

The Psychology of Religion and Religious Experience

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Historical Background

The reasons for the relative neglect in the 20th century of the psychology of religion within mainstream psychology are open to debate (see Wulff, 1998 for a valuable extended discussion), but prominent among them is the desire by psychologists to identify psychology with the physical and biological sciences, which would exclude anything associated with religion, a subject seen by many as difficult to explore under laboratory conditions and as representing beliefs and practices explicable in terms of self-delusion, primitive conditioning, magical thinking, father fixation, and the like. An example of this attitude comes from Malony's finding (1972) that only 14 (1.1%) of a random sample of 1,111 members of the American Psychological Association reported an interest in religion—a vanishingly small number.

The Current Position

This relative neglect of religion has impoverished psychology. Whether one believes in the truth of religion or not, religious beliefs and practices are a continuing and significant influence upon human behavior. Paloutzian and Park (2005) describe them in fact as “the greatest force for good and evil in the history of the world,” and the fact that religion has flourished for thousands of years and in virtually all cultures is ample evidence of its importance to individuals and society. Human motivation, morals, values, self-concepts, legal structures, relationships, philosophical systems, education, altruistic behaviors, hospital care, and attitudes to death and dying have all been intimately influenced by religious theory and practice. In addition,

IAAP Handbook of Applied Psychology, First Edition. Edited by Paul R. Martin, Fanny M. Cheung, Michael C. Knowles, Michael Kyrios, Lyn Littlefield, J. Bruce Overmier, and José M. Prieto.

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life-changing religious experiences have been reported from all cultures and in all centuries (see, e.g., Hay, 1987 for recent examples). And religious differences, though often of minor significance in themselves, have proved a potent excuse for conflict between cultures and nations.

If belatedly, these facts are now becoming more recognized within psychology. The foundation of the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* in 1961 and of the Psychology of Religion Division within the American Psychological Association in 1976 have been instrumental in furthering this recognition, and research papers on the psychology of religion are increasingly appearing in refereed journals. Something of the quantity and quality of these publications is evident in Emmons and Paloutzian (2003) and in a classic text by Wulff (1997). The fact that human behavior is no longer seen solely as a set of conditioned responses to the environment but as a consequence of the ability to perform intentional acts congruent with sets of beliefs has also helped to draw attention to the subject. However, much work remains to be done. Religion and spirituality are elusive concepts, and the tendency of many psychologists of religion is to focus upon what is measurable by appropriate scales, rather than upon narrative and other approaches that enable individuals to articulate their inner religious experience. Andresen (2001) emphasizes the time is right for developing cognitive approaches to the study of religion, yet to date these approaches are more apparent in the work of anthropologists, philosophers, sociologists, and specialists in comparative religion than in that of psychologists. The reason many psychologists are reluctant to adopt a subjectively oriented approach is that, from the scientific perspective, there is no way of investigating consciousness directly. However, it is within the field of consciousness that the individual experiences his or her religious life. The suggestion by Emmons and Paloutzian (2003) that psychology should adopt a multilevel interdisciplinary paradigm drawing upon many levels of analysis (some of which take account of consciousness) is thus particularly relevant for the psychologist of religion.

Wallace (2000), an expert on the introspective Buddhist approach to the study of mind, takes a similar view, arguing that a major impact of scientific materialism in the West is that it “alienates us from our firsthand experience of our own minds, which it equates with ‘common sense’ or ‘folk psychology’” in the belief that subjective experience “is often, if not always misleading.” And this despite the fact that discoveries by neuroscientists of the brain’s influences upon mental processes draw extensively upon subjects’ first-hand accounts of these processes. The time is right for the psychology of religion to insist it has a warrant to show the same reliance.

Religion as Social Phenomenon

Some acceptance of the role of first-hand accounts is becoming apparent in the increasing importance attached by psychologists of religion to attitude-based research. Donahue and Nielsen (2005) recognize that investigation of the degree to which attitudes and behavior are consistent with each other is now a core approach in social psychology, and within the psychology of religion this approach is beginning to make use of cognitive dissonance theory, social identity, secularization theory, and value

systems. The research question involved is the extent to which religious beliefs and behavior are influenced by forces in the outside world, which, in turn, is related to broader questions on the origins of religious belief. To what extent is this belief a response to external forces and to what extent a response to private reflection and/or a sense of inner spiritual realities?

