

## Corruption, Religion and Moral Development

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# Religions and Development Research Programme

## Corruption, Religion and Moral Development

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Working Paper 42 - 2010



# Religions and Development

## Research Programme

The Religions and Development Research Programme Consortium is an international research partnership that is exploring the relationships between several major world religions, development in low-income countries and poverty reduction. The programme is comprised of a series of comparative research projects that are addressing the following questions:

- How do religious values and beliefs drive the actions and interactions of individuals and faith-based organisations?
- How do religious values and beliefs and religious organisations influence the relationships between states and societies?
- In what ways do faith communities interact with development actors and what are the outcomes with respect to the achievement of development goals?

The research aims to provide knowledge and tools to enable dialogue between development partners and contribute to the achievement of development goals. We believe that our role as researchers is not to make judgements about the truth or desirability of particular values or beliefs, nor is it to urge a greater or lesser role for religion in achieving development objectives. Instead, our aim is to produce systematic and reliable knowledge and better understanding of the social world.

The research focuses on four countries (India, Pakistan, Nigeria and Tanzania), enabling the research team to study most of the major world religions: Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism and African traditional belief systems. The research projects will compare two or more of the focus countries, regions within the countries, different religious traditions and selected development activities and policies.

The consortium consists of six research partner organisations, each of which is working with other researchers in the four focus countries:

- University of Birmingham, UK: International Development Department, Department of Theology and Religion, Centre for West African Studies, Centre for the Study of Global Ethics.
- University of Bath, UK: Centre for Development Studies.
- Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, New Delhi.
- Nigerian Institute of Social and Economic Research, Ibadan.
- University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.
- Lahore University of Management Sciences, Pakistan.

In addition to the research partners, links have been forged with non-academic and non-government bodies, including Islamic Relief.

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# Summary

Lacking in much of the current research on religion and corruption is a sense that there may be alternative ways that people view corruption, which in *their minds* may be moral, and that if we are to truly develop an understanding of how religion influences people's attitudes and behaviour towards corruption, we must start from a critical and interpretive perspective at the individual level of analysis. This paper argues that the methodologies used in many current studies are not adequate to study what is ultimately an individual decision, and one that is at least in part informed by a person's own ethical and moral standpoint. As such, starting research with the mindset that particular types of activities are corrupt, and thus 'wrong', may prevent researchers from uncovering why people develop particular attitudes to corruption, or why they choose to behave in a way labelled by some as corrupt. If corruption research is to explore some of these issues at the individual, as well as the regional and national levels, it is important to learn from existing work that examines how attitudes are formed, both on religion and the impact that religion has on attitudes to moral issues and on moral reasoning. A number of studies, few of which deal specifically with corruption, are reviewed in order to establish useful ways forward for corruption researchers.

Research on religion and attitudes towards deviant behaviour shows that individuals' interpretation of messages on moral behaviour is significant in determining their acceptance or rejection of deviancy. However, there is little evidence to suggest that the religious reject behaviour that is 'anti-social' any more than the non-religious. Indeed, there is little evidence to suggest that religion, in terms of religious content, impacts upon individuals' attitudes to public morality. Membership of a religious community that rejects behaviour seen as being 'corrupt' seems more likely to have an impact, but a lot depends upon whether members of the community are encouraged to use religious principles to think through moral issues, or to interpret religious teachings literally.

The implications of this for research on corruption are

- The messages individuals receive about behaviour that is deemed to be moral and behaviour that is seen as 'deviant' may be conflicting and the ways in which they interpret such messages are important, influencing their ideas about what constitutes 'corruption'.
- People are part of multiple communities – religious, family, friends, work, professional and so on – and may not separate their lives into 'public' and 'private' spheres, governed by public and private morality.



- The communities of which individuals (including researchers and those involved in anti-corruption initiatives) are part (including religious communities) all, in one way or another, impact upon their attitudes towards corruption and so research must focus on individuals not in isolation but as members of wider communities.
- To understand *why* corruption occurs, therefore, it may be necessary to put aside prior assumptions about what corruption is and why people engage in it.

# 1 Introduction

Mohammedans are Mohammedans because they are born and reared among the sect, not because they have thought it out and can furnish sound reasons for being Mohammedans; we know why Catholics are Catholics; why Presbyterians are Presbyterians; why Baptists are Baptists; why Mormons are Mormons; why thieves are thieves; why monarchists are monarchists; why Republicans are Republicans and Democrats, Democrats. We know that it is a matter of association and sympathy, not reasoning and examination; that hardly a man in the world has an opinion on morals, politics, or religion that he has got otherwise than through his association and sympathies (Mark Twain, nineteenth century American author, humorist and political commentator, cited in Hauk and Saez-Martin, 2002, pp. 311-312).

Interest in fighting global corruption has increased significantly since the former head of the World Bank, James Wolfensohn, famously spoke out against the 'cancer of corruption' in 1996. Since then, international organizations, bilateral donor agencies, charities, multinational corporations, individual activists, government watchdogs and so on have struggled to explain why corruption occurs, let alone to formulate clear strategies for its eradication. Millions of dollars have been spent by donor agencies on anti-corruption programmes and several well-known attempts to measure corruption to inform better policy-making have been made, such as Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index and the World Bank Institute's Worldwide Governance Indicators. Despite this, many perceive corruption to be on the increase globally and new and innovative ways to fight corruption continue to be sought.

Much time has been spent by the World Bank, among others, in establishing corruption as a symptom of institutional failure, while cultural aspects of corruption have been deliberately underplayed (Marquette, 2003), although a growing body of work is emerging that explores the potential of cultural explanations for corruption. Of particular interest are those studies that use religion as a proxy for culture and attempt to establish a link between religion and corruption at the national level. It has been argued that in countries where religion plays a vital role in the lives of most people, many, including public servants, are likely to derive their ethical framework at least in part from their religion. Religion is said to provide many with a language of ethics and, often, an actual set of rules to live by, some of which can be interpreted as being of particular importance to fighting corruption.

