



Invitation to the
PSYCHOLOGY
OF RELIGION

T H I R D E D I T I O N

Raymond F. Paloutzian





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INVITATION TO
THE PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION

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PSYCHOLOGY
OF RELIGION

THIRD EDITION

Raymond F. Paloutzian



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To Ann, with love

About the Author

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Preface

A critical, psychological examination of human religiousness and spirituality, and their areligious and secular counterparts, is an essential component of a well-rounded education in the modern world. I wrote this book in order to help students deal with fundamental issues and to advance the progress of psychology. I want students to think about important basic issues. What better topic to do it with than the psychology of religion?

This third *Invitation to the Psychology of Religion* might be subtitled *Foundations, Issues, and Building Blocks*. It was intended as a revision of the second edition, but in the intervening 20 years it became a new book. Recent developments are so many and far-reaching that a mere update would not do the job. The goal is the same—for this to be the best, clearest, most accurate, and user-friendly book available on the psychology of religion. As in the first two editions, I speak directly to the student, while at the same time addressing some points to my colleagues that I hope will affect them, the psychology of religion, and psychology as a whole. Importantly, I want the book to help students envision big changes while taking the small steps that bring about long-term change. I hope this lesson sticks with my students regardless of the specific line of work they may enter.

GOALS, ORGANIZATION, AND NEW FEATURES

Core Material and Course Themes

This third edition is crafted to provide the anchor for, and core elements of, a course in the psychology of religion (or nowadays, psychology of religion and spirituality). For many years, professors have used the book to

provide the basic outline and structure for their courses. They then supplemented the text with other materials (books, chapters, articles, exercises, projects, audiovisual presentations) in order to give their courses the particular accents or emphases that they wished. I have retained this vision for how the book would be used. This approach allows a professor to highlight preferred themes—clinical/counseling, developmental, historical/theoretical, theological, evolutionary psychology of religion, cognitive science of religion, social–personality, social issues—while ensuring that the core material and issues that ought to define any solid course in the psychology of religion are prominent. Thus the book serves as the core text in an undergraduate course with an accent on any substantive topic, as well as a basic resource that contains some new material that might be of interest to advanced students and professionals.

Chapter Order

This book is crafted to allow maximum flexibility. The topics in this book appear in the same order as in the first and second editions, but in contrast to the earlier editions, the chapters have been crafted so that after reading the essential introductory material covered in Chapter 1, a student can read the remaining chapters in any order without undue loss.

As an aid to this flexibility, the chapters are amply cross-referenced throughout in order to point the reader to related material elsewhere in the book. Adding this flexibility allows the professor to tailor his or her course design. When I taught psychology of religion, I found that the sequence of topics in the table of contents worked well as a structure to anchor the course. However, with this new edition, if a professor wishes to begin with one or more substantive topics and then “return” to the foundational theory, methods, and historical material contained in Part I, that will also work well.

New Highlights

There are three aspects of the psychology of religion, and therefore this book, that have changed dramatically since the first and second editions were published. First, the field has become genuinely international. Second, the topics examined and methods used in the field are considerably enriched. “Data” no longer means only questionnaire responses, and “results” no longer means only Pearson r correlation coefficients. Many new research techniques, both qualitative and quantitative, enrich our studies. Third, discussions of theory in the psychology of religion no longer rely simply on Freud and Jung. In the past 20 years many new approaches have greatly expanded our theoretical horizons. I fold the new ideas into this text by means of two pivotal ideas: religious meaning systems and the

multilevel interdisciplinary paradigm (see Paloutzian & Park, 2013). These conceptual frameworks provide thinking tools that enable us to integrate our theory and data better than we have in the past.

A short Prelude introduces each section of the book—Part I contains the foundational chapters, 1–4; Part II contains the substantive chapters, 5–11; and Part III contains my closing statement and charge to the students in Chapter 12. Each Prelude gives the reader a picture of the character and topics to be addressed in that part.

The Prelude to the substantive chapters in Part II is particularly important. Its purpose is to explain some of the fundamental processes that constitute the psychological substrates of meaning systems, religiousness, and spirituality. Religions and spiritualities surely are manifestations of many far more complex processes, but they could not exist at all without these fundamental processes that enable their most basic aspects.

A Pinch of Song and Art

I also include a line from songs by two masters of the popular musical arts of my generation—Bob Dylan and Paul Simon—as well as one cartoon to accent key psychological points and to integrate psychological science with the arts and life.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

So many others helped prepare this book that it is a challenge to find the best words to thank them. It is wonderful to have such good colleagues, whose help is as collaborators, not evaluators or critics. Their contributions, professionalism, and competence stick with me in a deep way. I list their names in alphabetical order: Michael Barlev, Justin Barrett, Chris Boyatzis, Gordon Burghardt, Chris Burris, Luetilla Carter, Jozef Corveleyn, Miguel Farias, Tamsin German, Jennifer Hahn, Peter Hill, Ralph Hood, Ines Jindra, Michael Kinsella, Bill Kneip, Susan McFadden, Vikas Milhotra, James Morgan, Katie Mukai, David Myers, Ara Norenzayan, Ella Paldam, Crystal Park, Juliet Rohde-Brown, Christopher Ross, Dennis Schell, Uffe Schjødt, Bernard Spilka, Ann Taves, Alberto Verona, Doug Wessel, Paul Williamson, Paul Wink, and anonymous reviewers E and J.

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Finally, Jim Nageotte, Senior Editor at The Guilford Press, is tops. This is the third book I have done under his leadership, and I feel as if I have been given a gift. He is a good guide, gentle and kind while clear and direct, with the right touch of seriousness mixed with a dose of good humor. When I learned that I could work with him on this third edition, I did not hesitate. Jim cares deeply about what is published under his charge, and he guided me accordingly. I don't have words good enough to explain how much I appreciate the way he does his craft. He and his right arm, Jane Keislar, are second to none, utterly the best.

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INVITATION TO
THE PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION

Introduction

No doubt, you come to this book with questions. What is the “truth” about religion or spirituality in general and “my” religion or non-religion in particular? Does concern with such things help me live a life worth living? How do I live in a multicultural, multireligious world without succumbing to stereotypes of people whose beliefs, practices, and ways of life are different from those I have learned? How do I make decisions about religious or worldview matters? How do I know that what I purport to think and believe is genuinely my own? This book will help you deal with questions such as these.

The issues are important. We live in a world in which religiousness and spirituality, as well as their areligious and aspiritual counterparts, relate in major ways to how people live and die. A great deal of prosocial and antisocial behavior is served up to others under the umbrella of a religion. Why? And why do we see seemingly opposite (positive and negative) effects of any particular religion, let alone religion in general? Moreover, some people who adhere to a particular form of religion or spirituality claim that they have a privileged position on Truth—that they have experience and knowledge that are disallowed to others (thus they are chosen leaders, and others are to follow them). So, do they have special experiences not available to ordinary people (like you and me)? Do they have a privileged way of knowing that is closed to others, so that we should accept whatever they claim to be true? Or, alternatively, is their religiousness evidence that they suffer from deep psychological disturbances?

Grappling with issues such as these involves trying to validly answer questions about life, God, believing, authority, love, community, self, one’s own group, all groups, and death—all questions of meaning that have perplexed the best philosophical minds in the history of thought. Why should

you think through these and related issues? Because doing so will help you understand what it means to live a life worth living.

This book falls into three parts. A short Prelude precedes each part in order to give you a picture of what follows, and why that part is crafted the way it is.

After reading Chapter 1, which contains essential material to start with, you can read the rest of the chapters in any order.

PART I

FOUNDATIONS

PRELUDE TO PART I

The first part of this book lays out the foundations of research and theory aimed at providing an understanding of the psychological bases of religiousness, spirituality, and irreligion. No matter what specific topic one wishes to explore, a well-honed ability to apply the rules of thinking, psychological scientific logic, and methodology to future research and practical problems is essential. Part I explains the intellectual ground rules for how to think psychologically about some of life's basic questions.

The book opens by illustrating a few real-world examples of religiousness and spirituality, both ancient and modern. All examples are true, some are individual and some are social, and they accent some interesting puzzles about human behavior that we will later examine in depth. No one has ever written a satisfactory definition of religion or spirituality, but a discussion of those efforts and my conclusion are presented. A basic point in this discussion is that neither religion nor spirituality is a psychological construct; and religion is not “really” spirituality, nor is spirituality “really” religion, just by another name. They are complex cultural concepts (CCCs) whose meanings are diverse between cultures and contested within cultures. That is why there are many religions, and why attempts to define a true essence of “religion” fail. Nevertheless, we can map the dimensions on which aspects of religions are manifest (believing, feeling, behaving, etc.) and examine where to look

for the roots of religiousness and spirituality (e.g., in the brain, unconscious mind, early childhood development, social pressure, history). The opening chapter addresses the above issues.

Psychologists of religion have been on an intellectual journey that has been incredibly enriched in the recent past. Part of that journey has occasionally included apparent confrontations with other realms and disciplines, as is illustrated by the so-called science–religion dialogue. The second chapter helps us think through the issues in this dialogue and explains why examining religiousness and spirituality through the lens of a psychological meaning-making approach not only enables us to understand them better but sets the stage for us to begin to synthesize our psychological understanding with that from allied disciplines.

Psychological ideas about religiousness either explicitly or implicitly rest upon one or more theoretical notions about the processes at work. Thus, the third chapter is a walk through ways of thinking theoretically about religions and spiritualities. Are their roots to be found in the evolution of prehuman species? In the unconscious mind? In parent–child attachments or lack of them? In Big Gods who, because people came to believe in them, helped inhibit cheating, fighting, and other intra-group negative behaviors? Or are religions a by-product of other human capacities, so they just happened to come along for the ride? How do religions provide a source of identity? Why do people make supernatural attributions (e.g., saying that God caused this or that)? There are theoretical statements that address all such issues. Chapter 3 provides a look at them, so that you can begin to use them in your thinking.

All scientific psychological theories are subject to test, to be supported or disconfirmed based on the evidence. Doing this requires research. Understanding the research methods is the purpose of Chapter 4. Whether research is conducted in the field or the laboratory, by a group or a single individual, a student or a professional, our understanding is enriched with the use of multiple methods. Therefore, this chapter promotes use of research within a multilevel interdisciplinary paradigm.

I think the training one gets by going through this material is a non-negotiable requirement for undergraduates and a well-advised refresher for graduate students and professionals. With good grounding in these rules of thinking and methodology, you will be better able to grasp the psychological and research issues surrounding the development of religiousness; the role religiousness or spirituality may play in mental and physical health; how religiousness affects one’s behavior—both

prosocially and antisocially; and what is involved in experiencing an unusual mental event and then deciding whether to deem its source supernatural, spiritual, or otherworldly, or none of the above. Most important, you will gain wisdom to make your own decisions about how to live your life through its unexpected twists, turns, and surprises, both positive and negative. You will begin to assess whether or not you wish to inculcate an identifiably religious, spiritual, or irreligious way of being.

CHAPTER 1

Religion in Psychological Perspective

The Prevalence and Scope of Religion

Notions about the Source and Essence of Religions

Dimensions of Religiousness

Psychological Roots of Religiousness Exist at Multiple Levels

Is Religion Psychologically Special?

My Approach

Take-Home Messages

Further Reading

Nothing in human history has sparked more controversy and argument than religion. Nothing has played a more persistent, durable role in the personal and social lives of human beings, at once prompting them to the most wonderful acts of love and the most grotesque acts of brutality. It is obvious that religious questions, religious experiences, and religiously motivated behavior are alive and well today, in all cultures around the globe. Let us take a brief glance at the prevalence, scope, and manifestations of religiousness and sample how sweeping its influences are. We will see how important it is to learn what psychological research has to say about it. The argument running through this book is that it is essential to understand religiousness psychologically in order to integrate knowledge gained from allied fields (religious studies, history, anthropology, evolution, biology, sociology, neuroscience, cognitive science) into a coherent picture. A conceptually integrative way to view religion psychologically is in terms of meaning systems processes that are rooted in evolution. These processes interact with each other in the human cognitive system to appraise, combine, and respond to information at various levels and in various ways

(experiential, affective, motivational, social, cognitive, behavioral) as we go through life.

THE PREVALENCE AND SCOPE OF RELIGION

Data from the United States show that 91% of the population believes in “God or a universal spirit,” 58% pray daily, and 21% pray weekly or monthly (Pew Research Center, 2012). Fifty-six percent report that religion is a “very important” part of their lives; an additional 23% feel it is “fairly important” (Newport, 2013). Forty percent of Americans say they are “very religious,” 29% are “moderately religious,” and 31% are “non-religious” (WIN/Gallup International, 2012). These and similar percentages have tended to fluctuate only somewhat for several decades. What about religions elsewhere in the world? A brief international comparison shows that in Canada, 30% of people say they are willing to “embrace religion” (Angus Reid Institute, 2015), and weekly attendance at church or synagogue is about 18% (Eagle, 2011). In the United Kingdom, 30% say they are religious, and 9% have attended church or synagogue in the past week (Office for National Statistics, 2011). The contrast among countries, illustrated in only the smallest way by this small sample of three Western English-speaking democracies, raises questions about the reasons they differ. This book will help you understand why.

The combined global reach of religions is breathtaking to see. On the earth there are about 2 billion Christians, just over a billion Muslims, about a billion Buddhists, almost the same number of Hindus, and myriad others, including Sikhs, Jews, followers of religions in China, Japan, and Africa, new religious movements (NRMs; Woodhead, Kawanami, & Partridge, 2009), and even “invented religions” (Cusack, 2010; Possamai, 2005, 2010). Some countries define themselves in religious terms. For example, Iran is formally an Islamic country; Israel is an officially Jewish state. Globally, about 6 billion of the world’s 7-plus billion people are religious at some level or have their lives affected by religion in important ways; about 1-plus billion are not religious (Johnson, 2014; PEW Research Center, 2012).

Even those who are not religious have their lives affected by religion in important ways. For example, atheists are the second-most disliked group in North America on the “religious” dimension, ranking only above Muslims (Pew Research Center, 2014). Negative feelings toward atheists include disgust and fear (Franks & Scherr, 2014; Ritter & Preston, 2011), stereotypes about them include “hedonistic” and “cynical” (Harper, 2007), and they have been subject to prejudice and discrimination (Gervais, 2013; Gervais, Shariff, & Norenzayan, 2011; Giddings & Dunn, 2016; Johnson, Rowatt, & LaBouff, 2012). And in Saudi Arabia “freedom of religion is neither recognized nor protected under the law” (U.S. Department of State,

2013, p. 5); a Saudi citizen who converts from Islam could be punished by death (Bayle & Sheen, 1997).

A moment's look at the past reveals that religions have affected the lives of many of the central figures of history, who, due to religious motivation, became pivotal influences in their world—for good and evil. Adopting a religion or having a spiritual experience has triggered profound changes in the lives of individuals. It has also motivated people to work or fight for social revolution—whether to free oppressed people (e.g., using nonviolent protest to promote racial equality) or to change a political structure (e.g., using violence to install a formal religious government). On the other hand, religious factors can prompt people to keep the status quo, insist on only one way of living, cling to a past or present way of being and doing, and thus be unwilling to change.

The increasingly prominent role certain forms of religion—especially very conservative forms such as fundamentalist Christianity in the United States, militant political Islamism in various places, and strict Orthodox Judaism in the Middle East—play in national affairs in the early part of the 21st century is apparent to anyone willing to look and see. It is as if the adherents of those versions of those religions have an absolute belief that theirs is the True Way that must dictate specific social policies to all of society—and in some individuals' minds all of the world—with no give-and-take. We need a thorough understanding of various forms of religiousness and spirituality to enable us to see the unique meanings they hold for the individuals, groups, and nations involved. This book will contribute to your ability to understand such meanings and the implications that stem from them.

Finally, religion is big business, supporting formidable media enterprises. And some aspects of it are highly politicized. For example, the Roman Catholic Church has formal ambassadors to many governments of the world. In the case of the United States and other Western countries, although society seems to have become more secular and multicultural, and while participation in traditional organized religion seems to be declining (Altemeyer, 2004; Krysinska et al., 2014), subsets of religious people seem to be becoming more fervent in their beliefs, practices, and insistence that the codes and customs they adopt should apply to all. Add to this that both atheism and individualized, noninstitutionalized forms of belief and practice have been on the rise (Ammerman, 2013a, b; Williamson & Yancey, 2013; Zuckerman, 2011), and we have an exceedingly interesting and complex mix of beliefs, practices, alliances, oppositions, and motivations to understand.

Religion in Action

So far I have been discussing major religions as traditionally identified. However, individual preferences and styles change; many people are

adopting a more personalized form of areligious spirituality in addition to or in place of a traditional mainstream religion (Oman, 2013; Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005). This suggests that although people may have religious or spiritual impulses, there are many individual and cultural variations in form and strength (Paloutzian, 2006). The fundamental psychological questions for us are “What are the processes by which humans function that make what we call religiousness and spirituality?” and “What are their mental, physical, and social effects?”

In this book we shall explore religious and spiritual belief, behavior, and experience from the point of view of empirical psychological research. At the outset we face the inevitable question “What is religion?” and, nowadays, its companion term, “. . . and spirituality?” The only honest intellectual answer is that there is no best way to define these terms (Paloutzian & Park, 2014). The best I can do is explain and illustrate what they do and do not (or better, can and cannot) mean in psychological research. But all attempts to state finally and definitively what religion or spirituality “really is” have failed—across all disciplines, including religious studies (see Oman, 2013, and Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005, for comprehensive discussion and lists of attempted definitions). However, the nature of the scientific process as manifest through psychological research has a clear and important benefit in that it allows for good definitions to evolve from the research process—in contrast to trying to know and state one definition in abstract terms ahead of time. The effect of this is that over the long term, the psychological scientific approach can yield definitions that come closer to what humans behaving in real life actually do.

Two more questions arise immediately: “What do we mean by ‘psychology of religion?’,” and “Why read about the psychology of religion when you could study religions from the point of view of the humanities or read a scripture?” Consider the following eight true instances of belief and behavior, and see if you can detect the scope of this subdiscipline:

1. Several times when I taught psychology of religion, some students in my course said they believed that God was in control and answered prayer. Then they prayed for a grade of A on a course exam. When they learned that their exams earned a grade of C, they blamed me.

2. In 399 B.C.E., the Greek philosopher Socrates, before his execution by the Athenians on charges of impiety and corrupting the youth of the city, gave a speech to the court in which he was questioned about possible impiety and disbelief in the gods. He in no uncertain terms declared his belief in the gods, yet was sentenced to death anyway (Plato, 399 B.C.E./1997).

3. Before driving her car, a young woman, following her daily custom, recites a Sanskrit mantra aloud. It translates to “I bow to the ancient Wisdom, I bow to the Wisdom of the ages.” She denies being either spiritual or religious but recites this mantra as encouraged by her yoga teacher.

4. A young man raised as a Hindu no longer believes in a specific religion but feels a sense of peace and closeness to a power greater than himself whenever he is in nature—such as at a lake in the mountains. He said that for him this connection with and through nature reflects a more authentic “connection” than the religion of his upbringing.

5. Seeing no contradictions between core values in certain religions, a woman embraces multiple religious belonging and is committed to being both an authentic Buddhist and an authentic Christian at the same time (Drew, 2011).

6. A small religious group formed and began to grow. Its leader claimed to be a prophet, taught about her contact with deity, and predicted that the earth would end on a specific date by a great flood. The flood did not happen, but her followers continued to believe anyway (Festinger, Riecken, & Schachter, 1956).

7. A teenager raised in one traditional “world religion” converted to a militant faction of a second religion. The group he joined planned to replace the democratic national government of his country with strict religious law. Its leader taught that there are only two kinds of people—true believers in their particular version of their religion, and all other humans. In their intended society, people who did not believe as they did had a choice: they could convert, they could be killed or tortured, or they could live but be required to pay an extra tax (Taub, 2015). At the same time, others in that country and of the same religious tradition to which the youth had converted raised funds to help pay for repairs to the worship center of a third religion, as an act of friendship on the theme of “Living Together” (Raushenbush, 2015).

8. Ancient Hebrews declared that they were chosen by God, that they had revelations of God, that theirs was the only god, and that they were to be an example to the world. Then early Christians declared that they were the true followers of God, and that it was they who were to tell others the Good News and be an example to the world. Then Muhammad declared that he was a prophet of God, that he was the final Prophet, and that he and his followers were to proclaim the final revelation to the world. Then Joseph Smith declared that he was the latter-day prophet of God, the recipient of the final revelation, and that he and his followers, the Mormons or Latter-day Saints, should carry the final revelation to the world.

Disagreements? Work 'em out. . . .

God is old.

—PAUL SIMON, “Old”¹

Can events with such variety all be called religious? Probably most readers would say “Yes.” If you have asked yourself what religion “really”

¹Reprinted with permission from Music Sales Corporation and Paul Simon Music.

is, then you know that trying to state an explicit definition is like taking something that has endless variation and talking about it as if it were one thing. But religion is not one thing; there is no essentialist definition that can capture all that religions contain.

For purposes of psychological understanding, we can describe (not define) religions as meaning systems that comprise orientations through which people see the world and define their reality. Religion is a multi-dimensional variable that involves how people believe, feel, behave, and know. These dimensions are explained below. Specific religions are made up of aspects of these dimensions and other elements (Burris, 2005; Jensen, 2014; Taves, 2009b). Given the recent increase in research into religion's co-expression, spirituality, we can safely state that these same dimensions are also manifest when we grapple with how to understand spirituality.

Religion and Spirituality

From about 1900 until midway through the 20th century, the terms *religion* and *spirituality* were pretty much interchangeable (Paloutzian, 2006). Either term could be used to refer to more or less the same thing; thus a devoutly religious person and a spiritual person were one and the same: a person who practiced what he or she preached and believed in a transcendent agent (usually a god or similar entity with supernatural properties) as the basis for doing so.

About a half century ago, however, *religion* and *spirituality* began to take on different meanings. Religion gradually came to refer primarily to traditional, established faith traditions. Religions have histories, organizations, and activities, such as worship or outreach. In psychological and sociological research on religions, they were usually categorized as Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Mormon, and others (for a classic presentation of such research, see Argyle & Beit-Hallahmi, 1975).

At the same time, people began to look outside established religious structures to find their spiritual orientation and meaning in life. For example, the traditional parish or synagogue was not fulfilling for many people, so they searched for other ways to find values and principles by which to live. This search expressed itself in religious and nonreligious ways. During the 1960s some people looking for "genuine spirituality" converted to an NRM and left the religions in which they were raised. The search led others to groups that were not identifiably religious, while an analogous exploration led still others to focus exclusively and specifically on the self. The alternatives included nonreligious forms of spirituality. Often, those who were searching were reacting against aspects of traditional religious institutions such as formal rituals, doctrines, and creeds. Traditional God language may not have been satisfying their needs for meaning, purpose, and fulfillment. They became concerned about what values to hold and which experiences to enhance, rather than what church, synagogue, or

mosque to belong to or which doctrines to declare belief in. They became spiritual and secular.

These shifts in people's religiousness and spirituality prompted researchers to explore the degree to which the terms *religion* and *spirituality* mean the same or different things to people (Ammerman, 2013a, 2013b; Oman, 2013; Hill & Pargament, 2003; Streib & Hood, 2016; Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005; Zinnbauer et al., 1997). Both religion and spirituality tend to be associated with frequency of prayer, church attendance, and intrinsic religious orientation (an internalized way of holding a religion—this will be addressed in Chapters 6 and 11). Both terms refer to connecting with whatever one perceives to be sacred (Hill et al., 2000). However, mystical experiences and distaste for formal church are more associated with the concept of spirituality, which connotes more concern with personal growth and existential issues. Religion, on the other hand, brings to many people's minds denominational beliefs, institutional practices, self-righteousness, and church attendance, with an accompanying sense of community and belonging (Oman, 2013; Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005; Zinnbauer et al., 1997).

People describe their spirituality or religiousness in diverse ways. For example, people say they are both religious *and* spiritual, *neither* religious *nor* spiritual, spiritual *but not* religious, religious *but not* spiritual, and a peculiar combination of religious spirituality combined with nonreligion (as expressed by one of my students), "I am a spiritual Christian *but not* religious" (Paloutzian & Park, 2005). As Hood (2003) has said, sometimes people care very much whether they are called spiritual or religious, so much so that the meanings given to these two terms could be exact opposites in two different cases. For example, for one person, saying, "I am a spiritual person" equals an enthusiastic affirmation of his or her religion. In contrast, for another person, saying, "I am a spiritual person" means he or she is an atheist, decidedly antireligious, and regards all religions as incompatible with the Good Life. (See Streib & Hood, 2016, for a comprehensive review.)

Meaning Systems Approach

In order to understand why people become or remain religious or spiritual, it is not sufficient for us to measure the existence or strength of a belief, or evaluate how spiritual a person may report feeling in terms of verbally stated categories or dimensions. This is because the same religious or spiritual words can have different, even opposite, meanings to people. Because of this, the best research would be that which assesses the meanings that religious and spiritual concepts and categories have for people, because it is such meanings that they ultimately feel are important.²

²This is consistent with the long-known psychological principle that people respond to the meaning a stimulus has for them, not the stimulus itself as it may or may not exist out there in ontological reality.

That which transcends (or better, which lies outside of) a person may involve a personal God in or apart from a traditional religious institution, an alternative supreme being, a nontheistic construction of ultimate values and concerns, or a stick, stone, or idea. It does not have to connote a being or entity beyond this world (Paloutzian & Park, 2013b, 2014). For others, whether theistic or atheistic, a purpose, principle, or state of being may be that through which they regulate and guide their lives (Emmons, 1999). A meaning systems approach can accommodate all of this and more.

Placing the emphasis on gaining a psychological understanding of the meanings that religious words, categories, and symbols have for people, instead of on the words, categories, and symbols as if they were static entities with their own inherent “true meanings,” gives us a great advantage. It enables us to use the same concepts and terminology in discussing research in all areas of the psychology of religion, ranging from the micro level of analysis (e.g., the neuropsychology of religious experience) through the midrange psychological level (e.g., religion and development, emotion, personality, or cognition) to the macro level of analysis (e.g., religion as culture and in international relations and terrorism). In all cases and at all levels, the role of a religion in a person’s life hinges upon its meaning to that person, not on an idea about what it may or may not “truly” mean in the abstract.

Although noted only briefly in this chapter, the notion of meaning making and the meaning systems model is a major integrative theme in this book. It is explained in detail in the last section of Chapter 2, which will help us think through the intellectual bases for the science of the psychology of religion. Like connective tissue, this model can help knit the phenomena, research, and theories together.

NOTIONS ABOUT THE SOURCE AND ESSENCE OF RELIGIONS

There are a variety of questions to be asked about the psychology of religion. This first chapter is concerned with communicating a picture of the nature and scope of the field: How do psychologists approach the task of analyzing and conceptualizing religiousness in meaningful psychological terms? Subsequent chapters take up a series of more typically focused issues: What intellectual place did this field come from? What are its important theories, methods of study, and conflicts? What happens during religious development? What is the difference, psychologically, between someone being religiously genuine versus not? Does one’s religion affect mental and physical health? Is there a personality type, normal or abnormal, that is particularly prone to conversion? Does doubting strengthen or weaken belief? Why are there religious extremists?

In order to be able to deal with such issues, it will be useful for us to do the following:

1. Present different uses of the concept of religion and the research psychologist's response to them.
2. Break religiousness down into its conceptual parts, the dimensions on which it can vary.
3. Sketch the approaches psychologists may take to understand religiousness—the levels at which they conduct research to find the psychological causes and consequences of believing, feeling, and acting in ways deemed spiritual or religious.

These three things are interconnected, but this interconnectedness will probably become clearer as we get further into the topic and see some relation among them within a meaning systems framework. Each of these ways of thinking about religiousness provides a set of conceptual tools, like building blocks, with which to construct our understanding. After examining them, you will be better equipped to think of psychological questions about religiousness, and better prepared to examine psychological research on it and apply the knowledge gained to your life. We will also be better able to differentiate between the psychological and philosophical questions about religion.

Cultural and Personal

Religion, from Latin *re + ligare*: to bind or connect.

The examples of religion in action noted above and the notion that being religious involves a human need for connectedness imply that religion can be understood at both the cultural and personal levels of analysis. Examine the following statement by Kenneth Pargament: “Religion can be found in every dimension of personal and social life. We can speak of religion as a way of feeling, a way of thinking, a way of acting, and a way of relating” (Pargament, 1992, p. 206).

Religiousness at the personal level refers to how it operates in the individual's life. It may supply someone's life with meaning, create ecstatic states of consciousness, provide a code of conduct, set up the person to feel guilty or free, or supply a truth to be believed. This is partly what William James (1902) must have had in mind when he said that personal religion is concerned with “the inner disposition of man himself, his conscience, his deserts, his helplessness, his incompleteness.” The key questions at this level of analysis are “What do you personally believe and how does your religion function in your life?” “What does it do to, for, or against you?” “How does it affect what you do, your attitudes on social issues, your mental and physical health, your well-being and your ability to cope with crises?”

At the cultural and societal levels, a religion is a social institution or a dominant trend across a society as a whole. This may refer to churches, synagogues, mosques, shrines, and analogous structures or groups, or to other groups such as independent sects, together with their collective beliefs and practices. Here the emphasis is on how religions interact with other parts of society and on how group processes operate in religious organizations.

This difference between a religion in an individual person and across a culture in general matters because the meaning of people's beliefs and the psychological processes that function to sustain or change them are not necessarily the same for individuals and cultures. As a simple example of how they may differ, you as an individual may not exactly agree with your socially dominant religious denomination about the statement "God is in control." Or, the psychological processes for why you hold your own beliefs may differ from those for the culture as a whole.

Thus, both conceptual clarity and methodological precision require that we grasp the difference between religion at a personal and a cultural level. Also, this "levels of analysis" argument can be extended to include the biological level of understanding of religious belief or experience at the micro end (e.g., Feierman, 2009; McNamara, 2006, 2009; McNamara & Butler, 2013; Schloss & Murray, 2009; Wildman, 2011) and the cultural anthropological and sociological level at the macro end (Dillon, 2003). In real life, of course, both the psychological function a religion serves and the content and substance of what is believed are the result of the *interaction* between individuals and their social context. Knowledge of such interactive processes is one of the consequences of invoking the multilevel interdisciplinary paradigm.

Function and Substance

Religion as Function

Both functional and substantive definitions of religion have been offered (Figure 1.1). Functional definitions are those that define religion in terms of what it does—what it means psychologically—for a person or the society. For Durkheim (1912/1995), a religion helps to perpetuate social and moral codes, allowing people to overcome "anomie" or isolation and thus carrying functional significance.

The functional approach is also represented at a personal level of analysis. Milton Yinger (1970), for example, noted that what is important about a religion in the life of individuals concerns the manner in which they cope with ultimate problems, such as the inevitability of death, the meaning of life, the absoluteness versus relativity of morality, and the quest to overcome existential aloneness. In a similar way, theologian Paul Tillich (1952, 1963) argued that whatever else "religion" is, it involves a person's relationship to some "ultimate concern." Whatever is of ultimate concern to someone is filling a religious function for that person.

		Conceptualization of Religion	
		Function	Substance
Level of Analysis	Personal	Whatever serves a religious purpose for the individual; e.g., supplies meaning, reduces guilt, increases guilt, supplies moral guidelines, assists in facing death, etc.	Unique belief of individual Personal awareness of sacred, transcendent, or divine
	Social	Whatever performs a religious function for society Operation of group processes in religious groups	Formal creed and deity it represents Group consensus on belief and practice Public stance of church, synagogue, denomination, sect, etc.

FIGURE 1.1. Conceptualizing religion in terms of its psychological function versus its substance, at both personal and social levels of analysis.

If we emphasize the function of religion, we can see it as a process and not merely as doctrinal content. Because of this, the functional approach gives us a broad and tolerant vision of religiousness. Almost anything can serve a religious function. It can be theistic (e.g., Judaism, Christianity, Islam) or atheistic (e.g., Buddhism); it can include one god or several; it can be of this world only, or not. As Malony (1980) put it, “religion can be God, Country or Yale!”

However, this very tolerance also embodies the most important weakness of the functional emphasis. If anything can be a religion, then just what is “religion”? There is the built-in danger that the definition will become so broad as to include everything—at which point it becomes impossible to differentiate religion from anything else. In other words, it is difficult to avoid the pitfall that “everybody is religious.” Does it help to invoke the concept of spirituality, as was illustrated by my student who said (emphatically) that she was a spiritual Christian but not religious? No. It only extends the problem because the concept of “spirituality” has the same range of meanings that the concept “religion” does, so that anyone can have his or her own spirituality.

Religion as Substance

Definitions of religion in terms of substance place the emphasis on the belief, doctrine, creed, or practice of the religion; these reflect the essence of what is believed. Often this is stated in terms relating to whatever is

seen as sacred, holy, numinous, transcendent, or divine. The key for the substantive approach is that it is *what* is believed or done that matters, not the psychological function it serves. Substantive definitions range from the very specific (e.g., belief that Mary conceived while a virgin and that Jesus's dead body came to life again, or belief in the one true God, Allah, and in Muhammad, God's Prophet) to the broad (e.g., belief in a universal spirit or in general human community) (Jensen, 2014; Woodhead et al., 2009).

As with the functional approach, the substantive approach can be differentiated into the personal and cultural levels (Figure 1.1). At the cultural level it is reflected in the common creed that is given assent by the social unit (e.g., congregation, denomination, order). It may also include practices performed as part of the religion.

At the personal level, religion as substance refers to belief in something deemed sacred, transcendent, or divine as seen by the individual. The individual's religious belief may be very similar to that of the group, but it does not have to be. It is entirely possible, psychologically speaking, for your religious belief to be unique to you.

Conceptualizing religion in terms of substance has its merits as well as its drawbacks. The primary advantage to the substantive approach is that it is simple. It is relatively easy to categorize a group as religious if it labels itself as such. A particular religion becomes easy to see and identify. This approach also avoids the potential error of considering as religious those who attempt to deal with life's problems but who would not label themselves as religious (e.g., selfhelp groups, health faddists, social action groups, political groups). It circumvents the simplistic overgeneralization that "everyone is religious."

The problem with the religion-as-substance approach, however, is that it might exclude an apparently "nonreligious" factor in the life of a person or group even though this influence is fulfilling a so-called religious function. For example, politics may have no formal religious content, but participation in a political party can do the same thing for one person that an established religion does for another. Overall, we can say functional approaches refer to *how* something comes to be called religious, whereas substantive approaches aim to indicate *what* things are essentially religious.

Given that these questions are conceptually two distinct issues, they can nevertheless be blended together so that the distinction between them blurs. This occurs, for example, with the concept of sanctification. Pargament and Mahoney (2005) and their colleagues documented that people can sanctify (i.e., set apart for God and therefore make religious) almost any aspect of ordinary "nonreligious" life, including sex, eating, and exercise. Such ordinary "nonreligious" acts become religious when changes in the person's meaning system invoke this adjustment. Such an adjustment would occur in the service of some higher-order meaning. This illustrates the utility of the meaning systems model. We will invoke it from time to time throughout the book.

The Variety of Religious Behaviors

The complexities involved in trying to state what religion is can be made more vivid by making one final point. With all the different ways of conceptualizing religion mentioned above, one would predict an almost endless variety of behaviors labeled “religious.” This point has been made clear by James Dittes of Yale University:

The diversity of phenomena within religion has been catalogued dramatically by Paul Johnson (1959, pp. 47–48):

In the name of religion what deed has not been done? For the sake of religion men have earnestly affirmed and contradicted almost every idea and form of conduct. In the long history of religion appear chastity and sacred prostitution, feasting and fasting, intoxication and prohibition, dancing and sobriety, human sacrifice and the saving of life in orphanages and hospitals, superstition and education, poverty and wealthy endowments, prayer wheels and silent worship, gods and demons, one God and many gods, attempts to escape and to reform the world. How can such diametrical oppositions all be religious?

Johnson’s catalog of contradictions could easily be extended. Even within the relatively homogeneous JudeoChristian tradition, one finds firm insistence on the importance of obedience to regulation and on freedom from regulation, on inculcation of guilt feelings and on freedom from guilt feelings, on autonomy and on “absolute dependence,” on the conservation of social values and on the overthrow of social values, on individual mystical aloofness and on the interdependence and responsibilities of group membership, on fear and on trust, on intellect and on emotion, on salvation by passively received “justification” and on salvation by energetically pursued “good works.” The catalog is almost endless. (1969, p. 607)

And today, almost a half century after the preceding quote by Dittes, if we add “spirituality” to the above considerations about religion, the catalog becomes endlessly multiplied. Therefore, with this diverse set of behaviors carrying the single label “religious,” it is important that whenever we discuss religious behavior, we specify the precise meanings and behaviors in question. Actions, however diverse, can be considered religious at least insofar as they reflect meanings deemed religious by the person acting. Even though they are diverse, focusing on religious actions can be useful in part because actions form the basis of two of the dimensions of religiousness that are presented below.

Defining Religion in Psychological Research

The Attempts

It is now no surprise to say that there is no agreed upon definition of religion either in religious studies and philosophy or in psychology (see Burris,

2005; Stausberg, 2009; Woodhead et al., 2009). One important psychological book uses a functional approach by stating that religion is what one does to come to grips with existential questions (Batson, Schoenrade, & Ventis, 1993), but that is limited in scope and focuses on only one aspect of the general phenomenon of human religiousness. Another important book avoids a strict psychological definition of religion and offers an alternative and useful distinction between “cumulative tradition” and “faith,” and lets what is meant by “religion” be apparent from the context in which it is used (Wulff, 1997). Yet another approach attempts to combine both substantive and functional aspects into one definition: “Religiousness is more or less conscious dependency on a deity/God and the transcendent. This dependency or commitment is evident in one’s personality—experiences, beliefs and thinking—and motivates one’s devotional practice and moral behavior and other activity” (Tamminen, 1991). The substantive aspects (God) and the functional aspects (conscious dependency, motivation) are evident in this definition. However, it breaks down because not all religions require a transcendent god. Also, most psychodynamically oriented psychologists emphasize the unconscious rather than the conscious, most would allow for nontheistic religion rather than only belief in deity, and some of the research data on the correspondence between belief and behavior would seriously challenge whether religions actually motivate moral behavior (Beit-Hallahmi, 2014; Galen, 2012a; Myers, 2012; Saroglou, 2012). Attempts to define religion do not seem to converge.

Of Forces, Gods, and God

Some difficulties in efforts to define religion are illustrated by the ancient meanings of words whose meanings are different today. Two of the most important ancient words whose original meanings differed from subsequent usage are the Hebrew word *elohim*, which meant *gods* (plural), and the Greek word *theos*, which could have been translated by the English word *god* but also often meant *force*. The dilemma with the Hebrew *elohim* is obvious: How is it that Gods are said to have created the heaven and earth, and later the same scriptures are adamant that there is only one God? The Greek *theos* poses perhaps an even greater dilemma in our efforts to understand important religious words and therefore define religion. Its uses varied so that it did not always refer to a god, especially not a good god. Classics scholar Rex Warner, translator of Euripides’ plays, sums it up this way:

Such an idea must be completely foreign to those who use the word “god” in the context of Jewish or Christian tradition. And indeed it is nearly always a mistake, though an unavoidable one, to translate the Greek word “theos” by our word “god.” Often the word means nothing more than a

“force,” whether psychological or material. Physical love, for instance, is a “force” of this sort. . . . The sun also is a “theos,” . . . and these impressive distant objects, like the sun or the stars. . . .” (1958, p. xiii)

If key religious words conveyed such different meanings, it is not surprising that “religion” does also.

The Sacred

Probably the most often quoted definition by a psychologist for the past 20 years was offered by Pargament (1992): religion is “a search for significance in ways related to the sacred” (p. 204), an idea that has its roots in the sociology of religion theorist Emile Durkheim (1912/1995). This sounds good upon first hearing, but when we ask certain key questions, the definition no longer works. For example, we have to know what is meant by “significance”; the answer is that anything that matters to someone is significant to him or her. We also have to know what is meant by “the sacred”; the answer is that sacredness is a property that can be attributed to any object that is set apart due to any blend of social, cognitive, and emotional motivations. This last point has been stated rather bluntly by religious studies scholar Jeffrey Kripal (2014): “In actual fact, almost *anything*—from a rock, a tree, an animal, or a place to a person, a temple, a totem, even a run-over beer can—can become sacred. . . . So, clearly, the sacred is not some stable ‘thing’ or essence” (p. 95, emphasis in original). Now, it is crucial to understand the logic of this definition.

Efforts to define religion by reasoning such as the above break down. A definition so crafted is circular because it results in suggesting that a person’s religion is whatever he or she says, because he or she says so. Consider an alternative strategy: Would it not be better to start by understanding the fundamental processes that regulate or mediate all behaviors? The consequence of this latter approach ought to be that we know more about the complex set of factors that, among other things, result in what is deemed religious or spiritual (Paloutzian & Park, 2014).

The Lesson

A word of wisdom was stated by a scholar of almost 50 years ago: “Any definition of religion is likely to be satisfactory only to its author” (Yinger, 1967, p. 18). This does not mean that we should not grapple with what the concept means, but it does mean that one should not be so foolish as to think that he or she has “got it” at its core, that one’s statement captures an essence of what religion “truly” is.

My own approach, consistent with that of Hood, Hill, and Spilka (2009), is that for psychological research purposes there has not been much

benefit to adhering to one strict definition of religion because such efforts do not seem to have pushed scientific knowledge forward. Definitions go from those stated in essentialist terms to those stated in operational or stipulated terms for purposes of a research investigation. For the purposes of psychological understanding, a religion at least includes the notion that it is a generalized, abstract orientation through which people see the world; it defines their reality, provides a sense of meaning or orientation, and receives a variable level of allegiance and commitment. In light of this and the conceptual distinctions discussed above, for research purposes it is a multidimensional variable that includes facets such as what people believe, feel, do, and know, and how they respond to their beliefs. Such facets are explained below and are called dimensions of religiousness.

As psychologists, it is not our purpose to define the essence of “true religion” or “true spirituality” in a philosophical or theological sense, although trying to do so might be important for other purposes. Instead, our task is to learn how psychological processes work in people’s lives to make what people call the religious and/or spiritual.

A corollary of this is that the results that you get from doing one study are bound to particular techniques, dependent upon the specific procedures and measures that you use. Therefore, if you do a second study and use a different technique to test the same general hypothesis, your results may be different. Such differences in results based on differences in technique make you refine your measures of religious variables and force you to restate more clearly the general religious concept you are attempting to study. Thus, our conceptual understanding of religiousness as a latent variable evolves out of our use of various measured variables. Empirical investigations may use many operational definitions (see Hood & Belzen, 2013, for an overview). When this process is repeated many times and across disciplines, and when the data from one level map well with those of another, we get closer to a comprehensive, accurate, and valid conceptualization of religiousness. This book will reveal that researchers use many approaches. These are discussed more fully in Chapter 4 and are illustrated throughout the book.

DIMENSIONS OF RELIGIOUSNESS

As is the case in the progress of any science, the science of the psychology of religion begins with descriptions of the events to be explained. After the descriptions are reasonably clear, researchers create more refined techniques for measuring the key variables. These subsequent measures both stimulate ideas for theory and are used to test for predictions derived from theory. In the case of psychological understanding, the best place to start is with a good description of an aspect of a religion that states it plainly and objectively in terms of people’s thoughts, feelings, and actions as raw

		Knowledge				Effects of religion in practical life	
		Yes	No			Yes	No
Belief	Yes	Informed Faith	Blind Faith	Belief	Yes	Consistent believer	Hypocrite
	No	Informed Rejection	Blind Rejection		No	Moral agnostic	Consistent unbeliever

FIGURE 1.2. Combinations of religious belief with religious knowledge and with the effects of religion in life.

information prior to attributions or interpretations of them. For example, one should begin with statements in the form “I had a visual percept of a human figure with x -colored hair, y -colored skin, and of z height,” instead of statements such as “I saw Jesus.”

A simple and often used technique to accomplish this (in addition to the previous definitional distinctions) is to recast religiousness as a series of dimensions. Have you ever known people who did not “practice what they preach,” that is, who believed in their religion’s teaching on some moral issue (say, sexual or economic behavior) but who nevertheless acted in the opposite way? Or, have you known someone who had strong religious beliefs but who had very little knowledge about the basis for those beliefs? This would be a classic instance of “blind faith.” These examples illustrate how religions are made up of a variety of facets called dimensions of religiousness (Glock & Stark 1965; Stark & Bainbridge, 1985).³ They also illustrate how these facets can occur in various combinations. Figure 1.2 illustrates different combinations of religious belief with religious knowledge and with the practical effects of one’s religion in life.

Implicit in what I have said so far is a conceptually rich schema for mapping out some logically distinct dimensions of religiousness. This schema, developed by Glock (1962), is a useful way of organizing the field. He made explicit the distinction between what people believe as Truth, what they do to practice their faith, how emotions or conscious experiences are involved in it, what they know about their beliefs, and how their everyday lives are affected by their religion. Glock summarized this analysis of religiousness in terms of five dimensions: beliefs, practice, feelings, knowledge, and effects. Religiousness is seen as a multidimensional variable composed of

³These dimensions used to be called dimensions of religious commitment. I have changed the wording to religiousness in order to place a more distinct emphasis on the psychological processes that mediate religious belief, behavior, practice, feelings, and effects than the term *commitment* might suggest.

at least these five factors, and they are implied by Pargament's (1992) more recent characterization, quoted earlier.

This and similar schemas are useful because they conveniently enable us to describe different religions. Ninian Smart (1989) clearly illustrated the differences among the world's major religions by distinguishing them along such lines. For example, certain religions are long on practice and ritual (e.g., an Armenian Apostolic mass can last an hour and a half and you are looking at the priest's back almost all the time), other religions or religious individuals place heavy emphasis on feelings and emotions (e.g., Otto, 1923/1950, emphasized a sense of the "numinous" and awe), whereas others put the emphasis on believing a specific doctrine (e.g., the doctrine of the Trinity, or that there is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet). Thinking of religiousness as being made up of a combination of these facets also makes it easy for me to ask questions about the relation among cognitive variables (religious belief and knowledge), emotional variables (religious feelings), and behavioral variables (religious practice and effects). Similarly, much research and several modern, refined measures in the psychology of religion (see Chapter 4) are designed with the relations among such facets of religiousness in mind.

These five factors are not completely independent of each other—a methodological issue to be detailed later. They correlate with each other to a moderate degree; that is, people who have strong beliefs may also (but not necessarily) have religious feelings, display religious practice, and so forth. Nevertheless, due to its logical clarity and its potential for wide application, this schema gives us a good descriptive language that we can use to begin talking psychologically about religions.

Believing: Ideology

The belief dimension refers to what is believed as part of a religion, how strongly the belief is held, the bases for the intellectual assent, and how salient that belief is in the person's life. For example, belief in the existence of God is a religious ideology. In nontraditional religions or other spiritualities, this dimension could correspond to a deep commitment to a set of values. Or, in primitive or "local" religions, it may refer to the belief that spirits inhabit physical objects.

Different categories of belief exist. One type of belief essentially amounts to a bottom-line assumption that serves as the basis for the religion. For example, belief in specific teachings about God, Christ, and salvation serves to warrant the existence of the Roman Catholic Church. The belief that Allah revealed himself to Muhammad is a foundation of Islam. The belief that there is one monotheistic God who promised certain things to Abraham is a cornerstone of Judaism. Such beliefs embody part of the essential "ground" upon which the religion rests.

A second type of belief refers to purpose, that is, belief about what the purpose of humankind is. A third type of belief refers to how best to implement that purpose. For example, if one of God's purposes is for people to behave kindly toward each other, then this type of belief would be concerned with specific ways in which kindness should be enacted.

Personal religious beliefs can be held with varying degrees of strength. They can also hold either central or peripheral roles in a person's life. Clearly, the more central the beliefs and the more strongly they are held, the more pervasive will be the effects of a religion in a person's life and the more devout the person will appear to others.

Practice: Ritual

The religious practice dimension refers to the set of behaviors that are part of the religion itself. This includes such acts as attendance at worship services, the format of worship services, prayer, observance of special holidays or days of the week as sacred, fasting, and participation in sacraments. Various practices are more or less central to a faith; for example, the Five Pillars of Islam are considered a definitive part of the Muslim religion. Most religions include as part of religious practice some ethical code which members of the group are expected to observe. In the Hebrew Bible, for example, the code was given in the Law of Moses and is written in the Torah.

Feeling: Experience

The religious feeling dimension is concerned with the inner mental and emotional world of the individual. In addition to experiential events to which people attribute a religious meaning, the feeling dimension includes such things as the desire to believe in some religion, the fear about not being religious, the sense of physical, psychological, and spiritual well-being that derives from believing, the feeling of guilt following a misdeed, and the like. Research on the nature of mysticism and similar intense experiences also focuses on this dimension. Feelings are sometimes used as a test of the validity of one's faith. For example, people who feel close to God may conclude that their faith is genuine—because their feelings say so. Feelings are also used as an indication of the presence or absence of a divine spirit. People who feel fearful and anxious may conclude that they are out of step with God, that they have sinned, or that God has left them.

Knowledge: Understanding

The religious knowledge dimension refers to the information one has about one's faith, as compared to belief in the faith. In the case of Islam and

Christianity, for example, the knowledge dimension refers to what the believer knows about the roots of their faiths in Judaism, the history of manuscripts, and other similar information both in agreement with and in opposition to the teaching of that religion. Religious knowledge can vary in degree of importance. As is illustrated in Figure 1.2, it is entirely possible that a person could be committed to a set of beliefs (and thus score high along the belief dimension), yet know very little about them (and thus score low along the knowledge dimension).

Effects: Consequences

The effects dimension refers to behavior, but not behavior that is a formal part of religious practice itself. Rather, the reference here is to the effect one's religion has on the other, "nonreligious" facets of the person's life. An example would be an alcoholic who stops drinking shortly after a religious conversion. The drinking or nondrinking behavior is not in itself a religious act; but it may be a consequence of the conversion that the person stops drinking. In general, a person's pattern of moral behavior or personal habits may be guided by religious beliefs, although such actions are not aspects of religious practice itself.

The Dimensions in Combination

The chief advantage of conceptualizing religiousness along these five dimensions is that it helps us see religion as a multidimensional variable composed of several facets. These facets can be teased apart in order to see how the different aspects of religiousness work in combination. For example, when we see someone who has strong belief but little knowledge, or one for whom knowledge is unimportant, we think of this person as having "blind faith." Such a believer is in effect saying "Don't confuse me with the facts." When we observe someone with strong belief who engages in religious practice but displays none of the expected effects, we tend to consider that person a hypocrite. In popular terms, such a person does not practice what he or she preaches. When the expected effects are present, we see the person as devout or genuine. A similar analysis shows that performing religious practices without belief or feelings amounts to little more than drily "going through the motions." It would be misleading to say, however, that such a person is not religious. It would be more correct to say that the person performs certain religious behaviors without the corresponding belief. For research purposes, teasing religion apart into its elements and then recombining them (as is illustrated in the most elementary of ways in Figure 1.2) allows psychologists of religion to pose and answer questions about more fine-tuned meanings of the workings of various religions in the

human mind. This book contains many examples of research conducted following logic of this sort.

PSYCHOLOGICAL ROOTS OF RELIGIOUSNESS EXIST AT MULTIPLE LEVELS

Psychology is a heterogeneous field with different levels of analysis that together enrich our understanding of human functioning. Each level is also a perspective on how best to understand people and includes fundamental assumptions about which root causes of behavior are most important. Each level points our attention to a different process in order to understand the basis of religiousness. We can appreciate each on its own, as was historically done, but current theory combines various aspects of them in order to create a more integrated picture of how psychological factors in religiousness work. At a minimum, the following seven levels, which go roughly from micro to macro, should be kept in mind.

Neuropsychological and Cognitive Bases

A new line of research whose knowledge is on the cutting edge and whose greatest impact seems likely to lie in the future is the neuropsychology of religiousness and experiences deemed religious. Researchers in these areas try to learn what is going on in the brain during such experiences. Modern tools provide brain scan techniques that makes it possible to “see” which areas of the brain increase or decrease in activity during meditation, religious rituals, prayer, and other spiritual practices (see Azari, 2006; McNamara, 2009; McNamara & Butler, 2013; Paloutzian, Swenson, & McNamara, 2006; Wildman, 2011). Proponents of this approach argue that the roots of religion are in neural pathways. We will take a closer look at this research in Chapter 8.

The cognitive emphasis stems from the idea that our minds process information before we respond to it. We respond to the meaning of a stimulus, that is, to our interpretation of it rather than to the stimulus itself. Also, our minds use special cognitive structures, called schemas, to plan and guide the sequence of our behaviors in accord with the circumstance. For example, if someone bows down and worships before a stone idol, that response is performed not because the person observes a piece of carved stone, but because that particular piece of carved stone carries a special religious meaning to the person, which activates a schema that regulates the appropriate bowing and worshipping behaviors. In addition, cognitive scientists of religion explore questions such as why humans tend to anthropomorphize the God concept when almost nobody actually thinks his or

her god is a human being, or what cognitive abilities and limitations regulate religious ritual. Many similar lines of research are found in Chapter 8.

Learning, Reinforcement, and Modeling

In the behaviorist–learning approach, represented historically in the works of Watson (1925) and Skinner (1953) and the social learning theory of Bandura (1986), people behave the way they do because they have been conditioned to behave that way. Virtually all behavior, except simple reflexes, is learned and can be changed by the procedures of classical conditioning, instrumental or operant conditioning, or modeling and imitation. When religiousness is seen as learned behavior, as contrasted with seeing it as the fulfillment of deep needs, there is no interest in unconscious processes or other needs that might exist inside people’s personalities. Rather, we look for specific stimulus cues that trigger religious responses, the religious responses to those stimuli, and the basic conditioning processes that link the two.

Strict behaviorists have tended to reject religions, but not because doing so is inherent in their position. It is simply that, historically speaking, behaviorists have been unconcerned with things they think cannot be observed. For them, religious behaviors may be observable but “religion” or “religious experience” cannot. Because they consider all behavior, including all religious behavior, to be learned via basic processes of reward, punishment, association, and imitation, there has been no reason to look for an alternative perspective. Behaviorists bring their powerful concepts and technology to the analysis of religious behavior, but they do not offer a formal, clearly stated “psychology of religion.”

Personality and Depth Psychological Processes

Perhaps the most well known of the possible psychological views is based on the psychodynamic approach, whose origin is in the thought of Freud (1900/1955; see Corveleyn, Luyten, & Dezutter, 2013 for an overview). There are variations of this approach in the writings of Adler, Jung, Erikson, and others (Walborn, 2014). The fundamental proposition in this approach is that people are seldom aware of the true determinants of their own feelings and actions because the true causes of action are unconscious. That is, the energy out of which our actions spring and the true motives that propel us to do whatever we do lie hidden in the unconscious mind. Seldom do we ever get in touch with these hidden motives. Instead, we usually must be content only with knowledge of our perceived, surface motives. It is these unconscious processes that are the “real” determiners of religious motivation. If we want to understand human religiousness, the unconscious mind is the place to look.

Different types of psychodynamic theory interpret the psychological function served by religion to be either positive or negative. Freud's theory, for example, as represented in *The Future of an Illusion* (1927/1961), was that religion is a type of group neurosis and that God is a fantasized substitute father figure. His rationale was that religious people are basically infantile, insecure, and unstable. (Actually, Freud believed this to be the case for everyone, not just religious people.) Consequently, they need religious doctrine, rules of conduct, and religious social support in addition to the other aspects of civilization in order to maintain a stable life. According to Freud, therefore, the religion that he observed was essentially a protection against anxiety. Not surprisingly, this idea was offensive to many people in the religious community. In contrast, Jung's (1933, 1938) psychodynamic depth view was that religion served a more positive role in the personality. Jung taught that people had an unconscious need to look for and find God. This need for God as a psychic reality was believed to be a natural part of human psychological makeup.

Looking ahead, there are several newer approaches to both the application of psychodynamic ideas (e.g., Corveleyn et al., 2013; Rizzuto, 1979, 1991) and concepts of personality traits and structure (Piedmont & Wilkins, 2013; Saroglou, 2002; Walborn, 2014) to understanding people's religion. These will be touched upon when they are related to our research-oriented discussion. Some views of the role of religion in the authoritarian personality (Chapter 6), conversion (Chapter 7), and the relation between religiousness and mental health and well-being (Chapter 9) have their roots in such theory.

Values, Growth, and Fulfillment

In this approach, one looks for the roots of religion in something that meets people's needs for fulfillment, growth, and meaning. The writings of Rogers (1961), Maslow (1970), and May (1967) are representative of this basic outlook, sometimes called the "humanistic" or "fulfillment" views in psychology. Existentialistic variations of this approach are found in the provocative works of Frankl (1969, 1975). In this view, people are generally thought to be born with positive potential for growth—an innate striving to continually become more "fully human." The emphasis is on the purposive growth process—the process of becoming—rather than on attaining a static end state. *Self-actualization* is the term used to describe the direction of movement. This term indicates that each person strives to unfold and fulfill the natural potential that is part of the self. Each person has an innate striving for meaning, and religion is one thing that can fulfill this need.

Those who posit growth and fulfillment needs as the basis of religiousness have been more likely than Freudians or behaviorists to be tolerant

or positive regarding the value of religions (Allport, 1950; Frankl, 1975; Maslow, 1964). They have pointed out that people have needs for fulfillment and that having a mature faith is one way to meet them. They would also add that religion can take on both positive and negative expressions. In one case, being religious might supply a sense of fulfillment and completeness for the individual; whereas in another case, it might supply a rigid set of rules that restrict individual freedom and inhibit personal growth.

Social Influence from Interpersonal to Cultural

This strategy places the emphasis on two observations: first, that human beings are social/cultural creatures; and second, that we respond to our experienced meaning of the world rather than to the world itself. The emphasis on the social/cultural dimension of human behavior stems from research in social and cultural psychology. Research in this field has shown that most of our behavior, most of the time, is influenced by social forces of one type or another such as direct social pressure, conformity influence, or orders to obey—sometimes to a degree far more powerful than we would intuitively guess. Further, modern cultural psychology has shown that people in different cultures process the same information in different ways, that is, the meaning of a stimulus does not automatically transfer to a person in a different culture even though the stimulus is identical. The relevance of knowledge of this sort for the psychology of religion is big because it means that the “same religion” is not the same religion in different contexts (Saroglou & Cohen, 2011, 2013).

From Past Time: Evolutionary and Historical Roots

There are two long-standing views of the roots of human religiousness. The field of evolutionary psychology, which has recently made important theoretical contributions to the psychology of religion (Atran, 2002; Bellah, 2011; Feierman, 2009; Kirkpatrick, 2005, 2013), explores questions about whether the human tendency toward religion was itself a primary adaptation (i.e., whether it had survival value in early humans and their prehuman ancestors) or whether the human capability of religion was instead a side effect of other adaptive processes. A related line of theory concerns the degree to which religiousness is rooted in genetic inheritance versus being due to cultural evolution. These issues are highlighted in Chapter 3. In either case, this approach points out that the brain developed through evolution in ways that make religious experience and the construction of religious meaning possible.

The second view of the roots of religiousness comes from the field of history. Historical factors obviously cannot be overlooked, since all human religions developed from something that came before them. Our current

events, including the formations of religions, do not emerge in a causal vacuum. The present is affected by the past. Thus, the longer view of the “sweep of history” in which our own lives and circumstances are embedded should be kept in view.

Multicultural and International Factors and Research

Religiousness and spirituality permeate every nation and culture. In a way unlike that of any other force, they shape and influence people’s world-views, how they communicate, and how they lead their lives. As our modern world becomes more diverse, yet also more interdependent, it becomes more important to understand the ways in which powerful religious phenomena operate and what they mean in the lives of individuals worldwide. Fortunately, modern research on the psychology of religion is being conducted in an increasing number of Western countries and expanding to other parts of the world. Multicultural psychology of religion has begun. Recent studies include data from predominantly Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, and other non-Judeo-Christian cultures that in the past did not produce psychology of religion research. Increasing numbers of universities worldwide teach and do research in the psychology of religion; their contributions are expanding in the field in ways that were previously not feasible (See Ağilkaya-Şahin, Streib, Ayten, & Hood, 2015, for illustration in Turkey; Dueck & Han, 2012, for illustration in China; and Paloutzian, 2016, for a global overview).⁴

Given the importance of religion in international affairs, the importance of acknowledging cultural and national identity as one of the major roots of one’s religion cannot be overstated. Cross-cultural research allows our understanding of religiousness to become more complete. It also allows the psychology of religion to connect more to the general, larger field of psychology.

Multilevel Explanations and Robust Knowledge

Each of the preceding levels of analysis of human religiousness reflects basic assumptions about how to view human nature and to interpret religious behavior. Psychologists of religion are likely to employ them synthetically, with parts of them knit together in various ways, as they develop research within a multilevel interdisciplinary paradigm. Each approach is related to some form of research mentioned in the text. For example, the

⁴*The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, *Archive for the Psychology of Religion*, and *Mental Health, Religion, and Culture* are three journals that are deliberately internationally focused. Examples of international research can be found in them.

various classical theories noted in Chapter 3 are reflections of the fundamental approaches. Strong social influence processes will be found to operate in some religious groups, as noted in various chapters. A combination of humanistic influence with social and cognitive emphases is the basis for Allport's research on religious orientation, highlighted in Chapters 6 and 11. Taken together, the overall set of approaches reflects a variety of levels that we can use to think with. We can combine them and apply them to those aspects of religious belief and behavior where they seem to fit. If we do it right, the outcome is a combination of findings that are maximally robust and creation of good theory.

IS RELIGION PSYCHOLOGICALLY SPECIAL?

Now that we have examined the attempts at defining religion and various schemas for conceptualizing religiousness, we come to a question basic to the whole field. Is human religiousness psychologically special? That is, are humans so constructed that they *must* be religious in some way? If so, then whatever contributes to a "genuine religious function" is an evolutionarily inherited need in all people. If not, then psychologically speaking it may or may not be useful, but it is optional. This issue has been battered around for decades in the psychology of religion. Here are its variations, followed by the implications of each.

A Unique or a General Psychological Process?

The central question of the issue of the uniqueness of religion is whether the processes that mediate religiousness are fundamentally different from those that mediate behavior in general. That is, is this an "essentially" unique phenomenon? If so, then psychological principles that apply only to religion are required to understand it. If not, then the principles from general psychology can more easily be applied to the understanding of religiousness. Below are Dittes's (1969) four steps along a continuum ranging from "religion is not unique" at one end to "religion is unique" at the other. Each step in succession represents increasing contention for uniqueness and a decreasing amount of relevance of general psychological concepts. The steps are summarized in Box 1.1.

The first and most open position is that religious behavior is regarded as one example of behavior in general. The principles of general psychology are simply brought to bear upon the analysis of religious behavior. The second position is that religious phenomena contain unusually prominent relationships among general psychological variables and processes. The basic position here is that religious behavior is governed by the same principles as any other behavior (so that the principles from general psychology should

be applied), but that in the case of a religion certain phenomena are more discernible than they are elsewhere. These phenomena may exist in other behavioral areas, but they “stand out” more in the area of religion. An example of a behavior that might be particularly prominent in a religion is the phenomenon of emotional arousal in groups. Imagine a speaker making an emotional appeal to a group for which emotional processes are important features of religious meetings, as is the case for certain groups in which those in the congregation demonstrate heightened activity, arousal, and glossolalia (speaking in tongues). The speaker might raise the emotional pitch with the audience responding increasingly over time. The result can include chanting, crying, fainting, or extreme arousal within a large proportion of the audience. Because this is a group phenomenon, those people who are part of the audience probably would not react in the same way if they were alone, and not part of a large crowd. Considering such behavior to be unusually prominent in a religion means that although it may occur in other areas, it is more likely to be seen in this particular religion.

BOX 1.1. Four Levels of the Possible Uniqueness or Non-Uniqueness of the Psychological Processes That Mediate Religiousness

Non-Unique

1. *Instancing.* Religious behavior is considered to be just one facet of human behavior and as such is non-unique among other subcategories of behavior.
2. *Uniquely prominent relationships.* Religious behavior is subject to the same guidelines for psychological processes and elements as other types of human behavior, but these psychological phenomena are more distinct and prominent in the realm of religion compared to other areas of behavior.
3. *Unique relationships.* The inherent special nature of religion causes general psychological variables and mechanisms underlying religious phenomena to have relationships that are definitively different from relationships that exist in other contexts.
4. *Basically unique variables.* There are unique psychological components that are imperative to the existence of religious phenomena; these elements are fundamental to no other area of life save religion.

Unique

The third position holds that religious phenomena contain relationships unique among general psychological variables and processes. The assumption here is that the basic factors that operate to produce religious behavior are the same as those found in any behavior, but that due to the special nature of a religion they work together in such a way that they generate forms of behavior and states of experience that are unlike those found elsewhere. In this case the explanations for religious phenomena are not unique to the religion, but the phenomena themselves are. An example might be a feeling of freedom that follows absolute acceptance by God. One might argue that the principles that operate to produce this type of freedom are understandable enough, but that this or a similar religion is the only place where it can be observed.

The fourth position is that religious phenomena contain fundamentally unique processes and variables, ones that operate in a religion and nowhere else. The assumption is that the factors that make it what it is are part of its essence; thus they cannot be found elsewhere. Any correspondence between religious behavior and nonreligious behavior is either coincidental or illusory. As an illustration, some people might argue that their religious commitment is unlike other types of commitment even though they would acknowledge that other commitments exist. They would say that the processes or sentiment involved in believing in one's religion is fundamentally different from the processes or sentiment involved in believing in anything else, whether it be a political party, a personal goal, a social institution, or another person, and that it is therefore meaningless to compare them.