Watts (2002) distinguishes between social constructionism that emphasizes the role of the social context and perennialism that stresses the unmediated nature of religious experience as evidenced by the common core of religious experience across cultures. We return to perennialism when we discuss inner experiences more extensively, but social constructionism is clearly correct in maintaining that many religious beliefs are influenced by cultural factors. To this we can add that religious beliefs and experience also influence culture. Donahue and Nielsen (2005) in fact conclude their survey of religion and social behavior by observing that the investigation of religion's impact on social life is "the most vigorous area of study in the psychology of religion." Their survey shows the diversity of this impact, which ranges from the promotion of "prejudice, intolerance, and war" to the furthering of "understanding, tolerance, and peace." The problem is to discover the reasons for this diversity, and the degree to which it is influenced by other belief systems such as those associated with politics or nationalism. This is particularly so when religious teachings are open to conflicting interpretations. The question for research then arises, why do individuals favour one interpretation over another? What factors are in play when choices are made? McIntosh (1995) argues that religious meaning systems are a lens through which individuals perceive and interpret reality, which prompts us to ask to what extent do nonreligious belief systems influence these systems and perhaps cloud the lens? An authoritarian political system may influence adherents to favour religious interpretations that divide men and women into the righteous who deserve reward and the sinful who merit punishment, which then justifies persecution on the grounds that the destruction of dissenting groups and nations is obedience to the will of God.

Silberman makes clear in several publications that religious meaning systems have a marked ability to integrate social groups, and that once integration takes place groups adhere to their systems in the conviction that they constitute unquestionable truths (e.g., Silberman, 2005a, 2005b). This is particularly true of systems associated with charismatic leaders who convince through force of personality rather than through spiritual qualities. The result can lead to sects that further bind their members together by insisting independence is surrendered through the forfeit of money and personal property and an embargo upon leaving the group or marrying without the permission of the group leader. In long-established monastic traditions the rights of the individual are protected by canon law, but sect leaders typically are responsible only to themselves, and the potential damage of their behavior, reinforced by indoctrination and the promotion of guilt, is all too obvious.

Religion and Individual Psychology

Research summarized by Koenig, McCullough, and Larsen in their excellent *Handbook of Religion and Health* (2001) shows that regular churchgoing and religious belief

convey significant health benefits. For example, one 21-year longitudinal study in the USA found that church attendance once a week or more is associated with a 25 to 33% reduction in mortality when compared with non-churchgoers, even when the benefits of belonging to organized social groups, of not smoking, and of leading a relatively healthy lifestyle are taken into account. An 18-year longitudinal study of 21,204 adults in the USA produced similar findings, and showed the average age at death of regular church-goers to be 81.9 years as against 75.3 years for non-churchgoers. Some degree of health benefits exists even for those non-churchgoers with religious beliefs who follow practices such as meditation, prayer, or Bible study. Research also shows that churchgoers and those with religious beliefs adapt significantly better to illness than nonbelievers, seemingly because they accept that illness carries meaning and is associated with God's purpose. Some studies even reveal a 14% better survival rate for churchgoers than nonbelievers when faced by life-threatening conditions, particularly if the religious beliefs of the former are intrinsic rather than extrinsic on the I-E religious orientation scale discussed later. Whether this is an example of the mind-body connection or of spiritual healing, it suggests that religion is not just a set of dogmas but a matter of life-enhancing conviction. Research also shows that regular churchgoing and religious coping (see Pargament, Ano, and Wachholtz, 2005) are also helpful for psychological problems such as anxiety and depression (see also Koenig et al., 1993), for parents coping with bereavement (Maton, 1989), and even for dealing with the stress of kidney transplant surgery (Tix and Frazier, 1998).

