

Faculty Research Fund Project Proposal

Section 1: Outline of Proposed Project

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Title: Conceptualizing Human Nature and The Divine: A Comparison of Christians and Buddhists in Two Cultures

Dates: May 2009 through January 2010

Abstract:

The proposed project investigates the prediction that people with a more “independent” sense of Self tend to conceptualize The Divine as a Being separate from themselves, while those with a more “interdependent” sense of Self conceptualize The Divine as something that is inherently part of themselves. During the 2008-2009 academic year, three relevant studies were conducted with Wittenberg undergraduates, focusing on contrasts between American Christians and Buddhists. I request funding to establish a new phase of this research program, to move beyond within-culture analysis to include cross-cultural comparison of Americans and Japanese. FRF funds will support translation of materials, compensation to Japan-based assistants, and compensation to Japan-based participants. A series of three studies is proposed: (1) a questionnaire study comparing Japanese Christians and Buddhists; (2) a paper and pencil-based experiment testing whether exposure to Christian/Buddhist ideology encourages an independent/interdependent Self-concept; and (3) an open-ended questionnaire study exploring understandings of “spirituality” and “belief in God” in the U.S. and Japan. Assuming that these studies produce interesting results, it is anticipated that the findings will be presented at a professional conference, and ultimately will be published in a peer-reviewed psychology journal.

Section 2: Description of Proposed Project

Background:

Belief in the existence of a mystical, spiritual domain is shared by many diverse societies around the world. Moreover, the impulse to link human experience to this numinous realm appears to be widespread, if not universal. Yet when this shared impulse toward the spiritual is made concrete for people living in specific cultural communities associated with different religious traditions, it can take on strikingly divergent forms (James, 1902/1961; Parrinder, 1996).

One important dimension of difference is the way in which individuals from different cultures conceptualize The Divine in relation to themselves and other human beings. For instance, adherents of Mahayana Buddhism, which is widespread across East Asia, tend to view Divine “Buddha Nature” as present equally in all beings, and indeed, in all of reality (Young, 2005). On the other hand, adherents of Christianity, which is widespread across the West, tend to view human beings as inherently alienated from God, due to original sin (Young, 2005). I am

interested in the possibility that the way in which The Divine tends to be conceptualized in a given culture may be linked to the way in which its members tend to conceptualize the Self.

Because an abstract domain like Divinity, by its very nature, cannot be observed directly, it makes sense that people should understand it in terms of a domain that is more intellectually accessible to them in their everyday lives. Thus, just as people seem to understand the abstract domain of *time* by relying on their concrete understanding of *space* (Boroditsky, 2000), I suggest that they also may conceptualize the abstract nature of The Divine by analogy to their models of Self, since the latter construct would seem to be more directly accessible, if not more concrete.

To investigate this possibility, it seems appropriate to take the United States as an example of “a Christian society,” since a high proportion of Americans identify themselves as Christian (76.5% in one large-scale study, Mayer, Kosmin, & Keysar, 2001). It also seems reasonable to take Japan as an example of “a Buddhist society,” since Buddhist temples are omnipresent in Japan and a large majority of Japanese are registered with one of them (around 85%, by some accounts; Adherents.com, 2005). Interestingly, at a societal level, there are well-documented cultural asymmetries in American versus Japanese sense of Self that seem to parallel this divergence in Christian versus Buddhist perspectives on The Divine.

On average, mainstream European-Americans tend to conceive of the Self in a way that emphasizes how each individual’s thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are inherently separate from those of other people, whereas mainstream Japanese are more likely, in general, to view the Self in a way that emphasizes how people are inherently interconnected with one another (Markus, Kitayama, & Heiman, 1996). For example, in free descriptions of the Self, Americans are more likely to describe their psychological traits in a context-free way (e.g., “I’m an outgoing person who likes to try new things”), whereas Japanese are more likely to frame them as bound to the social world (e.g., “I like to gossip when I’m with my friends”) (Markus, Mullally, & Kitayama, 1997). This asymmetry often is referred to as having an *independent* versus *interdependent* sense of Self.

