

Insights: Religion and Mental Health

Series 3, Episode 3 with Dr. Ozan Aksoy and Reverend Dr. Malcolm Brown

Catherine McDonald 00:05

Hello, and welcome to the third series of Insights the podcast from [Understanding Society](#). Understanding Society is a longitudinal survey that captures life in the UK in the 21st century. Every year, we ask each member of thousands of the same households across the UK about different aspects of their life. Each episode of insights explores how our data has been used in a key area; we look at what we found, and what we can learn from it. I'm Catherine McDonald, your host for this episode, where we'll be looking at the role of religion in mental health. Joining me to discuss this are [Ozan Aksoy](#), Associate Professor in Social Science at University College London, and the [Reverend Dr. Malcolm Brown](#), Director of Faith and Public Life at the Church of England. Ozan, I'd like to start by asking you about your research, if I may. So you looked at whether religious involvement made people more trusting and pro-social. Can you explain what you mean by pro-social? And can you also tell us how you did that research?

Ozan Aksoy 01:12

So there are conflicting theories in the literature about what kind of effects religious involvement might have on pro-social behaviour and attitudes. On the one hand, all religions involve some sort of golden rule, do good kind of messages, and also attending services. Being involved in religion also helps people develop their skills to do good, as well as abilities. But on the other hand, there is also some theories that predict the reverse. For example, people might be more concerned about their in-group when they attend say services more or more engaged with religion. And there's also a peculiar interesting theory from psychology, which is called moral licensing. So if you feel more subjected to a kind of divine or moral authority, people might be less inclined with the morals of the mundane. So there has been finding, for example, religious drivers might be more likely to double park, or religious books are more likely to be kept overdue, and so on. So there are these conflicting theories as to how religion affects pro social behaviour. And we just wanted to test these effects using amazing data from Understanding Society because we first want to rule out confounders of religious environment and pro-social behaviour. For example, personality, upbringing, socioeconomic status. And also we would like to tease out what we call social scientists as reverse causality, is it religion that affects pro-social behaviour? Or do pro-social behaviour make people more engaged religiously. So we need longitudinal data to do this methodologically. As to what we mean by pro-social behaviour, we looked at a range of indicators. One is trusting others. This is called generalised trust. It's a very widely used outcome in social science research. Do you think that most people can be trusted, that's one outcome. We also looked at how often people volunteered in a given year. And also we looked at that was something that Understanding Society data provided us with is the interviewer after having conducted the interview, rates how cooperative the respondent was during the interview, which is a kind of externally judged behavioural measure of how cooperative one is. And we thought that will be interesting to have a look at. So we basically looked

at how religious involvement, how much people attend to religious services, affected these three outcomes that we considered.

Catherine McDonald 03:51

And so tell us what you found.

Ozan Aksoy 03:53

So what we found is that people who attended more frequently to religious services had a higher generalised trust, they volunteer more frequently, and they are perceived more cooperative by the interviewers during the interview. So it seems that there is a positive link between religious involvement and all these three outcome measures that we measured on average, but there has been some differences between different religious traditions.

Catherine McDonald 04:23

Yeah so can we explore those differences? Because am I right in saying the effects were weaker for other indicators of religious involvement? Can you tell us a bit about that?

Ozan Aksoy 04:32

That's correct and that's in fact something that we keep finding. So it is really service attendance that seems to move the needle, so to speak. So that has an effect, but other indicators suggest such as subjective importance of religion does not seem to have these positive effects. And in fact, sometimes it might have a negative effect. So it is attendance that seems to have an effect but not these other indicators such as subjective importance And there are also differences across different religious traditions too.

Catherine McDonald 05:03

Yes. Can you tell us about those?

Ozan Aksoy 05:05

So these positive effects that I described, were mainly found for Anglicans and other Protestants in the UK. So this research that I mentioned is conducted in the UK. So the effect was there for Anglicans and other Protestants. It was absent for Catholics and other minority religions, such as Muslims and Hindus in the UK. And in fact, some outcomes had a negative, even negative association with attendance for some minority religions. So there is this heterogeneity across religious traditions.

Catherine McDonald 05:38

And why do you think these differences exist? Am I right in saying that what your research has found

out is that if a person regularly attends their church, or their place of worship, the effects are positive in terms of the attributes that you've been describing, or the behaviours you've been describing. But other religious indicators, so that I might be practicing my faith, but not attending a place of worship change? Have I oversimplified that? Or is that actually what the what you're saying?