Following the above belief illustration, for accurate psychological analysis it is crucial to distinguish between the content of various beliefs and the processes involved in believing anything. The contents of all beliefs are unique in some way, otherwise they would be the same belief. But that is not the issue. The psychological issue is whether there are processes at work in religiousness that are fundamentally, essentially different psychological processes such that there are no such psychological processes at work anywhere else in the human mind. This idea is what seems to be argued by those who promote the most extreme position summarized above. This seems to be the position that invokes the notion of supernatural agency in the life of a religious person.

Implications of the Various Positions

There are several aspects to the process of studying religiousness that may be related to one's position on the uniqueness issue. First, your position is likely to influence the methods that you use to study a religion psychologically. Those arguing strongly for uniqueness are more likely to use a phenomenological strategy for research because they do not believe that a religion can be understood in terms of the same variables as other behaviors.

They are more likely to be content with a completely descriptive account. They may be less intent on relating religious experiences to those of non-religious behaviors. On the other hand, those who see a religion as one instance of behavior in general are more likely to employ quantitative measurement of religious variables. They will make an effort to discover relationships between those variables and other, nonreligious variables.

Second, an investigator's position on the uniqueness issue will influence the starting point for his or her study of someone's religiousness. One who sees religious belief and behavior as part of behavior in general will more likely begin with principles that come from general psychology. These could include principles of reward and punishment, unconscious motivation, or social influence. In any case, the strategy will probably be to employ a known set of concepts and possibly a theoretical framework. In contrast, one who views religiousness as fundamentally unique is more likely to begin investigating it by avoiding the tendency to import already known concepts and theory to the task. Afterwards, building a coherent set of statements about a particular religion might be attempted.

Third, a strong position that religiousness is unique is more likely to be adopted by those who believe that a scientific and religious or supernatural explanation of something cannot both be correct at the same time. They might say that if God does something (supernatural), then it can't be fully understood by human reason (science). In other words, naturalistic methods cannot yield explanations of such events. In contrast, the religion-as-general-behavior position is more consistent with the view that scientific and religious explanations can coexist. The latter approach might point out, for example, that a scientific explanation of conversion merely helps us understand more about how the supernatural works. The possibility of such influences may be fully granted. Logically, the god hypothesis and scientific explanations are neutral with respect to each other, a point explained in more depth in Chapter 2.

Unique *and* Non-Unique

The issue of whether religiousness is like or unlike other human activities is foundational to the psychology of religion (Baumeister, 2002; Dittes, 1969; Paloutzian & Park, 2005). If a religion operates the same way that any other human behavior operates, then it is non-unique, and there is no compelling reason for psychology to study it other than its practical importance in the world (Funder, 2002; McCrae, 1999). But if a religion works in a way that is fundamentally different, then it is unique and psychology must study it with special concepts in order to be a complete science of human mental processes and behavior (Paloutzian, 2006).

Perhaps the unique and the non-unique assumptions are both true but in different ways. Looking at religiousness from the point of view of

a psychologist, it is obvious that religious belief, behavior, emotions, and cognitions largely operate by the same processes as any other beliefs, behavior, emotions, and cognitions. This should neither surprise nor threaten anyone, including the strict religious believer, because they are standard psychological processes. Also, however, there are substantive aspects of specific religions not found elsewhere (Pargament, 2002), for example, the idea that a God exists who is simultaneously omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent, while bad things happen in the world. This element of substance nevertheless has its effects by means of the same meaning system processes as any other item of information. Therefore, like anything else, religions are unique in particular ways while they share many psychological features in common and operate by the same meaning system processes that all human behavior does.

MY APPROACH

There are some overall orientations and themes that propel this book. The most basic of these is that I invite students (and more seasoned researchers) to the field. Thus, this book is not merely a text; I want what I say to stick with you.

Another orientation is that there is no contradiction between a scientific and a religious explanation of someone's believing, although there is a difference between them. The difference is that the scientific explanation is subject to test against publically verifiable evidence; the religious explanation is not. That is why psychology is a science, and religion is not. Science does not make a god hypothesis, nor does it by nature disconfirm it. Scientific and religious explanations are orthogonal to each other; they are by nature neither hostile nor friendly to each other. However, some people are suspicious of science, premised on arbitrary but unnecessary presuppositions. Psychology cannot explain away religion and religion cannot explain away psychology. Psychological methodology is inherently neutral with respect to religious truth claims.

Another orientation is that psychological concepts and methods can help us understand religion in a way that is complementary to the contributions of other disciplines. Fields such as history, anthropology, and linguistics, for example, each offer a set of concepts, a perspective, and a method that when brought to the study of specific religions and human religiousness add a special insight that cannot be gained in any other way. There are certain kinds of knowledge about religions that historians can gain because of their perspective, and there are other kinds of knowledge available to psychologists because of their perspective. No single approach by itself can give you the whole truth, but each approach can contribute a piece of it. Thus, thinking in terms of the multilevel interdisciplinary paradigm

in combination with the model of religious meaning systems gives you the most effective way I know of for how to approach looking at, and thinking about, this vast and important human phenomenon called religiousness. This book encourages you to look at religion from multiple disciplines to have a fuller grasp of it. The other perspectives will enrich the one you gain from this book—the perspective of psychology.

TAKE-HOME MESSAGES

- Religions are complex and diverse, and are found in every culture. The myriad manifestations of religiousness catalog all varieties of behaviors, beliefs, rules and freedoms, postulates of the nature of what is unseen, emotional expressions, and acts of violence as well as of loving care.
- Religiousness can be conceptualized at both cultural and personal levels, and as based on the substance or content of what is believed or as a matter of the functions it serves in the person or culture.
- Efforts to define religion in the abstract have not produced consensus. Although some psychologists have offered definitions of religion, a psychological approach is not concerned with essentialist definitions, whether or not based on notions of “the sacred,” and instead focuses on conducting good scientific research out of which better conceptualizations of religion can emerge.
- Dimensions of religiousness include the content of what is believed, practices performed as religious ritual or as other prescribed behaviors, knowledge about the origins and intellectual issues involved in the religion, feelings manifest as part of the religion as such or as an effect of its role elsewhere in life, and behavioral consequences of one’s religiousness in ordinary “nonreligious” life.
- The psychological roots of religiousness are multiple and exist at all levels of analysis ranging from the neurological to the social and cultural. Fully understanding them requires knowledge of the contribution of processes at each level, and knowledge of their interactions.
- Different views exist on the degree to which religion is psychologically unique. The most “non-unique” view (Box 1.1, number 1) is that religiousness is mediated by the same general psychological processes as any other behavior. The most “unique” view (number 4) is that certain processes are at work in religiousness that are found nowhere else. Between these two extremes is number 2, which proposes that religion is mediated by the same processes as any other behavior but that certain phenomena “stand out” more in religion than elsewhere. View

number 3 proposes that religious phenomena contain relationships unique among general psychological variables and processes, and thus that the basic factors operating to produce religious behavior are the same for any behavior, but that in religion they work to produce behavior and experience found only in religion.

FURTHER READING

Basic Concepts, Themes, and Scope of the Psychology of Religion

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CHAPTER 2

Intellectual Journey to the Psychology of Religion

Psychology of Religion at the Beginning of Psychology

The Exit and Reemergence of the Psychology of Religion

Philosophy of Science and Modern Psychology of Religion

Religion, Spirituality, and Meaning Making

Meaning Making and Remaking

Take-Home Messages

Further Reading

The psychology of religion is old and new. It was a part of psychology when it began as a science. Then it went into hiding for approximately 40 years, reemerged, and became a complete subdiscipline with research under way across the board in general psychological areas. It followed a non-uniform intellectual path. Why? And what insights do we gain by appropriating what was learned along that path? Let us follow the intellectual steps from the very beginning of the psychology of religion (in spiritism, the esoteric, telepathy, and the search for communication with the spirits of the dead) to today—what is unfolding now—slightly more than 100 years later. In this journey, we step through important, fundamental rules for how to think psychologically about religiousness and spirituality. So equipped, you can handle everything else in this book. Questions to be asked include the following:

1. Out of what intellectual mud did the psychology of religion evolve? And important for now, what issues did the early researchers solve, if any? Or, on the other hand, did they leave unfinished business that has come back to haunt us in disguise?
2. Why did the psychology of religion cease to exist for about 40 years? And on what basis are we now on intellectually sound ground for doing psychological research?
3. What philosophy of science underpinnings support modern psychology of religion and make it properly a subdiscipline of psychology as well as an important contributor to religious studies? Where does the psychology of religion fit in the so-called dialogue between science and religion?
4. How are we advised to think psychologically, and effectively, about religion and spirituality now that we are in the third millennium C.E.?

PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION AT THE BEGINNING OF PSYCHOLOGY

Imagine you were a scientist in the field of psychology when it was in its infancy, around the year 1900. Without having had any exposure to our modern research methods, how would you have studied the psychological aspects of human religiousness? Remember that psychologists at that time had no computer, no sophisticated techniques of questionnaire design, scaling, or test construction, and their statistical procedures were primitive compared with those of today. Add to this the challenges inherent in doing scientific research on a topic like religion: it is by nature difficult to study with laboratory experimental methods. One would guess that those researchers would forget it and study a more accessible topic.

Yet, the psychology of religion has been around since the very beginnings of psychology. Before 1900 there were research articles by Americans on the topic (Leuba, 1896; Starbuck, 1897), and contemporary with them the rigorous German experimental psychologist Wilhelm Wundt (1911/1921) wrote on it.¹ One of the first books ever with a title of the form “The Psychology of . . . *anything*” was Edwin Starbuck’s *Psychology of Religion* (1899). He was a young professor at Stanford University and had previously been a student of William James at Harvard. In 1902 James published his classic *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Many of the ideas of current writers have roots in James’s thought. Other pioneers of psychology and former presidents of the American Psychological Association, such as G.

¹See Wulff (1997) for a summary of Wundt’s approach to the psychology of religion.

Stanley Hall, also published research on the psychology of religion. Finally, one of the first psychological journals was titled *The American Journal of Religious Psychology and Education* (1904–1911). Therefore, even though the psychology of religion was not the only topic in psychology at that time, it did enjoy its share of attention from leaders in the field (Beit-Hallahmi, 1974; Dittes, 1969; Vande Kemp, 1992; Wulff, 1997, 1998).

These pioneers used two basic approaches to their research, which are early versions of some of the modern procedures. These approaches are called *empirical–statistical* and *interpretive–analytic*. Each of these contained features that contributed to the field’s decline, and each has its intellectual descendants today.

Starbuck and the “Either/Or” Philosophy

Starbuck (1899) did the first well-known empirical–statistical investigation of the psychology of religious conversion. He began with a premise that he stated unambiguously on page 2 of his classic book. This statement also reflects a flaw that I call the “either/or” philosophy.

Let us understand each other in the beginning. We proceed on the assumption that this is a lawful universe; that there is no fraction of any part of it which is not entirely determined and conditioned by orderly sequence: that the *laws which determine every event*, no matter how mysterious, are ascertainable and thinkable. . . . All things follow an irresistible sequence of cause and effect. (p. 2), emphasis added)

This is a statement of the classical doctrine of naturalistic determinism. Starbuck clearly means to apply this doctrine to religious phenomena. He argued that religiousness is non-unique and can be understood by the same principles as any other behavior. Thus, right at the outset he brought to the surface an issue that troubled people for a century: pitting religion and psychology against each other. This apparent opposition is more obvious when we want to explain how an event (say, a religious conversion) occurred. Either the religious explanation or the naturalistic explanation could be valid, but not both. It was an implicit assumption that somehow an explanation at one level violated the truth value of an explanation at the other level (e.g., if your conversion is the result of naturalistic processes, then how could God have done it?). This apparent opposition still causes misunderstanding on both sides today. It sounds as if science is a threat because it might “explain away” one’s religion.

Starbuck also wrote, “Science has conquered one field after another, until it is now entering the most complex, the most inaccessible, and the most sacred domain—that of religion” (1899, p. 1). Notice his use of the word *conquered*, as if science and religion were inherently and necessarily

in conflict with each other, and only one of them could win. This is an unfortunate and incorrect idea. Science and religion do not have to be at war, unless of course one begins with a presupposition that they must be.

The way Starbuck phrased his statements—and the way others responded to his general idea—represents the historical context of that time. His statements were phrased in terms of a 19th-century philosophy of science. Fortunately, modern thinking about the nature and limits of science has advanced beyond this presupposition. We now recognize that a sound philosophy of science does not include the either/or orientation. Nor is it blindly both/and. I alert you to this issue now; it is a crucial point we will examine later in this chapter.

Starbuck's procedures were an early version of a questionnaire-interview approach. He made a list of 12 openended questions, printed them on paper, and asked people to answer them, resulting in what amounted to a religious autobiography. Examples of his questions are:

- II. What force and motive led you to seek a higher and better life?
- III. [What were the] circumstances and experiences preceding conversion? . . .
- VI. What changes did you find that conversion had worked out in your life? (Starbuck, 1899, p. 23)

These and the other questions indicate that Starbuck had on his mind many of the questions that we still have on our minds today. He tried to get at whether there was a “ripe age” for conversion, what motives might be for conversion, what the effects of conversion were, and what role emotions might play, among other questions.

Starbuck then made large charts on which he categorized the information contained in the autobiographies. His charts were precursors to modern computer spreadsheets; one axis listed the participants in the study and the other axis listed the questions they answered. At the intersection of each element of each axis, he wrote what that participant said in response to that question. This method allowed him to see the important data across all questions for an individual subject, as well as to observe the commonality and frequency of a certain response to one question across the whole group of subjects.

This method had two desirable features. First, it allowed the researcher to see what a particular conversion in a particular person looked like—at least as it was reflected in the subject's verbal report. Second, it allowed him to see a composite picture of conversion in general for the statistically average person. Psychologists still do both of these things today, as is reflected by what are now called, respectively, the *idiographic* and *nomothetic* approaches to research.

One understandable limit of Starbuck's research must be mentioned,

especially nowadays when psychologists are serious about gaining knowledge that is valid globally, not only in the Western world. It is that his was one study conducted in the late 1890s in California, in the context of the Protestant Methodist denomination of Christianity. As such, although his book is a little masterpiece for its time, much additional research is required before we can know how well his findings generalize to other people, at other times, in other places, who convert to other religions. Fortunately, this expansive approach to research is now under way (Park & Paloutzian, 2013).

James and Empirical Phenomenology

William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* was the first book to explore individual accounts of religious experience. Although his work was less quantitative than Starbuck's, he examined what many people consider the deepest and most profound aspects of being religious.

In Chapter 1 you read about the distinctions between the terms *religion* or *religiousness* and *spirituality*. We defined spirituality as referring to a broader category of more personal and less institutionalized beliefs and practices. James was ahead of his time in his explanations of being "religious" as a private, personal experience and way of life. *The Varieties of Religious Experience* might well be titled *The Varieties of Spiritual Experience* if it were published today (Miller & Thoresen, 1999, p. 7). James (1902/1985) claimed that mystical states of consciousness are the "root and center" of personal religion (p. 301). As will be clear in Chapter 8, spiritual and religious experiences can be potent and leave a permanent mark on people's lives. Beyond mysticism, James addressed conversion (addressed in Chapter 7), prayer, and healthy- and sick-mindedness (addressed in Chapter 9). His definition of religion as "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine" (James, 1902/1985, p. 34) is still regarded by some scholars as among the most insightful that have been attempted. See Box 2.1 for my understanding of why James is important to the field.

Unlike his student Starbuck, James chose not to rely on statistical records. Some psychologists, especially those who favor so-called qualitative methods, argue that the richness of the religious life of the individual is lost with a statistical records approach. Instead, James used a *phenomenological* or *interpretive-analytic* strategy. Much of his book is filled with biographical or literary case study material, and much of that is in the form of personal descriptions of religious experiences. What James did was analyze these descriptions according to their psychological meanings and vividly use them to illustrate the points he made via philosophical analysis.

James's strategy differed from Starbuck's in several ways. This

BOX 2.1. Comment on William James by Raymond Paloutzian

Although William James (1902/1985) is highly celebrated, often quoted, and elevated for *what* he said, to me, more important than what he said are *that* he said it and *when* he said it. At the turn of the 20th century, almost no one in psychology was paying attention to religiousness. James was a Harvard professor of philosophy and medicine and a founder of the American Psychological Association. That such an influential, high-profile person would lecture and publish a book on individual accounts of religious experiences gave the psychology of religion credibility.

James is neither the Genius nor the Last Word on psychological processes in religiousness. But he was a highly critical thinker with an exceptionally keen mind who had the time and opportunity to use records of personal religious accounts and write psychological analyses of them. That he noted that there is a healthy and a sick kind of religiousness is neither surprising nor revelatory; that had been said for millennia. His oft-quoted definition of religion places singular importance on the role of experience, which had the effect of reifying its importance at the expense of other dimensions of religiousness—something that has taken almost a century for some scholars to get beyond. Contrary to some people's opinion, James did *not* say everything there is to be said about the psychological bases of religion, and all other research is *not* a mere footnote to him. He is important, influential, and noteworthy because he took the time and energy to write about the psychology of religion when no other elite leader had done so and before there was much psychology at all.

difference reflects the different orientations from which they came and from which people come today. First, James's work was much more of a personal expression of himself. Whereas Starbuck attempted to remain the detached scientist, James interjected a sizable dose of his own philosophy, such as his insistence that the test of the religious life of the individual must be found in its "fruits" rather than its "roots"—an obvious expression of his philosophy of pragmatism, for which he was famous. Second, James attempted to illustrate via rich and vivid case study material the extreme forms of religious experience. The descriptions of conversion experiences that he cites are selected for their unusual vividness. Starbuck, on the other hand, was more interested in describing the psychological laws that direct the lines of religious growth in the average person, rather than the extreme special case. Third, whereas James believed that the greatest insight could be gained via a blending of phenomenological description, logical analysis, and speculative analysis, Starbuck believed that statistical summaries would reveal the most important trends in religious life.

Even though your personality style may lead you to prefer one of these

two approaches over the other, neither is better than the other in any pure sense. They complement each other. Their differences indicate that they were developed in order to answer different types of questions. James's approach reflects what is now called qualitative methodology; Starbuck's approach reflects quantitative methodology. People who have been trained to think critically sometimes fall into the trap of criticizing a study for not yielding information that the type of method employed in it was not intended to yield. It's like getting mad at an apple for not being an orange. The best work ahead will avoid this error and glean the knowledge offered by both approaches.

Roots in Spiritualism, Occultism, and the Paranormal

The year 1900 is a convenient "round number" that we can use as a marker in time for when the psychology of religion began to develop to a noticeable degree, but people like Starbuck, James, and Hall did not begin studying this topic out of the blue, as if no work on it had been done before. In fact, approximately 15 years prior to the turn of the century a small group of mostly Europeans, along with James, began to do psychological research on psychic phenomena. This might be considered the "true" origin of this field. Therefore, although there was no formal "psychology of religion" until the beginning of the 20th century, there were earlier attempts at explaining religion-related phenomena that we would think of today as psychological. In some cases, those who wanted to explain some aspect of religion wanted to debunk it and explain it away, while protecting whatever they viewed as "true religion." So we have earlier theorists who were happy to explain "false religion" (e.g., magic, superstition, fanaticism, false inspiration, delusions, and so on) in psychological terms, while at the same time contrasting science and whatever they considered "true religion" as two entirely separate things.

William James was one of the most important spokespeople for an alternative approach, which argued that science—in this case, psychology—could help us to understand religion without explaining it away. James was particularly influenced by a non-Freudian understanding of the subconscious, which viewed it, based on clinical evidence, as divisible into separate streams that could act independently of each other when subjects were dissociated, hypnotized, or in trance. Although most late-19th-century neurologists and psychologists viewed the splitting of consciousness as pathological, James and some others viewed this as something that also occurred among healthy people. Not only, in his view, could splitting occur in healthy individuals, these subconscious parts of the self—he believed—offered a possible gateway to something ("the More") beyond the self.

James got this idea from his Swiss friend and colleague Frederic Myers,

a leading figure associated with the London-based Society for Psychical Research (SPR), of which James was also a member. The SPR was founded in 1882 by a small group of researchers at Cambridge University interested in testing spiritualist mediums, who claimed to have received communications from the spirits of the dead, to see if they could find empirical evidence for the survival of bodily death and/or unusual human abilities such as telepathy. At the earliest International Congresses of Psychology held in Europe in the 1890s, when modern experimental psychology was just emerging, psychical researchers played an active role alongside researchers trained in neurology, medicine, and other fields. When practicing occultists, in addition to psychical researchers, showed up at the Congress in 1900, controversy erupted over whether or not mediums and the phenomena associated with them could be studied scientifically.

In the wake of this controversy, psychical research, which continued to focus on finding evidence for life after death and supernormal abilities, was pushed out of the field of psychology and the psychology of religion, which took its lead from William James's *Varieties*, focused on the less controversial subject of "religious experience." But, as the careful reader of James will notice, he understands "religious experience" and "mysticism" in terms of the subconscious and leaves open the possibility that they are genuinely in contact with a larger "More." So while James focused his attention on religious experience, conversion, and mysticism, he viewed them, along with all kinds of other unusual experiences, as emerging out of subconscious processes. In many ways *The Varieties of Religious Experience* launched the psychology of religion by "taming" its object of study. Many today think it should be reconnected to a much wider range of unusual experiences. For a comment by a religious studies scholar and expert on James's early work on mysticism and the esoteric, see Box 2.2.

BOX 2.2. Comment on William James by Ann Taves

In a move that many readers (and scholars of mysticism) overlook, James pointed out that "religious mysticism is only one half of mysticism. The other half . . . the text-books on insanity supply. Open any one of these, and you will find abundant cases in which 'mystical ideas' are cited as characteristic symptoms of enfeebled or deluded states of mind" (James, 1902/1985, p. 337). James stipulated definitions for the purpose of his lectures, fully aware that the features associated with "religious experience" and "mysticism" were not limited to the "religious" domain. Unfortunately, many readers seized on his definition of mysticism and disregarded his observation about the other half the picture (Taves, 1999, p. 283).

THE EXIT AND REEMERGENCE OF THE PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION

Where and Why Did the Field Go?

Between the early years of the 20th century and the amazing advances of the psychology of religion following the last third of that century, this field virtually did not exist. This sounds odd because, all else being equal, one would expect that a field would show a more or less stable rate of development from its initial introduction to the present. Nevertheless, from roughly 1927 to 1967 there was a complete absence of systematic work on the psychological aspects of religion.² There was an occasional essay or research report but no sustained psychological research on the topic. The latter would occur later in manifest ways after the field took off and began to expand over the last third of the 20th century.

Several factors worked together to deter psychology scholars from devoting energy to studying religiousness. Perhaps most pervasive was the either/or philosophy mentioned previously. During those early days there were people who, perhaps only at a subtle level, believed that somehow psychological and religious accounts of things—human behavior most importantly—had to be mutually exclusive. The creation versus evolution debate over the question of human origin no doubt contributed to this antagonism between science and religion, as it still does today in many people's minds. With enough people on both sides of this presupposition, it is no surprise that, with some exceptions in the area of counseling in religious contexts, there was little interchange between them.

Another factor concerned competition for clients. Religious professionals had understood that it was part of their role to “cure sick souls,” to offer counsel to people with personal problems who were hurting. But about this time, along came the modern professional fields of psychiatry and psychology, appearing to proclaim a “new gospel.” The job of helping disturbed people, it appeared, now belonged to the new mental health professionals and not to the church. This competition naturally fed division and misunderstanding. This has changed dramatically as is indicated by

²I use these two dates as markers of the decline and reemergence of the psychology of religion for two reasons. First, after 1927, when Freud published *The Future of an Illusion*, virtually nothing was done on this topic. Second, in 1967 Allport and Ross published an article on intrinsic–extrinsic religious orientation in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* that, more than any other paper, triggered the modern period of psychological research on religion. Actually, there are no firm dates, and there were a small number of valuable writings on the topic during the period I have designated (e.g., Allport, 1950; see also Wulff, 1998). These two dates serve as convenient, if only approximate, markers for the exit and reentry of the psychology of religion to the science of psychology.

the emergence of graduate programs in clinical and counseling psychology being offered by some theological seminaries, and by the American Psychological Association supporting awareness of religious and spiritual issues (along with ethnic, sexual orientation, and other issues) as of potential use in clinical training.

Meanwhile, an analogous split was occurring in academic departments. Psychology had been part of philosophy, and most psychologists who worked as professors did so in philosophy departments. At that time, studying philosophical or religious questions was natural. However, during the 1920s and 1930s, psychologists were busy leaving philosophy departments and setting up departments of their own. Psychology was gaining recognition as an independent scientific field, modeling itself after physics, and in no way did it want to be confused with “speculative” fields such as philosophy. Hence, psychologists rejected the study of things that were “tainted” with philosophical or religious questions.

A poignant piece of evidence illustrates the force with which this split was felt. During the years just before and after 1920, psychologists were involved in the instinct-versus-behaviorism debate. William McDougall was presenting the case that human nature is governed by instincts. At the same time, the famous John B. Watson, whose influence permanently changed the course of psychology, was busy founding the doctrine of behaviorism, which claimed that all behavior is governed by the principle of conditioning. Watson’s view that all behavior was the result of conditioning left no room for mental, religious, or otherworldly influences; by his lights, such things were not merely false, they were impossible. McDougall published a classic book entitled *Outline of Psychology* in which he argued the instinct view. In response, Watson published a devastating review of McDougall’s book, which makes no secret of his attitude toward religion. The title of the review was “Professor McDougall Returns to Religion” (Larson, 1979). Today psychologists realize that even the loftiest of philosophical or religious questions are at the core psychological questions. Today we study them—psychologically.

One important book had a profound effect on the field: Sigmund Freud’s *The Future of an Illusion*, published in 1927. Freud was by training a neurologist, not a psychologist. According to his theory, all religion was a sign of grand-scale neurosis and insecurity that, one hoped, humankind would eventually outgrow. Obviously, this idea was unlikely to be well received by people in the religious community. Hearing about Freud’s book, they may have assumed that all religion was under attack by all psychology and psychiatry. Freud’s ideas may have had an undue influence because of the extent to which they permeated mainstream culture: psychoanalysis was the “face” of therapeutic intervention at the time. The fact that Freud’s theory was speculative and difficult to test by empirical methods was probably not recognized by religious people. The tendency on their part was to

BOX 2.3. Tensions Can Lead to and Stem from Misappropriation of Psychological Knowledge

A detail that helps to complete this picture of the psychology of religion's holding pattern concerns the apparent religious motivations behind some research efforts in this area. Pruyser (1987) listed seven motives or aims in psychologies of religion, starting with this one: "Some psychologies of religion seek to buttress religion or to defend it apologetically by trying to describe, if not prove, its psychological necessity or inevitability." I regard this as an inappropriate goal and believe that those few who have tried to use psychology for such a purpose have harmed rather than helped psychologists of religion in their efforts to contribute the knowledge from this field to the general discipline of psychology. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, psychology can neither prove nor disprove any religion. Those who try to use it to do so only help to decrease, not increase, the contribution of legitimate, scientific psychology of religion.

simply discount all psychology as contrary to religious teaching. Box 2.3 illustrates the tensions resulting from the tendency to misunderstand or misappropriate psychological knowledge in relation to a religion.

Finally, even as late as the 1970s and 1980s—when news media reported that extreme Islamic fundamentalists were killing people in the name of Allah, “cultic” and “new age” religious experimentation was on the upsurge worldwide, and Western cultural dialogue included talk of the meaning of the “post-Christian era”—there were still forces that held the field in suspension, as documented in the following comment by the former editor of the prestigious *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Robert Hogan:

Religion is the most important social force in the history of man: There is a legitimate field called sociology of religion. But in psychology, anyone who gets involved in or tries to talk in an analytic way about religion is immediately branded a meathead; a mystic; an intuitive, touchyfeely sort of moron, despite the fact that William James' original book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, is regarded, I think, by almost everyone as both a philosophical and a psychological classic. (1979, p. 4)

How and Why the Field Came Back

As the 20th century drew to a close, there began a dramatic increase in psychology of religion research. This trend has accelerated since the turn of the millennium (Paloutzian & Park, 2013b). The current flurry of activity includes even more experiments, quasi-experimental field studies,

theoretical papers, books, convention symposia, and stand-alone meetings on various specialized topics within the psychology of religion—all occurring nationally and internationally. Through these media researchers have exchanged ideas and research findings on a vast array of topics ranging from micro to macro levels of analysis (e.g., from neural mechanisms of religious experiences to the role of religion in international terrorism). There has been an increase in religiously related counseling and psychotherapy specialized for people of various beliefs and traditions (following the example of counseling and psychotherapy specialized for various ethnic and cultural populations), the presence of psychology in religious colleges and theological seminaries, psychology of religion courses being taught at colleges and universities (Hester, 2002; Hester & Paloutzian, 2006), and the contribution of psychology to the field of religious studies (e.g., Taves, 2009). The research and theoretical advances that have occurred seem sufficiently powerful to guide scholarship in both intradisciplinary and interdisciplinary ways. See Oviedo (2017) for a systematic account of 75 publications between 2009 and 2015 on scientific explanations of religiousness. Of the 75, 19 were published in the first 9 years, and 56 were published in the second 8 years. This finding reflects a steep increase in research in this area.

PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE AND MODERN PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION

There have been many conflicts between science and religion over the course of history. For example, in early 17th-century Italy, Galileo upset the Church's notion of a geocentric universe (an argument fortunately long since resolved), and in 20th-century America, the 1925 Scopes trial put the spotlight on the evolution versus creationism debate—an argument that can still, unfortunately, be communicated in hostile and emotional tones in extremist conservative Christian circles. However, such conflict is unnecessary—which becomes clear once a person has a clear grasp of the modern philosophy of science applied to the psychology of religion.

Psychology in the Science–Religion Dialogue

What is the proper place of the psychology of religion in the larger science–religion dialogue? Distinguishing between these two different ways of thinking—a religious way and a scientific way—is not new. At least two and a half millennia ago, at the dawn of Western thought, ancient Greek philosophers recognized that it was one thing to say that an event occurred due to processes in nature, and quite another to say that the same event occurred because the gods did it (Furley, 1997). The same distinction is

evident in stories in the Torah.³ Thus, the earliest known literate cultures could see that their lives were ruled by what appeared to be cycles of nature and simultaneously believed that events were governed by one or more gods.

Levels of Dialogue

Various questions emerge from such illustrations. The general form of the questions asks what, if anything, a religious and a naturalistic (i.e., scientific) way of thinking and looking at the world have to do with each other. Opinions on this general question range from those who see religion and science in some kind of mortal combat (reminiscent of the Galileo vs. Church conflict over the geocentric theory of the universe, and more recently the creation vs. evolution debate over the origin of humans), to those who hardly see much difference at all. We can capture the major ways the issues have been understood in science–religion scholarship for the past half century or so by describing the following four approaches (see Barbour, 1990, 1997, for elaboration).

1. Science and religion *conflict* with each other. This is the view held by strongly conservative religious people who accept the presupposition that if their god does something, then it is not explainable by science. The two most notable manifestations of this (in the United States) are (a) the disagreements over the age of the earth and the origin of humans, in the form of the creation versus evolution debate, and (b) in extreme cases, belief that psychology is an invalid discipline because all truth about humans is already contained in the Bible. My own experience has led me to conclude that I can have no genuine conversation with someone who approaches discussion based on such premises, because having the requisite open mind is ruled out. With such a person, one can have only verbal combat.

2. Science and religion *parallel* each other. This is the view that science and religion make progress together but each on its own track. They are neither oppositional, because they are not trying to get at the same truths, nor do they synthesize, because the nature of the truths that one is designed to explore differs in kind from those that the other is designed to explore.

3. Science and religion *dialogue* with each other. According to this approach, religion and science are, at points, trying to get at the same (or at least similar) issues, albeit in different ways. Thus, for example, both may say something about human violence, lack of love for one another, or the difference between feelings of forgiveness and forgiveness expressed in behavior. But they come at these phenomena with different methods,

³For example, the book of Exodus is clear in stating that when the Israelites had to cross the sea, a hot wind blew and parted the sea, and they crossed on dry ground. At the same time, it is also clear in stating that God parted the sea.

concerns, and priorities. However, they can engage in dialogue on matters of mutual concern for the betterment of both.

4. Science and religion *integrate* with each other. There are two forms of the integration of psychology of religion.

a. Integration can occur at a practical level. For example, when a doctoral student in clinical psychology is in training, it is in his or her interest to get as much exposure as possible to a wide range of worldviews and to learn what they mean to their adherents. This includes learning the nature of the religions in the population that the person will serve. To be effective, it is good if the trainee learns how to integrate the religious notions of a client into the process of psychotherapy in order to be maximally effective, in the same way that it is in the interest of effective therapy to understand any racial or ethnic issues unique to clients for whom they are relevant. Understood this way, integration of religion and psychology is a matter of how to be a maximally effective practitioner.

b. Integration at a theoretical level connotes the idea that scientific theory and theological ideas can somehow be synthesized. The rationale at the root of this idea is that all truth is one, and both science and religion are enterprises whose goal it is to arrive at truths or the truth; therefore, eventually, when all knowledge is known, they will be integrated into one grand theory. I think this idea reflects bad logic because it attempts to take something that, by its very nature, is always changing (scientific theory—see the preceding discussion of the nature of science) and integrate it into a fixed form with some theological “truth” that presumably can never change. It does not seem possible to integrate something that changes with something that does not.

They're All Wrong: Science and Religion Are Orthogonal

Anyone who grapples with such issues does so presumably because he or she is invested in synthesizing science and religion, as if they must fit together. Although integration in the practical sense, as illustrated in 4(a) above, is useful, in fact such synthesis is not necessary, or even possible, at the theoretical level. Science and religion are not “about” the same things. The logical relationship between science and religion is that they are orthogonal to each other. Science can neither prove nor disprove religious truth claims, and it would be nonsense for any religion to claim that science is worthless and cannot yield principles or conclusions of value. Thus, in the end, they deal with different concerns; we are wise to let each do what it can do best.⁴

⁴My analysis of the orthogonality of science and religion is philosophical, rooted in logic. Alas, human minds do not always work according to those same roots. See, for example, Pennycook, Cheyne, Seli, Koehler, & Fugelsang (2012) for research on cognitive style and prediction of religious and paranormal belief.

The Nature of Psychological Science

As a science, psychology operates on the assumption that behavior, including religious behavior and the things we choose to do of our own free will, is the result of the operation of natural cause–effect laws. By this is meant that every act has antecedent causes that produced the behavior, and that would produce it again if the same conditions were repeated. At the outset it should be made clear that the notion that natural cause–effect laws exist and regulate what we do is not a fact of science. It is a working assumption that is inherent in the scientific method. The purpose of this section is to help you understand the nature of scientific inquiry and psychological “laws of behavior” so that you can approach any issue in the larger science–religion dialogue with knowledge of the ways they can relate and skill at articulating the kind of relationship that is appropriate for any issue.

Scientific Inquiry through Different “Worlds”

Part of the essential nature of science is the notion that there exist two different “worlds”: the world of events and observations and the world of abstract ideas or concepts (Kemeny, 1959; Popper, 1972). Outside events occur and can be observed, but ideas cannot. An idea or abstract concept is a meaning made, that is, something that we construct in our minds after noticing some common thread in a whole set of specific observations.

As a way of seeing the difference between an observation and an idea, consider the example of prayer. We can observe and record a single instance of prayer behavior. Note, however, that when we do this we are not actually observing prayer in the general sense. Rather, we are observing someone kneel or bow, fold his or her hands and arms or perhaps stretch them out, and talk to someone referred to as God, Lord, Allah, G-d, or another name for a divine entity. We are not observing “prayer”; we are observing a behavior. In other words, the term *pray* is a general term that includes many specific acts that have key aspects in common. Not all of the specific acts within the general class called *prayer* are identical, since a person could in many cases pray standing up, with open hands, and holding the head erect. Therefore, the specific instances of any type of religious behavior belong to the world of events or actual occurrences. The concepts, generalities, and abstract principles are ideas.

It is important to understand that because scientific “laws” of behavior belong to the world of ideas, they are constructions of our minds. Scientific laws are meanings constructed out of many bits and pieces of data. The mental processes of working with data enable us to connect the dots, so to speak—to see patterns and relationships that enable us to see continuity and create scientific laws.

Induction, Deduction, Verification/Falsification: The Research Cycle

Like all sciences, the science of religious behavior begins and ends in the world of “facts” (events plus our perception of them). But it cycles through the idea world of theory as a way of maintaining a common, coherent framework in which to understand the facts. This is illustrated in Figure 2.1. Following our initial idea or question, we record observations of some type. From these observations we make an inference about the common factors or relationships we think are operating through all of those particular events. These common elements become the theory that we use to guide the next investigation. It is from the theory that we arrive at a research hypothesis and deduce the predicted result from the next study.

The meaning-making process of developing the general theory from the particular observations is called *induction*. The process of predicting some results or relationships from a theory is called *deduction*, or going from the general case to predicting the particular observations. The results, which are new observations at the end of the research cycle, are then checked against those that were predicted by the theory in order to find out what they mean, that is, whether they support or refute the prediction. If the obtained results correspond to the predictions, then the theory is supported; if they do not, then those predictions are falsified and the results function as new, additional observations that may themselves be fed into the beginnings of the research cycle. It is this last property of a theory, its ability to lead to predictions that can be shown to be false in order to eliminate inadequate explanatory ideas one at a time, that allows the research cycle to lead us closer to the truth (Popper, 1963). Through this process a meaning is made and remade; the theory can be modified and adapted so as to take into account these new observations.

The above example illustrates meaning-making processes in a slow, methodological way in accord with the formal logic of science. However, an analogous process is occurring inside a human mind constantly, and there is no such thing as a healthy human system that does not do this at multiple levels.

Theories become refined through this research cycle. If a theory stands for a long time and endures the test of much research, it is raised to a higher status and we begin to call it a “law.” However, theories and laws are not necessarily out in nature waiting for us to discover them, any more than a law in the civic legal sense exists “out there” to be discovered. Rather, they are our creations and must change in order to accommodate new emerging observations that challenge the existing law.

An Example from Physics

This overall process can be illustrated by three examples. An example from the physical realm: the “fact” that air, fuel, and heat produce fire. We

might initially wonder about how fire happens and may or may not have an idea about the processes involved. Then we might observe fires and their contexts and notice O_1 , one single instance in which we saw some combination of air, fuel, and heat being associated with fire. We might then notice O_2 , a different instance of air, fuel, and heat occurring just before fire. Observations O_3 , O_4 , O_5 , and so on, would each be another instance of this relationship. By seeing the common elements that link all of these specific cases together, we may develop the idea (theory) that air, fuel, and heat will result in fire when placed together in a specified way. At this point we have taken the inductive leap and moved from the world of observations to the world of ideas and theory. It is at this latter level where laws of behavior (including religious behavior) exist.

After we have developed our theory about air, fuel, and heat resulting in fire, we are then ready to deduce another specific instance of the fire-element relationship. In other words, we would predict that if we put air, fuel, and heat together in a new way, one that we had not observed before, then this new combination would also result in fire. If we did place the elements together in this new way and fire did occur, we would have generated a new observation that supports the theory. If we placed the elements together and fire did not occur, then we would have generated new observations that falsified the theory. In this latter case, the theory must be revised, thrown out, or at least tested again. Note the cycle: the theories and laws are meanings made out of common elements in observations, and the theories then serve as guides in our search for new observations. After we gather them, we examine them in order to see what they mean for our theory.

An Example from the Psychology of Religion

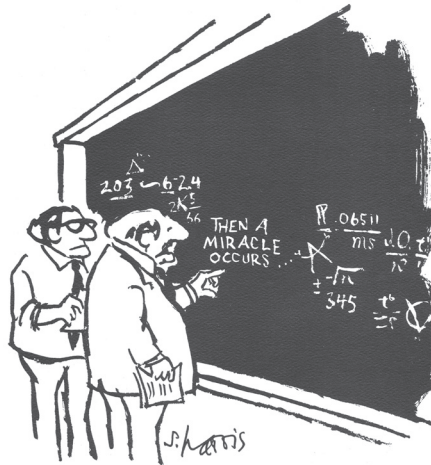
This same process, the cycle of research, can be illustrated in the area of religion also. The cycle may be less easily noticed because the observed relationships are much less obvious in religion than they are in physics. We might observe several instances in which “being raised in a loving home” and “adopting the creed of one’s parents” go together. From this we might then develop the abstract theory that loving parents cause their offspring to adopt their own beliefs. From this abstract conception we would predict (deduce) that in other cases of loving homes the offspring will also adopt the parents’ beliefs.

Although the logic of the research cycle in the psychology of religion is the same as that in physics, there are two important aspects of the psychology of religion that make it more complex. First, the physicist can define concepts operationally (i.e., in terms of specific, objective measuring procedures) more easily than the psychologist of religion can. For example, it is more difficult to be precise about what is meant by the term *loving home* than it is about the term *fire*. This difficulty in defining concepts in

operational terms means that it is harder to be sure whether an observation is actually an instance of one concept or another.

Second, in the psychology of religion our knowledge is sufficiently incomplete that it is possible to generate many theories to explain the observations. Because the theories are hard to test due to the complexity of religiousness, it is more difficult to eliminate the weak ones through falsification of hypotheses. In the case of the youth from a loving home adopting the same beliefs as the parents, for example, one can think of several possible theories that might explain it. One hypothetical explanation is that the children perceive that their parents genuinely care for them, and this makes the children feel secure and worthwhile. The feelings of security and worth may be psychologically linked to the religion of the parents via an associative learning process. This “theory” would mean that children from loving homes adopt beliefs because they have learned such beliefs make them feel secure and worthy. Another possible explanation is that children from loving homes are likely to internalize the personalities of their parents, and that these personalities are especially prone to that particular set of beliefs. A third possible explanation might rely on the concept of imitation. We could point out, for example, that all children tend to imitate their parents; so that just as a delinquent boy might imitate his delinquent parents, so also a loving, religious youth may be imitating loving, religious parents. It could also be that all of these explanations work in combination. The point is that in the psychology of religion many different explanations can be offered to try to account for the observed relationships. Clearly, it is not as likely that we would generate as many possible explanations for the relationship between air, fuel, heat, and fire. But the logic of the psychology of religion is the same as that of physics or any other science; it is only the content that differs.

Also, it is essential to understand and appreciate that even with all of the above examples of processes that might in whole or in part account for a relation between phenomena as “simple” as air, fuel, heat, and fire or as complex as a loving home and adopting parental beliefs, in no case have I put a miracle into the process. This is because if I had, then the theory or eventual law at issue would cease to exist as a possibility. The processes theorized to work could no longer be depended upon because an unknown agent that had the option of deciding to act or not, in any way it wished, at any time, and to any degree, was put into the equation, the effect of which is to make null, or unreliable, all other aspects of the equation. Miracles may or may not occur, but the idea of them is fundamentally incompatible with the logic of science as an endeavor to state laws of nature that work and that can be relied upon with a known degree of probability (see Chapter 10 and Paloutzian, Rogers, Swenson, & Lowe, 2008, for discussion of miracle attributions). Figure 2.2, a tongue-in-cheek way of illustrating this, is one of my favorite cartoons. I call it the cartoon of the scientist on a learning curve.



"I THINK YOU SHOULD BE MORE EXPLICIT HERE IN STEP TWO."

FIGURE 2.2. A scientist on a learning curve. Reprinted with permission from *ScienceCartoonsPlus.com*.

Illustration of Language Rules

Another way of illustrating the relationship between the specific observation and the general principle is to use the rules of a language as an analogy. Let us take the French language as a case in point. If you have studied French (or any other language) you learned that there were rules of the language that you had to follow if you were going to learn French properly. The rules are generalities about how, for example, the nouns and verbs behave. These rules are derived from the language, not imposed upon it. In other words, the writers of French textbooks observe the French language and then describe the language to the student in general principles called “rules of French.” There may also be exceptions to the rules. These exceptions must be explained on the basis of influences from sources other than mainstream French.

To carry the analogy further, the rules of French were not always the same as they are today. The French language has been different in different periods of history. Each period had its own rules of the language that were correct for that period. None of them are “the correct rules” for all time, because, as the language undergoes natural changes, the “rules” (general descriptions) must change or else they will become inaccurate.

The application of the language analogy to the psychology of religion is direct. The “laws” of religious behavior are not imposed upon people by

nature so that we are bound to obey them whether we like it or not. Rather, the laws are mental constructions of how people behave, based on data together with the relationships between our behavior and environmental circumstances.

It is more correct to say that the law is caused by our behavior, than to say that our behavior is caused by the law (Kemeny, 1959). If we do something that the law of behavior does not predict, we are not “violating” the law. It is simply that the law is an incomplete idea and must be changed in order to account accurately for the behavior.⁵

Determinism, Causality, Probability

The process of theory building described above is closely linked to three other concepts that are inherent in the research cycle: determinism, causality, and probability. Determinism refers to the assumption that there is an underlying order in nature. When we say our religious behavior is determined, we mean that it follows a pattern of regularity that is part of the natural order. Another way of saying this is to say that people behave according to a natural law of behavior. But in the preceding section we saw that natural laws of behavior are generalities constructed in our minds from the observation of common elements in many behaviors, rather than being “hard” rules that exist outside of behavior and merely direct it. Therefore, the principle of complete determinism must forever remain at the level of an assumption. It is not something that can be proved to be certain. A science of behavior must adopt some form of determinism as a working assumption, however.

We must assume the principle of causality. Another way of stating the principle of determinism as applied to behavior is by saying that our behavior follows the principles of cause and effect. This means that each piece of behavior is the consequence of antecedent factors that brought it about. For example, in common language I might say that the sight of a barking dog causes me to feel afraid. In saying this, I mean that my fear is a consequence of my seeing and hearing the dog, and that whenever I do see a barking dog, the same symptoms of fear follow.

This analysis of causality must be carried one step further. When we say that one event (*A*) causes another event (*B*), we are too quick to assume that there is an essential, mechanical connection between the two. We too quickly believe that whenever *A* exists, *B* *must* follow. This is not so. The concept of causality does not mean that one event *must* mechanically follow another, because *we cannot see cause*. The notion that one event causes another is an inferred link that our minds place between observed events.

⁵But the issue of whether there is an inviolate law, distinct from “incomplete” articulations, remains, and from a human point of view probably cannot be known.

We don't actually see causation; we do see the events and infer a causal link or association between them. To go back to an earlier illustration, when we see a loving home (event *A*) regularly preceding the children's espousing of parental religious beliefs (event *B*), we do not actually see the loving home *causing* the children to accept parental religious beliefs. What we do see are many instances of the two events associated with each other in some regular way, in this case the loving home preceding the belief acquisition. Any perception of a causal relation between the events, in the sense that the first event mechanically forces the second event to occur, is an inference and can never be known with absolute certainty.

The above analyses of determinism and causality lead to the next point—that scientific statements are probabilistic. Because we cannot know with absolute assurance that one event causes the next (or that one determines the next), we can know with only partial assurance. We can say that a conclusion is true or that a principle about religious behavior holds with some degree of probability, but not absolutely. If we have discovered that the adoption of parental beliefs reliably follows a loving home environment, we can say that children from loving homes are likely to (i.e., probably will) believe the same as their parents, but we cannot say for certain that they will do so.

Naturalism and Religion

A final point implicit in a science of behavior is that, like any science, it is concerned with processes of nature. We use the scientific method to try to understand events in nature, including human religiousness, from a naturalistic perspective. Nature is the focal realm of observation. This naturalistic assumption says nothing about who or what creates and sustains nature, just as the rules of a football game say nothing about who created the game or the rules. Professionals have various opinions about the role of otherworldly assumptions in research on religiousness, although the nature of scientific logic does not require them. However, the possibility that we might understand religiousness from a naturalistic perspective is neutral with respect to the truth claims of any religion. They are orthogonal to each other.

Multiple Accounts of Religiousness

In our discussion of the process of generating theories, I pointed out that many theories could be devised to account for the same religious behavior. At the strictly scientific level, each theory could be partially correct, yet none of them totally correct on its own. If this were the case, then each theory would require that the others be added to it to account for all aspects of the behavior. In other words, in order to understand behavior

more fully we need to be able to see it from many different perspectives at the same time.

Maps and Theories

Building several theories about religious behavior is like drawing different types of maps of a single area of ground. You could draw several different types of maps of California: a map of freeways and paved roads, a detailed map of population density, and a topographical map of the desert and mountain areas. Each map could be accurate, and each would provide you with some information about California. But none of them by itself would give you the complete picture. If you had only the topographical map, you might read it correctly but still arrive at the conclusion that California has no roads and few people. Obviously, the whole set of maps taken together provides a more complete picture than any single map by itself.

Theories and maps are images of the things that they purport to represent. They are like the percept of an apple that we see in our heads after light rays have bounced off a (presumed) actual apple “out there” in ontological reality, information that enters our visual system, triggers neurochemical processes, and is then made into a meaningful percept to which we respond. In the case of maps, a red line is not actually a freeway but an image or “scale model” of the real thing. In the case of theories of religious behavior, the concept “Hindu” is not an actual Hindu person; and the concept “conversion experience” is not identical to the phenomenon of a person experiencing conversion. The theories are summary reflections of the processes that produce the actual events; each particular theory is made from only the point of view of the theory builder. If subsequent research data are consistent with it, others may of course accept it.

When building theories, it is a rule of thumb that we try to eliminate those that are incomplete (Popper, 1963). We gradually try to construct a single, encompassing theory that contains all phenomena of interest within its scope. As noted previously, however, the theories that we do develop are views from only the naturalistic perspective. This being so, science does not make a god hypothesis, nor does it negate one.

Multiple Viewpoints and the Fallacy of “Nothing But-ery”

This last point can be illustrated by examining a triangle from different points of view. Suppose we show a drawing of a triangle to two very different types of people: an artist and a physicist. If you show the triangle to an artist and ask him or her what it is, the response may be “It’s nothing but a triangle, three straight lines that intersect forming three angles.” This statement would be accurate but not complete. If you asked a physicist the same question, the answer might be “It is nothing but certain chemicals

(ink) placed together upon some other matter (paper) in a certain way.” The statement of the physicist may be just as correct as that made by the artist, but it also would be incomplete. We might get a third answer if we asked a geometrician. Each account requires the others in order for a complete account to be given. All accounts must be correct in order for the figure to be what it is. Each account can be said to embody the others (MacKay, 1974). It would not make sense to say that the triangle caused the chemical arrangement or that the chemical arrangement caused the triangle. It would make more sense to say that the chemical arrangement embodies the triangle and vice versa. This relationship is more intimate than cause and effect because one facet of the figure cannot be changed without also changing the other. If we alter the chemical arrangement, we alter the shape of the triangle and vice versa.

Illustrations such as the triangle analogy can be used to argue that, for example, a psychological, neurological, and sociological account of life, or of some “spiritual” or “psychological” event, can be accurate at the same time at different levels. It is a mistake to claim that one is “nothing but” the other, as if the truth of one necessarily negated the possible truth of another. Following my line of argument in this book, this means that the truth of an explanation at one level does not necessarily rule out the possible truth of an explanation at other levels. To the contrary, just as in the case of the triangle, the truth of one may depend upon the truth of another.

When all levels of explanation are taken together, they provide complementary views of an event deemed religious or spiritual rather than competitive views. Thus, for example, it is possible for a conversion to be seen accurately from a sociological viewpoint and from the viewpoint of a psychoanalyst. Neither one necessarily reduces the accuracy or validity of the other. It is like looking at different photographs of a building, each taken from a different side, the top, bottom, and the inside, and putting them all together to get a more complete picture of the building than you would have otherwise.

“Explaining” versus “Explaining Away”

The preceding sections on the cycle of research, theory building, causality, and multiple viewpoints all relate to an issue of basic concern. This is the difference between explaining or understanding how something works and “explaining it away”—judging it to be worthless or of no value. Psychologists may or may not understand much about the workings of religious behavior and experience. But even if we could offer a full psychological explanation, we still could not “explain away” religious life as “nothing but” psychological processes. Other explanations complement rather than compete with a psychological one, so long as they are accurate at their level of analysis. It would be just as much an error to say that conversion

is “nothing but” a change in the brain. It may be that, but if so, it involves other things as well.

To explain behavior means to describe it with its functional relationships to other behaviors and environmental circumstances, pulling it together with some organizing framework called a theory. To “explain away” behavior means to discount the possibility of other viewpoints being valid—to declare that the other explanations are of no value. This is something that scientific psychology, by its very nature, cannot do. When it comes to the difference between a scientific approach and a supernaturalistic or otherworldly approach, there is a fundamental difference, and it matters greatly. It is that a scientific explanation is in principle testable based on evidence and is open to being shown wrong; a supernaturalistic explanation is not. The intellectual advantage of the scientific approach is its testability and modifiability based on data.

Cultural Relativity and the Psychology of Religion

One of the tensions inherent in the psychology of religion comes when we recognize that every religion works differently, with different belief systems and behaviors, and that each religious or spiritual experience might be different for every individual, regardless of demographic similarities such as belonging to the same religious group. Religious experience is unique for every person, yet we identify ways in which religions are similar, and we nonetheless characterize religious behavior across diverse religious groups. This tension between cultural relativity and scientific generalization underscores most disciplinary work that studies human beings, not merely the psychology of religion. However, both extremes of this spectrum—total relativity or absolute truth—are very limiting and diminish productive thought because they close opportunities for questioning.

We can see the relation between cultural relativity and the psychology of religion most clearly when we look closely at how psychologists develop theory based on data and evidence. We should begin to ask questions if we see that a broad theory about how all religions work has been based on a relatively small study of a narrow group of subjects. For instance, if a researcher uses only white, Protestant, and regionally specific American undergraduates as a data pool, we do not have scientific ground to suggest that findings apply to all religious populations around the world. Few psychological research programs have been based on the equivalent of a “random sample of the world.” At the same time, critiquing research based on sample limitations can be done too mechanically: Saying “the results could be different with a different sample” is of course true, but it matters only when there is a conceptual rationale for thinking so. Clearly there are some things that are true in one religious culture that are not true in another. Roman Catholicism may affect its adherents in ways that are different from

the ways in which Hare Krishna affects its adherents. However, it ought to be possible for us to discover or create some principles of how religion works that are applicable across religions. For example, if the psychological processes that operate in conversion can be stated at a sufficient degree of abstraction, with a large enough degree of generality, then they ought to apply transreligiously—that is, the principles ought to be the same whether you are talking about conversion to a new religious movement or to a traditional religion. This is a researchable issue. Stating such principles is a goal inherent in doing psychology of religion; the discipline assumes that such statements can be meaningfully made.

The important points to recognize are (1) our biases in interpreting data (especially in the psychology of religion, a field with great bias potential), (2) the relativity of knowledge, and (3) the contextual and tentative nature of truths that we propose. Scientists of all kinds must have a healthy skepticism and caution about the assumptions of their methods and the meaning of their data. Any single perspective, including that of science, is limited, and we must be aware of biases that are present in any research. Now that we have addressed some broad concerns at the root of research in the psychology of religion, let us look at a menu of very interesting research methods.

Psychology of Religion:

At the Center of the Science–Religion Dialogue

What, in the end, does psychology have to do with the so-called science–religion dialogue, which, after all, runs the gamut from micro to macro, particle physics to cosmology, and includes discussions of what each area of science has to do with religion? It seems that the psychology of religion is the centerpiece, or focal point, of the so-called science–religion dialogue. That is, discussions of a scientific discipline tend to begin with issues pertaining to the discipline itself, but as the discussions continue along with those in other fields, they gradually raise questions about, or focus on, what they mean for people and life on earth. Eventually, those issues boil down to matters of meaning to humans. A meaning-making and appraisal process is at the root of this, so that when questions are posed upon questions, the various sciences eventually arrive at the same central issues of what things mean for humans (Paloutzian, 2013, 2016).

RELIGION, SPIRITUALITY, AND MEANING MAKING

The need to integrate the wide range of material in the psychology of religion has been well known from the field's beginning. Almost a half century

ago Dittes (1969) noted that the field had a lot of data and no theory to integrate them. Until recently, the theories and data were like two parallel lines that never met. There were two psychologies of religion, one of numbers obtained from questionnaire responses and one of ideas written down as theories, and each had little to do with the other. This circumstance has changed dramatically. Paloutzian and Park (2005, 2013b) present five integrative themes that facilitate synthesis of knowledge in the field. The first two are pivotal and far reaching; in this book I shall return to them from time to time. The five are (1) religious meaning systems (RMS), (2) the multilevel interdisciplinary paradigm (MIP), (3) methods and theory, (4) the path of the psychology of religion, and (5) the role of the psychology of religion. Although this list may not be exhaustive, it provides a starting point from which researchers can work.

Meaning Systems Processes

The psychology of religion has long needed a common language that can unify and help explain its many different areas of research. As mentioned in Chapter 1, meaning making and the concept of RMS have recently been offered as an idea that does this (Paloutzian & Park, 2005b, 2013b; Park, 2005a, 2005b, 2013; Park & Folkman, 1997; Silberman, 2005). People commonly first think that questions about meaning are theological or philosophical and may not realize that they are also psychological. However, when we ask what something means, we are asking what it stands for, what its implications are, what its representations and connections are in the human mind (Baumeister, 1991; Wong, 2012). To create a theory of the psychological processes in religiousness that captures what it is about, we need to learn how meaning construction and assessment processes work.

The processes involved in how our systems make meanings out of ambiguous information and appraise and respond to those meanings are at the heart of how the human mind functions. Experiences deemed religious or spiritual, the development of a God concept, prosocial or antisocial actions performed based on one's beliefs, and perceptions and interpretations of symbols all are regulated by them. They are among the neurological processes that construct what some people call a "religious experience" (McNamara & Butler, 2013), positive and negative religious coping (Pargament, Mahoney, Exline, Jones, & Shafranske, 2013), religious factors in physical and mental health (Masters & Hooker, 2013; Park & Slattery, 2013), and the way religion is related to international terrorism (Moghadam, Warren, & Love, 2013). Figure 2.3 is a schematic diagram that summarizes the relationships between the global or overarching meaning, stressful incoming information, its appraisal as discrepant from or consistent with the global meaning, and examples of religious meaning making and remaking as outputs of the process.

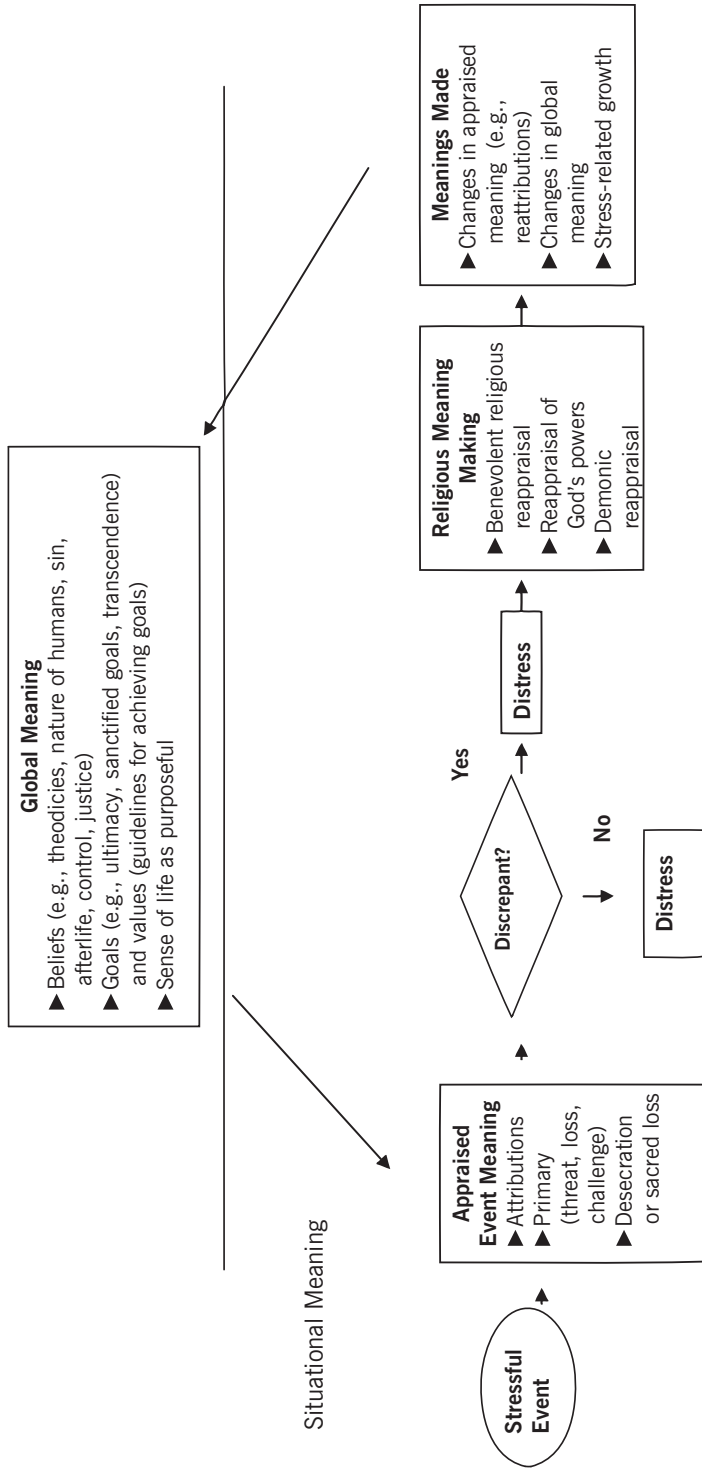


FIGURE 2.3. Meaning-making model, highlighting specifically religious aspects. From Paloutzian and Park (2013, p. 359). Copyright 2013 by The Guilford Press. Reprinted by permission.

What is a meaning system? Different presentations exist (see e.g., Park, 2005a, 2005b, 2013; Silberman, 2005), but the central ideas are twofold: (1) as the cognitive system receives and processes information, a well-functioning meaning system makes wholes out of the myriad inputs of bits and pieces of ambiguous information; (2) a meaning system is a structure within a human cognitive system that at minimum includes attitudes and beliefs, values, focused goal orientations, more general overall purposes, self-definition, and some locus of ultimate concern—elements that interact dynamically to appraise inputs to and regulate outputs from the system. Each element can affect the others. For example, a new piece of information may enter your mind and challenge your beliefs or values, and this conflict may then be assessed against your locus of ultimate concern (e.g., God, or a value that is absolute for you), which would then feed back into the system and cause a resolution of the issue by either an acceptance of the new information or the retention of the prior beliefs and values.

The model of RMS proposes that processes such as those illustrated above occur in relation to a global meaning that is other than themselves or their mere assembly. Thus, such cognitive processes operate in a world in which their very functionality is in the service of a higher-order meaning, whether explicit or implicit, that transcends the elements and processes within the meaning system itself. Meaning system processes function at all levels from micro (e.g., visual processing of light information to construct meaningful percepts) to macro (e.g., construction of cultural meanings in a society). They are fundamental to survival of individuals and groups; thus the idea of them seems compelling, evolutionarily essential, and far reaching (Paloutzian, 2016; Paloutzian & Mukai, 2017).

Multilevel Interdisciplinary Paradigm

There has long been a need for a framework to serve as an overarching umbrella within which studies in various areas would proceed and be related to each other. For many years, psychologists of religion were still trying to determine what their topic was (Gorsuch, 1988). However, the last quarter century witnessed a transformation in the richness of the data collected, the range of methods used, and the ideas driving the research and used to interpret the data (Hood & Belzen, 2005, 2013; Park & Paloutzian, 2013). The field is doing what the rest of psychology has been doing, that is, simultaneously with increased precision and specialization, it has gradually been moving toward synthesis of the many different sorts of data around common ideas.

The MIP (Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003) is an idea designed to help guide how we craft research whose data can be compared to those that come from parallel research at adjacent levels of analysis by multilevel data mapping. When findings obtained at one level (e.g., neurological) map with

those at another (e.g., cognitive), the results are replicated at two levels and are therefore more robust. The more this process is repeated, the stronger the findings. *Multilevel* means that research in the specialized areas within the psychology of religion can be related to each other and brought together around a common theory. *Interdisciplinary* means cross-fertilization of research in the psychology of religion with that of allied fields such as religious studies, anthropology, neuroscience, biology, sociology, and so forth. In the ideal world, the integration of knowledge from such varied fields fits within an overarching evolutionary meta-theory. This is needed because evolutionary principles constitute the only general framework that has been capable of subsuming and synthesizing knowledge from the other sciences under one idea, enabling its predictions to be tested and yielding data consistent with that. It is the only panhuman framework we've got that works. The MIP describes what has barely begun to be done in the field's recent past; it is a key concept to guide our future thinking and research.

MEANING MAKING AND REMAKING

Meaning

This section elaborates on the brief introduction to the meaning systems model in Chapter 1 and the preceding discussion. The model will be used as appropriate throughout the text. An overview of its roots in the evolutionary history of human development is presented in the Prelude to Part II.

The basic line of argument is that religiousness is not understood psychologically as a process unto itself, as if it were *sui generis*, unrelated to any other psychological processes. To the contrary, religiousness involves most or all of the same kinds of psychological processes that are involved in any other human behavior. In the recent past, the term *spiritual* has come to be used as a substitute for *religious* (Chapter 1). This wording change seems tolerable but not ideal, because *spiritual* sounds so lofty that people can too easily take it to mean something extra-psychological. Nevertheless, given this current terminology, religiousness and spirituality can both be subsumed under the general umbrella of the meaning system process. For example, both religious conversion and spiritual transformation can be understood as changes in a meaning system (elaborated in Chapter 7).

