation of the behaviour of (significant) others and the
consequences for them. Positive consequences reinforce the child’s tendency to behave similarly and negative consequences reduce this tendency (cf. Bandura, 1971). Finally, moral socialisation cannot do without a supportive moral community. That is to say, children will not abide by a value system if this system is not supported by the larger community to which they belong.

In this respect moral socialisation faces the same difficulties as religious socialisation, because of the moral pluralism in Western societies. There is no longer a unified body of moral norms, an undisputed set of moral principles or a clear-cut pattern of values ready to be transmitted and internalised. On the contrary, people in Western societies are often confronted with different, even contradictory value patterns. Felling (2004) finds that the traditional distinction between patterns like family values, economic values, social criticism and hedonism gets blurred, because people increasingly tend to combine these previously contrasting patterns. This leaves moral educators with the question of which values should be transmitted and internalised. Since it is increasingly difficult to answer this question, also in the field of moral socialisation, teaching children to communicate about moral values, norms and principles has become a major aim alongside the original aims of transmission and internalisation.

3 Measuring Instrument

In our research the socio-psychological perspective outlined above was operationalised in a measuring instrument consisting of two parts: one pertaining to religious socialisation and the other to moral socialisation. Both parts are represented below.

As is evident, our instrument concentrates on parents’ role in the religious and moral upbringing of their children. This is because parents play a crucial role in religious and moral socialisation processes, as indicated in the previous section. By the same token the youths we interviewed were not only asked how important their religious and moral upbringing is to their parents, but also about actual socialisation practices in their families, in which regard we distinguished between earlier and current socialisation practices. We also inquired into the nature of these earlier and current socialisation practices. Did the more traditional aims of transmission and internalisation prevail, or did parents also acknowledge the need for religious and moral communication? We thus tried to establish the role and importance
### Measuring instrument: religious socialisation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Options</th>
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</table>
| How important is it to your parents that you adopt their view of religion and worldview? | 1. not important at all  
2. not very important  
3. fairly important  
4. very important |
| How often did your parents talk about religion and faith in the past?    | 1. never  
2. sometimes  
3. often |
| Were you forced to go to church, mosque or any other house of prayer as a child? | 1. no, they left it up to me  
2. not really, but they did try and stimulate me  
3. yes |
| Are religious matters discussed in your home nowadays?                    | 1. never  
2. sometimes  
3. often |
| Do your parents still insist on church attendance?                        | 1. no, they leave it up to me  
2. not really, but they do appreciate it  
3. yes |

### Measuring instrument: moral socialisation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Options</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| How important is it to your parents that you accept their values and norms? | 1. not important at all  
2. not very important  
3. fairly important  
4. very important |
| Did your parents talk about values and norms in the past?                 | 1. never  
2. sometimes  
3. often |
| Were you forced to accept your parents’ values and norms as a child?      | 1. no, they left it up to me  
2. not really, but they did try  
3. yes |
| Are values and norms discussed in your home nowadays?                     | 1. never  
2. sometimes  
3. often |
| Do your parents still insist that you accept their values and norms?      | 1. no, they leave it up to me  
2. not really, but they do appreciate it  
3. yes |
of parents as significant others or meaningful models in socialisation processes; we tried to determine, moreover, whether parents take pains to explicitly communicate their religious and moral convictions to their children.

4 Results

As part of a large-scale inquiry into religious and moral orientations of Dutch students, a questionnaire including the foregoing instrument, along with other instruments, was administered to a sample of 974 students attending Catholic schools offering pre-university (VWO) and/or pre-college (HAVO) programmes. The students completed the questionnaire in December 1997 and January 1998 during one of their worldview/social studies classes. Scrutiny of the completed questionnaires showed that there were few unanswered items and that hardly any questionnaires had been completed unreliably. Of the 974 students, 44% were boys and 56% were girls; 42% were aged 16, 46% were 17 and 12% were 18 years old. Although 20% defined themselves as Catholic, 57% indicated that they seldom or never attend church.\(^3\)

Following the three research questions mentioned in the introduction, we present our research findings in three steps. Thus we start with the importance that students’ parents attach to religious socialisation, irrespective of their religious background (4.1). Next we consider the importance religious parents attach to religious and moral socialisation compared with nonreligious parents (4.2). Finally we focus on the religious milieu as such by looking at the importance religious parents attach to religious socialisation compared with the importance they attach to moral socialisation (4.3).