Ozan Aksoy 06:11

So it seems that the social aspects of religious and engagement have these effects, so going to service, talking to other people, seeing people interacting with others. It's this social aspect that seems to matter more than other inner aspects of religion, it seems. That's also encouraging because it means that we can learn from religion and transport this to say other non-religious contexts too. So if you want to improve cooperativeness, trust, and so on, we can learn from religion and generate this positive interactive social outcomes in other secular domains, too. And also, I mentioned differences across different religious traditions, and you ask why they might be. So these positive effects were mostly for Anglicans and other Protestants, but not for say, Catholics, and Muslims or Hindus, but I must say we don't really know why. But this is the UK context. And the former religious traditions, Anglicans, and other protesters, they are numerically dominant. So they are they might be more engaged with the wider society, the activities they organise seem to cross-cut other groups, religious groups, and so they seem to be more open. Whereas other religious traditions may be more inward looking, perhaps because they are they have a minority status, or they face hostility from the wider society. That's maybe why being engaged in religious activities among these minority religions may not generate the same type of positive outcomes that we see for Anglicans and other Protestants, but more research is needed. To really understand why these differences, for example, we need to look at, say, contexts where these other religions such as Catholicism, Muslim religion, or Hindu, they also have say majority status. That's so interesting. So you were looking at levels of things like as you say, trust, volunteering, cooperativeness, all generally considered pro-social behaviours. So was the assumption then that an increase in these things lead to improved mental health in that person? In this particular research, we didn't really make any assumption as to how these pro-social attitudes and behaviours might be related to mental health. So we separately looked at how religious engagement is linked with mental health. But there is research in the literature which shows that which shows that pro social behaviour and attitudes in general has a positive link with mental wellbeing and mental health.

Catherine McDonald 08:55

So in the research that you just mentioned, where you did specifically look at mental health and the connection with religion, what did you find there?

Ozan Aksoy 09:03

So we in fact, found consistent results. So service attendance, the social interactive aspect of religious engagement, has positive links with mental wellbeing but other indicators of religious involvement such as subjective importance of religion, etc. They don't seem to generate these positive outcomes. It's again this attendance dimension that seems to be protective or a positive for health. Again, we also found differences across different religious traditions. For example, Muslims,

Bangladeshi and other minority Muslims seem to have worse mental wellbeing to start with, compared with members of other religious groups.

Catherine McDonald 09:51

And do you think the kind of the reasons for that are the same that actually it hinges on the social aspects? That is the key to improving mental health and that's why religious attendance is the key factor.

Ozan Aksoy 10:04

It seems so yes. So that's some consistent finding that we keep observing in the data. So it is the social interactive in-person engagement has these positive aspects. So they seem to generate these positive outcomes, both in terms of pro-social behaviour and attitudes, as well as health. Whereas these inward looking in-person dimensions of this engagement do not seem to have generate these positive outcomes, and in fact, sometimes could have negative links with wellbeing as well.

Catherine McDonald 10:40

It's so interesting, Malcolm, what's your reaction to Ozan's research?

Rev. Malcolm Brown 10:46

Well, it's really fascinating stuff. And my first response was to be really grateful that Ozan has hasn't just taken a simplistic category and called it 'religion', as some people do contrasting religion and secular attitudes. Because religion is such a multifaceted phenomenon that he's absolutely clearly nailed down here. As I looked at his work, I kept thinking of a friend of mine who's a professional statistician, who has a t shirt that says, 'correlation does not imply causation' on it as a kind of permanent reminder not to leap to explanations. But of course, being a non-statistician, I look at this kind of work and crave for explanations. Why is this? And I have to kind of hold myself back from thinking 'obviously it's this' or 'surely it's that'. And I'm very pleased, you know another marker of Ozan's sheer professionalism is that he said you know more research is needed. It always is. But my first response really, is to think about the differences here, between different religious traditions and their, and the impact of practising those traditions. My first thought, as he's identified Anglicans, particularly identifying with the Church of England, at some level ties you into the history of this country, it ties you in quite literally at one level to the Establishment. Even if you don't feel very much part of the Establishment politically, it must be very different in other religious contexts, where as Ozan's hinted, the experience of those communities may be one of marginalisation and incomprehension by others. I'm fascinated by the interesting question: to what extent religion is about building relationships with what I think he called the in-group, my co-religionists. And to what extent it's about relationships that carry out from the religious community into the wider community. I mean, every religious person inhabits numerous communities, they're co-religionists is only one part of that. There's a very famous saying from Archbishop William Temple from the 1940s, that Christianity is a worldview, where the measure of it is the impact it has on other people not on you. It's about how your beliefs play out for the good of others. And it's quite nice, I must say, as you