Any discussion of meaning has to emphasize that meaning always means something in relation to something else. Relations between things have meaning with respect to each other. All relations are connections among elements; "meaning connects things" (Baumeister, 1991). Additionally, a meaning system is a lens through which reality is perceived and interpreted. It is a cognitive network that helps us integrate our discussion about conversion and spirituality into a more complete, dynamic psychological

picture about how humans construct meaning and make connections as they strive for something other than themselves.

Components of Meaning Systems

A short list of elements that comprise a meaning system includes beliefs and attitudes, values, goals and action tendencies, overall purpose, identity and self-definition, and ultimate concern(s). These elements interact in constant mutual feedback and assessment loops in response to incoming information. This incoming information is appraised and evaluated by all components of the meaning system, especially ultimate concern(s). These processes are occurring whether conscious or not. The response can be no change at all, or total transformation of all aspects of the meaning system, or minor or major adjustments in between—at behavioral, cognitive, and/or emotional levels. The more that changes, the greater the transformation.

Beliefs and Attitudes

Beliefs come in various configurations. Some are global or over-arching in that they cover many other more specific beliefs (Park, 2010, 2013; Park & Folkman, 1997). For example, if you accept the global belief that there is an ultimate purpose for suffering, you may also make an attribution that fits nicely under that umbrella about why you must endure a particular disease or trauma: “The Lord has a purpose for this suffering.” Notice that the specific purpose is subsumed under the more encompassing belief within the meaning system. There are also contingent beliefs of the form “If I pray, then God will cure my child of cancer” or “If I pray, my test grade will be an A.”⁶ Beliefs can be about ourselves and how we fit into the world, for example, “I am smart,” “I am a good person,” and so on. One’s beliefs may define what one sees as sacred and how it relates to humans, the world, and whatever is beyond world, or whether “God is on our side” versus there being no god to be on any side. The process of believing has infinite variations.

Attitudes contain elements of thought, feeling, and action tendencies toward the attitude object. They are especially important as part of the social cognitive processes through which people evaluate things, ideas, and new information, and thus are intimately linked to religion and spirituality. For example, if you have a positive attitude toward your church, you possess favorable information about it, like it, and your behavior reflects its teachings. The cognitive, affective, and behavioral components of an attitude are assumed to need to be congruent with each other, and an internally consistent faith would seem to involve all three elements. Indeed, a

⁶Recall my account of my students doing this in Chapter 1.

person can easily feel stress or guilt from doing something contrary to core beliefs. Observing such inconsistency in religious leaders is one of the main reasons why some people leave the religious organization in which they were raised (Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006).

Beliefs and attitudes are intimately connected. The relationship is bidirectional, so that accepting a belief can lead to attitudes consistent with it and vice versa (Paloutzian, 2005). For example, people who believe that the Bible, Torah, or Qur'an is the Word of God are more likely to have a positive attitude toward Christianity, Judaism, or Islam, respectively. Exemplifying the opposite direction of the relationship, converts to new religious movements (NRMs) or a traditional religion may develop positive attitudes toward the group and *then* accept their beliefs (Richardson, 1985, 1995). The link between beliefs and attitudes makes them important to how meaning systems evaluate new information, especially when it is discrepant from beliefs and attitudes already in place.

Values

Values are relative; some things have more, some less. They are guides for setting priorities and making choices. People use values to determine worth, importance, correctness, or moral rightness (Schwartz, 2012). Religions and spiritualities teach values of many kinds and can be potent sources of values for individuals and cultures (Baumeister, 1991). Further, sometimes the values taught by one religion are in direct conflict with those of another, for example, when religion A values equal rights for women and for men while religion B values rights for women subordinate to those for men. Thus, religions often supply a framework for evaluating what is right or wrong, and good or bad, but they can stipulate opposite values while doing so.

Goals and Action Tendencies

Goals are things or states that people work toward achieving, whether near or distant in time, and can range from narrow and specific to global and abstract. Global goals can be thought of as overall purposes. A narrower category of goals can be called strivings, which are typically ongoing intermediate goals that one characteristically tries to reach or maintain. For example, a personal striving might be to "seek out new ways of bettering my spiritual growth, attitudes, behavior" (Emmons, 1999).

Goals are the components of meaning systems that imply action tendencies. When one thinks of religion, prescribed behaviors usually come to mind, such as worship behavior, ritual, singing, praying, and/or sacrificing something for others (Spilka, 2005). Such behaviors are performed not as

ends in themselves, for their own sake, but because they reflect, convey, or help foster something else. For example, observation of one's own behavior is important in the evaluative processes of meaning systems as a check on whether one's acts are consistent with one's values and/or beliefs.

Overall Purpose

A meaning system also includes one's overall purpose. This is whatever someone strives toward above all else, somewhat like a super-goal, and thus usually (but not necessarily) stated as an abstraction that implies many more specific tangible goals. It reflects a person's ultimate values, whether they are implicit and unstated or explicit and elaborated. Overall purpose is also a function of, but also partly determines, the other components of meaning systems summarized above. Examples of statements of overall purpose are many but include such things as "love with no exceptions," "always do God's will," and "strive for what is good regardless of others' opinions."

Identity and Self-Definition

Identity and self-definition are like two sides of the same coin. Together they enable you to answer the question "Who am I?" For example, if you define yourself by saying "I am a good Catholic," then Catholicism is a part of your identity; you differentiate yourself from all other options by declaring that you belong to that group, believe its teachings, and participate in its rituals. Your definition of self takes this particular shape in accord with the processes underpinning uncertainty-identity theory, described in Chapter 3. Some research has explored the degree to which the self is stable versus changeable; notions of the unification of a divided self, or the self formerly lost but now found, have been popularized. Research on self-functioning, self-definition, self-control, self-esteem, and unity of the self makes up part of Chapter 7 on conversion.

Selves feel. Having a sense of meaning in life generally connotes positive feelings because one's attention and activities are occupied with fulfilling purposes seen as "higher" or of greater value (Paloutzian, 1981; Markman, Proulx, & Lindberg, 2013). Because religion and spirituality can be deeply felt, the evaluative process whereby new information is assessed and then retained or rejected can be heavily feeling-laden. And because humans are not as rational as our pure social cognitive models would lead us to think, new information and feelings can collide. Thus, when opposing meanings impose themselves and simultaneously lay claim to the same sense of self, great feelings of discomfort can erupt to which the person must respond, whether behaviorally, verbally, or by appeal to a higher power.

Ultimate Concerns

The ultimate concern(s) is the element of a meaning system that supersedes the rest. All other elements are underneath its umbrella, so to speak. This may be God, some other Higher Power, a country, an ideology, one's children, one's circumstance after death, or a principle held as inviolable. It is the end of the line, so to speak, in the pecking order of how far into one's thinking, evaluating, and feeling one can take information that has entered the system. All such information needs to be appraised by the combined elements in the meaning system, but this appraisal process has to check the possible results with the locus of ultimate concern for complete resolution to be attained. Thus ultimate concerns are the most global component of meaning systems; they have the most overarching reach (Emmons, 1999; Park & Folkman, 1997) and are difficult to change (Chapter 7).

Example: Believing as Meaning Made

Applying knowledge of meaning systems to the five dimensions of religiousness explained in Chapter 1 affords a number of insights. For the sake of illustration, let us focus on a meaning systems analysis of only the belief dimension. However, the same logic of meaning systems applies to each dimension singly as well as the whole set in combination.

Seitz and Angel (2014) provide thoughtful ways to consider some of the constructs within a meaning system. For example, they distinguish between static and active use of a belief, trying to get at the intersection of emotional and cognitive components of beliefs, whether religious or secular. They do not focus on whether belief is religious, spiritual, or secular, but on the processes of believing as such—processes involved in what they term *credititions*, a concept analogous to *emotions* (see Angel, Oviedo, Paloutzian, Runihov, & Seitz, 2017, for a full elaboration). Paloutzian and Park (2014) recast the notion of the process of believing within a meaning systems framework.

They explain that believing is a process by which our perceptual-cognitive-emotive systems construct an idea out of bits and pieces of information such that the whole is sufficient to convince our self of its validity. A “belief” is what exists in the human mind once meaning-making processes have produced something that is relatively stable, identifiable, and acceptable. Beliefs are meanings made. But they are neither fixed nor static. Like memories, they are in flux and can effect change elsewhere in the system or be changed by other processes in the system. Because of this, psychological understanding is enhanced if we focus on the processes of believing—not on “belief” as if it were fixed or firmly set—because they are in flux, like memories, due to the very processes that make them what they are. Thus,

like memories, they are made and remade in the brain (Cabeza & Nyberg, 2000; Daniels, 1986).

The process of believing contains at least three facets, each of which relates to the others as well as to the other elements within the dynamics of the meaning system. They are:

1. Constructing a belief—meaning made initially.
2. Holding and reconstructing belief—continuity, meaning maintained (sustained via all activity in the dynamic appraisal and feedback loops among the meaning system elements).
3. Changing a belief—meaning modified (changed or dropped via all the dynamics in the appraisal and feedback loops).

The processes involved in believing that are set in motion function to construct, sustain, or change belief. The principles that govern these processes are based on cognitive processes related to stress and coping derived from clinical psychology as well as processes involved in attitude formation and change derived from social psychology. They have a large and solid research base.⁷

TAKE-HOME MESSAGES

- The psychological study of religion was part of the beginning of psychology. It went out of favor as the field established itself as a science. But the fundamental questions and issues faced at the beginning remained, and are still researched today.
- James's descriptions of intense religious or spiritual experiences and his analyses of them reflect an idiographic approach that demonstrates qualitative methodology. Starbuck's method of calculating general trends across many subjects reflects a nomothetic approach and is an instance of quantitative methodology. The two methods are complementary.
- The psychology of religion can be rightly understood as being at the center of the modern science–religion dialogue, as all issues eventually arrive at the question of what it all means to and about human beings.
- The psychology of religion is orthogonal to religion in general and to any particular religion. Logic tells us that psychological science cannot

⁷Space constraints preclude elaborating on this point, but ample documentation is evident upon examination of graduate or undergraduate texts in coping and social psychology. Portions of this section were adapted from Paloutzian and Park (2014).

prove any religion true or false, but it can enable us to understand the psychological processes that mediate religiousness and spirituality. The rationale for this is rooted in the nature of scientific research, which is characterized by clarity about the kinds of questions that it can and cannot answer.

- The model of RMS is a fruitful way to conceptualize phenomena and research on the psychological processes in religiousness and spirituality. Incoming information is received, processed through the interactive meaning system components (attitudes and beliefs, values, goals, larger purposes, self and identity, and locus of ultimate concern), appraised and compared with the global aspect of the meaning system, and either retained unchanged or modified. This process, which is not necessarily conscious, continues throughout life.
- The process of believing is what happens as our perceptual, cognitive, and emotional systems integrate bits and pieces of information and construct them into a coherent idea or whole that takes an identifiable shape in our minds, and that carries sufficient weight for our self to claim acceptance of it as valid; beliefs are meanings made.

FURTHER READING

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CHAPTER 3

Psychological Theories Look at Religion

The Intellectual Backdrop

Theories of Function: What Does Religion Do Psychologically?

Theories of Cognitive Substrates

Theories of the “Groupness” of Religions

Theories of Origin

Assessment and Comment: When Meanings Differ

Take-Home Messages

Further Reading

Near the end of Chapter 1 you read through a list of seven levels of analysis at which psychologists can look for roots and causes of religiousness and spirituality. The levels, which range from micro (e.g., brain processes) to macro (e.g., social and cultural influences), can be thought of as locations within the psychological system through which one or more processes that mediate religiousness may be identified. Thus, one can try to explain religiousness by looking for those neural, emotional, social, cultural, developmental, experiential, and individual processes that are involved.

It would help, therefore, to know what the psychological theories pitched at these levels have to say about how religiousness and spirituality work. So equipped, we would be better able to examine the research on religious development, experiences deemed religious, the processes of

believing and rejecting, the relationships between religions and mental and physical health, religiously motivated prosocial and antisocial behavior, and similar topics of individual and societal importance. These topics comprise Part II (Chapters 5–11), the substantive core of this book. Moreover, employing the theories equips you to gain an in-depth understanding and think more critically as you read about religion and spirituality in scholarship from other disciplines such as history or literature, or from the popular media.

There is no one psychological theory that covers all the ground. There is instead an array of theories, each of which is stated in terms of “religion” but is actually about one of a set of interactive processes. Some theories are about the psychological functions religions or spirituality aim to meet. Others are about the neural or cognitive substrates involved. Others put the accent on the “groupness” aspect of religions. Still others focus on the origins of religiousness millennia ago. Can (or should) these theories be integrated into a coherent whole? In order to explore and compare them, this chapter will follow these steps:

1. Briefly explain the intellectual backdrop of overarching evolutionarily rooted principles that ought to guide good theorizing—about religiousness or any other behavior. This intellectual backdrop can be considered the default notion, or baseline, upon which the subsequent theoretical ideas may or may not stand the tests of time and evidence.
2. Summarize five theories of the psychological functions served by religiousness. These address questions about what being religious does for or to someone.
3. Present one neurological and three cognitive process models of religiousness. These try to account for basic information processing substrates that enable religious inputs to be received and religiously related outputs to be shaped and manifested.
4. Describe three approaches whose accent is on the “groupness” aspect of religions. These views highlight why it is that religions are almost always group phenomena.
5. Summarize two views of the origin of religions in the distant past. These views recognize the powerful role that religiousness can play in modern human lives and public affairs, but the question they are aimed at answering is why this came to be, as humans were initially becoming humans.
6. Finally, let us step back and examine the set of ideas above as a whole. The focus of some of the theoretical ideas about religiousness seems illuminating, while others have gaps in knowledge of various sizes that need more intellectual work.

THE INTELLECTUAL BACKDROP

Tree Trunk, Branches, and Connective Tissue

Imagine a sketch of a tree trunk with branches and the connective tissue that keeps the parts held and working together. The trunk and branches represent, respectively, the evolutionary common core and the specialized offshoots of living things, including humans, including the psychology of humans, including the psychological aspects of religiousness. The connective tissue, which I describe in terms of a meaning system, comprises the elements and processes that enable the parts to communicate with each other, transfer information, provide feedback to a higher or lower system, and modify response trajectories based on new information (Park, 2010, 2013). The connective tissue contains the receptors and receivers of information as well as the lubricant that enables the system to work smoothly, adjust, and learn. Such “tissue” implies a relationship, implication, consequence, contingency, or connection of some kind. This is what is meant when we say what something *means* with respect to anything else.

The two pieces of the picture—the branches (Kirkpatrick, 2008) and the connective tissue (Paloutzian, 2008)—represent the structural and functional core of the evolutionary backdrop of religiousness. It is hard to imagine the development of human beings, let alone religions, without these two properties. These two properties also constitute the basic ingredients of an overarching evolutionary meta-theory under whose umbrella other, more circumscribed theories need to fit if they are going to stand the tests of time and evidence.

What Psychology of Religion Theory Does for Psychology

A psychological theory of religion is more than “just” a psychological theory about the mental processes involved in religion. It is actually a psychological theory about all of human behavior, of which accounting for human religiousness processes is an essential component. Why is it that a good psychological theory of religiousness is also an attempt to explain the behavior of the whole human? As a basis for this admittedly unusual way of casting a discussion of theory, let me state two points raised by Lee Kirkpatrick (personal communication, 1995).

The “Religion” Problem

First, an occasional sticking point in engaging serious psychological discussions of religion has been the topic itself. Some people just don’t care for the word *religion* or its coexpression with overlapping meanings, spirituality—although they may nevertheless do research on other phenomena that they

also do not care for, such as aggression, prejudice, sexism, and racism. However, for purposes of psychological understanding it is not particularly important what religiousness is called. The important issues have to do with how religion and spirituality work and what basic psychological processes mediate them. These questions are intimately related to meaning system processes. Therefore, the scholarly material within the psychology of religion and spirituality could perhaps be called the psychology of meaning because religions are emergent properties of meaning-making processes in a manner similar to that of many other human behaviors (Markman et al., 2013; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2012; Wong, 2012).

Strange Human Contradictions

Second, a common observation of human behavior is that it is normal and natural for people to give thanks to God or another entity that serves a God function for them when good things happen and when they have survived hardships, tragedies, and the like. Giving thanks makes sense when the person doing it believes in the existence and activity of a being that has done something worthy of gratitude. It is consistent that if there is a transcendent source of meaning, one might give thanks to that source.

The psychologically interesting observation is that it is quite common for people to give thanks when they do not claim belief in a God or other source of transcendent meaning. By straightforward Aristotelian logic, those who do not believe in a “thankable” transcendent being presumably posit that it is meaningless to give thanks. Nevertheless, they do—by saying things like “I feel grateful” after surviving a flood, or “I am thankful” before eating or after recovery from a disease—although there is no believed-in agent to thank or logical basis for gratefulness. Given such factors and a rationalistic model of human behavior, verbalizing thanks is paradoxical when a person who does not postulate a transcendent being uses speech that implies such belief. But this does happen. (See Emmons & McCullough, 2004, for a research account of gratefulness, and Emmons, 2007, for an application of it.)

There are many psychologically strange behaviors that occur in religiousness. For example, many religious people would eschew a belief in magic, but they feel sure that an event for which there is no known natural process (i.e., a miracle inexplicable to human understanding, to be elaborated in Chapter 10) was performed by a being that they cannot be sure exists (Paloutzian et al., 2008). Such psychologically interesting behaviors are apparent not only in believers in traditional religions but also in some “new age” groups and believers in an afterlife and the paranormal based on near-death experiences (NDEs; Barlev, Kinsella, Taves, Paloutzian, & German, 2015). In addition, certain pairs of words that seem rhetorically disconnected have essentially the same or similar connotations (e.g.,

superstition and belief in so-called distant prayer; ESP and sensitivity to the Holy Spirit). Lindeman and Svedholm (2012) carefully examined the meanings of key words and concluded that “the concepts paranormal, superstitious, magical, and supernatural denote the same thing” (p. 241)—though one word is seen as a valid manifestation of one’s religion, whereas another is seen as invalid and illusory. People may manifest “theological incorrectness” (Barrett, 2013; Slone, 2004), speech that reflects contradictions to what one believes as religious Truth—for example, saying that a specific instance of a “bad thing” is God’s will while “knowing” on grounds of one’s theology that God neither endorses nor does bad things; or using words that anthropomorphize God even though one’s doctrine says that God is not a human being. In yet another example, atheists who asked God to do a bad thing felt anxious in doing so, when by standard logic (in contrast to “psycho-logic”) there was no reason to (Lindeman, Heywood, Riekkki, & Makkonen, 2014).

Examining the meaning system processes involved in religious thinking may offer insights into these and other religious behaviors. The examples above of human behavior inconsistent with a person’s beliefs or attitudes are in line with an enormous body of social psychological research on attitude–behavior inconsistency (see, e.g., Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Psychology of religion research along these lines is able, therefore, to add to the richness of the rest of the psychological research on these and similar human puzzles.

Midlevel Theories in Evolutionary Context

Theories differ markedly in the scope of phenomena they try to account for, their intellectual roots, and the methods best suited to test them. Table 3.1 lists theories covered in this chapter. Ideally (but not always), each one serves the goal of helping to integrate research into a good, comprehensive scientific theory of religiousness. The theory–data–theory feedback loop presented in Chapter 2 and its methods, elaborated in Chapter 4, are at the heart of the process.

Various concerns surface in thinking about how to understand religion theoretically. For example, for a psychological theory of religion to be valid, should it explain religious motivation? Religious development? Why some religious people “see” God’s activity in everything? Why a child insecurely attached to his or her parent grows up with a greater probability of undergoing a religious conversion than a child reared securely attached (see Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2004, for review)? When and by what processes mental illness and religion are related? How mental processes make and/or acquire religious symbolism? These questions are but the tip of a big iceberg of psychological issues that a good, comprehensive theory of religion capable of standing the tests of time, and scientific and human life tests, ought to explain.

TABLE 3.1. Theories of Religiousness Indicating the Emphases and Central Ideas of Each

Theory	Origin	Focus	Central idea
<u>Theories of function</u>			
Psychoanalytic	Freud	Unconscious	Religion reduces anxiety
Object relations	Rizzuto	Interactions with tangible and nontangible objects	There is a “living god” object which is the focus of our interactions
Jungian	Jung	Collective unconscious	God is an archetype
Ego psychology	Erikson	Unconscious	Religion satisfies the unconscious in a socially acceptable way
Attachment	Bowlby; Ainsworth	Individual	God is an attachment figure
Uncertainty-identity	Hogg, Adelman, & Blagg	Identity formed in context of uncertainty and social groups	Religion provides an identity
Need for meaning	Frankl	Unconscious transcendence	Religion is a way to strive for what lies beyond the self
Attribution	Field of social psychology	Individual	Religious beliefs are meanings made
<u>Theories of cognitive substrates</u>			
Neuro level	Newberg & D’Aquili	Brain function	Neural mechanisms exist that allow for religious experiences
Cognitive anthropomorphism	Guthrie	Relationships with animate and inanimate entities	Cognitive systems naturally infer the existence of supernatural presences in nonhuman sources
Cognitive structures	Lawson & McCauley	Hyperactive agency detection device (Barrett, 2013); cultural influences	Religion is culturally bound and involves culturally created “superhuman” entities that humans have the cognitive capacity to create and interpret
Cognitive processes	Boyer	Executive functions and basic cognitive processes	Religious “mental life” is processed by the same cognitive processes as other elements of nonreligious “mental life”

(continued)

TABLE 3.1. (continued)

Theory	Origin	Focus	Central idea
<u>Theories of groupness</u>			
Group selection	Wilson	Natural selection and survival of groups	Religion allows groups to survive and flourish
Big Gods	Norenzayan	Accountability in the context of anonymity	The idea of “Big Gods” keeps the behavior of individuals in large societies in check
Cultural psychology	Cohen	Cultural factors	Religion is its own culture
<u>Theories of origin</u>			
Evolutionary cascade	Atran	Evolution of the abstract	Religion developed due to a series of “evolutionary steps”
Paleolithic imaginative play	Bellah; Burghardt	Changes during Paleolithic age	The fantasy and imagination of the Axial Age have carried over into religion

Although the theories listed in Table 3.1 all claim to be about “religion,” no two of them are about the same thing. They are best seen as illustrative ideas and approaches, large and small in scope, that may in combination help move us toward the development of an integrative theory. It will help to try to relate each of the ideas to the meaning-making, assessment, and remaking processes that occur continuously in the human system. As such notions are brought together by meaning systems language and models, a comprehensive psychological theory of religion has a greater chance of emerging.

Evolutionary psychology developed as an extension of evolutionary biology (Kirkpatrick, 2005, 2013; Barkow, Cosmides, & Tooby, 1992). Understandably, given the roots of evolutionary theory in biology, its first concerns were with the structure and function of physical attributes such as why and when humans developed binocular vision, started to walk upright, and had visual sensitivity to certain wavelengths of light. These adaptations served the survival of what came to be humans.

Extension of the same kind of reasoning developed into the area now called evolutionary psychology. Its aim is to create theory to explain human behavioral and mental phenomena as adaptations (or as consequences of them) after the manner of physical and structural attributes. For example, the observation that humans have the capability of processing 7 ± 2 bits of information at a time (Miller, 1956) must be accounted for within the

framework of adaptations at a time that humans came about. Note that it is not sufficient to observe that humans can process 7 ± 2 bits of information and then say that it is an adaptation. Doing this only is naming, not explaining. It is instead necessary to account for the phenomenon by actual adaptations, on the grounds that the particular human capability observed would not otherwise have come to be. This means that the mere presence of a behavior or phenomenon does not in and of itself mean that it qualifies as an adaptation. (See Atran, 2002, 2006; Kirkpatrick, 2005, 2013; McNamara, 2006; and Schloss & Murray, 2009, for fuller elaboration of these points.)

The overarching evolutionary framework is not a “mere” psychological theory but a meta-theory capable of accommodating more midrange psychological theories of religion and everything else in psychology (Kirkpatrick, 2005, 2013, 2015). It is an idea matched well with both the multi-level interdisciplinary paradigm (MIP; Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003) and the meaning systems language and model (Park, 2010, 2013). Our question becomes how to tease those aspects that a good theory should retain from those it should cast aside.

Adaptation or By-Product as a Fundamental Issue

Our first set of questions asks if whether being religious is due to the same processes of natural selection from which evolved the color of our eyes, hands with four fingers and an opposing thumb, and the capability to see and hear. Does the phenomenon of human religiousness come about because the behaviors and capabilities that comprise it were uniquely adaptive? As we come to learn whether or how religion as a whole might have been adaptive, we also come to understand why specific features of religiousness survived the evolutionary test of time. For example, did religions with beliefs in supernatural agents come about because those who held those supernatural beliefs prayed to supreme beings and performed rituals, and because of that were more likely to survive and propagate their gene pool? In other words, was religion itself an adaptation? If so, how? And why?

Alternatively, did religiousness come about as a by-product of the evolution of other capabilities? Although not itself an adaptation, is religion an extra feature that was made possible by its association with something else that was an adaptation? This is no small question because the answer to it implies whether humans are supposed to be religious “by nature,” or, alternatively, whether people do not necessarily by nature need to be religious because religiousness as a specific adaptation never occurred. Instead, capabilities such as thinking, talking, believing, imagining, hoping, committing, leading, following, and congregating came to be, and one among

many variations of the use of those capabilities happens to have developed into what are called religions. Another way to make the same point is to draw an analogy between religion and soccer. That is, humans evolved so that they can kick, run, see, and throw—all capabilities involved in soccer. But there is no reason why playing soccer is itself an adaptation. It is instead a complex cultural behavior that is enabled because other behaviors that were adaptive happened to evolve. Similarly, humans can see, exchange information in groups, imagine, sing, perform rituals—all of which can be manifest in religions. But this means only that religiousness is enabled by the capabilities that humans have, not that religion itself is an adaptation. Thus, there is nothing “essential” in the nature of humans that makes being religious a built-in necessity. Which answer to this issue carries the greatest weight? This question provides the backdrop to what follows.

Human or animal properties of the “by-product” type are called *spandrels* or side effects of evolution that are not functional in and of themselves but developed incidental to some other adaptation. An important evolutionary psychology view says that religion is a spandrel and that humans have no built-in instinct toward it (Kirkpatrick, 2005, 2013, 2015). This idea differs from the view that humans have a built-in need to seek and find God, even as a psychic though not necessarily literal reality (e.g., Jung, 1933, 1938), or are predisposed to find a religious way to satisfy unconscious tendencies toward spirituality (Frankl, 1975). On the other hand, not all people on the earth are religious (Chapter 1); nonbelievers are the third largest group in terms of “religious belief” on earth (Lee, 2015). Thus, there must be something amiss with the idea that a healthy human *must* be religious in the same sense that a healthy human must be born able to ingest and digest nutrients. It is against this backdrop—the proposition that religiousness is a human behavior like any other (the non-unique view stated at the close of Chapter 1)—that other views of the relative specialness or non-specialness of religion can be evaluated (Kirkpatrick, 2005). With this backdrop in mind, let us examine what the theories do and do not say.

THEORIES OF FUNCTION: WHAT DOES RELIGION DO PSYCHOLOGICALLY?

When we ask what believing in or practicing a religion does for someone, we are posing a question about its psychological functions (Chapter 1). Theories that primarily aim to explain what a religion does psychologically to or for someone either explicitly or implicitly identify human needs and how a religion might meet them. The needs range from unconscious to conscious, emotional to rational, and cognitive to interpersonal.

Psychoanalytic and Depth Approaches

Classical Psychoanalysis

The original psychodynamic theory and the one most explicitly aimed at explaining religiousness is the psychoanalytic theory of Sigmund Freud. First published to present a new model of the mind based on the theory of the unconscious (Freud, 1900/1955, 1927/1961), it was expanded, changed, and eventually applied to virtually all aspects of human behavior. In his earlier writings about religion (Freud, 1907/1959, 1913/1953), the origins of “primitive” religions were explored and interpreted as part of the advent of totems and taboos. The simple, modern illustration of this is that all religions include behavioral and belief codes that are prescribed for the believer; religions say “thou shalt” and “thou shalt not.” In later writings Freud (1927/1961) applied the theory both more broadly to religions and cultures at large and more deeply to the lives of individual persons. By the time of his death in 1939, he had written what today still remains the most comprehensive attempt to psychologically account for human religiousness. Subsequent valuable psychodynamic theories of religion (Jung, 1933, 1938; Rizzuto, 1979) stand on the shoulders of Freud in terms of the depth, scope, and ingenuity of the ideas put forth by the founder of psychoanalysis.

Freud’s ideas about religion addressed two levels of manifestation, cultural and personal (Corveleyn et al., 2013). His view of religion as a cultural phenomenon emphasized its role in subduing the antisocial tendencies of people and harnessing primitive tendencies toward selfishness and aggression. In so doing, religion, like art, fostered the development of civilization (Freud, 1927/1961). At the level of the individual, religion was seen in somewhat ambiguous terms that can be interpreted negatively or positively depending upon one’s bent. According to Freud, the unconscious core of human motivation was a matter of pleasure seeking and self-gratification, with a special emphasis on sexual impulses, whether manifested literally or symbolically. Ego and superego functions served to repress the expression of these motivations, and religion, with its prohibitions and taboos, served those superego functions perfectly. Therefore, the intrapsychic role of religion in the unconscious mental life of the individual was positive in one way and negative in another. It was positive in the sense that it kept inappropriate social behaviors in check and thereby fostered the smooth operation of society as a whole. It was negative in the sense that in so doing it facilitated tendencies toward neurosis by requiring natural motivations to be kept under control.

It would be the healthy ego that would be capable of navigating the waters between unconscious needs and social restraints in order to enable the person to satisfy one within the reality boundaries of the other. Thus, a healthy ego could accommodate religion in a way that would be psychically comfortable for the person, whereas a weak ego, especially one combined

with a strong primitive superego (i.e., a superego that saw the world in simple black-and-white terms and punished the person with severe guilt for the slightest infraction) would accommodate religion but at the cost of a seemingly treacherous level of unconscious, neurotic, psychic conflict. These processes would be mediated through symbolic representations of religion in the mind. In this way people, stimuli, or events that appeared to be areligious on the surface could actually have religious effects on the person, but this would occur by unconscious, not conscious, mediation.

These are the simplest statements describing the basics of the classical psychoanalytic theory of religion. By using these ideas to think about religiousness, we gain a sense of how broadly they can be applied. They might be used in helping clinical patients whose disturbance involves religion. More generally, this approach seems capable of helping a psychologist understand some symbolic processes in the mental life of one person in depth. Those who favor it point out how rich an insight it offers into not only people's religious symbolization, but into the human ability to have a symbolic mental life at all.

Psychodynamic Variations: Jung, Ego Psychology, and Object Relations

Psychoanalytic theory is not one idea. It is actually a class of ideas that has evolved for over 100 years. In that time it has changed position on some issues, developed different emphases within the broader approach, and in some cases reversed itself completely (Corvelyn et al., 2013). The general psychoanalytic approach has been applied to many phenomena, but in particular the modifications that have addressed religion include ego psychology and object relations. Ego psychology places the emphasis on the part of the unconscious mind that satisfies unconscious wishes and then guides the person to do so in socially acceptable ways, including religiously acceptable ways.

More recent in-depth modifications have evolved into an object relations theory relevant to the psychology of religion (Rizzuto, 1979; see Wulff, 1997, for an overview). In this variant of a psychoanalytic approach, the emphasis is on the mental representation of God (as male or female, kind or punitive, tolerant or intolerant, etc.) and the person's relationship with that object. Keep in mind that in this and all variations of a psychodynamic approach, it doesn't matter whether there is or is not a god "out there" or what the character of that god or gods "actually" is. What matters is a person's psychic representation of God. In the object relations approach, this is made explicit, and how the person relates to that psychic entity is the key mental process to be understood.

These three psychoanalytic approaches (the classical drive theory of Freud, ego psychology, and object relations theory) all reflect a common

core set of psychic mechanisms. But they differ on which aspect of how religions function in the mind of an individual is most important. Thus, psychoanalysis is not one monolithic entity. In fact, its amazing contributions and durability for over a century are a testament to the strength and reach of some of its ideas. It has problems, however. Probably the one most commonly mentioned is its reliance upon unconscious mechanisms whose very existence has been difficult to establish, let alone test, by standard scientific methods. People often express sadness that in psychoanalysis we have a brilliant idea with an extremely wide reach, but there is little way to establish its validity. Fortunately, this has begun to change (see Corveleyn & Luyten, 2005; Luyten, 2015; Luyten, Mayes, Fonagy, Target, & Blatt, 2015).

Jung was an early follower of Freud but split off from Freud's inner circle in 1909 to establish his own approach to understanding the unconscious and people's tendency toward religion. Whereas Freud's view assumes "negative" motivations in the unconscious, Jung's view places more "positive" motivations there. For example, Jung thought that the human mind contained built-in universal ideas or thought forms that motivated a person to seek and find their real-world counterparts (e.g., the built-in universal idea "mother" motivated an infant to seek and find its real mother). One of the main notions was that of the *archetype*. An archetype was considered an unconscious psychic reality. Thus, for Jung, God was an archetype (whether or not it was a literal, ontological reality), and humans were born with the unconscious tendency to search for and find God. For both Freud and Jung, therefore, belief in God implied powerful, but unknown, unconscious forces. For Freud, people accepted a religion because of built-in human weaknesses, whereas for Jung, this occurred because of a built-in need to psychically find a match for the unconscious god archetype. Thus, it could be said that for Freud, religion served human needs, whereas for Jung, religion fulfilled them (Paloutzian, 2014).

Research

By translating hypotheses derived from psychoanalytic theory into empirical procedures and measures, we make it possible to test predictions from the theory along with predictions from other theories that bear upon the same questions about meaning. For example, an international research project in Belgium, Hungary, and Peru found that people feel guilt and shame upon performing a certain behavior or feeling a certain emotion only because doing so carries a prohibitive meaning (e.g., Fontaine et al., 2006). This shows that psychoanalytic concepts imply a meaning whose effects can be tested. When we add to this the observation that techniques for assessing the meaning-ladenness of concepts or behaviors are being developed (Park, 2005b, 2010), we can see the empirical testability of psychoanalytically

derived concepts and test them within a meaning-system model. This illustrates not only the research possibilities implied by a psychodynamic approach, but also the potential for identifying a meaning-laden common core. This core would likely constitute survival and continuation. Overall, the more this process is executed well, the more small steps the theory-building process in the psychology of religion takes toward compatibility with the evolutionary meta-theory that integrates the rest of the sciences.

Psychoanalytic theory has never been without its critics. As a theory of the psychology of religion, its most compelling recent challenge has come from within the framework of evolutionary psychology in the form of attachment theory (Granqvist, 2006a, b; Kirkpatrick, 1992, 2005). The core of the disagreements between those who endorse a psychoanalytic approach (at least in its classical form, which is what the proponents of attachment theory are criticizing) and those who endorse an attachment approach seems to stem from differences in opinion about what is going on in the mind of a child during the child-rearing years in relation to the child's caregivers and how this determines religious or areligious tendencies when the person reaches young adulthood. Kirkpatrick (2005) and Granqvist (2006b) have said that the classical Freudian way of explaining someone's need for God as a reflection of repressed libidinal needs for which the very agent of repression (God through culturally transmitted rules inhibits the satisfaction of those needs) becomes the object of love (i.e. identification with the aggressor) is unsatisfactory. Granqvist (2006a) proposes that such reasoning, including its modern variation in the form of object relations theory (Rizzuto, 1979, 2005), is circular. The proponents of attachment theory think that a different process is at work. Perhaps a key question is whether competing, testable predictions can be made from these two frameworks.

Attachment Theory

Child–Caregiver Relationships and Religiousness

Attachment theorists propose that the attachment of a child to his or her caregiver is developed during the formative years and can vary in type and quality. It is the type and strength of attachment relationship with the caregiver during childhood that determines whether the person will gravitate toward holding a God belief during adulthood, and if so what form that will take. The type of attachment experience a child has results in an “internal working model”—a schema that is a mental model of interpersonal relationships—that the person later uses as a guide for his or her interactions with others in the world. Three general types of attachment experiences (with some subtypes) were originally proposed: secure, insecure, and avoidant. A fourth “disorganized” type was added later (Hazan,

1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1986; see Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2004). The secure type is evident, for example, when a child encounters a strange person (e.g. Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1973), orients him- or herself toward or approaches the caregiver, and is touched, hugged, spoken to in a comforting way, or in other ways provided with the feeling of safety and security the child is seeking. The insecure and avoidant relationships are evident when in such circumstances the child's feelings of safety, security, and trust are not forthcoming. (See Kirkpatrick, 2005, and Shaver & Mikulincer, 2011, for reviews.)

The descriptions in Table 3.2 summarize what is meant by the three original attachment types. The statements quoted in the bottom row of the table illustrate a frequently used tool to assess attachment type in research; subjects are asked to select which of these three items best reflects their relationship with their mother. People show different rates of religious conversion depending on which item they select (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2004). Those who select the secure item are least likely to become religious converts, and if they are raised with a religious belief they are more likely to sustain than change it. Those who select the others are more likely to have a religious conversion. The implications seem to be that children raised securely tend to retain a sense of security during adulthood, so that there is relatively little in the way of security and safety needs to be met by a new relationship with God. But children raised insecurely have a need for a safe haven in times of danger, and that need is met by accepting a loving God who is always there to protect and sustain one.

Scholars who favor an attachment theory of religion over a classical psychoanalytic theory of religion do so partly because it has been more clearly testable than those based on the early versions of psychoanalysis and because the hypotheses that can be derived are reasonably clear and explicit. The theory proposes that certain modes of child rearing lay down models of interpersonal relationships in the mind of the child, and that a comparison of these models leads to hypotheses about who is more likely to become a religious convert. Such hypotheses are testable.

Interaction between Psychodynamic and Attachment Processes?

A debate has recently occurred over the relative positioning of these two approaches, both in relation to each other as well as in relation to how they might fit with an evolutionary meta-theory. Kirkpatrick (2005) and Granqvist (2006b) are explicit in arguing that attachment theory is a replacement for psychoanalysis. Their argument is directed primarily at classical psychoanalysis but seems to extend to modern variations of it (Granqvist, 2006a). A corollary of this idea is that certain aspects of psychoanalytic theory should be retained only because they fit within attachment theory. A related view sees these two approaches as somewhat compatible, with

TABLE 3.2. Summary of Secure, Avoidant, and Anxious Attachment Styles

Key features	Attachment style	
	Insecure: Avoidant	Insecure: Anxious
Secure	<p>Characterized by a desire for a high level of autonomy, which often strikes others as an attempt to avoid intimacy in relationships. These individuals are inclined to hide and suppress their feelings from romantic partners and tend to respond to rejection by putting distance between themselves and the origin of rejection.</p>	<p>Motivated to seek large amounts of intimacy, affirmation, and acknowledgment from partners, which may lead to an excessive amount of relational dependence. These persons may demonstrate high levels of worry, impulsive behavior, and emotional expression in their relationships.</p>
Distinguishing by being comfortable with intimacy and independence, seeking a balance between the two; Securely attached individuals often hold positive views of themselves, their partners, and their romantic relationships. They report higher levels of relationship satisfaction than anxiously or avoidantly attached individuals.	<p>Promoted by a caregiver who is attentive to the child's attachment behavior and responds in an appropriate manner in order to demonstrate emotional availability. The caregiver is able to regulate positive and negative emotions when interacting with the child.</p>	<p>The unpredictable nature of the caregiver's behavior creates confusion and can be divisive in the child-caregiver relationship. This inconsistency means the caregiver may be nurturing and effectively responsive to the child's needs sometimes but can be insensitive and oblivious at other times when the child is distressed.</p>
Caregiver characteristics	<p>The emotional unavailability displayed by the caregiver leads to a kind of "aggressive self-reliance," as little to no comfort is given in response to distress. Often, the children of these caregivers are discouraged from crying and encouraged to be emotionally independent.</p>	<p>"She was noticeably inconsistent in her reactions to me, sometimes warm and sometimes not; she had her own needs and agendas which sometimes got in the way of her receptiveness to my needs; she definitely loved me but didn't always show it in the best way."</p>
Sample description of relationship with mother	<p>"She was generally warm and responsive; she was good at knowing when to be supportive and when let me operate on my own; our relationship was almost always comfortable, and I have no major reservations or complaints about it."</p>	<p>"She was fairly cold, distant, and rejecting, and not very responsive; I often felt that her concerns were elsewhere; I frequently had the feeling that she just as soon would not have had me."</p>

Note. Key features based on Sable (2008). Caregiver characteristics based on Feldman (2010). Descriptions taken from Granqvist and Kirkpatrick (2004, pp. 231–232). Note that although Granqvist and Kirkpatrick provide sample descriptions of the mother as the primary caregiver, the caregiver could be the father, grandparent, aunt, etc.

attachment superordinate to psychoanalysis. In contrast, Wulff (2006) argues that both views have some validity for slightly different reasons, but that psychoanalytic theory covers more ground. He sees no apparent incompatibility between the two approaches and instead sees attachment theory as a subset of a psychodynamic theory. No one to my knowledge has argued that the two views are on the same plane. Perhaps the conflictual posture between these two views is real for classical psychoanalysis but less so for its more recent modifications. Additional intellectual work is needed to resolve these issues.

Regardless of which approach prevails, the interpretations will be most useful for the purposes of theory advancement and the construction of knowledge about the psychology of religion if they are cast in a meaning systems framework. Whether somebody becomes a religious convert because of attachment processes or because of the repression and rechanneling of unconscious impulses and motivations, the process works because the acceptance of God (or a functionally equivalent spirituality) holds a particular meaning for the person. The specific meaning may differ (i.e., the data may come out in favor of theory A or theory B), but the meaning dynamics and assessment processes are there nevertheless. Therefore, by integrating the research findings within a meaning model we build a more comprehensive picture of how the human mind works in the context of religiousness and beyond.

Uncertainty–Identity Theory

Hogg, Adelman, and Blagg (2010) have created a social psychological theory on the nature of religiousness called uncertainty–identity theory, which cleverly manipulates identity constructs. Instead of considering identity an intrapsychic entity that can be relatively unified or divided, or an aspect of adolescence to be formed (Erikson, 1963, 1997), the theory emphasizes the social psychology of identity in the context of uncertainty and social groups. Too much uncertainty can disrupt one’s sense of stability and belief in social factors (such as the stability of the family, the superiority of one’s nation, or the rightness one’s position on a social or cultural issue), on which one typically depends for a sense of identity. According to this theory, religious groups provide a most compelling antidote for uncertainty of identity in the face of such confrontation. By identifying with a religious group, one may gain a sense of who one is and what one is about, and clear answers to uncertainties about family, national, social, and meaning-laden issues such as what one should live for and how to go about it.

The premise is that some routine amount of uncertainty is built into the nature of life (i.e., there is no such thing as absolute sameness in life), but too much uncertainty is stressful, consciously or unconsciously too destabilizing or even frightening, to a degree that people are motivated to reduce it.

Identification with a group, especially with a religious group comprised of like-minded people offering clear answers to uncertainty-inducing issues, is an ideal way to reduce uncertainty and regain a sense of comfort, rightness, steadiness, continuity, closure, and predictability in the world. Group identification also decreases one's sense of aloneness in the world; by identification with a group, a person becomes part of "we" instead of remaining the lonely "I." Thus, so long as issues of uncertainty are matters on which one is not inclined to expend much cognitive and social energy, group identification and self-categorization will result in some degree of uncertainty reduction. And such uncertainty reduction is reinforcing, which increases the probability that the person will sustain identity with the group.

Another word for uncertainty is ambiguity. Religious group identity is particularly effective because it offers meanings to address the deepest and most far-reaching areas of ambiguity, such as who we are, why we are here, whether there is a basis for morality, whether or not there is something special after death, and so forth.

However, merely belonging to one group often creates boundaries between oneself and those in other groups. These boundaries are then reinforced and can become more rigid by heightened attention to the unique "specialness" of "our" teachings, practices, and eternal rights. In extreme cases, the stage is set for exaltation of the in-group and dehumanization of all out-groups: Highly dogmatic or rigid believers with an inflexible ideology and a fixed mode of thinking in black-and-white terms can lead to fundamentalism (see Chapter 11 for elaboration). One outcome of this process occurs when two or more such groups clash, and conflict between religious cultures ensues.

Need for Meaning

Viktor Frankl (1963) wrote what was been called one of the most important books of the 20th century, *Man's Search for Meaning*. Based on his experiences in a Nazi concentration camp during World War II, he developed the third Viennese school of psychiatry, based on the notion of the need for meaning.¹ According to this principle, the fundamental motive in life is to fulfill a search for meaning. This search can be fulfilled only by something that lies beyond oneself. Because of this, Frankl postulated that humans are born with an unconscious need for transcendence, that is, knowingly or not, people implicitly strive for something beyond them. The transcendence in Frankl's psychology may or may not be something typically called religious; whether it is religious, otherworldly (in some "spiritual" sense not typically called religious), or strictly of this world is not important. What

¹The first two Viennese schools of psychiatry were Freudian psychoanalysis, based on the pleasure principle, and Adler's individual psychology, based on the need for power.

matters is that it is something outside oneself—something religious or secular, a loved one, a cause. Anything other than self for which one strives will do. Thus the “best” in life is selfless, not selfish.

Given that meaning-making processes are fundamental and evolutionarily rooted (see the Prelude to Part II of this book for a complete explanation), the notion that people have a built-in “need for meaning” may sound compelling. But talking about a “need for meaning” is not the most precise way to express this in technical psychological terms, even though such a phrase sounds comfortable and poetic (Park, 2010). This is because it is too easy to hear the phrase “need for meaning” as primarily a reference to a particular mental state—a conscious awareness of “meaning.” But this is not what meaning making is about. It is not the case that humans have a “need for meaning” in the sense of a pleasant state of mind, a consciousness that feels aware of purpose. Why, for example, would we have developed such a need—just because it is an interesting state of mind? No. States of mind on their own serve no functional value and there is no compelling reason why humans would have a “need” for them. The important concern is about perceptual and regulatory meaning system processes that enable one to pursue something (e.g., food, safety, mating, shelter) beyond oneself. Doing so has survival benefit (Prelude to Part II) and requires well-functioning meaning system processes, most of which operate out of conscious awareness. Thus, it is more accurate to say that humans *automatically invoke a process of making meaning* out of ambiguity and therefore need a well-functioning meaning system than to say humans have a “need for meaning,” as the latter phrase can be too easily misconstrued.

Attribution Theory

Attributions Are Meanings Inferred

Attribution theory has its roots in a broad approach to social perception that attempts to explain how people make inferences about the properties of other people, causes of their behavior, and explanations for other phenomena. It is an intellectual descendent of cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) and the field of person perception that, like other consistency models in social psychology, has its origins in a more or less rationalistic assumption about the workings of the human mind. Like attachment and psychoanalysis, attribution theory was not developed with religiousness particularly in mind. However, it turns out to have wide-ranging applications to religiousness, especially with reference to how people “see” supernatural meaning in events (Spilka et al., 1985; Hood et al., 2009).

Attributions are inferences about some property of people, the intentional or unintentional cause of behavior of a person or a group, a

motivation that someone might have, a characteristic that might be part of someone's personality makeup, and the like (Malle, 2004). None of these things is directly observable. For example, we cannot see intelligence, but we can observe skilled problem-solving behavior and attribute the property of intelligence to the person's mind. We can also not see altruistic motivation, but we can observe someone perform a good deed and make an attribution of a desire to help to the person. All attributions are inferences. In fact, whatever else God may or may not be, God is an attribution. Nobody to my knowledge has ever seen God but billions of people claim God's agency in regulating events, large and small, in the world. The statement, "God is in control" is an attribution of supernatural agency exerting power over earthly events. If you have ever thanked God for anything, you have done so on the assumption (inference, attribution) that God actually was there and actually intervened in a way deserving of thanks. Similarly, the statement "this is God's will" is an attribution of intentionality or choice to God. None of this can be seen or known. Therefore, from a psychological point of view, all instances in which someone says that God does or does not do or will anything are attributional statements. The far reach of these very simple ideas is plain to see. (See Malle, 2004, for a careful analysis of attributions for intentional and unintentional behavior.)

Religious attributions seem to come in a common-sense type and a paradoxical type; the latter are much more psychologically interesting. Common-sense religious attributions are illustrated by the finding that people who believe that God is active in the world are more likely than people who do not hold this belief to say that an event is God's will. Related experiments show that, for example, those who have an intrinsic, internalized religious orientation (elaborated in Chapters 6 and 11) and who have ambiguous mental experiences while under sensory deprivation are more likely than those who have an extrinsic, utilitarian religious orientation to "see" religious meaning in those mental experiences (Hood & Morris, 1981). In the first case there is no mystery. If you believe God does things, then you are more likely to think God did something than if you don't believe God does things. In the second case there is little mystery, because those with internalized faith would be predicted to "see" God's meaning in events more than someone who has a more utilitarian way of being religious (Hood, 1995). So far, no surprises.

Human Contradictions Revisited: The Gay Paul Experiment

Earlier I said that religions afford us a number of strange contradictions in human behavior. Attribution theory is equipped to allow us to pose psychological questions about why people demonstrate those strange contradictions. In this section, let us examine one example by summarizing an

experiment conducted by two of my students.² The behaviors at issue are nonobvious and therefore contradictions that make them psychologically interesting. First, the researcher poses an obvious question keenly relevant to religion; this is followed by two nonobvious (psychological) answers. The obvious question is “What do people do when they are confronted with information contradictory to their deeply held beliefs?” Examples of such questions might include what a Christian might do if confronted with solid evidence that the body of Jesus was found, what a believer in the Torah might do if it was learned that the Israelites were never in Egypt or enslaved, or newly found documents indicating that near the end of his life Muhammad said that he was not a prophet of God after all.

A common-sense, “rational” view of humans might lead to the prediction that when confronted with conclusive evidence contrary to deeply held beliefs, one would feel sad, hang one’s head, and give up the belief. But there are behavioral surprises, and some of them can be shown experimentally. For example, Wick, Weedman, and Paloutzian (1997) explored the way college students made attributions about the cause of someone’s behavior and about the degree of its rightness or wrongness when the information presented to students violated their deeply held beliefs. The subjects were of a conservative Christian orientation whose beliefs included a high opinion of Saint Paul and a generally negative view of homosexuality. They were asked in a research session, which took less than an hour, to fill out rating scales that indicate how right or wrong they view homosexual behavior as being, the degree to which it is good or bad, and the degree to which they think the cause of the behavior is God, chance, the individual person, and circumstance. Students in the experimental group answered these questions before and after reading (fictitious) information that purported to document that Saint Paul was homosexual. Saint Paul was the stimulus person whose sexual orientation was to be assessed because we wanted to find out how people respond when confronted with information inconsistent with their deeply held beliefs, which include Saint Paul’s very high status. Students in the control group answered the same questions before and after reading the same (fictitious) information about the mayor of Sandpoint, Idaho—a figure with no status relative to those beliefs. We wanted to find out whether the subjects would interpret the homosexual behavior differently before and after reading the information and whether the amount their perceptions changed would depend upon the high status (Paul) versus negligible status (mayor) of the stimulus person.

The results are shown in Figures 3.1a and 3.1b. They illustrate an attributional paradox that looks psychologically interesting. For the mayor, the students interpreted homosexuality in pretty much the same way after learning about Paul’s alleged homosexuality as they did before. If their attitude

²Thanks to Karen Wick and Brock Weedman.

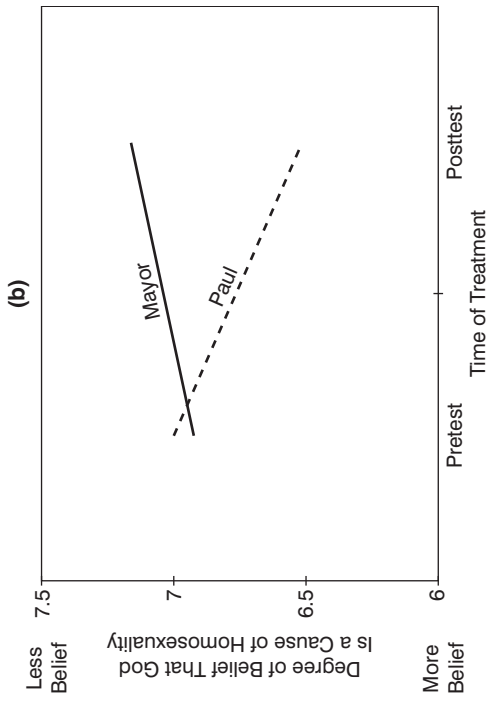
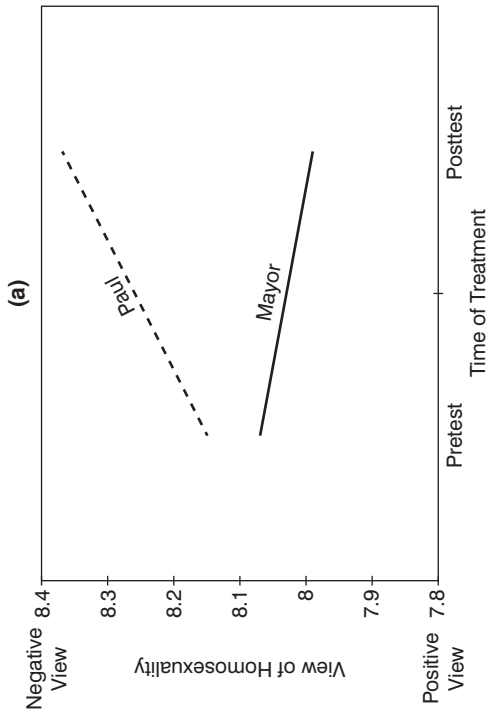


FIGURE 3.1. Results of experiment showing that when a highly esteemed person was found to be homosexual, homosexuality was rated as more wrong (a), while the attribution to God as the cause of the homosexuality went up (b). The psychological puzzle is how it could be that a good being (God) would cause more of a behavior deemed wrong.

changed at all, it was seen as slightly more positive (Figure 3.1a); attributions to God being causally involved are made to a slightly lower degree (Figure 3.1b). But for Saint Paul the pattern is significantly different. From before to after learning about his homosexuality, the perception of wrongness of the behavior went up (Figure 3.1a), but paradoxically the attribution to God as a cause of the behavior also went up (Figure 3.1b). After learning that Paul was homosexual, the students had a worse view of homosexuality, though they also believed more strongly that God caused it. This is an interesting attribution paradox because for the participants in this experiment God is supposed to be good. Saint Paul is seen as positive, esteemed, and central, and homosexuality is generally seen as bad (as was clear from pilot testing these procedures with similar participants), and the notion that God causes bad things is contradictory. This research project illustrates how it is possible to translate a psychological concept about attributional processes into interesting research questions. The results can lead to nonobvious findings and conclusions that one would not necessarily have thought of before.

Extensions and Applications: The Meaningful Path Ahead

The importance of attributional processes in real-life paradoxes involving religions cannot be overstated, and sometimes they are central to important mental or physical health dilemmas and the decisions people make when faced with them. Take, for example, the circumstance of a child who is sick and can be cured by known medical techniques, but the child's parents' religious beliefs dictate that modern medical techniques should be not used and instead say that God through prayer only should be used to heal the child. Many such cases are documented (Offit, 2015). One illustration occurred in Pennsylvania in which a young boy was bleeding to death due to hemophilia. His life could have been saved if his parents had taken him to the hospital, but they believed that cure was by God, not medical treatment, and the proper treatment was the application of prayer only. Stories like this illustrate the dilemma of medical neglect on the grounds of the attribution of supernatural meaning (Bottoms, Shaver, Goodman, & Qin, 1995). Box 3.1 gives a snapshot of the legal issues at the heart of such cases.

People make some of the most important decisions in their lives, such as whether or not to get medical help for a sick child, based upon their attributions of meaning to processes that they believe, but have no way of knowing, exist. Such decisions are based upon deeply held beliefs, and when those beliefs are confronted, their certainty about the correctness of those beliefs may go up, not down. To illustrate, Wortman and Park (2009) report the following:

The bereaved's purposeful interpretation of the loss in a religious/spiritual context can lead to . . . increased belief. Among parents who lost a

BOX 3.1. Illustration of Legal Issues in Medical Neglect on Religious Grounds

In cases in which parents disallow life-saving medical treatment for a child based on their religious beliefs, a fundamental issue is at stake. The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution guarantees all citizens equal rights with respect to their own religion. The parents' right to apply their religious beliefs to themselves is protected by law; they have the right to refuse medical treatment for themselves based on their religion. Nobody has the right to force someone else to have or not have medical treatment. However, parents and children are citizens in equal degree. This means that the right of parents to deny life-saving treatment to themselves because of their own religion do not extend to their child because the child has the same rights as the parents. Parents do not "own" children, they "have" them. The child has the right to be protected by reasonable means from active or passive harm, and undue risk and danger, in accord with the best medical knowledge available. Freedom of religion is protected by law, but it stops at the point of doing harm to another, including one's child.

child (Sormanti & August, 1997) . . . many reported an emergence or strengthening of beliefs about God or an afterlife. A mother said, "I want desperately to believe in life after death. Prior to my son's death I was ambivalent. . . . Now, I'm willing to be convinced." A father stated, "My thoughts and beliefs about life after death have changed. I cannot believe that [my son] is spiritually dead." (p. 467)

There is also evidence that adults whose child rearing included religiously motivated child abuse (e.g., beating the child in God's name or having sex with the child and telling the child it was God's will) are more likely than adults whose child rearing did not include such abuse to see God as being involved in their upbringing (Bottoms, Nielsen, Murray, & Filipas, 2004).

The tendency of the human mind to make attributions of supernatural meaning to almost every conceivable act,³ good and bad, is among the most important phenomena that a theory of religion and a theory of psychology must account for. Not only do some people "see" the outline of Jesus's dead body in the Shroud of Turin (Di Lazzaro, Murra, & Schwartz, 2013). They may also "see" the Virgin Mary in water stains in glass windows on the side of a building (World Religions & Spirituality Project, 2013), Satan's handiwork in "demonic conspiracies" (Frankfurter, 2006), "everything" as a miracle, and their favored political candidate as "God's person" for the

³See again the variety of religious behaviors described in Chapter 1.

next election. But the process of making attributions of supernatural meaning does not constitute a theory of all religiousness or human behavior as a whole. The process is rooted in a good midlevel attribution theory of how the human mind explains behavior in ordinary (including religious) life (Malle, 2004), and is enabled because people have global meaning systems under which all else must be subsumed (Park, 2010; Park & Folkman, 1997). Incorporating this idea into an evolutionarily consistent framework that contains meaning construction and sustaining processes is one of our great intellectual tasks, a point picked up again in the Prelude to Part II.

THEORIES OF COGNITIVE SUBSTRATES

Although couched in terms of “religion,” the so-called cognitive theories of religion are not, and cannot be, about religion. They are actually attempts at explaining the cognitive substrates through which aspects of religiously relevant information enter the system, are processed, and exist within the system.

The Neuro Level

Newberg, d’Aquili, and Rause (2001) argued that brain function constitutes the roots of religion, and they intimate that the ability to have a spiritual or mystical experience is an adaptation rooted in something otherworldly. Newberg’s research, which will be examined in more detail in the Chapter 8 on religion and experience, includes studies of meditating Tibetan Buddhists and praying Catholic nuns that show that even though the SPECT (single photon emission computed tomography) signals are the same, the meaning of the experience is reported differently by the two groups. Reasoning that the brain structures involved are from early humans, he concludes that the neural mechanisms are there to receive information from spiritual sources and thus let us know that there is more to life than this world and that a transcendent spirituality exists after death. To quote Newberg et al. (2001), “We have no rational reason to declare that spiritual experience is . . . ‘only’ in the mind” (p. 147). That is correct. But another statement is equally correct: We also have no rational reason to declare that “spiritual experience” is due to actual contact with or stimulation by otherworldly or paranormal beings, spirits, or forces.

Newberg’s conclusion is an enormous leap in the dark because it arrives at a declaration about something otherworldly from evidence that cannot be objectively connected to it, and that can yield no conclusions about it. No matter what neural processes are associated with people’s verbal reports of their state of consciousness, the only data we have are knowledge of brain states and verbal reports. We have no knowledge of the validity

of otherworldly interpretations of those verbal reports precisely because the raw data interpreted by the person exist in his or her mind and (to our knowledge) nowhere else. They are an individual's attributions of meaning to an unknown mental event and thus are nonobjective and can never be independently verified. By the ordinary rules of evidence, no conclusions can be made. Newberg claims to be answering an unanswerable question based on belief, not knowledge—a crucial distinction.

Cognitive Anthropomorphism

Anthropologist Stewart Guthrie (1993) began by considering religion to be rooted in cognition as “the extension of the field of people's social relationships beyond the confines of purely human society” (p. 33). This is interesting because it means that people engage with parts of their nonhuman world in the same way they engage with other humans. In such a world, one can have a social relationship with nonliving things like a car or a rock, living nonhuman things like pets and trees, and other literal or hypothetical nonhuman entities like gods, ghosts, or spirits. Thus, objects that are actually inanimate are mentally (though not necessarily consciously) animated, and to some degree nonhuman things can be anthropomorphized. Qualities such as intelligence, purpose, knowledge, agency, and the like may therefore be attributed to them, and they may be seen as having some power over or some protective role in such things as earthquakes, plagues, and calamities of all kinds. It is thus “natural” for people's cognitive systems to infer gods, spirits, and other nonhuman agents as a way of coping with the ambiguity and unpredictability of the world. Simply put, doing so helps people make sense of things they do not understand and may open the possibility for some sense of influence or control.

Cognitive Structures

The generic-sounding cognitive argument of Guthrie takes on a more structured appearance in Lawson and McCauley (1990). Their theory stipulates a definition of religion that is cultural, not individual, with the emphasis on the cognitive “constraints” that operate within the realm of natural phenomena and whose workings look different when used to process information beyond the domain for which they evolved. According to Lawson and McCauley, “a religious system [is] a symbolic–cultural system of ritual acts accompanied by an extensive and largely shared conceptual scheme that includes culturally postulated superhuman agents” (p. 5). These superhuman agents would later be called “counterintuitive,” on grounds that they are attributed the ability to do things that the rest of us are not.

Lawson and McCauley (1990) highlight that humans infer agency to inanimate things, a phenomenon attributable to processes such as the

hypothetical hypersensitive agency detection device (HADD; Barrett, 2013). Thus, as somewhat of a variant or extension of Guthrie's view, they propose that humans are prone to infer agency where there may be none. People and cultures infer the existence of superhuman (counterintuitive) agents that do things even though we cannot see them. This is done by the same cognitive system that symbolizes everything else in the world that we normally deal with. The only difference is that the cognitive system is now applied to things beyond its normal constraints. The function of ritual, therefore, sustains public commitment to the culturally postulated religious system. Thus, religion is cultural, not individual, and the cognitive mechanisms of symbolization of beliefs and ritual are what mediate and sustain it.

This leads to the notion that there is a "naturalness" to religion in that the human cognitive system is processing information and making inferences in the way that it should, given the incomplete information available to it. To the degree that humans are born with the tendency or capability to have brains that engage in the process of believing, they come equipped with the hardware necessary to participate in religion, even though they don't "need to." McCauley (2011) wrote *Why Religion Is Natural and Science Is Not* based on this idea.

The catchy book title is unfortunate because it compares an apple with an orange, psychologically speaking. By "religion" the book means ordinary, everyday speaking and behaving, routine and habitual religious thinking and talking. These are patterns of thinking and behaving that are based on fast processing, habits that are learned and now run more or less on autopilot. Thus, they are "natural" to do. Naturally! By "science" the book means professional science, formal procedural science. This is slow, methodical, systematic, and subject to peer review, hypothesis testing, examination, and correction based on evidence, and repeating the process again, so it is highly formalized and therefore not done "naturally" at all. Naturally! Professional science proceeds by means of slow, deliberative processing. Asprem (2016) explains that, given the differences in the information-processing speed of various activities, a proper comparison would have been, for example, between professional theology and professional science. The comparison that the book used unfortunately dimmed its good characterization of cognition in its natural and maturational manifestations.

Cognitive Processes

Anthropologist-turned-psychologist Pascal Boyer (2001) argues for the naturalness of religion, but not in the context in which McCauley cast the point. By saying that religion is natural, Boyer means that religious thinking, believing, emotions, and actions are processed with the same mental architecture as all human behavior is. The only difference is that religions are made up of ideas that are "minimally counterintuitive."

To illustrate, most ideas about God are worded in a manner similar to how ideas about humans are worded, except for a small number of differences. For example, one's idea of God typically includes ordinary human properties such as the ability to think, act, feel, be aware, observe, decide, and so forth. But what might be added are, say, two properties such as the ability to know everything and to be all powerful, neither one human. With only these two small tweaks, a typical idea of God is generated by our ordinary minds because the human cognitive system is capable of doing it. The system comes ready made with some degree of flexibility because if it didn't, there could be no human variability.

Thus religions exist “naturally” as an extrapolation of this built-in mental flexibility. Indeed, a world without built-in cognitive flexibility would be hard to imagine and does not sound like a very interesting place to be. For Boyer, there is no explicitly “religious organ”; thus, although the human mind evolved to do other things, creating religious ideas turns out to be an easy, low-cost by-product. Thus, the cognitive capabilities are universal in all healthy humans, and there is no essential reason why any individual need be religious. This perspective seems to be silent, however, on why someone does believe in his or her religion. However, there is cognitive neuroscience research that may address this issue at least somewhat: Lindeman and Lipsanen (2016) report evidence of differences in the cognitive profiles of religious believers and nonbelievers, a matter whose roots will need to be explored.

