

Psychology of Religion

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Psychology of religion is the application of psychological research methods and theories to questions about the causes, consequences, and correlates of religious belief, behavior, identity, and experience. It shares questions with the anthropology and sociology of religion, but approaches these questions differently. Unlike anthropology of religion, it involves survey- and laboratory-based research rather than participant observation and ethnography. Unlike sociology of religion, it emphasizes the individual rather than the society. There is increasing recognition of the drawbacks of these disciplinary boundaries, which has led to more collaboration across the social and psychological sciences of religion.

Studies of religion as a human phenomenon predate psychology as an independent discipline, such as in Enlightenment natural histories of religion and Victorian comparative anthropology of religion. From its earliest days, psychology inherited this curiosity about religion from its intellectual forebears. Francis Galton, who pioneered psychometrics and correlational research, published studies on the effects of prayer on health, finding that neither praying nor being prayed for led to longevity. Wilhelm Wundt, credited as the founder of experimental psychology, dedicated three volumes of his *Völkerpsychologie* to the psychological processes underlying myth and religion. Wundt's proposed approach to studying religion was more akin to comparative and historical research than to his experimental methods, but his successors would soon combine these two parts of Wundt's thought. G. Stanley Hall – who studied with Wundt before receiving the first PhD in psychology in the United States (under William James [see JAMES, WILLIAM]) and later becoming the first president of the American Psychological Association – strongly encouraged his students to pursue such empirical research on religion. Among them were James Leuba and Edwin Starbuck, on whose survey data about mystical experiences and religious conversion James heavily relied in *Varieties of Religious Experience*. Leuba's manifesto for the field published in 1901 outlines a research program that still rings true today. He was, as the field is still now, concerned with the psychological causes of religiosity; its behavioral, affective, and cognitive manifestations; and its effects in and for the individual. At least in the United States, psychology of religion flourished in the early twentieth century, even if it was dominated by a small albeit influential set of researchers.

Sigmund Freud (see FREUD, SIGMUND) is therefore a latecomer, whose psychoanalytical work departs from this earlier American psychology of religion not only in method and theory, but also in providing an overtly negative assessment of religion as a neurosis to be treated. With the exception of James Leuba – who argued that religious experiences were illusory, much like drug-induced and pathological ones – the

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Americans were generally sympathetic to religion, and interested in using psychology to the aid of theology and practical religious concerns. Carl Jung (see JUNG, CARL GUSTAV) followed Freud in considering the importance of desire in religion, though he did not think that religious yearnings were misguided wishful thoughts: rather, religion could be a legitimate path towards self-realization, the goal of psychological development and psychotherapy. Freud's and Jung's psychoanalytic approach to religion was developed by later theorists like Otto Rank, Erich Fromm, Ernest Becker, and Ana-Maria Rizzuto; it is still represented in the present day, but is no longer a dominant force in academic psychology.

It is often claimed that research on religion waned within academic psychology around 1930: Gorsuch (1988, 202) goes so far as to claim that between 1930 and 1960, "psychology of religion was almost extinct." This generalization is accurate enough, with a few caveats: little original research was published in this period, and introductory psychology textbooks from the 1960s to the 1980s rarely included empirical findings on religion. However, the picture of an extinct psychology of religion excludes the psychoanalytic tradition, which continued to publish on the subject outside of university departments of psychology. It also fails to account for the foundation of scholarly associations dedicated to the social scientific study of religion prior to 1960. Still active groups like the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, the Religious Research Association, and the Society for the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality (Division 36 of the American Psychological Association) all trace their origins to the 1940s and 1950s. Furthermore, Gordon Allport's publication of *The Individual and His Religion* in 1950 inaugurated a social psychological approach to religion that would dominate the field for decades. His Religious Orientation Scale, first used in studies on prejudice in the 1960s, is still the most influential psychological measure of religiosity: the distinction it drew between extrinsic and intrinsic religiosity triggered a quickly burgeoning interest in measuring dimensions and varieties of religiosity, and is an active area of research even now.

The 1970s and 1980s saw an explosion of empirical and psychometric studies besides a continuation of Allport's work on religious orientation by the next generation of psychologists (e.g. C. Daniel Batson; Richard Gorsuch). Ralph Hood's research on religious and mystical experiences began at this time, as did Batson's classic research on religion and helping behavior. As participation in organized religion declined from the 1970s onwards, psychologists began studying "spirituality" and "spiritual wellbeing" instead, which has since become a staple in social scientific research on health.

Theories from social psychology were also increasingly being applied to the study of religion. Martin Fishbein and Icek Ajzen examined religious variables in their foundational work on the weak correspondence between general attitudes and specific behaviors. Towards the end of the 1970s, Leslie Francis began applying personality theory to research on attitudes towards religion, especially among children and adolescents. The relevance of attribution theory – which is concerned with how people assign causes to effects – to religion was also gaining recognition. In his study of apostasy, Bruce Hunsberger recognized the importance of social learning theory to

the study of how religious ideas are transmitted, but this has not been picked up by the field until recently.