Religion as Inner Experience

Can psychology probe more deeply into subjective experience to determine why religion can be life-enhancing? Psychologists' suspicion of subjectivity leads many to doubt that it can. Scharf (2000) comments that all research attempts into inner religious experience are "destined to remain well-meaning squirms that get us nowhere." In his view it is "ill-conceived to construe the object of the study of religion to be the inner experience of religious practitioners" because "any assertion to the effect that someone else's inner experience bears some significance for *my* construal of reality is situated, by its very nature, in the public realm of contested meanings." Scharf is correct in that someone else's inner experience may be very different from mine, even though the two experiences are described in similar language, but this is also true for the study of behavior—two sets of behavior may appear the same, yet the motivation behind each set may be quite different. In any case, the sharing of experience through language is part of the commerce of social life and indeed of psychotherapy and psychological counseling. If psychology ignores this fact, it forfeits any claim to being inclusive. And even though inner experience is not susceptible to empirical verification this does not necessarily disqualify it from exploration by reliable research. Such research can, for example, seek comparisons between the reported inner experiences arising from spiritual practices such as meditation, an approach encouraged in transpersonal psychology (now a Section of the British Psychological Society). Results reveal a striking similarity of higher stages of

spiritual development between advanced meditators across individuals and cultures irrespective of the traditions to which they belong (Wilber, 1998). Recently so-called “Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction” (MBSR), a technique that seeks to make ancient meditation practices more broadly available, has shown that even brief training enhances stress-reduction, relaxation, pain management, and locus of control (e.g., Shapiro, Schwartz, and Bonner, 1998; also see Goldin 2001 for a survey), in addition to producing effects on left-sided brain activation and immune function (Davidson et al., 2003). It is possible to debate whether a religious practice such as meditation loses its spiritual connotations if taught in a secular context, or whether, irrespective of context, it retains spiritual as well as psychological effects, but it is pertinent to remember that all major meditation practices originated within religious traditions. However, embedding the practice in an overtly religious context does seem to enhance benefits. A comparison between mantra meditation using a spiritual mantra (“God loves me”) with that using a secular mantra (“I am loved”) showed the former to be associated with greater anxiety reduction, spiritual health and resistance to pain (Wachholtz and Pargament, 2005). Sceptics might argue that the former mantra is more successful because it is more personal and self-suggestive and thus constitutes a more positive affirmation, but those using it might disagree.

Further attempts to explore the influence of inner spiritual experience investigate its influence upon consequent behavior. For example, Ring’s findings (1984) indicate that those reporting Near Death Experiences (which typically involve subjective impressions of spiritual realities and survival of physical death) subsequently show positive long-term changes in value systems, life goals, career orientation, social relationships, and spiritual inclinations. For present purposes it is unnecessary to debate whether or not Near Death Experiences (NDEs) really inform us about survival of clinical death (see, e.g., Fenwick and Fenwick, 1995 for a discussion of the relevant medical factors); the point is that individuals who report these experiences declare themselves convinced of their spiritual nature.

Studies yielding information on the relationship between spiritual experiences and changes in observable behavior are potentially reliable ways of assessing the comparative psychological importance of these experiences and their intellectual and emotional impact. Sudden conversion experiences provide further examples of spiritual transformations that prompt long-term changes in behavior. The literature on saints in all traditions provides numerous instances of how these experiences lead to profound reorientations of career and life goals, of personal relationships, and of concepts of reality and ultimate meaning. Furthermore, research suggests such experiences are not exclusive to saints, and that mid-level personality functions such as purposes, attitudes and values may also change among lay people, together with global-level aspects of personality such as self-definition and identity (Paloutzian, Richardson, & Rambo, 1999). However, core personality traits such as the Big Five seem unaffected (though perhaps this was not so for saints such as Saint Augustine, St. Francis, and St. Paul), though they may be expressed and directed in new ways.

Many attempts to explain the genesis of conversion experiences have been made by reference to psychological factors such as the impulse towards socialization, the search for meaning, the resolution of inner conflicts, and the satisfaction of needs for power and for self-transcendence (Paloutzian, 1996; Rambo, 1993; Levenson,