THEORIES OF THE “GROUPNESS” OF RELIGIONS

Religion seems almost always to be a group affair. Religious people meet in congregations—inside churches, mosques, synagogues, and shrines, and in other designated places, such as under a special tree if no human-made structure is available. Further, entire cultures can be officially defined by one religion, such as Judaism (Israel) and Islam (Saudi Arabia), or unofficially so defined by the proportion of the population that identifies with one religion over others (e.g., Italy as predominantly Catholic).

Group Selection

Biologist David Sloan Wilson (2002) proposes an important idea that appears to be the opposite of Kirkpatrick's view, stated above, in two respects: (1) it is adaptationist and (2) it is about religion in the group, not in the individual. Wilson's idea is based on the principle of group selection. According to this principle, the processes that regulate the survival of

individual members of a species also apply to the survival of a group within the species. For example, if you try to catch any specific bird in a large flock of birds, you will find it almost impossible to do. The similar appearance of individual birds, their fast movement, and interference due to the arousal of the whole flock make it difficult to focus on only one. And even if one in the flock is caught, the rest of the flock escapes, lives, and reproduces. Thus, the reasoning is that any property of a group that enables the group, as opposed to any specific individual within it, to continue means that such a property will be evolutionarily selected to continue. Wilson argues that religion came about by means of group selection, even though not every individual in the group need be religious, precisely because it facilitated survival of the group.

Thus, the question emerges, are the group selection and individual by-product views of religion compatible or not? Maybe the notion that they are compatible is not unreasonable. These two ideas are not in head-to-head opposition because it is possible that individual religiousness is not evolutionarily selected but that some such process may have been selected at the group level. Allowing for individual nonreligiousness seems essential, since over 1 billion of the world's 7 billion people are not religious according to ordinary definitions.

Big Gods

Social psychologist Ara Norenzayan (2013) argued that belief in the "Big Gods" of the great monotheistic and polytheistic faiths (exemplars are the gods of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, but also the Buddha and many of the significant gods of the Hindu pantheon) spread because they promoted surveillance over people's behavior as human societies got larger and anonymity prevented people from monitoring each other. Big Gods are believed to see, hear, and know things that no ordinary human being can, and intervene to punish counternormative behaviors. In general, to the degree that people in a society believe they are being watched by supernatural monitors, they are held accountable for what they do. In this way, sincere belief in Big Gods is one of several important mechanisms that encourages people to follow local cultural norms (e.g., "Do not steal from people of your group"). Thus, as societies grew larger, belief in Big Gods increased with them because they helped keep antisocial or selfish tendencies in check, promoting stability in these expanding groups. This also helps explain why some cultural groups expanded into "world religions" while maintaining cooperative tendencies, despite their large size and anonymous interactions. As with Wilson's view, this would happen even if not all people in the society were personally religious. Even if some proportion of the people were nonbelievers, the effect of a society having Big Gods would nevertheless facilitate the cultural stability and long-term continuity of the society.

To correctly understand Norenzayan's proposal, it helps to clarify one point explicitly. He is not saying that having Big Gods in a religious sense is the only way that societies can cooperate while expanding in size. Societies have stumbled on many solutions to the need for large-scale cooperation, such as third-party institutions, establishment of norms, police, markets, and contract enforcement. Big God religious elements have been one such solution.

Cultural Psychology

One significant and promising enhancement to macro-level theories of religion comes from cultural psychology. Cohen (2009; Cohen & Hill, 2007) argued compellingly that religions are cultures. Saroglou and Cohen (2011, 2013) elaborated the levels and complexity of this idea and articulated how to conceptualize the possible relations between religions and cultures. Consider the following four elements:

1. A religion can be considered a culture. Both constructs include notions of shared values, norms, symbols, and practices that define the group and the expectations for members.
2. Members of a religion and members of a national or ethnic group may be one in the same, as when all people in a country follow the same beliefs. In such cases, we cannot separate the effects of the religion from the effects of the national or ethnic aspects.
3. The shape that a religion takes may result from the culture in which it happens to be placed.
4. A religion and the larger culture may interact to produce unique effects that would not otherwise appear.

With these observations, cultural psychology contributes to other approaches of understanding religiousness. As made explicit in Chapter 1, religions are both group/cultural and individual phenomena, and thus a complete psychological accounting of religions must include cultural factors (Belzen, 2010). This proposition seems consistent with both the meaning system and the multilevel principles discussed throughout this book, because meaning making, assessment, and remaking occur from the neurological (micro) to the social-cultural (macro) levels.

THEORIES OF ORIGIN

Perhaps the most hard-to-answer question concerns where and how religiousness started millennia ago when what came to be human beings started down that evolutionary path.

Evolutionary Cascade

The notion that religion developed as an “evolutionary cascade” (Atran, 2002) of elements, in a series of steps over long spans of time, may illuminate our understanding somewhat. The idea is that instead of religion constituted as one state, trait, or ability that evolved in singular or linear fashion, it instead came about by means of a sequence of evolutionary steps, each one being some kind of plateau that then set the stage for the evolution of the next aspect of what came to be called religion. This notion may be bolstered by Norenzayan’s idea that “Big Gods” (in both a religious and secular sense) may have evolved in stages or plateaus consistent with the “evolutionary cascade” sequence. This idea deserves further exploration.

Paleolithic Imaginative Play

In quite a different way from the lines of scholarship described above, Bellah, in *Religion in Human Evolution* (2011), assumes human evolution but mostly sets aside the by-product–adaptation issue. He takes it for granted that humans evolved and that religions came along via whatever processes. Thus, the focus shifts away from the questions of how religions function in the current psychological moment, how our cognitive architecture processes religiously or spiritually relevant information, or how religions came to be. Instead, the focus shifts to the observation that religions came into being along with the development of humans and groups of humans and takes it as a premise that this is the most important thing to understand.

Bellah’s emphasis traces the origins of humans in the Paleolithic Age and argues that what came to be called religions have their roots in play, with its corollaries of fantasy and imagination (Burghardt, 2005; in press). It is these capabilities that enabled human mental and behavioral activity to go “off-line,” not immediately regulated by responsibilities, obligations, or concern for the survival of oneself or one’s offspring. (The sequence of psychological steps by which these capabilities would have developed is explained in the Prelude to Part II.) Whether or not going “off-line” is itself also adaptive is another matter, but his point is that at such times one is, in a nonordinary and specific sense, “free.” Then the seeds of what became religions as we know them appeared during perhaps the greatest shift in human communal life—the Axial Age, roughly 800–200 B.C.E.

ASSESSMENT AND COMMENT: WHEN MEANINGS DIFFER

We can be grateful that the authors discussed above tried to theorize religion; this is valuable in ways that do not require any particular view to be

“the correct view.” It seldom happens in science that a particular argument contains the total truth about a process or phenomenon. Much more commonly people offer points of view, arguments based on their definitions and available observations, and presuppositions, and the mix of these leads to a theoretical idea that is a contribution, but not Truth. This characterizes the preceding list of theoretical ideas. At this stage it is not particularly important that one of them be true and the others false. What matters is that the authors have provided steppingstones that future scholars can put their feet on and take another step forward, or, if lucky, upward toward a higher level of knowledge.

The range of theories summarized above provides a set of ideas to think through and work from, or perhaps respond against, but they do not seem close to synthesis. How do they fare when stacked up against, or upon, the fundamental backdrop issue, as construed by Kirkpatrick (2005, 2013), noted in the opening of this chapter?

Theories Not about the Same Thing

Scanning the theoretical ideas sketched above may leave you at a loss in terms of attempting any synthesis of them. Part of the problem is that each attempt at writing a theoretical idea to explain “religion” uses a different definition of religion. One is about superhuman counterintuitive agents, one is about anthropomorphizing nonliving and other nonhuman objects, one is about symbolism and ritual, one is about group selection, and one is about Big Gods and their surrogates in society as mechanisms of social control. One says that unconscious motivations are the roots of religiousness, another disregards the notion of an unconscious mind, and another focuses on why an individual might join a religious group. One considers “religion” in an individual’s brain; another considers “religion” to be a group process. One says it is about individual identity while others say it is about safety, security, or “meaning.” They are not theories about the same thing.

Some of the theories are presented as cognitively rooted, but cognitions are about meanings and most theories listed above say little about how their proposed mechanisms work within meaning systems relationships. Also, religions are social, but only some of the views above make social psychological knowledge part of, let alone central to, the theory in question. A first glance suggests that the foci of each of these theories may address a set of features of whatever “religion” might mean, but only a few and far from all. Because of this, it may confuse more than it helps when authors say they are “explaining religion” (e.g., Boyer, 2001). They are not. At the very best, they may make a reasonable attempt at illuminating a few aspects of this highly complex cultural concept.

One of the theories is based on the notion that there are cognitive “constraints” that “bias” how humans process certain information, and

that the combination of these constraints and biases leads to the evolution of religious thoughts, beliefs, symbols, and rituals. But I am not sure this enlightens us much. Why does it sound illuminating to say that our minds can do only what they can do, and that they therefore distort some information because there are limits on the amount of information they can process at once? However, it is good that this is said because, probably, many people think the human mind is a generic information processor that has no limits—something that is decidedly false. Also, the views above provide service to the field in general because they comprise a set of serious attempts to account for religiousness—its psychological functions, cognitive processes, groupness, and origins—in all its complexity. Then, from the platform sketched in this chapter, we can go further.

One dilemma is that some of the cognitive theories seem as if they are intended to “explain” religion by going from culture straight to the brain and cognition without going through the whole human, as if neurons and cognitions have a direct, instant, hotline of communication full of meanings that include the cultural context and therefore do not interact with anything in between. In light of the MIP and Glimcher’s (2011) illustrations of how it is necessary to relate knowledge at adjacent levels (Chapter 2), such reasoning seems simplistic at best and illusory at worst. Our understanding of human religiousness and spirituality cannot go directly from the brain or cognition to culture. It must go through, not around, the various processes that comprise whole humans.

The Adaptation–By-Product Issue

In either explicit or implied form, the by-product-versus-adaptation issue seems to filter through some of the theories at various levels of analysis. However this question might be resolved, we are left with the question of whether the adaptation or by-product had its origins in micro- or macro-level processes. If what we are aiming to pin down is “religion” in whatever form it may accurately be seen, did it develop primarily at the neurological level or at the ecocultural level? In other words, by whatever means “religion” or “spirituality” came to be, is it best that we look for it somewhere in the brain or somewhere in the human sociocultural niche? Maybe we would find religion’s roots in one psychological location and level of analysis and spirituality’s roots in another (Chapter 1).

A reasonable assessment of the adaptation–by-product issue may be that what was adaptive, and therefore what evolved, could not have been “religion” in any sense in which it is typically defined. The minority of the world’s population that is not religious (Chapter 1) is too big for that. However, there is an argument that the process of making, assessing, and modifying meaning out of ambiguity in whatever way worked for the survival needs and continuity of humans did evolve (Prelude to Part II).

By evolutionary selection, people certainly are “born believers” (Barrett, 2012) in the sense that all humans are automatically engaged in the fundamental process of believing (Seitz & Angel, 2014; Siguria, Seitz, & Angel, 2015). But this fundamental process does not require that any individual believe religious things in the same sense that it requires humans believe that eating food will nourish one’s body. Eating food is required in order to live; believing or practicing a thing typically called religious is not. Thus, the process of believing certain things is a requirement, but believing or practicing a religion does not seem to be among them.

Application and Looking Ahead

The theories summarized above come into play in various ways throughout the rest of this book. For example, Freud’s theory is important in Chapter 6 when we look for religiousness in the individual. The cognitive approaches are relevant to discussions in Chapter 5 as we think through cognitive developmental implications for religiousness. The neurological approach is relevant to Chapter 8 in its examination of research on mental experiences to which religious attributions are made. Various theories bear directly or indirectly on understanding religious conversion, the relationships between religion and mental health, and the effects of religion on social behavior, discussed in Chapters 7, 9, and 11, respectively. An attributional approach applies in many areas as an illustration of how people can make religious meaning out of ambiguous information and shape responses consistent with it. We pick up these substantive topics after gaining a good understanding of the methods used to conduct the research.

TAKE-HOME MESSAGES

- An overarching evolutionary meta-theory has integrated the evidence across the sciences; thus, any theory about the psychological processes that mediate religiousness will need to do the same to stand the tests of time and evidence. The religion as adaptation-versus-by-product issue is fundamental to psychological understanding.
- Midlevel theoretical statements have been attempted from the micro to the macro level, including those resting upon neurology, cognition, group selection, and the development of cultures. Each one, however, defines religion in its own way. Therefore, revision and/or synthesis of these ideas is a task for the future.
- Psychodynamic and depth psychological approaches focus on unconscious processes at the root of religiousness. They range from the “negative” (religion is mainly an anxiety reducer) to the “positive” (God is an archetype that fulfills built-in spirituality).

- Attachment theory is a midlevel approach that accounts for how people make inferences about other people's motives and the causes for their behavior. As such, it is useful in helping us understand religious relationships and conversions.
- Uncertainty–identity theory and cultural psychology enrich our understanding of religiousness by highlighting how aligning oneself with a group and using cultural norms as guides to what to believe and how to live reduce the appearance of ambiguity, thereby heightening a sense of meaning.
- Attributions are meanings inferred. They are implicit in religious belief and behavior at all levels.
- The theories of various aspects of religion can be usefully categorized according to their particular emphasis, or the kind of question they are primarily aimed at answering. These include questions about the psychological functions served by a religion, the neural and cognitive substrates through which religious information is processed, why “groupness” is a typical aspect of religions, and how religiousness originated in early humans.

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CHAPTER 4

Logic and Methods in the Psychology of Religion

Focus: Religiousness in the Individual and People in General

Measuring Religious and Spirituality Variables

Research Methods

Take-Home Messages

Further Reading

This chapter has a key theme: Just how do we know what we think we know, and how do we form scholarly questions, let alone propose knowledge, about something as multilayered, and as fraught, as religion? Several strategies are frequently used. Each employs one or more methods and provides a different type of information, but they all are intended to follow the same logic—that which is illustrated via the research cycle presented in Chapter 2 and Figure 2.1. The two basic methodological concerns for doing psychological research on religion and spirituality are (1) what general approach to use (i.e., whom do you study, how, and exactly what, psychologically, are you are trying to learn about them?), and (2) how to measure the aspects of religiousness that will logically answer your questions.

It is easy for a psychology researcher to fall into the trap of thinking that there is a best way to do conduct research, that is, the way he or she does it. But when it comes to doing research in the psychology of religiousness, nothing could be further from the truth. Research means to re-search, to look for again, to examine one more time and find out more. In the Flemish Dutch language, the word for research is *onderzoek*—to seek underneath, to search deeper. There are many procedures for doing this, each one having its special strength, each one complementary to the

rest. Some allow us to answer questions about behavior, some about feelings, some about attitudes. With some we examine ongoing action; with others we examine traces left by past action; with others we study imagined interactions, wishes, fantasies.

The techniques sketched below are not mutually exclusive. They can overlap and be used effectively to explore a common question, even in the same study. Taken together and used effectively to study a central question, they can yield a rich mosaic of results that address a common theme. They feed into the research cycle and stimulate theory development. When the research is carried far enough, the knowledge gained begins to interface with knowledge from other areas within psychology and with knowledge from allied sciences and humanities. This process fits what is suggested by the multilevel interdisciplinary paradigm (MIP) in fostering an appreciation for what is said in combination with the data obtained by multiple methods (Hood & Belzen, 2005, 2013).

FOCUS: RELIGIOUSNESS IN THE INDIVIDUAL AND PEOPLE IN GENERAL

Before we talk about the different types of research in the psychology of religion, it is important to understand broadly how research is done—how it is designed and carried out. Before jumping into collecting data, we have to decide how broadly or narrowly our project shall be focused. Are we interested in how a religion functions in one person's life, or the psychological aspects of a religion for people in general? The former type of question illustrates the idiographic approach; the latter illustrates the nomothetic approach (Chapter 2).

Idiographic and Nomothetic Approaches

Whether you adopt the idiographic or nomothetic approach reflects the basic purposes of your research and will determine your basic strategy for how to do it. In the *idiographic* approach, one person is studied as much as possible, and a psychological account of the person is constructed from all available information. For an idiographic study of one person's religiousness, you might choose as a subject someone who is perceived as very religious. The goal is to learn everything about that person in all his or her uniqueness. The intent is that if we can completely know one person, then we may be better able to have insight into other people also.

For example, suppose you wanted to study your friend's religiousness. You might begin by following your friend everywhere, making observations and taking notes on everything he or she does, when and how it is done, with whom, and so on. You would record whether this person's religious

behavior was related to other behaviors and in what way. You would follow your friend to the church, synagogue, shrine, mosque, or other meeting place and record everything that occurred there. You might study personal documents, such as letters or a diary, which might contain illuminating information. Several in-depth interviews would help clarify the meaning of your friend's religion from his or her own perspective. After you did all this you might have a clear picture of this person, especially with regard to the unique features of his or her religious life.

How reliable are the conclusions drawn from studies using the idiographic orientation? Speaking narrowly and technically, the conclusions apply to the individual who was studied. By itself, learning everything about the religious life and experience of one person (your friend) allows very little leeway to generalize about the religious lives and experiences of other people, although it does allow you to pose questions and generate hypotheses. The high degree of emotionality in one person's conversion experience, for example, does not yield conclusions about others' conversions. Similarly, extending this argument to various religions in various cultures, it is best to say that knowing a lot about the psychology of one Muslim in Turkey does not allow you to draw specific psychological conclusions about a particular member of the Church of England in Canada. This caution about drawing conclusions is one fundamental aspect of the logic of the idiographic approach.

Nevertheless, the idiographic approach has two potentially important benefits. First, to the extent that people are similar (a question answerable by nomothetic data), the results derived from an idiographic study are transferable to other people. Knowing this, a priest, rabbi, imam, or counselor who attempts to help someone going through a religious crisis can validly draw upon his or her experience with former clients with similar problems. Second, the method yields many research questions that guide psychologists in constructing theories of religiousness and suggest specific studies that can be done to test the hypotheses derived from those theories.

The idiographic approach yields knowledge in depth about someone; the *nomothetic* approach yields knowledge in breadth about many people. In the nomothetic approach, one is less concerned about knowing all the facets of the religious life of one person, and more interested in the processes that mediate religiousness in people in general. Usually a large sample of people is studied on the psychological or behavioral dimensions in question, and conclusions are reached that pertain to the hypothetical average person. For example, if you wanted to compare the average age of conversion to various religions, you might gather a large sample of people from those religions and ask how old they were when they converted. Then you could compute the average age for the sample from each religion, which you would infer to be representative of each of the larger populations. Thus, based on your samples, you would know the age of conversion of the

hypothetical average believer in each of the religions that you sampled. Yet, you could not predict with certainty the age of conversion of any specific individual.

Such a strategy reflects both the strength and the weakness of the nomothetic approach. The strength is that it enables us to begin to state generalities—probabilistic statements about processes that produce observed regularities in the phenomenon under study. Following the logic of the research cycle explained in Chapter 2, these generalities are not data; they are ideas about how data from future research might look. Starbuck (1899) did a primitive version of nomothetic research with his study of the age of conversion and its accompanying psychological components. As described in Chapter 2, he used a nomothetic approach with a large sample of subjects and proposed that religious conversion is an adolescent crisis reaction that generally occurs around the age of sixteen. The nomothetic approach is powerful in the development of any science because it facilitates the development of theories. Its weakness is equally glaring, however: the strategy does not allow us to know anything specific about a particular person. Finally, we have to consider general conclusions drawn from nomothetic research findings to be imprecise, because we can always find exceptions to the statistically average person.

Qualitative and Quantitative Research

An analogous distinction can be made between *qualitative* and *quantitative* methods. Like the idiographic approach, qualitative research tends to be more useful for probing in-depth questions about individuals. Like the nomothetic approach, quantitative methods lend themselves to evaluating aggregate data on larger groups and only on preselected measures. Qualitative data could be a biography of a religious person, open-ended interviews, or observations of religious services and practices (Hood & Belzen, 2005, 2013; Hood et al., 2009). Qualitative procedures involve interpreting the meaning of (or assigning meaning to, depending on how one understands what the researcher is actually doing) the raw material, which is often in the form of transcripts of interviews. Because of this, qualitative methods can be considered as a type of content analysis.

Quantitative data, on the other hand, could be people's self-ratings of how often they pray, rankings or ratings of how important their religion is to them, or any other countable or publicly measurable behavior or attribute. Such data include trace records left over from past behavior, such as the number of religious books in a public library as a rough measure of the religiousness of the culture, or the amount of wear measured on the floor of a temple as an indicator of how much it is used. The quantitative approaches reflect the traditionally understood objective measures in the nature of the data collected.

The qualitative approaches, which have received more recent attention and which allow for detailed examination of the phenomenology of someone's religious experience, are an attempt to see it (or at least get closer to it) as it is seen by the experiencing person. Such studies are based on the researcher's interpretation and categorization (based on a set of decision-making rules) of the elements in a description of religious experiences or meanings. The critique of this approach is that the researcher's own hermeneutical bias can determine the data categories into which bits and pieces of information are placed. In order to control for possible bias effects, it is important to establish that the scoring and interpreting procedures are objectively applied. This can be done by, for example, having independent judges who are unaware of the study purposes independently score the material and then calculate the degree to which their assessments agree. If agreement is high, the scoring and interpreting was objective, and psychological questions can then be meaningfully asked of those data. If agreement is low, the scoring and interpretation are nonobjective and yield no knowledge other than each interpreter's impression. If there is only one scorer/interpreter, reliability cannot be checked; and if that one scorer/interpreter is the researcher, inadvertent bias cannot be ruled out.

Quantitative methods involve numerical scales, whereas qualitative data have to be "processed" into categories and/or numerical ratings before they can be statistically analyzed. A researcher then uses standard statistical techniques to assess results for a group of subjects on particular dependent variables of concern. Although quantitative data collection and analyses are more common in research, as has been aptly stated, "There is no doubt that they miss something. A description of a sunset in terms of physics is quantitative, but none would argue that a painting of that sunset is replaced by the physical description" (Spilka, Hood, Hunsberger, & Gorsuch, 2003, p. 13).

The idiographic approach could be considered a case study, and thus a special case of qualitative research. When categories are extracted from qualitative research and assigned numbers (whether the raw data come from one research participant or several), they are summarized by being coded into quantitative form; these numerical summaries of qualitative information can then be subject to standard quantitative analyses. Analogously, but going in the reverse direction, themes that emerge from standard quantitative research can be checked to see how well they map onto the categories in a phenomenological study. Thus, the information and approach of both the qualitative and quantitative methods can be used to complement and illuminate the findings of the other approach.

Methodological Pluralism

In the recent past, there has been some tendency among psychology of religion scholars to talk about qualitative and quantitative methods as if

they were dichotomous, that is, as if one was more likely than the other to yield “true” knowledge about the psychological processes in religiousness. It is wise to reject this notion. These two approaches are not inherently on opposite sides of a fence, such that they are inherently and automatically in opposition, but enclosed by the same fence. Promoting the idea of their separateness fosters an artificial distinction. The field now offers a menu of both quantitative and qualitative approaches for looking at religiousness both from the point of view of the outside observer and from inside the mind of the religious person. In reality, there is no such thing as purely qualitative or purely quantitative research. This is partly because qualitative methods can be used to study, for example, either the religious experience of one person or trends in religious experiences across a larger sample, so long as the measures of religious experiences are objectified and replicable. It is also because quantitative methods, although they place the emphasis on the objectivity of data gathering and public replicability of findings (or at least public testability of a hypothesis), are also guided by the ideas and expectations (and perhaps also the biases) of the researcher—in the questions to pose, the assessment tools used to measure the variables, and the language with which the data are interpreted. The so-called qualitative and quantitative methods are inherently inseparable; they are fused together by a fundamental scientific logic that includes the collection of one kind of data and the use of another kind of idea to guide its interpretation.

The issue of whether the quantitative or the qualitative approach gets us closer to the truth about the psychological meaning of religiousness is akin to the problem of whether the chicken or the egg came first. Corveleyn et al. (2013) capture the point well that those who use one approach are wise to see the other as complementary and cross-fertilizing. They state their case this way:

. . . we believe that the existing divide . . . between a hermeneutic, interpretive approach . . . and a (neo-)positivistic approach . . . is not only to a large extent artificial, but also unfruitful. . . . There is no (quasi-)experimental research without previous theorizing and subsequent interpretation. Likewise, interpretations can and should be empirically tested. . . . Whereas it can be said that much (quasi-)experimental research in the psychology of religion concerns “impeccable studies of nothing very much,” many interpretive studies are vulnerable to the critique that “anything goes” in such studies. Hence, instead of seeing these approaches as conflicting, they should rather be seen as completing each other, with much possibility of mutual enrichment. (p. 102)

Preventing Bias

Considering that empirical research is interpreted by humans, it is important for researchers to know their biases. Even after taking meticulous

precautionary measures, scientists can unknowingly let their biases creep into research procedures or interpretation. Although some forms of bias are fairly easy to detect, others may be completely disguised. Often, the bias is underlying how religiousness and spirituality are categorized, measured, or interpreted.

A potential bias may arise from the vast difference between the religious preferences of psychologists and those of the general population (Hood & Belzen, 2005). In general, the American public is twice as religious as professionals in psychology. This difference has been termed the “Religious Gap” (Coyle, 2001). Seventy-two percent of Americans affirm the intrinsic item “My whole life is based upon my religion,” whereas only 33 percent of psychologists affirm this statement. Such differences can reflect biases, which may intrude on the way findings are stated and variables are defined. Without an accurate understanding of the religiousness to be studied, those who conduct and interpret research are in danger of working with faulty assumptions about what their data mean, whether they are accounts of a violent religiously motivated behavior or a pencil mark on a questionnaire. This is especially difficult when researchers study beliefs or practices that are different from their own, such as when religiously liberal persons study religious fundamentalism (RF) or when those from the Judeo-Christian Western world and those from the Muslim world study each other. For example, read the discussion by psychologists Ashiq Ali Shah (a religious Muslim) and Sebastian Murken (a secular Westerner) in the special issue of *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* titled “From Conflict to Dialogue.” Their statements were made on the 1-year anniversary of the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and illustrate the difficulties of communicating in a bias-free way across fundamentally irreconcilable differences (Kahlili, Murken, Reich, Shah, & Vahabzadeh, 2002; Murken & Shah, 2002).

Regardless of their personal religious or nonreligious stance, researchers need to be careful that they are posing research questions and designing procedures and measures that are appropriate to the religiousness of the population they are studying. Doing this will help them achieve the proper goal of their efforts—which, as explained in Chapter 3, is the creation of good theory capable of explaining the psychological processes that mediate religiousness. There is now a broad range of measures and methods available that have a demonstrated track record of success in the conduct of good psychological research on religiousness (see Hill, 2013; Hood & Belzen, 2005, 2013, for excellent reviews). They use qualitative, quantitative, longitudinal, $N = 1$, experimental, quasi-experimental, field observational, correlational, questionnaire, interview, and other kinds of measures and research designs. The following measures and methods are illustrative of the many procedures used.

MEASURING RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUALITY VARIABLES

There is no such thing as “measuring religion.”¹ Doing psychological research on religiousness requires that you measure the multiple variables that in combination best reflect the way a particular form of religiousness is conceptualized. In fact, as we will see later, some property of behavior, attitudes, or experience has to be assessed in order to explore a psychological question about religiousness. We need to measure reports of mental events; frequencies or intensities of experiences or actions; strength, certitude, or content of belief; blood flow or electrical activity in the brain; the behavior of people in groups; the meanings embedded in the words people speak or write; or many other similar variables in order to explore how religiousness works psychologically. Until recently, attempts to measure aspects of religiousness and spirituality were primitive. But this has changed dramatically (see, e.g., Hill, 2013; Hill & Hood, 1999).

Measuring religiousness is about as easy as defining it conceptually: not at all simple, but illuminating and important to try. Measuring religiousness empirically is a useful endeavor because the process of developing the measures not only gives us tests we can use in research; it also forces us to clarify our conceptual definitions and distinctions. Our conceptual definitions and our operational definitions (or rather operational representations) interact. We translate our conceptions into concrete procedures. Then refining these procedures enables us to rethink and possibly reconstruct our conceptions in order to make them reflect reality more accurately.

In Chapter 1, I argued that for purposes of psychological research, religiousness is best thought of as a multidimensional variable. Glock’s five dimensions were presented for their clear logic and intuitive appeal. The other way of conceiving of religious variables is as a set of yes-or-no, all-or-nothing categories: people either believe in a religion or they don’t; they either “believe in God” or they do not. Other ways of measuring religious variables reflect either the categorical approach or the multidimensional approach. The categorical approach is based upon simple identification. The multidimensional approach is based upon factors and formal scales.

Simple Identification and Categories

The simple identification approach is straightforward. You ask people what they believe, what they do, or to what religious group they belong and

¹Therefore, for example, when you read an article that says the researchers measured church attendance and concludes that religion has these or those effects, you can level a harsh critique at the authors for drawing a conclusion about “religion” as a whole from one behavioral measure taken from one religious group at one time, and nothing else. Sweeping statements of this sort are made all the time.

then place the data for like subjects into one category. Although seemingly primitive, this approach has been used in many studies, especially in earlier periods. For example, numerous studies have made simple comparisons between Protestants, Catholics, and Jews on some dependent variable (Argyle & Beit-Hallahmi, 1975). Asking direct questions such as “Do you believe in God?” also fits this category.

The simple identification approach is useful for several reasons. First, it is easy. You can simply ask people, usually via a paper-and-pencil questionnaire, for the information you desire. Second, it has intuitive appeal. For example, if you have reason to believe that Protestants, Buddhists, Catholics, Jews, Muslims, and agnostics differ on some dimension (say, attitudes toward abortion or support for women in religious leadership roles), then why not ask people straightforwardly what their religious affiliation is and what their attitudes are? Third, it is versatile. You can ask people about their beliefs (“Do you, in your personal, secret, and deep heart of hearts, *really* believe that Mary became pregnant with Jesus while never having had sexual intercourse?”), practice (“How often do you attend prayers at the mosque?”), experience (“Have you ever experienced fits, trances, or visions that you deemed religious or spiritual?”), and other of the dimensions of religiousness (Chapter 1). Fourth, it fits in well with what is easy to presume are the “important” religious variables—and these are usually variables with which we are already familiar, such as religious group, doctrinal belief, type of practice, and frequency of ritual.

But simple identification has its drawbacks. One drawback is that it can easily be misleading. For example, if you desire to compare “religious” persons with “nonreligious” persons, and you do so by using religious affiliation to operationally define a “religious person,” your procedures can be inaccurate because many religious people claim no affiliation and have no membership (Roof, 2001). Some churches do not count children as members, some do not have formal membership at all, and in the past some did not count women (Argyle & Beit-Hallahmi, 1975). Add to this that many people are active in religious groups but are not formal members, while others consider themselves to be religious but do not participate in religious services, and you get at least five different subcultures—dogmatists committed to various beliefs, born-again Christians, mainstream believers, metaphysical believers and seekers, and secularists (Roof, 2001)—and it becomes clear that using simple identification to identify “truly” religious people can be very misleading.

Another drawback is that because simple identification puts people into imprecise and undifferentiated categories, it can mask other key variables. Knowing whether you have a Jewish or Muslim affiliation reveals little about your deep religious feelings and attitudes. Why and how you hold your beliefs can determine more of your behavior than the beliefs themselves. For example, within limits, whether people are high or low on intrinsic or extrinsic orientation to their faith is more important in

predicting their racial prejudice than what their denominational affiliation happens to be. People who are relatively high in extrinsicness are more prejudiced; people low in intrinsicness are less prejudiced (see Chapters 6 and 11; Allport & Ross, 1967; Donahue, 1985). Similarly, people who score high on the RF scale, which is correlated with right-wing authoritarianism (RWA), tend to be more racially intolerant than those low on the RF scale (see Chapter 11; Altemeyer, 1996, 2003; Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 2005; Hunsberger, 1996; Rowatt, Shen, LaBouff, & Gonzalez, 2013). Simple denominational identification masks finer distinctions based on religious orientation and degree of fundamentalism and authoritarianism. These finer distinctions, which are assessed with a variety of specialized scales, become particularly important when we add to this discussion the many recent measures of spirituality (Hill, 2013).

Factors and Scales

The discussion above highlights the need for refined ways of measuring religious variables. Once the criteria for devout religiousness have been specified, measuring instruments are needed that will identify the genuinely religious person, as compared to one with only nominal religious affiliation. The same need applies to measuring the degree of a person's religious belief, feeling, practice, or motivation. Fortunately, various multifactor or multiitem scales have been designed to do this so that today hundreds of scales are available and easily accessible for research that involves measuring aspects of religiousness and spirituality. The comprehensive review of scales by Hill and Hood (1999) presents 125 measures of religiousness and spirituality available up to its date of publication. It has been significantly updated by Hill (2013), who shows that some are unnecessary and some are duplicate efforts to measure the same thing, so the number of good or useful ones is lower. But the range of facets of religiousness and spirituality for which there are measures that have passed the statistical and methodological requirements to qualify as a good research tool has gone far beyond merely documenting someone's denomination or belief category.

Box 4.1 presents 66 measuring tools that Hill (2013) concluded satisfied the criteria for inclusion in the list of useful measures. They are broken down into two broad categories that reflect, respectively, measures of dispositional religiousness or spirituality and functional religiousness or spirituality. By dispositional religiousness or spirituality, Hill means that these measures tap religiousness as a property of the person. This includes measures of commitment, religious or spiritual development or maturity, and measures of transcendence. By functional religiousness or spirituality, Hill means scales that tap what religiousness or spirituality does for a person and how it works in a person's life. These scales assess dimensions such as religious involvement, practices, ways of praying, how one might use one's

**BOX 4.1. Specific Measures of Religion and Spirituality
by 13 Common Domains****Level I: Measures of Dispositional Religiousness or Spirituality**

1. Scales That Assess General Religiousness or Spirituality
 - Mysticism Scale (Hood, 1975)
 - Religiosity Measure (Rohrbaugh & Jessor, 1975)
 - Spiritual Transcendence Scale (Piedmont, 1999)
2. Scales That Assess Religious or Spiritual Well-Being
 - Spiritual Well-Being Scale (Paloutzian & Ellison, 1982)
 - Functional Assessment of Chronic Illness Therapy—Spiritual Well-Being Scale (Peterman et al., 2002)
3. Scales That Assess Religious or Spiritual Commitment
 - Dimensions of Religious Commitment Scale (Glock & Stark, 1966)
 - Religious Commitment Scale (Pfeifer & Waeltly, 1995)
 - Religious Commitment Inventory—10 (Worthington et al., 2003)
 - Santa Clara Strength of Religious Faith Questionnaire (Plante et al., 2002)
4. Scales That Assess Religious or Spiritual Beliefs
 - Beliefs and Values Scale (King et al., 2006)
 - Buddhist Beliefs and Practices Scale (Emavardhana & Tori, 1997)
 - Christian Orthodoxy Scale (Fullerton & Hunsberger, 1982; Hunsberger, 1989)
 - Love and Guilt Oriented Dimensions of Christian Belief (McConahay & Hough, 1973)
 - Loving and Controlling God Scale (Benson & Spilka, 1973)
 - Belief Inventory (Holland et al., 1998)
 - Spiritual Belief Scale (Schaler, 1996)
 - Student Religiosity Questionnaire (Francis & Katz, 1988)
 - Views of Suffering Scale (Hale-Smith, Park, & Edmondson, 2012)
5. Scales That Assess Religious or Spiritual Development
 - Faith Development Interview Guide (Fowler, 1981)
 - Faith Development Scale (Leak, Loucks, & Bowlin, 1999)
 - Faith Maturity Scale (Benson, Donahue, & Erickson, 1993)
 - Religious Maturity Scale (Leak & Fish, 1999)
 - Spiritual Assessment Inventory (Hall & Edwards, 1996)
6. Scales That Assess Religious Attachment
 - Attachment to God Inventory (Beck & McDonald, 2004)
 - Attachment to God Scale (Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1992)
 - Attachment to God Scale (Rowatt & Kirkpatrick, 2002)

(continued)

7. Scales That Assess Religious Social Participation or Religious/Spiritual Support
 - Attitude toward the Church Scale (Thurstone & Chave, 1929)
 - Attitude Toward Church and Religious Practices (Dynes, 1955)
 - Congregation Climate Scales (Pargament, Silverman, Johnson, Echemendia, & Snyder, 1983)
 - Congregation Satisfaction Questionnaire (Silverman, Pargament, Johnson, Echemendia, & Snyder, 1983)
 - Religious Involvement Inventory (Hilty & Morgan, 1985)
 - Religious Support Scale (Krause, 1999)
 - Religious Support Scale (Fiala, Bjorck, & Gorsuch, 2002)
 - Spiritual Experience Index—Revised (Genia, 1997)

8. Scales That Assess Religious or Spiritual Private Practices
 - Buddhist Beliefs and Practices Scale (Emavardhana & Tori, 1997)
 - Inward, Outward, Upward Prayer Scale (Ladd & Spilka, 2002, 2006)
 - Religious Background and Behavior (Connors, Tonigan, & Miller, 1996)
 - Types of Prayer Scale (Poloma & Pendleton, 1989)

9. Scales That Assess Religious or Spiritual History
 - The SPIRITual History (Maugans, 1996)
 - Spiritual History Scale (Hayes, Meador, Branch, & George, 2001)

Level II: Measures of Functional Religiousness or Spirituality

10. Scales That Assess Religious or Spiritual Experiences
 - Attitudes Toward God Scale (Wood et al., 2010)
 - Daily Spiritual Experience Scale (Underwood, 1999)
 - Index of Core Spiritual Experiences (INSPIRIT) (Kass, Friedman, Leserman, Zuttermeister, & Benson, 1991)
 - Religious Experiences Episode Measure (REEM) (Hood, 1970)
 - Religious Strain (Exline et al., 2000)
 - Spiritual Experience Index-Revised (Genia, 1997)
 - Spiritual Orientation Inventory (Elkins, Hedstrom, Hughes, Leaf, & Saunders, 1988)

11. Scales That Assess Religion or Spirituality as a Motivating Force
 - Duke Religion Index (Koenig et al., 1997)
 - Intratextual Fundamentalism Scale (Williamson et al., 2010)
 - Intrinsic-Extrinsic Scale - Revised (Gorsuch & McPherson, 1989)
 - Quest Scale (Batson et al., 1993)
 - Religious Orientation Scale (Allport & Ross, 1967)
 - Religious Internalization Scale (Ryan, Rigby, & King, 1993)
 - Religious Fundamentalism Scale (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992, 2004)

(continued)

12. Scales That Assess Religious or Spiritual Coping with Adversity
 - Attitudes Toward God Scale (Wood et al., 2010)
 - Religious Comfort and Strain Scale (Exline et al., 2000)
 - Religious Coping Scale (RCOPE) (Pargament et al., 2000)
 - Religious Coping Activities Scale (Pargament et al., 1990)
 - Religious Pressures Scale (Altemeyer, 1988)
 - Religious Problem-Solving Scale (Pargament, Kennell, Hathaway, Grevengoed, Newman, & Jones, 1988)
 - Spiritual Transformation Scale (Cole et al., 2008)

13. Scales That Assess Religious or Spiritual Meaning and Values
 - Functional Assessment of Chronic Illness Therapy—Spiritual Well-Being Scale (Peterman et al., 2002)
 - Meaning Scale (Krause, 2008)
 - Purpose in Life Scale (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964)
 - Seeking of Noetic Goals Scale (Crumbaugh, 1977)
 - Sense of Coherence Scale (Antonovsky, 1987)

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religious faith in coping with problems, types of religious motivation, such as intrinsic, extrinsic, or quest, and religious or spiritual experiences. It is clear from examining this one sample of religious measures that the menu of tools available for research has come a long way.

Not only are there a greater number of tools that measure a greater number of psychology of religion dimensions than in the past, but the measures have vastly improved in quality as well. The criteria to use when examining them for possible use in a study include, but are not limited to, the following, presented by Hill (2013).

1. *Conceptual clarity.* A good measure was developed with a clear idea for what it was supposed to measure, and it is presented for users in a way that articulates plainly what that dimension is or is not.
2. *Sample representativeness.* A good presentation of a scale includes a clear description of the sample(s) from which the scale development data were obtained. If the scale was designed for use with a specific religious population, it says so, and the data have been obtained from a representative sample of this population. If the scale was designed for use across religious or nonreligious populations, it likewise says so, and its database represents that.
3. *Cultural sensitivity.* Ideally, the measure has been fine-tuned so that it measures the desired dimension in a way appropriate to the meanings of religious language in the culture.

4. *Sustained research programs.* It is preferable that a measure stand the test of time by being used in many studies and by demonstrating a consistent pattern of reliability and validity across them.
5. *Alternatives to self-report measure.* By their very nature, measures of the type presented in Box 4.1 were developed in order to assess a property of religion that either could not be assessed by self-report or that would be grossly distorted by a simple category.

Measures meeting these criteria are more likely to show the high degree of reliability and validity needed for research on a given concept to continue. If it can be sustained, then we are better able to connect it to other psychological processes and theory as a whole.

International and Multireligious Measurement

A recent development in the measurement of religiousness and spirituality has advanced the field dramatically: translation of psychology of religion scales (such as those in Box 4.1, which were developed originally in English) into other languages, and revising them in order to make them applicable to religions not part of the Judeo-Christian tradition. The need for these changes is obvious. We learn something about a religion in a Judeo-Christian context from data collected in English from people in the United States, England, Canada, or Australia, or from some smaller English-speaking population. When I describe research of this type to my colleagues and students, without exception the first question I'm asked is "What about the _____?" Fill in the blank with Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, atheists, or people who follow myriad other religions, beliefs, or practices. Because data collected in English with predominantly Judeo-Christian subjects does not automatically generalize to different religions in different languages and cultures, it is necessary to either adapt existing tools to those contexts or to develop new tools applicable to them. Otherwise it is not possible to psychologically compare what religiousness means to people across cultures.

Fortunately, translation work has begun and its future is wide open. Pawel Socha (1999) translated the intrinsic–extrinsic religious orientation scale, which has been the granddaddy of empirical measures for the past 40 years, into Polish. He further compared scores on this measure with their counterparts from American samples. Ghorbani and colleagues (Ghorbani & Watson, 2006; Ghorbani, Watson, & Mirhasani, 2007) translated the intrinsic–extrinsic measures into Iranian and adapted it for use with Islamic subjects. Hutsebaut and colleagues (Duriez, Fontaine, & Hutsebaut, 2000; Hutsebaut, 1996) translated the intrinsic–extrinsic scale into Dutch for use in Flanders and found that there were significant cultural differences compared to American samples. Measuring extrinsic religiousness

simply did not work in the Belgian setting, that is, a religious person was either intrinsic or the person was not religious. There was no dimension of extrinsic religiousness. Therefore, in response to the nonutility of the translated scale, he developed a postcritical belief scale, which turned out to be successful in measuring different religious dimensions appropriate in that culture. The RF scale and RWA scales (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992, 2005) have been translated into many languages, with data collected by thousands of people worldwide (Altemeyer, 1996). The Religious Coping Scale (RCOPE) has been translated for use with a Hindu population (Tarakeshwar, Pargament, & Mahoney, 2003), the Spiritual Transcendence Scale has been translated for use with a Filipino population (Piedmont, 1999, 2007), and a Brief measure of Buddhist Coping (Brief BCOPE) was developed by Phillips, Cheng, and Oemig-Dworsky (2014). The Spiritual Well-Being Scale (Paloutzian, Bufford, & Wildman, 2012) has been translated into Arabic, Cebuano, Chinese, Korean, Malaysian, Norwegian, Portuguese, Spanish, Tagalog, and Turkish.

One methodological detail is especially important when translating a paper-and-pencil measure into another language for use with another religion. It is important that its scale be translated accurately, but not so much the words on the scale in a literal sense. In other words, it is less crucial that the items on a questionnaire be translated exactly word for word, and more important that the meaning of the items and the mental measurement weight given to them be comparable to those in the language and religion for which it was initially created. If this is accomplished, then the scores on the translated scale will have the same meaning and magnitude as the original scores and can be properly compared to them, as found by Socha (1999) in the citation noted above. When the cross-language and cross-religion validity of a measure is established, then the possibilities for testing research hypotheses originally investigated in one domain in another domain are wide open. Given the importance of religiousness in today's world, it is of utmost importance for psychologists to do research of this kind. It is also theoretically compelling, given the need to develop comprehensive psychological theories to explain human religiousness and the rest of human behavior worldwide. (See Saroglou & Cohen, 2011, 2013, for further elaboration of cross-cultural issues.)

Multiple Measures Are Complementary

These refined scales do several useful things to help us understand the psychological meaning of religiousness. First, they enable us to measure someone on the various dimensions of religion. We can get a belief score, practice score, experience score, and so on. We can measure a person on each factor, as well as assess the degree of consistency between these factors. Intuitively, we would expect a high degree of belief to correlate with

a high degree of practice. With multidimensional measures we can explore such questions and learn with some precision how the meaning of a religion is manifested to someone.

Second, some of the scales help us assess the “inside” of a person’s religious life, rather than the more visible religious practice or institutional affiliation. They help tap such things as intrinsic, extrinsic, or questing motives for having a religion, one’s need for meaning or cognitive closure, and the nature of the subjective experience of a religion (e.g., degree of mystical experience, sense of awe, or fear of being judged). The Intrinsic–Extrinsic Religious Orientation Scale (Allport & Ross, 1967; Gorsuch & McPherson, 1989; Hill & Hood, 1999) and the Mysticism Scale (Hill & Hood, 1999; Hood, 1975) are two well-known scales developed to do this. The former measures the extent to which someone “lives” their religion (intrinsic) versus “uses” their religion (extrinsic). The latter measures the extent to which someone has had vivid experiences deemed mystical that have been found to overlap with near-death experiences (NDEs; Greyson, 2014). Additional scales have been developed to measure religious fundamentalism (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992, 2004), rightwing authoritarianism (Altemeyer, 1996), religiousness as quest (Batson et al., 1993; Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992), spiritual well-being (Paloutzian & Ellison, 1982; Paloutzian et al., 2012; Ellison, 1983), degree of spirituality (Piedmont, 2012), faith development (Leak, 2008), faith styles (Streib, Hood, & Klein, 2010), doubt (Altemeyer, 1988; Hunsberger, McKenzie, Pratt, & Pancer, 1993; Hunsberger, Pratt, & Pancer, 2002), values (Rokeach, 1973; Schwartz, 1992), and other characteristics. Techniques have also been created to assess the degree to which people intuitively (or “without thinking”) say things contrary to their own beliefs (“theological incorrectness”; see Slone, 2004), anthropomorphize God (Barrett & Keil, 1996; Chilcott & Paloutzian, 2016), and are inclined toward secular identities (Schnell, 2015). The research possibilities are great.

Fortunately, recent steps have been taken to broaden a concept or a tool originally developed to measure a construct in one group to measure that construct in other groups. For example, the Religious Fundamentalism Scale of Altemeyer and Hunsberger (1992, 2005) was skillfully designed so that it does *not* focus on specifically Christian fundamentalism. Instead, they designed the scale to assess the sort of fundamentalistic mental process that might appear in any religion—Christian, Muslim, Jewish, or others. Also, this general adaptation of scales to other contexts is occurring across traditional age barriers. For example, Gorsuch and Venable (1983) developed an “age-universal” version of the Intrinsic–Extrinsic Religious Orientation Scale that was intended to be used for research with children, and Cotton et al. (2005) developed a short version of the Spiritual Well-Being Scale appropriate for use with adolescents.

The overall advantage to the multiple scale approach is that it allows more precision. We can measure finer distinctions along religious dimensions within the broader classifications. This notion has empirical support. With the aid of factor analysis (a statistical procedure that helps us see which dimensions are empirically real), we have learned that there exists a general religious factor and several religious dimensions with a narrower focus that exist within the general religious factor (Gorsuch, 1980, 1984).

RESEARCH METHODS

Being able to state a research question clearly and spell out a research goal with precision are necessary but not sufficient conditions for the production of knowledge. In fact, they are worthless unless you are able to design and execute the research projects that will test the questions and move you closer to the goal. The methods explained below and summarized in Table 4.1 are all used in psychology of religion research, and each one is ideal for answering a question posed a certain way. Yet, they differ greatly among themselves. This means that they are complementary, each one offering its own unique sort of knowledge to the whole. Thus, when the same general question is tested using several methods, the outcome is a set of data that provides a particularly rich, possibly robust, picture of the phenomenon under study.

During the past 25 years the type of research approach used has expanded. When the first chapter on the psychology of religion was published in the *Annual Review of Psychology* (Gorsuch, 1988), correlational procedures were overwhelmingly the most frequently used (see also Hunzberger, 1991). By the time the second *Annual Review* chapter came out (Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003), experimental methods began to get a foothold. About a quarter century ago, a debate flourished about whether psychologists could or should conduct manipulative experiments (see Batson, 1977, 1979, 1986; Gorsuch, 1982; Yeatts & Asher, 1979). Some researchers seemed to think the pure laboratory experiment was the ideal model of how to do science and that the psychology of religion had to use it or be second rate. That debate is history. Researchers and theorists understand that it is against the abstract model of the perfect experiment that claims of public knowledge acquired by any method are evaluated. The ideal goal is knowledge of causal relationships, and experiments are more likely to get us closer to this goal than one-shot correlational studies. The idea of the pure experiment is a logical prototype of the process of knowledge production. This is because scientific knowledge is knowledge of differences. Let us get a taste of how to do good research in the psychology of religion by the correct application of a number of interesting methods.

TABLE 4.1. Summary of Psychological Research Methods: Defining Features, Strengths, and Weaknesses

Research method	Defining features	Strengths	Weaknesses
Lab experiments	Manipulation of independent variable(s) to examine potential effects on dependent variable(s).	Allows researcher to control the situation. Permits researcher to identify cause and effect, and to differentiate between placebo and treatment effects.	Situation is artificial, and results may not generalize well to the real world. Sometimes impossible to eliminate experimenter effects.
Field experiments	Manipulation of independent variable(s) to examine potential effects on dependent variable(s) in the context of the “real world” as opposed to the lab setting.	Closer approximation to “real-world” behavior than experiments conducted in a lab. Allows researcher to control the situation. Permits researcher to identify cause and effect, and to differentiate between placebo and treatment effects.	Sometimes impossible to eliminate experimenter effects.
Quasi-experiments	Lack of random assignment sets quasi-experimental designs apart from “true” experiments.	Easier to set up than pure experiments. Reduces threats to external validity.	Internal validity may suffer without random assignment.
Naturalistic observation	The research scenario is in the context of everyday life, not the artificial setting of a lab.	Results relate directly to real-world occurrences; can study visible behavior.	Allows researcher little or no control of situation. Observations may be biased. Does not allow firm conclusions about cause and effect.
Field observation	No participation necessary on part of researcher; purely observation and recording of behavior(s).	With permission: No deception necessary.	With permission: Observer effect is more likely; potential loss of accurate, “true” behavior. Allows researcher little or no control of situation. Observations may be biased. Does not allow firm conclusions about cause and effect.

Participant observation	Researcher is an active participant in the group that he or she is studying.	With permission: No deception necessary.	With permission: Observer effect is more likely; potential loss of accurate, "true" behavior.
Observation of unusual groups	Done with naturalistic observation methods, but with a concentration on a particular group that is not considered part of the "normal" population.	Enables researchers to comprehensively learn about that population.	Possibility for overgeneralization.
Correlational studies	Approach that evaluates a potential relationship between two or more variables.	Allows for general predictions.	Does not permit identification of cause and effect.
Surveys	Use of a questionnaire to collect data about internal states (opinions, thoughts, beliefs, etc.)	Ability to collect large amounts of data with relative ease.	Self-report bias.
Content analysis	Approach used to quantifiably score, or code, qualitative information. This includes the use of interviews and written texts.	Reveals qualitative information; qualitative information can easily be turned into quantitative data for statistical analysis.	Can only provide descriptions of patterns found in the data, not any potential reasons why those patterns exist.
Phenomenology	Introspection from an individual's first-person perspective, allowing for deeper understanding of one's beliefs and motives.	Rich, deep information can be revealed. Useful when examining complex beliefs and behaviors.	Subjective nature allows for smaller sample sizes and is more time-consuming to implement in a study.
Neurophysiological studies	Study of the activity of the central and peripheral nervous systems with the use of physiological observations and measurements.	Reveals neurological correlates of behavior.	Expensive; time-consuming; typically smaller sample size for these reasons.

Experiments in the Lab

The most precise form of research design is the laboratory experiment. This procedure allows you to come closest to a cause–effect conclusion of the form “changes in variable A reliably lead to changes in variable B.” In the psychology of religion, such a statement might be “adopting a transcendental belief system reduces people’s fear of death.” The laboratory experiment is the logical prototype for all empirical psychological research. It is the model of precision and clarity against which any research procedure or conclusion, including those from correlational procedures, is compared.

In a true experiment the investigator manipulates one variable, called the independent variable, to see whether changes in that variable bring about changes in a consequence variable called the dependent variable. Suppose, for example, you wanted to find out whether thinking about religious ideas causes people to feel emotional. You could show a list of religious words to one group of subjects (the experimental group) and a list of neutral words to another group of subjects (the control group). The independent variable in this case would be the religious versus neutral content of the word list. The dependent variable could be the increase, decrease, or constancy in skin conductance due to perspiration in the palms of the hands, one sign of emotional response. You would determine whether people who are shown religious words respond more, or less, emotionally (as measured by skin conductance) than people who see neutral words. If the results show that the religious-word subjects have greater skin conductance responses than the neutral-word subjects, then one piece of evidence has been offered for the general proposition that seeing religious words or thinking religious thoughts causes emotional arousal.

It is difficult to do controlled experiments in the psychology of religion, and not long ago they were few and far between. Warren (1976) found that from 1950 to 1970 only 2% of the studies were true experiments. Although we want to treat some aspect of religiousness as an independent variable, we often cannot manipulate that variable ourselves. For example, you may be interested in the effects of conversion; but it is impossible to randomly assign people to the condition of being converts or nonconverts (nor would it be ethical to do so if it were possible). Fortunately, the recent past has witnessed a rise in the use of experiments, in both laboratory and field settings, in the psychology of religion (Hood & Belzen, 2005, 2013; Park & Paloutzian, 2013).

A clever application of the experimental method involved the use of isolation tanks in which participants dressed in waterproof suits were submerged under water, floating slightly below the surface (Hood & Morris, 1981). Isolation tanks are dark and silent and control body temperature, which allows for the subjects’ thoughts to be the only salient focus of attention. Intrinsically and extrinsically religious participants were asked

to imagine either religious or cartoon figures while floating in the tank. Results showed that the intrinsics reported more religious imagery under the religious imagination condition than did extrinsics. In another isolation tank experiment (Hood, Morris, & Watson, 1990), intrinsics reported religious experiences whether prompted or not, in contrast to extrinsics, who did not. Experiments of this sort are discussed further in Chapter 8 in connection with research on factors that trigger or facilitate experiences interpreted as religious or spiritual. In the years since these experiments were conducted, researchers have applied experimental methods to psychology of religion questions including but not limited to those from cognitive psychology (Farias & Barrett, 2013; Wenger, 2004, 2007), social psychology (Blaine & Nguyen, 2002; Ladd & Borshuk, 2013), neuroscience (Azari, 2006; McNamara & Butler, 2013; Schjødt, Stødtkilde-Jørgensen, Geertz, & Roepstorff, 2011), behavior in natural settings (LaBouff, Rowatt, Johnson, & Finkle, 2012), and performance of mental tasks as hypothesized from ethnographic interview data (Luhmann, Nusbaum, & Thisted, 2013).

In the Wild: Field Experiments

Field experiments allow the researcher some degree of control over the independent variable, although this control is often not as precise as that of a laboratory experiment. However, field experiments do allow you to give a treatment to some people but not to others, and consequently assess the effects of that treatment in both groups. An example of this type of experiment was done by Pahnke (1970). The subjects were theology students attending a Good Friday service. Some of them were given the hallucinogenic drug psilocybin before the service, while others were given a mild control drug with no “mind-expanding” properties. Those who took psilocybin were significantly more likely to have a mystical religious experience at the Good Friday service, compared to the control group. The key things that make a field experiment desirable are that (1) the investigator can exercise some control over the independent variable treatment and avoid too much confounding due to extraneous variables, and (2) the data are obtained in the ordinary context in which the research participants behave, so the results are generalizable to that “real life” context. There is no concern about the “artificiality” of the laboratory.

The results also maintain the internal validity of the experiment while maximizing contextual realism, which makes them applicable to real settings (Hood & Belzen, 2005, 2013). It is precisely because of this contextual realism that field experiments can reveal different patterns of results than experiments conducted in laboratories. In light of the MIP, both types of study are necessary and useful because they keep us from overinterpreting the meaning of either one (Hood & Belzen, 2005, 2013).

Quasi-Experimental Methods

Natural quasi-experiments share the features of field experiments, with one exception: in a natural experiment you do not manipulate the independent variable. Nature manipulates it for you and you record its effects. Natural experiments take advantage of natural conditions as a “manipulation.” Good applications of this approach can be read in articles by Hood (1977, 1978), Chilcott and Paloutzian (2016), and Xygalatas, Konvalinka, Roepstorff, and Bulbulia (2011). Hood was aware that people sometimes report a religious or mystical experience when they spend time in the wilderness, where they become more acutely aware of nature. He also had theoretical reasons to expect that the amount of stress someone felt might affect how likely it would be that the person would have such an experience. In order to explore this question he took advantage of an excursion in the wilderness that was required of boys in a private school. He was able to measure the amount of stress the boys felt in anticipation of doing potentially dangerous activities such as whitewater rafting or rock climbing. He found that boys who scored lower in anticipatory stress for such high-stress activities also had higher scores on a measure of mysticism.

In general, in order to use the natural quasi-experiment method you must be prepared to exploit the research possibilities embedded in circumstances beyond your control. As you can imagine, there are lots of possibilities for quasi-experimental studies in field situations and for using anticipated natural events as experimental “manipulations.” However, doing these studies can be time-consuming, expensive, and impractical. When circumstances do not allow for the use of the experimental method, correlational and survey research can be a good option.

Naturalistic Observation

In naturalistic observational studies, the researcher takes advantage of naturally occurring circumstances in the real world. Rather than artificially constructing a situation to test some hypothesis, as would be done with formal experimental procedures, the researcher uses the “natural laboratory” of real life. One advantage of naturalistic observation is that the results speak directly back to real-world events. Another advantage is that with naturalistic methods we can study actual, overt behavior directly, rather than measuring only opinions or other mental dimensions as is the case with questionnaires.

In one type of naturalistic method called *field observation*, the investigator develops coding categories appropriate to the behaviors under study and then observes and scores the subjects’ behavior without interfering in any way. An example would be if you wanted to find out how religious denominations differ in the degree of vocalizing done by the congregation

during church services. An outside, nonparticipating observer would visit the worship services of the various groups and record how often people in the audience spoke, what they said, whether or not the minister, imam, or priest encouraged it, and so on.

Another type of naturalistic method called *participant observation* is used when it is necessary for the investigator to appear to be actively involved in the group whose behavior is being studied. In this case the investigator “joins” the group and acts like an average participant. A good participant observer takes care to be inconspicuous in order to avoid drawing personal attention and distorting the situation. The necessary data are thus gathered from inside the group, resulting in unique findings not obtainable by other methods. A classic example of the participant observation method appears in *When Prophecy Fails* by Festinger et al. (1956). The authors infiltrated a “doomsday group” that predicted the end of the world. Their study of the formation, maintenance, and dissolution of the group, and of the activity of the group members after the world was not destroyed on the expected date, became a milestone in the study of social forces operating in small religious groups.

Both field and participant observation can be done either with or without permission. There are advantages and disadvantages either way. The obvious advantage of getting permission to observe and record what others are doing is that it is honest and transparent. No deception or later debriefing is required. The important problem with observation with permission, however, is that those who are being observed know they are being watched and that their behavior is recorded. This often creates reactive effects, that is, the behavior that is being studied is changed because of the very process of being studied, so that the behavior that is observed differs from what it normally is (which is what one wishes to study). The solution to the problem of reactive effects is to conduct the observations without permission. The problem with that, however, is that it can be seen as unethical and, except for behavior in the public domain (e.g., walking down the sidewalk), as a violation of privacy. Because of the issues illustrated by these examples, professional associations and governmental agencies have published guidelines for scientific research involving human subjects. Researchers in the psychology of religion may need to resolve such issues in their research protocols.

Studying Unusual Groups

The approach of studying unusual groups has been used in conjunction with the methods listed above. It involves studying specialized groups or individuals and generalizing the findings to the ordinary population as far as is valid. Studying unusual groups has both positive and negative aspects. A positive aspect of this approach is that it enables you to learn

much about one special population, as is illustrated by the Festinger et al. study mentioned above. It could also illustrate especially potent forms of religiousness. But these good aspects set the stage for a possible negative side effect—overgeneralization. This is a difficulty for any approach that involves studying only a unique group and then drawing conclusions about the population as a whole. Freud, for example, studied neurotic patients and then applied his theory to normal individuals. Albert Ellis (1962) made the logical error of concluding that all religion is bad for mental health by basing his conclusions primarily on observations of his clients (who came to him because they had problems). Even James (1902/1985; see comments in Figures 2.2 and 2.3, in Chapter 2) based his insights on the analysis of cases of extreme religious experience. In fact, many important contributions to understanding religiousness have come from studying extreme cases. Therefore, there is an important place for this approach. At the same time, it would be a mistake to rely exclusively on this approach because global generalizations about religiousness based solely on highly specialized populations might not be valid. Instead, we should balance the study of specialized cases with its opposite, the study of religiousness in normal populations, from which we then generalize to and predict the deviations.

Correlational and Survey Studies

The most common form of research in the contemporary psychology of religion is the questionnaire and survey. The word *survey* refers to the procedure for sampling the subjects for a particular study; *questionnaire* refers to the instrument itself.

Questionnaire survey data can be collected from one person at a time, but a big advantage of this method is that data can be collected from many subjects at once. Subject sampling procedure can be random, representative, or biased, with several specialized techniques available for determining who should be in the sample. Questionnaires do not measure overt behavior. Instead, they ask a series of structured questions about people's opinions or judgments on issues, their memory of past behavior, and guesses as to how they might behave in a particular situation. For example, a questionnaire might be able to assess whether people claim that they actively participate in church work, but you cannot measure actual church-working behavior with a questionnaire.

A psychometric issue concerning the use of behavioral versus questionnaire measures of religiousness is applicable here. Whether a study is experimental or correlational,² it is highly desirable to include behavioral

²In a correlational study, the investigator assesses only the degree of association between the variables. In an experimental study, the investigator independently manipulates a variable(s) to see whether that manipulation produces a change in the other variable.

dependent variables (outcome measures). These show what people actually do in response to their beliefs rather than what they feel, imagine, or say they might do on a paper-and-pencil questionnaire. This difference is important. However, this concern is softened somewhat in light of the work by Fishbein and Ajzen (1975). They showed that when a questionnaire is designed to tap tendencies to act such that the range of religious behaviors sampled by the set of questions approximates the range of actions that comprise the behavioral measure, the correspondence between the questionnaire score and the behavioral outcome measure increases. To illustrate, a measure of overall praying comprised of many questions, such as when, how, under what circumstances, under whose direction, and with what amount of self-motivation one prays, will be a better measure of one's typical prayer behavior than the question "Did you pray last Tuesday night?" Also, in an ideal research world, we would always get both measures of actual behavior and subjective self-reports, since their correspondence or lack of it is informative.

Content, Interview, and Text Analysis

Content analysis is a set of procedures for assessing verbal material for various types of content. For example, suppose you have a reason to think that people with schizophrenia have religion "on their minds" more often than people with bipolar disorder. One way to test this hypothesis would be with content analysis. You could go to your local mental health center and conduct interviews with people who have been diagnosed as either schizophrenic or bipolar. Your assumption would be that what is "on people's minds" is expressed in their speech. The interviews would all be conducted in the same way so that you do not bias the results by artificially drawing out more religious material from one group over the other. After transcribing the interviews, you could have judges "blind" to the study (who would be ignorant of the hypothesis and subject categories) score the subjects' verbal responses for their amount of religious content. A simple coding procedure would be to count the number of times the patient used the words *God*, *religion*, *Christ*, *holy*, *divine*, *Allah*, or other words with obvious religious meaning for his or her religion or culture. You would then see which group scored higher on this measure. A more imaginative type of content analysis might be to analyze a work of art, music, or dance for religious content.

The manifest appearance (raw, uninterpreted information) of a stimulus can be categorized by a first-order content analysis. The psychological meaning attributed to that content (what it is "really" about) is a separate issue and must be inferred by the researcher. In a hypothetical study of people suffering from psychoses, for example, a greater frequency of religious language in the patients could be the raw finding. But the psychological

meaning of those results (i.e., whether being religious caused the disorder or is helping the patient recover) is an inference that the investigator must make based upon some theory of what that religion does to or for people, or to or for that individual.

The content analysis of textual material is done following the same logic as the content analysis of interview transcriptions. Excellent examples of how this technique has been applied can be seen in two clever studies:

1. Weingarten, Luborsky, Andrusyna, Diguier, and Descotreux (2014) showed the variations in how the deity (respectively God, Allah, and G-d) related to humans in the New Testament, Qur'an, and Torah through a combination of qualitative and quantitative examination. Among the many interesting findings, it is clear from the verbal data that the deity's concern about interpersonal love and charity extends primarily to in-group members that is, love, charity, and forgiveness are extended primarily toward those within the same religion and only secondarily to outsiders.

