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# Concepts and Approaches

Any book on psychology and religion needs to begin by considering what is meant by "religion" and by "psychology." As it is intended that this book should give more attention than most comparable books to conceptual issues, it is especially important to consider these two key terms. Neither is straightforward. Having done that, we will need to consider ways of bringing them into relation with each other.

## What Is Religion?

The concept of "religion" has changed massively over the centuries, and it is really only since the latter part of the nineteenth century that having a religion has come to refer to the extent to which someone adheres to a faith tradition, and to be contrasted with non-religion. Before that, someone's religion (*religio*) might have been his or her pattern or rule of life. "Religion" is used in this book as a shorthand for "religiosity" or "religiousness" and is contrasted with non-religion.

"Religion" has had slightly different meanings in different cultures and historical periods. In most countries, Christianity is an elective religion, that is, people opt in or out of it. The same is probably true of Western Buddhism. However, most other religions are closely intertwined with cultural identity (rather in the way that being Protestant or Catholic in Ireland is intertwined with cultural identity). To be Jewish, for example, is as much a matter of cultural or racial identity as of what is now thought of as "religion."

"Religion" also has different connotations in a culture in which everyone is religious, from one in which religion is contrasted with non-religion. The psychological study of religion has largely been carried on in the latter

kind of culture, and so the psychology of religion is largely concerned with different aspects of religiousness or "religiosity."

Though there are many religious traditions around the world, religion has been most extensively studied from a psychological point of view in the United States and in Europe, where Christianity predominates. It has to be admitted that, so far, the so-called psychology of religion is largely the study of American and European Christianity, and mainly Protestant Christianity. There is no reason in principle why it should be limited in that way. In fact, it would greatly enrich the psychology of religion if it included more cross-cultural psychology of religion, and there are promising trends in that direction.

One of the main problems facing the psychology of religion is that religion is multi-faceted. Adherence to a religion is now generally recognized to be complex, in that a person can be religious in one way but not in another. For example, someone might be a believer but not a religious practitioner. Of course, empirically, there tend to be correlations between different aspects of religion, but it is nevertheless true that different people are religious in different ways. Psychology has perhaps been too ready to assume that religiousness is unitary. It is part of a general problem of psychology being over-impressed with the explanatory power of traits. We constantly need to be reminded of just how different people can be in different situations. It is also important to remember just how different religious people can be from one another. Under some circumstances, the different aspects of religion can become unusually dissociated, as may happen, for example, in some patients with neurological disorders.

So, how does religion subdivide? The most important distinctions are probably between experience (or feeling), practice (or behavior), and belief (or thinking). As a general framework for understanding how humans function, it is not specific to religion and goes back to Aristotle. Some such threefold categorization arises in many areas of psychology; it applies equally to morality, for example.

This threefold distinction has been made in varying terminologies and is the most commonly used framework in books on the psychology of religion (e.g., Loewenthal, 2000). It features in what is probably the most widely used such scheme, developed by Glock and Stark (1965), which distinguishes (among other things) between what they called the ritualistic dimension (i.e., religious practices), the ideological adherence (i.e., adherence to religious beliefs), and the experiential dimension (i.e., religious feelings and experiences). Chapters 5–7 of this book will consider, in turn, religious experience, practices, and beliefs.

I think this conceptual framework is more helpful than one that is currently fashionable in the sociology of religion, between "believing, belonging, and behaving" (sometimes "becoming" is added too). The main deficiency is that this scheme leaves out religious experience; any conceptual framework that has no place for that is clearly inadequate. (I am not saying that experience is especially important, just that it ought to be included.) There is also a problem in distinguishing between belonging and behaving, as belonging is largely manifest through behavior.

An important recent issue has been whether and in what sense "spirituality" extends beyond religion, and what the relationship is between spirituality and religion. Spirituality is notoriously difficult to define and, despite considerable effort, there is a lack of agreement about what spirituality is and how psychology should study it. One problem is that spirituality, like religion, is multi-faceted.

Some circles tend to regard one of these aspects of religion as foundational, and the others as derivative. William James, in his *Varieties of Religious Experience* (James, 2012/1902), regarded experience as primary, and the organizational and doctrinal aspects of religion as secondary. It is a view for which he has been much criticized, because it is over-individualistic and neglects influences in the other direction, that is, social and doctrinal influences on experience. In contrast, some sociological thought regards society, language, and culture as primary. Yet again, the current atheist critique of religion tends to focus on religious belief as the root of the religious problem, and to regard that as primary.