The increasing attention given to the religion-corruption nexus stems from the argument that fairness and honesty are basic to the teachings of many religions, and that they can therefore be used in

attempts to reduce corruption (Luxmoore, 1999). All the major world religions attempt to define humans' relationship with a sole or dominant deity, but also served as sources of institutions used in managing early societies. Thus they all address the issue of honesty (see, for example, Reisman, 1979; Armstrong, 2007). According to Beets, two apparent assumptions underlie attempts to enlist the support of religious leaders and groups in the fight against corruption. The first is that "faithful adherents to religion will refrain from corruption because of the inherent theft, dishonesty, illegality, and mistreatment of others [it implies]. The second, related assumption is that those who are not faithful adherents of religions are more likely to engage in corruption because of an absence of religious guidance" (Beets, 2007, p. 72).

However, in apparent contradiction of these assumptions, many of the most corrupt countries in the world (according to Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index [TI-CPI]<sup>1</sup>) also rank high in terms of religiosity (using indicators such as those used by the Pew Global Attitudes Project).<sup>2</sup> On this basis, there would appear to be little evidence to support the above assumptions, but there is a growing body of literature that looks to see if it is the *type* of religion that makes a difference as to whether or not a country is corrupt (Beets, 2007; Norris and Inglehart, 2004; Paldam, 2001).

I have argued elsewhere that the evidence for a causal relationship between religion (or types of religion) and either higher or lower levels of corruption is in no way convincing (Marquette, 2010). The methodologies being employed thus far are insufficient for proving – one way or another – a causal relationship. The literature is largely quantitative, with a dearth of empirical, fieldwork-based evidence. The results are often contradictory, depending upon which international dataset has been used, which points to significant methodological concerns. The findings are tentative at best, offering comparisons between various datasets and pointing towards possible explanations, sometimes rooted in theory, sometimes not. The data used are often flawed, making the explanations that are put forward problematic. Data are aggregated at the country level and cannot tell us anything about how individuals' attitudes towards corruption are formed, the impact of religious (and other socio-cultural influences) on attitude formation, or the ways that individuals condemn or justify corrupt behaviour using the language of religion.

This paper argues that the methodologies used in many current studies are not adequate to study what are ultimately individual decisions, that are at least in part informed by individuals' own ethical and moral standpoints. As such, starting research with the mindset that particular types of activities are corrupt, and thus 'wrong', may prevent researchers from uncovering why people develop particular attitudes towards corruption, or why they choose to behave in a way that some would label as corrupt. I do not posit here a 'correct' ethical or moral standpoint on corruption. As Migdal (2001, pp. 19-20) points out, "What may be easily labelled as corruption or criminality, such as nepotism or smuggling, can also be looked at, for instance, as a morality favoring kinship ties over meritocracy or one expressing the right of movement of people and goods across the boundaries arbitrarily imposed by state law." Whether an individual agrees or not with Migdal's characterization of the nature of corruption, what is lacking from much of the current research on religion and corruption is a sense that there may be alternative ways that people view corruption, which in *their minds* may be moral. It is argued in this paper that, if a valid understanding of how religion influences people's attitudes and behaviour towards corruption is to be developed, it is necessary to start from a critical and interpretive perspective and from an individual level of analysis.

There are currently few, if any, published studies that approach the study of religion and corruption in this way. If corruption research is to explore some of these issues at the individual level, as well as at the regional and national levels, it is important to look at the literature on how attitudes are formed, in relation to religion, and the impact that religion has on attitudes towards moral issues and on moral reasoning. This paper reviews a number of studies, few of which deal specifically with corruption, in order to establish useful ways forward for corruption researchers. Unlike the majority of the studies to date on corruption and religion, which tend to be largely economics-based and use international datasets, this literature is largely sociological and psychological. Although studies generally focus on the individual level of analysis, some do use global survey data, such as the World Values Surveys. Many of the studies are empirical in nature, although some are rooted within the theoretical literature, and most are quantitative, rather than qualitative (i.e. structured survey-based rather than semi-structured interview-based).

Importantly, it has not been possible to identify any literature that examines these issues in developing country contexts, with the overwhelming bulk of the studies based on U.S. population surveys and a smaller number focusing on the Scandinavian and Benelux countries. Much of the current interest in global corruption arises from its impact on development and developing countries in particular; as such, the available studies may provide a useful guide for future research on corruption, but it is important to consider the significance of context to their findings. There is no reason to assume *a priori* that results of surveys of college students in the U.S. will be replicated by surveys or interviews with public servants and others in developing countries; nevertheless, there is still much to be learned methodologically from exploring the theoretical and explanatory issues raised by this literature. This paper is thus both a methodological exploration and an original contribution to a rich literature that delineates links (or the lack thereof) between religion and moral decision-making, by extending it to the context of the study of public sector corruption, particularly in the developing world.

## 2 Religion and attitudes towards moral issues

Increasingly, the influence of religion on attitudes towards corruption is becoming of interest to a wide range of actors. The World Bank has a Development Dialogue on Values and Ethics; the World Faiths Development Dialogue works on corruption; several international faith-based organizations, such as Christian Aid, Tearfund and Islamic Relief, have undertaken anti-corruption work; and so on. Making links between religion and corruption seems like common sense in many ways. It may be reasonable to assume that many people derive their ethical framework from their religion. Certainly those people who consider themselves to be religious are likely to do so, but even those who describe themselves as secular, humanist, agnostic or atheist may be influenced by the religion(s) that forms a significant part of their cultural heritage, even if its influence is not acknowledged. Many early studies (and some contemporary ones) by theologians and other 'religionists' seem to assume that there is a clear, measurable, positive relationship between religiosity and morality. Even David Nussbaum, the Chief Executive of Transparency International, referred to a study by the Federal Reserve Bank of St Louis, which concluded that "A belief in hell tends to mean less corruption and less corruption tends to mean a higher per capita income...Combining these two stories...suggests that, all else being equal, the more religious a country, the less corruption it will have and the higher its per capita income will be" (cited in Nussbaum, 2006, p. 14).

However, the bulk of the literature shows that the impact of religion on attitudes towards moral issues is not clear-cut. Sometimes religion has a measurable influence and sometimes it does not. Sometimes religious people take a more 'moral' position on issues and sometimes they do not. In addition, as noted above, the data used and analysis conducted is often subject to challenge. For example, the original article cited by Nussbaum has since been updated to take out the conclusion quoted above because errors in the data used to arrive at it were subsequently detected (Kliesen and Schmid, 2004).

