

---

## INTRODUCTION

---

### Religion and Psychology: Introduction to the Special Issue

Roy F. Baumeister

Psychology purports to be the science of behavior, with behavior defined broadly enough to include inner processes such as thoughts and emotions. Psychologists have built an impressive stock of knowledge about many spheres and forms of behavior, including learning, aggression, love, sexuality, mental illness, coping with stress, attitudes and influence, competition, first impressions, relationships, helping, and too many others to name. However, some areas remain strangely neglected, constituting holes in our field's understanding. Religion is one of these.

Why has religion been neglected? Two answers stand out. Stark and Bainbridge suggested one in their classic 1985 work, *The Future of Religion*. They pointed out that religiosity tends to have a strong negative correlation with education. Researchers are themselves highly educated and tend not to be religious. More important, they tend to spend most of their lives at universities, where they are surrounded by other highly educated people. This may cause such people to get the false impression that religion is a rare, marginal phenomenon. Even if they occasionally meet a religious person at a university, the person tends to be an exception and, knowing this, tends to keep his or her religiosity under wraps. All of this differs radically from the experience of living among people who all embrace a common religious faith and share the assumption that certain religious truths are fundamental to the nature of reality.

The other reason is that the psychology of religion at times has been monopolized by people with strong personal feelings about it. Because religion was never a popular, so-called hot topic that attracted the attention of a great many energetic psychologists, the only people who undertook to study it were those who were personally invested in it—usually because they themselves had strong religious beliefs or, in some cases, because they were personally hostile toward religion. These patterns probably tainted the study of religion as highly biased and defined it as something that people would do only out of some inner drive. You could not simply be curious about religious phenomena.

This volume was conceived as a way of bringing the study of religion closer to mainstream psychology. Like television, money, sex, and aggression, religion is an important fact of life, and psychology cannot pretend to be complete unless it understands religion alongside these other phenomena. Moreover, it is essential that religion be studied in a balanced, open-minded, objective fashion rather than being left to the pro-religious and antireligious zealots who are seeking to support predetermined conclusions.

One major advantage of taking the study of religion out of the hands of people with strong personal investments is that it becomes possible to acknowledge tradeoffs. In psychology and in the social sciences generally, many things are intertwined such that benefits and costs are linked. In life, one often must accept the bitter with the sweet. However, the study of religion has been reluctant to acknowledge this, probably in part because personally motivated researchers wanted to depict religion in all favorable or all unfavorable terms. Pargament's (this issue) article is an important, marvelous contribution because it scrupulously recognizes both the costs and the benefits of religious coping. In my view, adopting a balanced approach such as Pargament's will prove to be essential if the psychology of religion is to be any more than a marginal sphere of biased inquiry.

Recent tragedies have highlighted the importance of understanding religion. In September 2001, Islamic terrorists attacked the United States, most notoriously by hijacking two airplanes and crashing them into New York's World Trade Center. Currently, it appears that religious and political motivations underlay the attacks. In the Islamic world, religion and politics are intertwined in a way that Americans, given their long tradition of separating church and state, cannot easily understand. In particular, our society has coped with diversity by aggressively promoting tolerance for all beliefs and acceptance of religious pluralism, but both of these are quite alien, unacceptable notions to people who live in communities where everyone shares the same religious faith and where religious belief is expected to permeate most aspects of life. The terrorists

who oppose us live in such a world and seem unlikely to be willing to accept the prospect of living in a more open, tolerant, pluralistic society.

Berger (1967) highlighted this dilemma in his analysis of why religions do not easily accept the idea of peaceful coexistence, and his views are relevant to some of the discussions in this issue. Religion is not simply a matter of the private, personal beliefs and practices of individuals. Rather, religion can be a force in society that shapes collective life, binds people together, and helps them to live in harmony. To accomplish this, however, it is necessary that the religious beliefs and associated moral values be shared. In this, religion resembles language: If everyone has a different language, communication will be impossible, whereas a language shared by everyone can be a potent force in social life. Berger noted that each religion claims ultimate truth for its doctrines, and thus, it could not readily accept the coexistence of other, alternative religions. Pluralism and tolerance represent a major defeat for any religion because they force it to the margins of life.

Violence in the name of religion is hardly new. History may look back on the terrorist attacks of 2001 as simply one more event in a long, dismal tradition by which religious people killed others who did not share their beliefs. To be sure, violent competition between different groups has an even longer and fuller history. However, religion may intensify such violence by legitimizing it and by reducing the willingness to compromise. After all, if two groups argue about land or water or money, they may be able to find some "live and let live" resolution, but if their dispute invokes the assumption that the other side is thoroughly, fundamentally evil and its continued existence represents an affront to divine truth and justice, there is less room to negotiate.