In short, Americans appear to favor both an independent sense of Self and the Christian view that God is somewhat distinct from humanity. Japanese, in contrast, appear to favor both an interdependent sense of Self and the idea that Buddha Nature permeates all humanity and all existence. These apparent parallels suggest a link between sense of Self and conceptualization of The Divine that has not yet been documented in the psychological literature. Yet if a solid link between Self-schema and Divinity-schema truly exists, then it should be possible to demonstrate this relationship at both the cross-cultural level, when groups of American and Japanese individuals are compared to each other in aggregate, and at the within-culture level, when individuals from the same cultural background are compared to one another as well.

During the 2008-2009 academic year, I have been exploring this question at the within-culture level in collaboration with Wittenberg psychology majors enrolled in PSYC 400, *Cultural Research in Psychology*. In the fall, we carried out a content analysis of interview transcripts collected from 12 American Christians (6 Methodist, 6 Catholic) and 8 American Buddhists (all Caucasian). The open-ended interview questions asked about sacredness, afterlife experience, and humanity’s relation to the natural world; the content analysis focused on participants’ descriptions of human nature and the nature of The Divine. We found that at both levels, Christians were significantly more likely to mention “independent” separation-oriented themes, whereas Buddhists were more likely to mention “interdependent” integration-oriented themes. This finding suggests that one’s concept of The Divine goes hand-in-hand with one’s concept of Self. The findings of this interview study have been submitted, with joint student

authorship, for presentation at the *Ethnographic and Qualitative Research Conference* in July. If the paper is well received there, then it subsequently will be submitted to the associated *Journal of Ethnographic & Qualitative Research*.

Based on what we learned about Christians and Buddhists through our close analysis of the context-rich, open-ended interview data, the students and I jointly constructed a questionnaire (see Appendix 1) to be given to new groups of Christians and Buddhists, with the primary goal of replicating our interview-based findings with a larger sample. Questionnaire data collection began in the fall, and is continuing this spring with a new group of PSYC 400 students. When data analysis is completed this semester, we expect to find confirmatory evidence that conceptualization of Self correlates with conceptualization of The Divine. In addition, in collaboration with this group of students I also currently am conducting a paper and pencil-based experiment designed to move beyond correlation to test causality. More specifically, we are testing whether exposure to Christian or Buddhist ideologies might actively promote a more independent or interdependent perspective on the Self, respectively. In this study, participants read either Christian or Buddhist parables, then complete two self-description tasks. We hope to find evidence that exposure to a particular religious ideology is one mechanism through which individuals come to develop an independent or interdependent sense of Self.

Objectives:

I am requesting Faculty Research Fund Project funding to establish a new phase of this research program that moves beyond within-culture analysis to include cross-cultural comparison of Americans and Japanese. I propose a sequence of three studies:

Study 1. In this study, the questionnaire described above, which currently is being distributed to American Christians and Buddhists, would be translated into Japanese and be distributed to Christians and Buddhists in Japan, with the assistance of overseas colleagues. Americans and Japanese are reported to favor an independent and interdependent sense of Self, respectively (Markus et al., 1996, 1997); at the same time, my interview study suggested that American Christians are more likely to favor an independent sense of Self (and of The Divine) than American Buddhists. I expect to find that Japanese Christians would, likewise, be more likely to favor an independent sense of Self (and of The Divine) than Japanese Buddhists. This pattern of results would provide support for the idea that across cultures, religion serves as an enculturating force with regard to sense of Self.

Study 2. In this study, the paper and pencil-based experiment described above, which currently is being conducted with American college students, would be translated into Japanese and conducted with college students in Japan, again with the assistance of overseas colleagues. I expect to find that in both countries, exposure to Christian ideology elicits greater attention to independent aspects of Self, whereas exposure to Buddhist ideology elicits greater attention to interdependent aspects of Self. This pattern of results would add evidence of causality to the correlational outcomes predicted for Study 1.

Study 3. In this study, American and Japanese Christians, Buddhists, and college students will be asked to answer open-ended survey questions that explore their understandings of “spirituality” and “belief in God” (see preliminary version in Appendix 2). It is anticipated that data collection in the U.S. will be carried out by the students enrolled in PSYC 400 next fall, while data collection in Japan will be carried out with the assistance of overseas colleagues. I expect to find that the responses of Japanese Christians somewhat resemble those of Americans, taken as a group, while the responses of American Buddhists somewhat resemble those of

Japanese, taken as a group. Taken together with Study 2 evidence that exposure to Christian or Buddhist ideology promotes an independent or interdependent Self-concept, this pattern of results would suggest that religion partially explains the cross-cultural differences in sense of Self that have been reported for Americans versus Japanese.