4.1 Importance attached to religious and moral socialisation

As stated in the introduction, our first research question reads as follows: what importance do students’ parents attach to religious and moral socialisation, irrespective of their religious background? This question can be answered with the help of table 1, which gives an overview of the mean scores of all students in our sample on the different aspects of socialisation covered in our measuring instrument: how important is it to students’ parents that they accept their parents’ view of religion and/or their values and norms (importance of religious and moral socialisation), how often were religion and/or values and norms discussed in their homes in the past (early religious and moral communication), whether or not students were forced
to go to church and/or accept their parents’ values and norms in the past (forced to attend church and accept values and norms in the past), how often religious matters and/or values and norms are still discussed in their homes (current religious and moral communication) and whether or not their parents still insist on church attendance and/or accepting certain values and norms (forced to attend church and accept values and norms now).

### Table 1. Mean scores: religious and moral socialisation (entire sample)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious socialisation Variable</th>
<th>Mean scores</th>
<th>Std. dev.</th>
<th>Moral socialisation Variable</th>
<th>Mean scores</th>
<th>Std. dev.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Importance religious socialisation</td>
<td>1.88</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>Importance moral socialisation</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early religious communication</td>
<td>1.80</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>Early moral communication</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forced to attend church in the past</td>
<td>1.73</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>Forced to accept values and norms in the past</td>
<td>2.06</td>
<td>.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current religious communication</td>
<td>1.60</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>Current moral communication</td>
<td>2.21</td>
<td>.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forced to attend church now</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>.48</td>
<td>Forced to accept values and norms now</td>
<td>1.90</td>
<td>.58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Our findings make it clear that, according to the students themselves, issues pertaining to moral socialisation are more important to their parents than those relating to religious socialisation. On average parents find it fairly important that their children accept their values and norms, but they consider it less important that their children should also adopt their religious beliefs and worldview. The same difference is apparent in regard to religious and moral communication as instances of socialisation. As far as moral communication is concerned, parents sometimes discussed moral matters with their children in the past and sometimes they still do so now. But whereas religious matters were also discussed occasionally in earlier childhood, this hardly occurs any more. By the same token parents stimulated their children to attend church in the past, but now they leave it up to the children to decide whether or not to attend. When it comes to moral socialisation, however, parents still appreciate it when their children accept their values and norms. As far as our entire sample is concerned, the con-
clusion seems to be that students’ parents on average find the moral upbringing of their children of enduring interest, while they show far less interest in their religious upbringing. The finding accords with the observation made in the introduction to this article: religious decline and the concomitant differentiation between religion and morality do not lead to moral decline.

4.2 Comparison of importance attached to religious and moral socialisation by religious and nonreligious and by churchgoing and non-churchgoing parents

Having elucidated the importance that students’ parents attach to the religious and moral socialisation of their children, we now focus on how these instances of socialisation are valued in the religious milieu when compared with the secular milieu. This brings us to our second research question: what importance do religious parents attach to religious and moral socialisation compared with nonreligious parents? Before we can answer this question, we need to define the religious milieu as distinct from the secular milieu.

To begin with, it must be noted that we distinguish between two orientations: an orientation towards the church and an orientation that one may label personal religiosity. Both orientations are found in what we call the religious milieu, but they are not the same. As pointed out by several sociologists of religion (e.g. Davie, 2002), the fact that people leave the church does not necessarily mean that they stop believing or lose interest in religion. This contemporary religious phenomenon, which Davie calls ‘believing without belonging’, is empirically supported by the European Value Study (Halman & Petterson, 1996). Bearing this distinction in mind, we feel justified to divide the religious milieu into two groups: a religious and a churchgoing group. Hence our study of the relative importance attached to religious and moral socialisation involves a comparison between four groups: students with religious and nonreligious parents, and students with churchgoing and non-churchgoing parents. We identified the four groups as follows. If students indicated that religious faith is important or fairly important to their parents and that their parents also believe in God or an ultimate reality, they were considered to have religious parents. Students who indicated that religious faith is not all that important to their parents and whose parents do not believe/find it hard to believe in God or an ultimate reality were considered to have nonreligious parents. In similar fashion,
if students indicated that their parents are regular or monthly churchgoers, we regarded them as having churchgoing parents, while students who indicated that their parents never attend church or only on special occasions were seen as having non-churchgoing parents.

