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THE IMPACT OF PERSONALITY TRAITS ON THE FEAR OF DIVINE PUNISHMENT AMONG MUSLIM PARTICIPANTS IN INDONESIA

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Abstract:

Divine punishment is an important yet often overlooked concept in the study of religiosity. Past studies have shown that the effects of divine punishment can be contradictory. To better understand this contradiction, the current study examines the relationship between personality traits and the fear of divine punishment among 249 Muslim participants in Indonesia. The findings indicate that only two personality traits significantly predict fear of divine punishment: Neuroticism and Agreeableness. Higher levels of Neuroticism are associated with an increased fear of divine punishment, while greater Agreeableness is linked to a heightened fear as well. These results suggest that fear of divine punishment may serve as an indicator of religiosity and reflect excessive emotionality. Overall, this study enhances our understanding of how individual personality influences religious experiences and attitudes.

Keywords:

Divine Punishment, Personality Traits, Religiosity



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Introduction

Scholars have emphasized the significant role of religion in shaping various aspects of human behavior. However, despite extensive research on religiosity, specific teachings and principles of religion, such as divine punishment, remain underexplored (Saleam et al., 2016). Existing studies also provide contradictory findings: while some suggest that divine punishment promotes positive behavior (Purzycki et al., 2016; Yilmaz & Bahçekapili, 2016), others indicate that it may exacerbate pathological symptoms or diminish well-being (Moroń et al., 2022; Tan et al., 2026).

These contradictory findings may be linked to personality characteristics. For example, some studies have focused on individuals with personality-related problems, such as obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) (Mauzay & Cuttler, 2018; Siev et al., 2017). In contrast, other studies suggest that fear of divine punishment is indicative of a certain religious personality (Cranney et al., 2018). In this context, religious individuals tend to exhibit a higher fear of divine punishment than those with lower religiosity (Al-Issa et al., 2025; Horwitz et al., 2019). To address this gap, previous studies have examined the impact of fear of divine punishment by focusing on personality traits. Nevertheless, conclusions regarding the association between personality and fear of divine punishment remain contradictory. On one hand, it is argued that fear of divine punishment can indicate a disordered personality (Fang et al., 2016). On the other hand, Cranney et al. (2018) argue that fear of divine punishment is not pathological but rather part of a faith-based personality indicator.

However, these studies have limitations that weaken their conclusions. First, Fang et al. (2016) appear to overlook important traits, particularly Neuroticism, which has been shown to predict mental health issues and lower well-being (Schunk & Trommsdorff, 2023). Similarly, Cranney et al. (2018) do not address the relationship between fear of divine punishment and two key personality traits, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness, which are consistently linked to religiosity (Joshani, 2023). These omissions weaken the robustness of their conclusions.

To resolve these contradictions, a more detailed analysis of the relationship between fear of divine punishment and personality traits is necessary. Personality assessments should encompass all traits rather than focusing on only one or a few in order to provide a complete picture of an individual's personality. Therefore, because several limitations undermine the conclusions drawn from past studies, there is a need for a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between personality traits and the fear of divine punishment.

Literature Review

This section discusses two aspects: (1) personality trait theory and (2) the association between personality traits and religiosity. First, it reviews Five-Factor Theory to explain the five

personality traits. It then examines the connection between the five personality traits and religiosity.

Five-Factor Theory

The Five-Factor Theory of personality, introduced by Costa and McCrae, builds on their earlier work from 1987 on the Five-Factor Model (McCrae & Costa, 1987). They found that this model effectively explains personality traits through both self-assessment and others' evaluations. Four years later, certain aspects related to Agreeableness and Conscientiousness were revised (Costa et al., 1991). In 1992, Costa and McCrae introduced the NEO Personality Inventory (NEO-PI), which they considered a superior measure of the Five-Factor Model. Since then, Five-Factor Theory has been widely explored in various studies.

The five personality traits are Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness. Neuroticism is characterized primarily by tendencies toward depression, which may include low self-esteem, irrational thinking, perfectionism, and pessimism (McCrae & Costa, 2008). Extraversion is associated with social skills such as making friends and participating in groups or clubs. According to McCrae and Costa (2008), Extraversion entails enjoying social interactions and activities, and it is negatively correlated with social introversion, underscoring that sociability is a key component of this trait.