If these studies produce interesting results, then, as with the interview study, the findings will be presented in shared authorship with Wittenberg psychology students at a professional conference, such as the annual meeting of the *Association for Psychological Science*. In addition, the plan would be for the final product resulting from this series of studies to be publication in a scientific journal like *Culture & Psychology*.

Methodology:

Carrying out these three studies will require collaboration with colleagues in Japan. I am well prepared to undertake such collaboration, having collaborated frequently with Japanese researchers on data collection studies in the past (e.g., Mukaida, Crane, & Azuma, 2009; Shapiro & Azuma, 2004; Sonoda, Leuers, & Shapiro, 2000; Wakabayashi, Butler, & Shapiro, 2001). I plan to translate the study materials through the paid assistance of these colleagues, and also ask them to distribute surveys to their students for course credit if possible. If this is not possible, then I will ask them to identify a Japanese research student who might collect data from Japanese participants for pay. I plan to collect American data with the assistance of Wittenberg psychology research students. Projected sample size is 45 participants per study, per country.

Collecting data from college students in the two countries will be a straightforward process. After securing Institutional Review Board approval to conduct a given study, participants will be recruited through psychology courses and/or posted advertisements. Upon arriving at the research site, participants will be asked to sign an informed consent form, then given the survey materials to complete. Once they have finished, they will receive a debriefing form that explains the study and provides them with contact information for further questions. They will be paid for their time, if needed, will be thanked, and excused. The collected data will then be subject to statistical analyses.

Collecting data from Christian and Buddhist community members in the two countries will be similar, differing only in the recruitment process. In the U.S., local congregations will be randomly selected from a list of religious institutions, using a random number generator. In Japan, congregations will be approached through networking and personal contacts. In both countries, researchers will contact the institution's religious leader to ask permission to run the study, and arrange the logistics with him or her. The researcher will arrive at the institution at the appointed time, and carry out the study as described above.

Budget:

<u>Study Component</u>	<u>Anticipated Cost</u>
Translation of study materials into Japanese, 10 pages @ \$8 per page	\$80.00
Translation of Japanese participant responses into English, 45 pages @ \$8 per page	\$360.00
Compensation to Japanese participants, 3 studies @ 45 participants per study @ \$5 per participant	\$675.00
Compensation to Japanese research assistants, running 135 participants in 16 sessions @ 1 hour per session @ \$10 per hour	\$160.00
Photocopying materials in Japan, 135 participants @ 9 pages per participant @ \$.10 per page	\$121.00
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TOTAL:	\$1,396.00

Plan of Work:

<u>Dates</u>	<u>Tasks</u>
May, 2009 (following proposal approval)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Submit Institutional Review Board application to Wittenberg for all three studies• Translate English-language Study 1 materials into Japanese• Back-translate Japanese-language materials into English• Revise and finalize Japanese-language materials• Begin Study 1 Japanese participant recruitment (Christians, Buddhists)
June, 2009	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Collect Study 1 data• Analyze Study 1 data & draw conclusions• Translate English-language Study 2 materials into Japanese• Back-translate Japanese-language materials into English• Revise and finalize Japanese-language materials• Begin Study 2 Japanese participant recruitment (college students)
July, 2009	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Collect Study 2 data• Analyze Study 2 data & draw conclusions• Translate English-language Study 3 materials into Japanese• Back-translate Japanese-language materials into English• Revise and finalize Japanese-language materials
August, 2009	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Begin Study 3 Japanese participant recruitment (Christians, Buddhists)• Collect Study 3 Japanese data (Christians, Buddhists)• Translate Japanese-language responses into English (Christians, Buddhists)
September, 2009	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Begin Study 3 Japanese participant recruitment (college students)• Collect Study 3 Japanese data (college students)• Translate Japanese-language responses into English (college students)• Begin Study 3 American participant recruitment (Christians, Buddhists, college students)• Collect Study 3 American data (Christians, Buddhists, college students)
October, 2009	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Continue to collect Study 3 American data (Christians, Buddhists, college students)
November, 2009	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Analyze Study 3 data & draw conclusions• Prepare conference presentation
December, 2009	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Continue to prepare conference presentation, if necessary

- Begin manuscript for journal article publication

Special Issues or Problems: Not applicable.