2. Varona (2009) gave the God depicted in the Torah a personality assessment used to measure several dimensions of mental health or illness by scoring the P and J texts of the Torah³ on the basis of God's actions and reactions in relation to humans and circumstances. Varona was particularly interested in readers' psychological experience of the God depicted in the texts. Scores on the personality profile, aggregated from all research participants, were mostly in the normal range, with two exceptions.

The profile that emerged described YHWH as possessing both Narcissistic and Antisocial Personality traits. The Narcissistic Personality traits were just slightly below the threshold for a formal diagnosis of Narcissistic Personality Disorder. The primary traits revealed include attention-seeking, controlling, critical, angry, and hostile, and seeking power and influence over others. In addition, the Antisocial Personality traits describe a figure that experiences no remorse for the harm or injury caused to others, nor concern for the consequences of his actions. Although the participants were very consistent in their portrayal of YHWH, a deviation was found in those who showed an affinity for YHWH, and these participants' assessments were significantly correlated with a more favorable description of the figure. (pp. i-ii)

Content-analytic techniques have two mutually complementary benefits. First, they enable us to dig into the qualitative meanings that may be

³Scholars think that the Torah is a composite of accounts written at different times and distinguished by different patterns of word usage. Although intermixed, "P texts" refers to the so-called priestly texts and tend to emphasize worship, religious rituals, and priestly activities, whereas "J texts" refers to those Torah scriptures that emphasize *YHWH Elohim* (Achtmeier, 1996).

at the root of people's religious behavior, experiences, and attitudes. Second, the data from content analyses are amenable to statistical analysis and hypothesis testing by standard quantitative psychological methods. Thus, they allow for the "deeper" understanding of single or only a few cases, which can be subject to testing for theoretical relevance and development. They can be understood as a set of procedures that are one step toward more phenomenological methods.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a method that allows for deep, personal exploration of an experience. The basic approach of the phenomenological report method is accurate description of the perceptual field of the individual. A *perceptual field* is the totality of experience within a person's mind at any given moment. The procedure of phenomenological self-report involves introspection—"looking inside our minds" and reporting what we see. In the case of experiences that come to be labeled "religious," the attempt is made to fully describe (1) the uninterpreted, raw content, and (2) the meaning of the experience from the perspective of the individual. The most famous example was presented in Chapter 2 in the discussion of James's empirical phenomenology. He first reported the verbal accounts of people's strange mental states, and then he interpreted them.

Phenomenological research is by definition highly subjective because it looks very closely at the unique, interior experiences associated with various states of an individual's consciousness. As a result of this subjectivity, phenomenological research methods are often tailored to accommodate the particular scope of each project. Nonetheless, certain kinds of quantitative and qualitative measures have proven most effective.

In one combined ethnographic and experimental study of people in the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS) (Barlev, Kinsella, Taves, Paloutzian, & German, 2015), phenomenological questions about consciousness, spirituality, and the afterlife were gauged using an array of quantitative and qualitative methods. The qualitative methods included interviews, participant observation, analysis of personal texts, and conversations. The quantitative methods included experiments, self-administered measures, and correlational analyses. Used together, these methods illuminated the attributional processes involved in how the IANDS members identify otherwise mundane or ordinary events (such as perceiving patterns or noticing coincidences) as spiritually meaningful experiences. Used in combination, the measures spoke to questions about the formation and implementation of attributional processes at intrapersonal, interpersonal, intragroup, and intergroup levels. One finding was that persons involved in NDE groups often attribute "proof of an afterlife" as the meaning of NDEs. Phenomenological research from the IANDS project has

revealed that the target population made meaningful associations between random or coincidental events and that they understand these associations as evidence for the presence of spirits (of deceased persons) or Spirit (as some transcendent force). For these subjects, the research suggests that the mind is itself understood to be permeable and open to the influence of Spirit or “higher” consciousness.

In another example, Shanon (2002) studied both his own and others’ experiences after taking a natural psychoactive brew called *ayahuasca* that is used in the Amazon. Shanon has taken this drug more than 100 times, written detailed first-person accounts of the experiences induced by it, recorded changes in those experiences over time, and compared them with the experiences of others who have taken it (Hood & Belzen, 2005, 2013). His method includes introspecting on his own sessions as well as doing structured interviews of others who have taken *ayahuasca*.

Brain-Imaging and Physiological Studies

Sometimes when psychologists of religion are chatting casually among themselves about learning what religion really means to someone, they make remarks like “I need to get inside of his (or her) head in order to know what is really going on.” The phenomenological approach explained above is one technique for doing that. It lets you “get inside someone’s head” by gaining some picture of the person’s perceptual field and its meanings. But suppose your research questions and goals require that you dig further into someone’s head? What then?

You go to the level of the brain. And due to the relatively recent innovations in brain-imaging techniques it is now possible to see and measure what is going on inside someone’s brain when he or she is engaged in religious activity, including religious behaviors such as praying or meditating, feeling religious emotions, or participating in ritual (Newberg et al., 2001), speaking in tongues (Schjødt, Stødkild-Jørgensen, Geertz, & Roepstorff, 2009), or reciting and thinking about religious scriptures (Azari, Missimer, & Seitz, 2005; Azari et al., 2001). In addition, advances in electroencephalogram (EEG) technology make it possible to study what is going on in electrical fields in and around the skull. Some research involves inducing mild electrical fields around the head in order to study any changes in mental sensations (Persinger, 1987). These techniques open up a plethora of possibilities for future research. State-of-the-art brain imaging can measure various neurotransmitter systems, blood flow volumes, and other activity in the brain, thereby allowing researchers to pinpoint where in the brain certain activation or deactivation is occurring when the person is engaged in a certain activity.

One of the most revealing studies involves the SPECT (single photon emission computed tomography) images of eight Tibetan Buddhist

meditators and nuns at baseline and during meditation or prayer. Their brain images during their intense spiritual states appear very similar. Both Tibetan monks and Franciscan nuns show decreased activity in the posterior superior parietal region and increased activity in the dorsal lateral prefrontal region, which governs involved cognitive processes such as complex visual perception, concentration, and orientation (Newberg et al., 2001).

From neurophysiological studies, it is clear that particular regions of the brain and certain neurotransmitters are active during meditation and other spiritual practices (Azari et al., 2001; Newberg et al., 2001). Azari found that PET scans of religious subjects in a religious state showed blood flow in the right dorsolateral prefrontal cortex; those of nonreligious subjects did not. Physiological studies allow us to understand brain activity during spiritual states, but how this “picture of the brain” fits into the bigger picture of human religiousness and spirituality remains a puzzle for future inter- and multidisciplinary scholarship.

Research Methods and the Multilevel Interdisciplinary Paradigm

It is important to keep in mind the extent to which the various approaches, methods, and modes of questioning used in the psychology of religion are complementary. Two illustrations of this point suffice.

First, Hood and Belzen (2005, 2013) illustrate how it is the combination of methods that gives us the rich blend of data that we need in order to glimpse the complexity of religious meaning. For a number of years Hood and his research team have examined religious serpent handling by people in rural U.S. Appalachian areas. They have documented entire services of serpent-handling sects and have archived this material for other researchers.⁴ Williamson, Pollio, and Hood (2000) used open-ended interviews and phenomenological methods to identify the experience of handling serpents from a handler’s perspective. An oral history of the tradition has been compiled, and extensive taping of services and individuals allows for longitudinal studies (Hood, 2005). These tapes include the interviews and experiences of members who were bitten, including those who sought medical help and those who suffered from the bite, including being maimed or dying. Field, laboratory, quantitative, qualitative, phenomenological and other methods all contribute to better understanding the unique serpent-handling tradition. With the use of multiple measures, the picture that emerges of the psychological meanings involved in religious serpent handling becomes richer, much more intricate, and more complete than can be gained by use of any method alone. There is no such thing as

⁴It is housed in the Hood-Williamson Research Archives for the Holiness Serpent Handling Sects of Appalachia at the Lupton Library of the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

one best method. The data from one need the data from the others. Further, the use of multiple methods facilitates multilevel intradisciplinary and interdisciplinary research.

Second, scientifically describing or explaining religious phenomena does not take away from the authenticity or validity of these objects of study. Knowing which areas of the brain are activated during prayer doesn't mean prayer is any less real, any more than it "proves" that God communicates with individuals through that part of the brain. Likewise, knowing that a person's religion gives her a sense of meaning doesn't implicate that religion as a mere myth that she hangs on to because it gives her life meaning, any more than it proves that its truth claims are true. Psychology and the rest of science do neither one. It is possible that God or some ultimate being designed humans with an inherent need for meaning and purpose, just as it is equally possible that there is neither a God nor other ultimate being to do any "designing" of humans at all.

The psychological phenomenon is that people are born with a need to make meaning out of ambiguous information, and this process operates at the micro, mid, and macro levels. However, this need may not be met in the same way across the lifespan. In order to explore whether this is so, we need to examine religious development.

TAKE-HOME MESSAGES

- No single method is "the best" method. The data from one method are complementary to, not in competition with, the data from another.
- The idiographic and nomothetic approaches, along with the more newly labeled qualitative and quantitative methods, are complementary to, not in competition with, each other. When these methods are used well in combination, knowledge is enhanced more than by the use of one method only.
- Methodological pluralism is advised in order to test an idea in several ways and to assess the robustness of knowledge.
- Religious and spirituality variables are measured by the use of simple identification and categories, and by development of formal scales. Some of the scales often used in research appear in Box 4.1.
- Research methods in the psychology of religion include laboratory experiments, field experiments, quasi-experiments, the study of unusual groups, case studies, phenomenological studies, brain imaging, content analysis of interviews and texts, questionnaires and surveys, and naturalistic observation. Use of them in combination enriches the research within the MIP.

- Table 4.1, Box 4.1, and this chapter constitute a “mini-handbook” for understanding and conducting research on the psychology of religion and spirituality. You should refer to it regularly when studying other material in this book and beyond, and throughout the process of conducting, interpreting, and writing your research.

FURTHER READING

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PART II

SUBSTANTIVE AREAS

PRELUDE TO PART II: SUBSTANTIVE PROCESSES AND PSYCHOLOGICAL ROOTS—WHAT DO THEY MEAN?

The longest section of this book surveys the central research areas in the psychology of religion, with special attention to the fundamental issues in each area. The research topics deal with religiousness in the context of human development, looking inside the individual for the roots of religiousness, conversion and spiritual transformation, experiences deemed religious or spiritual, mental health and illness, issues related to physical health, and social behavior. These chapters are not written to be exhaustive; that is accomplished in other books. This book focuses on the fundamentals, those issues at the root of human proclivities toward and against religions and spiritualities, how the processes that mediate them work, and how, as intelligent and enlightened people, we are to reach our own conclusions to questions that, at bottom, rest upon unprovable assumptions.

Substrates of Meaning Systems, Religiousness, and Spirituality

Because all basic psychological processes (e.g., perception, learning, motivation, cognition, development, social interaction) are foundational to behavioral capabilities throughout a person's lifespan, they must work well for spirituality, religiousness, and the meaning system processes that undergird them in order for an individual to function

normally. They also depend on healthy development. If developmental processes do not unfold well, then the other foundational processes noted above, on whose interaction a healthy human depends, cannot function as they should. Therefore, a well-conceived understanding of religiousness and spirituality requires an examination of what development means in the context of the psychological roots, or beginnings, of what became meaning system processes. This understanding enables not only a deeper grasp of developmental processes in childhood and adolescent religiousness and spirituality, but also of every topic involving religiousness and spirituality throughout adulthood. Thus, Chapter 5 highlights research on religiousness and spirituality in childhood and adolescence; it closes with a presentation of lifespan models. Chapters 6–11 then address substantive topics on religiousness and spirituality as they are manifested in myriad ways throughout one's life.

Foundations of Root Capabilities

This prelude to Chapters 5–11 examines the origin and development of key psychological processes that are the substrates, or roots, of what makes it possible for us to make meaning, be religious, and seek that which we mark as spiritual. In order to explain what I mean by the development of the substrates of meaning systems and therefore set the stage for the psychological capacity for religiousness and spirituality, let us walk through a series of illustrations of aspects of human and animal functioning for which the development of some form of meaning making, assessment, and remaking is an essential aspect. The sequence will go from the micro to the macro level of analysis. Each step represents an instance of meaning system properties identifiably more developed than the ones before it. The human propensity for meaning making, religiousness, and spirituality is increased as one goes up the steps from a relatively rudimentary system to complex human global meaning systems (Paloutzian & Mukai, 2017; Park, 2010).

Seeing

Consider perceptual processes. Visual meaning does not come from the human eye making a photograph of an object that is “really out there” and depositing it in exact, unchanging form into your occipital cortex. Instead, certain wavelengths of the electromagnetic spectrum, called light, bounce off an object (let us assume it is a red apple) and

enter your eye through the pupil. Then they strike rods and cones in the retina, whose network of cells partially processes the smattering of stimulation and transduces it to neural impulses that follow the visual pathway in the brain. From this barrage of information a percept is constructed. Our perceptual system has made a meaningful percept out of a barrage of wavelengths of light: a delicious red apple that we can eat or throw. Percepts are meanings made. They are also central to the further appraisal of perceptual information as global meaning systems become more complex and include other components such as goals, attitudes and values, identity, and worldview. And the construction of symbols as meaningful percepts is inherent in religiousness and spirituality.

The above example, indicating that perception requires the visual, auditory, or other sensory system to have well-functioning meaning-making capabilities, can be seen as somewhat unidirectional,¹ in the sense that stimuli enter the system from the outside and are appraised and interpreted after a pattern based on them is constructed inside. But let us go up the ladder of complexity only one small step, and we will begin to see how a process that appears to us only slightly more complex requires a more developed meaning-making and appraisal potential.

Learning

Meaning-making and assessment functions are important for the way animals learn to respond to ambiguous stimuli and learn the location of food in a maze (or in their natural habitat). For example, in the first trial run in a T-maze, a rat is in a completely unknown environment and has no clue about whether food is located down the left or right arm of the maze. But after several trials and errors the rat has made the “correct” meaning out of the ambiguous stimulus series to which it has been exposed and has learned to turn left at the choice point to receive food reinforcement. It has “connected the dots” (i.e., figured out or “perceived” the pattern) between running down the runway, seeing the choice point, executing one turn and not the other, and finding food in the goal box. Operant conditioning, a process of learning by reinforcement, is another instance of meaning making. And given that it requires not only perceptual capability but also the application of sensory–motor, neuromuscular, and appraisal-of-success skills over and above sense perception, the meaning system processes in this example

¹Actually, it is not unidirectional, as there is both bottom-up and top-down processing. See any textbook on sensation and perception for more clarification.

can be understood as more developed than those for vision only. And learning patterns and relationships is inherent in all known religious and spiritual systems. One is hard pressed to imagine the transmission of these systems from one generation to the next without the new generation learning from their elders the relevant attitudes and beliefs, values, goals, overall purposes, meaning of individual identity, and locus of ultimate concerns.

Intuiting

Next, consider the case of a rabbit sitting in the middle of a clearing in a forest. Evolutionary processes are relevant in this example. All of a sudden, the rabbit hears the leaves at one edge of the clearing rustle and stir; the rabbit looks and sees the leaves shake. Is it the wind? A hungry lion? A human hunter? The rabbit is confronted with an ambiguous stimulus complex, a circumstance of uncertainty its response to which could mean living or dying (and thereby reproducing or not). If you were the rabbit, what would you do? Evolutionary processes have selected for rabbits the behaviors of running and hiding upon confronting such ambiguous stimuli. Of course, many times that response may be technically unnecessary because the rustling leaves may be due to the wind. But it is evolutionarily unfair to call the response an error because if the rustling leaves are hiding a lion, the rabbit will die. A rabbit gets to make an “error” (not running away) in this situation only once.

Because of selection processes such as those operating in this rabbit scenario, many organisms evolved to respond to possible danger with safety-enhancing reactions. What meaning system capabilities are needed for a rabbit to have evolved this way? I hesitate to apply words appropriate for humans to other animals, but it may not be inappropriate to say that the rabbit has had to develop the “rabbit analogue” to the human capability to conceptualize alternative possible outcomes from a specific set of ambiguous circumstances, and to engage in the process of believing one of those conceptualizations as a potential danger. The rabbit might also feel what humans would call anxious arousal. In this example, the rabbit has to be able to “imagine” that there is a lion there whose bite is lethal or a human whose arrow is deadly, and that it will be safe if it moves to another location. That is, the rabbit has to have developed what in humans we would call the ability to “intuit” or guess what might be there, engage in the process of believing that intuition, and then choose the appropriate response to that process. This means

that the rabbit has evolved to make meanings that are often technically not required, because by doing so it is more likely to live and reproduce.

Of course, in the above characterization of what evolution is selecting in the rabbit, I may have assumed too much cognitive processing and intelligence on the rabbit's part. Do I really suggest the rabbit is capable of imagining anything? I don't know, and offer it only as an analogue to make the point about constructing meaning out of ambiguous stimuli. The rabbit cannot see the threat, but there are stimuli that trigger its reaction to flee. An equally plausible process may be that the ambiguity of the stimuli triggers anxiety and the anxiety carries the meaning "danger," and that the rabbit's fleeing the scene helps the anxiety (and the danger meaning) to dissipate. Or, perhaps more plausible, the anxiety process and a rudimentary imaginative process coevolve and over time make up part of an overall meaning making, appraisal, and response capability.

Certain evolved meaning system intuitions yield responses that facilitate survival. Of course there are many developmental steps on the ladder going from a rabbit to a human, but the fundamental meaning making processes are the same because evolutionary processes select for them. And if human beings, like the rabbit, have developed the ability to intuit possible danger that is unseen, then I do not see it as surprising that they can also intuit other beings, such as a god, gods, or other forces, which they also cannot see but to which they nevertheless respond.

Implementing

It is known that some birds and nonhuman primates can use tools. In order for them to do this, they must have developed complex layers of meaning system processes. Take, for example, the way an animal can mold a stick or a rock into a tool and then use that tool to trap or "prepare" food to be eaten later. In order to use objects in this way, the animal has to be capable of psychologically going into the future, even if only by a small amount. Using implements in a way that "saves" or "prepares" food for a subsequent dining experience requires some rudiments of what in human terms we would call time perception—the ability to "see" ahead, plan accordingly, and then remember to perform the appropriate behaviors at the appointed time. Such mental abilities allow for layers of meaning making over and above those that are phylogenetically older. One starts to consider that such developments constitute the

ability to remember and imagine—processes at the core of how religions and spiritualities function at the level of both the individual and the group.

Remembering

For the nonhuman animal to perform the behavior of forming and using a tool to save or prepare food for future consumption, the more complex memory systems would have had to develop. But even human memory is based on meaning making. It is now known that a memory is not “retrieved” in the form in which it was initially stored, but is instead “reconstructed” (i.e., a meaning-remaking process) and can actually be changed by that very process, that is, the meaning that was made and called a memory can be reconsolidated and stored in a new form (Debiec, LeDoux, & Nader, 2002). Thus, as the capacity to remember extends further, its interactions with the elements of the meaning system become more complicated. And it thereby fosters further development of that system.

Imagining

In Chapter 3, I briefly discussed Bellah’s (2011) theory that human religiousness has its roots in play and imagination (Burghardt, 2005, in press). It does seem that whenever humans developed what came to be called religions, the capability of imagination was concurrent with it and probably a requirement for it. We can add to this same time period the development of human language as we know it, humans living in complex social groups, and the establishment of what Park (2010, 2013) calls global meaning systems—complex blends of conscious worldviews, values, specific goals and larger purposes, visions for the future, and identities, as well as the tendency to infer the content of others’ minds (what psychologists call *theory of mind* [ToM]). This means that people became able to not only remember and imagine what they had done before. They also became able to imagine things that had never been, remember (reconstruct) those imaginings, and imagine paths to take and goals to pursue in order make those things actual. Religious rituals, believing that deities have minds, and the ability to make imaginary worlds (as when children play “doctor and nurse” according to imaginary rules [Taves, 2013]) are all manifestations of such processes. The

ability to mentally construct and manipulate symbols thus became fundamental to what humans now do to make meaning out of ambiguity and establish global meaning systems. Whatever else religions might be, they help serve that function in the human mind (Burriss & Raif, 2015).

Social Interdependence

It seems almost self-evident that religions are social and that the rudimentary capabilities summarized above set the stage for, and are inherent in, the social manifestations of religion and spirituality throughout the lifespan. But it is in the social contexts, in groupness, that some people express whatever is spiritual or religious to them in the most profound ways—sometimes in cases of violence and killing and at other times in cases of forgiving and loving. Current events provide us with plenty of both to see. The point here is that the blend of the evolved capabilities noted above seems to manifest in a full and complex form as humans express their religiousness and spirituality in aggregates, instead of as isolates. Although this idea is implicit in all the chapters that follow, it seems especially important in certain discussions in Chapters 7, 8, 11, and 12.

Summary

The development of meaning system processes are fundamental to the acquisition and development of religiousness and spirituality in the same sense that the development of motivation, perception, behavior acquisition, cognition, social influence, and personality dynamics are. The evolved capabilities that lie at the root of human behaviors, including religiousness and spirituality, alone and in combination with each other, are among the essentials of meaning making, appraisal, and response capabilities. They include seeing, learning, intuiting, implementing, remembering, and imagining. Each capability is essential and interacts with and depends upon the others. These interactions give rise to the religious and spiritual meanings people ascribe to things and the goals and behaviors they invoke to fulfill them.

The rest of this book documents how central such processes are to religiousness in all its manifestations and by any definition, spiritualities in all their variations, with their myriad and conflicting assumptions, and all related issues of equal importance.

FURTHER READING

- Bellah, R. N. (2011). *Religion in human evolution: From the paleolithic to the axial age*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.—Chapters 2 and 10 have good discussions of the role of evolved capacities of imagination and play in religiousness.
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- Taves, A. (2013). Building blocks of sacralities: A new basis for comparison across cultures and religions. In R. F. Paloutzian & C. L. Park (Eds.), *Handbook of the psychology of religion and spirituality* (2nd ed., pp. 138–161). New York: Guilford Press.

CHAPTER 5

Developmental Processes in Religiousness and Spirituality

Models of Religiousness and Spirituality in Children

Cognitively Oriented Research on Child Religious Development

Learning, Attachment, and Socialization of Religion

Interdependence and Religiousness

Adolescents and Young Adults

Two Lifespan Models

Seniorhood Research Snapshots

Take-Home Messages

Further Reading

When exploring what preschool children thought about the concept “soul,” Boyatzis (1997) found that 20% said that furniture had soul, 40% said plants did, and 45% said cats and dogs did. With respect to humans, who had soul was dependent upon age: babies, 48% (similar to cats and dogs); children, 64%; parents, 75%. Highlighting that these answers were from young children, the question emerges, “What do processes of psychological development have to do with what or how people think about religious or spiritual matters?” Do children have spiritual lives as we think of them? If so, how can this be? If not, then what should we make of children’s verbalizations and behaviors that look spiritual or religious to us?

In Chapter 1 we dealt with the problems involved in trying to define religion and spirituality. Here I add the task of defining *development*. The

concept *develop* can be contrasted with the concept *envelop*. The first means to expand outward in specialized ways, the second means to fold over and enclose inward. Development involves change over time but does not equal it. For example, the animal life form called a sponge, a multicelled animal that lives in seabeds, multiplies its number of cells over time. But we do not say the sponge develops, although it changes. This is because the process is one of mere replication of cells with no hierarchical structure, no specialization so that some cells perform one function and other cells perform others, allowing the organism as a whole to change so that it becomes made up of “higher” levels and layers of organization. In a sponge, there is no higher layer of function that comes to overlay lower-level functions. In contrast, the human body, as well as human religiousness and spirituality, is highly developed. A sponge, no matter how many cells replicate in it, does not develop; it just gets bigger.

To illustrate with one more example, both crickets and humans have a brain, but a human brain is massively more developed than a cricket brain. This difference in development is not due to a difference in size but because the human brain has developed to have specialized functions for subsets of cells, with layers of function that overlay and that lie within each other.

To put the idea of development into an even larger context, each step in the sequence of capabilities that constitute the psychological substrates enabling religiousness and spirituality (seeing, learning, intuiting, implementing, remembering, imagining), summarized in the Prelude to Part II, develops from what came before it. Each requires the others for the operation of well-functioning meaning making, appraisal, and remaking capabilities, which are part of what religions and spiritualities are. Thus, each step in the sequence of substrates is not only a manifestation of development; it is also an additional foundational step in the continuing psychological development essential to forming, believing, appraising, and responding to what religions and spiritualities put into one’s life.

Therefore, let us examine religiousness and spirituality in human development. We begin with snapshots of the development of religiousness or spirituality in children. Psychological ideas about religious development have historically relied on knowledge from cognitive–developmental psychology, but this has changed in recent years as our understanding of child and adolescent religiousness has expanded to draw from various psychological models (Chapter 3). In what follows we shall first explore basic observations, research, and stage models of religiousness derived within a cognitive approach. Then we will expand the orbit of understanding to include more recent approaches, still with our eye on childhood. Then we will explore some novel research on religiousness and spirituality in adolescence. Finally, we will examine models of lifespan generic faith development and of making religious judgments.

MODELS OF RELIGIOUSNESS AND SPIRITUALITY IN CHILDREN

It has been said that religion is primarily an adult affair—that the questions with which religion tries to deal are too deep, complicated, or mystical for children to worry about. After all, who would expect little children to grapple with issues such as what life means, what happens after death, the rationale for morality, the purpose of existence, and other ultimate questions? Surely, such matters need not trouble children until they are old enough to make sense out of the basic ambiguities of life, that is, more developed.

Nevertheless, children are involved in religions in ways that have life-long consequences. Sunday schools, children’s religious services, religious instruction classes, parochial schools, Jewish, Muslim, and Christian youth academies, and religious television programs are designed to teach, convert, and retain them. A more potent influence, perhaps, is the role of religious parents, extended families, and clans in teaching, training, and modeling their religion for their youth. The statistically predominant effect of such influences is that although religious conversions are by no means uncommon (see Chapter 7), as adults most people remain in the religion of their upbringing even if they do so in a modified form (Beit-Hallahmi, 2014). Early religious training can have durable effects, but not always; and the outcome depends on far more than the parents.

Ancient Wisdom

Some of the oldest human literature, written during the Axial Age between 800 and 200 B.C.E., says things about child rearing and what kind of teaching produces the desired adult. Probably the two most famous examples come (figuratively if not literally) from ancient Athens and ancient Jerusalem: the book of Proverbs in the Hebrew Bible and Plato’s *Republic*:

Proverbs: “Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old he will not depart from it” (Proverbs 22.6 KJV).

Republic: “And so, when children have a good beginning in their play and musical education has instilled a spirit of order, this reverence for law . . . will attend them in all their doings and foster their growth . . .” (Plato, *Republic* IV. 425¹; Cornford, trans.).

The ancient wisdom represented in these two quotes has influenced people for millennia. Is what they say correct? Is it true that if you train

¹This is the “Stephanus number,” a commonly used notation in the scholarly works of Plato, that refers to the corresponding page in the standard Greek text, thus facilitating comparison among translations or between a translation and the Greek text.

a child a certain way (presumably in teachings of the Judaism of the day), he or she will stay that way? Is it true that parents can teach their religion to their children so that they will grow up to believe and practice what the parents expect? Or do youngsters find their own way by confronting life and making their own decisions about what their parents' religion (or lack of one) or any other worldview means to their own lives? Also, is it true that play combined with an education in certain subjects (say music, poetry, and the arts) creates an adult with a sense of harmony and order that leads to a life worth living, whether religious or secular?

About 2,000 years after the statements from Proverbs and Plato's *Republic* were written, post-Enlightenment philosophers came back to the question of the nature of the child. Only a short while prior to that it seemed as if the question had not been dealt with much. For example, paintings that included children sometimes portrayed them as smaller than adults but with the same body proportions and facial features. The assumption seems to have been that a child is like an adult, only smaller. This makes some sense in light of the nature of life and the economy of the time, when children went to work and did pretty much the same work as an adult.

Modern Models

Modern research into the nature of religious or spiritual development in children falls into four general camps. The first, reflected in the long and important history of the cognitive–developmental approach started by Jean Piaget (1954, 1963), views the child as preset to go through an invariant sequence of developmental stages of cognitive ability in which each stage is more complex than those that came before. When applied to the development of religiousness, it means that at the early stages only simple mental operations are needed to understand a religious teaching (e.g., God is like a big person) and that at later stages, when more complex mental operations are developing, one begins to think more deeply about esoteric or complex religious doctrines (e.g., whether there is a God and if so what the implications are of whether God is immanent, transcendent, or both, or male, female, or neither). Thus, as one goes up the developmental steps, one goes from a religion as relatively concrete with its teachings absorbed and followed more or less as stated, to a religion as more abstract, with the person grappling with that abstraction and its accompanying uncertainty about basic principles and the difficulties in applying them across the board.

The second approach, reflected most strongly in psychology by behaviorism, assumes that the child is an empty vessel, a *tabula rasa*, into which the adults deposit religious ideas, doctrines, habits and rituals, thought patterns, values, assumptions, and prejudices (both good and bad) according to their wishes. Meanings are learned (i.e., received), and that is all there is

to it. Elaborating on implications of this general idea, Barrett (2012) calls this an indoctrination view.

The third perspective comes from attachment theory, introduced into psychology by Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980) and applied more broadly to psychology by Cassidy and Shaver (2008) and to the psychology of religion by Granqvist and Kirkpatrick (2008) and Kirkpatrick (2005). Attachment theory proposes that the nature of the interaction between a child and his or her caregiver (usually the parent) leaves emotional and safety needs relatively met or unmet, and that how this is done leaves various kinds of “internal working models” (schemas) in the mind of the growing child. Variations in these schemas can affect one’s tendency toward religiousness in either adolescence or adulthood. Thus, unfulfilled childhood needs may affect the development of religious meaning systems (RMS).

The fourth approach views the child as a developing interactive agent—neither a creature that merely goes up a sequence of mental steps (as if thinking is the only thing religion and spirituality are about), nor a being to be conditioned as the parents wish. A child is instead an interdependent agent whose cognitive processes do develop and who does learn, but whose mind also makes meanings that are unique and not predictable from only a cognitive–developmental or learning approach. It does this interdependently in interaction with the culture(s) it happens to be in, unique situational factors, and family influences (Bruner, 1990). This approach greatly qualifies the others. Let me unpack and try to relate these approaches to each other by first presenting a reasonable interpretation of child religiousness from the cognitive–developmental perspective.

COGNITIVELY ORIENTED RESEARCH ON CHILD RELIGIOUS DEVELOPMENT

There are distinct steps of mental development, reflected in religious thought and speech, that one climbs in making the transition from a child to an adult way of thinking religiously. The general character of these developmental steps is common to all cognitive stage models. We can think of ascending this sequence of steps as an increasing ability to think in complex ways about religious or spiritual matters.

The Basic Picture

Cognitive and emotional processes at relatively early stages of development are at work in the meanings children learn to “see” in symbols (verbal, physical, ritual), the feelings they learn to attach to them, and the behaviors they learn to associate with them. Because children have not yet developed to the adult level, their minds do not work as adult minds do. They

do not attribute the same meanings as adults to key symbols, such as the words *god*, *soul*, *afterlife*, *religion*, and *spirituality*. Thus, for psychological understanding we need to not only identify these differences developmentally, but also to clarify how our theoretical ideas apply to explaining them.

Intimately linked to a child's perception is the child's language. It is through words and other symbols that religious and spiritual beliefs, rules, and experiences become specific points of reference in children's minds. Their meanings are manifest through memory. Words are symbolic pegs on which children hang selected thoughts, and words gain meaning through experience. But unlike the adult, who has a large store of language and memory to draw on in order to understand and modify the meaning of new words, the child must learn the meaning of every new word from scratch. A consequence of this is that words initially have only concrete, limited meanings. At first there can be but little verbal abstraction to general classes and little conscious tendency to think in terms of general principles (such as kindness, goodness, etc.) or nonphysical entities (e.g., God, heaven), even though the assumption of an existent caregiver, even if physically absent, is crucial. At the beginning, children of necessity can understand a word to represent only concrete (experienced) things or acts. But they begin to infer abstract rules very quickly. The meaning children attribute to words is at first much more literal rather than figurative, though in time they develop a paradigm of figurative meaning alongside literal meaning.

This issue of concreteness versus abstractness becomes especially important as it pertains to questions about religious language and symbols. Because early on children think in concrete terms, religious language for them connotes concrete entities. Thus, the term *God* for a young child is likely to mean *big person*. If God is called *Father*, the child thinks in terms of an oversized, more powerful father who is basically similar to the child's actual father. Depending upon the language with which the child has heard God referred to and the child's perceptions of those purported to have Godlike attributes (e.g., Santa Claus), the child may have the mental impression that God is a big old person in the sky. Questions asked about God by children in grades K–3 reveal the way they think: "Does God die like everyone else?" "How does God pick up people that are dead?" They also ask about how God makes himself, how he gets up in the sky, how he makes things, how and when he was born, how old he is, whether he is married, and whether he is Christian or Jewish (Zeligs, 1974). One Muslim child told me that she "knew" that Allah spoke her language, Arabic. Box 5.1 illustrates how youngsters communicate with God, via letter, about the earth, friends, and religion.

The meaning of prayer is also simple for young children. Often prayer is understood to be a tool used to get something—especially when nothing else works. For example, I have observed 4-year-old youngsters playing a game of marbles. When one child did not get to make the desired move, the

BOX 5.1. Children's Letters to God, from Heller (1987)

Dear God,

Why did you give Jesus such a hard time? My dad is rough on me too. So I know what it's like. Maybe you both could ease up?

Mark [age 11]

Dear Ms. God:

I believe that you are a woman. In fact I am sure for sure. I think that is why the rivers and sky and birds are so beautiful.

If by some flook you are a boy please do not take it out on me. Boys should not hit girls.

Trisha [age 11]

child blurted out, "Next time I'm going to pray before I throw the dice!" Prayer was apparently seen as a type of force—a tool to be used to produce a desired outcome. Only when the child reaches a higher level of cognitive ability will this and other religious or spiritual practices become infused with deeper meaning.

With the introductory summary of a cognitive–developmental approach presented, let us now go into greater detail in two lines of research that illustrate it. First let's look at research on how religious concepts develop in children. Then we will take a look at what praying sounds like across those same years.

Research on Stages of Religious Concepts

The results of several studies of religious thinking are generally consistent with a three-stage model. In one early study, Harms (1944) asked several thousand children covering the full childhood age range to draw their idea of God. He also discussed this with them and thus obtained verbal (written or spoken) statements about what they thought God was like. He concluded that there were three stages:

1. Ages 3 to 6 years were called the *fairytale stage*. At this stage religion, as reflected in ideas about God, seemed to be at the same level as stories about giants, talking animals, ghosts, angels with wings, and Santa Claus. It appeared difficult for a child at this stage to tell the difference between fantasy and reality. A further, practical complication is that adults sometimes tell the child that an actual fantasy is a reality (as is sometimes the case in the United States with Santa Claus), so that the difficulty in distinguishing fantasy from reality becomes even greater.

2. The second stage was between 7 and 12, and was called the *realistic stage*. Here the child tended to concretize religious concepts. God and angels were seen as real persons. They were superhuman but influenced events on earth, like the gods of ancient Greece. Religious symbols began to acquire meaning. The children's drawings included institutional symbols such as the Cross, Star of David, drawings of churches, and so forth. At this stage, children began to differentiate obvious fantasy. For example, they began to realize that Santa Claus was a fantasy.

3. Ages 13 to 18 were called the *individualistic stage*. This stage was characterized by the greatest diversity, and was broken down into three categories. One group held conventional religious ideas and basically adhered to the mainline religion of their group. A second group was more mystical. Their drawings contained fewer of the traditional religious symbols and more of the abstract expressions such as a sunset or light in the clouds. A third group expressed religion through symbols of religions and cults that they had imagined and/or learned something about but had never experienced—such as religions of foreign or primitive cultures or ancient religions.

Goldman (1964) conducted landmark research on religious development. He used an interview method in which children were asked questions relating to religious pictures and Bible stories. Ten boys and 10 girls at each age from 6 to 16 were interviewed (a total of 200 white, Protestant British children). Like Harms, Goldman concluded that there were three stages of religious development. Goldman's stages parallel Harms's very closely but are couched in distinctively Piagetian terms. His first stage (up to 7–8 years) was called "preoperational intuitive thought." It was characterized by unsystematic and fragmentary religious thinking, illustrated by lack of understanding of religious material due to not being able to consider all the evidence involved in a religious story. For example, the question "Why was Moses afraid to look at God?" (Exodus 3:6) received answers like "Because God had a funny face" (p. 52). The second stage (ages 7–8 to 13–14), labeled "concrete operational thought" (obviously Piagetian again), was typified by the children focusing on specific details of pictures and stories. When asked why Moses was afraid to look at God, children at this stage referred to aspects of the story itself but in a concrete way: "Because it was a ball of fire. He thought it might burn him" or "It was a bright light and to look at it might blind him" (p. 56). Goldman's third stage (ages 13–14 and up) was called "formal (abstract) operational thought." Goldman's interviews with this age group contained evidence of hypothetical and abstract religious thought. For example, Moses was said to be afraid to look at God because "God is holy and the world is sinful" or "The awesomeness and almightiness of God would make Moses feel like a worm in comparison" (p. 60).

Goldman's research caused controversy because it seemed to have implications for how children should be taught a religion. That is, the results might be interpreted to mean that inculcating young children with a literal interpretation of the Bible could, in the long run, be counterproductive. Children's minds were constructed so that (so the argument went) they were prone to accept literalism only up to a certain point. When, through the natural course of development, their minds moved to higher levels of functioning, they would be inclined to reject the literal teaching of their past. Two (uncertain) consequences might follow: the youth might then either retain the beliefs but in a nonliteral way, or reject them. And both of these outcomes would be seen as negative by those who insist on a literal approach as the only true one. Hyde (1990) reports that Goldman even received "abusive, anonymous letters" by some who were critical of his conclusions.

Building on Goldman's work, Pealting (1974, 1977) created the Thinking about the Bible (TAB) test. Goldman's method involved "semiclinical" interviews that yielded much verbal material that had to be content analyzed. Pealting took the stories Goldman used and wrote four questions for each one. Each question had four response options. Of the four response options (of which the subject had to choose the most and the least acceptable), one represented each of the following levels of religious thinking: very concrete, concrete, abstract, and very abstract. The answers for the two concrete categories were combined, and the answers for the two abstract categories were combined. This yielded two scores, one for abstract and one for concrete religious thinking.

Pealting (1974) got results that were in general similar to those of Goldman. The TAB was given to 1,994 students in Episcopalian schools, from grades 4 to 12. There was a linear increase in abstract thinking scores across the grade levels, as would be expected based on Goldman's results. It was somewhat unclear whether the data showed plateaus in strict accordance with a stage model, or whether they showed a gradual incline in abstract religious thinking. This lack of clarity could easily be due to the difference between the two techniques—Goldman's interview method and Pealting's scaling method. The general direction of the results was sufficiently robust to be replicated in Finland by Tamminen (1991) with youth ages 9–20. This crosscultural replication suggests robustness of the trends and is clearly reflected in the data in Figure 5.1.

Research on Stages of Prayer

Long, Elkind, and Spilka (1967) studied religious developmental stages by asking children about prayer. They asked 160 boys and girls ages 5–12 questions such as "Do you pray?" "Does your family pray?" "Do all boys and girls pray?" "Do dogs and cats pray?" "What is prayer?" "Can you pray

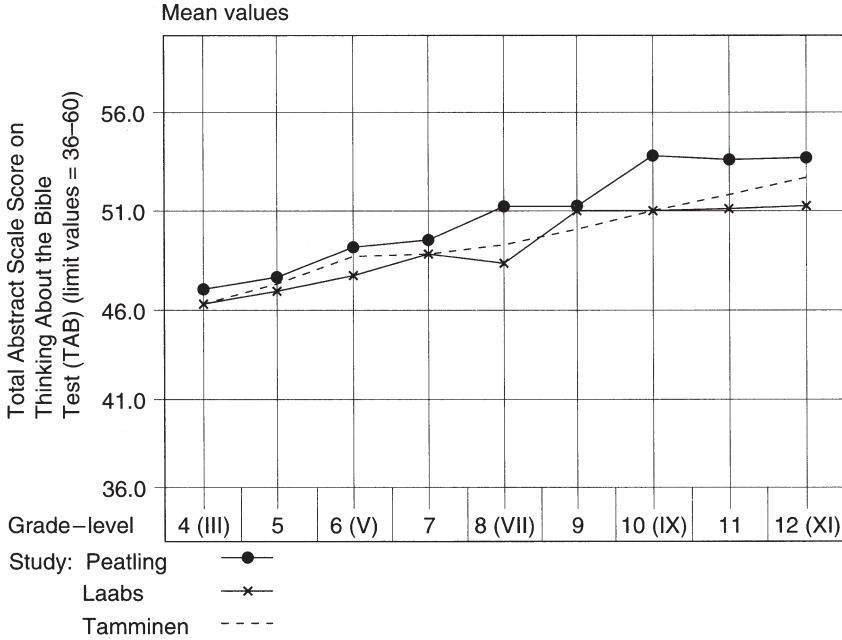


FIGURE 5.1. Total Abstract Scale Score on the Thinking about the Bible Test (TAB) across the grade levels for the studies by Peatling, Laabs, and Tamminen. Abstract scale scores can range from 36 to 60. From Tamminen (1991, p. 105). Reprinted with permission from the Finnish Academy of Science and Letters.

for more than one thing?” “What must you do if your prayer is answered? If it is not?” “Where do prayers come from?” “Where do prayers go?” They also asked children to respond to the following incomplete statements: “I usually pray when . . .” “Sometimes I pray for . . .” “When I pray I feel . . .” “When I see someone praying I . . .”

Their results suggested that religious development, as traced via children’s statements about prayer, appears to evolve across three stages:

1. *Global, undifferentiated stage* (ages 5–7). Here the child’s understanding of prayer was very rudimentary and vague: “A prayer is about God, rabbits, dogs and fairies and deer, and Santa Claus and turkey and pheasants, and Jesus and Mary and Mary’s little baby.” “A prayer is God bless people who want to say God bless. Now I lay me down to sleep” (p. 104).
2. *Concrete, differentiated stage* (7–9 years). Here prayer was understood as uttering verbal requests, as distinct from expressing a deeper thought or feeling that would underlie them in older children.

3. *Abstract, differentiated stage* (ages 11–12). Here prayer behavior was an external expression of an internal activity that, in essence, was conversation with God. Concrete requests were proportionally less prevalent. Prayer was sharing of intimacies—a way to communicate with God.

Although there are differences between Long et al.'s research and that of Tamminen (1991) (e.g., the stage at which the shift from petitionary prayer to nonpetitionary prayer took place—such differences can be attributed to cultural factors), the overall theme that emerged from the findings was similar. For example, Tamminen found that from grade 3 to grade 9 (American grades 4–10) there was a slight decrease from 30 to 24% in the proportion of answers to the question “I think prayer is . . .” that were concrete in nature, such as asking for something from God. Conversely, across that same age range there was an increase from 19 to 40% in the proportion of answers that were more abstract, such as conversation with God or general reliance on God. Similar trends resulted when the youngsters were asked, “Has God answered your prayers in some way or other? . . . If so, please write about the occasion(s).” From Finnish grades 3–9 there was a decrease from 22 to 10% in the proportion of concrete answers (“help in illness”) and an increase in the more abstract answers (“the spiritual effect of prayer”). Extending the findings, in response to being questioned about the effect of prayer, the youngest (ages 7–10) mostly saw God as acting directly, whereas the children ages 11–12 were more likely to see God as acting indirectly, for example, through medication or circumstances. Overall, the general pattern of this set of findings suggested that they could be attributed to basic psychological processes, and that individual differences among the findings of various studies could be attributed to unique features of the religious subgroup being studied or to cultural variations.

Reflection

The findings from these two lines of developmental research—on religious concepts and on prayer—are so consistent with each other that one is tempted to conclude that religious development is as simple as it is portrayed in the three-step model presented above, and that there is not much else to learn about it. However, this is not so. Research on the development of religiousness and spirituality has gone further and added to the preceding picture in two important ways. First, far more is involved than cognition only; learning, attachment processes, and socialization are all features essential to gaining a fuller understanding of the subject. Second, development does not stop at the end of childhood; it continues throughout the lifespan. We pick up these two topics in subsequent sections.

LEARNING, ATTACHMENT, AND SOCIALIZATION OF RELIGION

We can now add two additional theoretical notions to the cognitive approach illustrated above in order to round out our initial search for processes involved in children's religiousness and spirituality. The family and social contexts are crucial, and their influences qualify and moderate whatever outcomes might be anchored in cognitive stages. Particularly helpful for our understanding are the principles that come from social learning theory (Chapter 1) and attachment theory (Chapter 3).

Social Learning of a Religion

Social learning principles are based on the ideas of reward, punishment, reinforcement, and imitation and modeling. Simply put, a child is more likely to remember and reproduce those behaviors for which he or she gets a reward and is less likely to perform those behaviors that are punished (Skinner, 1953). According to modern versions of this theory, reinforced behaviors are stored as memory traces in a cognitive retrieval system so that, at a later time, the child can reconstruct those memories and enact the behaviors represented in them. The process of imitation and modeling works the same way. When a child sees an adult perform a behavior, a partial representation of that perception is stored as a memory trace in the child's cognitive system, and it is later reconstructed and implemented when the child is sufficiently motivated to perform that behavior (Bandura, 1986). The applications of this type of understanding to the question of how children learn to perform religious behaviors are straightforward.

Attachment and Religiousness

Attachment theory can help us understand the nature of the emotional bond between the child and the family and how this relationship affects the child's religiousness. The essential notions of attachment theory are that the infant is by nature in a biosocial system in which he or she must stay in physical proximity to the parent or primary caregiver (Bowlby, 1969). This enables the child to get those things that are essential for survival, such as sustenance and protection from predators. According to the theory, the optimal relationship between the infant and the primary caregiver, or attachment figure, is one in which the attachment figure provides two things: "(1) a *haven* of safety and comfort to which the infant can turn in times of distress or threat, and (2) a *secure base* for exploration of the environment in the absence of danger" (Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990, p. 317, emphasis in original). How optimally this is done leaves traces in an emotional-behavioral-cognitive system that are presumed to be active,

or at least be available, as a schematic “working model” of the attachment relationship that influences behavior throughout one’s lifetime. Applications of this idea to the psychology of religion have been made by Kirkpatrick (2005; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1992) and Granqvist (2014), who have noted that in most theologies God is the ideal attachment figure. God is said to be like the perfect parent who, either literally or spiritually, is always there to provide you with a sense of security and protect you from danger.

The interaction of social learning and attachment notions can help us describe religiousness and spirituality in young children. The preschool-age child’s exposure to religious symbols, teachings, and practices is largely under the control of the family. Hence, whatever sort of religion the parents have exposed the child to may constitute the totality of what the child has to interact with in terms of beliefs and practices. The result might be seen as a straightforward, albeit somewhat simplified, result of social learning processes. But the meanings of a religion to a child are not so simple or straightforward, in either practical or theoretical terms (Boyatzis, 2005; Richert & Granqvist, 2013).

Context and Confrontations

The child’s social context can either promote or discourage the child’s religiousness. Family and church, synagogue, mosque, temple, or other social influences are obviously motivated to inculcate their beliefs and practices into the lives of “their” children. But the higher the child goes in school (except sectarian schools) in a multiethnic, multireligious country in the modern world, the greater the likelihood of exposure to people and ideas different from those of his or her early childhood experience. One consequence is a greater tendency to realize that a variety of options exist in addition to those practiced by the family. This exposure, which sometimes can mean confrontation, in combination with the developing cognitive abilities in older children, can prompt the questioning and doubt during adolescence of what one has been taught during early childhood. But how the adolescent responds to such contextual influences may depend on the psychological processes most operative at the time.

For example, each person has a particular type of attachment relationship that is part of his or her past. Those with an insecure attachment relationship with their mothers or primary caregivers may become religious in some form in order to compensate, using God as the secure attachment figure that is absent in their backgrounds. In contrast, those with a secure attachment relationship, at least those with nonreligious parents to serve as a model, may be less likely to become religious for those reasons. (See Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2004, 2008, and Kirkpatrick, 2005, for elaboration.) Also, for example, the application of social learning theory might predict that a person would eventually fall back on performing the behavior

patterns that yield the greatest personal and social rewards, whether they be the old or new ones.

Finally, given the emphases of the cognitive view of mental processes and the need to mentally accommodate to diverse information, we could predict that by the time the child is beginning to think in complex ways, he or she might either (1) intuit intellectual arguments in opposition to a new belief and in defense of one already held, or (2) incorporate the new belief into his or her personal system by either adopting it in place of the old one (i.e., converting to a different religion, a major change in the meaning system) or cognitively blending the two into a new meaningful whole (i.e., a partial change in the meaning system). This means that a child's religious and spiritual development is not a matter of independence; it hinges on interdependence with social and contextual factors. Interaction with social forces thus becomes a paramount factor shaping RMS development.

INTERDEPENDENCE AND RELIGIOUSNESS

A child is not merely a little person who learns or an entity who feels the pull of attachment from caretakers; a child is also an interdependent meaning maker. This latter notion may sound strange, and even in psychological circles this has not been a typical way of talking about children. Apparently it has been assumed that children are mere receivers of meanings from others.

The cognitive–developmental and learning–socialization models seem compelling upon first learning them. This is because, for example, children obviously acquire knowledge and skills by learning (a child who grows up speaking Chinese does not automatically know Russian), and their mental and sensory–motor skills take time to develop (thus, a 2-year-old communicates but not yet in well-articulated sentences, as he or she will by the age of 6). But research conducted in the wake of a half century of behaviorist and cognitive–developmental thinking about the processes by which children become adolescents and adults seems to be leading to a model of children's mentality different from those of the past. The child is no longer thought of as a mere logical thought box that automatically goes “up” a series of stages of mental capability, nor as an initially empty vessel that becomes only what it has been taught to become based on reinforcement and modeling. That is, the classic versions of the cognitive–developmental and social learning models, although not necessarily incorrect, are inadequate to explain the full gamut of what developing children actually do. They are incomplete even when softened by attachment theory and its accent on interpersonal relationships at an early age.

The cognitive–developmental and social learning views, no matter how insightful they are and how clear and logical they appear to be, cannot

be the whole story. Perhaps children's religious and spiritual development might proceed along the lines proposed by those views if they were raised in a world in which they were confronted with only those problems that would goad their cognitive systems to step up to the next level, or a world in which the only factors determining their behavior were those stimulus cues and reinforcers sufficient to shape and sustain the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors desired by those who control the reinforcers. But such a sanitized environment is imaginary. In the real (and modern) world, the number of factors that can affect someone is, in principle, infinite. And it is in the real world that real children develop.

The key to understanding children's religious and spiritual development hinges on the interdependence of factors including culture, family, and so forth—an idea rooted in a blend of evolutionary psychology (Tooby & Cosmides, 1992) and cultural psychology (Saroglou & Cohen, 2013)—the most important of which is the child himself or herself. The result is a picture far more complicated than the past views taken alone, with far greater emphasis on what the child brings to and does in the transactions with those other factors. Thus the meanings (whether religious, spiritual, or otherwise) that get made are not merely inside the minds of the children. They are a function of interactive processes and undergo continual appraisal that results in their reinstatement or modification (Bruner, 1990; Park, 2010).

New knowledge suggests that we need to broaden our picture of a child's developing mind, and that doing so can be enriched by taking interdependent meaning system processes into account. As noted in the Prelude to Part II, when children see, learn, intuit, implement, remember, and imagine, they make meanings. But these meanings are created not by them alone, but in their engagement with others in their family and cultural context. Children also appraise incoming information against the (as yet incomplete) overall meaning system that is partway through the process of developing, and can either adjust or reinforce it in accord with that appraisal.

The Contextual Nature of Belief

I said in Chapter 1 that believing is a process, not a static state, and that a belief is a meaning made. But engaging in processes of believing (Seitz & Angel, 2012, 2014, call them *credititions*, analogous to emotions) is something children do whether adults influence them to do so or not. This leads to the question of whether a child is “born to believe,” that is, ready to engage in the process of believing. The answer is yes, but not quite in the sense that those who favor religious believing might wish.

The evidence suggests that a child's mind does not automatically or mechanically do only what the classical cognitive–developmental models

suggest. Consistent with the classical views, a child's mind at age 3 does not work the same way that it does at age 8. But neither does it always follow in stepwise fashion the strict rational logic of the stage models. Children's minds do things not predicted by the cognitive–developmental or the learning–socialization views. They instead do things in addition to them, not necessarily always instead of them (Barrett, 2012; Boyatzis, 2005; Richert & Granqvist, 2013). What are some of these things and how do we make psychological sense of them?

Children of preschool age seem to find it easy to believe in many things, including gods, spirits, ghosts, and other invisible beings, to all of whom are attributed the property of agency, meaning that they can choose, decide, and cause things to happen. Preschool children easily believe in nonphysical agents (Barrett, 2012). They can also, for example, look at a computer screen that portrays a triangle and a square in motion and appears to show the square being “chased” by the triangle, and use language that indicates that they think the triangle is trying to catch the square and that the square is trying to get away from it. That is, children can make attributions of agency to objects that have no agency. These findings seem to demonstrate that a child's mind comes into the world preset to believe . . . something.

Does it *have* to be “religious” or “spiritual” things? No. No one comes into the world designed to believe any specific doctrine, theology, or alternative teaching (no matter how true, obvious, or “natural” doing so may seem to adult believers). Such outcomes are left to the influence of family, peer groups, culture, and the like. Children are not born to believe in Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hindu, atheism, or anything else in particular. Thus the meaning of those teachings, doctrines, and practices that the parents may so earnestly want their children to accept (or to disdain) in the same way that the parents do, cannot be delivered to the children in the form held by the parents. Children have their own minds that make their own meanings out of the information that enters their system; and whatever that becomes is unique to them.

One explanation for a child's propensity to infer agency even when he or she cannot see a real agent can be captured in a clever concept that Barrett (2004) developed, call the hypersensitive agency detection device (HADD). There is no actual device in the brain, so please keep in mind that this is just catchy shorthand for a neural process; its workings are not in the slightest way mechanical even though the word *device* is part of the phrase. But this concept conveys the idea that the human cognitive system comes prepared to easily infer agency under certain circumstances of ambiguity. Take the rabbit in a clearing, described in the Prelude to Part II. We can use the HADD concept as a shorthand way of saying that upon hearing the leaves rustle at the edge of the clearing, the rabbit's mind has evolved to infer a dangerous agent behind the bush whose intent is to enjoy a rabbit dinner. Thus, the rabbit runs away and stays alive regardless of whether or

not there was any dangerous agent in any one instance. The rabbit, like the human in analogous circumstances, is in the long run better off intuiting that there is. Overall, as Barrett (2012) put it, “Regardless of culture and without need for coercive indoctrination, children develop with a propensity to seek meaning and understanding of their environments” (p. 9).

Theory of mind (ToM) is a phrase that refers to the tendency to infer that others’ behavior is due to things such as beliefs, desires, and intentions that are located inside their minds. For example, if Person A invites Person B to a Sabbath evening meal and you are an uninformed observer, ToM might suggest that you would infer that Person A’s mind contains positive thoughts about B, that A desires that others present at the meal meet B, and that A believes B is a friend. Thus, your mind explains Person A’s behavior by attributing certain contents to his or her mind—a meaning-making process.

Within the ToM framework, agents need not be visible any more than people need to be visible in order for a viewer to believe that they are there. In fact, we all believe other people are there even though we don’t always see them. It is evolutionarily natural for humans to have developed this automatic tendency to believe that entities not immediately seen nevertheless exist, just as it is for human and nonhuman primates to have evolved the capability to remember that the food they have saved for later is still there even though they cannot see it at the moment.

ToM research with children who have invisible friends also suggests that children attribute agency to beings they cannot see. Wigger, Paxon, and Ryan (2013) explored whether children ages 3–8 would, when given three different problems to solve, attribute knowledge to their imaginary companion, God, a human, and a dog. The 3-year-old children (those with the least ToM capability) were more likely to attribute knowledge to all four agents. The 4-year-old children (with emerging ToM) began to see the agents differently, attributing different degrees of knowledge to them, and viewing God and humans differently. The oldest children, who had developed robust ToM, were more likely to attribute knowledge to God maximally, as a kind of super-knowledge, compared to the dog, human, and imaginary companion. In general, the imaginary companion seemed to occupy a position between God and the human and dog.

Does the finding that children from ages 3–8 attribute knowledge to invisible agents mean that the meaning they are making is true and accurate? Not necessarily. One way to explain why the youngest children are more likely to attribute knowledge to all agents, putting humans, God, a dog, and an imaginary companion on the same plane, is that they tend to overapply rules. Or perhaps they are overgeneralizing based on intuiting their own inner experience and perceptions. In fact, children may use religious and spiritual language before they really understand or appreciate the full meaning of what they are saying. At a certain stage during language

development, children learn rules for how to use certain words (e.g., adding *-ed* to the end of a word for the past tense), and they overuse them. A child's mental operations are using the rule even when it does not work. For example, a child may say she "runned" (instead of ran) or he "goed" (instead of went). When a 4-year-old learns the New Testament story about Jesus dying, being buried, and then being alive, he or she may wonder how Jesus could be alive and dead at the same time. Asking a parent "How can Jesus be both dead and alive?" may represent the simple mental operation of overapplying a rule. However, when a 25-year-old student of philosophy and biology ponders how Jesus could have been dead and then alive, different mental processes occur, and the person may experience a more profound, multifaceted understanding of death and life. In other words, the same exact language spoken by someone young and someone old may reflect very different cognitive processes. This distinction underscores the developmental process of meaning systems, in which literal meaning gives way to more complex figurative meaning.

Overall, children and adults seem to engage in the process of making attributions of meaning about the contents of others' minds as an evolutionarily rooted capability, and not only with respect to the behavior of other humans, but also to that of what they imagine to be nonphysical agents of myriad sorts—sometimes invented by themselves but largely introduced to them via their family and subculture, or the larger culture (Bruner, 1990).

Culture and Family Transactions

In some ways the importance of cultural and familial influences on children's religious and spiritual development is so obvious that it hardly needs repeating. Even so, some suggest that a child's mind is preset to think in terms of an invisible supernatural agent in particular, and that this tendency is universal. For example, if the question posed to children concerns how the world originated and how the species of plants and animals got here, what would children of different ages and cultures say? The "universal" view predicts that, if given a choice between God and evolutionary processes, children across various ages would select God and that this response would be the same in different cultures. But the data vary. Some findings suggest that children ages 5–7 show a mixed preference for the view that God created things or that they just happened, and that children between 8 and 10 tend to prefer the creationist explanation (Evans, 2000). However, those data come from the United States, a country that has a highly religious population even though it is constitutionally secular. In contrast, Smith and Richert (2011) conducted analogous research in China that showed the opposite trend. Chinese children ages 6–14 uniformly endorsed an evolutionary explanation. Overall, this set of findings suggests that the meanings children across the age span give to things in the world

are to be found not only in their developing mental abilities or their culture, but in the interdependent workings of the two.

To carry this idea further, it has been argued that religions are cultures (Cohen, 2009). Thus, the degree to which childhood religiousness and spirituality are a function of the interactions between cultures and children's developing minds would be due to their interdependence with their religious subculture. A prediction follows that even within one larger culture, subcultural differences are to be expected in how children make meaning out of ambiguous issues having to do with religious or spiritual claims. A good example of this is Boyatzis's (1997) study discussed earlier in this chapter (exploring how preschool children think about the concept "soul" as applied to furniture, plants, cats and dogs, human babies, children, and parents). Importantly, there was a relatively unique subcultural difference in this study. There was a small group of Mennonite children from conservative Christian families in rural Pennsylvania who had had little contact with the broader U.S. culture; thus, we should expect that their subculture would be a dominant factor in determining their views. None of the Mennonite children attributed the property of soul to plants, animals, or furniture, but 88% attributed soul to babies and children and 100% attributed soul to parents.

The implication seems clear that what children think in response to religious and spiritual questions is not only a function of their progress along the path of mental development, but is highly interdependent with their cultural context. And it is those unique meanings, not the child's state of mental development *per se*, to which they respond—responses they will cling to or depart from throughout adolescence and the rest of their lives. As Boyatzis (2005) put it, "we must study children growing up in different religions to capture the complexity and variety in children's religious cognition and ontologies" (p. 131). An implication is that neither the indoctrination nor the total independence views of religion and spirituality in childhood is adequate; the evidence seems to lead to the concept of interdependence.

The interdependence model has an important implication. It is that what a child develops into in terms of his or her religiousness or spirituality is not a matter of unidirectional communication from parents to child but is instead the consequence of bidirectional, mutual give-and-take communication between them (Boyatzis, Dollahite, & Marks, 2006; Boyatzis & Janicki, 2003; Kuczynski, 2003). In the Boyatzis and Janicki (2003) study, families with children between 3 and 12 years old were asked to keep a diary of all conversations about religion or spirituality for 2 months. The results showed clearly that the communication between parents and children is bidirectional, with mutual exchange and influence. The parents influenced the children and the children influenced the parents. This finding, like others summarized above, suggests a child's eventual religiousness or lack of it is a function of transactions between him or her and family

such that the thoughts, beliefs, and practice of either party is interdependent with those of the other.

One important line of research on the transactions between parents and children concerns what is called parenting style, elaborated and researched by Baumrind (1967, 1991). As reviewed by Hood et al. (2009), she proposed the existence of

Four very different styles of parenting, based on parental responsiveness and demandingness: “authoritarian,” “authoritative,” “permissive,” and “rejecting/neglecting.” Authoritarian parents are high on demandingness but low on responsiveness, preferring to impose rules on their children and emphasize obedience. Authoritative parents tend to be both demanding and responsive, explaining why rules are necessary, and being open to their children’s perspectives. Permissive parents make few demands, use little punishment, and are responsive to the point of submitting to their children’s wishes. Rejecting/neglecting parents are neither demanding nor responsive, being generally disengaged from their children. (p. 90)

Their review is suggestive that an authoritative, but not authoritarian, style of parenting seems to show the greatest probability of facilitating the socially responsible development of children, whether in religious, spiritual, or other areas. (See Mahoney, 2010, for a comprehensive review of other research on religion in families.)

Mental Flexibility

In Chapter 4 I explained why “either/or” thinking that leads to “nothing but-ery” is an unnecessarily constricting framework for considering how religious phenomena come to be, because scientific and otherworldly explanations are logically orthogonal to each other. The difference between them is that scientific explanations are in principle testable and can therefore be supported or disconfirmed by publicly accessible empirical evidence. Otherworldly explanations cannot be supported or disconfirmed by such evidence, and therefore must remain in the realm of unverifiability. One thing developmental research suggests is the mental flexibility with which children of various ages can approach trying to understand something that for some adults can be explained only one way (i.e., via either/or thinking, when there is no reason for it). That is, whereas some adults (e.g., those who hold very conservative or fundamentalistic religious views) may insist that either natural processes caused something to happen (e.g., the evolution of humans) or God did it but not both, children can, depending on their cultural context, hold such diverse views at the same time.

For example, Legare and Gelman (2008) examined how children ages 5–15 living in a peri-urban settlement outside of Johannesburg, South

Africa, made attributions about the cause of illnesses. They found that although biological explanations were the most frequent, about half of the children also explained the illness in terms of some variation of bewitchment. The child would have to have developed both imaginative and tolerant capabilities in order to think with that kind of mental flexibility (set aside, for now, the question of whether those thoughts are ontologically accurate, as the bewitchment explanation, like a God explanation, is not subject to the test of evidence). The question for us becomes, what kinds of adolescent and adult minds and characters develop following one or another kind of childhood upbringing?

ADOLESCENTS AND YOUNG ADULTS

Childhood religiousness is not expected to satisfy the intellectual and emotional needs of adolescents. The meaning system processes that operate to enable children to learn to think, grow mentally and emotionally, and transition through the early years continue to operate, albeit in an even bigger way, during adolescence and adulthood. Various consequences could result from this: (1) the adolescent could decide that religion is nonsense, or deny its importance, and reject his or her early-life beliefs; (2) the adolescent could blindly adhere to the religion in order to avoid having to pursue issues concerning religions or spirituality in a deeper way; (3) he or she could grapple with new questions and doubts, try to think through and evaluate alternatives, perhaps experiment with alternatives, and eventually arrive at a satisfactory decision about the issues.

Paradoxically, adolescents may be both religious and nonreligious, but in ways different from their early years. More precisely, there can be plenty of religious involvement, practice, dialogue, and discussion, as well as more doubt and experimentation with alternatives, and less acceptance of traditional and literal religious teachings. To illustrate, although the trend was slight, in a large U.S. sample of mid-adolescents there was a positive association between anxiety and two religious variables (service attendance and importance of faith); for the most part this link was positively mediated by guilt (Peterman, LaBelle, & Steinberg, 2014). Many factors contribute to diverging trends in adolescent religiousness and spirituality, including but not limited to the following:

- Gender differences (women are, across all age groups in Western cultures, more religious than men by any measure, a trend stable for generations).
- New social influences emerge during the teenage years as diverse spiritual models enter the person's life.
- Experimentation with sexuality as it relates to religious teachings.