Jennings, Aldwin, & Shiraishi, 2005). Valuable as these attempts are, they do not shed much light on how conversion experiences actually seem to those who have them. The closest we have come to knowing more about these experiences is through the autobiographies of saints and through the accounts of first-hand religious experiences amassed by research centres such as the Princeton University Center for the Study of Religion in the USA and the Religious Experience Research Centre in the UK. Such accounts allow identification of the context in which religious experiences most frequently occur, and this context appears in fact to be similar in the USA and the UK. Contrary to sociological interpretations of religious experiences, the great majority of these experiences take place in solitude or silence rather than in religious gatherings. Approximately half occur in times of distress, while around a third happen spontaneously and for no obvious reason (e.g., Hay 1987, 2006). Again, contrary to attempts to associate spiritual experiences with the superstitious and unlettered, the findings show they appear most common among the well-educated and the middle classes. The natural world and spiritual practices such as meditation and prayer seem associated with religious experience, and the experience seems most frequently to take the form of a sense of presence (usually of God though sometimes of deceased loved ones or of an unnamed power). In the great majority of cases the experience is interpreted positively, and is seen as confirming religious belief.

Mystical Experience

Mystical experiences are at face value the most profound of all religious experiences, and consequently have attracted research attention. One problem is the definition of mystical experience, and it is disappointing that psychologists have made little use of the vast literature on mysticism presenting the reported experiences of Western mystics such as St. Teresa of Avila, Mother Julian of Norwich, St. John of the Cross, Jacob Boehm, and John Ruysbroeck, or of Eastern mystics such as Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda, Sri Ramana Marshi, and Paramahansa Yogananda. Cox (1983), following on from Stace (1960), in a wide-ranging survey of Western mystical experience, considers that all contain an awareness of God that carries with it the “unitive acquisition of knowledge inaccessible to rational understanding,” while despite the fact that Eastern mystics typically use terms such as “absolute reality,” “emptiness,” or “essential nature” in place of the word God, their experiences remain essentially similar to those in the West. In both Western and Eastern mysticism these experiences take two identifiable forms: transcendent mysticism in which God/absolute reality is perceived as being outside oneself, and immanent mysticism in which this reality is sensed as pervading and unifying all things. In the Hindu literature these two forms are described respectively as *savikalpa samadhi* and *nirvikalpa samadhi*, that is, as becoming one with the divine or as contemplating the divine (“becoming the sugar” or “tasting the sugar,” in Sri Ramakrishna’s words; see Fontana, 2003).

Factor analytic studies by Hood of mystical experiences have essentially confirmed these two forms, and augmented them with an *interpretive* factor that identifies differences between theistic and nontheistic attempts to put mystical experience into words (Hood, 2002). However, other psychologists of religion have tended to use

the term “mysticism” for less exalted states than the core experiences of immanence or transcendence. Greeley (1975) considers that feelings of profound peace, the certainty that all is well, the conviction that love is central to all things, the assurance of personal survival, and the sense that everything has life are also mystical experiences, while Hardy (1987) lists in addition visions, bright lights, voices, transformation of the surroundings, and feelings of awe and reverence. Drawing upon sources such as these, Hood (1995) developed a 32-item scale to measure the incidence of less exalted mystical experience in appropriate samples of the population, and some subsequent studies put this incidence as high as one third, with positive responses most apparent in subjects whose religion emerges as intrinsic on the I–E scale described below.

This broadening of the meaning of mysticism risks blurring the distinction between less transcendent states and the profound experiences reported by the great mystics of West and East. This matters only if we are interested in what it is about religion that can produce the extraordinary “turning around in the deepest seat of consciousness” of which mystics speak, and if we are interested in what is meant in psychological terms by the states of “enlightenment,” “samadhi,” and “satori,” associated with mystical experiences in the Eastern traditions. It is said that spiritual teachers who are themselves “enlightened” can recognize these states in their pupils when they occur, and major questions remain as to what guides this recognition, since the answers might provide searching insights into the essential core of mystical experience.

Assessing Individual Differences in Religious Orientation

The empirical study of religion by psychologists has made use of interviews and scales/questionnaires such as that of Hood (1995), mentioned above. Despite their obvious limitations (Do they ask the right questions? Can we place reliance upon the replies?) scales and questionnaires facilitate large-sample research and help focus the minds of respondents upon the areas of interest to researchers. One of the most widely used scales and one that has proved effective in identifying dimensions relevant to the individual’s religiosity and to the concerns of psychologists is the I–E (Intrinsic–Extrinsic) religious orientation scale first assembled by Gordon six decades ago and further developed by Gorsuch and McPherson (1989). Hill and Hood (1999) review 11 attempts to design similar scales aimed at measuring qualitative differences in religious motivation, and, in spite of criticism by Kirkpatrick and Hood (1990) that the I–E concept is “theoretically impoverished and has really taught us little about the psychology of religion,” it has helped throw light upon the relationship between religious orientation and such things as physical health, transcendent experiences, psychological health, coping ability, tolerance, and socially appropriate behavior (Donahue 1985, Donahue and Nielsen 2005).