Furthermore, as we will see, many factors come into the formation of attitudes towards moral issues – age, education level, gender, engagement with a wider community, the nature of the religious community(ies) involved, the nature of the moral issue itself, and so on. What is clear is that religion itself, in terms of theology or religious teachings, appears to have very little influence on attitudes towards moral issues related to corruption, with socialization being a much more significant factor in determining individuals' attitudes towards corruption. Thus one of the problems identified is that the

influence of religion lies less in what the texts say than in how interpreters, priests, and so on interpret them and also in how their relevance and importance to collective social behaviour is understood.

Much of the literature seeks to explain 'deviant' behaviour, often in the context of increased secularization and the (perceived) decline in moral values. Ter Voert et al (1994), for example, conclude from their review that the literature suggests that "the decline of religion and the decline of an 'absolutist' perspective on moral values go hand in hand. Secularization has led to moral breakdown, and interaction is based on self-interest rather than on any more charitable notions... Empirical research indicates that religious people are more likely to express strong disapproval of behaviours like cheating on taxes and welfare than nonreligious people" (p. 302). In another example, Cortes (1965) claims that "Most acts of delinquency are amoral, and the roots of morality are either principally or exclusively religious. Delinquents, therefore, should be lower than nondelinquents in religiosity or religiousness" (cited in Hirschi and Stark, 1969, p. 202).

A highly influential study by Hirschi and Stark (1969) called this claim into question. Their own survey of young people in California showed that the alleged relationship is not the case. Respondents were asked to disclose both their own actual deviant acts (such as stealing, getting into fights, and so on). In addition, the authors examined police reports on delinquency. They found that attendance at church did not impact either actual delinquent acts or attitudes towards delinquency, even amongst respondents who believed in a literal hell and devil. This research ran counter to what many saw as a 'common sense' approach to delinquency and undermined a number of public and social programmes in the U.S. that encouraged increased religious attendance as a deterrent to delinquent behaviour.

However, a number of empirical studies emerged in the following two decades that showed just the opposite effect, confirming Cortes' original hypothesis. One of the most interesting is that by Tittle and Welch (1983), who sought to find theoretical explanations to oppose Hirschi and Stark's surprising findings. In order to test the hypotheses, the authors undertook a multi-state (U.S.) survey, including respondents of different ages, education levels, income, religious affiliations, gender, and so on. They included questions on deviant behaviour, including small theft, large theft, pot (marijuana) smoking, illegal gambling, assault, lying to an intimate, tax evasion and not standing for the national anthem. They label the two hypotheses proven valid by their research 'normative dissensus' and 'perceived

conformity'. Based on Parsons' work on social systems (1937, 1951), 'normative dissensus' is defined as a state in which "disagreement about the badness of various behaviours prevails", and their hypothesis states: "*The extent to which religiosity influences conformity varies directly with (a) general normative dissensus in a given context ( $H_1a$ ) or (b) with normative dissensus concerning specific offences ( $H_1b$ )*" (p. 659, emphasis in original). In other words, religion is more likely to impact attitudes towards those moral offences specific to that religious context. As such, religiosity may help to predict "conformity to rules uniquely prohibited by religious institutions but not to rules prohibited by society as a whole, [which] actually reflects the effect of normative dissensus" (p. 659). According to Tittle and Welch,

The fundamental idea is that social order rests on collectively held values... To the extent that people internalize moral commitments reflecting consensual values, they will probably not contemplate deviance, or if they do consider rule breaking, moral revulsion or potential feelings of guilt will restrict action. Religion presumably aids internalization by linking supernatural sanctions to moral precepts, many of which correspond to behaviour norms of the larger society. Moreover, participation in religious activities and institutions continually reinforces and strengthens internalized moral commitments – therefore, according to functional thinking, religious training and active participation should be highly predictive of conformity to social rules – at least those social rules which religious groups define as having moral components (1983, pp. 656-657).

In terms of 'normative dissensus', "[t]he statistics support the idea that involvement in religious activities has a strong constraining effect on deviant behaviour in contexts characterized by relative normative ambiguity. Apparently when secular moral guidelines are unavailable, in flux, or have lost their authority and hence their power to compel, the salience of religious proscriptions is enhanced" (p. 672). They found that there was little to no difference between religious and non-religious respondents when it came to behaviour that is condemned by society as a whole, particularly large theft, assault and tax evasion. However, they found considerable differences when it came to behaviour that society generally does not condemn widely, such as pot smoking and not standing for the national anthem. The implication for research on corruption is that, if their hypothesis holds, religion may have more of an impact on attitudes concerning corrupt behaviour that society generally does not condemn widely than it does for behaviour that is condemned less widely. In corruption parlance, this could mean the difference between 'low level corruption', also known as 'petty corruption' – cutting red tape, engagement in clientelistic networks, and so on, i.e. the sort of corruption that many engage in – as



opposed to 'high level corruption', also known as 'grand corruption' – political corruption, state capture, and so on, i.e. the sort of corruption engaged in by the powerful alone.

'Perceived conformity' is based on work in criminology by Sutherland and Cressey (1978). It asserts that where "deviance is directly related to excess exposure to social definitions (or message inputs) favourable to deviance...[it] seems to suggest that the greater one's religiosity, the less likely the person will be exposed to an excess of favourable deviant definitions; hence, the greater the likelihood of conformity" (Tittle and Welch, 1983, p. 657). Sutherland and Cressey are known for their differential association opportunity theory (DAO), which

...explains the process through which an individual comes to engage in criminal behaviour. Its fundamental principles rest on the argument that opportunities and networks of criminal behaviour are critical determinants of an individual's engagement in a criminal action. In other words, people who commit crime not only have frequent interaction with those that condone such behaviour, but also have the opportunity to do so (Alolo Al-hassan, 2006a, p. 7).

DAO theory has also been used by Alolo Al-hassan (2006b) in her study of the relationships between gender and corruption, in which it helps to explain the impact of corrupt networks and opportunities for corruption on attitudes.

Tittle and Welch's 'perceived conformity' hypothesis states, "*The extent to which religiosity influences conformity varies directly with the aggregated religiosity displayed in a given context ( $H_4$ )*" (p. 660, emphasis in original). It would be expected to work best where messages are both widespread and consistent with religious messages. In terms of 'perceived conformity',

...boundary maintenance and moral differentiation may become most salient when substantial variation is perceived in the moral conduct of contemporaries. In such contexts the perceived rarity of virtuous behaviour may enhance its value and motivate religiously active people to distinguish themselves from the mass of sinners through conspicuous conformity to social norms (p. 673).