- Peer group influences as the young person's sphere of social contacts expands.
- Generalized flexible or liberal thinking fostered during the transition through college or university.
- Broad exposure to an increasingly complex and interconnected world that offers anyone who pays attention almost any worldview imaginable.

These factors can be confusing to anyone, especially young people. Making the transition through those years in a healthy way is important for future individual and family concerns. (See Hood et al., 2009, for review.) I wish to focus our attention on two processes that are especially pivotal during the adolescent and young adult years: identity and doubt.

Identity

Identity is one of the most basic areas of life about which a person must make meaning. A baby is not born with a sense of identity; it is constructed. Identity comprises many elements, such as physical makeup and skin color, social class, sense of group belonging, sense of individual abilities and skills, and religious or spiritual belief, membership, and tradition. Adolescence is often a time of confusion and exploration in all areas of identity, not only the religious or spiritual area.

Paradoxes

Each model of psychological processes involved in religiousness and spirituality in this chapter implicitly if not explicitly includes the notion that the adolescent faces paradoxes that confront his or her identity, religious or otherwise. Such paradoxes include simultaneously being interested in religious questions while doubting or feeling hesitant about them. This inconsistency seems best understood as one instance of the general paradoxical phase of the adolescent years. These paradoxes include, for example, the need to be independent from parents while still dependent upon them, to be conservative yet exploratory regarding sexual behavior, to believe in whatever their family has taught them about religious or spiritual issues while learning how to think their own thoughts about them, and to believe in a superior moral principle, yet understand moral relativism. It would appear that the same basic questions that plague many adults throughout life begin to have their influence during adolescence.

Seen in this light, religiousness or spirituality in the life of an adolescent can be understood as part of a general coping pattern in which the youth is attempting to deal with life's conflicting needs and demands in

ways that reduce feelings of guilt, foster a sense of security, and offer a philosophy of life anchored in the belief in a greater power that has the ability to overcome death. But it should not be a surprise that young people make decisions about their religiousness at this time of life; after all, it is a time when many have to decide about important things such as vocation, marriage, sexual behavior, military service, drug use or nonuse, and so forth—factors that could also affect their religiousness (Regnerus, 2007).

Questioning

At least three types of psychological processes interact not only to set the stage for a quest concerning religious or spiritual matters, but in some ways to encourage it. First, the cognitive factors elaborated above yield more complex mental abilities. During adolescence, the youth becomes more mentally able to conceptualize at the abstract level necessary to think through more difficult religious issues.

Second, new social factors confront the old. For example, peers are an especially potent influence during adolescence. Unless a teenager attends a religiously segregated school, he or she will encounter peers whose views range from the same to the radically different from what he or she was raised with. In addition, beliefs and practices involving recreational, sexual, or other morally loaded activities may be directly challenged by those of new friends. The extent of this influence can be great, all the way from challenging a specific practice (e.g., you should not have sex) to challenging the foundations of any prohibition (e.g., all morals are relative). Because youth regulate their behavior in part by social comparison processes in which others are looked to as guides for belief and behavior, the confrontation of issues set in motion by peers can prompt the youth to reassess the views of his or her past.

Third, the personal factors may be summarized by the concepts of individuation and identity. *Individuation* refers to the process of becoming separate; *identity* refers to the process of developing a stable self-definition.

When the fetus is still in its mother's womb, it is in a very real sense one with its mother. It has no sense of a separate existence or separate identity, no sense of individuation as a unique human being. Even in infancy, the sense of one's separate existence is rudimentary at best (Fromm, 1941). But as children grow, they gradually learn that they are separate human beings with a unique existence. This process of individuation is discovered and developed gradually over time. By the time of adolescence in individualistic cultures, the process has impressed upon the youth that he or she is unique, has a separate existence, and therefore has a unique identity. The only problem is that adolescents often have difficulty in figuring out just what this separate identity is.

Several psychological consequences occur because of this individuating process. Perhaps the most basic is that the youth must now arrive at his or her own selfdefinition. What Erikson (1963) called the *identity crisis* occurs. Rice (1975) noted that adolescents confronted with issues about religious or spiritual identity ask questions such as “Who am I? Why am I here? What is the purpose of life? What can I believe? What can I value? How should I live?” (p. 309). The identity crisis is not only relevant to asking questions about religious or spiritual matters. It is part of a whole constellation of dimensions that cut across many facets of life and, at the end of the line, hinge on the question, “Why is there anything, and what am I supposed to do with and about it?”

Doubt

Two kinds of data tell us something about the degree to which youth feel doubt about their religious beliefs. The first kind comes from applying a straightforward method introduced in Chapter 4 on research methods: Ask people what their thoughts are about an issue. As one typical example of this kind of research in the United States, Gallup used representative sampling survey research procedures and found that the general trend was for degree of belief to decrease with education. For example, among college students there was typically a trend toward a less literal interpretation of their religious teachings and less acceptance of the functions of their religion, in the direction of more liberalism. Of those with a high school education or less, 46% believed the Bible is the literal word of God. That percentage went down to 22% in those with some college, and to 15% in college graduates. Only 16% of people with a postgraduate education believed the Bible is the actual word of God (Newport, 2007, 2011). Going in the opposite direction, the percent who believed that the Bible is comprised of ancient fables, history, and legends shows a reverse pattern: 25% of postgraduates and 19% of college graduates believed the Bible is a human creation. Among those with some college, only 19% believe the Bible is fables and legends; the number drops to 13% for high school graduates. Similar trends are found for Catholics (Benson, Yeager, Wood, Guerra, & Manno, 1986) and in youth across a similar age span in Finland (Tamminen, 1991). Overall in the United States, 3 in 10 say they take the Bible literally (Jones, 2011). (See Hood et al., 2009, for comprehensive review.)

Secret Doubt and Hidden Observers

In addition to doubts people will admit to in questionnaire and interview studies such as those above, people may have secret doubts they have never admitted to another person that, I think, reflect important but hidden

meanings to them. These are more difficult to study. But Canadian psychologist Bob Altemeyer (1988) demonstrated an excellent way to do so.

The students in his General Psychology class heard a lecture concerning the “Hidden Observer” phenomenon in hypnosis. The metaphorical “Hidden Observer” is a presumed unconscious part of the person’s mind that is aware of what is really happening during a hypnotic session, even though the hypnotized person appears to be unaware of it. For example, your arm may be in a bucket of ice water and should hurt very much, but your hypnotized self feels no conscious pain (due to hypnotic suggestion to feel no pain). However, the Hidden Observer is aware that it hurts and can admit it if asked. With this as a background, Altemeyer later gave these instructions to his students as part of an anonymous “Secret Survey”:

“You may recall the lecture on hypnosis dealing with Hilgard’s research on the ‘Hidden Observer.’ Suppose there is a Hidden Observer in you, which knows your every thought and deed, but which only speaks when it is safe to do so, and when directly spoken to. This question is for your Hidden Observer: Does this person (that is, you) have doubts that (s)he was created by an Almighty God who will judge each person and take some into heaven for eternity while casting others into hell forever?”

The students had to choose one of the following answers:

- ___ Yes, (s)he has secret doubts which (s)he has kept strictly to herself/himself that this is really true.
- ___ Yes, (s)he has such doubts, but others (such as parents and friends) know (s)he has these doubts.
- ___ No, (s)he totally believes this, and has no doubts whatsoever.
- ___ Yes, in fact (s)he openly says (s)he does not believe there is a God or an afterlife, but (s)he has some secret worries there might be.
- ___ Yes, in fact (s)he openly says (s)he does not believe there is a God or an afterlife, and (s)he has no doubts about this whatsoever.

Altemeyer presents data for 200 subjects, one half high and one half low in right-wing authoritarianism (RWA).² One fourth of all subjects (50) said that the Hidden Observer indicated “secret doubts which (s)he has kept strictly to herself/himself.” For the high RWAs, who are also more likely to firmly hold fundamentalist, conservative religious beliefs,³ the Hidden

²See Chapter 6 for more on the authoritarian personality.

³In most studies testing the relationship between RWA and religious fundamentalism (RF), the correlation between them is about .7. According to Hunsberger (1995), RF is a religious manifestation of RWA. See also Chapter 11.

Observer expressed secret doubts, ones never shared with another person, at a rate of approximately one third.⁴ I find this interesting.

There may be great value and variety in doubting. Hunsberger et al. (1993), for example, listed eight varieties of religious doubt, such as that based on shortcomings of organized religion or on an apparent clash between science and religion, and created clever ways to research them empirically. They were able to detect a positive correlation between self-reported religious doubt and greater complexity of thought about them. Not until one has probed deeper, raised the critical questions, examined the evidence, and thought the issues through to their logical limits is one prepared to make intelligent decisions for or against some belief system. It is only by facing the critical issues with honest doubt and questioning that one can move from a less informed religious mentality to a more informed orientation to whatever one eventually believes.

Alternatives

There are at least three responses people can make to doubts of the sort discussed above. First, they can undergo a religious conversion or other form of spiritual transformation, with the change in their meaning system implied by it. Changes of this sort are discussed in Chapter 7 on conversion. Second, they can adopt a stance of being “spiritual but not religious,” a topic touched upon in various chapters. Third, they can come to hold no religious beliefs and become agnostic or atheistic. These topics are addressed in Chapter 11 on religion, attitudes, and social behavior.

In any case, the processes of establishing an identity, questioning, and honestly dealing with doubts prompt many fundamental issues, which can haunt someone until he or she dies.

Kohlberg's Six Stages of Moral Judgment

Even so, how decisions about fundamental issues such as those noted above are approached is by no means constant throughout the lifespan. And the decisions one makes during the adolescent and young adulthood years, and the psychological bases for why they are made, can certainly affect one's subsequent sense of identity. These decisions often involve paradoxes and doubts, moral dilemmas, issues of who or what is authoritative, what agreements are binding, and what values should take priority over others. Such seems to be the stuff of which adolescence is made.

⁴In order to test whether this result was due to chance, I conducted a chi-square test of the probability of this many “secret doubters” occurring by chance in the high-RWA group. The probability of getting the obtained result by chance was statistically significant, $p < .05$; the conclusion is that “secret doubters” reflects a real phenomenon.

Kohlberg (1964, 1969) developed a model of the stages of the complexity of moral reasoning that helps us understand something of the hurdles of the adolescent period. His model is an extrapolation of Piagetian thinking and is composed of three overall stages with two substages of each. As with any strictly developmental view, Kohlberg's stages are presumed to be invariant in sequence and hierarchical, with each stage seen as something like a layer on top of the previous ones.

To appreciate the nature of Kohlberg's stages, you should confront the same problems he gave to his subjects. He used an interview method in which he gave his subjects real-life dilemmas, and then he asked a series of questions about them. Here is the most famous of the dilemmas, the story of Heinz and the drug.

In Europe, a woman was near death from a special kind of cancer. There was one drug that the doctors thought might save her. It was a form of radium that a druggist in the same town had recently discovered. The drug was expensive to make, but the druggist was charging ten times what the drug cost him to make. He paid \$200 for the radium and charged \$2000 for a small dose of the drug. The sick woman's husband, Heinz, went to everyone he knew to borrow the money, but could only get together about \$1000, which was half of what it cost. He told the druggist that his wife was dying and asked him to sell it cheaper or let him pay later. But the druggist said, "No, I discovered the drug and I'm going to make money from it." So Heinz got desperate and broke into the man's store to steal the drug for his wife. (Kohlberg, 1964)

In order to detect the level of moral reasoning on which a person should try to solve Heinz's problem, Kohlberg asked his subjects questions such as the following: Should Heinz have stolen the drug? Why or why not? Should he have stolen the drug if the sick person was not his wife? Suppose the sick person was not his wife but was someone who was a stranger. Should he then steal it? What if the sick person was an enemy? Should he steal the drug in order to save an enemy? Would a "good" person steal it or not steal it? Why? Would you steal it? Why or why not? (Kohlberg, 1964, 1969).

Look carefully at the genius behind Kohlberg's technique. He has created a moral dilemma that has obvious analogies to real life and into which we can easily project ourselves. More basic than that, he has pitted two ancient, universal, religious values against each other, values that go back at least to Moses: the value of property ("Thou shalt not steal"; Exodus 20:15) and the value of life ("Thou shalt not kill"; Exodus 20:13). Real-life dilemmas are like this; would you steal to save someone's life, or let the person die and not steal?

Kohlberg's system was supposed to be direction neutral with respect to the answer the subject gave. That is, a person's score on the scale of moral development should not be based on whether the person decided in

favor of or against stealing the drug, but instead on the complexity of the mental operations behind the decision—whichever direction it was in. He concluded that people's complexity of moral reasoning fell into the following stages.

Preconventional: Emphasis on External Control

- *Stage 1. Punishment and obedience orientation.* Right and wrong are decided on whether one obeys authority or gets punished for what one does. Heinz should or should not steal because a person in authority or God says so or because he would be punished by others or God for which-ever he did.

- *Stage 2. Instrumental relativist orientation.* Right and wrong are decided upon whether one gets a reward (by others, society, or God) for what one does. Heinz should steal the drug because he wants his wife to live; he should not steal because the druggist has a right to make a profit.

Conventional: Emphasis on Pleasing Others, Maintaining Standards

- *Stage 3. Interpersonal concordance or "good boy," "nice girl" orientation.* Right and wrong are based on what a "good" person would do under the circumstances; motives and intentions are taken into account in efforts to please others. Heinz should steal because that is what a good and loving husband would do; he should not steal because it is not his fault, it is the druggist who is being selfish and Heinz should not have to do anything illegal.

- *Stage 4. Social system maintenance; law and order orientation.* Right and wrong are based on maintaining the social system and living within reasonable, established rules; showing respect for higher authority and doing one's duty are important. Heinz should steal because it is his responsibility to do everything possible for his wife, with the intention of repaying the druggist. He should not steal because it is wrong to violate the established social principles.

Postconventional Moral Reasoning: Acknowledgement of Conflict and Internal Choice among Alternatives

- *Stage 5. Social contract orientation.* Right and wrong are based on agreed-upon social contracts; the implicit or explicit will of the majority is valued. Stealing the drug is justified in this case because our social contract with society was not designed to handle, or at least cannot adequately

handle, situations like this; this would not be normal criminal behavior. Alternatively, stealing should not be done even in this case because the ends don't justify the means.

- *Stage 6. Universal ethical principles orientation.* Right and wrong are based on internalized standards regardless of conformity or nonconformity with social mores. Stealing is right in order to save a life because life is ultimately valuable and property is not. Stealing, in this situation, is wrong because others may need the drug just as badly as Heinz's wife; all lives are equally valuable.

Critique of Kohlberg's Model

Two aspects of Kohlberg's model are problems, but not catastrophes. The first is that it has an implicit political bias in favor of Western democratic liberalism. It is not an accident that "higher" on his scale means "more developed." The implicit assumption is that more developed equals better, an obviously value-loaded notion that should be made explicit. To illustrate the opposite, if this were Nazi Germany, Kohlberg's Stage 1 would be labeled "more developed" and Stage 6 "least." The lessons are twofold: (1) keep research as free from bias as possible; (2) make explicit those values that must be inherent in our work.

The second problem, or correction, to Kohlberg's stages has to do with a subtle sex bias in their sequence and scoring. Gilligan (1982) discovered differences in how men and women think about morality. Men tend to think in terms of abstract principles such as justice, whereas women tend to think in terms of responsibility to particular people. To use only one of Gilligan's illustrations of this difference, consider two biblical stories. Abraham is willing to sacrifice his son Isaac in order to demonstrate conformity to the principle of absolute faith (Genesis 22:10). In contrast, the woman who came to Solomon confirmed her motherhood by relinquishing the truth that the child was hers, in order to save her child's life (I Kings 3:26). Gilligan, therefore, has offered helpful modifications to Kohlberg's approach.

The contributions of Piaget and Kohlberg to general psychology have been enormous, with important implications for philosophy, education, and religious studies. Piaget's model mostly concerned children. Kohlberg's lower stages paralleled Piaget's, but Kohlberg's model extended the general idea to include stages extending into adolescence and adulthood. Their models of moral development prompted other "lifespan" models designed to account for changes in religiousness and spirituality through adolescence and adulthood.

TWO LIFESPAN MODELS

Although most of this book is about religiousness and spirituality through the young and middle adult years, hidden in the cracks and between the lines are many variations of issues rooted in notions of faith and doubt. Fowler's model of generic faith development and Oser and Gmünder's model of religious decision making may be helpful aids in thinking some of this through. Your intellectual integration of the material in this book may be facilitated by relating material in subsequent chapters to these lifespan stage models.

Stages of Faith Development

Fowler (1981, 1986, 1991) created a model of faith development that attempts to cast a wide net and to account for all forms of faith, including nonreligious faith. His is an attempt to capture the essence of faith development in a generic sense, devoid of the meanings that it might have when said in the language of a particular religious tradition. He says that from the time we are born we must create a sense of order out of the chaos of the world, and in so doing we find or compose a system of meaning in which we live. In this context "faith is our way of discerning and committing ourselves to centers of value and power that exert ordering force in our lives. Faith . . . grasps the ultimate conditions of our existence, unifying them into a comprehensive image in light of which we shape our responses and initiatives, our actions (1981, pp. 24–25)." Faith is relational because the self is bound to others by mutual two-way loyalty and joint loyalty to a "center of superordinate value" (CSV). A CSV may be the principles of liberty at the heart of a free democracy, the vows one makes at marriage, or the principles of excellence in the professions. In religions, the "ultimate environment" of faith is provided by the supreme CSV under which all subordinate faith relationships exist. In Abrahamic faith terms this is God.

Note that whatever serves this faith function appears also to serve a religious function even without religious content or substance (Chapter 1), and, according to Fowler's model, the development of faith in terms that are not typically religious follows the same path as does identifiably religious faith development. This model combines cognitive–developmental roots with the neo-Freudian psychosocial model of Erikson (1963). According to Fowler, faith development proceeds in the following order.

Primal, Undifferentiated Faith

This is a prestage in which the lifelong impact of a basic trust and loyalty relationship with the caregiver is laid down. As a result of proper nurturing from ages 0–2 years, the foundations of hope and courage, although rudimentary, are established. If this stage is deficient, then the rudiments

of mistrust and lack of faith are laid down. The establishment of basic trust offsets the anxiety of separation during infancy.

Intuitive–Projective Faith

The onset of thought, language, and the ability to symbolize prompts the transition to the first real stage of faith. It rests upon the child's tendency toward imagination and the development of episodic thought patterns. Children's fantasies fill stories with meaning and enable the child to retain the moods, examples, and stories of adults. In this stage, the child is confronted with new material without a background of established, fixed experiences or images with which to deal with them. The child therefore develops his or her own preoperational logic and emotional attachments and fears. The child constructs rich ideas, yet there is the danger of too much exploitation of them based on fear, in order to enforce taboos or make children conform. This corresponds to the approximate ages of 3–7.

Mythic–Literal Faith

The development of the capacity for concrete operations enables the child to make more ordinary sense and meaning out of experience. Lessons and images are taken literally, and there is more coherence within the child's logicoemotive system. There is less reliance on intuition, and truth is based on external criteria. Moral rules are literal, and symbols are concrete in meaning. Age range: 7–11.

Synthetic–Conventional Faith

Here the sphere of one's life broadens greatly and facets include family, friends, society, media influences, and perhaps work and religion. Because such an array of factors demanding our attention and allegiance can cause confusion, we need a coherent orientation as an overall guide. Thus, "faith must synthesize values and information," and as a consequence must be the basis for who you are, your identity. One shows the beginnings of being able to take the other's point of view. This stage corresponds to adolescence and is conformist in the sense that one conforms to mutually held values and perspectives that are not yet independently assessed or chosen. Ideology formation occurs as one begins to combine values and beliefs. Age range: 12 and older; adults may remain at this stage.

Inductive–Reflective Faith

The movement to this stage, which might occur during late adolescence, involves the confrontation of unavoidable tensions, and how one negotiates

these determines movement to the next stage. The confrontations might be, for example, between being an individual versus being a member of a group, the tendency toward subjectivity versus the need for objectivity, believing in relativism versus the possibility that there is an absolute. An outgrowth of the struggle is that the self forms its own identity and adopts its own outlook or worldview, acknowledged as separate from those of others. This process involves critical reflection on self and outlook and results in the “demythologizing” of faith. Age of onset: late adolescence to 30s or 40s.

Conjunctive Faith

The transition to conjunctive faith occurs as one discovers polar tensions in the self and “paradox in the nature of truth.” Such tensions move one to find a way to unify the opposites both in one’s mind and experientially. In order to do this, the mind develops a “second naiveté,” which is an “epistemological humility.” Truths are no longer seen in an either/or fashion but as relative. It is not essential that one side be right and one wrong, even in religion. Instead one is free to experience truth in paradox and experience the blend of opposites, in personal, social class, ethnic, or religious ways. For Fowler, this stage requires dialectical thinking. Age of onset: before midlife if at all.

Universalizing Faith

Few people reach this stage. One may move toward it due to the discrepancy between what life is and what unity with the Ultimate leads one to make it. Such persons are said to experience a oneness with an “ultimate environment” and have a sense of the inclusiveness of “all being.” They see beyond human categories and believe that they live with a power that “unifies and transforms” the world. Drawing on this, they contribute to humanity by trying to transform the human community and may be punished for trying.

Fowler’s own content analyses of 359 semiclinical interviews showed that the relation between chronological age and stages of faith was roughly as expected up to early adulthood. For children ages 0–6, 88% were found to be in Stage 1, and 12% were transitioning between Stages 1 and 2. For the 7–12 age group, just over 72% were at Stage 2, just over 17% were transitioning between Stages 2 and 3, and approximately 10% were still at Stage 1. In the 13–20 age group, 50% were at Stage 3, and 28.6% were transitioning between Stages 3 and 4. For subjects ages 21–30, 40% were in Stage 4, 33.3% were at Stages 3–4, and smaller percentages were at surrounding stages.

At higher ages, the reliability of Fowler’s stages, as reflected in his data, is not clear. For those ages 31–40 there was a reversal, with 37.5%

“back” at Stage 3, and there was an increase in those transitioning between Stages 4 and 5 and at Stage 5. Subjects ages 41–50 had the largest percentage at Stage 4 (56.2%) and only 9.4% at Stage 3. Beyond that age, there continued to be a variable pattern of percentages with subjects’ responses ranging from Stages 2 to 5, with one exception: in the entire sample there was one subject scored at Stage 6, and this person was over 60.

An empirical assessment of Fowler’s system is difficult to make. One could criticize his model for being stated in extremely abstract, almost obtuse language. Alternatively, one could philosophize that those who reach Fowler’s highest stage are those who continue on a search for the highest level of meaning. Below are two responses to Fowler’s model.

Critiques and Developments

MORE THAN COGNITION

Various commentators have pointed out what may be limits and drawbacks in Fowler’s stage model (Levenson, Aldwyn, & D’Mello, 2005; Piedmont & Wilkins, 2013; Wink & Dillon, 2002). Actually, the same critiques apply to all the stage models. The most fundamental point is that the models are very heavily cognitive to the point of excluding emotions, beliefs and values, and either the practice of or behaviors presumed to be a consequence of religious stages. Religiousness and spirituality involve a lot more than cognition. There is no attention given to personality or other differences that might contribute to someone’s religious or spiritual path, or lack of it. But Wink and Dillon found that certain characteristics were predictors of increased spirituality in later life. These included being introspective, insightful, intellectually curious, religious, and unconventional during young and middle adulthood. Importantly, they found that for women, negative life events during midlife years predicted spirituality in later years.

FAITH STYLES

Important advances in our knowledge about the development of religiousness and spirituality comes from research that modified or countered strongly held classical views. One such advance was published by Streib (2001). He showed that development as assessed along his Faith Styles Scale, an intellectual descendent of Fowler’s stages of faith, followed roughly the same sequence but that the “stages” were not abrupt changes from one to the next, but overlapping ways of being religious; it was possible for someone to be religious in one way in one domain and in another way in another domain. It was also possible for someone to be in two “stages” at the same time. Streib’s modification of Fowler’s model adds flexibility to it

and suggests that the concepts of phases and styles may be more accurate than stages; it also enables more fine-tuned assessments.

Stages of Religious Judgment

Swiss psychologists Fritz Oser and Paul Gmünder (1991; Oser, 1991) offered a developmental model of religious judgment in which five stages are seen as invariant and hierarchical. By religious judgment they mean “reasoning that relates reality as experienced to something beyond reality and that serves to provide meaning and direction beyond learned content” (Oser, 1991, p. 6).

In Stage 1 people view God (the Ultimate Being) as active and the human being reactive. In Stage 2 people see God as external to themselves, capable of punishing and rewarding, and influenced by a person’s good behavior or prayer. People at stage 3 tend to push God out of the natural world. In this stage, people develop ego identity and gain distance from parental, educational, and even religious authority. At stage 4 God appears symbolically in nature, culture, and love. A person at this stage may see God in himself or herself and in others, and may realize much of life is not under his or her control, and thus surrender to the “will” of God. In stage 5 the person feels connected to God, with an unconditional acceptance and complete mediation of Being and the world.

Oser and Gmünder said that religious judgments can occur in any context but are “especially likely in times of crisis.” The rationale is that crises require responses and decisions, and these can easily become tests of one’s purported commitment to some higher principle, God, or Ultimate Being.

Consider the following crisis situation, called the Paul Dilemma. This is one of three such dilemmas that their subjects are presented with during an interview and must respond to.

Paul, a young physician, has recently passed his board exams. He has asked his girlfriend to marry him. Before the wedding he goes on a trip to England paid for by his parents as a reward for having successfully completed his education. Paul embarks on his journey. Shortly after take-off, the plane’s captain announces that one engine is malfunctioning and that the other one is working unreliably. The plane is losing altitude. Emergency procedures are initiated immediately: Oxygen masks and life preservers are being handed out. At first, the passengers are crying and yelling. Then, there is a deadly silence. The plane races toward the ground at a great speed. Paul’s entire life flashes past his eyes. He knows it’s all over. In this situation, he remembers God and begins to pray. He promises that, if he were somehow saved, he would invest his life in helping people in the Third World. He would also renounce the marriage to his girlfriend, should she refuse to accompany him. He promises to forgo a high income and social status. The plane crashes in a field—yet,

through a miracle, Paul survives! Upon his return home, he is offered an excellent position at a private clinic. Because of his qualifications, he has been selected from among ninety applicants. However, Paul recalls the promise he made to God. Now, he does not know what to do. (Oser & Gmünder, 1991, pp. 102–103)⁵

If we apply the concept of “story grammar” from cognitive psychology to an analysis of the Paul Dilemma we can see the following deep structure in the story line: (1) Paul’s happy life, (2) the crisis, (3) his reaction to the crisis, (4) his promise, (5) Paul’s survival, (6) the dilemma of whether to keep his promise, (7) the decision point. In order to measure the developmental level of their subject’s judgment in Paul’s situation, Oser and Gmünder ask them an extensive series of questions (1991, pp. 103–104). Some of them are:

Should Paul keep his promise? Why or why not?

Do you believe that one has duties to God at all?

What is your response to this statement: “It is God’s will that he should go to the Third World (i.e., that he keep his promise).”

What does this demand mean for Paul?

Are persons entitled to claim their personal freedom over against the claims of a religious community? Why or why not?

Let us assume . . . Paul does not keep his promise. . . . Shortly afterward, Paul gets into a serious car accident for which he is at fault. Does this accident have any connection to the fact that Paul did not keep his promise to God?

Religious judgments such as that asked of Paul are seen as requiring a balancing act in response to the tension between two (or more) competing values. Such tension involves disequilibrium and requires the person to solve the problem in order to arrive at a state of balance. According to Oser (1991) this tension exists along seven bipolar dimensions that are part of the essence of producing a religious judgment. These are (1) the feeling of either freedom *versus* dependence on God or the Ultimate Being, (2) thinking that God’s interaction with the world is either transcendent *versus* immanent, that God either does things on earth directly or does not, (3) the feeling of hope *versus* absurdity, (4) the functional transparency *versus* opacity of God’s will, that God either gives people a clear “sign” or God’s will is a mystery, (5) the feeling of either faith *versus* fear in the situation, (6) focusing on only the holy *versus* the profane aspects of the issue or circumstance, and (7) seeing things as involving only the eternal *versus* the ephemeral. According to Oser, these tensions are intimately involved in

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situations like the Paul Dilemma. Such dilemmas can be seen through the lens of any combination of the seven polar opposites.

Through analysis of the subjects' responses to the dilemmas, Oser and Gmünder realized that at the lower stages of religious judgment, one thought in terms of only one or the other of each polar dimension, for example, one had either faith or fear but not both, or saw values in decisions as either eternal or temporal but not both. At the higher stages, however, there was a tendency to think in terms of both ends of the spectrum at the same time. Paul's situation was both hopeful and absurd, Paul should have both faith and fear, God is both immanent in the situation and transcendent from it. For Oser and Gmünder, it is how a person coordinates these polar opposites that constitutes the deep structure of his or her religious judgments. And it is the development of this deep structure through the process of differentiation and integration and transition from one plateau to the next that is described by the stages of religious judgment.

Do these stages appear across the age span in the way that Oser and Gmünder suppose? Figure 5.2 describes the percent of responses from 112 Swiss subjects, male and female, ages 8–9 to 20–25, who are in Stages 1–4. The dramatic decrease in Stage 2 judgments and a corresponding increase in Stage 3 judgments across the age span is apparent. Stage 4 judgments do not appear to an appreciable degree until the late teen and young adult years.

The correspondence between their ideas about the stages and the data showing how subjects' judgments change across the age span suggested to Oser and Gmünder that they were on the right track, at least up to young adulthood. Their theory is concerned with only a cognitive task, however—that of making religious judgments.⁶ But religion involves more than the cognitive dimension and not all faith is religious faith, as reflected in Fowler's model and the critiques of it.

SENIORHOOD RESEARCH SNAPSHOTS

Most of the rest of this book addresses issues and phenomena of religiousness and spirituality in people across the age spectrum. Thus there is little use in repeating that material here. I instead highlight two special topics: the relationship between work and spirituality for most of the adult population, and what old people see, religiously and otherwise, when they know

⁶The original Oser–Gmünder research put the emphasis on the “rational” aspects of the decision-making process and seems to minimize the influence of affect on reasoning. This emphasis has been softened by an independent line of research on “moral intuitionism,” which suggests that judgments are made by feeling as well as thinking. See the research by Haidt cited in the References to follow this up.

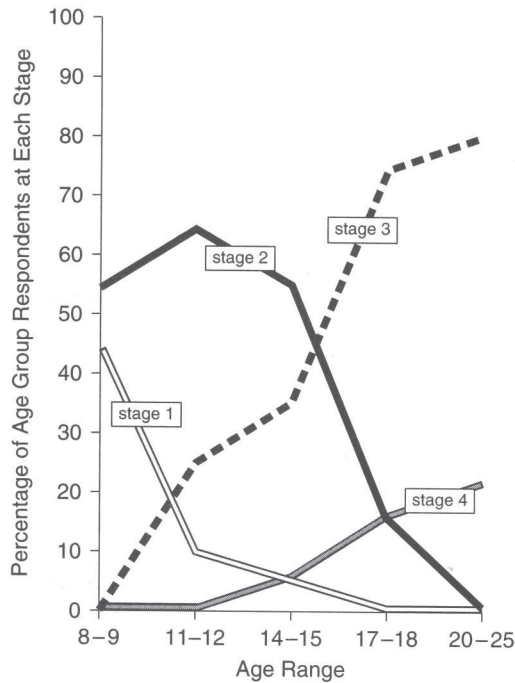


FIGURE 5.2. Changes in stages of religious judgment across the age span. From Oser (1991, p. 14). Reprinted with permission from Religious Education Press.

death is imminent. My comments are brief, but the literature cited has a lot more if you wish to dig.

Work and Spirituality

As one's years of life mount up, a person likely notices that he or she has spent a lot of time at work and may begin to wonder whether it was worth all the effort. Because of this, research on workplace spirituality has become established. Its purpose is to assess the degree to which one's work satisfies one's values and commitments and provides a sense of meaning, and to generate knowledge that will facilitate the creation of workplace environments in which people's values find expression (Benefiel et al., 2014; Hill & Dik, 2012). In the ideal case, one's job would not be "just a job" but would be a "calling" or "vocation" that the individual has chosen because it fulfills the person's higher values. Thus the possibility of benefits to the employee and employer are most likely when their values and goals, or individual spirituality and organizational spirituality, are congruent (Hill,

Jurkiewicz, Giacalone, & Fry, 2013). An example of this might be, for example, the case of a young college student who came to value thinking and learning very highly and eventually became a college and university professor, thereby being employed in the very kind of institutional setting whose values maximally match his or her own.

Looking Back and Ahead

Just because, by the time of adulthood, someone may have settled into a form of religiousness or nonreligiousness with which he or she is comfortable does not mean that this aspect of the person's life is settled once and for all, static (or ecstatic) ever after. To the contrary, the meaning of one's beliefs and practices may change in several ways (see McFadden, 2005, 2013, and Hood et al., 2009, for reviews).

Most poignant to me is that the older a person gets, the more his or her perception of life and its possibilities changes from a future-oriented vision to a past-oriented observation. A young person looks forward to a future life; there is not much to look back at. In contrast, an old person looks forward unavoidably to narrowing time and impending death. The only large space of life that is available to look at is that which has already happened and to ponder whether one's life was good or bad, well spent or wasted, and worth it. Maybe this circumstance is sad, to be taken as a kind of degradation. On the other hand, it has been argued that decrements in functioning that occur when a person becomes old and faces dying actually create the opportunity for spiritual *ascent* (Bianchi, 1982; McFadden, 2015; McFadden & McFadden, 2011) (see Figure 5.2 once again). It makes sense that people's way of dealing with religious or spiritual issues would be involved with how they deal with old-age issues such as the above.

TAKE-HOME MESSAGES

- The development of religiousness and spirituality in the context of meaning systems unfolds in ways consistent with known models of general developmental processes. Attitudes and beliefs, values and goals, larger purposes, identities, worldviews, and ultimate concerns may take new forms and mean new things across the lifespan depending upon which developmental processes are prominent at the time.
- The history of theory on child religiousness and spirituality is anchored heavily in a general cognitive–developmental model, which puts the emphasis on an invariant sequence of stages through which the child must go, each stage being manifest in more complex reasoning than those that came before.

- Social learning principles and attachment theory have offered additional principles to the general socialization model of childhood religiousness and spirituality.
- An interdependence view identifies the interaction of cultural and family with the child as an active agent in the process of transactions through which the child makes his or her own meanings.
- Adolescents and young adults grapple with paradoxes, doubts, and identity formation.
- Three six-stage developmental models have been offered to capture the nature of various religious and spiritual manifestations across the age span. These include stages of the complexity of moral reasoning, generic faith development, and religious judgments.
- Working adults can hope for a life in which their own values and those of their employer are a match. As people become very old, they may reflect back on their work and personal life and assess whether it was worth it, and may look ahead to dying in light of their own beliefs and values.

FURTHER READING

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CHAPTER 6

Looking for Religion in the Individual

The Whole Person

Religiousness and Spirituality in Classic Personality Theories

Is Religiousness Related to Traits and Dispositions?

Midlevel Functions

Global Constructs and Processes

Take-Home Messages

Further Reading

Are the roots of religion or spirituality to be found inside the individual, and if so, where? If a human being has developed in a full and integrated way, then the adult ought to manifest some coherence in traits, attitudes and values, goals, ability to perform behaviors to achieve them, and overall sense of self and identity. A person lucky enough to have been given a clear developmental path ought to function as a whole, integrated person, not as a set of dissociated, separate parts. An internally consistent, well-regulated meaning system is key to this; it may even constitute it and have a major role in how one's religiousness, spirituality, or parts of or lack of them are manifest in the person's life. We are thus compelled to ask whether certain parts of a person or certain dimensions of an individual's makeup have anything to do with religiousness or spirituality, or whether they require "the whole person" to be engaged.

THE WHOLE PERSON

The study of what constitutes a person comes in variations that range from holistic to particularistic in what they include and how much they intend

to explain. Some psychologists have promoted what I call a “grand theory” of human nature, which in the ideal case would explain all of human behavior including all forms of religion and irreligion. This ideal has never been accomplished, but there have been several attempts. Other psychologists conceptualize people as made up of a set of core traits or temperaments (e.g., high or low extraversion, high or low neuroticism), so that an individual is made up of a combination of a high-to-low degree of each dimension. In this chapter we explore what these and other approaches mean with respect to understanding religiousness and spirituality psychologically.

The guiding question is “What do we find when we look inside the individual (instead of at neurons and cognitive schemata, child development, culture, strange mental events, or social factors and groups—topics in other chapters) for the roots of religiousness?” This examination automatically includes research from the psychology of personality. However, it is not limited to that and that is not its purpose. This is because some dimensions of human makeup are not typically construed as dimensions of “personality” (e. g., intelligence, absorption, hypnotizability), but nevertheless questions about their relationships with religiousness and spirituality have been researched and are of interest to us. We need to examine them when we look inside individuals for possible roots of religiousness.

After characterizing what psychologists mean by “the whole person” we will be ready to

1. Learn what the major prototypes of classical grand theories say about the psychological bases of religion.
2. Examine research on the relationships between forms of religiousness and various dimensions of human makeup.
3. Examine research on so-called “midlevel functions” through which one or more manifestation of one’s religiousness or spirituality may be expressed.
4. Place the above under the umbrella of whatever self-processes or ultimate concerns one might hold.

The Four Processes of Religiousness

An excellent rubric for conceptualizing reflections of “the whole person” in context of a person’s religiousness was introduced by Saroglou (2011, 2014b). In grappling with how to convey the meaning(s) of religiousness, he explained that a person who is religious in the most complete sense is involved in the processes of *believing*, *bonding*, *behaving*, and *belonging*. All four of these processes have cultural variations. But in combination they cover the range of human functions from mental (believing involves cognitions), affective (bonding involves emotions and attachments), active

(behaving involves practices and consequences), and social (belonging involves group participation). Further, in addition to these four processes constituting a useful way to conceptualize religiousness, they also are useful for clarifying key differences between religiousness, other aspects of individuals, and the interrelationships between them (Ashton & Lee, 2014).

The Psychology of the Whole Person

McAdams (2009) contributed greatly to conceptualizing the whole person. He proposed that a person is comprised of three levels of functionally interdependent processes. The levels are core traits, midlevel functions such as goal orientation and strivings, and identity and worldview.

Traits

Traits are sometimes called temperaments or dispositions. They are basic dimensions of a person's makeup—the roots, or core tendencies, that manifest themselves in the continuity of someone's behavior across time and situation. To illustrate, if we say that Ann has an agreeable personality, we mean that she tends to behave in an agreeable way at work, home, and school, when singing in the choir, at casual social activities—today, yesterday, last year, next year. It is the consistency of Ann's behavior pattern that results in others saying that she “is agreeable,” that is, that Ann has an agreeable personality. If instead she behaved like an introvert today and an extrovert tomorrow, or conscientiously last month and unreliably next month, we would be less likely to label her pattern of behavior with only one term. It is the continuity of people's behavior over time and across situations that leads us to make attributions about their personal character with research-based trait words such as *openness*, *conscientious*, *extroverted*, *agreeable*, and *neurotic*, and with colloquial words such as *smart*, *dumb*, *nice*, *mean*, *religious*, and *spiritual*.

There is, however, a difficulty with relying too much on the notion of traits when trying to account for someone's religiousness. Recall Saroglou's four-part characterization of religion mentioned above. Although all humans engage in processes of believing many things, by no means do all of them engage in the process of believing something religious or spiritual. In its fundamental sense, believing is a basic human function; believing an explicitly religious idea, however, is not. The same argument applies to bonding, behaving, and belonging. Thus, it seems like an error to think of religiousness or a tendency to gravitate toward religion in general or a particular religion as a core human trait. The meanings ascribed to religions are so culturally varied that one is hard pressed to arrive at this conclusion (Saroglou, 2011, 2014b).

Midlevel Functions

Humans do more than express their traits. They also construct near-term goals, long-term purposes, ideas toward which they strive, values that they will or won't compromise, expectations about amounts of money they think their labor or knowledge is worth, and so forth—all of which reflect meaning system operations. Thus someone who is caring for a sick child is not primarily expressing a trait; he or she is performing behavior in service of the larger purpose of seeing that the child is healthy. Goals one strives toward can be short term and specific ("I want to finish the marathon I will be running in today") or long term and abstract ("I want to do as my Higher Power guides me at all times") (see Emmons, 1999, for elaboration). Either way, midlevel functions constitute much of where the rubber meets the road, so to speak, in religiousness. Many religious or spiritual activities can be thought of as ways to serve or strive for long-term higher purposes by means of a succession of short-term goals.¹

Self-Identity and Worldview

The most global facets of a person's makeup, the overarching umbrellas underneath which the other functions operate, are one's self-identity and worldview. Although technically distinct, self-identity and worldview are combined here because they are closely linked psychologically. One's self-identity draws guidance, sustenance, and direction from one's worldview, while the continuity of one's worldview depends on a relatively stable self-identity as one interacts with the world. Self-identity is part of how one defines oneself; worldview is an overarching source of importance for that definition. It is not that worldview is the only or most important factor in self-identity. It is that the two are so interdependent that, although they serve different functions and are not identical, they work in collaboration to enable someone to define what he or she is about.

The notion of worldview is easy to think of in this way. For example, if you hold a Buddhist worldview, you will presumably strive for a state of nonself, not cling to things or status, and practice daily meditation. Alternatively, if atheism constitutes your worldview, you she may be relatively tolerant or intolerant of religions while not participating in them, more likely to enact helping behaviors in secular than religious ways, and give more donations to secular charities than to a church, temple, or mosque.

The notions of *self* and *identity* occupy an extremely important place not only in psychological science but in popular culture generally. They address the question "Who am I?"; they define someone in an individual

¹An interesting self-examination exercise may be for you to make a list of your activities and see which items fit this idea and which do not.

sense. In some contexts, the word *self* is almost synonymous with the word *individual*. For example, if someone commits a crime and is identified, it is the individual who is brought to trial, not the situation or the context. We assume a self exists, is independent, and can decide to do right or wrong and therefore be properly judged innocent or guilty. Much of global society and some major religions are built upon the assumption that independent selves exist.

Self as a Construct

Psychologically speaking, the notion of self is constructed, not detected. It is a meaning made and undergoes constant appraisal and remaking. The self you are today, including your “religious self” or identity, is not and cannot be exactly identical to the self you were yesterday, if for no other reason than because something happened in your life between then and now. As a consequence, one’s self is not static but fluctuates over time. (See Sani, 2008, for further information on self-continuity). It is also interdependent with one’s surrounding world. As a child grows, it gradually discovers its sense of separateness and eventually identifies itself as its own entity. Thus, one of the first things a human meaning system does is begin to construct a representation of one’s self. This is called the process of individuation.

In general, a self can be thought of as being made up of individual, relational, and social facets. One’s religiousness or spirituality is intimately infused with the workings, needs, and expressions of all three. For example, the individual self is the most motivationally potent; it has been called the “home base” of selfhood (Sedikides & Gebauer, 2014). It is what “owns” believing, is saved or damned, or has the qualities of saintliness or devilishness attributed to it. It is the thing that needs esteem (offered by a religion upon confessing the “right” faith), a sense of control (gained by believing that prayer works to enhance the positive and diminish the negative), reduced uncertainty (attained by believing that the deity has a plan), and meaning (evident in the idea that this life ultimately matters).

The relational aspect of self is that which engages with others, talks and listens, commits and disengages, and leads and follows. Religions can smooth rough edges off such transactions because the participants begin with fundamental things in common. For example, they may hold a mutual understanding that they are “on the same page,” that they believe in and are committed to the same religion. Such mutual commitments in turn reflect the collective aspect of self. As pointed out earlier, a religion is, among other things, a culture to which individuals can belong and adhere, and that in return provides a group that meets a person’s social needs so that one can feel a sense of belonging and safety (Johnson & Cohen, 2014).

Disposition–Situation Interdependence

The picture of an individual sketched above makes it sound as if a person’s religiousness or lack of it is due to his or her disposition. But a long-standing conclusion in psychology is that most of what we do is not a function of our dispositions only; it is just as much a function of social processes. For example, most acts of religious worship are performed in groups (some called congregations, some factions, sects, or cults), where the coaction of many people facilitates the performance of a prescribed behavior—such as praying, singing, or chanting. Participants feel part of the whole in performance of a collective ritual. Similarly, although religious individuals often feel motivated to help those in need, they are more likely to channel their helping behavior through a vehicle or activity organized by their religious group, church, or denomination and have a lower probability of helping on their own or helping those with whom they have no familiarity (Saroglou, 2013). These examples illustrate that seldom is religion or spirituality solely an expression of a person’s dispositions or of social psychological processes. Instead, the situation and disposition interact; each is interdependent with the other.

RELIGIOUSNESS AND SPIRITUALITY IN CLASSIC PERSONALITY THEORIES

Conceptualizing personality as made up of three levels provides us with the notion that a “whole person” is a fully developed entity with layers that serve hierarchical functions. This is consistent with the multilevel interdisciplinary paradigm (MIP), where in this case *multilevel* is understood as within the subspecializations of both the psychology of personality and the psychology of religion. In addition, this idea is related to various features of each theory of personality.

In *Religion in Personality Theory*, Frederick Walborn (2014) summarizes 14 theories and how religion is addressed in each one. They fall naturally into three main categories: five of them are psychodynamic, three are behavioristic, and three are humanistic. A fourth, “other” category includes three theories that do not fit neatly into these categories. These are attachment (discussed in Chapter 3), intrinsic–extrinsic (I-E) religious orientation (discussed later in this chapter), and a strict trait view (detailed later in this chapter).

All the theories rest upon basic assumptions about the core of human nature. For Freud’s psychoanalysis it is the pleasure principle,² for theories

²Freud revised his theory many times. The pleasure principle was uniquely prominent in his early theoretical formulations and remained central to his ideas. During subsequent years he added the death instinct and made other modifications.

rooted in existential/humanistic assumptions it is the need to strive for or feel connected with something beyond oneself, and for the theories rooted in behaviorism it seems that the core of human personality is basically an empty space with no fundamental motive other than to survive. In no case does a theory posit religion to be at its core. But religion takes on a positive cast for some theories and a negative one for others. Each theorist also paints a picture of how a human personality might be structured, what its parts are, and what kinds of dynamic processes regulate the interactions among the parts and with religion. The distinctive features of Walborn's three main categories are presented briefly below, along with references to earlier chapters of this book where these types of theories (and the three "others") were discussed.

Psychodynamic

The theories in the psychodynamic group share two things in common. First, all of them have their intellectual roots in the psychoanalytic theory of Freud. Second, although the notion of what the unconscious mind is like varies among them, all of them assume that there is such a thing as an unconscious mind and that human religiousness exists in order to accommodate it.

As noted in Chapter 3, Freud is among the most influential thinkers in the modern history of the Western world. Freud's theory of the unconscious mind introduced in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900/1955) is at the root of many popular notions—that humans have an *ego*, that a young man who is looking for a wife is unconsciously looking for a mother substitute, that a verbal mistake or "slip of the tongue" is actually an expression of the contents of one's unconscious, that an artist painting on canvas is projecting his or her unconscious mental content onto it, or that long narrow objects in movies are put there as phallic symbols so that viewers will unconsciously be sexually aroused by the film and thus like it better.

The premise is simple and far reaching: We think we know why we do what we do, but we do not really know because the real motivations are hidden beneath the surface, out of conscious awareness. Thus on the surface, it looks like a young woman is in love with a man, but unconsciously she is actually searching for a father substitute. Carried to the area of religion, this means that on the surface one may believe in an absolute loving God, while unconsciously one holds that belief because as a child it was the father who was the source of safety and protection from an otherwise hostile and scary world. One accepts the idea of a powerful and loving God who provides absolute safety and security. Key to the theory is that the religious believer is not aware of the unconscious "true" motivations for believing. They are powerful and sustained, however, because they protect against the dread and anxiety of admitting unconscious fears of harm and

nothingness into the conscious mind. Therefore, their satisfaction via religion is understood as wish fulfillment, but a wish that the person does not know he or she has.

Religious believing is therefore not rational; it is instead based on irrational fears that humans would hopefully someday outgrow. For Freud, religion is an illusion. However, in psychodynamic psychology an illusion does not necessarily equal a falsity. Rather, saying that something is an illusion means that one's image of it is constructed by the operations of one's unconscious mind as a way of satisfying needs and desires. This process does not address issues about ontological truth claims. Because of this, it is possible that one's God image might be an illusion in this technical sense and at the same time a supreme being may exist in ontological reality, just as it is possible that one's God image might be an illusion with no God existing in ontological reality. As explained in Chapter 4, scientific explanations and religious truth claims are orthogonal to each other.

Three of the main variations of the psychodynamic approach were written by Jung (1933, 1938), Adler (1954), and Rizzuto (1979). Although they rest upon the same fundamental premise of the existence of the unconscious mind, they differ on what it is like. For Adler, the primary unconscious drive is for power, not pleasure, even in symbolic sexual form as in the case of Freud. Thus it was Adler who gave us the term *inferiority complex*, since the experience of lacking power would lead to feelings of being inferior. For people suffering from such a complex, accepting or identifying with an all-powerful God relieves the sense of inferiority as well as gives access to great power. For Jung, the nature of the unconscious changes from the individual unconscious of Freud to a collective unconscious, one that exists across the minds of all of humanity. All people's unconscious contains universal thought forms, called archetypes, which are primitive symbolic representations that serve some psychic function. In Jung's theory, God is an archetype. Thus, the theory goes, the mind is constituted by nature to strive to search for and find that which fits the God archetype. Rizzuto's variation, called object relations theory, places the emphasis on the mental representation of God and how a person interacts with that representation as it changes across the lifespan in accord with the person's needs. According to this view, a person's relation with the object, or God representation, can be different at different times because the person's needs change and the representation of the object changes in ways that meet them.

Behaviorist

The approach of behaviorism to the psychology of religion is little more than an application of the principles of conditioning and modeling to religious behavior. We discussed such principles in Chapter 5 with regard to learning

and the development of child religiousness. One important addition to that discussion is useful here in order to illustrate the approach. In classic illustrations of the power of reinforcement to control behavior, Skinner (1953) conditioned superstitious behavior in a pigeon via operant conditioning. He delivered a positive reinforcer (food grain) noncontingently into the food cup of the pigeon's cage. No matter what the pigeon was doing, food would drop into its food cup automatically every 60 seconds. At first the pigeon would behave haphazardly but would nevertheless eat the food. After a few trials, however, it would begin to perform some routinized behavior as the 1-minute time period drew to a close—at which moment it would receive food reinforcement. In one famous demonstration, the stereotyped, routinized behavior that was conditioned happened to be a motion to face the food cup and repeatedly move its head in an up-and-down motion—a behavior that would, in human terms, resemble bowing and praying. In only a few trials the pigeon “connected the dots,” so to speak, and learned that facing the cup and bowing “made” food fall into the cup. Once the behavior pattern was conditioned, the animal would repeat it even though the appearance of food did not depend on the pigeon's behavior. Bowing came to mean that food would appear. For Skinner, religious rituals such as rain dances, invoking God for cures, voluntary or mandatory prayers by individuals or groups, rites performed by priests and imams, and so forth, develop in ways illustrated by the conditioning of superstitious behavior.

Humanistic

The existential/humanistic view of human functioning in religion is less focused on the presumed irrationalities of an unconscious mind and more concerned with a person's striving to sustain meaning amidst a seemingly meaningless world, a reaching beyond one's self. For Maslow (1964, 1970) this tendency is evident when a person is free to strive for “self-actualization” by doing things that help one's “genuine self” emerge and unfold as does a blooming flower. For Frankl (1963, 1975) it is in the search for meaning—an idea elaborated in Chapter 3 in context of psychology of religion theory. It may help to reread that section.

These prototypical approaches differ in their delineation of what constitutes the good life. In the psychodynamic view, it involves digging down into the unconscious in order to control, regulate, and satisfy whatever its needs may be, whereas in the existential view it is more a matter of forgetting about yourself and striving for whatever is beyond you. In the behaviorist view, the individual is less significant as a genesis for religiousness than the environmental factors acting upon the person's behavior to shape it in accord with reinforcement contingencies. Each approach appears to speak straightforwardly to the role of religion in life and its relations to the expression of traits, operation and selection of goals and strivings, and concept of self, identity, and what one is fundamentally about. But the

approaches are looking for the psychological roots of religiousness in different places, and none of them captures the whole concept of “religion.” As with the theories summarized in Chapter 3, these approaches are trying to get at different things. Other approaches examine more specific attributes of people to find out how well they relate to religiousness.

IS RELIGIOUSNESS RELATED TO TRAITS AND DISPOSITIONS?

Several approaches have been attempted to measure how high or low someone is on an attribute and to see how well that predicts religiousness of one kind or another. The approaches include those that emphasize a profile of trait dimensions as a possible combination of predictor variables, those that focus on one desirable quality such as intelligence, in which people may differ, those that assume a human need for authority, and those that hypothesize that some variation in human mental flexibility would be a good predictor of religiousness or certain aspects of it. Let us examine each in turn.

The Big Five or Six

How Many Traits Are There?

The most popular approach to profiling trait dimensions of human makeup is the five-factor model (Costa & McRae, 1992; Digman, 1990). In this model a large amount of data based upon self-report and other report assessments of people’s personalities led to a summary picture of people made up of a blend of five trait dimensions. A person may be high, medium, or low in any combination of them. The dimensions (known as the Big Five) are openness to experience (O), conscientiousness (C), extraversion (E), agreeableness (A), and neuroticism (N). They are collectively called the OCEAN model. What aspects of religiousness and spirituality might be predictable from measures of O, C, E, A, and N?

Two kinds of research answers extend from this model. The first has been the straightforward measurement of the dimensions to see how well they correlate with various aspects of religion. For example, higher scores on A or C tend to be associated with involvement in religious activities such as prayer (Saroglou, 2002, 2010). Taking a long-term developmental perspective, some findings show that scores on A, C, and O predict religiousness and spiritual seeking later in life (Wink, Ciciolla, Dillon, & Tracy, 2007), a finding that deserves further exploration as to why and for whom.

A second line of research (Piedmont, 2012; Piedmont & Wilkins, 2013) concluded that when all five factors were taken into account, there remained some unanswered questions. It seemed that some variability in

outcome measurements remained unaccounted for; thus, perhaps a sixth dimension should be added to the five. Spirituality was proposed as this needed new dimension. It was best seen as a motive, whereas religiousness was its primary sentiment (Piedmont & Wilkins, 2013, p. 300). Measuring this sixth dimension was said to account for an aspect of personality missing in the Big Five and thus gave “added value” to our knowledge of personality traits, especially in accounting for religiousness and spirituality. Some evidence has been obtained that suggests possible cross-cultural stability of this added dimension. For example, following the initial research with a Christianized population in the United States, a similar trend was found in the Christian population in the Philippines (Piedmont, 2007). These research developments raise an obvious question with two sides to it: Should we consider five trait dimensions or six, and how are traits and universal motives related?

Traits as Motivations?

What ought we to make of the suggestion that the phenomena of spirituality or religion are driven by personality traits? In the narrow band of psychological theory and measurement associated with trait psychology, one might be tempted to conclude that spirituality motivation looks like a sixth dimension that accounts for religiousness. However, there are problems with this notion.

The proposal that spirituality is a sixth dimension of personality includes explicit affirmation that spirituality is a universal human motivation with religiousness as its primary sentiment. But this leads to theoretical difficulty: On a personality dimension, someone can in principle score anywhere from having “none” to “a great deal.” However, all people must have a universal human motive. But if someone scores “none” on spirituality, then we cannot attribute it to him or her—thus it would not be a human universal. The implication is that spirituality cannot be both a personality dimension and a universal human motive.

Positing that spirituality is a fundamental human motive brings to the surface a basic evolutionary question, “If spirituality and religion are a fundamental human motivation, then what is that motivation for?” (Kirkpatrick, 2013). It can’t be because feeling such a motive constitutes an interesting state of mind. After all, why would evolution have selected a mental state for reasons of survival or continuity of a species? It can’t be because the process of believing religious or spiritual teachings was genetically selected, since not all human beings are so engaged and those who are not, although a minority, are surviving and continuing on just fine. The conclusion has to be that spirituality and religiousness do not constitute a fundamental human motivation.

In fact, “motive” is probably not the best concept because it can too easily be taken to refer to something conscious. Rather, it is the *process* of

making meaning out of ambiguity, in all its variations and across levels of analysis, that is a primary human *function*. Various manifestations of it are what we call religiousness and spirituality. Thus, psychologically speaking, religiousness and spirituality are not due to their own fundamental motivational process. They are one manifestation of basic functions rooted in the processes that facilitated survival (see the Prelude to Part II).

Intelligence and Achievement

There are three questions that can guide the investigation of the relationship between religiousness and variables such as intelligence and achievement: (1) whether degree of religiousness differs according to IQ, (2) whether scientific achievement, probably as an assumed proxy for high intelligence, is related to being religious, and (3) whether there are differences among professional groups in strength and type of religious belief and practice.

There is a general inverse relationship between IQ and being religious, i.e., the overall trend is for higher IQ scores to be associated with lower indices of religiousness. This trend is slight, however, and has been relatively stable for about a century, since shortly after IQ tests were invented. A review of recent research reports the same general pattern. IQ tends to show a weak inverse association with variables such as fundamentalism, religion based primarily on tradition, and private religious practice (Ashton & Lee, 2014). Consistent with this trend, Nyborg (2009), in a large U.S. sample, found that the difference in IQ between atheists and believers was statistically significant but with a small and negligible effect (5 points), with the atheists scoring higher.

An analogous pattern is apparent in the relation between religiousness and achievement in scientific fields. Studies in the United States showed that 45% of scientists generally and 72% of those in the National Academy of Sciences were nonbelievers (Larson & Witham, 1997, 1998). There was a clear difference between the religious profiles of American scientists and those of the general population; scientists as a group were about 10 times more likely to be nonbelievers. Clearly, greater academic achievement, as evidenced by being a scientist, is associated with a lower probability of being religious. Again, this trend seems relatively stable. Studies from a past generation reported that more eminent scientists believed in God less often and were more skeptical about religious issues (Clark, 1955; Leuba, 1934).

An interpretive caution is in order. It is too easy to think that because about half of scientists do not claim religious belief or affiliation, they automatically have no interest in religious questions or are even hostile to religions. Instead, it may be that scientists' energy is so absorbed in their work that they simply have little time to cultivate religious interests. It could also be that these scientists might be deeply concerned about religious questions but do not identify with religious organizations or doctrines, and so are less inclined to speak publicly or with certainty about religious matters.

Their scientific questioning may foster a mode of thinking and questioning that precludes a fundamentalist-style religious thinking or identity. With respect to this latter distinction, some data have been collected that look at the religious proclivities of psychologists. In one survey of over 1,300 clinical psychologists, 42% claimed no religious affiliation (Henry, Sims, & Spray, 1971). In another, psychologists as a group were found to be the least religious of all groups in the academic community (Ragan, Malony, & Beit-Hallahmi, 1980).

Can these differences among professional groups be explained as a result of time pressures peculiar to academicians and scientists? Probably not. Many types of employment occupy much of people's time. Other explanations may be more plausible. A good possibility is that some psychologists in particular may be less religious due to selfselection for unconventional-ity. Psychology is an unconventional field among the academic disciplines, whose goal is to understand and explain human behavior, including religiousness and spirituality, in scientific terms. Those who choose this field may by their own constitution gravitate toward novel, untried points of view (Argyle & Beit-Hallahmi, 1975). Finally, the interdependence of myriad factors in constituting a meaning system, religious or not, is sufficiently complex to preclude any strong single-variable relationship. Both religiousness and intelligence can be understood only in connection with numerous other factors—some of which we take up in the rest of this chapter and those to come.

Authoritarianism

An appealing idea to some investigators has been that people who gravitate toward a religion also tend to be rigid but submissive to authority. The reasoning is that the cluster of traits and needs that makes someone amenable to religious answers and attracted to religious institutions also makes up the characteristics of authoritarianism. Research on whether this reasoning is accurate has gone through three periods. The first period began in the wake of World War II with the publication of *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950) and used the authoritarianism measure (F Scale [*F* for *fascism*]) of the 1950s. The high authoritarian was conceptualized within a psychoanalytic framework. The second period, overlapping and extending the first, replaced the concept of authoritarianism with the concept of dogmatism (Rokeach, 1960). The third period involved a revitalization of the concept of authoritarianism, now seeing it as a consequence of social learning processes and using Altemeyer's (1988, 1996, 2006) psychometrically superior right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) scale.

A person high in authoritarianism is characterized as rigid, inflexible, strict, and conservative. Authoritarians have a clear and firm sense of morality. Acts are either right or wrong, with few shades of gray in

between. They have difficulty tolerating ambiguity and feel uncomfortable in the absence of clear perceptions of stimuli and clear answers to questions. When it comes to ambiguous and difficult questions about life, high authoritarians want simple and clear answers to these also. Because such answers may be provided by a religion (at least one of a relatively rigid form), the hypothesis follows that religiousness and authoritarianism must be associated. Authoritarians also prefer a direct line of authority as a guide for regulating behavior. The hypothesis follows, therefore, that authoritarians would feel secure with the authority structure of many religious institutions. These adult traits would have been laid down during a childhood characterized by discipline and punishment provided by authoritarian parents. The outcome is, theoretically, an adult with relatively high needs for authority, discipline, certainty, and security, which are satisfied through a religion that most likely takes a strict form.

Is some form of religiousness related to being a high authoritarian? Yes and no. Generally, research from the first period using the F Scale to measure authoritarianism initially seemed to show that greater orthodoxy of religious beliefs was associated with greater authoritarianism, which was associated with anti-Semitism (Adorno et al., 1950). But as the 1950s wore on, contrary findings were reported and methodological problems were noted in the original research. By the end of the decade, a relationship between religious belief or practice and authoritarianism did not reliably hold up in the data. The general pattern of findings suggested that there was little consistent relationship between conventional ways of being religious and an underlying authoritarian personality as measured by the F Scale. This finding ran counter to the idea that religious tendencies were rooted in a punitive and strict upbringing.

Puzzled by these findings, psychologists proposed alternative concepts. One important critique was that the F Scale was biased against the political right wing, sensitive to authoritarianism of the right but not to that of the political left or the middle of the road. In order to correct for this problem, an alternative concept, dogmatism, was developed (Rokeach, 1960). It was purported to be sensitive to authoritarianism in general, not just of the political right. Dogmatism was conceived of as a closed cognitive style, not a symptom of underlying psychodynamics, as was the case with the original authoritarian personality. According to this concept, dogmatism was a closedminded style of thinking and of perceiving the world, not a set of unconscious needs for authority and security, that led one toward being religious. Research along these lines lent slight but general support to that link, at least within the moderate range of dogmatism studied and for certain types of (closed-minded) religiousness. However, the dogmatism scale was confounded. When its items were compared with the concept of fundamentalism, it was found that 24 of its 40 items tapped beliefs presumed to underlie closedmindedness (e.g., beliefs about human helplessness, inadequacy of self, paranoia), rather than closedmindedness itself (Kirkpatrick,

Hood, & Hartz, 1991). This conflated the structure of a closed mind with the content of that mind.

The third period of research has been most illuminating. Bob Altemeyer (1988, 1996, 2006), whose research on secret doubt was highlighted in Chapter 5, reconceptualized the developmental roots of RWA as stemming from a social learning process and being established during adolescence. This is in contrast to the theorizing about authoritarianism during the 1950s, in which its basis was seen as a cluster of unconscious needs stemming from strict early childhood parenting. Altemeyer reports that parents were the most often cited sources of his Canadian students' answers to items on the RWA scale. High-RWA students were the most likely to say that their own opinions were derived from their parents and their religion, whereas low-RWA students more often pointed to their own experiences and to peer influence. Altemeyer reports that subjects who score high on the RWA scale are more likely to adhere tightly to the religion they were taught while growing up, regardless of its particular teachings. He suggests that being raised with an authoritarian religion facilitates the behavior pattern of authoritarian submission. Such a pattern turns out to be associated with a religious manifestation of RWA, religious fundamentalism, which we shall examine more closely in Chapter 11 on religion and social behavior. (See Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 2005, and Rowatt et al., 2013, for review and elaboration.)

Overall, authoritarianism and dogmatism are supposed to be linked to many of the same variables in the same direction, but for different reasons. For example, high authoritarians and dogmatics would both be expected to be more suggestible, especially when an authority figure is doing the suggesting and when there is much ambiguity over the issue. But for the authoritarians, the greater suggestibility would be due to a greater need to depend upon a superior authority for guidance, whereas for dogmatics it would be due to a more closed cognitive style in which information from an authority is held unquestioningly. In either case, the hypothesized link between religiousness and suggestibility needs to be examined.

Malleable Mental Boundaries

The reasoning behind the argument for a relationship between authoritarianism, dogmatism, and religiousness leads to a set of related questions that involve not only the notion of suggestibility but a trio of notions that can be subsumed under the rubric of *malleable mental boundaries*: suggestibility, hypnotizability, and absorption.

There are three possible relationships between religiousness and this trio of malleable mental boundary processes. First, religious people (or those who adhere to certain forms of religiousness) may be more suggestible than others. Second, religious people may make better hypnotic

subjects and be more able to go into the deeper levels of hypnosis. Third, they may have minds that are more able to get fully absorbed in something to such a degree that imaginative fantasy is taken as external or literal reality. Such mental abilities ought to enable someone to do better at processes that involve imagining, role-playing mental events as if they were concretely real, and mentally “soaking in” suggestions of visual, auditory, or other images and feelings and responding to them as if they were concretely real. People with such abilities could be said to have relatively flexible mental boundaries, which leads to hypotheses about these abilities and skill at engaging in the imagining that is at the heart of many religious practices.