By the end of the 1980s, there was clear evidence for the psychological study of religion's return to the mainstream of academic psychology. For example, two landmark papers by Richard Gorsuch bear witness to this. His 1984 paper in *American Psychologist* noted the proliferation of questionnaire-based measures of religiosity, and even called for a moratorium on further scale construction. In 1988, he published the first ever *Annual Review of Psychology* article on psychology of religion. Two major textbooks also appeared in the 1980s: Raymond Paloutzian's *Invitation to the Psychology of Religion*, now in its third edition (2016) was first published in 1983, and *The Psychology of Religion: An Empirical Approach*, now in its fifth edition (2018), first came out on 1985, co-authored by Gorsuch, Bernard Spilka, and Ralph Hood.

The field continued to grow throughout the 1990s, particularly as researchers from other disciplines – medicine, neuroscience, and anthropology – became more interested in psychological aspects of religion. Research on the religious correlates of mental health and wellbeing outcomes flourished now, resulting in books like Harold Koenig's 1998 *Handbook of Religion and Mental Health* and Kenneth Pargament's 1997 *The Psychology of Religion and Coping*, which collated empirical findings and theoretical perspectives. Koenig's handbook also included a chapter by Andrew Newberg and Eugene d'Aquili, who brought attention to the potential of neuroscientific techniques to study religious experiences. Michael Persinger's high-profile and controversial work on electromagnetic manipulations of temporal lobe activity to produce a "sense of a presence" also came to the fore in the 1990s, building on earlier research linking temporal lobe epilepsy to religious experiences.

This period also saw increasing collaboration between anthropologists and psychologists, which resulted in the eventual founding of the COGNITIVE SCIENCE OF RELIGION. The seminal monographs were written by anthropologists drawing on cognitive psychological theories, such as E. Thomas Lawson and Robert McCauley, Stewart Guthrie, Pascal Boyer, and Harvey Whitehouse, but psychologists like Justin Barrett would soon test these theories directly. Research on adolescence had been a consistent focus in psychology of religion since G. Stanley Hall's days, but research on preschoolers (3 to 6 years of age) began picking up pace in the 1990s. Jacqueline Woolley's and Paul Harris's work on children's causal reasoning and magical beliefs, and Deborah Kelemen's research on children's beliefs about the causes of natural phenomena are of particular importance to this new collaborative effort. Another significant strand of developmental research that arose at this time is Lee Kirkpatrick's application of attachment theory to religion, which posits that gods are like parental figures with whom one can develop more or less positive relationships.

Progress continues apace. The current emphasis is on supernatural belief and experience, rather than identity and behavior, in part because religious affiliation and participation rates have declined precipitously in recent years. Indeed,

research on religious identity and behavior – especially ritual – focuses on their cognitive aspects, such as perceptions of ritual efficacy. Despite the sociological decline of organized religion, the assumption in psychology of religion is still that supernatural belief – the belief in things like gods, SOULS, the AFTERLIFE, karma, and curses – has a strong inertial force. Research attention on the psychology of ATHEISM is increasing, but even this work often assumes that people are cognitively predisposed towards supernatural beliefs.

Evidence from research on young children provides some weight to this view. For example, children distinguish between physical and mental properties (Hood, Gjersoe, and Bloom 2012), and are more likely to think that psychological states persist after death than are biological states (Bering, Blasi, and Bjorklund 2005). Besides this intuitive dualism, children are also prone to teleological thinking, which expresses itself in thinking that things happen “for a reason” (Banerjee and Bloom 2015) and in thinking of natural phenomena in functional terms (Kelemen 2004). Furthermore, there is some evidence for these tendencies in predominantly secular societies and that they decrease as children age, which suggests that they are not just the result of socialization in religious contexts.

The concern to replicate previous findings, and for cross-cultural replication in particular, is an important theme in recent research. There is increasing recognition that, until fairly recently, the psychology of religion would more accurately be called the psychology of American Protestantism. Thus, insofar as psychologists are interested in basic and universal psychological mechanisms that underlie religion, they are motivated to collect data from multiple cultures. It is now *de rigueur* to look beyond Anglo-American and Christian populations, and especially to societies whose historical influences and current structures differ markedly from urban Western liberal democracies.

The other source of skepticism of previous theories is recent criticism of previous generations’ research methods. The early neuroscientific work by Persinger, for example, has been challenged on theoretical and empirical grounds. D’Aquila and Newberg’s theory that states of altered consciousness are caused by an overload of limbic system structures has also not enjoyed consistent empirical support, perhaps due to differences in the religious experiences they studied. This has not slowed down the pace of neuroscientific research on religion, but it has become obvious how difficult this work can be. Neuroimaging research in general has been criticized for its small sample sizes, lack of theoretical specificity, and poor use of statistical techniques. Furthermore, it is unclear how comparable different kinds of religious or mystical experiences are, and therefore how much consistency there should be across studies. Twenty years after the enthusiasm for a neuroscience of religion began, naive expectations to find a “god spot” have dissipated, and neuroscientists are more inclined to use their methods to confirm cognitive hypotheses for which there is already independent evidence, especially about the role of social cognitive processes (e.g. theory of mind) in religion.