know, as an Anglican to hear some of that, apparently reinforced here. But that strikes me is really interesting. If your religious experience is about solidarity in times of trouble and marginalisation, it will be, I think, a very different experience to identifying yourself very strongly with the traditions and history of the wider community. And I'm really interested in that aspect, how the status of all religions is changing. As you may know from the last census survey, it was the first time that those with professing no religion outnumbered those who had some religion. The secularisation theory, I don't think works as it's often expected to, there are some really interesting growth areas for religion, globally and in this country. But all the same as religion in like Anglicanism, and traditional Protestantism, become less associated with being part of the mainstream. I wonder what changes we might see if Ozan's research was run again in say 10, 20 years time. All in all, I think it's got some very interesting questions raised here for people of faith. One thing I don't see in the research is, how much what people believe about God or about Christ, whatever it may be are part of the causation of the pro-social behaviours. I just don't, obviously don't know, what the answer to that would be. Within a faith group, people tend to focus very much on orthodoxy on believing the right things, and less on orthopraxis, which is doing the right things. Here we're looking at the impact on behaviours on praxis. And I'm fascinated by what possible connections there may be that other research might show between what a faith teaches about the relationship of the individual to society, about the relationship of the person to the community, to the religious community, to the wider community. How much does what is taught influence this? And how much is it more behavioural? After all, when else do we meet with groups of people who we haven't chosen every one of those relationships. We may have chosen to go to church or to the mosque or whatever it is, but the people we will meet there are not just those we've chosen to meet. That's a really quite interesting set of relationships, which isn't replicated I think, all that often in modern society, where so many relationships are simply chosen, possibly for their utility to the individual, possibly for reasons of kinship, whatever. It strikes me, there may be something in that about the attendance point that Ozan has picked out. And then there's the question, what do we do when we attend a religious gathering of some kind? How is the activity, how is the belief, how is the teaching all welded together? And it just set my imagination flowing this research, and I just want to congratulate Ozan as then on some very interesting work.

Catherine McDonald 16:45

And Ozan would you like to come in there? What's your reaction to Malcolm's reaction to your research?

Ozan Aksoy 16:53

Thank you, Malcolm, there are a few really important points raised here. The first thing correlation versus causality is a point well taken. And I have to mention here, that the fantastic data set Understanding Society provides here. Because to really tease out correlation versus causality as much as we can that's what ideally we want to do; Understanding Society provides longitudinal data. So the same set of people interviewed over and over again, multiple times. So what we're looking at in most of this research is changes within-person. So people increasing their attendance or decreasing their attendance, and what that within-person change, how that is related to the changes within-person changes in the outcome. So that gives us some leverage as to teasing out this

correlation versus causality. And we can also look at, say, reverse causality account for that with our analysis because of this longitudinal nature of the Understanding Society data. But that's obviously a very important point. teasing out causality from correlation is a kind of ideal place, and we strive to reach there, but it's never going to be perfect.

Rev. Malcolm Brown 18:13

That's absolutely understood. I'm interested to know with a longitudinal study like this, how long you've been interviewing people, how often and how long you intend to go and doing so?

Ozan Aksoy 18:26

Yes so Understanding Society has been building on this British Household Panel Survey, which has been running for quite a long time, I think starting from 1990s. And Understanding Society, the first wave is 2009. And it has been run since 2009 and people have been interviewed regularly. So we are talking about really a long time period. And it is going to be fascinating to look at how these things change over time, Malcolm, as you mentioned, because religion has been evolving, and the number of people who report belonging to no religion has been rapidly increasing. So all these associations will likely change as well. That's why it's important to have this long-term perspective. We in fact, compared the results we get from British Household Panel Survey, which is the older dataset versus Understanding Society. So far, the associations seem to hold but as you say, we will be extremely interested in to see what happens in the next decade or so.

Rev. Malcolm Brown 19:35

And does any of your data relate, you hinted and I tried to expand on, the relationship of a particular faith community to wider society, in terms of whether that membership of the faith community is essentially, I mean to use a more emotive word, is it reassuring that you're kind of a mainstream person? Or is it tending to suggests that you're minority and perhaps vulnerable, has that that criterion been part of the exploration here, because it does strike me that some religions make a real, you know, particularly very minority ones make a big deal of being over against everybody else. Some of them are over against because of historic factors that only apply in England and others never think of their faith as putting them over against anybody. Do you get the kind of distinctions I'm trying to pick there?