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Appendix 1: English-Language Version of Religion & Spirituality Survey

1. Gender (please circle one): Female Male
2. Age: _____
3. Race or ethnicity: _____
4. Highest level of education completed: _____
5. How would you describe your current relationship status? (please circle as many as apply)
 - a. Single
 - b. Married
 - c. In a relationship (not married)
 - d. Divorced/separated/widowed
6. Your *current* religion(s), if any (if more than one, circle the one you consider to be dominant):

 - a. How would you describe your current feelings toward the dominant religion listed above in question #6 (if any)?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
I feel strongly alienated from it				I feel neutral				I feel strongly connected to it
7. Religious tradition(s) *in which you were raised*, if any (if more than one, circle the one you consider to be dominant):

 - a. How would you describe your current feelings toward the dominant religion listed above in question #7 (if any)?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
I feel strongly alienated from it				I feel neutral				I feel strongly connected to it
8. How often do you attend religious services or other religious events at a communal place of worship? (please circle one)
 - a. I don't go very often
 - b. I go from time to time
 - c. I attend quite regularly
 - d. I almost never miss one, if I can help it
9. How much time have you spent outside of the U.S? Please specify where and for how long (over 1 week):

ID # _____

Religion & Spirituality Study

People have a range of views on spirituality and religion, and we want to learn how people from a variety of different backgrounds in our area think about these issues. To share your personal view, please answer the questions without talking to others. Your answers will be kept entirely confidential.

1. *Sacredness* means different things to different people. Please indicate the extent to which your idea of *sacred* includes each of the things below:

	definitely not included	probably not included	unsure	probably included	definitely included
<i>Something related to the Divine</i>	1	2	3	4	5
<i>Something related to my religion or spiritual tradition</i>	1	2	3	4	5
<i>A place or location</i>	1	2	3	4	5
<i>A physical object</i>	1	2	3	4	5
<i>A belief or idea</i>	1	2	3	4	5
<i>A feeling or emotion</i>	1	2	3	4	5
<i>An attitude or outlook</i>	1	2	3	4	5
<i>A non-religious event or occasion</i>	1	2	3	4	5
<i>A person</i>	1	2	3	4	5
<i>An animal</i>	1	2	3	4	5
<i>A tree</i>	1	2	3	4	5
<i>An interpersonal relationship</i>	1	2	3	4	5
<i>Other (please explain):</i>					

2. The ultimate spiritual Force or Entity that exists in the universe is superior to every human being.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

strongly disagree no opinion or unsure strongly agree

3. During the past two weeks, I have thought about my religious or spiritual beliefs mainly during meditation or prayer.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

strongly disagree no opinion or unsure strongly agree

4. My main focus regarding my religious or spiritual tradition is where it will take me, in the end.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

strongly disagree no opinion or unsure strongly agree

5. Animals have a spiritual essence that lives on after death.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
strongly disagree			no opinion or unsure			strongly agree

6. At root, animals and humans are more similar than different.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
strongly disagree			no opinion or unsure			strongly agree

7. Every human being is so intertwined with the ultimate spiritual Force or Entity that exists in the universe that it is impossible to pull the two apart.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
strongly disagree			no opinion or unsure			strongly agree

8. Some – but not all – human beings are so intertwined with the ultimate spiritual Force or Entity that exists in the universe that it is impossible to pull the two apart.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
strongly disagree			no opinion or unsure			strongly agree

9. Humans are so intertwined with the natural environment that it is impossible to pull the two apart.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
strongly disagree			no opinion or unsure			strongly agree

10. The ultimate spiritual Force or Entity that exists in the universe is so intertwined with the natural environment that it is impossible to pull the two apart.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
strongly disagree			no opinion or unsure			strongly agree

11. I would describe myself as *spiritual*.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
strongly disagree			no opinion or unsure			strongly agree

12. I would describe myself as *religious*.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
strongly disagree			no opinion or unsure			strongly agree

13. I would describe myself as *superstitious*.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

strongly no opinion strongly
disagree or unsure agree

14. My main focus regarding my religious or spiritual tradition is what it does for me in my everyday life.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

strongly no opinion strongly
disagree or unsure agree

15. People have different understandings of the terms *spiritual*, *religious*, and *superstitious*. Please indicate your view by identifying each of the things below as (a), (b), (c), **and/or** (d):