An additional scale often used alongside the I–E dimensions seeks to measure “Q”, a dimension of “Quest” or “Seeking,” thought to represent the strength of an individual’s religious seeking and development (Batson, Schoentade, & Ventis, 1993), and there is no shortage of additional measures (Hill, 2005 lists no fewer than 46 such scales) specifically designed to measure aspects of the psychology of religion and

spirituality. However, valuable as these scales are, they tend to treat scores on the variables concerned as if they are analogous to static traits, whereas religious belief and experience can be labile, and in some cases more akin to state-based than to trait-based qualities. Much of this lability can be due to transitory disappointment at one's own behavior and at one's sense of spiritual adequacy, and to doubts over one's relationship with God. Religion relates not only to the spirit and the intellect but to the emotions and the senses, and short-term emotional and sensory variations can influence the strength of religious feelings. Furthermore, the religious impulse can lie fallow for a period before abruptly finding renewed energy. In addition, rating scales still do not provide access to what it really means to the individual to be religious. Ideally, we need to identify the concepts (or experiences) of God that underlie religious orientation. One person's intrinsic orientation may be toward a God of peace and love while that of another may be towards a God of anger and conquest. The first orientation may lead to sainthood, the second to terrorism. Part of the answer may be to allow religious people to speak for themselves through more in-depth interviews and autobiographical writings. Unfortunately, such work is time-intensive, which is why, as in other areas of psychology, religious research is predominantly nomothetic rather than idiographic, and thus reflects the researcher's perspective rather than that of the subject.

What of the Future?

The advances made in the psychology of religion over the last three decades are encouraging for all those interested in the subject. Researchers responsible for these advances have made various suggestions as to the direction in which the subject can go, and these are fully discussed in Wulff, 1997 and Paloutzian and Park, 2005. However, two somewhat neglected areas also warrant emphasis. The first is the way in which religion is practiced. The form of this practice varies widely in response to the individual's beliefs, to the religious and cultural tradition to which he or she belongs, and to personal cognitive and affective variables. Research is needed to identify the psychological consequence of these different practices. The most enduring—and potentially helpful—way of categorizing these practices dates back to early Hindu scriptures such as the Bhagavad Gita (5th Century BCE/1st Century CE). Essentially, it offers five different mutually supportive paths through which the devotee approaches God or the Absolute. These five paths, known as *yogas* (see Aurobindo, 1957 and Ghose, 1970), are known respectively as *hatha*, *karma*, *bhakti*, *gnana*, and *raja*. Hatha reflects the belief that through aesthetic practices and physical self-denial one can turn away from the material world and transmute physical energies into spiritual; karma that in serving others one is serving the Divine and surrendering the self; bhakti that through devotion and the immersion of the self in love and worship of the Divine one draws closer to the source; gnana that prayer and sacred studies facilitate the development of intuitive spiritual wisdom; and raja that meditation and the stilling of mental distractions enable the devotee to see into the true nature of the self and recognize its unity with the Divine (see Fontana, 2003, for more detail).

All five of these yogas include practices that can be either esoteric or exoteric, the former representing hidden and complex teachings and the latter those more accessible and readily understood. Collectively, the yogas demonstrate the recognition that religion is a tension in unity between doctrine, liturgy, and mysticism, and that the choices made as to practice are partly determined by the individual's cognitive and affective variables, as well as cultural conditioning and personal religious experience. If psychologists of religion wish to understand how individuals view and experience their religion, and to learn more about the many factors that influence their beliefs and behavior, it is important to recognize that although all traditions share a common core, religion cannot be treated for psychological purposes as a unitary phenomenon. Furthermore, it cannot be studied solely from the outside, in the way of many other social psychological phenomena. For a proper understanding the processes involved must also be studied if possible from the inside so that the researcher can assess how religion determines the way the individual lives life and views the nature of self and others.