Psychological research has begun to suggest a novel twist on religious disputes, however. My reading of the works in this volume and other, related findings points toward a startling conclusion: What matters in terms of psychological and health outcomes is whether a person is religious—period. It does not make much difference which religion a person believes. For example, religious people recover from heart attacks faster and more thoroughly than nonreligious people, but the benefits seem to flow from religiosity *per se* rather than from holding any particular faith.

The research findings thus represent a sweeping challenge to the way religion is practiced and believed. Most faiths assert that theirs is the only true religion. Indeed, one of the few things on which a religious and a nonreligious person can usually agree is the wrongness of other religions. However, the scientific evidence, at least, does not provide any basis for thinking that one religion is superior to others.

Theologians may scoff at the idea that God intervenes in the world to heal the sick or provide other benefits to believers; however, many grassroots believers

assume that God will intervene, and they often pray for specific outcomes. Sick people pray for health and ask their relatives to pray for them. The belief in divine intervention may lack both scientific and theological foundation, but it retains a strong hold on the mind of the average believer. If God does intervene, however, the data suggest that divine intervention is indifferent to the individual's chosen faith. Believing is all that matters in some religions versus not believing in any. Perhaps this realization could be used to promote world peace by indicating that different religions should make a common cause and validate each other as different paths to the same ultimate truth.

For psychological scientists, of course, divine intervention is not a satisfactory explanation. George, Ellison, and Larson (this issue) therefore consider a series of very secular theories about why believers are healthier than nonbelievers. They find that several theories receive support, but even if all are accepted as valid, much is still left unexplained. Understanding the individual health benefits of religiosity remains a fascinating challenge for further study.

The focus on the health benefits of religion (in George et al.'s article in this issue) is counterbalanced by Exline's (this issue) exposition of the inner struggles that many believers encounter. Inner struggles have been a characteristic of religious faith for centuries. However, the nature of these struggles has changed as society has moved toward religious pluralism and tolerance. Berger's insight that religion depends on collectively shared assumptions is not only true at the societal level but also for the individual. That is, it is easier for an individual to maintain religious faith if he or she lives in a community where everyone else holds that same faith. In contrast, it is far more difficult to maintain one's own faith while living amid people who do not share your faith and who instead either subscribe to other, alternative religious beliefs or reject religious belief altogether.

Some of the commentators wonder whether there is anything special about religion. They suggest that the study of religion can be subsumed under the study of other psychological processes, such as social support, attachment, attitudes, and group behavior. From the point of view of the psychology of the individual, they may have a point. From the point of view of society as a whole, however, religion does seem to occupy a relatively special, privileged place as one of the only large-scale institutional supports for values, morals, shared assumptions, and the like. Certainly no one questions that the study of religion can benefit by borrowing principles and findings that emerged from the study of other phenomena. Whether there is anything unique about religion as a sphere of human behavior is an intriguing empirical question.

Regardless of whether religion is unique, however, it still can be an enormously fertile source of insights

and observations that can be used to develop and refine psychological theories. In other words, psychology can learn a great deal about basic human behavioral processes by studying how people practice their religion, maintain their faith, and are shaped by it. In the pages that follow, the authors touch on a remarkable range of psychological phenomena: coping with stress, physical health, self-deception, consistency and rationalization, attachment, memory and distortion, prejudice, violence, love, sexuality, attitude change, social support, interpretation and meaning, authority and power, ethnicity, emotions and emotional intelligence, depression, self-understanding, time, memory, uncertainty, happiness, goals, hope, and cultural differences. The study of religion can potentially enrich all those fields of inquiry as well as being enriched by them.

In closing, I thank the people and organizations who have made this volume possible. The authors of the target articles were crucial contributors, and each has offered a valuable, carefully thought out contribution to the scientific study of religion. The commentators were specifically recruited from the ranks of scholars who have not focused their research on religion. This was done to get fresh perspectives. Nearly all of the commentators are highly respected, influential opinion leaders who have made substantial contributions in other areas. They were invited to bring their disparate expertises to bear on the target articles and to think about how their own work might offer some useful per-

spective on religion. The richness, diversity, and intellectual power of their views will be immediately obvious to anyone who reads them. Indeed, my hope is that many people who read these commentaries will be stimulated to begin collecting data and advancing the field's understanding of religion.

Several institutions have contributed to this work. Lawrence Erlbaum, Inc., continues to provide first-class publishing expertise. My home institution, Case Western Reserve University, provided support and infrastructure, and my sabbatical institution, the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University, enabled me to complete the project.

Last, and most important, I am especially grateful to the John D. Templeton Foundation for its support for this project. They made resources available that have helped us make this much more than just another issue of *Psychological Inquiry*. The Templeton Foundation has done much to bring the scientific study of religion into the 21st century and up to the level of quality that befits a profoundly important topic.

### References

- Berger, P. L. (1967). *The sacred canopy: Elements of a sociological theory of religion*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Stark, R., & Bainbridge, W. S. (1985). *The future of religion: Secularization, revival, and cult formation*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Copyright of Psychological Inquiry is the property of Lawrence Erlbaum Associates and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.