All of these views are, in different ways, "foundationalist" in that they take one aspect of religion as foundational. I suggest that no single aspect of religion should be regarded as foundational to the others, and that there are mutual influences between all three of these facets of religion – each one influences the others in a systemic pattern of interrelationships. Psychology can make a contribution to understanding each of them.

The relative importance of different aspects of religion can change over time. The psychology of religion has a long tradition of distinguishing between different "conversion types." People can have different entry points into religion; experience, practice, and belief can all, in principle, be the point of entry to religion. In principle, intellectual conversions can arise from extensive exploration, though it is generally agreed that these are relatively rare. Mystical conversions can arise from a sudden, powerful religious experience, but they are also probably not very common. What might be called "affectional" conversions can arise from the experience of being loved by members of a religious community.

The most common point of entry to religion is probably "belonging," that is, becoming part of a religious community, though there can be exceptions. Whichever aspect of religion is the initial draw and point of entry, there will be a tendency for other aspects of religion to be added. For example, those whose first contact with religion is through social contacts and public religious practices are likely to develop religious beliefs and private religious practices too.

Another important distinction is between relatively social and relatively individual aspects of religion. It seems that religion often starts social, though again there can be exceptions. It sometimes seems that the sociology and psychology of religion are locked in an ideological clash about the relative importance of society and the individual. I suggest that is unhelpful. Social and individual aspects of religion influence each other. They are both interesting and important, and psychology studies both. It is worth dispelling the idea that psychology only studies the individual. Psychology includes social psychology and can focus on social processes. The distinction between social and individual aspects of religion is perhaps clearest for religious practices, and it is something to which we will return in Chapter 6.

Some facets of religion occur more frequently than others, and I suggest that distinction between frequent and infrequent aspects of religion may also be quite important. There seems to be a tendency for the more common aspects of religion to be rather general, and for the less frequently occurring forms of religion to be more specific. That is seen most clearly with religious belief. The most common form of religious belief is to "believe in God" or, even more generally, to think that at least there is "something more" than the natural world. Fewer people hold religious beliefs that are defined in more specific terms, such as belief in the virgin birth of Jesus.

A significant development in the psychology of religion has been the study of non-religion. From the point of view of those who see non-religion as the obvious, rational default position, there may not be much need to study it psychologically. However, the psychological study of religion and non-religion makes no presuppositions about the truth of either. Both religion and non-religion are worthy of psychological study, regardless of assumptions about their validity.

## What Is Psychology?

Let us now turn to psychology. There has long been interest in matters that we would now call "psychological," mainly under the auspices of either philosophy or religion. However, psychology only emerged as an

independent discipline in the late nineteenth century. It has generally endeavored to be "scientific," though that term has been understood in different ways at different times.

The psychology of religion has had a fluctuating position within this new discipline of psychology. (For a good overview of the history of psychology of religion, see Paloutzian, 1996). It was an important part of psychological theory and research in the early decades of the discipline, and William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* is the classic of that period. By c. 1925, psychology generally was moving into a more behaviorist period, with much less interest in the psychological study of religion (though psychoanalytic approaches to religion continued to be influential with the general public in the middle of the twentieth century, even if they had little impact in academic psychology).

By c. 1970, interest in the psychological study of religion had revived, and an impressive volume of research has accumulated in recent decades that sheds interesting light on almost every aspect of religion. However, this revived psychology of religion has had its limitations. It has never regained a position of importance within psychology as a whole. It has also tended to be rather atheoretical, and to concentrate on collecting detailed information rather than answering big questions.

Psychology is, in part, a human science seeking reasons and interpretations, but it is also a natural science seeking causal explanations. This raises the fundamental issue of how best to understand people; that question arises whether the focus is on their religion or anything else. Experimental psychology has aspired to be a natural science and has tried to apply to people the same scientific approach as would be used with anything else, looking for the "laws" or universal processes that will enable us to understand why humans function in the way they do.

An alternative approach (e.g., Harré and Secord, 1972), albeit a minority one, has suggested that a different explanatory style is needed for people than is appropriate in the natural sciences. The claim is that people have intentions that govern their actions, and indeed that how we describe actions often implicitly includes assumptions about intentions. The task in understanding the actions of people is to understand their reasons for their actions, rather than the causes of their observable behavior. It takes a first-person rather than a third-person approach to understanding people. People's accounts of why they acted as they did are highly relevant, if not the last word.

This debate has sometimes been very fierce, but my approach to it is peaceable. I see value in both approaches and do not want to discard

either, but I also see limitations in both approaches. Each can be enriched by taking the other into account, and each benefits from checking its claims against those of the other. Applying this to religion, I suggest that what religious people have to say about their religious life (i.e., why they do what they do, and how they experience it) is far too rich and interesting to be ignored. However, given the limitations of human awareness, and given the extraordinary human capacity for self-deception, augmenting it with the more rigorous, albeit restricted, approach of the natural sciences has great benefits, as far as that is possible. A psychology of religion that takes this binocular approach will have more to offer than a monocular approach based solely on either the natural or human sciences.