This is a very interesting finding for corruption research. It contradicts much earlier research by arguing that "religiosity inhibits deviant propensity most effectively in contexts where the proportion of people who are non-religious is greatest" (p. 674). In other words, it may work best when religious

people feel that not engaging in corruption demonstrates their own religiosity in contrast to the corrupt behaviour engaged in by ‘the mass of sinners’. However, in countries where few people are non-religious, corruption is widespread, and those who are known to engage in corrupt behaviour are also known to be religious, it is difficult to see how religious people can seek to differentiate themselves in the way suggested by this hypothesis.

As Tittle and Welch conclude, “religiosity has the greatest effect on conformity when each of the four contextual conditions prevail: general normative ambiguity, low social integration, generalized perception of low peer conformity, and a relatively high proportion of people who are not religious” (1983, p. 674). This could explain findings such as those in the study by Beets (2007) and may be useful for researchers in helping to explore why countries with high levels of religiosity often have high levels of corruption.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, U.S. studies produced findings that both contrasted with and confirmed those of Hirschi and Stark, leading to theoretical and empirical bewilderment. In 1996, over twenty-five years on from the original study, Stark sought to explain why such differences in findings might exist. He argued that subsequent studies showed a strong *sociological* impact, in that young people in other parts of the country than the West coast, where the original study was conducted, seemed to behave differently and have different attitudes. It is widely agreed that people on either coast in the U.S. generally demonstrate lower levels of religiosity than those in the middle states, and most of the studies with contrasting findings took place away from either coast. Stark explained, “I suspect that what counts is not only whether a particular person is religious, but whether this religiousness is, or is not, ratified by the social environment. The idea here is that religion is empowered to produce conformity to the norms only as it is sustained through interaction and is accepted by the majority as a valid basis for action” (1996, p. 164). He thus explains the differences by concluding, “Religious individuals will be less likely than those who are not religious to commit delinquent acts, *but only in communities where the majority of people are actively religious*” (p. 164, emphasis in original).

This is interesting, especially as it directly contradicts Tittle and Welch’s findings on ‘perceived conformity’. In Stark’s analysis, based on a number of empirical studies, widespread membership in

religious communities provides a disincentive to engage in delinquent behaviour. Although these studies are all based in the United States, and generally consist of surveys of teenagers and college students, the contradictory findings may be important for corruption research more generally because, no matter what the outcome, the research seems to point towards membership in *religious communities* as having a significant impact on attitudes towards moral issues, although only where the social environment condemns delinquent behaviour.

White (1968) reviewed theories contemporary at the time that suggested that theology should be seen as the primary source of differences between religions and between those that are religious and those that are not. These suggested “that individuals who ‘believe’ seek a consonance between ... theological tenets and their attitudes and behaviour in other spheres of life” (p. 24). However, White himself disagreed with these theories, identifying instead with work by Lenski (1961) that showed how communalism and associationalism, as aspects of religious involvement, are much more significant than theology, leading to what White called the “interaction model of religious influence” (1968, p. 25).<sup>3</sup> Partly the significance of communalism and associationalism could, he asserted, be explained by the way that interaction is backed both by sanctions (e.g. loss of status or position within the community, public condemnation) and by the reinforcement of community norms. Harris and Mills (1985) concur with White, and “further suggest that measures of religious *participation* will better explain the impact of religion on...attitudes than will religious preference, belief, or intensity measures” (pp. 139-140, emphasis in original).

Membership in religious communities comes through as a significant factor in another study by Scheepers and Van Der Slik (1998) in the Netherlands. They argue that previous research is flawed because it isolates individuals and neglects important sources of socialization, including the role of parents, spouses and members of the individuals’ religious communities, “with whom they might discuss all kinds of everyday problems as well as moral issues” (p. 679). Although they support the hypothesis that “moral attitudes are primarily affected by one’s individual characteristics, that is, more specifically by religious involvement, religious beliefs, one’s education level, and personal income”, they see the need to look at theories that suggest that social interaction in religious communities is particularly significant, because “the influence of religion on a variety of moral issues might operate through moral community formation” (pp. 679-680). Referring to work by Stark (1996), for example,

they reflect that the research seems “to imply that people take roles in a community, (re-)define social situations, deliberate upon specific issues, and adjust their responses to each other. As a result, specific subcultural patterns, that is, values, norms, and behaviours prevail” (p. 680).

The nature of the values, norms and behaviours to which Scheepers and Van Der Slik refer is seen as being highly significant. For example, Woodrum (1988) conducted a city-wide survey in Raleigh, North Carolina, to examine the impact of community membership on ‘traditional-conservative’ versus ‘liberal-modernist’ world views, and the impact of these world views on moral attitudes. According to him, “Adherence to traditional conservative versus liberal modernist world-views and corresponding attitudes toward a range of moral issues are better understood as deriving from general patterns of cultural change, socialization, and social relations” (Woodrum, 1988, p. 553), as opposed to ‘status politics’,<sup>4</sup> as previous research had suggested. As he further explains,

Controversies over moral issues can be anticipated in complex societies like the United States when social change affects various segments of the population unequally. Societal trends of cultural pluralism, secular rationality in economics, and the legal formalization of individual rights influence the moral sensibilities of highly educated cosmopolitans and youths disproportionately. The plausibility structures of such persons increasingly incline them toward moral relativism. Yet there remains substantial numbers of moral conservatives who adhere to traditional absolutes...and oppose the moral relativism of liberal modernists (p. 554).

Woodrum found that roughly 25 per cent of his respondents were either morally conservative or morally liberal, leaving 50 per cent somewhere in between. This means that conservatism and liberalism should not be assumed to be outliers but just either end of a broad spectrum. He also found that ‘status politics’ was not a viable explanation for moral conservatism, because those who might feel ‘threatened’ by moral relativism were not those in fear of losing their high status, i.e. those with higher education and income levels. Indeed, the higher the education and income level, the more likely respondents were to be liberal modernists. He also found that respondents were more likely to be morally conservative if they were women, over 60 years old and, in contrast to expectations related particularly to ‘status politics’, had a high school or lower education level and were African-American (including ‘upwardly mobile’ African-Americans with higher education and income levels) (pp. 561-563). These conclusions led him to argue that the focus of most research in the field, which tries to understand the reasons for moral conservatism, is misplaced. Instead, he argued, there is more to be

learned from looking at “the young, the highly educated, those estranged from traditional communities, and those secularly self-identified and political liberal [who] have embraced moral relativism most conspicuously”, in order to try to understand their social dynamics (p. 568). He also argues that, although there are obvious socialization effects, people with conservative characteristics are more likely to be attracted to conservative religious communities, in other words, conservative religious communities do not ‘turn’ liberals into conservatives, but are made up of self-identified conservatives who then foster a particular set of values, beliefs and norms at the community level (pp. 567-569).