Openness to Experience revolves around the concept of action (McCrae & Costa, 2008). Individuals high in this trait seek new experiences and challenges, displaying an adventurous spirit and a desire to engage in varied activities. Research indicates that the development of Openness to Experience is relatively consistent from adolescence into early adulthood but tends to decline during middle age and later life (Schwaba et al., 2017). Agreeableness emphasizes compliance and conflict avoidance; individuals who are high in this trait are inclined to collaborate and readily forgive others (McCrae & Costa, 2008). Finally, Conscientiousness is characterized by a strong drive for achievement, which can manifest through effective leadership, organization, and expertise (McCrae & Costa, 2008). Those high in Conscientiousness often experience a strong sense of fulfillment when they reach their goals.

Five-Factor Traits and Religion

Previous studies have established a clear relationship between religion and specific personality traits, particularly Neuroticism, Conscientiousness, and Agreeableness (Joshani, 2023; Stronge et al., 2021). In this regard, Stronge et al. (2021) found that both converting to and deconverting from a religion, although the effects are generally small, can significantly influence personality traits such as Neuroticism and Agreeableness. This suggests that religious beliefs and practices can shape personality, with important implications for personal development.

Furthermore, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness have been consistently associated with an individual's level of religiosity across various studies (Entringer et al., 2020; Joshani, 2023). These traits appear to reflect fundamental aspects of a religious personality and provide insight into how they may manifest in religious behaviors and attitudes. Understanding this connection can help clarify the broader characteristics that define highly religious individuals. Thus, empirical research suggests that religion exerts a clear, albeit modest, influence on various

personality traits, indicating a complex interplay between belief systems and individual characteristics (Saroglou, 2015).

Therefore, in the present study, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness can serve as indicators of whether fear of divine punishment signifies a religious personality. Additionally, examining Neuroticism may reveal deeper personality issues that this fear might reflect. Together, these considerations suggest that a comprehensive understanding of personality traits can provide valuable insight into religiosity, particularly fear of divine punishment, and its impact on individual behavior.

The Present Study

Because believers' personality traits have been found to be relatively consistent in highly religious countries, this study was conducted in Indonesia, which has been recognized for its high levels of religiosity (Pew Research Center, 2018). The research also focuses on non-clinical believers who are highly religious, as studies have shown that the effects of religion are consistently significant in this group (Mochon et al., 2011). In addition, using non-clinical participants is important because examining the effects of religion in clinical populations can lead to confusion and potentially misleading conclusions about causal relationships (Pargament, 2002).

Method

Participants

A total of 249 Muslim students consented to participate in the study and were enrolled in three universities with Islamic backgrounds on Java Island, Indonesia. Among the participants, 111 were male (44.6%), and 138 were female. The mean age of the participants was 20.06 years ($SD = 1.58$). The number of participants from each university was 127, 80, and 42, respectively. All participants provided informed consent before the study began.

Measurements

The Revised Penn Inventory of Scrupulosity (PIOS-R)

The Revised Penn Inventory of Scrupulosity (PIOS-R) (Olatunji et al., 2007) is a psychological instrument developed to assess scrupulosity. This inventory comprises 15 items divided into two dimensions: 10 items addressing fear of sin and five items focusing on fear of God. Participants responded to each item using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (never) to 4 (always). The instrument was translated and validated for Indonesian participants in a previous study (El Hafiz et al., 2025). In the present study, the measure remained reliable, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.892 ($\alpha = 0.802$ for fear of God and $\alpha = 0.849$ for fear of sin).

The NEO Personality Inventory Revised (NEO PI-R)

The NEO Personality Inventory Revised (Indonesian NEO PI-R) (McCrae & Costa, 2010) is a comprehensive tool for evaluating personality across five traits: Extraversion, Neuroticism, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness. The inventory consists of 240 items and requires approximately 30 to 45 minutes to complete. Respondents assessed each

item on a five-point Likert scale, where 1 corresponded to “strongly disagree” and 5 to “strongly agree.” The total score for each of the five traits ranged from 48 to 240. Prior research validated the translation of the NEO PI-R for Indonesian respondents (Halim et al., 2004). In the present study, the measure remained reliable, as shown by Cronbach’s alpha scores for all traits: $\alpha = .896$ for Neuroticism, $\alpha = .818$ for Extraversion, $\alpha = .721$ for Openness to Experience, $\alpha = .774$ for Agreeableness, and $\alpha = .894$ for Conscientiousness.