It is important to distinguish two very different enterprises in the psychology of religion. One is concerned with why humans in general tend to be religious, with what makes humans the religious primate. The other is concerned with differences between people, with why some people are religious and others are not, and with why religion takes different forms in different people.

The question of why humans tend to be religious has probably had particular urgency and fascination for psychologists who are not themselves religious, and who find religion deeply puzzling. Why should so many people be engaged in something that seems to them to be so manifestly false? Answers to that question fall into three groups. First is a sociological answer, which falls outside the scope of this book. For Durkheim, for example, religion provided society with the symbolic language by which society could understand itself. A second set of answers has focused on what religion does for the individual. Freud, for example, in *The Future of an Illusion* (Freud, 1961/1927) argued that religion assuages the sense of helplessness that people would otherwise feel by providing them with belief in an all-loving and all-powerful God. We will return to that in the next chapter. Both of those explanations have focused on the social or personal benefits that religion may confirm, despite religion being presumed to be false.

The third approach to explaining why humans are religious has taken a different tack and has suggested that religion is an inevitable by-product of how humans have evolved. The idea is basically that we are religious because our brains are "hardwired" in such a way that religion comes naturally to us. As we will see, a minority position holds that religion has evolved because it has adaptive value, but most people think that it is a by-product of other evolutionary developments. We will return to that in Chapter 3.

It is important to emphasize that psychology is a multi-faceted discipline that holds together various perspectives and methodologies. It is really a family of disciplines, each with its own subject matter, questions, and methodology. In principle, almost every subdiscipline of psychology can be used to study religion from its own distinctive perspective, though some of these psychologies of religion are much better developed than others. Many are covered in this book, and it will be helpful now to introduce briefly some of these subdisciplines.

Psychoanalysis is rather on the fringe of psychology and is in fact largely ignored in academic departments of psychology. That is largely because there is widespread doubt about whether psychoanalysis is sufficiently scientific to be admitted to mainstream psychology. On the skeptical view, there is so much speculation in psychoanalysis, mixed in with whatever empirical element there may be, that it is thought to be wholly unreliable. Another complication when psychoanalysis is applied to religion is Freud's own personal hostility to religion, though it has become increasingly clear that psychoanalysis does not need to share Freud's own negative view of religion. Though the psychoanalysis of religion needs to be handled with care and can never be accepted uncritically, it has a depth and range that are not easily matched by other approaches to the psychology of religion and, in my view, should not be ignored.

The biological wing of psychology has come into prominence in recent decades, and both evolutionary psychology and neuropsychology have made significant contributions to understanding religion. Relating psychological functioning to brain processes has proved enormously fruitful in many areas of psychology, especially in understanding cognitive processes such as memory. It has also proved useful in the study of religion, though it has sometimes been associated with the simplistic idea that once you know which areas of the brain are involved in particular aspects of religion, you have explained religion away completely.

It has undoubtedly proved useful to place religion in an evolutionary context, and to try to understand how and why humans became religious. The problem with evolutionary psychology, as we will see in Chapter 3, is that it has limited evolutionary data to work with. That leaves the way open for rather speculative evolutionary theories to be presented in an overdogmatic way, and for what are really only presuppositions to be presented as research findings. One thing that the three areas of psychology we have considered so far (psychoanalysis, evolutionary psychology, and neuropsychology) have in common is that, when applied to religion, they have tried to answer the most general question – why are humans religious?

The question of why humanity is religious is intriguing and currently the focus of much controversy, but it is also a frustratingly general question. It glosses over important details in significant ways. First, it neglects differences between people. People differ in how religious they are, and those who are religious differ massively in what form that religiousness takes. The psychology of religion tries to understand how those differences between people arise.

Psychology is partly concerned with the psychological processes that normal, healthy humans have in common, but it is also concerned with how people differ and with why some people do one thing and some another. A well-established approach to psychology, and one that has been extensively applied to religion, is concerned with "individual differences." It is an approach to psychology that has made extensive use of the psychological questionnaire as a research tool, and a huge number of such questionnaires are now available in the psychology of religion. Some provide general, overall measures of religiousness; others focus down on particular aspects of religion. I will suggest in Chapter 9 that it has proved more fruitful to look at why different kinds of people are religious in different ways than to look at why some people are religious and others not.

Another important strand in psychology has been to focus on developmental processes, with how people change over time. It has certainly been fruitful to chart how children change in their religiousness as they grow up. In some areas of religion, particularly the ability to understand religious ideas, that seems to follow a standard path, and to reflect maturational development. Other aspects of religion change in a less predictable way through childhood, and the same is true of changes of religiousness in adults. It is less clear that such changes should be regarded as "development" in a strict sense of the term. Another strand in developmental psychology has tried to use aspects of people's childhood to predict how they function as adults. Some fruitful research of that kind has occurred recently, using childhood patterns of attachment to predict what form religion will take in adulthood (Granqvist and Kirkpatrick, 2008).

A prominent strand of psychology has been concerned with problems or abnormalities and their treatment. The main focus has been on mental and physical health, but a wide range of personal and behavioral abnormalities can also be considered. Psychological factors have been found to play an important role in many personal problems and disorders, and an interesting strand of the psychology of religion is concerned with the role

of religion, for example, with how religion helps people cope with problems.

This is not an exhaustive list of the range of subdisciplines within psychology, but it covers the main ones and gives an indication of the scope of psychology.

## Relating Psychology and Religion

The final issue to be considered in this chapter is how psychology in general and the psychology of religion in particular relate to religious life and commitment. This can be seen as a special case of the more general question of the relationship between science and religion, about which there is much controversy.

It is best to begin with the question of whether psychology explains religion so completely that it explains it away and leaves no room for any other kind of explanation in terms of God or the spiritual world. Note first that it is only some aspects of the psychology of religion that are offering sufficiently general explanations of religion that they could possibly be seen as explaining it away; those are the areas of psychology to be considered in the next three chapters, psychoanalysis, evolutionary psychology, and neuropsychology and the cognitive science of religion.

I will argue that none of these can be assumed to offer *complete* explanations of religion. That can only be asserted if it can be shown that no other explanatory factors could possibly be relevant. In fact, of course, that is never the case, and it is hard to see how it could possibly be proved. What can sometimes be claimed is that the psychology of religion provides a sufficient explanation of religious life, so that it is unnecessary to invoke other factors to make sense of it. However, that leaves open whether non-psychological factors are relevant. In the nature of things, it is not something that psychology can settle. I see no basis for claiming that psychology can explain religion completely, or explain it away, in a fashion that leaves no room for any distinctively religious factors.

Another argument is sometimes advanced here, based on the assumption that simple explanations are always to be preferred. If psychology provides an adequate explanation of religion, it is argued that it is simplest and therefore best to accept that, and not to invoke any other explanatory factors to do with God. I would suggest, in response, that whether simple explanations are to be preferred depends on context. In physics, the search for simple and elegant explanations seems a guide to the truth. However, most things to do with humans

seem to have multiple causes (e.g., both biological and social ones), so I see no general case for claiming that simple, mono-causal explanations, such as psychological explanations of religion, are always to be preferred.

However, that leaves many questions about how to bring psychological explanations of religion into relationship with the accounts given of religion by religious adherents. If we are willing to consider both kinds of accounts, what is the relationship between them? In most books on the psychology of religion, "religion" is treated just as a phenomenon to be studied. However, it also itself offers an interpretative perspective, that is, a religious perspective on religious phenomena can be brought into dialogue with the perspective of psychology.

Psychology offers an explanation of religion from an outsider's perspective, but it can also contribute to religious interpretation from the inside, interpreting the psychological significance of the scriptural texts and doctrinal beliefs. This interpretative role has been relatively neglected. This book will also give more attention than usual to the to-and-fro between the outsider's perspective of the psychologist and the insider's perspective of the faith community.

Some might say that though psychology cannot rule religious accounts out, psychological and religious accounts are answering such completely different questions that no useful engagement between them is possible. That would be the counterpart of the position, argued more generally for science by Stephen Jay Gould, that science and religion are "non-overlapping magisteria" (Gould, 2002).

Against that view, I want to maintain that there can be fruitful contact between psychology and the perspective of religious people themselves. I claimed earlier in this chapter that it is helpful to consider both the kind of external causal explanations that the natural sciences try to offer and the first-person accounts in terms of reasons and intentions that participants offer. In the case of religion, first-person accounts will normally come from people who are themselves religious and who see things in religious terms. Psychology is normally offering an outsider's perspective, whereas religious people are offering an insider's perspective. I suggest that these are best seen as complementary perspectives, not as mutually exclusive.

Most books on the psychology of religion make no mention of the insider's perspective of religious people themselves, though their perspective cannot be entirely excluded from the study of religious experience. I shall refer to how religious people see things, where that is relevant and