There is also increasing recognition of the limits of self-report measures. Research on the social psychology of attitudes has raised concerns about the extent to which

responses to such measures are easily biased, both by how the questions are asked and by respondents' social- and self-presentational concerns. Furthermore – like Wundt and Freud – many psychologists now believe that there are psychological states that are inaccessible to conscious awareness: thus, self-report measures provide an incomplete picture even if not an inaccurate one. This has led to the diversification of measurement methods, including interview, free-list responding, response-time tasks, behavioral observation, and behavioral economic games.

Current research in psychology of religion shares questions with those of previous generations: about the causes and consequences of religious beliefs and practices, and therefore about their nature and function. In some ways, very little has changed. Like Wundt, psychologists are still interested in the universal psychological processes involved in religion, despite its historical and cross-cultural diversity. Like Starbuck, psychologists are still interested in how religion develops across the lifespan. Like Leuba, psychologists are still interested in the physiological basis of religious experience. Like James, psychologists are still interested in how experiences are related to beliefs. Like Freud, psychologists are still interested in the role of unconscious processes in religion. Like Galton and Allport, psychologists are still interested in how different aspects of religion are associated with other psychological and physical outcomes.

Nor would current theories seem utterly foreign to our forebears. The hypothesis that the belief in gods is a product of an overextension of our social cognitive and causal attributional tendencies is resonant with not only Freud's ideas, but figures from before modern psychology like Ludwig Feuerbach, E.B. Tylor, and David Hume (see HUME, DAVID). Similarly, another currently influential idea, that religion is an example of meaning making (Park 2013), would be congenial to James and also to post-Freudian psychoanalytic theorists like Ernest Becker. Even theories about how religion evolved, whether by natural selection or as a byproduct of other adaptations were prefigured by the earliest theorists: Leuba's manifesto took for granted that religion evolved and Hall's magisterial work on adolescent development – including the development of religion – was based on his commitment to evolutionary theory, albeit of the Lamarckian variety, and grounded in his commitment to the dictum that “ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny.”

Psychologists of religion have also, for most of the discipline's history, been committed to quantitative methods and a research paradigm focused on measurement. This has led to a reductionist approach towards religion, in which religion – an obviously complex phenomenon – is fractionated into components that are measurable and therefore amenable to investigation under the norms of the natural and quantitative social sciences. For the same reason, psychologists of religion rarely provide real definitions of religion; rather, they provide operational definitions that are limited in scope, and may vary from study to study (see RELIGION, DEFINITION OF). Philosophical reflection on psychological research on religion should be cautious not to equivocate different uses of the terms used in psychology.

Psychological research on the causes of religion raises obvious questions about the epistemic status of those beliefs and the reality of their referents. On one hand,

naturalistic explanations of religious experience and belief might undermine them. On the other, the universality of religion might lend them support by *consensus gentium*. Arguments on both sides have been proposed since the earliest days of the field. Leuba's deflationary account of religious experience has already been alluded to, and Freud's antipathy against religion is well known. James also observed that the possibility of deriving anti-religious conclusions from psychological research on religious experience. However, he is himself convinced that religious experiences are, despite their variety, experiences of something real. Starbuck is somewhat more cautious: he distinguishes between the task of psychology – the collection and systemization of evidence – and that of philosophy and theology, the interpretation of the evidence and the use of it to reinterpret traditional beliefs. In the end, however, he is confident that not only will psychology enhance our appreciation for religion, but it will also prove useful in improving religious practices.

This ambivalence is still visible now. Claims about the naturalistic causes – physiological, social, evolutionary, or otherwise – of religious experience and beliefs are used as premises in arguments against their veridicality or reliability (see COGNITIVE SCIENCE AND DEBUNKING ARGUMENTS OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF). On the other side, nativistic claims about the development of religious beliefs are used as premises in arguments for particular religious epistemologies. Typically, these arguments are made by philosophers and theologians, rather than by psychologists. Within psychology of religion itself, Starbuck's separation of labor is still observed. Thus, in the most recent edition of *The Psychology of Religion: An Empirical Approach*, Hood, Hill, and Spilka (2018, 5) insist that “The psychological study of religion cannot directly answer questions about the truth claims of any religion; attempting to do so is beyond its scope.” Similarly, in the most recent edition of his *Invitation to the Psychology of Religion*, Ray Paloutzian asserts that “Scientific and religious explanations are orthogonal to each other; they are by nature neither hostile nor friendly to each other” (Paloutzian 2016, 38).

See also: COGNITIVE SCIENCE AND DEBUNKING ARGUMENTS OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF; COGNITIVE SCIENCE AND NATURAL THEOLOGICAL ARGUMENTS; COGNITIVE SCIENCE OF RELIGION; FREUD, SIGMUND; JAMES, WILLIAM; JUNG, CARL GUSTAV; SCIENCE AND RELIGION

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