Analysis

The study focused on identifying the traits that predict fear of divine punishment by using multiple regression analysis in JASP version 0.19.3.0. This approach provided insight into the psychological traits that influence individuals’ fear of divine punishment.

Procedures

Prior to data collection, respondents were informed about their rights and the purpose of the research. The invitation also stated the duration of the study, in which participants were asked to take part in two phases. However, respondents were also informed that they had the right not to participate in the second phase without any obligation to explain their reason. In addition, all respondents were informed that they would receive a voucher after participating in each phase, up to Rp. 25,000 (twenty-five thousand rupiah).

The invitation to participate in the first phase of the study was sent to all potential participants via email, chat groups, and other platforms. If the target number of participants had not yet been reached, potential participants received a reminder to join. The invitation clarified that all collected data would remain confidential and would be used only for research purposes. Students who wished to participate voluntarily were asked to complete the eligibility criteria, namely the devoutness criteria, and confirm that they had never been diagnosed with OCD. Data from participants who did not meet the inclusion criteria were excluded from the study. Participants who met the research criteria were asked to provide demographic information, including name, gender, email address, age, and department. This was followed by the PIOS-R scale.

The second phase of the research was conducted 2 to 45 days after the first phase. Invitations to participate in the second phase were sent by email only to those who took part in the first phase. In this phase, respondents were required to complete the NEO PI-R questionnaire. As an incentive, participants who answered all items on the questionnaire received an appreciation voucher worth Rp. 25,000 (twenty-five thousand rupiah) after submitting their responses.

Results and Discussion

Results

Based on the descriptive analysis, Agreeableness had the highest score (mean = 109.297, SD = 12.902), followed by Conscientiousness (mean = 109.108, SD = 17.554). Although Agreeableness scores were slightly higher, the mean difference between the two traits was small. Meanwhile, Extraversion had the lowest score (mean = 97.566, SD = 14.463), although it was only a few points lower than Neuroticism (mean = 102.402, SD = 18.758) and Openness

to Experience (mean = 103.281, SD = 11.763). Therefore, the results show that the highest scores were observed for Agreeableness and Conscientiousness (see Table 1).

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

	Mean (SD)	1. N	2. E	3. O	4. A	5. C	6. FoS	7. FoG
1.	102.40(18.75)	—						
2.	97.56(14.46)	-0.400***	—					
3.	103.28(11.76)	0.034	0.291***	—				
4.	109.29(12.90)	-0.010	-0.130*	-0.067	—			
5.	109.10(17.55)	-0.518***	0.436***	0.261***	0.225***	—		
6.	24.76(8.03)	0.221***	-0.093	-0.112	0.200**	-0.048	—	
7.	14.83(4.41)	0.190**	-0.007	0.024	0.164**	0.007	0.700***	—
8.	39.59(11.56)	0.217***	-0.040	-0.026	0.191**	-0.014	0.868***	0.962***

1=N (Neuroticism), 2=E(Extraversion), 3=O (Openness to Experience, 4=A(Agreeableness), 5=C (Conscientiousness), 6= FoS (Fear of Sin), 7= FoG (Fear of God), 8= Total score of PIOS-R

Source: Created by the author

Based on the regression analysis, the R^2 value of .096 indicates that the combined personality traits account for 9.6% of the variance in the dependent variable (see Table 2). Despite this modest effect size, the model demonstrates high statistical significance ($p < .001$), confirming that the independent variables collectively have genuine predictive power and that the overall regression model is statistically robust.

Table 2: Summary of Regression Model and ANOVA Results

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	F	p
Regression	3197.176	5	639.435	0.311	0.096	0.078	5.189	< .001
Residual	29944.856	243	123.230					
Total	33142.032	248						

Note. Model includes N, E, O, A, C

Source: Created by the author

Finally, the regression model presented in Table 2 shows that personality traits significantly affect fear of divine punishment. However, examination of the individual predictors reveals that only Neuroticism ($\beta = 0.297$, $p < .001$) and Agreeableness ($\beta = .183$, $p = .006$) exert a significant influence. In contrast, Extraversion ($p = 0.230$), Openness to Experience ($p = 0.299$), and Conscientiousness ($p = 0.334$) do not contribute significantly to the model, as their p-values exceed the standard .05 threshold (see Table 3).