There are some significant methodological and theoretical implications here for corruption research. Firstly, Woodrum’s findings apply to *personal* moral issues (e.g. pornography, homosexuality, premarital sex) and it is not clear how respondents might react to *public* moral issues. This brings us back to Tittle and Welch’s ‘normative dissensus’ hypothesis. Based on this work, corruption researchers might find either:

a) liberal/rational → moral relativism → acceptance of corruption  
 conservative/traditional → moral conservatism → condemnation of corruption

or:

b) liberal/rational → moral relativism → condemnation of corruption  
 conservative/traditional → moral conservatism → acceptance of corruption.

In other words, there seems to be a correlation between the first two variables but not the third – corruption. It is clear that, no matter what, processes of socialization and social dynamics seem to be key; but what is also clear is that being either liberal/rational or conservative/traditional may also be significant, in terms of corruption, although *how* it might be significant is not entirely clear.

Going back to the Netherlands study by ter Voert et al (1994), the effect of religion on ‘self-interest morality’, including in pecuniary issues (e.g. tax evasion, insurance fraud, selling goods without disclosing problems), is examined, which brings us closer to research on corruption in terms of public moral issues. They helpfully begin by reviewing previous research, explaining that

Several studies indicate that in European countries and the United States respondents who are less likely to describe themselves as religious or to engage in religious practice are more inclined to have a permissive moral outlook towards actions involving pecuniary

dishonesty...one possible explanation for the relationship between religion and self-interest morality is that religion carries a certain set of absolute moral values (p. 303).

As the main religious communities in the Netherlands are Protestants and Catholics, they try in their research to assess whether there is a difference between adherents of these two communities, as well as between the religious and the non-religious. Referring to work by Greeley (1989), they suggest that the two denominations are differentiated in the following ways:

Protestants value the virtues of initiative, integrity, honesty, and thrift more than Catholics because Protestants are individualists and have an imagination of society as 'sinful and God-forsaken'. Protestants have a dialectical imagination; they picture the individual as struggling for his or her personal freedom over against the sinful oppression of social networks, and they stress those values of behaviours that contribute to the strengthening of personal freedom and independence from group control. Catholics, on the other hand, are communitarian because they have an imagination of society as sacramental, that is, revelatory of God – the Catholic analogical imagination pictures humans as integrated into social networks – networks which in fact reveal God – and stresses those values and behaviours which contribute to the building up and strengthening of those networks (ter Voert et al, 1994, pp. 303-304).

Their findings suggest that Catholics are more permissive of pecuniary issues than Protestants, but conclude that denomination matters less than church involvement. Indeed, "We conclude that Christian belief and church involvement both had moderate effects on self-interest morality. Strong Christian believers were more likely to have a strict moral outlook than those low on Christian belief...our results indicate that the decline of religion and the decline of a strict attitude toward self-interest morality go hand in hand...and this difference exists irrespective on nonreligious background characteristics. The decline of religion seems to bring about a process of uncertainty about morals" (pp. 317, 320). However, it is very important to note that they found that non-religious people still rated highly on disapproval ratings, so the difference between religious and non-religious respondents is at the high end of the disapproval scale.

Ter Voert et al also argue that their findings dispute Greeley's claims about the differences between Protestants and Catholics, because pecuniary issues have community damaging impacts (pp. 318-319). This conclusion seems to be based on quite a simplistic understanding of community and social networks: it assumes, for example, a single Catholic vision of 'society' and that the nature of

‘religious belief’ is clear. However, not only are there variations within worldwide Catholicism<sup>5</sup> but also the nature of religious belief is far from clear. It is well known that in some instances people are ‘born into’ religious traditions, whereas adherence to others requires a conscious individual choice. Thus self-declaration of religious denomination amongst certain groups (notably Catholics) does not act as a particularly good guide to how members act, nor how their religiosity influences their day-to-day behaviour. The significance for corruption research is that the religious communities under study need to be understood and differentiated, in terms of their overall ‘vision’ of society, as members of global religious communities, and in terms of their own national and regional contexts.

In a similar vein, Middleton and Putney (1962) differentiate between different types of moral standards in order to explain differences between various theoretical and empirical studies. Previous studies, they explain, “have failed to find relationships between measures of religiosity and ethical behaviour, nondelinquency, humanitarianism, and altruism. In contrast, several studies have found the religious less likely to violate certain moral standards” (p. 142). The difference, once again, seems to be between *private* moral standards, such as sexual morals, and *public* moral standards, such as cheating. It is worth citing them at some length:

We believe that this particular confusion, and much of the confusion surrounding the relation between religion and morality, derives from failure to distinguish two different types of ethical standards – the ascetic and the social. Social standards proscribe actions which in general are harmful to the social group, and, we hypothesize, tend to be shared by the religious and nonreligious alike as part of a general social ideology. The fact that religious ideology may also proscribe these actions is incidental; we would hold with Durkheim that religion is more a reflection of social morality than a source of it. Cheating, then, is a violation of a social standard, and it is not surprising that the nonreligious engage in it no more often than the religious. In contrast, ascetic standards – abstinence from sensual indulgences, gambling, and the like – derive primarily from an ascetic religious tradition. Within the context of religion violations of ascetic standards may be held spiritually harmful to the perpetrator. But since such violations are usually not directly or obviously harmful to the social group – at least in moderation – ascetic standards have less persuasiveness to the secularly oriented individual. He is therefore more likely to violate them. In short, we hypothesize that differences in behaviour between the religious and the nonreligious are confined to specific areas and are a product of differences in standards rather than a differential upholding of standards (pp. 142-143).

Their own study, which asked about both attitudes and actual actions, corroborates this: the religious are more likely to believe that anti-ascetic actions are wrong and are less likely to engage in them. However, when it comes to anti-social actions, the study found that there was no difference between the religious and the nonreligious, in terms of either attitudes or violating their own standards by engaging in anti-social actions (p. 151). Interestingly, while women were found to be much stricter in terms of moral standards related to anti-ascetic actions, particularly sexual behaviour, there was little difference between men and women in terms of anti-social actions, and in one action particularly – stealing from hotels – women were much more permissive than men. Differentiating between different types of moral attitudes, therefore, seems to be important for research. It is interesting that many of the studies reviewed here took place after Middleton and Putney's study in 1962, yet they continued to fail to make this distinction.

Middleton and Putney raise another very interesting methodological issue in their paper, one that surprisingly does not often come up in the literature – the issue of social desirability bias, or the proclivity of respondents/interviewees to present themselves in such a way that others will see them favourably, although they do not refer to it as such. At the end of their survey, they asked a simple question: "How frank have you been in your responses – very frank, partially frank, not frank at all?" They found that this question led many respondents to go back to the survey to revise their answers in order to be more honest. Considering that corruption research involves behaviour that is socially (and often ascetically) undesirable, social desirability bias must be taken into account, and Middleton and Putney's question may be one way to deal with the issue.

It is useful to conclude this section by looking at a study that tries to differentiate between values and attitudes. Harris and Mills (1985) explain that they propose a theory in which values partially determine attitudes, quoting Rokeach: "While an attitude represents several beliefs focused on a specific object or situation, a value is a single belief that transcendentally guides actions and judgements across specific objects and situations...value is a determinant of attitude as well as of behaviour" [Rokeach, 1968, pp. 160, 157; cited in Harris and Mills, 1985, p. 138]. In this context, they state, "we regard broadly specified attitudinal orientations, such as civil liberties or on deviant behaviour, as indicators of a general value such as self-determination" (Harris and Mills, 1985, p. 138).



Looking at value conflict is important when trying to understand the impact of religion and belief on attitudes towards morally complex and controversial subjects. Harris and Mills further explain:

To this premise of inner ambivalence yielding unified preference, we add two corollaries. First, competing values and norms not only create inner conflict in the deciding person but also generate a substantial amount of autonomy and flexibility in decision-making... Second, many such contrasting values and interests are structurally rooted in each person's roles and statuses, making the ambivalence sociological because it is rooted in social structure... The anchorage of conflicting values in simultaneously held roles (or a single role) provides a degree of legitimacy to one's behaviour regardless of how the decision comes out. One can both contain and express inconsistent views without losing role or status, since group life is predicted upon such inconsistency and supports it through sociological ambivalence' (Harris and Mills, 1985, p. 138).

Because of this, they argue that it is important to control for the effects of value conflict in studies looking at the impact of religion on attitudes, and they identify the two main value conflict as 'responsibility for others (RFO)' and 'self-determination (SD)'. In their own study on attitudes to abortion, they found that individual respondents needed to deal with their own internal value conflict between RFO and SD in order to come to a view on abortion, and that the sources of conflict came from both within their own religious communities and outside. They refer to these variables as 'additive', or existing socially, outside religious involvement, and 'interactive', or legitimized within religious groups (Harris and Mills, 1985, p. 141). This again brings us back to Tittle and Welch's 'normative dissensus' and 'perceived conformity' hypotheses and reminds us of the need to try to identify 'messages' that respondents receive from both within their religious communities and outside them, and to identify possible sources of value conflict regarding corrupt behaviour.

### 3 Religion, corruption and moral reasoning

The previous section looked at literature that has examined the relationships between religion and attitudes, basically looking at the *outcome* of religion's influence on attitudes. This section, in contrast, looks at literature that examines the relationships between religion and moral reasoning, that is, basically looking at *processes* rather than outcomes. It is obvious from the previous section that religion has an impact on attitudes towards moral issues, even if there is not much of a consensus about what this impact is. The same lack of consensus can be found in the literature on moral reasoning. Much of the literature reviewed here focuses on the sophistication of moral reasoning processes, concluding that the *type of religiousness* is significant to how an individual processes messages about moral issues. What is meant by 'type' is not the religion itself but the way it is expressed and understood by the individual.

A recent study by Duriez and Soenens (2006) is particularly useful and is discussed in some detail here. They begin by summarizing some key studies regarding moral action choices:

...moral behaviour is the result of at least four component processes: (1) identifying a situation as a moral problem, (2) figuring out what one ought to do and evaluating possible plans of action, (3) evaluating how the various courses of action serve moral and nonmoral values and deciding which action will be pursued, and (4) executing the plan of action...there are several interpretive systems by which moral action choices can be generated. People may rely on justice reasoning or so called moral reasoning...but they may also rely on concepts of care...social norms and conventions...or religious prescriptions (Duriez and Soenens, 2006, p. 76; referring to studies by Rest (1983); Thoma, Rest and Davison (1991); Kohlberg (1976); Gilligan (1977); Nisan (1984); Turiel (1983); and Lawrence (1979).

Duriez and Soenens highlight Kohlberg's arguments regarding moral reasoning as particularly significant. According to them

Kohlberg (1981) has argued that religiosity and moral reasoning are inherently unrelated because they constitute two distinct areas of human concern: whereas moral decision making is grounded in rational arguments of justice and is influenced by level of cognitive development (e.g. education) and exposure to socio-moral experiences (e.g. role-taking opportunities), religious reasoning is based on revelations by religious authorities. Whereas the primary function of morality is to resolve competing claims among individuals, the primary function of religion is to affirm morality. In other words, whereas moral reasoning provides moral prescriptions, religious reasoning affirms moral judgement as meaningful (Duriez and Soenens, 2006, p. 76).

This is not to suggest, of course, that religious persons are incapable of rational arguments based on justice, nor that those making such arguments must do so without reference to religious texts or arguments. It depends, they assert, on how individuals process moral action choices, based upon the type of religious or nonreligious person they are and their stage of moral development. By ‘type’, Duriez and Soenens mean the “extent [to which] people accept the existence of God or some other transcendent reality and...being religious or not and being spiritual or not” (p. 77). They call this the “inclusion or exclusion of transcendence”.<sup>6</sup>

Individuals may process religious contents either literally or symbolically, but in this interpretation the inclusion or exclusion of transcendence is significant. A person may interpret transcendence literally, what Duriez and Soenens refer to as “literal affirmation”, in which “the literal existence of the religious realm is affirmed” (as in religious fundamentalism), or “literal disaffirmation”, in which “the existence of the religious realm is rejected and in which the possibility is lost out of sight that religious language has a symbolic meaning. Religious language is understood in a literal way, but this time religion is rejected” (p. 77).<sup>7</sup> Similarly, individuals may interpret religious contents symbolically, but this may result in either “symbolic disaffirmation”, in which “the existence of the religious realm is rejected, but where the possibility is taken into account that religious contents might refer to a hidden symbolic meaning”, or “symbolic affirmation”, where “the existence of the religious realm is affirmed, and in which one tries to encompass and transcend reductive interpretations in order to find a symbolic meaning in the religious language which has personal relevance” (p. 77).

The significance of this way of looking at the way individuals interpret religious contents in terms of moral decision-making is evident when comparing Duriez and Soeren’s model with their discussion of Kohlberg’s (1984) six stages of moral development:

Pre-conventional	Stage 1	Avoid punishment
	Stage 2	Satisfy one's needs
Conventional	Stage 3	Be a nice person
	Stage 4	Maintain the social order
Post-conventional	Stage 5	Focus on the moral principles upon which social norms are based
	Stage 6	Focus on abstract ethical principles, such as equality and respect for the dignity of human beings

Source: Based on discussion in Duriez and Soerens (2006, p. 78).

Kohlberg's stages, Duriez and Soerens say, should be understood in terms of the level of sophistication each stage requires. It does not imply that those at Stage 6, say, will make 'better' decisions than those at Stage 3, but that they demonstrate more consistency in their approach. As they explain, "When there is a conflict between conventions and moral principles, a conventional reasoner will judge by convention rather than by moral principle, whereas a post-conventional reasoner will judge by principle rather than by convention. However, this does not imply that individuals at the post-conventional level are also more moral" (Duriez and Soerens, 2006, p. 78).

These two models help to link religiosity and morality. In religious communities where principled reasoning is valued (Stages 5 and 6), members will have higher preferences for this than in those communities where principled reasoning is not part of the teaching. However, what also needs to be taken into consideration is where the stages of moral reasoning fit with respect to Duriez and Soerens' literal/symbolic and the inclusion/exclusion of transcendence model. It is the combination of the two that is significant in terms of predicting the quality of outcome, i.e. how moral a decision will be. In other words, "The moral reasoning of religious persons depends on the seriousness of their religious commitment and on the moral stage which is normative for their religious community" (Duriez and Soerens, 2006, p. 78).

Their own study, mainly of Belgian university students and their parents, confirms this. Those respondents who were more religious and processed religion in a literal sense had lower moral reasoning scores. Duriez and Soerens conclude,

... although religious people tend to be conservative and submissive, they are neither more or less happy, good-natured and tolerant. This suggests that the impact of being religious or not on individuals' lives is limited when it is separated from the impact of the way people process religious contents. The impact of the way people process religious contents, on the other hand, seems vitally important, with people processing religious contents in a literal way not only showing less advanced moral reasoning abilities but also less psychological well-being, less empathy and more prejudice (2006, p. 81).

A related point is of course that the way a particular religious community approaches principled reasoning is also very important. In an earlier study, Duriez (2003) suggests that Roman Catholic churches attract people with literal affirmation values, so people with low moral competence may be attracted to the Roman Catholic Church, presumably because of its emphasis on literal orthodoxy.

These ideas may also have relevance for the policy-making community. Encouraging moral development education programmes, for example, in literal-orthodox religious communities that do not value principled reasoning is unlikely to produce more principled moral reasoning. The nature of particular religious communities needs to be taken into account. As Duriez and Soerens conclude,

There is a consensus among researchers that educational programs targeted at stimulating moral development should be aimed at learning to translate one's ethical principles to solutions for specific problems with which one is confronted in real life, even under those circumstances where factors like prejudice, authority or the so-called moral majority try to prevent people from thinking about the different aspects that are part of the problem (2006, p. 81).

Another study that contributes to our understanding of how religion may or may not contribute to an individual's moral reasoning is by Sapp and Jones (1986). Like Duriez and Soerens, they suggest that "religiosity is not a crucial determinant of situational honesty... [and that] religious people can be more intolerant, more prejudiced and lacking in humanitarian concern than non-religious people" (p. 208). They are quick to point out, however, that other studies do show contrasting results and that "the relationship between religiosity and moral reasoning may be curvilinear", especially for children who go to religious schools, for whom early conventional moral reasoning may be more sophisticated than their peers. However, studies do show that such children do not seem to move towards post-conventional reasoning (p. 209), again suggesting that the religious community in which people are located is significant.

Sapp and Jones refer to Allport (1966), who makes a “distinction between the intrinsic orientation (a religious sentiment in which faith is both the supreme value and the master motive) and the extrinsic orientation (a utilitarian, self-serving attitude providing self-justification and endorsement of one’s way of life)” (p. 209). This seems to refer to whether or not religion is seen as an end in itself or a means to bring meaning to one’s life. However, in Allport’s work it means the difference between someone who goes to church regularly and who bases his or her life around religion and someone who goes to church more sporadically and is more secular – or at least less religious – in outlook (Allport, 1966, pp. 454-5).

However, Sapp and Jones identify weaknesses in Allport’s model, which make research based upon it difficult. Referring to work by Batson (1976) and Batson and Raynor-Prince (1983), they point out that Allport’s model seems to *assume* that an intrinsic orientation is a more mature orientation, whereas it is not necessarily so. Indeed, “it may indicate a fanatical devotion to orthodoxy” (Sapp and Jones, 1986, p. 209). Extrinsic orientation can also be either negative (e.g. religion as a means of providing status, networks and even wealth) or positive (e.g. religion as a framework for articulating a position on social justice). So rather than assuming that an intrinsic orientation will be a more *moral* orientation, an intrinsic orientation can have both positive and negative effects on moral reasoning.