The second rather neglected area concerns what believers in different traditions mean when they speak of the Divine. For example, the Hindu, although accepting many manifestations of the Divine, regards the Absolute (Brahman) as ineffable, and approachable only through the realization that the Atman, the indwelling spirit in man, is one with Brahman and returns to Brahman after many lifetimes. The various schools of Buddhism make no mention of a Divine Creator, and regard the Absolute, or Nirvana, as a state into which the enlightened being passes after death rather than as a being to be worshiped. Christianity worships a personal God, symbolized as a Heavenly Father, who knows and is known to worshipers. Among the many consequences of these different concepts is the Eastern view that all created things are one, and the Western view that all things have their individual relationship with God. In the East, individuality is therefore something to be transcended, while in the West it is something to be purified and sanctified. The psychological and cultural implications of these different views are too obvious to need emphasizing. Yet the psychology of religion has not fully engaged with them and acknowledged that even within each religious tradition there is a range of concepts of the Divine. Many years ago I carried out research into student teachers' concepts of God and was surprised to find an almost complete lack of any consensus, even though all sample members were Westerners and most professed a belief in God. Equal cause for surprise is that, many years later, the otherwise excellent *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* (Paloutzian & Park, 2005) includes no reference to God in the index. Unless we know how people see God or their gods, we cannot expect to make real sense of their religion.

Equally surprisingly, the *Handbook* has no entry for the afterlife. Yet unless we have some knowledge of how religious believers conceptualize a possible life after death, we cannot fully understand how they conceptualize the present lifetime. Eastern religions and many New Age spiritual groups teach the existence of rebirth/reincarnation, which the Christian church ruled against at the Council of Constantinople (553 CE), and which Judaism has never accepted as part of orthodox belief. Obviously, the notion that we are reborn on earth lifetime after lifetime until we reach enlightenment and leave the cycle of birth and death produces a different

attitude to earthly life from the belief we have only one lifetime, and that our conduct during it determines our destiny in the afterlife. The two beliefs can lead to divergent attitudes toward ourselves and toward others, since reincarnation can imply everyone is responsible for personal misfortunes in the present life. Reincarnation also indicates that the consequences of each lifetime are carried into the next, and that the present life is largely determined by past incarnations rather than by current endeavors and opportunities.

There are other important areas of the psychology of religion that merit more extensive future attention. These include the influence of prayer and the study of sacred literature, the presence of intimations of immortality, the influence of religious art and architecture, and that of pilgrimage and sacred rituals such as initiation, baptism, the Eucharist, and ordination. The different forms of liturgy also deserve attention. For example, in Christianity corporate worship is very different for the Roman Catholic and for the Quaker, and we need to know why some individuals are drawn to the one and some to the other (Prince Vladimir of Kiev is said to have favoured Orthodoxy in preference to Roman Catholicism for the Russian state church because of his preference for the music and ceremonies of the former). And there are major differences in doctrine within each tradition that are also worthy of study. The various schools of Buddhism and of Hinduism are so diverse that they could almost be regarded as different faiths. Within Christianity the doctrinal divergences between for example Anglicans and Unitarians are such that it is sometimes difficult to identify their common ground. Even within Christian denominations there are important differences—High Anglicans versus Evangelical Anglicans, Methodists versus Primitive Methodists, Strict Baptists versus Free Church Baptists, and so on.

Finally, there is also a need for increased focus on non-Christian religions such as Islam, Judaism, and Hinduism. What, for example, is the influence of the great religious festivals upon the Hindu, of Ramadan upon the spiritual life of the Moslem, of lengthy solitary retreats upon the Buddhist? What is the consequence for the Jew of the strict observance of the Sabbath? What is the consequence of the direct wordless transmission of spiritual realities said in Hinduism and Buddhism to take place between teacher and pupil? Overall it is important to emphasize that the consequences of religious beliefs and experience in all traditions for human behavior, motivation, and attitudes are very much part of the domain not only of the psychology of religion but of psychology generally. Only when this is fully recognized will the psychology of religion take its rightful place as a leading force within 21st-century scholarship.

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