The distribution of respondents over these four groups is shown in tables 2 and 3. With regard to the dichotomy of religious versus nonreligious parents, one third (33.4%) of our sample could not be classified and was omitted from further analyses. Of the remaining 649 respondents 40.5% have religious parents and 59.5% have nonreligious parents. In the case of churchgoing versus non-churchgoing parents, we were able to assign almost 90% of our sample to one of the two categories, of which the majority (61.2%) have non-churchgoing parents.5

Table 2. Religious and nonreligious parents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Religious parents</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>27.0</td>
<td>40.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonreligious parents</td>
<td>386</td>
<td>39.6</td>
<td>59.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>325</td>
<td>33.4</td>
<td>Unclassified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>974</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Churchgoing and non-churchgoing parents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Churchgoing parents</td>
<td>279</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>31.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-churchgoing parents</td>
<td>596</td>
<td>61.2</td>
<td>68.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>99</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>Unclassified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>974</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Having defined the four groups, we now show the actual comparison of the relative importance attached to religious and moral socialisation by these groups in order to answer our second research question. First we look at how the respective groups value their children’s religious socialisation (table 4). In this respect our findings yield no surprises. As was to be expected, children’s religious socialisation is considered far more important by religious and churchgoing parents than by nonreligious and non-churchgoing parents. The same applies to such related practices as earlier and current
communication about faith and earlier and current parental insistence on church attendance. In line with our theoretical premises concerning religious socialisation (cf. section 2.2.), as well as related studies of religious socialisation practices in the Netherlands (cf. e.g. Andree, 1983; De Hart, 1990; Van der Slik, 1992; Alma, 1993; 1998; Lanser-Van der Velde, 2000; Vergouwen, 2001; Ter Avest, 2003), our findings confirm that religious socialisation of children indeed requires parental religiosity and church involvement.

Table 4. Comparison of importance attached to religious socialisation by religious and nonreligious and by churchgoing and non-churchgoing parents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Religious</th>
<th>Nonreligious</th>
<th>Eta</th>
<th>Churchgoing</th>
<th>Non-churchgoing</th>
<th>Eta</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Importance socialisation</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>.63*</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>.49*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early communication</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>.53*</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>.40*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forcéd to attend church in the past</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>.53*</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>.44*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current communication</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>.46*</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>.37*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forcéd to attend church now</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>.60*</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>.51*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The asterisk (*) indicates a statistically significant difference between groups ($p \leq .001$)

When it comes to moral socialisation a somewhat different picture emerges (cf. table 5). Whereas there are marked differences between the valuation of religious socialisation by religious and churchgoing parents on the one hand and nonreligious and non-churchgoing parents on the other, this does not apply to the valuation of moral socialisation.
Table 5. Comparison of importance attached to moral socialisation by religious and nonreligious and by churchgoing and non-churchgoing parents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Religious</th>
<th>Nonreligious</th>
<th>Eta</th>
<th>Churchgoing</th>
<th>Non-churchgoing</th>
<th>Eta</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Importance socialisation</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>.23*</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>.15*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early communication</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>.10*</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forced to accept values and norms in the past</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>.14*</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>.10*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current communication</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>.10*</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forced to accept values and norms now</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>.15*</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>.10*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The asterisk (*) indicates a statistically significant difference between groups ($p \leq .05$)

In view of the cultural developments outlined in the introduction, this finding is not all that remarkable or unexpected. It merely underscores the fact that religious decline is not followed by moral decline. In other words, it reaffirms that children’s moral upbringing is a constant concern to all parents. But apart from this there is something remarkable about table 5. For although the differences in mean scores are relatively small, in most instances they are still statistically significant and indicate that the moral socialisation of children is considered most important by religious and churchgoing parents as well. Parental religiosity and church involvement are conducive not only to religious upbringing but also to moral upbringing of their children.

Hence the answer to our second research question is as follows. Religious and churchgoing parents not only consider their children’s religious upbringing much more important than nonreligious and non-churchgoing parents do, but – albeit to a lesser degree – they also attach more importance to their children’s moral upbringing. We look into this remarkable finding more closely below when we consider our third research question.
4.3 Comparison between the importance attached to religious and moral socialisation by religious and by churchgoing parents

The fact that both religious and moral socialisation is considered most important by religious and churchgoing parents when compared with non-religious and non-churchgoing parents makes one wonder whether parents in the first group differ among themselves in their evaluation of their children’s religious and moral socialisation. This is what our third research question is about: what importance do religious and churchgoing parents attach to religious socialisation compared with the importance they attach to moral socialisation?