Ozan Aksoy 20:31

Yes this is a this is a, again, another very good point that I'm glad that we could really talk about. So we see these differences across different religious traditions in the UK with the UK data. So we cannot really distinguish these two are Anglicans and other Protestants you know, attendance increase for social outcomes for these groups specifically? Is it because they have this majority status and they're part of the Establishment? Or is it something really inherent in the religious tradition itself? We cannot really tease this apart with the data that we have so far. So to really address your question, Malcolm, I think we should look at these in other contexts too Where for example, Catholics, Muslims, or Hindus do not have a religious minority status, do we observed same

outcomes in other contexts too or we can pin down into the actual teachings that people might hear in these service attendances. But for to answer that question, we definitely need more research, possibly in other contexts than the UK.

Rev. Malcolm Brown 21:43

And if I could just raise one other interest well it's interesting to me, let's put it that way. People who leave religions do so for many different reasons. But sometimes the it's a sudden disillusion, it may be that the leadership of that community has proved to be unreliable, untrustworthy, it may be a blinding flash of insight, it may be peer group pressure. But in terms of mental health and attitudes to wider society, we hear quite a lot of stories particularly in in the media, of people who've left religion in a disillusion state of mind, it strikes me that someone's personal story might go from religion being very important in their attitudes to social engagement, very important in terms of their mental health, and then have all that turned on its head, because essentially leaving a religion religious tradition is like standing your worldview on its head rather abruptly. And I wondered whether in the course of a longitudinal study, that sort of question had come out, so that religion went from being a positive to a negative for someone rather than just flowing through as you know, various levels of indifference.

Ozan Aksoy 22:59

So what we see when we look at mental wellbeing is that those who report no religion belonging to no religion do not have worse mental wellbeing than people who say they have a religion. However, attendance itself improves mental wellbeing. And obviously, it improves mental wellbeing more for people who report to have a religion. Non-religious people some of them also report to attending religious services. But for them, service attendance does not have the same positive protective outcome as people who are religious. And also importance of religion. That's something that has been also surprising for us importance of religion seems to have a negative link with mental wellbeing. And that's another puzzling aspect. So attendance, again, the social in-person dimension of engagement seems to be protective, but the subject of importance do not seem to have that positively. If anything, we found some negative indicators for some outcome measures that we looked at. And that's also something which puzzled us. Is it due to some, you know, some form of guilt associated with some religious beliefs? Or does it reflect a religious upbringing? Or is it really again, correlation versus causality methodological issue that we've just talked about? But that's a puzzling, interesting, fascinating outcome too.

Rev. Malcolm Brown 24:34

I love these puzzles. Obviously, working for a religious organisation. We're constantly looking out for data and we're searching insights that help us to understand ourselves as much as anything because in a religious context, certainly in the Church of England people very often move from anecdote to as if it were facts, you know, this is how it looks to me therefore, that's how everyone must behave. And part of my job is trying to challenge that quite a lot of the time. But I love the point about attendance, because we tend sometimes to be a bit sniffy about attendance, as if it's not just being there, but it's what you believe that counts. I'm fascinated by this work that suggests that actually

attendance has its own value, and attendance in a religious context shapes behaviours. That's really interesting in the context of my work, where we're constantly trying to get the behaviours and the beliefs to correlate, not correlate, but to flow together. So that there's a consistency in how people work out their beliefs in practice. Looking at it from the point of view of attendance as the factor that you're examining and some things seem to flow from that. It's just a new thought to me, in some respects, to focus my thinking somewhat differently. It makes me look at the huge variety, even within the Church of England, of what it is that people attend when they go to church, ranging from you know, the very traditional cathedral sung even song right through to the epitome of the happy clappy as it's called, you know, the charismatic services, where there's very little structure, one of the factors that is pretty much common is singing. And so I wonder about singing. I mean, apart from singing in the bath, whoever sings these days unless you're in a band. I just, these are just questions that flew through my head as a result of this research that I think I'm going to have to take quite some time to digest.

Catherine McDonald 26:38

Can I just jump in and ask one thing that sort of keeps coming to my mind hearing you both have this fantastic discussion? Is how concerned should we be about the negative effects or the less than positive? So we've established what attendance does? It's a worry, isn't it about the negative effects of you know, other religious indicators?