Table 3: Regression Coefficients for Personality Traits Predictors

	Unstandardized	Standard Error	Standardized	t	p
(Intercept)	-2.555	11.695		-0.218	0.827
Neuroticism	0.183	0.047	0.297	3.900	< .001
Extraversion	0.071	0.059	0.089	1.203	0.230

Openness to Experience	-0.069	0.066	-0.070	-1.040	0.299
Agreeableness	0.164	0.059	0.183	2.792	0.006
Conscientiousness		0.052	0.054	0.079	0.968

Source: Created by the author

Discussion

The objective of the present study was to examine whether personality traits can help explain the contradictory effects of fear of divine punishment, particularly through Neuroticism, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness. If Neuroticism predicts fear of divine punishment, the emotion may be interpreted as an indicator of mental health issues. Meanwhile, if Agreeableness and Conscientiousness predict the emotion, fear of divine punishment may be understood as a normal religious emotion.

Interestingly, the results show that both arguments are valid, with some qualifications. First, the findings indicate a connection between Neuroticism and fear of divine punishment. In this regard, the results support the idea that a strong fear of divine punishment may be a sign of a more serious mental health issue (Olatunji et al., 2007). People who experience this intense fear may be more vulnerable to mental distress.

Second, the results show that Agreeableness positively predicts fear of divine punishment, supporting the argument that this emotion reflects a normal religious sentiment (Cranney et al., 2018). Nevertheless, this relationship is present for Agreeableness but absent for Conscientiousness, raising important questions about how personality traits shape emotional experiences within religious contexts. These findings deepen our understanding of the connections between inherent dispositions and religious sentiment.

There are two main explanations for the significant relationship with Agreeableness but not with Conscientiousness. First, the findings support past studies showing that the concept of divine punishment can enhance cooperation (Cranney et al., 2018; Saleam et al., 2016). McCrae and Costa (2008) explain that Agreeableness is characterized by compliance and conflict avoidance; individuals who score high on this trait are generally more inclined to collaborate and cooperate with others. Therefore, the positive relationship between fear of divine punishment and Agreeableness helps clarify that divine punishment may promote cooperative behavior.

Second, the non-significant relationship between fear of divine punishment and Conscientiousness indicates that this fear likely does not arise from an individual's internal drive. Conscientiousness is generally associated with strong self-motivation (McCrae & Costa, 2008). Consequently, the results suggest that a pronounced fear of divine punishment may reflect a tendency to conform to religious norms rather than emerge from genuine personal intent. In Indonesia, where religiosity is notably high (Pew Research Center, 2018), it is understandable that this fear appears to stem more from social expectations than from an individual's intrinsic motivation.

Although the current study does not fully resolve the contradictions surrounding fear of divine punishment, it offers a more nuanced explanation of its effects. By examining personality traits, this research sheds light on how fear of divine punishment influences believers. Notably, it

provides a more detailed explanation of the paradoxical effects associated with divine punishment.

The present study acknowledges several limitations, particularly regarding the negative implications of fear of divine punishment. One major limitation is that the study did not analyze personality traits at the facet level. Fang et al. (2016) suggest that this fear may be pathological and recommend focusing on Deliberation, a facet of Conscientiousness associated with obsessive-compulsive disorder, to confirm its negative effects. Additionally, facets of Neuroticism, such as Vulnerability and Impulsiveness, may also help demonstrate the adverse impact of fear of divine punishment, as these facets reflect susceptibility to stress, difficulty coping, and challenges in managing cravings and urges (McCrae & Costa, 2010).

Another limitation concerns the relationship between fear of divine punishment and Agreeableness, which suggests that this emotion can foster cooperation. To deepen understanding, future research should explore specific facets of Agreeableness, particularly Trust and Tendermindedness, which reflect an individual's belief in others' intentions and concern for their well-being, both of which are crucial for nurturing genuine cooperation (McCrae & Costa, 2010). Therefore, future studies are encouraged to investigate in greater detail the connections between fear of divine punishment and the various facets of personality traits.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings indicate a positive relationship between two personality traits, Neuroticism and Agreeableness, and fear of divine punishment. This suggests that fear of divine punishment has a dual nature: it may signify religious fear, but it may also indicate underlying mental health issues. Therefore, these findings are expected to contribute to a better understanding of the complexity of personality and its effects on religiosity.

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