To answer this question we calculated paired t-tests for the differences in importance attached to religious and moral socialisation by religious parents (table 6) and churchgoing parents (table 7). As the two tables reveal, both religious and churchgoing parents consider almost all issues relating to their children’s moral socialisation more important than issues relating to their religious socialisation. And although the differences in mean scores are not very large, they are still statistically significant. The only exception is the scores on the question whether or not the students were forced to go to church and to accept their parents’ values and norms in the past. It is only in respect of this facet of early religious and moral pressure that religious and churchgoing parents do not differ significantly. In respect of all other facets the children’s moral upbringing is considered significantly more important than their religious upbringing by both religious and churchgoing parents. Firstly, they consider it more important that their children should adopt their values and norms than their religious beliefs and worldview. Secondly, these parents also communicate more about values and norms than about religion and faith, both in early childhood and currently. Finally, religious and churchgoing parents also put more pressure on their children to accept certain values and norms than to attend church.
Table 6. Comparison of importance attached to religious and moral socialisation by religious parents (t-test)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Religious socialisation mean scores</th>
<th>Moral socialisation mean scores</th>
<th>T-value</th>
<th>DF</th>
<th>2-tail sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Importance socialisation</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>-5.99</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early communication</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>-4.02</td>
<td>209</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forced in the past</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>-0.40</td>
<td>227</td>
<td>.691</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current communication</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>-7.65</td>
<td>243</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forced now</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>-9.34</td>
<td>256</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7. Comparison of importance attached to religious and moral socialisation by churchgoing parents (t-test)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Religious socialisation mean scores</th>
<th>Moral socialisation mean scores</th>
<th>T-value</th>
<th>DF</th>
<th>2-tail sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Importance socialisation</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>-6.32</td>
<td>234</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early communication</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>-3.68</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forced in the past</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>237</td>
<td>.308</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current communication</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>-8.37</td>
<td>259</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forced now</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>-8.46</td>
<td>267</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The answer to our third research question confirms what we have already noted, namely that parental religiosity and church involvement are important conditions for the religious upbringing of children, but are even more conducive to their moral upbringing. Thus our case study of the importance of religious and moral socialisation produces a very interesting finding, which brings us back to the intricate relationship between religion and morality.
5 DISCUSSION: RELIGION AND THE EVOLUTION OF MORALITY

In the introduction to this article we referred to a growing body of evidence that the bond between the religious and moral domains is loosening and that religion is gradually ceasing to function as a moral authority or source of moral beliefs. This development is partially confirmed by our findings. The answer to our first research question shows that parents generally deem the moral socialisation of their children more important than their religious socialisation, which means that a child no longer needs to have religious or churchgoing parents to receive moral socialisation. In this regard our findings accord with the findings of, for instance, the European Value Study (cf. Halman, 1991; Halman & Petterson, 1996; Halman & Riis, 2003; Draulans & Halman, 2003) about what one may call the ongoing secularisation of the moral sphere or the dissociation of religious views from moral values.

But, as mentioned in the introduction, this divergence between religion and morality is less self-evident when considered from the perspective of religion itself. And, surprisingly, this is reflected in our findings. As our analyses of responses to our second and especially our third research question reveal, not only is religious and moral socialisation considered very important by both religious and churchgoing parents, but these parents actually consider moral socialisation more important than religious socialisation. Hence in addition to secularisation of the moral sphere, our findings also point to a ‘moralisation’ of the religious sphere! In view of the ongoing debate on the relationship between religion and morality this latter finding is particularly interesting and merits careful consideration. In the remainder of this article we look for a possible explanation for this moralisation of the religious sphere by considering the following question: why are religious and churchgoing parents in particular so concerned about the moral upbringing of their offspring?

As mentioned in the introduction, in order to answer this question we adopt the perspective of evolutionary psychology, in which context we refer to two important claims. The first is that morality is naturally implied in the evolution of humankind. This claim is based on the insight that humans, like all living organisms, have a drive to reproduce in order to transmit their genes to the next generation and, in consequence, a drive to survive as a necessary condition for reproduction. These two basic natural tendencies are said to result in two forms of altruism: kin altruism and reciprocal altruism.

Kin altruism concerns social relations among relatives and is rooted in the drive to reproduce. That is to say, if spreading one’s genes is a natural
drive of humans and other living organisms, their next of kin become very important because they carry fifty percent of the parents' genes. Hence for parents to be sure that their genes continue to be transmitted to the next generation it is very important to care for and protect their children (Pinker, 1997, pp. 429-440). This phenomenon is what evolutionary psychologists call *kin altruism*, which they regard as an emotional response of solidarity, sympathy, tolerance and trust towards their relatives. Thus the evolutionary psychologist Pinker (1997, p. 431) considers it perfectly natural that “parents love their children above all others, [that] cousins love each other but not as much as siblings do and so on”. Kin altruism, then, is a natural, loving response to relatives, with a diminishing degree of self-sacrifice depending on the distance of the relationship in the family tree.

*Reciprocal altruism*, by contrast, concerns social relations among non-relatives such as friends and acquaintances (Pinker, 1997, pp. 502-509). This form of altruism is as natural as kin altruism. Its basis, however, is not self-sacrifice in order to promote the spread of one’s genes, but equal sharing of costs and benefits. That is to say, people act favourably towards others in order to get some sort of return sooner or later: reciprocal altruism is based on the principle of exchange. In this sense friendship can be explained in evolutionary terms, because in the course of evolution people learned to maintain friendships as a kind of ‘insurance’ against misfortune. As Pinker (1997, p. 509) puts it, “the point of friendship (…) is to save you in hard times when it’s not worth anyone else’s trouble”.

Reciprocal altruism gives rise to several important emotions that constitute the moral sense of humans. They include *liking* (willingness to do favours for those we like, i.e. people who are likely to offer favours in return); *anger* (disgust for those who did not reciprocate a favour); *gratitude* (towards others who helped us out at their personal expense); *sympathy* (a desire to help others in order to earn gratitude); *guilt* (a feeling that prevents us from cheating or prompts us to make amends for social misdeeds); and *shame* (a public display of remorse to show people that one is a reliable partner despite an earlier misdeed).

The human urge to survive and reproduce thus evokes natural responses of sympathy, solidarity and love towards relatives (kin altruism) as well as towards non-relatives (reciprocal altruism) and in this way acts as a natural source of morality. But what role does religion play in the process? This brings us to the second claim made by scholars who adopt an evolutionary perspective to account for the origins of religious thought and ritual (cf. e.g. Boyer, 2001; Bering & Johnson, 2005; Bulbulia, 2005): religion, they argue, functions as a *motivational force* for reciprocal altruism.
According to Bulbulia (2005, pp. 80-81), religion primarily serves to find solutions to two adaptive problems: getting along with others and getting along with ourselves. The first problem is of special interest in our context, because it relates to reciprocal altruism. Like other evolutionary psychologists, Bulbulia views human cooperation in terms of the principle of exchange as the key to biological success. But in addition he explicitly wonders why humans do not cheat. Why are they committed to social exchange when cheating is even more profitable? This is where religion comes into it. According to Bulbulia religion functions as a ‘commitment device’. It facilitates social life, because it “fosters cooperation by enabling individuals to reliably predict and secure social exchange where there are rational incentives to defect from cooperation” (Bulbulia, 2005, p. 85). Religion can do that – that is, it has the power to build strong social alliances – because of its specific makeup. For only religious systems have the concept of a supernatural agent with ‘privileged epistemic access’ to the self’s mental state. That is to say, only religion offers the concept of an omniscient, supernatural being that foresees all our actions and actually knows all our deepest intentions (Bering & Johnson, 2005, pp. 120-122).

Such a concept not only promotes the development of human conscience, but is also a strong incentive for proper social behaviour and social exchange. For whereas you may still be able to fool a tribal chief, king, queen, president or just your fellow humans, you cannot fool an omniscient God who has unlimited access to the information you withhold from others. From this evolutionary perspective the relationship between religion and morality is not primarily one in which religion implants moral values in humans or equips them with moral imperatives. As Boyer (2001, pp. 170-174) puts it, the gods do not function as legislators or divine role models. No, what religion implants in humans is a deep sense of moral causality or moral recursiveness. It creates a sense of supernatural retribution, which in the course of evolution has evolved into a kind of religio-moral conscience that to this day speaks to us via an inner moral ‘voice’, a tacit feeling that ‘Big Brother’ is indeed watching us and punishment will follow our wrongdoings (Bering & Johnson, 2005, pp. 130-131, 136).