It turns out, though, that science doesn't provide clear support for these hypotheses. Research on the possible relationship between suggestibility and religiousness is equivocal, mainly because psychological research has not yet yielded compelling evidence that suggestion is a uniform concept. At least five types of suggestibility are referred to by psychologists:

1. Persuadability or social suggestibility refers to the tendency to believe or act upon a persuasive message given by a communicator.
2. Psychomotor suggestibility refers to the tendency to perform a bodily movement upon another's suggestion, even if one is not consciously trying to do so.
3. Hypnotic suggestibility refers to the ability to be easily hypnotized, follow the hypnotist's directions, and go quickly into the deeper stages of hypnosis.
4. The placebo effect refers to the tendency to respond to a fake as if it were the real thing; for example, the ability to respond to a sugar pill (placebo) with reduced pain sensations while believing it is a pain-reducing drug.
5. Everyday conversation includes statements of the form “I suggest that we do X or Y . . .”, which is the common sharing of ideas in ordinary discussion. Although suggestibility in context of everyday conversation overlaps the first four, it deserves separate examination because it occurs in casual conversation with no formal procedure or setting to prompt it, in contrast to social or hypnotic suggestibility.

A summary of the research suggests that in general suggestibility is not a human trait (see Nash & Barnier, 2008, for comprehensive review). Do any of these specific types of suggestibility lead to being religious, or being religious in certain ways?

The evidence is scanty. A general problem is that the research is primarily associational, making it difficult to untangle whether the chicken or the egg (i.e., communicator and message or the tendency to believe) came first. For example, one study reported that people who value religion more

and attend church more often also score higher on a questionnaire measure of acquiescence, implying that they are more likely to believe the statements of a prestige communicator (Fisher, 1964). But such persons tend to be conservative in other ways, not just religiously, and may just as easily have attributed prestige to their communicators rather than having been persuaded by them. Another study found that students who report a greater number of religious experiences also tend to be better at complying with the hypnotist's suggestions (Gibbons & De Jarnette, 1972). This finding has a hypothesized link with sudden conversion (Chapter 7), in particular, because of its stereotype as similar to hypnotically induced, trancelike phenomena. But all it actually shows is that people who are better able to imagine and fantasize do more or do better when engaged in activities that involve imagination and fantasy.

The notion of *absorption* connotes how much of what you are paying attention to goes deeply into the intricate workings of your mind. The analogy of a dry sponge drawing a pool of water into itself is relevant here. The absorption scale (AS) measures a "disposition for having episodes of 'total' attention that fully engage one's representational (i.e., perceptual, enactive, imaginative, and ideational) resources" (Tellegen & Atkinson, 1974, p. 268). It includes questions that ask how vivid a sensory experience might be, how "caught up" in it you might get, and the degree to which you might become oblivious to other things when experiencing something interesting or beautiful. Sample items from the AS are "I experience things as if they were doubly real" and "I recollect certain past experiences in my life with such clarity and vividness that it is like living them again or almost so." Anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann (2012) gave the AS to a group of charismatic evangelical Christians and found that although the AS is not a measure of religiousness and scores on the AS were not related to how long someone prayed each day, they were related to how the person experienced prayer. People with higher scores on the AS showed a greater sense of vividness in their communication with God, and a greater chance of saying they experienced God with their senses, and they were more likely to say they experienced God as a person (p. 195). These findings can give the impression that absorption has a special relationship to being religious, at least in the "soft charismatic" experiential way studied by Luhrmann (2012; see also Granqvist, Hagekull, & Ivarsson, 2012).

But again, the science is not that simple. The same absorptive process that seems to be manifest in experience-oriented religiousness is also prevalent in novelists who, becoming totally absorbed in their writing, report that it feels as if the book is writing itself through them. Musicians, composers, athletes, and others have described the feeling of engaging in their activity in similar terms. Thus the notion that there is something unique about specific mental states or abilities and being religious in particular ways seems to be on unsteady ground.

MIDLEVEL FUNCTIONS

Spiritual Intelligence

Like all psychological constructs, intelligence cannot be seen. It is a property that is attributed to people based on other observable indices, such as a score on an IQ test, or skill at solving problems or creating unusual ideas. In order to create a reasonably workable model of how people orient their lives in a way that is meaningful to them, Emmons (1999, 2000) proposed a model of midlevel functions that includes the concepts of spiritual intelligence (SI) and ultimate concern (UC). UCs are those aspects of living and believing that a person holds as absolute or as highest in importance. For many people this is God, Allah, or a similar representation. For others, it may be their children, reputation, or a prospect of fame. In the ordinary routines of life, it would be against the UC that the possible meanings of new information, ideas, or proposals would be assessed. Thus, whatever is assessed as consistent or as adaptable within the global meaning system is retained, and whatever is assessed as wrong or incompatible is rejected (Park, 2010; Park & Folkman, 1997).

SI does not connote anything that is necessarily religious, since what is “spiritual” for someone can be anything beyond the individual self (Chapter 1). SI reflects someone’s ability to define goals and purposes that are part of the person’s UC and continue to perform behaviors that move the person toward those goals even though the behaviors may be mundane, boring, or difficult (Emmons, 1999, 2000). For example, someone’s UC may be to “live a life of virtue,” with an intermediate purpose to perform a virtuous deed that accomplishes a specific, near-term virtuous goal—such as feeding hungry people. But feeding hungry people requires that many things be done ahead of time—somebody has to raise money to buy food, purchase food, peel potatoes, and so forth, all with sufficient lead time so that the hot meal can be delivered on time. In actual practice, this requires months of planning and work, and performing all of those steps (i.e., being where the action is) may or may not be glorious, but it is laborious.

When hearing about SI it is easy to focus particularly on the concept of intelligence and think of SI in the same way that one thinks of “ordinary” intelligence, or IQ. Definitions of intelligence differ, but in general they include statements about the properties of the human mind that operate in problem solving, abstract reasoning (whether spatial, verbal, or numerical), and the ability to manipulate and apply ideas. However, there is one important exception to this in the intelligence literature. It is Gardner’s (1993, 1999) theory of multiple intelligences. Unlike most views of intelligence, which are based on the assumption that intelligence is a more or less a unitary property of the mind that people can be relatively high or low in, Gardner’s view is that human intelligence is made up of seven (in the first

statement of his theory) or eight (in a modified version) dimensions that are orthogonal to each other. The seven dimensions are verbal, quantitative, spatial, kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and musical. Gardner's theory says that these are independent dimensions of intelligence, so that it is possible for a person to be high or low in any of them in any combination. It is this combination that determines how the person performs in various kinds of tasks. This means, for example, that it is possible for an Olympic athlete to be kinesthetically gifted and verbally impoverished, or for a math star to be quantitatively gifted but socially inept. This view of intelligence has been popular among schoolteachers partly because it makes intuitive sense and partly because it gives them a conceptual tool that allows them to teach different children in different ways according to the best learning style for each child.

Emmons (1999, 2000) presented the model of SI with the argument that it met Gardner's criteria for what constitutes another dimension of intelligence. According to Gardner (1993), a property of the mind qualifies as intelligence only if it is consistent with evolutionary theory and shows anthropological, psychological, and neurological evidence—a set of requirements that illustrates the power of the MIP (Chapter 1). If SI meets these criteria, then people ought to display a greater or lesser degree of it.

It may help to think of SI as a special case of the more general concept of self-efficacy, whose roots are in social learning theory (Bandura, 1986; see Chapter 5). The self-efficacy model is well researched and has an enormously supportive database. The basic concern of the self-efficacy model has to do with those factors that enable someone to sustain behavior in pursuit of a goal. The goal may be anything from something midrange (e.g., getting a BA degree in psychology) to something global and long-term (e.g., fulfilling a supreme being's purpose for one's life), to something near-term and specific (e.g., not drinking alcohol for the next hour). Somebody who is efficacious believes that (1) he or she is capable of performing the behaviors necessary to reach the goal, and (2) if those behaviors are performed, then the reward will be provided. It is more likely that the person will continue to put forth effort to accomplish something if these conditions are met than if they are not. SI seems to be a special variation of the self-efficacy model because it also includes the notion of sustained behavior in pursuit of a goal or in service of a purpose. With what one accepts as a UC at the apex of one's global meaning system, one is behaving efficaciously in sustained striving toward it.

This analysis connects a basic psychological notion such as "behavior in pursuit of a goal" with more abstract meaning construction, assessment, and feedback processes. Furthermore, by being related to a broader self-efficacy model of goal-directed behavior, this analysis incorporates vast and impressive advances in learning theory. Bandura's (1983, 1997) approach is called social cognitive theory, but it is a modern descendant of behaviorism

that has been infused with the necessity to account for the cognitive operations that occur between stimuli and responses. Doing this automatically invokes the processes of memory, judgment, expectancy, decision making, attention, and other aspects of cognitive psychology.

Intrinsic, Extrinsic, and Quest Religious Orientations

A well-known principle from the psychology of learning tells us it is possible for a behavior to be learned and performed for an external reinforcement, but that later, as the reinforcement gradually diminishes to nothing, the behavior may be performed for its own sake, with no reinforcer following it. A behavior so learned and performed is said to have become *functionally autonomous* (Allport, 1937). A functionally autonomous behavior is performed based on its own intrinsic motivation, not because an extrinsic reward is received for doing so. This idea has been used to account for various ways of being religious. The longest-standing model of religiousness is based upon the concepts of intrinsic and extrinsic religious orientation (Allport, 1950; Allport & Ross, 1967) and the additional orientation called religion as quest (Batson et al., 1993).

By intrinsic orientation, Allport was referring to an internalized readiness, or being “set” to respond in a certain way, in which a person incorporated his or her religious teachings and values into his or her life, accepting the religion not for some extra-religious reason but for its own sake. For the purely intrinsically religious person, the religion *is* simply because it *is*. Allport’s way of putting this was to say that the intrinsically religious person “lives” his or her faith. A behavioral outcome of this might occur, for example, in mixed-motive situations in which a person has to choose between the religious motive and a competing motive, such as a sexual or economic one. Given mixed-motive confrontations of this sort, Allport’s model suggests that a person whose religious orientation is intrinsic is more likely to do whatever is in line with his or her religious values rather than compromise them.

The extrinsic orientation is more utilitarian, and this designation was later divided into extrinsic–personal and extrinsic–social (Kirkpatrick, 1989; Kirkpatrick & Hood, 1990). By extrinsic Allport originally meant that the religion is used in the service of obtaining other, nonreligious ends. Allport’s interpretation of this meant, for example, that an extrinsically religious person is more likely to compromise the religion in mixed-motive situations. Persons with an extrinsic religious orientation tend to agree with statements such as “Although I am a religious person, I refuse to let religious considerations influence my everyday affairs.” In other words, the extrinsic “uses the religion” (Allport, 1966).

However, not all religious orientations are so clearly identifiable, either as something to be accepted and expressed on its own terms (intrinsic) or as

something that helps a person in some other way (extrinsic). Sometimes a religious orientation involves searching, probing, grappling with life's ultimate questions. To address this idea, a third orientation was proposed that extended the two-dimensional I-E model into a three-dimensional model of religious orientation made up of the intrinsic, extrinsic, and quest dimensions (Batson et al., 1993). Someone high in quest has an open-ended, searching, motif in thinking about religious matters. Such a person openly faces existential questions. Rather than having answers for them, however, he or she may relish struggling with them. Someone high in quest tends to agree with statements that suggest that his or her beliefs are open to change. For a person high in quest, questions about religiousness or spirituality may be appreciated as much as, or possibly more than, answers. Simply put, a quest orientation seems to involve continually exploring.

Researchers abbreviate the intrinsic, extrinsic, and quest religious orientations by the letters I, E, and Q, respectively. A vast research literature has been built up based on these three dimensions since Allport and Ross triggered the modern history of psychology of religion research with the publication of their 1967 IEQ paper. Various combinations of I, E, and Q predict racial and ethnic prejudice, helping attitudes and behavior, some coping- and health-related variables, some personality variables, tendencies toward political liberalism or conservatism, tendencies toward religious fundamentalism, RWA, and other variables. A look at this research is part of Chapter 11.

These three religious orientations have been construed as attitudes, as trait-like dimensions, and as motivations. The general phrase "religious orientation" probably taps all three. Overall, people are religious in these and other ways, and these orientations to being religious can incline people to do things consistent with them. Thus, one person may be intrinsically inclined to take care of sick people, and someone else may be extrinsically inclined to do so. But religions deal with ultimate questions and purport to deal with ultimate answers in terms of ultimate meanings. Thus when a person either feeds or kills others as a reflection of his or her beliefs and with the intent of doing God's will, the person is accomplishing midrange goals believed to be part of the divinely prescribed ultimate meaning. This illustrates that the forces that push people to express their religiousness through their behavior and those that pull people to do things in accord with their ultimate concerns have to be accounted for in any psychological explanation of religiousness.

Forgiveness and Humility

The five dimensions of religiousness summarized in Chapter 1 include one easily seen as a "bottom line" in life—the consequences dimension (taken up at length in Chapter 11). For now, recall that the consequences dimension

refers to the outcomes of one's purported beliefs in concrete behavioral terms in the ordinary, everyday life that one lives. To varying degrees and with different limits, some major religions teach the virtues of forgiving and being humble. In certain religions they are desirable, expected outcomes of someone's devotion to the faith. The relationship between religiousness and these two virtues is, however, nonuniform. It turns out that adherence to a religion can foster forgiving and humility, and it can also impede them (see Emmons & Farhadian, 2010, for a good explanatory review).

Forgiveness is an idealized concept; it is hard to do. Forgiveness is typically discussed in the context of the victim, for whom the process of coming to forgive an offender can be very difficult. It flies in the face of evolutionarily rooted behavior patterns that fostered human survival, such as the fight-or-flight response—an almost automatic tendency to either run from an attacker, hide in safety, and not communicate, or to counterattack. Such biologically based responses are part of what makes us human. Nevertheless, the response of forgiving came to be taught as humans began to live in groups and imagine alternative responses. As a consequence, we now live with a built-in conflict: we have an inborn tendency to display a fight-or-flight response, while at the same time we are taught an ideal that says we ought to forgive, even love, that same attacker. How does one resolve the tension between these two motivations? (See Paloutzian, Shankar, & Luyten, 2014, for discussion and analysis.)

Religions vary on what they say about forgiving. For example, in certain forms of strict Judaism, only God can forgive; humans not only cannot forgive, but it is not even their responsibility to want or try to do so. This idea rests upon a legal notion of forgiveness, in which God is the judge who has the authority to pardon someone who has committed a crime (in this case sin is viewed as a violation of God's law). This connotation of forgiveness seems to be lacking important elements as far as human relations are concerned, because it leaves no place for honest human-to-human confession, communication, and reconciliation (Paloutzian & Kalayjian, 2012). Some aspects of Islam allow for forgiveness, but it is with certain conditions (the perpetrator must confess, show genuine sorrow, and so forth). Christianity teaches unconditional forgiveness and love of your enemy on grounds that God gives love and forgiveness unconditionally and undeservedly. These variations bring important questions to the surface. When one person harms another or when one nation attacks another, how ought the victim to respond? Can we live in a world in which one party forgives only within the bounds of what his or her religion or irreligion teaches, while the other party does either nothing or responds in kind but only insofar as what is in accord with very different (or perhaps restricted) religious guidelines? The search for common ground, both psychological and practical, among people of different religions is a researchable question.

Much literature on religion and forgiveness is concerned with forgiving at the level of attitudes and feelings (e.g., see Worthington et al., 2013). Forgiving attitudinally and affectively is good as far as it goes because one can regain some degree of composure, mental health, and satisfactory general functioning by use of the mental and imaginary processes required to regulate attitudes and feelings. And sometimes the perpetrator is not available for direct contact, such as when he or she is dead or in prison. In such cases, inculcating forgiving feelings is probably the most one can do. But something seems incomplete if forgiving stops there.

Let us push the idea of forgiveness to its limits by asking the question (which I personalize in order to most plainly illustrate its application), “What behaviors do I perform if I forgive the offender that are different from the behaviors that I perform if I do not forgive the offender?” (Paloutzian, 2010, p. 76). This question is important for two reasons. First, it is too easy to fool oneself. It is too easy to talk forgiveness or develop forgiving feelings, and therefore feel good about oneself, while having no contact and nothing to do with the offender. Thus, one can feel forgiving but never know whether the feeling is real—never know whether one has actually forgiven. Second, behavior is the bottom line of forgiving in the same way that it is the bottom line of loving. If you say “I love you” to your partner but strike him or her in the face with your fist or shoot the person, then you do not love your partner regardless of your words. Love without behavior is fluff.³ Forgiving feelings are good as far as they go, and sometimes reality does not allow more. But forgiving behavior is the only way one can know for sure whether one has forgiven. And it is one of the most difficult things that can be asked of a person, whether the need is to forgive an out-group, a bygone empire, oneself (Paloutzian & Kalayjian, 2010), or God (Kushner, 1981). Only the individual can do it for him- or herself.

Humility is another virtue taught by major religions. Buddhism, for example, promotes the notion of not-self—which on the surface sounds like the opposite of the Western emphasis on finding or knowing oneself, self-esteem, and self-identity. Inculcating the psychological sense of not-self seems to be inherently associated with not playing oneself up for more than one is worth, that is, related to humility. Likewise, Christianity promotes humbling oneself before God and others, not thinking that one is better than one’s neighbor. An excellent psychological picture of humility has been offered by Tangney (2000, 2009). She summarized the nature of humility, breaking it down into six components. These are (1) a willingness to see the self accurately, (2) an accurate perspective of one’s place in the world, (3) an ability to acknowledge personal mistakes and limitations,

³A more professional way to say this might be to say that love without congruent behavior is incomplete or hypocritical. But I have published this statement elsewhere and am content that it drives the point home.

(4) openness, (5) low self-focus, and (6) an appreciation of the value of all things (see Bollinger & Hill, 2012). Psychologically, it would seem that humility is related to being forgiving, because in so doing the person is not assuming superiority over another who has wronged him or her. Extending this point, humility would also be related to feeling grateful because it includes acknowledging the other as the source of goodness. To this general conceptual statement about humility, one can add the same bottom-line argument stated in connection with forgiveness. The acid test of being genuinely humble is not found in one's attitudes or self-perceptions about being humble, but in one's behavior: What behaviors does a person who is humble perform that are different from those of a person who is not? The answer to this question tells the real story. It awaits research.

The Dark Side of Spirituality

A topic seldom spoken about in the terms dominant in this book is the dark side of spirituality. Whenever spirituality is addressed in psychology of religion literature, it is almost always put in a positive cast with little or no mention of the reality of its negative side. In most writings, spirituality is said to involve notions such as "the sacred," transcendence, God, fulfillment, relationships, valuing life, creativity, connectedness, and similar positive values. Rarely do explanations of spirituality make it explicit, let alone highlight, that negative aspects of life, such as war, killing, suppression of rights, or subordination of women, can also be spiritual for some, and can be given attributions of sacrality. But there is nothing about the psychology of focusing on a goal, meaning, or Being that transcends a person that requires it to be positive. A negative striving or purpose can fulfill the same psychological functions for one person that a positive striving or purpose fulfills for another. Every one of the positive virtues or proclivities discussed above has a negative counterpart that can be as spiritual for one person as the positive ones are for another.⁴ Even some spiritually oriented psychotherapies, including various forms of meditation, can have a down-side (Farias & Wikholm, 2015).

GLOBAL CONSTRUCTS AND PROCESSES

Rounding out the discussion of the whole person and the self with which this chapter began, we can now go to the most global constructs and

⁴I would add that the very notions of "positive" and "negative" are without a clear referent. For example, for someone who kills in the name of God, the act is positive, but for the victim, it is of course negative. This illustrates the subjectivity of meaning and value, good and evil, and indeed, of all that is espoused as sacred.

processes and explore how they interface with religiousness. These constructs include the self, overall life purposes, and worldview and ultimate concern(s). All of them can affect or be affected by one's religiousness or spirituality in important ways.

Self-Processes

Inherent in the notion that making meaning is central to human evolution is the principle that making meaning also facilitates continuity. The process of making meaning enabled early individual humans, and groups of them, to monitor their environment and their own behavior in relation to it so that they would be safe, survive, and reproduce. As their mental abilities developed sufficiently to enable what we now call religions to exist, people began to attribute positive results (e.g., their own continuity) to their gods or similar forces. A long-term, integral part of this process would be development of the combination of self-monitoring, self-control, and behavior regulation in accord with established rules. This means that an individual self has some self-control precisely because it is able to identify itself as an entity separate from (but interdependent with) its environment.

A religion provides a further context for self-monitoring, regulation, and control based on a set of rules and expectations on how to live. Moreover, a religion provides a reason for self-monitoring and control because it often includes standards for behavior and a promise of reward for compliance or punishment for noncompliance with those standards; depending on the religion, those outcomes could be in this life, in an afterlife life, or both. As the established rules for behavior evolved to become a moralizing compass under the directive of supernatural agency, the stage was set for religious effects in replenishment of self-control (Rounding, Lee, Jacobson, & Ji, 2012), self-regulation in resistance to temptation (Laurin, Kay, & Moscovitch, 2012), and social comparison of behaviors, attitudes, beliefs, and dress with others in the same religious group as a means of thinking and doing the "right" things.

One outcome of this process is that it became possible for one's religion to offer self-esteem. If a person said and did what the religion taught, the reward of esteem was available—for the person's own sense of him- or herself but also in public for the observation and example of others. In this way, one's religion could offer both individual and social rewards. Further, self-esteem (or self-degradation) could be available as one compared oneself to the ideal religious standard, so that if one measured up, esteem was supplied, but if one fell short of the mark, it was held back. Thus the degree of discrepancy between religious ideals on the relevant criteria (e.g., love your enemy; if someone strikes you on the right cheek, let him strike your left cheek also; inculcate not-self; eliminate all desire) and one's actual performance can determine one's view of oneself.

Worldview and Ultimate Concerns

Perhaps the most basic (or grandiose) thing a religion offers someone is a sense of having a place in the world. A social connection is almost an automatic feature of any religion, and thus a religion can meet social as well as self needs. As part of a religious group, one belongs, one is less lonely, one has a place to “be” in an otherwise uncertain, sometimes strange, hostile, or fickle world. Some religious practices also allow a safe place to display behaviors that in other contexts might draw concern, disfavor, or (in some cultures) psychiatric diagnosis: deindividuated behavior (Zimbardo, 1969) manifested when submerged in a group performing behavior that is “out of control,” self-mutilation rituals such as slashing one’s back with chains until it bleeds, certain forms of chanting or marking of one’s body, walking barefoot on fire (Xygalatas, 2012), handling poisonous snakes (Hood & Williamson, 2008), or drinking poison (Williamson & Hood, 2014). Religious behaviors reflect a worldview and set of ultimate concerns that, to the genuine believer, are not mere reality but are given attributions of a greater ultimate reality than the real but temporary world we live in. Thus, it is to the overarching worldview and ultimate concerns that one becomes devoted and within which one’s experiences and actions are given meaning.

TAKE-HOME MESSAGES

- A person’s psychological makeup can be construed as being comprised of three layers—core traits, midlevel goals and strivings, and overall identity and worldview. Understanding how religiousness is related to the “whole person” requires taking the processes operating at these layers into account.
- A trait view of what constitutes someone’s “personality” emphasizes measurement of the core dimensions of temperament (illustrated by the Big Five OCEAN model). Other personal attributes not typically understood as personality factors are also measured, including intelligence, absorption, and hypnotizability. In general, single-measure dimensions predict little about religious or spirituality variables.
- Religious attitudes, feelings, and actions are not a function of an individual’s attributes, but of the interaction between individual and social/contextual factors, or disposition–situation interdependence.
- Theories of personality as they relate to religiousness correspond to classical approaches in general psychology. Each orientation—psychodynamic, behavioristic, and humanistic—has its own set of assumptions about human nature that lead to how that approach engages the phenomena of religions.

- ▶ Midlevel processes that are part of the functioning of the “whole person” include the intrinsic, extrinsic, and quest religious orientations, forgiveness and humility, spiritual intelligence, striving for long- or short-term goals, and the like. Ideally, they fit within the larger sense of self and worldview and are consistent with ultimate concerns.
- ▶ *Self* is a construct. Therefore, an individual’s self and sense of identity are related to a religion as a meaning that is made. Just as meanings and values change from time to time, so do selves and sense of identity.
- ▶ The dark side of spirituality is seldom talked about, but it is as real and important as the positive side. If anything can be spiritual or sacred to someone, then hostility, killing, and hatred can be.

FURTHER READING

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CHAPTER 7

Religious Conversion, Deconversion, and Spiritual Transformation

Conversion Landscape

How a Meaning System Changes

Conversion Types

Looking for Conversion in the Individual

Step-Stage and Dynamic Models in Conversion and Transformation

Take-Home Messages

Further Reading

Religious conversions and spiritual transformations are among the most perplexing events that can occur in someone's life. They can change a person forever. It can seem paradoxical that we live in an increasingly secular age while so many people undergo changes in their religious or spiritual lives. More now than in the past, standards of acceptable behavior are perceived to rest upon a philosophy of moral relativism. Such a philosophy does not require religious foundations. Nevertheless, concurrent with this trend (perhaps as a reaction against it), people in large numbers continue to adopt religions or alternative forms of spirituality, although not necessarily in traditional institutional forms (Paloutzian, 2014; Rambo & Farhadian, 2014a). Changes in religiousness also occur in the reverse direction; people deconvert (Streib, Hood, Keller, Csöff, & Silver, 2009). Not many of these changes include the fits, trances, and visions of the religious awakening in 19th-century America (see Taves, 1999) or the social pressure or "brain-washing" machinations of new religious movements (NRMs) such as the Unification Church of the 1960s (Galanter, 1989; Lofland, 1977a, 1977b). But even today important religious and spiritual transformations take place

in the minds and actions of many people. And once in a while the right confluence of factors leads not only to individual transformations but also to a new religious movement (Taves, 2016).

CONVERSION LANDSCAPE

Like other manifestations of religiousness, conversions reveal our human capacity and desire to be connected to something greater than ourselves. There has always been a lot of mystery about specifically *how* and *why* conversions happen, perhaps because totalistic, radical conversions are rare (Beit-Hallahmi, 2014). What exactly was occurring inside Moses, the Buddha, Augustine, Joseph Smith, Muhammad, and Malcolm X throughout the process of transformation? Through what process does a formerly peaceful person adopt a religious belief in killing nonbelievers, or a person in his family, or the person next door? What psychological mechanisms are operative, and what do they do for or to people? This chapter focuses on the psychological issues embedded in these questions.

Conversion Locally and Globally

Although most people in all cultures typically stick to the religion (or lack of religion) of their upbringing (Beit-Hallahmi, 2014), a sizable minority leave it for something else. It is not uncommon for about 30% of U.S. adults to switch from one religion to another, and in Germany and the United States approximately 10–18% have deconverted and claim no religion (Pew Research Center, 2015; Streib et al., 2009). When adults who convert to a different religion or deconvert altogether are asked why they did so, about 40% say a major reason was disagreement with the teachings of their religion; approximately one-quarter say this disagreement was a minor reason for their change. Although finding a meaningful faith would intuitively seem to be an important factor in someone's decision to switch religions, only about one-third say a major reason was "you found a new religion that is more fulfilling"; about 15% list this as a minor reason. Thus, slightly over half of the time switchers say that finding a more fulfilling religion is a motivating factor in their conversion. Slightly less than half make the change due to dissatisfaction with their local church; likewise, slightly less than half tend to change religions due to their dislike of leaders struggling with each other to control the direction of their religion (Pew Research Center, 2015).

Religions differ in the degree to which they emphasize recruiting others into the fold. Of the major "world religions," Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism are called "missionary religions" (Rambo, 1993) because their doctrines teach that believers should spread the faith. Of the people in the United States who identify as very religious, approximately half think it is

sufficient to lead the best life they can personally; the other half think they also *must* bring others into their religion (WIN/Gallup International, 2012; see also Chapter 1). This means that among U.S. adults alone, about 65 million people are aiming to convert you to join them.

For most would-be converters, the goal is to induce a religious change in individuals. But for about 6% of U.S. adults, the goal includes “converting” the whole society so that all of it conforms to their beliefs and practices (Newport, 2007). This means that for this small minority, the goal is to create a theocracy, something fundamentally contrary to most modern governing systems and the laws and liberties in all modern free countries.

The Definition Issue: The What and How of Conversion

There has been incomplete consensus on defining religious conversion. What often comes to mind is the stereotype of a sudden and total transformation, such as that of the Christian Saint Paul as depicted in the New Testament. Saul of Tarsus was on his way to Damascus, saw a bright light, heard a voice he deemed to be that of Jesus telling him to stop persecuting Christians; he immediately dedicated his life to being a Christian apostle and later wrote about half of the New Testament. Although such a total turnover is sometimes regarded as the “true” kind of conversion, it is extremely rare. It is a mistake to think spiritual transformations are fundamentally all the same, that they occur to the same degree, and that the story of Paul is the gold standard for them. In fact, a conversion isn’t limited to a single event but is better seen as a process (Paloutzian, Richardson, & Rambo, 1999).

Content or Process?

Paul’s example includes both the content of the conversion and the process by which it occurs. Early attempts to understand religious conversion psychologically categorized areas of life that undergo transformation and various modes of the conversion process but fell short of untangling them. For example, Thouless (1971) distinguished among intellectual, moral, and social conversions. Intellectual conversions are thought-mediated changes in the content of what someone believes; moral conversions are changes in one’s motivation toward morally relevant behavior; social conversions are changes in one’s actions toward the social environment and issues. The recent development of the psychology of morality¹ (Haidt, 2007, 2008, 2010) is in part a modern intellectual descendent of such distinctions. The

¹The area of the psychology of morality is often called “moral psychology,” but that is an unfortunate misnomer because morality is not a property of psychology as a science, but of people.

use of three types to characterize conversion illustrates that the facets of conversion can be differentiated along the important life domains of belief, motivation, and action, paralleling some of Glock's dimensions of religiousness (Chapter 1). Changes in these facets are not mutually exclusive; changes in one area can, but do not always, accompany changes in others. Separating these facets of change is useful in psychological analysis with the qualification that, as originally stated, this categorization leaves unclarified the difference between the psychological *processes* involved in conversion and the *content* or focus of change. As we explore the concept of meaning systems in greater depth later in this chapter, we will see that beliefs, values, actions, goals, and related concepts can change to different degrees, corresponding to different types of spiritual transformation and with respect to myriad contents and foci of change.

Agency

Another important distinction is between conversion understood as an active and as a passive one. In the active view, the individual exercises free agency in seeking and choosing to convert. Through one's own volition one adopts a personal belief or joins a different religious group, whether it is culturally accepted or deviant from the norm. In the passive view, one's change in belief or religious group is determined for him or her by either psychological processes (e.g., mental or emotional needs) or social forces (e.g., interpersonal manipulation, group pressure) (Richardson, 1985, 1989). So, is conversion an active process or a passive process? Do you decide what you will believe and what your life is about, or are you a pawn whose beliefs and purposes are made to happen by either your psychological needs or the people who surround you? The answer is both, of course. The final outcome is a result of a complex interaction of personal and social forces; and the relative weight of each in determining the conversion in a particular case depends upon the person's cultural context, other life situations, personality, and meaning system.

Speed

What about changes that come about by means of a slow, gradual process? Do they also deserve the right to be called conversion? A mid-20th-century researcher reserved the term *conversion* only for the sudden type of experience (Stanley, 1964), and a highly prominent 21st-century researcher uses the phrase "spiritual conversion" to describe approximately the same process (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 1998). These researchers would agree that other people may possess the same belief system as the sudden convert or person who experienced a "spiritual conversion" but might argue that

it does not carry the same meaning because the converts arrived at it by means of a unique process. Thus, the other believers would not be called converts, because they arrived at the belief by means of a slower process, whether gradually thinking through the issues or being trained in it from childhood. However, many people who do label themselves converts and talk about their spiritual transformations cannot easily fit their experience into the sudden stereotype. Because of this, I and most other psychologists find it more useful to consider as conversion any process by which a person comes to hold a religious belief he or she didn't hold before (Paloutzian, 2005, 2014) and to allow for subtypes that include both sudden and gradual processes.

Spiritual Transformation

Religious conversion is not a psychologically isolated phenomenon but is instead one instance of a larger category called spiritual transformation. This category also includes deconversion. Recall from Chapter 1 the general similarities and differences of religiousness and spirituality. Although they overlap, they are not synonymous. Most people who are religious also consider themselves spiritual, but not all those who call themselves spiritual call themselves religious. Spirituality is a broader construct than traditional religion. It can include personal orientations toward some higher power, values, principles, causes, or other things apart from any church, synagogue, mosque, shrine, or group. Religions involve belief in a faith system, whereas spirituality may not involve scriptures, a group, or a faith system, and do not necessarily imply anything otherworldly (Paloutzian & Park, 2014). Although defining spirituality is no easier than defining religion, both concepts are functional equivalents in part because they both include the values, goals, and purposes that transcend a person and to which he or she is committed or strives (Paloutzian & Park, 2005, 2013b, 2014).

Spiritual transformations can be manifested in a variety of ways. A person may convert from no religion to an established religion or to an alternative, personally meaningful spirituality. One may change from adhering to one religion to another or to none. Additionally, someone may go from one level of commitment to a different level of commitment to the same religion. This may result in a deeper or shallower degree of caring about one's religion. Another type of spiritual transformation involves a change in a specific element within the same religion or worldview. For example, a person may continue to adhere to a religion but without the belief that God can intervene to cure diseases (see Kushner, 1981, for an example of this). Another type of spiritual transformation is the adoption of different goals within the same religion or worldview. For example, a Christian or Muslim who is initially committed to the establishment of a theocratic

government can reject belief in theocracy and in its place pursue the goal of separation of church and state and thereby protect individual religious liberty. Similarly, a person may adopt a new ultimate concern or may shift from one orientation or interpretation to another within the same religion. Although it usually doesn't come to mind immediately and it might sound counterintuitive, one form of spiritual transformation is to go from being either religious or areligious to being antireligious, that is, deconverting from one's religion constitutes a spiritual transformation as much as turning toward it (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1997; Streib et al., 2009).

Meaning system changes are more often partial and graded than total and abrupt (Park, 2005a, 2005b). In the relatively rare case of the total conversion, the old religion or spirituality is completely replaced by a new one. Overall, because religious conversions and spiritual transformations are nonuniform and take place in many ways and over many different time spans, the change that defines them is best seen as a process, not an event (Gooren, 2007; Paloutzian, 2014; Paloutzian, Murken, Streib, & Rößler-Namini, 2013; Rambo, 1993; Rambo & Farhadian, 2014a).

Conversion Is Meaning Remade

In any spiritual transformation, the new form of spirituality fits better with the convert's meaning system than the old form did. A working definition of conversion is the distinct process by which a person goes from believing, adhering to, and/or practicing one set of religious teachings or spiritual values to believing, adhering to, and/or practicing a different set. The key to a conversion is the distinctiveness of the change. It is important to not confuse conversion with other types of changes, such as developmental changes or religious socialization. The shortest way to describe a conversion would be "then, no; now, yes" in regards to a person's religious beliefs or commitments (Beit-Hallahmi, 2014; Hood et al., 2009; Paloutzian, 2005, 2014; Paloutzian et al., 1999, 2013).

The same concept of conversion as change is used by chemists when they talk about converting water into steam by boiling it. In this example, something is done to a substance of one form that causes it to be transformed into some new form. So it is with religious conversion. Something happens to people that causes them to change from adhering to one group to another, one belief to another, or one belief to no belief. Like the transformation of water into steam, religious conversion may take variable amounts of time. Various psychological explanations of conversion allow from an instant to a lifetime for the forces of religious conversion to complete their work. Thus, though the process of change may be different, the fact of change is part of the reality of conversion. It is more fruitful, therefore, if we define conversion broadly and allow for the existence of subtypes.

HOW A MEANING SYSTEM CHANGES

Each element of a meaning system, summarized in Chapter 2, affects the others. When pressure is imposed on one component of the system (e.g., a person who holds one set of religious beliefs is introduced to beliefs of a different religion and is encouraged or inspired to convert), the beliefs that are under pressure confront information already in the other elements of the system. If these beliefs change in the direction of the pressure, they may become inconsistent with information already in place. If the initial beliefs are resistant enough, the ties among the elements of the system repel the pressure to change (Burris, Harmon-Jones, & Tarpley, 1997). But if resistance capabilities have not developed, the pressure on the beliefs might be strong enough to dent or topple other elements of the system. Thus, a meaning system can be modified in one or more aspect(s). When the degree of modification reaches a certain threshold, we call it religious conversion. If the whole system is replaced by a completely different one, then we consider it a dramatic spiritual transformation, the relatively rare example of the radical convert (Beit-Hallahmi, 2014). Figure 7.1 summarizes the steps in the process of meaning system change.

Using the model of religion as a meaning system helps us understand religious conversions and spiritual transformations. We can extrapolate and apply this model to all aspects of religiousness from the micro

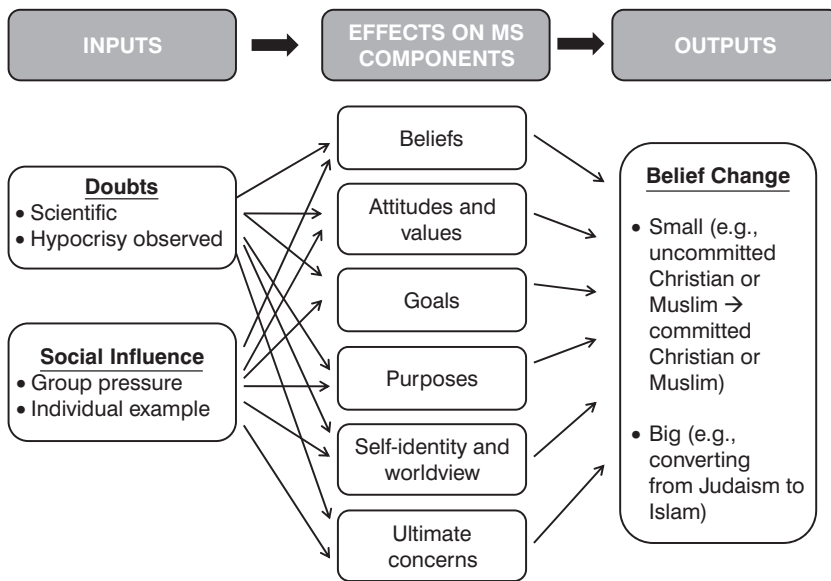


FIGURE 7.1. Diagram of the process of change in a meaning system (MS).

(neuropsychology of experiences deemed religious) to the macro (religious motivation toward or justification for violence and terrorism).

Elements of the Process

Clarifying the meaning-making model and how its elements may interact helps us to understand the processes that can result in a change in one's meaning system. For a person to convert from one religion or spirituality to another, at least the following elements are part of the process (see Paloutzian, 2014, for elaboration).

Need

The person must need or want something; this may be conscious or not. Examples include pleasure, rights, purpose, perception of justice, basic survival, reduction of unpleasant mental or emotional states such as guilt, anxiety, and loneliness, or continuity between major life domains.

Doubt

The person must doubt (broadly conceptualized as cognitive disbelief, vague unease, emotional aversion, or other) that the need(s) will be met or the problem solved within the system as it is presently constituted. Examples include a perception of conflict between two statements in scripture, a belief that a scientific notion and the teaching of one's religion are incompatible, hypocrisy observed in one's religious leaders, or one's own failure to live up to an ideal taught by one's religion. In all cases, there is a discrepancy between the "is" and "ought" (Hill, 2002) in the person's own life or perception of the religious lives of others. This discrepancy feeds a generic doubt, or unease with the status quo.

Context and Resources

There must be resources that make conversion possible (Rambo, 1993). For example, even if a person is on a personal quest for meaning, finding meaning in religious ways does not occur by random chance. The person must also encounter some agent (whether formally organized or not, of any size, etc.) via some medium of communication, with the relevant information and materials, potential for social support, and so forth.

Appropriation

In order for change to occur, the person's meaning system must notice, encounter, appropriate, and respond to the above resources. The more

resources the meaning system confronts, the greater the probability of change in one or more elements within the system, and the more likely we are to see changes in the form of psychological functioning, or in the form of belief or behavior that is different than it was before.

Elimination of Barriers

Prohibitions and other barriers must be either set aside or satisfied. For example, if one's ethnic, religious, or cultural group forbids a person within it to accept some alternative to what it has inculcated in the person, a would-be convert is likely to face resistance if he or she indicates a desire to change. In some instances the barrier to leaving one's parent group is extreme, on the threat of death—occasionally this has meant literally killing the person, or slightly less extreme, symbolic death of the convert (such as when a person is “cut off” from all aspects of the family, never to be spoken of again, because he or she converted to a religion regarded as fundamentally incompatible with the original one). Many lesser barriers exist; the degree to which they are permeable varies with the tolerance level of the parent group or culture. The dilemma that these circumstances can create for a person who wants to change religions has the potential to be extreme and can cause distress, loneliness, and feelings of grief and loss. At the same time, the person may also feel elated by the feeling of release, comfort, satisfaction, and joy experienced in the wake of the final decision to follow the new religion. In either case, the person must either disregard the barriers to a degree that will enable him or her to make the change (or, e.g., psychologically set them aside as no longer important) and/or must satisfy them in some way, if possible in a way that is acceptable to the former group or culture.

Implementation

The change must be implemented; something new must be believed, or something actually done differently than before. Acceptance of a new set of doctrines as revealed truth, changing one's opinion about whether Jesus was the messiah or Muhammad was the final prophet, and the corresponding change in learning and following what they said, are examples of this, as are altering where one attends religious services, what one does to practice the faith, what one listens to as sacred music, and what religion one teaches to one's children.

Similarly, changing from a religion to “none” is as important a transformation of a meaning system as changing from one religion to another. If a person becomes an atheist or an agnostic after having been a religious believer, the person may have come to that point due to doubts (again broadly construed), may have to confront, disregard, or accommodate prohibitions

or barriers to denying there is a God, and will show evidence of the reality of the transformation by identifiable differences between what the person said and did before and after the transformation (see Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006, for a summary of research on changes to atheism).

Basic Steps in the Process

There are *inputs*, *intermediate processes*, and *outputs* to the process of religious conversion or spiritual transformation. Figure 7.1 summarizes the basic steps in the transformation process. The left column is functionally infinite in what it might contain; thus only two items (“doubts” and “group influences”) are listed, both broadly understood as exemplars of many other potential input factors. They are inputs, sufficient to prompt a modification (of any size) in one or more elements of the system indicated in the center column. The center column contains the elements of a meaning system (Paloutzian, 2005). The right column lists the sorts of changes that ought to emerge from the modification of the system. The greater the internal change, the more we ought to be able to identify differences in the outputs.

CONVERSION TYPES

Sudden and Gradual Conversion

Conversion types have been broken down into two basic categories, sudden and gradual conversion. A third type of belief acquisition, religious socialization, has been studied in relation to sudden and gradual conversion, but the concept of “transformation” seems inappropriate for it. It is nevertheless one kind of belief acquisition process. Each type takes a different amount of time and has attracted a different psychological explanation.

Sudden

The most dramatic of the conversion types is the sudden conversion. Here the conversion occurs all at once, on the “spur of the moment.” Sudden converts are thought to experience conversion either with or without prompting by others. The sudden conversion of the Saul to Paul, noted above, has been interpreted as an example of a transformation not prompted by others. In this unusual instance, depending on one’s theological orientation, he has been seen either as a passive responder in the transaction with the active agent of change being some thing or entity other than Paul the person (Richardson, 1985, 1989; Thouless, 1971), or as a person responding to his own unconscious conflict and guilt over the mistreatment of innocent

others. One can do it in a moment and without preliminary deliberation or forethought, even though it may be the culmination of earlier thoughts and circumstances. In either case, the key feature of the sudden conversion is the short time span in which it occurs.

Psychological explanations of sudden conversion have invoked the concepts of conflict, frustration, and the unconscious. It has been proposed that some people are predisposed to sudden conversion because of their personality types or intrapersonal conflicts and frustrations (e.g., feelings of personal inadequacy, lack of self-worth, guilt over a misdeed). Processes such as these are related to how depth aspects of the personality function, to be taken up in a subsequent section.

Gradual

Gradual conversion can be seen as a process of growth of belief over an intermediate period of time. The time span may extend from a few days to several months or years. During this period the person reassesses aspects of his or her life and begins to consider a religious worldview as a viable alternative. A gradual convert may ask some of life's basic questions and weigh religious and other answers to those questions. There may be a series of intellectual objections to religious doctrines that must be thought through. Gradually the person resolves those issues and moves from a point of rejecting a belief or religious system to a point of accepting it, and the person can identify when he or she crossed that line.

Psychological explanations of gradual conversion imply a more intellectual type of process than either sudden conversion or religious socialization. Gradual converts make conscious, active efforts to resolve conflicts and frustrations they feel. The conflicts might be between personal, societal, and religious values; or the frustration might be due to a discrepancy between the person's actual and desired levels of performance in the moral or intellectual sphere. Also, gradual converts may have a cognitive need to answer basic questions and search for a meaning in life. When these needs or search for a meaning are not met, frustration may be felt. Gradually, however, these needs are met as the person thinks through and accepts a faith.

Comment on Religious Socialization

The extreme opposite of sudden conversion is lifelong religious socialization, in which the person cannot remember a time of not believing the faith. There is no dramatic turning point of acquiring a new religion as there was with the sudden convert. It is called "socialization" instead of "transformation" because it occurs in the natural course of development from early childhood onward. The person grows up with the faith and does

not recall making a conscious decision about it (Boyatzis, 2005; Richert & Granqvist, 2013).

The dominant psychological explanation for religious socialization relies upon the concept of social learning (Bandura, 1986; Dowling & Scarlett, 2006). People learn to accept the beliefs and practices they have been trained to accept during their upbringing. While growing up, two learning procedures influence a child's acceptance of the beliefs: reinforcement and modeling processes. The youth is reinforced for actions and statements that indicate acceptance of the beliefs, and consequently learns to accept them. The youth also imitates the model set by parents and their surrogates, and thus acquires their beliefs and practices. Although not "conversion," the utility of this category for research purposes is that it serves as a baseline control group of religious people who have beliefs but who have not acquired them by means of a fast or slow conversion process of which they are aware. Thus, comparisons can be made between believers of the sudden and gradual conversion types and those in the baseline religious socialization category, all compared against nonreligious matched controls. The odds are high that what the religion means to the person differs considerably from one type of faith acquisition process to another.

Let's Get Beyond Conversion Types

Differences emerge when we compare the ideas presumed to underlie these types of conversion experiences along key dimensions. Theories of a generation ago led to a relatively simple way of understanding the differences in importance of intellectual, emotional, and learned factors. Intellectual factors seemed most important in gradual conversion; emotional factors were given greater importance in sudden conversion; social learning processes were given greatest importance in religious socialization. Thinking psychodynamically, at least two of the three types of believers would have different personalities or predispositions. The sudden convert would presumably be the most volatile due to higher emotionality and tendency to vacillate. The gradual convert, on the other hand, would be less volatile due to a tendency to calculate decisions. The above sketch of conversion times sounds easy, clean, and simple. It also sounds too simplistic and is, in fact, primarily descriptive, not explanatory. We need to dig deeper.

LOOKING FOR CONVERSION IN THE INDIVIDUAL

Recent analyses suggest that conversion processes are far more complex than indicated in our simple three-type model. As we currently understand it, conversion involves an interactive mix of individual, phenomenological,

social-contextual, and historical factors (Beit-Hallahmi, 2014; Gooren, 2010; Jindra, 2014; Rambo, 1993; Rambo & Farhadian, 2014b). Before we examine how a meaning systems analysis of conversion can accommodate such factors, it will help to summarize key ideas about factors whose involvement has been proposed.

The Process of Believing

In Chapter 5 on development, I related some evidence that humans are “born believers” (Barrett, 2012), indicating we are constituted with an innate tendency to make meaning out of ambiguity. In the present context, this means our minds automatically (and mostly nonconsciously) engage in a generalized process of believing (Angel et al., 2017; Seitz & Angel, 2012, 2014), summarized in Chapter 1. This process has nothing to do in any immediate sense with believing or denying something religious, but is instead fundamental in sustaining an ordinary, healthy, regulated life in which one acts upon beliefs in ordinary propositions (e.g., that the chair you are sitting on will hold you), the continuity of objects (e.g., when you drive home from work today your house will still be sitting on the ground), and the continuity of processes that enable living (e.g., that your food is actually there and nourishes your body). Nature has primed our systems with constructive learning capabilities so we can engage in the process of believing and enacting beliefs in ways necessary for us to navigate the world in a stable, sustaining way. It is difficult to imagine a healthy life without such a capability.

But if humans have a built-in tendency to make meaning out of ambiguous stimuli, then at what point, under what personal, psychic, or social circumstances, and by what process might they be most prone to make *religious* or *spiritual* meaning out of the ambiguity of life itself, the stars and planets, the whole cosmos, and death? It is one thing for our eye to receive light rays depicting an object that looks red sitting on the table and construct a mental percept of an apple (and then act upon that process by eating it), and it is quite another to ponder the “why” of humans existing at all, what the cosmos might mean, and what happens after we die. One action requires us to make meaning at a micro level from the wavelengths of light bouncing off a small object and entering the eye; the other requires expansive thinking, imagination, and perhaps a leap of faith when, unlike the apple whose meaning can be put to an immediate and specific test, the “meaning” of what happens after death cannot be tested and thus remains unknown, so long as we stay alive.

Age

In traditional churches and some so-called parachurch organizations, for example, heavy emphasis is placed on youth classes and other programs

designed to either create or rekindle a commitment to the faith. Many readers will be familiar with youth camps, outreach programs, or missionary endeavors designed to do this. Also, the NRMs of a generation ago knew the importance of adolescence. The vast majority of people who joined them did so in their teens and early twenties. Proselytizers knew that high school and college campuses were fruitful places to recruit new members. Several classic studies reported that the mean age for NRM conversion was in the midteens (Argyle & Beit-Hallahmi, 1975), and the average is still about the same. Psychoanalytic theorist Erikson (1963, 1997) proposed that an “identity crisis” occurs during the teenage years, and one way a youth might resolve such a crisis is adopting a religion or other form of spirituality. More recent research continues to show the same tendency in adolescents (Beit-Hallahmi, 2014).

Is this stereotype of conversion as an adolescent reaction valid? Perhaps so, but the stereotype could be obscuring other factors. For example, it is during adolescence and young adulthood that many of life’s major decisions are made. Decisions about college, marriage, lifestyle, vocation, and military service are routine during this time of life. It is appropriate for decisions about religion to be made at this time also. If religious choices are more likely to be made during adolescence, it could be due to the same processes that mediate other decisions instead of some unusual or troubled state during that age.

Adolescence is not the only proposed ripe age for conversion. The ideas of Jung (1933) and Erikson (1997) suggest that the middle and later years represent another phase of religious interest. These authors argue that during middle age people begin to strive for more inner understanding, wholeness, and personal integrity. This striving sets the stage for religion-related questions, facilitating heightened interest in religious or spiritual matters and in developing intimate connections, ego integrity, and wisdom as one gets old (Granqvist, 2014).

Emotions

Another question concerns the role that feelings may play in the conversion process. People often describe their conversions in very experiential language. Some religious groups, such as Pentecostal Christians, place great emphasis on emotion-inducing ritual and public displays of intense feelings through crying, shouting, speaking in tongues, or fainting. Sometimes the impression is given that this is the one mark of genuine conversion. So in one sense, the question of emotions simply asks whether conversion includes a conscious awareness of intense feelings as a necessary part of the process. A variant of the issue of emotions in conversion rests upon a possible relation between certain emotions and some forms of psychopathology. That is, psychological disturbance has been classically understood to involve “emotional problems.” Based on this idea, some have concluded

that emotional disturbance leads one toward conversion, and a “conversion experience” is evidence that emotional factors were involved.

Some of the psychological theory summarized in Chapter 3 is pertinent to this issue. For example, a psychoanalytic view stresses the role of the unconscious in emotional conflict. Unconscious conflicts are believed to incubate until they are resolved at the moment of sudden conversion. In contrast, a cognitive need theory of conversion deemphasizes feelings, unconscious or conscious, and places its emphasis on the need for perceived pattern, purpose, and wholeness of life. From these simple views came the notion that sudden conversions are mostly based on emotions and gradual conversions are mostly based on cognitions. Things are more psychologically interesting than this simple dichotomy, however.

Moving away from reliance on the notion of unconscious processes, emotions can be thought of in the sense of the ideal affective state one would like or the actual affective state one is in at the moment. The model for this distinction, affect valuation theory (AVT; Tsai, Koopmann-Holm, Miyazaki, & Ochs, 2013), highlights the gap between these two affect assessments as a motivating factor in a variety of behaviors including adopting or changing a religion or spiritual orientation, participating in rituals targeted to foster the desired affective state, and surrounding oneself with people who will help sustain the desired state. This model implies that it may not be the absolute emotional state that determines one’s openness to alternatives, but the relative distinction between the two emotional states. This would imply that it is not emotion as such that prompts change but the meaning of the emotion relative to some other emotion as the point of comparison. For example, aversive discrepancies between what one actually has and what one would like to have may foster some degree of transformation.

As we will examine below, a dynamic facet model and meaning systems analysis will carry our understanding further, as will the conceptualization of human change by certain ancient Greek philosophers. For example, many of Plato’s dialogues provoked conflicted feelings because they confronted people with contradictions or assumptions about deeply held beliefs and basic life issues. The dialogues often ended by showing that what a person believed was wrong, or at least that they did not know what they thought they knew. Plato intended to induce transformations of people’s fundamental assumptions, beliefs, and emotions about many things (Goldstein, 2014). A deep grasp of a meaning systems approach may do the same.

Creativity

Another idea puts the accent on mental rather than emotional processes. Related to the cognitive models summarized in Chapter 3, Batson et al. (1993) proposed that the processes involved in conversion are cognitive and can be understood as analogous to the process of creativity. The analogy

between conversion and creativity is based first on the notion that our perception of reality is embodied in a cognitive structure of the order of the world. Batson points out that the creative process involves “improvement” (I would say “alteration”) of one’s cognitive organization. The four steps in the creative process are (1) preparation, in which the person faces a dilemma or problem to be solved with the existing cognitive structure, (2) incubation, when one is unable to solve the problem and stops actively attempting to do so, (3) illumination, insight based on cognitive reorganization in which the problem is seen in a new way, and (4) verification, elaborating and then testing the idea to see how well it works.

According to Batson, a similar sequence of steps is involved in religious conversion and spiritual transformation. He labels these (1) existential crisis, in which a person grapples with basic issues of the meaning of his or her life, (2) self-surrender, trying and failing to resolve those issues within the framework of one’s current life perspective or worldview, (3) new vision, in which the issues are resolved by seeing them through the perspective of the new belief system, and (4) new life, resulting in a change in behavior and a new way of negotiating one’s way through life. Understood in this way, religious conversion is thought to constitute a stepwise tension reduction process for which the outcome is personal transformation. This transformation is rooted in a new cognitive structure created in order to resolve an existential crisis. This sounds close to saying that conversion involves the adoption of a better-fitting life schema with the sense of satisfaction and closure that would accompany it (Ozorak, 2005).

There are at least two problems with the conversion–creativity analogy. First, generic “religion” probably should not be considered a schema, at least not in any specific sense (Paloutzian & Smith, 1995). There are many specific religious schemas—a Roman Catholic schema, Muslim schema, Hindu schema, Evangelical Protestant schema—which vary greatly, and some of their variations are fundamentally incompatible with others. So referring to “religion schema” in a generic sense could be misleading. Perhaps “worldview” might be a better word for referring to such a concept. Second, although some religious conversions are precipitated by an existential crisis, not all of them are. The conversion–creativity parallel is a useful working model because it helps us see some aspects of the process that we might otherwise miss. It is a helpful analogy (which is how Batson et al. meant it) for what is going on inside the convert’s mind, but not, of course, supported by fact. Research on the robustness of the analogy will tell us how powerful it is.

Mental Illness

A persistent issue is whether there is a relationship between psychological disturbance and religious conversion. Two stereotyped popularized forms of this notion can be stated as (1) anyone who converts must be suffering

from a mental illness, and (2) a person who converts will thereby become mentally ill. Biases at the root of these stereotypes even color attempts to define the concept of conversion. It has been defined as the “unification of a divided self,” implying that a person must be somewhat “disintegrated” to convert—a notion that presupposes some level of disturbance in the very definition of conversion. However, looking ahead to Chapter 9 on mental health and religiousness, the research shows that people spanning the entire spectrum of psychological health status undergo the meaning-remaking changes called conversion. This suggests that a singular definition is inadequate and that a meaning-making model might do a better job of accommodating variations in how people convert.

If you have strong religious beliefs, you may naturally be inclined to hear with caution information that might connote something negative about religious conversion experiences. For example, when researchers of a past generation first reported findings suggesting that converts scored higher on a hysteria scale (Spellman, Baskett, & Byrne, 1971) and a research review later suggested that religious people do not behave more prosocially than nonreligious people (Galen, 2012a, 2012b), you might have felt puzzled because the psychologists appeared to be “putting down” your faith. Analogously, someone with antireligious biases who hears evidence of positive consequences of religious conversion may feel equally puzzled. This illustrates that our personal biases can interfere with and color our interpretation of data.

Suggestibility and Neediness

Is there a special type of personality that is prone to experience dramatic religious changes? If so, is this a sign of personal strength or personal weakness? Various hypotheses have been offered to account for the so-called preconvert. The writings of Adler (1930) and Hoffer (1951) suggest that the preconvert has a need to gain access to some great power. This need is satisfied via conversion, through which one gains access to the Almighty. According to this view, the need for power is a sign of inner weakness. Trying to overcome this weakness is what motivates a person toward conversion. Other variations of this theme include the ideas that preconverts suffer from overdependency, repressed hatred for authority, and existential anxiety. The first two are derivatives of Freudian reasoning; the latter is derived from Frankl’s (1963, 1975) ideas. These needs are occasionally said to be unconscious, so that the preconvert is not aware of being a preconvert. Consistent with this notion, there is some evidence that sudden converts are more suggestible and hypnotizable than others (Burt & Falkenberg, 1941; Gibbons & De Jarnette, 1972). But such evidence seems slight. The most recent comprehensive examination of the research on the relation between such variables and conversion concluded that there was little appreciable relation between them (Paloutzian et al., 1999), although

someone with a particular need may be prone to be attracted to a group or leader whose style meets that need (Namini, Appel, Jürgensen, & Murken, 2010; Namini & Murken, 2008).

More recently, psychologists have suggested that people who suffer from feelings of inadequacy, perhaps from stressful childhood or adolescence experiences, may be more prone to conversion (Granqvist, 2014; Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2004; Hill, 2002; Kirkpatrick, 1997, 1998; Zinnbauer & Pargament, 1998). Research from identity theory has shown that people who convert may seek to change their identity and self-definition (Hogg et al., 2010). They may also want to change certain behaviors and see a religious group as a vehicle through which they can do so (Richardson, 1995). Some may be idealists who need a way to express their idealism through action. Thus, the personalities that seem “susceptible” to conversion are those that are actively seeking to achieve personal behavioral and identity goals. They may not be initially drawn to the beliefs but to the atmosphere and culture of the religious group, which help foster perceptions of self they hope to achieve. Then, as the newcomers become integrated into the group, the group’s beliefs become more attractive (Paloutzian et al., 1999). Overall, it seems that some personalities choose to join a religious group out of a desire for personal growth, identity redefinition, and meaning, but they do not seem “vulnerable” to conversion because of a need for power, as Adler and others hypothesized.

Need for Meaning

The above discussion of individualistic processes such as emotions, creativity, mental health status, and personal neediness, in addition to the so-called need for meaning described in Chapter 3, leaves us searching for a more comprehensive way to conceptualize the myriad processes involved in religious conversions and spiritual transformations. Any of these processes may be involved, but none of them seems like more than one possible aspect among many. In general, an overall sense of valuing is heightened in religious converts (Paloutzian, 1981), and our attitudes and behaviors are expressions of our values. Fortunately, more comprehensive ways of understanding conversion and transformation have been offered. We turn to these now.

Toward Dynamic Models of Conversion

Given the list of meaning system components presented in Chapter 2, it should now be clear why total, dramatic changes or “complete spiritual transformations” are rare. Rambo’s (1993) model summarizes the many interactive factors involved. They include personal, social, contextual, informational, and emotional factors, the medium of communication, the

time span involved, and the degree to which someone has close versus distant relationships with others who espouse the worldview to which one may convert. The mix of inputs to the person constitutes or creates doubt, which inculcates a feeling of need of change. The degree of force placed on the target person by communicators of the message, combined with the degree to which the target person feels it, combined with the flexibility versus rigidity of the message, can have variable degrees of impact on the system. Thus the output variable (whether or not a change occurred and if so, of what sort, of what strength, on which dimensions, for how long, etc.) can take on many different manifestations. Not all conversions are psychologically equal.

STEP-STAGE AND DYNAMIC MODELS IN CONVERSION AND TRANSFORMATION

Some older models of conversion that come from sociological social psychology² summarize the process of conversion as a series of steps. In some cases they see the person as an active seeker of personal transformation, in others as a passive subject. The active seeker can be understood as a person who is consciously searching for new meaning. In contrast, the passive subject can be understood as someone not searching for transformation but nevertheless available or ripe to acquire it. The two most enduring of these approaches are summarized below. They are the result of research on conversion to NRMs, so their broad application to psychological concerns is open to debate. Arguing from within the field of sociology, Gooren (2007) points out where they do and do not apply and offers a synthesis of them based on the idea of conversion careers and a life-cycle approach to the development of religious activity and identity. Let us take this up after a brief look at two ideas from the classical step-model approach.

Stepwise Models

The best-known early model of conversion to an NRM comes from the sociological work of Lofland (1977b) and Lofland and Stark (1965). This model was derived by an in-depth participant observation study of what is widely assumed to have been the beginnings of the 1960s Unification Church of the Reverend Sun Myung Moon. According to this model, there are seven steps involved in a person becoming fully converted to the group. At each step, a new meaning is engaged.

²In academia, there are two social psychologies, psychological social psychology and sociological social psychology. Each one puts the accent on its parent discipline, so much so that they overlap only about 10–20%.

Background and Predisposing Factors

First, the person must experience enduring, acutely felt tensions. A tension can be thought of as being analogous to a deprivation. It is a gap (or a perceived gap) between the actual and the desired or ideal state of affairs. The person wants circumstances to be different than they are and is therefore motivated to pursue change through some problem-solving strategy. Second, the potential convert must adopt a religious strategy instead of some other strategy (e.g., a political one) as a means of solving the problem and reducing the tension. Third, when a person in tension adopts a religious problem-solving perspective but does not have his or her needs met by conventional religious institutions, the person seeks unusual religious answers. These three factors are regarded as personal conditions that predispose a person to become a convert, whereas the following four are situational factors that must also be present.

Situations and Circumstances

Fourth, the potential convert must be at some turning point in life and must encounter the religious movement at this point. Often, this involves one phase of life's activity ending and another beginning, such as moving to a new town or becoming a parent. This could also be a traumatic event, such as the death of a loved one. It doesn't constitute or cause a spiritual transformation, but it may set in motion the process of meaning system change. Fifth, when the new convert initially enters the group, strong affective bonds are formed between the newcomer and other group members. These strong emotional ties serve to link group members closely together with a sense of unity. Sixth, concurrently, the new convert's attachments to people or things outside the group begin to diminish. The lack of ties with people in the "outside world" tends to solidify the connections with those inside the group. Seventh, according to Lofland and Stark (1965), in order for a person to become a "total convert" there must be intensive interaction between the new convert and the rest of the members. This means putting one's life at the disposal of the group. It often involves frequent contact with other members. Such interaction further cements the convert's commitment to the movement and increases his or her own availability to recruit new members.

The Lofland and Stark model was highly popular during the heyday of the stepwise model in the 1960s because casual observation made it appear to fit the many NRMs that were emerging. The emphasis of the model is distinctly on group processes and pressure, however, not on personal psychological factors. The impression conveyed to the general public was that the group was capable of picking any individual on the street at random and successfully bringing that person into the group (something decidedly false, as will be explained below). This popular impression developed partly because it became known that the particular NRM on which

the model was based approached possible new converts with a particular tactic, withheld certain information about the group from them until a later time when they were “ready,” and engaged in “love bombing.”³ This was a skillful application of elementary psychological manipulative tactics. As with most NRMs that rose in that era, the popularity of the Unification Church eventually waned.

Multimotive Sect–Church Model

One factor that is critical in determining the type of group to which someone converts is the person’s motive and what kind of tension is felt. Glock (1964; see also Glock & Stark, 1965) offered a theory that enables us to conceptualize how different motives or tensions would lead one toward converting to a particular type of group. His model is an expansion of early sect–church theory, a traditional sociological theory about the development of religious groups. The sect–church theory considers “church” a social organization or institution that is a part of the established society. Church members are likely to have been raised in the church and likely to raise their offspring in it. As contrasted to the church, the sect is in tension with the church and with other facets of “main-line” society. The sect would likely be composed of people who have converted to the sect movement from the church. It would be smaller than the church, and may have as its goal the changing of the larger structure against which it is reacting. Theoretically, sects emerge when some people in the church break off from the main group and form a group of their own. Though the sect begins small, as a reaction against the church, it gradually becomes church-like as it grows.