Ozan Aksoy 27:02

Yes, so we observe this negative link with these subjective in-person indicators of religious engagement. And again, before, you know, whether we should worry about these findings or not, we should really understand I mean, Malcolm raised this fascinating point, what it is, what is it in attendance that improves mental wellbeing as well as pro-sociality? Is it singing? Is it just talking to other people? Is it this, it's important not only to understand how exactly these things play out, but also maybe to transport these findings to the wider society? If you think from a public health perspective, how can we leverage these positive aspects that we find in attendance in other domains in more secular, non-religious domains of life? So we should really understand, you know, what is there that is really resulting in these positive outcomes? And possibly what elements of the disengagement that might have these negative links? So we could avoid these negative, you know negative effects while promoting the positive ones?

Rev. Malcolm Brown 28:18

That's fascinating, isn't it? In other words, can you have godless religion and still get benefits? Do you have to have some transcendent power in there? I'm interested, also in a phrase that crops up in The Bloom Report to the government on the importance of religion where Colin Bloom talks about, I think, he says churches, he may say, religions, I'm not sure. He calls them schools of virtue. And I think that's not just about what's taught from the pulpit, it's about the ethos that's shared among the people. And in that sense, it would be really interesting to see whether a secular philosophy with no God can still be a school for virtue, in that sense, not of a teaching, a lecture

theatre, but a place where virtue is practised, and taught and learned, just by being among people who have a way of life. Interesting stuff.

Catherine McDonald 29:17

Listen, I could sit here and listen to the two of you discussing this all day. There is clearly I mean, Ozan, as you said, there's more research to be done. Malcolm, as you said, you would welcome that as well. It's a great testament to the strength of the Understanding Society data. And I do wish this conversation could go on, I just want to ask a final question to both of you. And that is what would you like to see happen to the role of religion in society moving forward? And Malcolm, I'll come to you first on that.

Rev. Malcolm Brown 29:47

First of all I would like more people to recognise as Ozan has that religion is not one thing. This isn't about a binary choice between being religious or being secular, religions can be all sorts of things, and they don't all have the same impact on people and communities. Secondly, I would like to see religion, religious beliefs and religious communities valued for the contribution they make to the social fabric, and not understood as some do, as always over against each other. You sometimes hear people talk because if you put a Muslim or Christian Jew or Hindu in a room together and lock the door, and they'll all just kill each other within an hour. The more likely outcome is that they will all find ways of getting out of the door together because they have a lot in common. I would like to hear religion talked about in a way that wasn't just adversarial. But equally, I'd like to have it more widely understood that religious belief and religious practice and not just valuable instrumental terms, these are worldviews, and everybody has a worldview. It's not that some are acceptable, and some are not. It's that this, these are worldviews that talk to people about their place among others, the way they relate the way they relate to creation, the world, the physical environment, as well as to other people. It's not just a set of choices, like what you buy in a supermarket. This is about the fabric of your life, and how you relate to others. And in a world where most decisions are understood to be simple personal choices, being a person of faith, whatever the faith, I think, isn't simply a kind of scanning the shelves of what's on offer and deciding I'm going to be one of those. It's much more profound than that. And so it needs a different kind of respectful dialogue, which isn't to say it should be protected against criticism. But it should be understood in its depth, and not as if it were just a slightly irrational choice that slightly bonkers people make.

Catherine McDonald 32:00

And Ozan what would you add to that?

Ozan Aksoy 32:03

So there has been two large scale trends that's been going on, that social scientists have been pointing at. One is decline of religion in Western countries. Malcolm mentioned that the proportion of people who report to have no religion has increased in the last decade or so. And at the same time, there's a mental wellbeing epidemic. So more and more people are reporting worse wellbeing

over time, and given the research that I and others have been conducting these two trends may have been linked causally. Then the question is, what should we do as a society? So obviously, making people more religious? I mean, some people might try doing that. But the secularisation trend seems that it's not going to happen. And then the question is, what shall we do? So, my, my answer is, we try to learn from religion, organised religions, what they do well, and why do they generate these positive outcomes? And how can we transport this widen this up to other schools of thought, and ways of life? That's basically what I could say from my perspective as a researcher, as an academic, but it is ultimately the society, the wider society that should decide on what we want to do with religion in current societies.

Catherine McDonald 33:39

Ozan Aksoy and the Reverend Dr. Malcolm Brown, thank you so much for joining us for this discussion today. It's been absolutely fascinating. You can find out more about how the data from Understanding Society is changing practice and informing policy by visiting the website understandingsociety.ac.uk and following us on [social media](#). This was a [Research Podcast](#) production. Thank you for listening. And remember to subscribe wherever you receive your podcasts.