<i>meditating</i>	(a) Religious	(b) Spiritual	(c) Superstitious	(d) Other
<i>praying</i>	(a) Religious	(b) Spiritual	(c) Superstitious	(d) Other
<i>making a wish</i>	(a) Religious	(b) Spiritual	(c) Superstitious	(d) Other
<i>consulting a horoscope</i>	(a) Religious	(b) Spiritual	(c) Superstitious	(d) Other
<i>keeping an object for protection or good luck</i>	(a) Religious	(b) Spiritual	(c) Superstitious	(d) Other
<i>believing in an afterlife</i>	(a) Religious	(b) Spiritual	(c) Superstitious	(d) Other

16. In the space below, please explain the difference between *spiritual*, *religious*, and *superstitious*.

17. During the past two weeks, my decisions have been influenced by my religious or spiritual beliefs.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

strongly no opinion strongly
disagree or unsure agree

18. Human beings have a spiritual essence that lives on after death.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

strongly no opinion strongly
disagree or unsure agree

19. Human beings are inherently superior to other living things.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
strongly disagree			no opinion or unsure			strongly agree

20. Being alive and being dead are two distinctly different states.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
strongly disagree			no opinion or unsure			strongly agree

21. I know more or less what will happen to me after I die.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
strongly disagree			no opinion or unsure			strongly agree

22. After death, all people experience more or less the same thing.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
strongly disagree			no opinion or unsure			strongly agree

23. It is very important to me to have an understanding of what will happen to me after I die.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
strongly disagree			no opinion or unsure			strongly agree

24. What happens to me after I die depends heavily on what I do, think, and/or feel while I am alive.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
strongly disagree			no opinion or unsure			strongly agree

25. What happens to me after I die depends heavily on what I do, think, and/or feel after my death.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
strongly disagree			no opinion or unsure			strongly agree

26. What happens to me after I die depends heavily on what other people do, think, and/or feel.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
strongly disagree			no opinion or unsure			strongly agree

Please explain:

27. What happens to me after I die depends heavily on the workings of a Spiritual Force or Entity.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
strongly disagree			no opinion or unsure			strongly agree

28. What happens to me after I die depends heavily on something not mentioned in Q24-Q27.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
strongly disagree			no opinion or unsure			strongly agree

Please explain:

29. After death, some people get to experience happiness, and other people do not.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
strongly disagree			no opinion or unsure			strongly agree

30. Being alive and being dead are so interconnected that it is not possible to clearly tell them apart.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
strongly disagree			no opinion or unsure			strongly agree

31. I will be rewarded for my good deeds and/or pay for my bad deeds after my death.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
strongly disagree			no opinion or unsure			strongly agree

Appendix 2:
English-Language Version of *Concepts of Spirituality* Survey

Survey on Concepts of Spirituality

Part I. Open-Ended Questions

1. Are you a spiritual person? (Feel free to define “spiritual” however you like.)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
extremely non-spiritual				don't know				extremely spiritual

2. When answering question #1, what idea of “a spiritual person” did you have in mind? Please describe the concept that you used, assuming that you are writing for someone who knows nothing at all about your religious tradition or philosophy.

3. Do you believe in God? (Feel free to define “God” however you like.)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
definitely no				don't know				definitely yes

4. When answering question #3, what idea of “God” did you have in mind? Please describe the “God” concept that you used, again assuming that you are writing for someone who knows nothing at all about your religious tradition or philosophy.

5. To what extent do you agree with the statement: “Spirituality/God is present in my life”? (Feel free to interpret this statement however you like.)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
strongly disagree				don't agree or disagree				strongly agree

6. Consider your answer to question #5. What does it mean to say that God and/or spirituality is “present in one’s life”? Please explain.

Part II. Demographics

9. Gender (circle one): Female Male
10. Class Year (circle one): First-year Sophomore Junior Senior
11. Hometown (city & state): _____
12. Race/ethnicity: _____
13. Religious tradition(s) in which you were raised, if any (if more than one, please circle the one you consider to be dominant):

- a. How would you describe your current feelings toward the dominant religion listed above in question #5 (if any)?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
I feel strongly alienated from it				I feel neutral			I feel strongly connected to it	

14. Your current religion(s), if any (if more than one, please circle the one you consider to be dominant):

- a. How would you describe your current feelings toward the dominant religion listed above in question #6 (if any)?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
I feel strongly alienated from it				I feel neutral			I feel strongly connected to it	

15. Have you spent time outside the U.S.? If so, please specify where and for how long:
