

Why the Psychology of Religion?

The Breadth and Scope of Religion

Years ago, when I first began to study psychology, the psychology of religion sounded to me like one of the dullest areas of the subject. It suggested dreary sermons, near-empty churches, and earnest individuals talking about their experiences of being “saved”. Over the years, I have come to realize how mistaken this view was. Religion has been one of the major formative influences upon human thought and behavior throughout the centuries. It has had a profound effect upon the lives of individuals, and upon groups and cultures. It has inspired some of the most noble acts of self-sacrifice and altruism. It has stimulated much of the world’s greatest architecture (including virtually all the monuments of the ancient world), and some of the finest sculpture, painting, and music. It has motivated men and women to develop moral and ethical systems, to philosophize on the nature of self and on the meaning and purpose of life, and to speculate on the destiny that awaits us beyond the grave. It has stimulated the development of techniques for altering consciousness such as meditation, contemplation, ritual, and prayer. It has been associated with mystical states that raise major questions as to the nature of mind, and it has provided countless millions with psychological comfort and solace and with a reason for living. It has been deemed important enough to provide a livelihood for more people than almost any other profession, and has spawned institutions that have become fabulously wealthy and gained political as well as spiritual power. It has, again through its institutions, been the inspirer and the guardian of learning and of scholarship, and has been a powerful force behind business, commerce, and economic development in all its forms, and its legacy to the world includes universities, schools, hospitals, and social welfare.

However, religion has also had a negative side, serving during various periods of history as an ultra-conservative and repressive influence upon scientific development and upon the freedom of thought and speech. It has led to social and cultural divisions, and been the excuse for some of the most barbaric wars in history. It has spawned excesses like the Inquisition, has led to the torture and execution of thousands, to the ruthless repression of whole systems of belief and, through attempts at proselytization, to the virtual extermination not only of many indigenous cultures but also of the innocent people to whom these cultures belonged. It has broken up families and relationships, disrupted lives and ruined careers across sectarian divides. On an individual level, it has led many people to suffer psychological hardship and damage, and been a source of needless guilt, fear, and anxiety. It has taught dogmatic ways of thinking and behaving, hindered many forms of educational development, led to rigid and punitive parental styles, justified social stratification of the most unfair and pernicious kind, led to unnatural and repressive attitudes toward the human body and sexual relations, and hindered creative expression in literature and in the visual and performing arts.

Religious traditions of thought and behavior thus undeniably provide the psychologist with a richness of material well nigh impossible to find in any other area of human activity. If this is not sufficient reason to study the psychology of religion, there are many other, highly contemporary ones. For example, the impact of religious fundamentalism upon the modern world, the growth of cults and supposed "New Age" thinking, the increasingly multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-faith nature of many Western societies including Britain, and the religious conflicts apparent in the Indian Sub-Continent, in the Middle East, in the Balkans, in Northern Ireland and in the Far East. Psychology is not in the business of answering questions posed by religion such as whether or not there is a God or gods, whether or not there is a soul and a life after death (though it has much to say about the nature of mind and human consciousness which impinges upon these questions). But it is in the business of explaining why people believe in such things. Do beliefs spring from coherent inner experiences and from a reasoned appraisal of religious teachings and texts, or from less considered sources such as the desire to conform to cultural and subgroup norms, and the need to seek protection against existential fear and uncertainty?

The psychologist is also interested in exploring whether or not religious belief is rendered irrational by the advances of modern science. Have these advances demonstrated conclusively that religious belief has no grounds for serious support? Science cannot prove that something does *not* exist, but under certain circumstances it is able to provide us with insights into the odds for and against such existence. If science

shows the odds against grounds for religious and spiritual belief are near overwhelming, this strengthens the notion that such belief is irrational. On the other hand, if science does not stack the odds against religion and spirituality too heavily, then charges of irrationality might be misplaced, and the psychologist can reasonably ask what light if any does the possible existence of the realities taught by religion throw upon our knowledge and understanding of the mind.

Why the Current Neglect of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality?

In spite of these extensive implications for human thought and behavior, the psychology of religion has not attracted the attention it deserves among mainstream psychologists. This does not mean that the subject has been neglected. The literature on the psychology of religion is vast (although there is much less on the psychology of spirituality). An extensive bibliography up to 1970 is given in Eysenck, Arnold, and Meili (1972), and more recent ones appear in Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle (1997) and in Wulff (1997). However, it remains on the periphery of modern psychology. Smart (1996) even considers that the subject is arguably less flourishing now than it was in the years following the birth of scientific psychology, and is relatively neglected when compared to many other areas of psychological investigation. For example, it currently merits no mention in most introductory psychology texts, even one as thorough and well respected as *Hilgard's Introduction to Psychology*. The question is sometimes asked (typically by undergraduate students who are more curious than their elders about such things) why should this be? Commenting upon this question, Houston Clark (1977) observes that "It is a paradox that [in view of the power of religion fundamentally to change lives] modern psychology should be so incurious about the dynamics involved and so neglectful of a force in human nature with the influence religion has for both good and evil in human personality and human history." Further on, he comments that mistakenly "the conventional psychologist still tends to observe [the psychology of religion] warily as a subject that he is not quite sure belongs in his field."

There are four main reasons – in addition to the misleadingly perceived dullness of the subject – for this misguided neglect of the psychology of religion and perhaps particularly of the psychology of spirituality.

1. We have already touched on the first reason, namely that religion and spirituality appear to be contrary to the teachings of science, and to the materialist–reductionist philosophy which arose from the scientific enlightenment of the seventeenth century and dominated

scientific thinking for much of the twentieth century. This philosophy is still seen by many academics and laypeople as the touchstone against which theories of reality must be judged. It dismisses many of the concepts of religion and spirituality as arising variously from superstition, wish fulfillment, and an outmoded and primitive worldview. Religion is seen as claiming the existence of a personal God not far removed from the image of an idealized parent, and spirituality as encouraging belief in a nonmaterial spirit and/or soul for which there is no scientific evidence. Both religion and spirituality, which are defined in due course below, are seen as accepting the survival of consciousness after physical death and as locating this survival in heavenly or purgatorial realms whose existence makes no rational sense. Moreover, they are seen as identified with a form of outmoded dualistic thinking which preaches that mind is separate from brain, and has more to do with an immaterial soul than with a physical body.

Critics argue in addition that the scriptures upon which much of religious doctrine relies is based upon myths, such as those in the Christian bible which claim among other things that the world was created by a divine intelligence in seven days and nights, that human life arose from a man and a woman made respectively from clay and a rib bone in the Garden of Eden, and that physical impossibilities such as raising the dead, walking on water, turning water into wine, and bodily resurrection are all possible for the divine will.

2. The second reason why the psychology of religion and spirituality has not attracted more scientific interest among mainstream psychologists is that not only does religion appear contrary to science, it has in the Western world at times actively opposed the progress of scientific thinking. A much-quoted example is the hostility the Catholic Church showed toward advances in astronomy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries made by Copernicus, Brahe, Galileo, Kepler, and others, an hostility based not upon reasoned argument but upon the charge that these advances contradicted orthodox religious doctrine. Even when Charles Darwin advanced his theory of evolution by natural selection in the nineteenth century, religion was still seen as opposed to free inquiry about the world and the place of humankind within it. Many scientists still retain the fear that such opposition may again become a reality if religion is allowed to reclaim power over hearts and minds. The intolerant behavior of fundamentalist religious sects in both Western and Eastern worlds, together with the dogmatic posturing of various religious cults, is not surprisingly seen as lending substance to this fear.
3. To work effectively, the psychologist of religion must have a knowledge not only of psychological theory and practice but also of

relevant areas of history, philosophy, theology, and the creative arts. We cannot hope to make sense of the psychology of religion by assuming that psychology is only something done by psychologists, and by seeking to abstract religion and spirituality from the complex matrix of disciplines and patterns of thought within which they are embedded. In these days of increasing specialization, where it is ever more difficult for the scientist to keep up with the exponential growth of knowledge in his or her own subject, few people have the time and energy to achieve more than a cursory acquaintance with the many disciplines essential to an understanding of religion.

In addition, as we discuss in due course, to operate effectively the psychologist of religion must penetrate the esoteric as well as the exoteric side of religion – which often necessitates first-hand acquaintance with certain of the practices used in esotericism, such as meditation and contemplation. Furthermore the psychology of religion requires an ability to tolerate ambiguity and contradiction within the material that is being studied, an openness to the many different ways in which humans express their inner lives and their search for direction and purpose in those lives, and a readiness to approach religion with the respect borne from a recognition of the depth of meaning and reverence with which it is associated by countless men and women from every culture and every walk of life.

4. The fourth reason for the relative neglect of the psychology of religion is that its study presents major methodological problems. Social psychology can investigate the behavior of religious groups and the influence of religious belief and behavior upon cultures and upon the individual, but religion and spirituality are very much more than social behavior. They have to do in large measure with that slippery domain called inner experience, a domain looked upon with great suspicion by many psychologists. The inner experience of others is not directly observable, and our knowledge of it therefore depends upon what they choose – or are able – to tell us about it. The accounts they give depend firstly upon their ability to observe their own mental processes accurately (i.e. to *introspect*), secondly upon their willingness to give a truthful account of this introspection, and thirdly upon their ability to put introspective experiences into adequate language (so important is introspection to the psychology of religion and spirituality that much of Chapter 3 will be devoted to it).

These various reasons – together with comments on the misunderstandings that sometimes surround them – will be touched upon at various points during the chapters that follow. They help to explain why the psychology of religion and spirituality has been neglected by mainstream psychology, but do not in themselves justify this neglect.