From an evolutionary perspective, then, religion is not the source of morality, but fosters or reinforces morality. This insight may also explain, we believe, why religious and churchgoing parents are so concerned about the moral upbringing of their offspring. We would attribute that concern to the sense of moral causality or moral recursiveness, of which religious and churchgoing parents are probably more aware than their nonreligious counterparts. Thus we assume that awareness of and commitment to a supernatural
agent that sustains the moral order urges religious and churchgoing parents to take the moral socialisation of their children even more seriously than their religious socialisation. Religious belief – in the sense of a more or less explicit awareness of a moral ‘eye in the sky’ or a transcendent moral authority that actively sustains the moral order – thus prompts not only moral behaviour in terms of reciprocal altruism, but also moral upbringing of future generations.

NOTES

1. This reference to the European Value Study (EVS) only applies to findings concerning the Netherlands. As documented by the EVS, the religious and moral landscape of Europe reveals marked differences between countries, which make it impossible to generalise about the continent as a whole (cf. e.g. Halman & Petterson, 1996). Still, as far as the Netherlands is concerned, one can safely say that the ongoing secularisation of society does not result in higher levels of moral permissiveness. Draulans and Halman (2003) demonstrated this by studying the relationship between the degree of religious pluralism as a partial indicator of secularisation, and the degree of moral pluralism as an indicator of moral autonomy, for various European countries. Although their findings do not reveal a clear, uniform pattern for Europe as a whole, in the Netherlands at all events a high degree of religious pluralism does not result in an equally high degree of moral pluralism. In other words, the ongoing secularisation of Dutch society is not accompanied by a higher degree of moral leniency.

2. Another interesting hypothesis regarding the relationship between religion and morality is that of Halman and Petterson (1996). Using the EVS data they studied the relationship between religion and morality for Spain, the Netherlands, Sweden and the USA. In all four countries the data generally revealed a trend towards increasing permissiveness in sexual and bio-ethical matters, more or less irrespective of the religious background of the respondents. The only difference is that church-goers’ permissiveness increases at a slower pace. This finding makes Halman and Petterson surmise that the churches nowadays follow rather than dictate value changes in Western societies and in this respect prove to be “unsuccessful ‘breakers’ in the back of the train of cultural change” (Halman & Petterson, 1996, p. 44).

3. Religious self-definition is as follows: 20% Catholic, 5% Protestant/Christian, 2% other faiths, 5% believers, 28% agnostic, 19% non-believers and 20% atheist. In addition, the students described their church attendance as regular (9%), occasional (34%) and seldom or never (57%).

4. According to the paired t-tests we calculated, the differences in mean scores on these aspects of religious and moral socialisation reflected in table 1 are all statistically significant (p < .001).

5. In view of the popular conviction that personal religiosity does not necessarily coincide with church attendance, the following cross-tabulation is very interesting. It shows that of the 378 non-churchgoing parents 80 parents (21.1%) can still be called religious, while of the 202 churchgoing parents 25 (12.3%) have to be labelled nonreligious – that is to say, according to the students themselves. Thus, at least as far as our sample is concerned, the association between religious belief and church attendance is still relatively strong (Cramér’s $V = .63$) and hardly justifies describing the religious situation in the Netherlands in terms of ‘believing without belonging’.
6. In view of this assumption it would be very interesting to study the God images of religious and churchgoing parents who emphasise the moral upbringing of their children. Do these parents in fact all share a conception of God as a supernatural agent with privileged epistemic access? And do they all share a tacit fear of divine retribution? These are important questions. If further research were to yield positive answers to these questions, it would certainly be strong support for the above considerations. Not that we completely lack empirical evidence. Recently, for instance, Stark (2001) tested – and largely could confirm – the hypothesis that a close link between religion and morality calls for specific images of God: God as a being, who is concerned about humans, relates to humans, favours good above evil, and exhibits qualities like omnipotence and omniscience. Stark’s findings thus seem to concur with our views, although he only studied the correlation between these God images and approval/disapproval of immoral behaviour like buying stolen goods. Hence although Stark’s findings point in the same explanatory direction, there is still a need to study the relationship between these God images and certain educational practices.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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