Further, as Sapp and Jones go on to say, “as Allport’s definition of mature religiosity was translated into operational concepts, several components were omitted... These were: 1) mature religious sentiment is integrative and accepting of complexity; 2) mature religious sentiment is self-critical and doubting; and 3) mature religious sentiment emphasizes a continuing, tentative search for more knowledge about religious questions” (Sapp and Jones, 1986, p. 209). Again, we can see the relevance of Duriez and Soenens’ model and Kohlberg’s levels of moral development here. It is the openness to principled reasoning, the ability and desire to approach moral issues from a self-critical perspective and an emphasis on religion as a ‘quest’, or “an endless process of probing and questioning generated by the tensions, contradictions, and tragedies in their own lives and in society” (Batson, 1976, p. 32), that leads to more mature moral reasoning. It could certainly be argued that the skills required for mature moral reasoning are just the sorts of skills needed by someone faced with a decision about whether to behave corruptly or not.

Sapp and Jones' study is far too narrow to draw meaningful conclusions, as it is simply a survey of 97 undergraduate students at one conservative U.S. university, all of whom were taking a module on educational psychology. However, their findings may still be applicable to corruption research: those who see religion as a quest to find existential meaning tend to be more principled in moral reasoning, but "intrinsic religiosity and principled moral reasoning are not highly related...the evidence also suggests that intrinsic religiosity may have more in common with conformity and a devotion to orthodoxy than it does with an introspective concern with social justice" (p. 213). The implications of this are that religion experienced intrinsically, as an end in itself, may not play a role in attitudinal formation regarding corruption, while the opposite may be true for religion experienced extrinsically.

## 4 Conclusion

The studies discussed here are all based in either the United States or the Benelux countries, but the language used will be familiar to anyone engaged in research in developing countries – traditional, rational, modern, secular, orthodox, and so on. However, the current Western research on religion and corruption, and on religion and deviant behaviour more generally, seems to reproduce the public/private distinction between the secular and religion, between public and private moralities. Work in public administration by Ekeh (1975) and Hellsten and Larbi (2006) question the relevance of this dichotomy in a developing country context. In Nigeria, for example, Smith (2007, p.5) argues that,

...when Nigerians talk about corruption, they refer not only to the abuse of state offices for some kind of private gain but also to a whole range of social behaviour in which various forms of morally questionable deception enable the achievement of wealth, power, or prestige as well as more mundane ambitions. Nigerian notions of corruption encompass everything from government bribery and graft, rigged elections, and fraudulent business deals, to the diabolical abuse of occult powers, medical quackery, cheating in school, and even deceiving a lover.

Thus in many developing countries, public and private morality are said to overlap, making the public/private distinction a false dichotomy. From anthropology, writers such as Bloch (1977), Sperber (1975), and Boyer (1994), for example, emphasize the cognitive process and how ultimately 'moral systems' in many developing countries are often worked out in terms of an 'applied ethics', which may or may not incorporate 'religious' or transcendent elements. This points to the need for real caution in assuming that the application of the methodologies described in this paper in a developing country context, and in the context of corruption, will produce similar results. They may, of course, but they also may not.

Still, there is much here that may assist researchers looking to understand how and why corrupt behaviour occurs. Research on religion and attitudes towards deviant behaviour shows that individuals' interpretation of messages on moral behaviour is significant in terms of determining their acceptance or rejection of deviancy, but there is little evidence to suggest that the religious will reject behaviour that is 'anti-social' any more than the non-religious. Indeed, there is little evidence to suggest that religion, in terms of religious content, impacts upon individuals' attitudes towards public morality. Membership of a religious community that rejects behaviour seen as being 'corrupt' seems more likely to have an impact, but a lot depends upon the way in which members of the community are encouraged (or discouraged) to engage in principled reasoning.



In either case, the individual on his or her own, or as part of a religious community, is likely to face conflicting messages in terms of behaviour that is deemed to be 'deviant'. Because of this, it is important to approach the study of corruption with an open mind in terms of defining what constitutes corruption. Individuals exist within multiple communities – religious, family, friends, colleagues, professional and personal networks and so on. Although messages from these various communities may very well conflict, it is clear that the communities will all, in some way or another, impact upon individual attitudes towards corruption. The same can of course be said about those individuals who conduct research on corruption or design policies to combat it: all go through similar processes of socialization. No matter what the economic impact of corruption is upon development and developing countries, it is becoming increasingly clear that to really understand *why* corruption occurs, it may be necessary to put aside prior assumptions about what corruption is and why people engage in it.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The TI-CPI is a 'survey of surveys' that looks at perceptions of corruption and then ranks countries according to their score. It can be found at [www.transparency.org](http://www.transparency.org), along with an explanation of its methodology.
- <sup>2</sup> Religiosity, although not formally defined in the Pew Global Attitudes Project <http://pewglobal.org/> is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as "religiousness, religious feeling or sentiment" or "affected or excessive religiousness". Measures of religiosity focus on self-definition as a member of a religious community, regular participation in religious services and rituals, and regular prayer.
- <sup>3</sup> White explains that the interaction model of religious involvement contains two principles: "The first of these principles is that religion is first and foremost a group phenomenon...The second basic principle...is that the religious group, like any other group, has a particular *normative* structure" (1968, p. 25, emphasis in original).
- <sup>4</sup> Woodrum explains that although 'status politics' emerged from Weber's three irreducible dimensions of social stratification (economic, political and status prestige), it is more often associated with American social science of the 1950s (1988, pp. 556-57). Citing Wood and Hughes (1984), he explains that [s]tatus politics theory predicts that 'moral reform (anti-pornography) social movement adherence will be more likely among: 1) *The geographically mobile*, [notably] migrants from rural areas and small towns to cities, especially Protestant migrants...2) *The old middle class*, [including] owners of family-owned businesses and self-employed professionals, small businesses, especially in rural and small town settings...3) *The upwardly-mobile status discrepant*, [including] the newly wealthy, upward mobile Catholics and upward mobile Blacks....4) *The over-rewarded status discrepant*, [the discrepancy owing to] low investments (education or occupation) coupled with high returns(income) (cited in Woodrum, 1988, p. 556, emphases in original).
- <sup>5</sup> Guiso et al (2003) argue that their study shows that Catholics raised after Vatican II are less likely to break legal norms than pre-Vatican II Catholics. They do not provide much in the way of evidence or explanation for this claim, but it certainly highlights the danger of seeing religious communities as homogenous masses. It may also point to the role of normative values concerning principled reasoning within religious communities, but without evidence, it is not possible to make a definite claim in this regard.
- <sup>6</sup> Based on early work by Wulff (1991).
- <sup>7</sup> Richard Dawkins's recent work on *The God Delusion* is a good example of this.

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