Although this theory doesn’t hold true in all situations (for e.g., not all sects grow out of churches), it provides a basic understanding. Glock notes that various types of deprivation can give rise to religious movements. The main deprivation-induced motive is economic. Glock uses the term *deprivation* to refer to “any and all of the ways that an individual or group may be, or feel disadvantaged in comparison either to other individuals or groups, or to an internalized set of standards” (Glock & Stark, 1965, p. 246). Two points need to be brought out in this definition. First, feelings of deprivation may result when one compares oneself to another and discovers that the other is “higher” or better off. Second, the standard of comparison can be one’s own internal standard. Thus, when a person’s level falls below his or her own personal standard, feelings of deprivation may result. Deprivations then function as motives that induce people to change their situation, belief, group, or behavior. Glock lists five types of

³Love bombing was a tactic in which members would reinforce the recruit’s desired behavior by responding in a caring and affectionate way when the recruit did or said what the group wanted but extinguish undesired behavior by responding in an aloof and impersonal way when the recruit did otherwise.

deprivation that may lead a person to join a certain type of religious group or movement: economic, social, organismic, ethical, and psychic deprivation. They are described as follows:⁴

1. Economic deprivation refers to the differential distribution across society of money and goods. Those who perceive themselves as having less than they should, especially as compared to others who are similar, interpret this to mean that they are economically deprived. Economic deprivation motivates people to break off from the mainstream church to develop a new sect whose meaning holds promise for economic advancement.⁵

2. Social deprivation refers to the perception that socially valued attributes such as age, race, and intelligence have been unevenly distributed. For example, in American society, it somehow conveys a different meaning to be young, white, and educated than to be old, nonwhite, and uneducated. Social deprivation motivates the development of a separate church organization. Church members who are not having their social needs met for such things as status, recognition, and opportunity may reorganize into a new church more suited to the satisfaction of their own social needs.

3. Organismic deprivation refers to feeling disadvantaged due to physical or mental illness or other disabling traits such as blindness or deafness. Obviously, having such traits means that people are deprived of certain rewards obtainable by others. According to Glock, organismic deprivation leads to the development of a religious healing movement. It is a means of hope for miraculous healing, with extreme forms becoming cult-like.

4. Ethical deprivation refers to the perception of conflicts between society's ideal values and the performance of individuals or groups in light of those values. Ethical deprivations are thought to underlie the development of reform movements. The ethical reformer means to correct what he or she sees as too much moral compromising.

5. Psychic deprivation refers to an unmet cognitive need for satisfactory purpose and meaning. When such needs are not met by existing value systems, the individual's meaning system may undergo change, which we will discuss later in this chapter. Glock suggests that some people may turn to cults out of psychic deprivations.

This presentation of deprivations as precursors to movement toward specialized religious groups is only a conceptual analysis. Perhaps religions arise not only out of deprivation, but also out of healthiness, and the desire to share the abundance of what one has experienced. Nevertheless, it seems

⁴These generalizations from the theory were more applicable in times past. For example, sect conversions do not necessarily occur among members of lower social classes today.

⁵Modern "prosperity churches" may be an example of this.

clear that motives are important. In Glock's system, a particular type of deprivation-induced motive leads one toward conversion to a particular type of religious group. By fusing Lofland's step processes of conversion with Glock's system, we can hypothesize that encountering a group that promises to meet a person's particular need, under the right combination of predisposing and situational circumstances, creates an exceptionally strong motivation for that person to convert to the group.

Forced Conversion: A Special Case

There is one phenomenon sometimes referred to as conversion that has little relationship with other notions of the processes that mediate it. It is so-called forced conversion. However, *coercion* is a better word for it. What it refers to does not fit the other ideas in this chapter or in conversion and spiritual transformation research generally. This is because in such "conversion" a person is forced to change; there is no choice. Because this is a special case, Box 7.1 is provided to explain more about it and stimulate discussion, either at this point, at the end of the chapter, or both.

BOX 7.1. Summary of the Circumstances Typically Involved in So-Called Forced Conversions

There is a special category of converts whose circumstances raise important issues beyond those with which this book is primarily concerned. These are people who are subject to forced conversions. Sometimes thought of as a relic of past centuries, forced conversions occur today more than most people are aware or would like to acknowledge. The circumstances are typically those involving intergroup conflict in which the stronger captures the weaker, and they are given a choice between converting or dying. In some cases the dominant group imposes a mandatory "state," or "official," religion that a person is required to acknowledge.

The idea of forced conversions does not seem to fit naturally into the general discussion of the psychology of conversion. This is probably because the concepts of conversion and its superset, spiritual transformation, are typically understood psychologically to involve a significant degree of choice in the potential convert. The magnitude of social influence may vary, but it is assumed that the individual has the freedom to say yes or no to an appeal. But when the "appeal" changes from enticement to aggressive manipulation to threats or coercion, other psychological processes beyond choice become relevant. A fundamental psychological issue concerns when social and psychological determinants end and personal choice begins. As we continue to look at spiritual transformations and meaning in people's lives, think about whether this issue is relevant to any important changes you have made in your own life.

Dynamic Models

The stepwise models of conversion are conceptually rich. They enable us to think about the multiple, varied factors that must be taken into account when trying to understand profound changes such as the religious transformation of someone's life. They may help us be aware that not all conversions are the same and that no single factor is causal in them all. Furthermore, not all conversions fit these too-neat models. Thus it seems unwise to apply them across the board. Conversion is too dynamic a process to be captured by relatively static models.

Conversion Careers

After explaining how each step model seems to apply to a segment of conversion phenomena, Gooren (2007) proposes a new synthesis centered on the concept of the "conversion career," which he defines as "the member's passage, within his or her social and cultural context, through levels, types and phases of church participation" (Droogers, Gooren, & Houtepen, 2003, quoted in Gooren, 2005). Here is a verbatim list of the four essential elements of his approach:

1. The conceptualization of individual dissatisfaction.
2. A five-level typology of religious activity (disaffiliation, preaffiliation, affiliation, conversion, and confession).
3. The need for a life-cycle approach.
4. The many factors influencing changes in individual religious activity. (Gooren, 2007, p. 349)

This approach is flexible enough to accommodate a range of processes involved in conversion, including but not limited to personality, social, institutional, cultural, and contingency factors. As such, it seems to restate, partially overlap, sharpen, and extend the "systematic stage model" proposed by Rambo (1993), which is discussed next.

A Systemic Stage Model

Is it possible to consolidate the various bits and pieces of research and theory that describe the conversion process into one coherent, integrated picture? Rambo (1993) has written the most inclusive attempt at this so far. He calls his approach a "systemic stage model" in contrast to a "sequential stage model" because, in his view, the order of the stages is not universal or invariant, as it typically is in developmental theory. Rather, the stages might be thought of as simultaneous facets. Each "stage" is used to

organize part of the “cluster of theme patterns, and processes operative in religious change” (p. 195). The overall process of conversion occurs across time, but the “stages” occur concurrently and in varying degrees, each in continual interaction with the others. This complex description of the conversion process is summarized in Figure 7.2.

Rambo’s (1993) systemic stage model far exceeds the notions of conversion type and the various models of steps in the conversion process in its comprehensive scope. Rambo offers a thorough *descriptive list* of the variables involved in conversion. His list is not, however, an explanatory model. That is, it does not attempt to account for the processes through which one factor affects others as part of the conversion process as a whole. However, a meaning systems approach can do this. To illustrate, look through the list of factors involved in the conversion process in Rambo’s list and compare them to the elements in a meaning system and the processes through which they interact. The composition and processes that comprise meaning systems and those in Rambo’s model map nicely onto each other. Thus we have both a full description of the individual and group factors to be taken into account and a psychological model that allows us to understand and account for what is being transacted among those factors.

The meaning of each stage (context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, consequences) is apparent in Rambo’s carefully selected labels and in the examination of the types of experiences, circumstances, events, or behaviors listed under each one. Rambo sees these elements as “interactive and cumulative over time” (p. 17). To illustrate: Like all human activity, conversion must occur in some context (from macro to micro in level of analysis), and this context may change radically or evolve slowly during a person’s life. A context may, however, also precipitate a crisis or a quest, or serve as the person’s refuge from one. Perhaps exacerbating these states, but perhaps also satisfying them, are encounters with advocates for or against conversion, the proposed benefits to be gained from it, and interaction with the individuals or groups involved, their systems of meaning, and attributions and expectations about self and God. These interactions and encounters can, of course, modify the crisis, quest, and context as well as be outgrowths of them. The person’s commitment as manifested in public or private acts, the internal sense of motivation and surrender that may accompany it, and its psychological, behavioral, and social consequences add to the strength of each of the above elements of conversion as well as being responses to them. The complexity of this model is apparent when one tries to picture the intricate web of possibilities for how its elements can be knit together.

From his model, Rambo draws an interesting conclusion: It may be impossible to discover what a “pure” conversion is—“conversion is malleable.” For him, this means the debates involving either/or assertions about conversion are inadequate: “debates about whether conversion is sudden or

Stage 1: Context	Stage 2: Crisis	Stage 3: Quest	Stage 4: Encounter
<p>Macrocontext</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Systems of access and control <p>Microcontent</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Degree of integration and conflict <p>Contours of context</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Culture • Social • Personal • Religious <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Valence of dimension <p>Contextual influences</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resistance and rejection • Enclaves • Paths of conversion • Congruence • Types of conversion <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Traditional transition ◦ Institutional transition ◦ Affiliation ◦ Intensification ◦ Apostasy • Motifs of conversion <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Intellectual ◦ Mystical ◦ Experimental ◦ Affectional ◦ Revivalism ◦ Coercive <p>Normative: proscriptions and prescriptions</p>	<p>Nature of crisis</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intensity • Duration • Scope • Source: internal/external <p>Catalysts for conversion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mystical experiences • Near-death experience • Illness and healing • Is that all there is? • Desire for transcendence • Altered states of consciousness • Protean selfhood • Pathology • Apostasy • Externally stimulated crises 	<p>Response style</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active • Passive <p>Structural availability</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional • Intellectual • Religious <p>Motivational structures</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience pleasure and avoid pain • Conceptual system • Enhance self-esteem • Establish and maintain relationships • Power • Transcendence 	<p>Advocate</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secular attributes • Theory of conversion • Inducements to conversion <p>Advocate's strategy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic style <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Diffuse ◦ Concentrated • Modes of contact <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Public/private ◦ Personal/impersonal <p>Benefits of conversion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • System of meaning • Emotional gratification • Techniques for living • Leadership • Power <p>Advocate and Convert</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initial response • Resistance • Diffusion of innovation • Differential motivation and experiences <p>Missionary adaptations</p> <p>Convert adaptations</p>

FIGURE 7.2. Systemic stage model of religious conversion. From Rambo (1993, pp. 168–169). Copyright 1993 by Yale University Press. Reprinted by permission.

Stage 5: Interaction	Stage 6: Commitment	Stage 7: Consequences
<p>Encapsulation Sphere of Change</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical • Social • Ideological <p>Relationships</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kinship • Friendship • Leadership • Disciple/teacher <p>Rituals— choreography of the soul</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deconstruction • Reconstruction <p>Rhetoric—systems of interpretation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attribution • Modes of understanding <p>Roles—reciprocal expectations and conduct</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self and God • Self and others 	<p>Decision making Rituals</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Separation • Transition • Incorporation <p>Surrender</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desire • Conflict • “Giving In”: relief and liberation • Sustaining surrender <p>Testimony: biographical reconstruction integrating personal and community story</p> <p>Motivational reformulation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple • Malleable • Interactive • Cumulative 	<p>Personal bias in assessment</p> <p>Nature of consequences</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Affective • Intellectual • Ethical • Religious • Social/political <p>Sociocultural and historical consequences of conversion</p> <p>Religious landscapes</p> <p>Unintended sociocultural consequences</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nationalism • Preservation of the vernacular • Secularization <p>Psychological consequences</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Progression • Regression • Stasis <p>Stories of conversion</p> <p>Theological consequences</p>

gradual, partial or total, internal or external, and the like, can be resolved by acknowledging a spectrum of possibilities” (p. 170). The research hypotheses that can potentially be derived from it are many.

Person–Environment Fit

Implicit in the ideas of Rambo and Gooren is that religiousness and spirituality are human activities that are most effective and satisfying when there is a good fit between the needs and offerings of the individual and those of the social environment. This not a new idea in psychology; it was stated in the heyday of classical gestalt psychology by social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1936). Namini and Murken (2008) applied the core of this idea to understanding the degree of fit between the individual and the religious group context in which his or her spiritual transformation occurred. The variables involved would unavoidably include those in Rambo’s list.

Namini and Murken build on the arguments by Richardson (1985, 1995) that their research participants (converts to NRMs in Germany) were not passive initiates to the group but instead were active seekers who were motivated to find a new religion or philosophy of life that would serve their needs better than whatever they had before. Namini and Murken emphasized was that there is an interaction between the person and the environment in which each comes to a transaction with something to give and something that it wants. The individual and the group continue a collaborative partnership as long as a mutual win–win relationship exists. Therefore, both the group (the NRM) and the individual benefit because of their mutual fit. The group receives bolstered participation, financial support, and confirmation of its rightness or goodness because new people join; the person’s desires for affiliation, a sense of purpose, or a need for security are met (Namini & Murken, 2008). In addition, the new group member may have heightened self-esteem, satisfaction with life, and happiness, and may also decrease harmful habits such as drug abuse. Also, Namini and Murken found that a large percentage of their participants had lost a parent at an early age, a result consistent with predictions based on attachment theory (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2004; Kirkpatrick, 2005) that membership in a religious group may compensate for the absence of a parent. Features of the person (e.g., loss of a parent) and features of the environment (group benefits) interacted with each other such that there was a mutual fit.

The person–environment fit can also be described as a match between the *needs* and *supplies* of both the person and the group (Namini, Appel, Jürgensen, & Murken, 2010). For example, a good fit may occur when the group supplies affiliation to the person, while the person supplies financial support to the group. The person’s need for belongingness is met, while the group’s need for material support is also met. However, if there is a

mismatch between what either party needs and what the opposite party can supply, the outcome could be decreased well-being, increased resentment, and, in the extreme, severing the tie between the person and the group.⁶

Person–Group Un-Fit: Deconversion and Apostasy

The notion of spiritual transformation includes changes in meaning systems that move one away from, not only toward, a religion or spirituality; in other words, “deconversion” and “conversion” are both spiritual transformations—the two terms just refer to going in opposite directions. Following the above line of reasoning, when a person deconverts, the transformation would be the result of some degree of un-fit between the person and the group; the group no longer supplies what the individual needs or wants; thus, the person departs and tries to have those needs satisfied some other way. Such a lack of fit has been researched most by Streib et al. (2009; see also Streib, 2014) in Germany and the United States, in a long research program that used both qualitative and quantitative methods (see also Burris & Raif, 2015). The experiential dimensions in the list of elements of deconversion include loss of specific religious experiences; intellectual doubt, denial, or disagreement with specific beliefs; moral criticism; emotional suffering; and disaffiliation from the community. Space precludes writing a detailed account of this research, but you can see a snapshot of Streib’s six possible deconversion trajectories and their characteristics in Table 7.1.

This characterization of deconversion can be easily mapped onto components of a meaning system as summarized by Park (2005a, 2005b, 2010) or Paloutzian (2005, 2014) and be interpreted in such terms. Intellectual doubt and moral criticism (two of the five criteria for deconversion) reflect beliefs, attitudes, and values—components of meaning systems. Disaffiliation and the final outcome of deconversion reflect new goals and a new purpose. The experiential and emotional aspects are implicit and inherent in meaning system change because the process involves stresses and pressures that may be experienced as various kinds of unease, affective depletion, lowering of resistance to change, feelings of dissatisfaction with the status quo for any number of reasons, and because much of the process of appraising incoming information occurs at an affective level. Finally, departing from a religion almost automatically involves a transformation, or at least a modification, of ultimate concern and worldview. Thus it seems that the descriptive characteristics of deconversion summarized above map reasonably well onto the social cognitive processes that comprise a shift in a meaning system, a set of changes also apparent in a sample of 35 recent deconverts from Islam (Cottee, 2015).

⁶Portions of this last discussion adapted from Paloutzian (2012) in Hill and Dik (2012).

TABLE 7.1. The Six Possible Deconversion Trajectories According to Streib et al. (2009)

Type of trajectory	Characteristics
Secularizing exit	Termination of (concern with) religious belief and praxis and, eventually, disaffiliation from organized religion
Oppositional exit	Adopting a different system of beliefs and engaging in different ritual practices, while affiliating with a higher tension, more oppositional religious organization, which could mean, for example, conversion into a fundamentalist group
Religious switching	Migration to a religious organization with a similar system of beliefs and rituals and with no, or only marginal, difference in terms of integration in the surrounding culture
Integrating exit	Adopting a different system of beliefs and engaging in different ritual practices, while affiliating with an integrated or more accommodated religious organization
Privatizing exit	Disaffiliating from a religious organization, eventually including termination of membership, but continuation of private religious belief and private religious praxis
Heretical exit	Disaffiliating from a religious organization, eventually including termination of membership, and individual heretical appropriation of new belief system(s) or engagement in different religious praxis but without new organizational affiliation

From Paloutzian, Murken, Streib, and Rößler-Namini (2013). Copyright 2013 by The Guilford Press. Reprinted by permission.

TAKE-HOME MESSAGES

- Conversion is a change in a meaning system. Most conversions, or “spiritual transformations,” are not radical or totalistic—the change from one’s status quo to some alternative state is a matter of degree.
- Standard psychological hypotheses have often been incomplete, as if only one element of what is actually a complex process caused or constituted the conversion. It is instead a process that involves myriad variables.
- Early models of conversion, or step-stage models, analyze conversion as a sequence of steps through which one becomes a total convert or true believer.
- Dynamic models recognize myriad complex factors that interact in the conversion process, not a sequence of fixed stages, and are more consistent with a meaning systems analysis.

- Individual–group fit models emphasize the interaction, or fit, between group pressure to convert and individual personality or needs.
- Spiritual transformation includes deconverting from a religion or group, just as it includes converting to a religion or a group. Analogous psychological processes are involved; they just happen to be working towards an opposite end state.

FURTHER READING

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CHAPTER 8

Religion, Spirituality, and Experience

Relations between Religion and Experiences

Explaining Religious and Spiritual Experiences

Experience Triggers and Modulators

Experiences and Interdependence: New Spiritual Movements

An Emergent Property

Take-Home Messages

Further Reading

There are two fundamental aspects, what I call two bottom lines, to a human being's life. One of them is intensely individual and private: your own experience. The other is necessarily public: your actions. Your experiences are available in their pure phenomenological form only to you; no one else can see, hear, or feel them. Your actions, on the other hand, are observable in the public arena and it is those, including the verbal behavior with which you describe your subjective experiences, that others use to decide whether you are crazy or sane, criminal or innocent, genuine or a fake. This chapter is concerned with the first aspect, the relations between religion, spirituality, and experience in the individual. Its core question is "What do you make of whatever it is that is going on inside your head?" The other bottom line, your behavior, is the topic of Chapter 11.

RELATIONS BETWEEN RELIGION AND EXPERIENCES

In a basic sense, your experience of life is the basis for whatever you consider reality for you. An elementary philosophical analysis reveals that

despite all of our logic and our data, what we “know” is what is going on inside our own heads, even though what is going on in our heads includes observations of our own behavior as well as information from the body that includes feelings. Descartes’s classic “I think, therefore I am” is based on the fundamental notion that at the end of one’s efforts to know whether there is any “objective” truth outside oneself, there is, at last and at least, awareness of oneself being aware. Each of us as an individual lives with whatever experience we are aware of, whether it is labeled religious, spiritual, agnostic, or atheistic.

The Experiential Bottom Line

To illustrate how basic one’s personal perception and experience are, suppose you were defined as “crazy” by clinical psychologists or psychiatrists because you said you experienced strange visions: you saw a pink elephant on the wall, saw many other such animals and odd sights, and heard their voices talking to you. Other people do not see or hear these, but you do; you are certain of it. Who is to say whether what you see and hear is “really there”? Might it be possible that a pink elephant is indeed there and that you have veridical perceptions, but the other people (who do not see it) do not? Technically, this is possible. However, if you claimed to see a pink elephant and nobody else could see it, you would likely be diagnosed as having a mental disorder, because the others say your perception is abnormal. Simply put, your mental status is diagnosed in part by your purported experiences. Each of us navigates through our perception of reality based on our experiences, but nobody can see them but us. For reasons such as this, experiences deemed religious are at once the most important and core aspects of religiousness and the most difficult and ephemeral to study. However, it is well known that the experiences that precede or follow a religious commitment and the mystical or altered states of consciousness that are part of some people’s spiritual lives can be potent.

To extend this illustration specifically to the area of religion, suppose a friend said to you, “I see God.” Because in most theologies God is supposed to be invisible, you might at first not take your friend’s remark seriously. But suppose he or she persists in the claim, stating unreservedly that he or she saw God. Further, suppose your friend said that God’s audible voice told him or her to drop out of college and pursue life as a poor servant in a poverty-stricken country in which foreigners contract infectious diseases at a high rate. How do you interpret your friend’s claim of a vision and conversation with God? The dilemma you are faced with is logically identical to the one you’d face if your friend claimed to see a pink elephant. It is also logically identical to the claims of certain charismatic Christians that God spoke audibly to them (Luhmann, 2012), and to the claims of the ancient Hebrew leader Moses, Muhammad, founder of the Muslim religion in the

early middle ages, and, more recently, the American founder of Mormonism, Joseph Smith, each of whom claimed that God or an angel of God spoke audibly to him (see Table 8.1). This is not to say that these people were mentally ill, though sometimes people who have claimed too persistently and loudly to have seen God and heard God's voice have been diagnosed as having mental disorders (see Chapter 9).

Each instance above of a "religious experience" or a "spiritual experience" raises basic issues involving how people attribute meaning to stimuli. Questions emerge about the degree to which mental abilities or proclivities such as imagination (Prelude to Part II) or absorption (Chapter 6) are involved in how someone makes sense of something he or she has never heard or seen before. They also point to issues of culture. For example, how is it that Mormon founder Joseph Smith could claim to have had strange mental experiences in the middle of the night and at first be uncertain about what they meant, but after accepting the interpretations of intimate others proclaim that an angel of God had appeared and explained theological truths to him, and have one religious culture accept this as truth while another rejected it as a sham? Perhaps experiences deemed religious or spiritual are not automatically accepted as such by those who have them. Perhaps the interpretations are instead interdependent with the inclinations of the group with which one is aligned.

I'll let you be in my dreams if I can be in yours.
—BOB DYLAN, "Talkin' World War III Blues"¹

Interpretations of Experience

We generally take one of two general approaches to accounting for spiritual experiences. One of them proposes that the meaning of an experience is a given—that what it means is inherent, part of its essence. The other view is that the meaning of an experience is created, that is, constructed or "read into" a mental event. In social psychological terms, this second approach refers to attribution processes. Variations of this latter view include the suggestions that some experiences have a common core (Hood, 1995) that is fundamentally the same but is interpreted differently depending upon the language and perceptual set the person brings to the process of interpreting it (Proudfoot, 1985). Thus persons who have a preexisting belief that their dead loved ones communicate with them through special states of consciousness may interpret an unusual mental event as a message from a deceased parent or child. In contrast, a person who has no particular afterlife belief may interpret the same experience as a meaningless intrusive

¹Copyright ©1963, 1966 by Warner Bros. Inc.; renewed 1991, 1994 by Special Rider Music.

TABLE 8.1. Scriptural Texts Documenting the Initial “Calling” of Moses, Muhammad, and Joseph SmithMoses (1–2 centuries B.C.E.), Judaism

Exodus 3:2–10: There [at Horeb, the mountain of God] the angel of Yahweh appeared to him in the shape of a flame of fire, coming from the middle of a bush. . . . “I must go and look at this strange sight. . . .” Now Yahweh saw him go forward to look, and God called to him from the middle of the bush. “Moses Moses!” he said. “Here I am,” Moses answered. “Come no nearer,” he said. “Take off your shoes, for the place on which you stand is holy ground. I am the God of your father,” he said, “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” At this Moses covered his face, afraid to look at God. And Yahweh said, “I have seen the miserable state of my people in Egypt . . . I am aware of their sufferings . . . so come, I send you to Pharaoh to bring the sons of Israel, my people, out of Egypt.”

Muhammad (7th century C.E.), Islam

T. 1150 Sura 96: 1–5: When it was the night on which God honoured him with his mission . . . , [the angel] Gabriel brought him the command of God. “He came to me,” said the apostle of God, “while I was asleep, with a coverlet of brocade whereon was some writing, and said, ‘Read!’ I said, ‘What shall I read?’ He pressed me with it so that I thought it was death; then he let me go and said, ‘Read!’ I said, ‘What shall I read?’ (T. 1150). . . . He said: ‘Read in the name of thy Lord who created, Who created man of blood coagulated. Read! Thy Lord is the most beneficent, Who taught by the pen, Taught that which they knew not unto men.’ (Sura 96:1-5). . . . I heard a voice from heaven saying, ‘O Muhammad! Thou are the apostle of god and I am Gabriel.’”^a

Joseph Smith (19th century C.E.), Mormonism

History 1:33–34; 1:42: He called me by name, and said unto me that he was a messenger sent from the presence of God to me, and that his name was Moroni; that God had a work for me to do (1:33). . . . He said there was a book deposited, written upon gold plates, giving an account of the former inhabitants of this continent, and the source from whence they sprang. He also said that the fullness of the everlasting Gospel was contained in it, as delivered by the Savior to the ancient inhabitants (1:34). . . . Again, he told me, that when I got those plates of which he had spoken . . . I should not show them to any person. . . . While he was conversing with me about the plates, the vision was opened to my mind that I could see the place where the plates were deposited, and that so clearly and distinctly that I knew the place again when I visited it (1:42).

^aGuillaume (1955/2011, p. 106).

thought, a trigger of a memory, or perhaps as a delusion or other symptom. In both cases, the person interprets the event based upon the terminology and concepts with which he or she makes sense of the world. A multilevel interdisciplinary understanding argues that the entire process of meaning making is a matter of humans evaluating information, constructing meaning, reevaluating and reconstructing from one moment to the next. This lifelong process enables us to navigate through the world with the impression of continuity and coherence, purpose, and direction (Markman et al., 2013; Park, 2005a, 2013; Wong, 2012).

Although this is a bit speculative, we may be able to integrate data from neuroscience and psychology to address historic questions that have come to us from philosophy and theology. For example, how does someone make sense of a spiritual experience and come to a conclusion about what it means? We begin with an assumption that understanding such experiences is important because people have them and because they can carry a heightened potency of meaning. It is clear that human beings need to make meanings; thus, if people do not have a meaning readily available to them with which to make sense of an experience, they will make one (Park & McNamara, 2006). The process of making meaning out of extraordinary experiences is not necessarily an aberration rooted in a malfunctioning brain, but rather human beings' inherent tendency to connect one thing with another, strive for wholeness and integration of elements, and see pattern and order. Understanding this tendency involves more than identifying whether incoming information fits a preexisting schema or is interpreted in a way that is consistent with cues in the social environment. It involves learning how neurological data and meaning making as a recursive evaluative process fit with each other (Paloutzian, Fikes, & Hutsebaut, 2002; Paloutzian et al., 2006; Park & McNamara, 2006).

Ordinary and Extraordinary Experience

Experiences involving religion differ along a number of dimensions, including the degree to which they are ordinary versus unusual, frequent versus infrequent, prebelief versus postbelief, mystical versus earthly, discrete versus continuous, and explainable versus unexplainable. Differences along all of these dimensions are layered on top of those that are inherent in the characteristics of the particular religious culture of each denomination, group, or sect.

An account of ordinary experiences within one worldwide religion has been provided for Roman Catholics (Donahue, 1995). For example, Michael J. Donahue says that even with all the diversity within the Roman Catholic Church, a Catholic is a Catholic. Within the boundaries of Catholicism people may express a wide range of opinion over issues such as whether women should be priests, birth control, abortion, and church hierarchy, but

there is nevertheless an impression of community. This sense of community is strong enough so that, he says, “when Protestants have disputes over belief or practice, their tendency is to schism; Catholics, apparently, prefer to stay together and fight.” They are bound together by certain defining features of “being a Catholic,” such as the Eucharist, a unique line of authority and church hierarchy, the Mass, and a profound history. Other experiences, for Catholics and non-Catholics alike, that might be seen in the ordinary or “common sense” category are the feeling of being safe with a loving God, feeling fear in the face of an angry God, feeling happy when getting what you prayed for, and feeling empty and disappointed when what you prayed for did not occur. One might feel a sense of something inexplicable or powerful when thinking of God as infinite, or feel a smallness or absurdity when trying to imagine the size of God.

More unusual, extraordinary experiences are hard to define. They have an ineffable quality, sometimes termed noetic, and tend to be potent and memorable. They are described as having an immediacy and mystical quality that is not reducible. They are said to be numinous (providing an awesome and fascinating sense of the presence of something holy) and nonrepresentational, in the sense that whatever is seen in them is not understood to be a mental picture or visual representation of something. They do not require a validity check with the outside world. They are, instead, their own source of validity. They may be paradoxical in the sense that whatever is experienced in them does not feel like it has to follow the rules of ordinary logic.

What are the causes and the consequences of experiences of the ordinary and the extraordinary type, and what do they do for or to those people who have them? In trying to answer these questions, it helps to keep in mind that there are several ways in which religions and experiences may be related to each other. First, religiousness may lead to experience, either to a unique, singular experience or a more general way of experiencing life. In other words, precisely because someone is (or becomes) religious or spiritual, he or she may experience life in a different way. In fact, the promise of a different experience of life (e.g., the “true life,” a life worth living) is offered by all religions of which I am aware. In this case, a new experience functions as a confirmation of one’s faith. Second, one or more experiences may lead you to adopt a religion or to change the way you live the form of spirituality you already have. For example, profound sorrow over a negative life event (e.g., the death of a daughter) may prompt parents to seek a conscious awareness of a supreme being in search of an answer to the question, *Why?* In this case, the negative life experience functions as a stimulus to personal faith. Third, the relation between religions and experiences can be one of reciprocal determinism; each causes the other in an interactive manner. Here the experience is both a mediator of one’s personal faith and an avenue for its expression, as well as an event to be interpreted through

the eyes of that faith. Fourth, one's personal faith and experience, or one's agnosticism or atheism, may both be determined by a third factor. For example, upon seeing the birth of one's child, a person may both express a devotion to God and feel a sense of awe attributed to God; and in contrast, upon contemplating the philosophical problem of evil (Why do bad things happen if God is good and all powerful?), a person may conclude that God isn't really there.

Anomalous Experiences

Before examining claims of having had spiritual experiences or visions, hearing voices of God or angels, or seeing demons or Jesus or another Being, we ought to have a clear understanding of what such experiences are.

Voices: Gods, Demons, Angels

One attempt at understanding these phenomena broadly defines spiritual and mystical experiences as the "recognition of and response to what might be inherently sacred realities" (Hood, 2005, p. 356). This definition leaves unaddressed the question of where the experience came from, with the emphasis on what "might" (implying "or might not") be inherently sacred. There are at least two ways to interpret what this definition is referring to. First, implied by one meaning of this definition is that an experience may be inherently sacred for ontological reasons, that is, it is sacred because it comes from a sacred source that actually exists, whether it is called God, a Supreme Being, or an Ultimate Other. Second, implied by another meaning of this definition is that an experience may psychologically be inherently sacred as seen substantively by the person, regardless of its other ontological origins or lack of them. In this latter case, the quality of sacredness exists neither in the experience itself as a raw, uninterpreted mental event, nor in its root, but in the meaning attributed to it in the mind of the perceiver. The first, ontological approach seems to be consistent with the view that spiritual experiences are given by a higher force or being, and then "recognized." The second, attributional approach is consistent with the psychological idea that they are actively or passively constructed.

The level appropriate for gaining scientific understanding of spiritual experiences is the latter one because attributions are known psychological processes that can be understood in the context of scientific theory and evidence. The question of whether experiences can be attributed to possible supernatural or paranormal ontological realities (e.g., whether God or another supreme being exists and is the source of a voice, vision, or other anomalous event) cannot be answered by scientific methods (Masters, 2007; Paloutzian, 2006). Whether or not otherworldly agents are involved

in experiences deemed spiritual or anomalous, we know that such experiences are neurobiological and psychological events, and it is at these levels of analysis (or, in the case of this chapter, a blend of levels) that such experiences can be understood.

Timelessness

One aspect of life that is fundamental to how we experience anything is time. Any event (including any mental experience) that occurs happens at a particular moment in time, whether that moment is long or short. And any interpretation of that experiential event can begin only following the onset of the initial experience. Thus, the interpretation of that experience is itself another event, one that involves making meaning out of the initial experience. Therefore, the interpretation is a meaning made of a past mental experience, even if that experience is “only” an immediately preceding mental event.

For ordinary day-to-day life tasks, this seems of little interest. However, people vary on their proclivity to experience their sense of self as timeless. Burris and Sani (2014), who term this ability the “immutable likeness of ‘being,’” have developed the Immutable Self (IS) scale to assess it. People prone to experiencing their self as timeless agree with statements such as “Whether it is true or not, I sometimes feel as if I have always existed” and “I know that I will physically die, but it feels literally impossible for me to imagine my mind ‘turning off’ as a result.” People who were high in IS tended to reject the idea that death includes the total elimination of a human’s “self,” presumably including the continuation of consciousness. They are also more prone to adopt views that include notions of “something” existing transcendentally, both during our present lives and especially before and after them. These findings suggest that people can vary in their tendencies toward the esoteric and transcendent, on those who have more of this tendency or ability are more likely to accept and feel comfortable with their own anomalous experiences and others’ claims of the unusual, paranormal, or inexplicable. Burris suggested that IS experiences are linked to intuitive dualism—that sense that consciousness *feels* distinct from incarnate existence, whether or not that is a biological fact.

EXPLAINING RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES

Spiritual experiences occur in every culture and are given many labels (Hood & Chen, 2013; Hood et al., 2009). We need to explain this labeling process by drawing upon a blend of knowledge from cultural psychology, social-cognitive-attribitional approaches, and neuropsychology.

Cultural Psychology

A culture is constituted by the meanings that emerge from the interaction of individuals in a collective (Geertz, 1973; Saroglou & Cohen, 2013). Though they are given different labels in different cultures, people's experiences during activities such as meditation, contemplative prayer, active rituals, and even ingestion of certain drugs are biologically and observably real. Names such as the Tao, nirvana, the Unio Mystica, and Brahman/atman may refer to similar experiences whose core is a state of unity (Newberg, d'Aquili, & Rause, 2001). These experiences may include an awareness of an Ultimate Being, extreme sensory stimulation, spiritual growth, new knowledge or enlightenment, heightened consciousness, feelings of peace or joy, a sense of unity or completeness, impressions of sacredness or holiness, eroticism, trance possession, mediumship, hallucinations, changes in body image, and synesthesia (Cardeña, Lynn, & Krippner, 2014). Their intensity can vary greatly, depending partly on the subculture in which they occur. A rosary group quietly praying together may experience a mild divine connection, whereas Native American tribes engaging in ceremonial dances or intense "vision quests" may experience deeper levels of mystical experience such as trance states or hyperlucid visions (Newberg et al., 2001).

The Common-Core Thesis and Attributions of Meaning

The most basic question is whether the experiences people have are the same or different from each other. Compare the following two verbatim accounts of spiritual experience from William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* and decide whether you think they are, in their essence, the same:

(A) "The highest experiences that I have had of God's presence have been rare and brief—flashes of consciousness which have compelled me to exclaim with surprise—God is here!—or conditions of exaltation and insight, less intense, and only gradually passing away. I have severely questioned the worth of these moments. To no person have I named them, lest I should be building my life and work on mere phantasies of the brain. But I find that, after every questioning and test, they stand out today as the most real experiences of my life, and experiences which have explained and justified and unified all past experiences and present growth."

(B) After being awakened one night, one man said, "I then turned . . . to go to sleep again, and immediately felt a consciousness of a presence in the room, and singular to state, it was not the consciousness of a live person, but of a spiritual presence. . . . I do not know how to better describe my sensations than by simply stating that I felt a consciousness of a spiritual presence . . . I felt . . . a strong feeling of superstitious dread, as if something strange and fearful were about to happen."

Do statements A and B share a central element that gives both of them their “religious” or “spiritual” quality? Is the essence of both experiences the same but described in different terms, either religious (A) or nonreligious (B) language, only because those happened to be the words and concepts used by each person? The common-core thesis is the idea that the central essence of such experiences is the same, and that their different descriptions are due to the particular interpretations imposed on them through the various spiritual traditions. Thus, for example, a sensation of being at one with the universe upon seeing a sunset and the vision of an angel share the same core properties but are given different meanings, one religious and one not, due to the interpretive set of the person experiencing them. The interpretive set is in turn learned from the person’s subculture, the web of meanings that indicate how one ought to interpret such experiences and the language with which one ought to describe them. A variant of this idea is that the differences in reports of experiences are due to the language the person has available to describe an otherwise indescribable experience. Because a person can use only the words available to him or her, a religious believer will “filter” the experience through a religious lens and see it in those terms, whereas a nonreligious person will do the same thing but through the medium of nonreligious language. Do the available theories of religious experience shed any light on issues such as these?

The other thesis, not necessarily in conflict with the common-core thesis, is the constructivist thesis. This is the notion that for an experience to occur at all it must be mediated by language or learning of some kind. No “pure” mental experience exists that is not constructed by the language or concepts that create it and through which it is seen (Proudfoot, 1985). In extreme form this thesis suggests that the language, tradition, and concepts through which an experience is interpreted themselves constitute the experience, because an experience has to be described by some kind of language in order to be recognized. On the face of it, it appears that the constructivist thesis is in conflict with the common-core thesis. Is it? Probably not, because one can put into words and interpret only the sensory information that comes through sense organs even if it consists of internally generated sensations. Whether or not it is initially “experienced,” it nevertheless must be interpreted so that some appropriate meaning can be attributed to it. All experience is mediated—we never have a purely “objective” experience, but rather an aesthetic experience filtered and molded through the modes of sensory perception and the lenses of language and ideology. We need to distinguish between raw phenomenology and its appraisal. This idea is part of the core of critical thought and self-reflection. A sketch of the theories of religious experience and a survey of some of the factors that facilitate it may help us find out.

At a neurophysiological level of analysis, we know that particular regions of the brain and certain neurotransmitters are active during meditation and other spiritual practices (Azari et al., 2001; Newberg et al.,

2001). This suggests that the common-core thesis may have some validity. What might this tell us about how human beings construct meaning out of what is happening neurologically?

Social Cognitive Theory

We can answer that question using one or more social cognitive models. Each approach presented below is concerned with a successively wider question about the psychological mechanisms of spiritual experience. The notion that one's cognitive schemas determine how an experience is perceived focuses on the most immediate cause of the experience—the mental structures that are already inside the mind of the experiencing person. The view that is next widest in its scope of explanation is attribution theory (elaborated in Chapter 3); in order to explain how an experience is perceived one looks outside the person to the social context. Even more global in the domain of its explanation is attachment theory, which is best suited to addressing questions about the more general patterns or tendencies to experience religion a certain way. Cognitive arousal theory adds that it is not only social context that may shape the perception of experience, but the interaction between social cues and one's physiological state. The theories seem complementary, although each focuses on a different question about the nature of religious or spiritual experience.

Religion as Schema

One important way of explaining the mental processes involved in religious experience invokes the concept of the schema from cognitive psychology and social cognition (Ozorak, 2005; McIntosh, 1995). A schema is a cognitive structure of knowledge that is organized and based on past experience. It is through a schema that events are interpreted, that their meaning and significance are assessed in light of preexisting knowledge. For example, the schemas of an Orthodox Jew, a Christian, and a Muslim are undoubtedly different regarding the meaning of some Messianic passages in the Hebrew Bible, and they therefore interpret the claim of Jesus as the Messiah differently.²

Different types of schemas can be identified and applied to religion and the interpretation of spiritual experience. A schematic *knowledge structure* exists for the organization of information. A *script* is a schema containing procedural knowledge, the sequence of steps for doing something such as

²The concept of religious schemas is also relevant to the topic of religious conversion and spiritual transformation. Chapter 7 notes that conversion can be seen as the adoption of a better-fitting life schema; in the present chapter schemas are examined as cognitive structures that guide interpretation of experiences. Both applications of the concept seem to be useful.

how to order a meal at a restaurant. A *story grammar* refers to the basic or “deep” structure underlying the description of a human event. *Plans* are schemas that are generalized abstracted rules for how to approach solving a problem.

As applied to religion, it would be too sweeping a use of the schema concept to call religion in general a schema (Paloutzian & Smith, 1995). But examples of specific religious knowledge structures would include a Buddhist schema, a Roman Catholic schema, a Hindu schema, and a Bahai schema. Each of these contains its own body of information, traditions, some unique sacred writings, and interpretations that are organized into a schema and that are the filter through which other information or events are interpreted. In other words, each of these religions has its own organization of knowledge that serves as the basis for interpretation of the world.

Each religion also has different scripts. For example, the procedures for what to do at a Catholic Mass differ from the script for the ritual hand washing at a Sabbath evening meal. Each religion also has a different story grammar that underlies its own main story of how God deals with people. The deep structure of the story line of the Evangelicals with their singular emphasis on the resurrection of Jesus differs from the deep structure of the story line of the Catholics with their emphasis on the tradition of the Church. Finally, the notion of schemas as plans, or generalized approaches to problem solving, would differ for different religions. For example, they may differ in the extent to which they encourage people to look first for a “vertical” versus a “horizontal” resource for solving the problem. The schema of those whose religion teaches faith healing might prompt them only to pray to God and to avoid medical intervention, with the belief that any disorder will, of necessity, be cured. In contrast, the schemas of other people may prompt them to first seek the advice of a Western medical practitioner. In general, schemas are mental structures that guide our interpretation of events. Without schemas we would have no approach to solving problems. They enable us to follow the rules we have learned in order to negotiate ordinary human activities and to relate our own personal life experiences to those of others.

The schema concept can be usefully applied to the understanding of religious experience. For example, suppose someone experiences an ecstatic or mystical state of consciousness. It is going to be framed by the person’s schema and must be seen within and through it. If you say that you have had a vision of God, the meaning of that vision can make sense only within the context of the schema that was activated when the vision occurred. Schemas are said to be activated automatically within milliseconds (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Thus, when a vision occurs, your mind immediately activates the mental structure most relevant to making sense of it, and it is given meaning within that. In this way, a general sense of awe is assigned a God-related meaning by someone with a devout theistic schema but is given some other meaning by someone who does not have any particular religious schema.

A key to understanding how schemas operate to affect our religious experiences is that they work instantaneously and involuntarily. Because the influence of schemas is virtually automatic, it could be said that their function is to help you decipher an immediate experience. That is, the role of a schema in religious experience is understood to be close to the “raw data” that constitute the experience. However, a schema must be distinguished from an experience, because the more arcane an experience, the more likely it is that the individual will be aschematic with respect to it. Also, because a schema is something that you carry around inside your head, it is part of you, and therefore the root of the religious interpretation of the experience is within you. It is dispositional. More complicated interpretations or meanings perhaps rely on a more elaborate situational attribution process.

Attachment: Internal Working Models

One source for the schemas that give experiences religious or spiritual meanings is the nature of a person’s early attachments. Recall from Chapter 3 that the character of early childhood parenting can foster secure, anxious, or avoidant attachment styles and that these are laid down as internal working models (i.e., schemas) that affect an individual’s interpersonal relationships through the lifespan. One implication of attachment-rooted schemas is that it is possible for someone to need, and therefore be prone to have, a particular kind of experience. Kirkpatrick (2005) points out that the phenomenology of attachment includes an affectional bond: “to be attached is to love and to feel loved.” Loving God and being loved by God are, it is noted, powerful expressions of a core religious experience for many people. Central ingredients of an attachment bond are the experience of seeking comfort and security and using the source of security as a base. These are also some of the experiential properties of various religions—seeing one’s God as a source of comfort and security and turning to one’s God during times of need. At the root of these tendencies and experiences, it is said, is the attachment system formed during the course of development. Various experiences of adult religiousness can then be interpreted as expressions of this system. According to Kirkpatrick, this would include such things as the feeling of nearness to God, asking God for help in times of stress or danger, likening one’s religious conversion to “falling in love” with God, and glossolalia or “speaking in tongues” as a childlike form of attachment behavior directed toward God.

Cognitive Arousal Theory

Closely related to the notion of the religious schema is the cognitive arousal theory of attribution of religious meaning to experiences. This theory comes to the psychology of religion from social psychology. (Hill, 1995; Spilka & McIntosh, 1995; Spilka et al., 1985). The central ingredient is the

idea that the core of different experiences is the same but that the experience as felt is congruent with specific cues in the environment that signal to the person what meaning to ascribe to it. Therefore, the cause of the individual's interpretation of the experience is situational, outside the person in the immediate social environment. It is not attributed to the dispositions of the individual such as personality, needs, or schemas. The general approach to attributing experiences in this way is derived from a classic experiment by Schachter and Singer (1962).

What would you think was happening to you if you suddenly noticed your body showing signs of physiological arousal but you did not know the reason why? The experiment by Schachter and Singer (1962) was concerned with the interaction between cognitive, physiological, and social factors in determining someone's emotional state. The fundamental notion was that if someone experienced physiological arousal for which he or she had no explanation, that arousal would be given a label that is congruent with the mood in the person's social environment. This is because in the presence of unexplained arousal one must look to people nearby and detect what they are experiencing in order to label one's own arousal the same way. The key groups in their experiment were given (without their knowledge) an injection of epinephrine, a natural substance associated with the adrenal glands that activates the body and creates physiological symptoms such as increased heart rate, more frequent and shallow breathing, perspiration, and a general feeling of being aroused. Schachter and Singer claimed to have demonstrated that subjects injected with epinephrine but told it was Suproxin (a fictitious "drug" supposedly affecting vision) reported feeling the mood displayed by people near them. In one condition, experimental peers in the same room as the subject behaved angrily, and anger was the label given by the epinephrin group to describe their arousal. In another condition, the experimental confederates behaved in a happy mood, and the epinephrin subjects reportedly interpreted their arousal as happiness.

The application of the cognitive arousal model to the question of how someone attributes religious meaning to an ecstatic or mystical experience is straightforward. Say that for some (unexplained) reason you have an experience. Like the unexplained arousal in the Schachter–Singer experiment, your experience must be explained. But in this case the explanation includes attributing the experience to a source and seeking meaning in it. If the experience occurs in an environment in which others say that God caused various experiences they had, then you would also attribute your own experience to God. Similarly, if others say their experiences contain religious content and meaning, then you would be more likely to do the same.

A few cautions must be offered about universally accepting a narrow version of the cognitive arousal model of religious experience based on the Schachter–Singer experiment. First, although there is evidence that the social context partly determines whether a person will make a religious attribution, that the person in a church will more likely have a religious

experience than someone doing most other things (Spilka & McIntosh, 1995), the results of the Schachter–Singer experiment do not apply uniformly to all religious experiences because that experiment is actually a study of *misattribution*. The real cause of the arousal was an injection of a hormone, and the subjects were said to label their feelings congruent with the mood of others nearby only because they did not know the true source of their feelings. But in the case of religious or mystical experiences, one's religion may in fact cause one's experience, and the question of misattribution may be moot, at least in some instances. Second, not all religious experiences occur in a social environment. As shall be discussed below, some profound experiences occur in isolation, or prompted by music, drugs, or other nonsocial factors. Third, there are some methodological difficulties with the original Schachter–Singer experiment which suggest that unexplained arousal is not experienced as emotionally neutral. Marshall and Zimbardo (1979) and Maslach (1979) also induced unexplained arousal, by injection and by hypnosis, and found that it was experienced as aversive and fearful, not neutral. This latter finding seems close to what clinical psychologists would call free-floating anxiety, which would make a person afraid that he or she was “losing control.” By extrapolation and application to the case of religion, perhaps if unexplained arousal is felt as negative rather than neutral, maybe unexplained experience is aversive and difficult to infuse with religious meaning. This issue is not resolved. In fact, it is not clear what a “pure” experience is, an issue akin to the one discussed above about whether there is such a thing as an uninterpreted experience. Nevertheless, even given the cautions voiced above about a simple application of the cognitive arousal theory, the general attributional approach is among the most powerful approaches available for understanding the perceived causes of experiences deemed religious or spiritual.

Brain–Mind

Meaning and Brain Functionality

What we call mental events, including spiritual experiences, are the product of and mediated by brain processes. These processes include memory, conscience, knowing, and choice, all of which theologians used to attribute to the soul. An easy demonstration of this human mind–brain correspondence can be seen by the observation of the loss of specific functions in brain-damaged patients. If a person's brain is damaged in the hippocampus, the person suffers loss of memory; damage to the left temporal lobe produces loss of speech; to the frontal lobes, reasoning and judgment; to an array of other areas, changes in affect and self-regulation. Knowledge of this sort does not tell us where or whether a soul exists, but it does seem to say that what used to be thought of as soul functions depend on an intact brain to work correctly, because their functionality is apparently limited by damaged equipment.

The human brain has developed in a way that gave it ample ability to symbolize and perform various relationship operations that are part of meaning systems processes (Deacon, 1997; Solso, 2003). It may be that experiences given the label “spiritual,” which may draw upon these abilities, contribute to or help sustain this unifying, meaningful activity. This is one possible suggestion derived from an examination of apparently “abnormal” spiritual experiences of persons with schizophrenia (Rogers & Paloutzian, 2006).

Schizophrenia is a brain disorder that involves diffuse ventricular enlargement and decreased cortical volume, particularly in the gray matter of the medial temporal and frontal lobes, as well as their thalamic relays (Clinton & Meador-Woodruff, 2004; Halliday, 2001; Wong & Van Tol, 2003). Some of the main cognitive symptoms of schizophrenia are deficits in executive control, attention, memory, and general intellectual function (Mohr & Huguelet, 2004). Are these the areas where abstracting and relating functions such as those in the process of meaning making reside? If so, does this mean that less gray matter equals less hardware and software with which to make judgments, assess relationships, and abstract? If so, then this may help explain the correspondence of the less integrated system, the lower sustaining of current meaning, and the reduced constructing of new meaning (Rogers & Paloutzian, 2006; see Park & McNamara, 2006, for additional discussion of meaning and neurology). Part of the syndrome of schizophrenia seems to be incoherent connections between words, percepts, memories, feelings, and judgments; this incoherence is expressed as inappropriate or bizarre speech and social behavior that is often interpreted as *meaningless*. Thus, various parts of our brains seem to have the ability to connect and communicate with other parts around a more global idea or function, a meaning or a meaningful process.

The implication is that making meaning is a necessary process built in to being human, something asserted long before modern techniques for studying the brain were developed. But the analogy of biological development is useful (see Prelude to Part II for review). For example, just as animals developed from simple to complex organisms, the brain developed to a form that would embody complex meaning processes (Kirkpatrick, 2005, Solso, 2003). By extension to the psychological level, we can say the human mind developed in the same way. With that in mind, we can speculate about how some brain and meaning functions may interact or, better, may embody each other.

Links with Cognitive Processes

Although we can make only tentative statements at this point, meaning systems seem to operate in a way consistent with fundamental cognitive processes that themselves correspond to recent neurological data. Recall

that Park's (2005a; Park & Folkman, 1997) model of meaning-making involves the appraisal of incoming stimuli, comparison with global meaning, reappraisal if there is a discrepancy between situational meaning and global meaning, and resolution when the situational meaning is congruent with global meaning. Meaning making seems to involve a process of formulating causal explanations, such that the brain perceives sensory experiences as having causes and having relationships with other information. This may involve the semantic encoding of unfamiliar stimuli, which is associated with bilateral hippocampal activation (Goel & Dolan, 2000). Recent research on the neural correlates of inferential and deductive causal thought suggest that human reasoning involves a distributed network in the left hemisphere, over the inferior dorsolateral and medial prefrontal cortex and temporal lobe (Goel & Dolan, 2000; Goel, Gold, Kapur, & Houle, 1998). Undoubtedly, these areas also play a role in the interpretation of spiritual experiences.

It seems that the brain tries to find an identifiable causal explanation, and if one is not readily available, it is created. In the case of spiritual experiences, the incoming sensory data do not match the brain's knowledge of ordinary events, so meaning-laden causal processes are activated. The areas of the brain responsible for this function seem to be the inferior parietal lobule in the left hemisphere, the anterior convexity of the frontal lobes, primarily in the left hemisphere, and their reciprocal neural interconnections (Newberg & d'Aquili, 2000). This suggests that explanations and interpretations of the world and specifically of spiritual experiences are rooted in learned meaning systems. Thus, when a mystical experience occurs, the person does not necessarily construct a random myth to explain it, but instead makes meaning of the event in accordance with his or her global meaning system. This may include the creation of a meaningful myth.

Another process that is likely to be occurring during spiritual experiences is the gestalt process of seeing parts as a whole. Humans' tendency to see components of something as a cohesive whole, such as seeing a tree when looking at an assemblage of bark, leaves, and trunk, seems to involve activity in the parietal lobe, specifically the posterior superior parietal lobule and adjacent areas (Newberg & d'Aquili, 2000). It appears that the ability to see ambiguous, random bits of information as having a structure and pattern fosters a sense of direction, plan, and purpose in an otherwise confusing world (Paloutzian et al., 2002). Thus the notion of humans' gestalt process overlaps with an important aspect of the idea of meaning systems. In the absence of the information or knowledge needed to make sense of something, people rely upon their meaning systems to fill in the picture with probable guesses and make meaning of an otherwise confusing event (Park, 2005a; Silberman, 2005).

Our understanding of which areas of the brain are active during gestalt processes, and which are activated during spiritual experiences, has been

helped greatly by Ursula Bellugi's research examining people with Williams syndrome and Down syndrome. Those with Williams syndrome, a neurodevelopmental disorder, have difficulty perceiving wholes; those with Down Syndrome have problems perceiving parts (Bellugi, Lichtenberger, Jones, Lai, & George, 2000). MRIs indicate that Williams syndrome is marked by an overall smaller brain size, an enlarged neocerebellum, and deficits in the paleocerebellum (Bellugi et al., 2000). Interestingly, the brains of those with Down syndrome show nearly the opposite pattern, as indicated by brain volume on an MRI. This suggests that different areas of the brain are active depending upon whether one is perceiving wholes or parts. Additionally, individuals with Down syndrome have well-developed subcortical (lenticular) areas, whereas those with Williams syndrome do not (Bellugi et al., 2000). This suggests that the paleocerebellum and subcortical areas may be necessary for gestalt processes, which play an important role in how spiritual experiences are interpreted. Causal and gestalt cognitive processes enable a meaningful interpretation of the world based on incoming sensory information and thoughts. An overall understanding of how spiritual experiences make sense to a person requires neuroscientific research on diverse topics as well as the basic ideas of social and clinical psychology.

Predictive Model

Modern neuroscience research has led to the development of a *predictive model* of how the brain receives, makes sense of, and processes information. The model also, coincidentally, matches perfectly the inferences about the processes that are suggested by psychologists (Park, 2005a, b, 2010, 2013; Park & Folkman, 1997; Paloutzian & Park, 2013, 2014). According to this model, no stimulus comes with an inherent, preset meaning according to which the person must understand it. To the contrary, all sensory data are scanned by the sensory system and bits and pieces of it are selected for closer examination. Which bits and pieces? The meanings already in place constitute a "readiness to detect" in the person's mind-brain that guides the perceptual process. Those elements of the stimulus complex that are expected, consistent with already known information, desired, or prompted by cues are selected for attention and processing, and other elements are left in the background. This is partly what "top-down processing" means and is essential to the meaningful processing of sensory information.

An example of this can be illustrated by looking at the word *spiritual*. Eye-tracking studies can show exactly what part of the word *spiritual* the eyes are focusing on when they shift to another aspect of the stimulus, when and for how long they shift back to the element of original attention, and so forth. Thus one person looks at the word *spiritual*, and his

eyes focus on the *S*. Another person's eyes look through the whole word but very slowly, as if to think about it carefully. Yet another scans over it quickly, as if to skip over and either dismiss it or assume it. Thus, one person's eyes scan the word, and the thought *spiritual but not religious* immediately comes to mind, while another person's eyes scan it and the thought *devoutly religious* comes to mind. These observations inform us that eye movements are neither random nor uniform. No two people's eyes "see" the same stimulus, even if both people are looking at the same word in the same verse of the same scripture.

The predictive model says that people's eyes are initially directed to see whatever their meaning system directs them to attend to. Thus different people can look at the same religious object, such as the Shroud of Turin, thinking they are seeing the same thing in its creases, markings, and indentations, when in fact what one person "sees" may be radically different than what the other person "sees." Thus, one person "sees" letters in Greek that spell the word *Christ*, and another person "sees" indentations in the cloth presumed to have been made by Jesus's body. And another sees no such things. Same stimulus? No, not really. Knowledge of the predictive model helps our understanding of how different people can look at, and study in detail, the identical object and come to diametrically opposite conclusions about what it "really" is—as has been demonstrated with the Shroud of Turin (Di Lazzaro et al., 2013; Whanger & Whanger, 2008).

EXPERIENCE TRIGGERS AND MODULATORS

There are two classes of variables that seem to facilitate experiences being given religious or spiritual meaning. One class includes general dispositional factors that increase the probability of such attributions due to such things as developmental level, socialization, attachment needs, religious orientation, and malleable mental boundaries (Chapters 5 and 6). The other class includes certain situational environmental or physiological states, or the interaction between the situational and dispositional factors, that may facilitate or perhaps trigger such experiences (Hood, 1995). The list includes the effects of isolation, drugs, groups, preparatory set, being in church or outdoors in nature, ritual, music, sensory deprivation, sex, prayer, physical exercise, and expectations. A brief sampling of a few studies will illustrate some of the research into these two classes of variables.

Perceptual Set: Religious Orientation, Isolation Tanks, and Sensory Deprivation

Many examples can be given of how one's perceptual set, or readiness to respond to a stimulus in a certain way, is associated with a religious or

spiritual experience. Two lines of research by Ralph Hood are good examples. Both are tests of hypotheses derived from the model of intrinsic-extrinsic religious orientation (Chapters 6 and 11). Recall that Allport's concept of intrinsicness is the notion that intrinsics find "experiential meaning" in their faith. Some of the items on the intrinsicness subscale ask about one's inner experiences as opposed to opinions or behaviors. Examples include "Quite often I have been keenly aware of the presence of God or the Divine Being"; "The prayers I say when I am alone carry as much meaning and personal emotion as those said by me during services." Because extrinsics have not internalized the religion, we do not expect them to have similar inner experiences. They would have less of a religious schema and be less prone to make religious attributions. This reasoning leads to the prediction that intrinsically religious persons would be more likely than extrinsically religious persons to report having had religious experiences.

In order to test this prediction, Hood (1970) developed the Religious Experience Episodes Measure (REEM), made up of 15 descriptions of profound religious experiences taken from James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902/1961). After reading the description, the subject indicates on a 5point rating scale the degree to which he or she has had a similar experience. Responses can range from "I have had absolutely no experience like this" to "I have had an experience almost identical to this." A higher score represents more religious experience of the type measured by the REEM. (Statement A, in the section above on the common-core thesis, is from the REEM.)

Hood compared mean REEM scores for each type of religious orientation in four groups of psychology students. The groups were: intrinsics, extrinsics, indiscriminately proreligious persons, and indiscriminately anti-religious or nonreligious persons (whom he expected would score the lowest on the REEM measure). The results are presented in Figure 8.1. The intrinsics reported the highest REEM scores, and the nonreligious group the lowest. The extrinsics and indiscriminately proreligious subjects reported a slight amount of religious experience. They differed from each other only by a small, statistically chance amount, but both were substantially lower than the intrinsics. The prediction that people with an intrinsic religious orientation, who would come to the task with a "prepared" mental set, would have the greatest amount of religious experience is supported by Hood's study.

Another study by Hood is particularly clever. He explored whether being in isolation would facilitate religious experiences. Hood and Morris (1981) placed subjects in water, floating slightly submerged in isolation tanks; this constitutes some degree of sensory deprivation. They found that whether subjects reported a religious or mystical experience in this environment depended upon the preparatory mental set given to them. Those who were given instructions suggesting that they should try to imagine cartoon figures (a nonreligious mental set) were less likely to report having

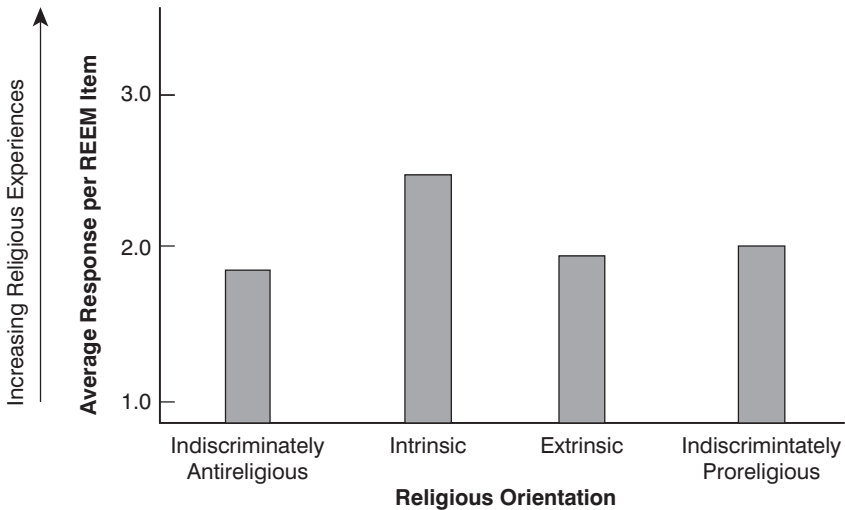


FIGURE 8.1. Average responses per REEM item by religious orientation. From Hood (1970). Copyright 1970 by the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion. Reprinted by permission.

a religious experience than those instructed to imagine religious figures. This effect was maximized in intrinsics, an effect perhaps similar to that attained during prayer (Hood, Morris, & Watson, 1989). In general, those whose preparatory instructions hinted that such sensations might have religious meaning were more likely to interpret them in religious ways. Such findings do not imply that a person will have a religious experience merely by being isolated or deprived of sensation. But consistent with the predictive model, they do imply that factors that facilitate experiences may lead them to be interpreted religiously if that is in accord with the perceptual set or expectations of the person.

Cues: Context, Source Credibility, Placebos

Whether a particular experience occurs, and whether it is labeled religious or spiritual, is partly dependent on the circumstances. To illustrate, one does not typically experience a mystical state of consciousness while walking through the grocery store or filling one's car with gasoline. These are routinized behaviors that cue certain states of mind, but not a mystical state of mind. Special states of consciousness (mystical, spiritual, religious) are more likely to depend on at least three interdependent circumstances.

First, the context is important. Just as walking through the grocery store prompts mental events cued to it (e.g., "Which cheese shall I buy?"),

being in a setting defined as religious or spiritual (e.g., church, synagogue, mosque, shrine) or in the presence of particular cues (a cross with a crucified Jesus on it, a yarmulke, quotes from the Dalai Lama) prompts thoughts and emotions connected to one's religion or spirituality. A well-known investigation by Pahnke (1970) demonstrated the effects of context on religious experiences. The subjects were at a Christian Good Friday service, and unbeknownst to them half of them received psilocybin beforehand and half did not. Later, those who received the drug were more likely to report having had unusual experiences and interpreting them in religious terms. More than two decades later the logic and procedures in the Good Friday study were extended and refined by using a double-blind procedure with placebo control groups. Subjects who took psilocybin scored higher than controls on a measure of mysticism and reported that this experience was among the most meaningful in their life. This impression was sustained at a 1-year follow-up assessment (Griffiths, Richards, McCann, & Jesse, 2006, 2008).

Second, if the source of information is seen as an authority, then his or her credibility is increased. Such a source is perceived as knowledgeable, trustworthy, and capable of giving accurate statements about what to expect in a situation. People in the "authoritative source" role (minister, priest, guru, imam, faith healer) are therefore able to set the expectation for what to experience and why it is to be desired. They have major influence on the meanings one attributes to the events or experiences in question—whether or not the communication is genuinely knowledge based or is, functionally speaking, "merely" words that shaped the hearer's mental impressions.

Third, placebos can facilitate a religious or spiritual attribution to an experience. A placebo is typically understood to be an inert drug (like a sugar pill) with no medical or healing properties. A *placebo effect* occurs when someone ingests the placebo and later feels healed, reports less pain, and so forth. But the concept of placebo applies beyond a sugar pill being taken as if it was actual medicine. Functionally speaking, a placebo can be any action performed upon or by a person that in and of itself has no effect, but that can be reported to have effects when someone believes such effects will occur.

A marvelous demonstration of this phenomenon comes from research by Granqvist et al. (2005), who set out to discover whether certain reports of the "sensed presence" of a sentient being were real (Persinger & Healey, 2002). Persinger placed a helmet on the head of his research subjects that would surround the person's head with a very weak transcranial magnetic waveform. Approximately 80% of the subjects reported the presence of a (transcendent) sentient being in response to the magnetic field. I remember hearing about how this magnetic field might be the medium through which God communicated with humans, especially by activity in the temporal lobes. Granqvist borrowed Persinger's helmet and tried to replicate the results. The key to Granqvist's experiment, however, was that he included a control group. The control group was treated exactly like the experimental

group except that they did not receive the stimulation and did not know whether the helmet was turned on or off. Also, they were not informed about what the helmet would do. But they were subject to unknown but implied contextual suggestions as well as the mock helmet. The combination of putting on the helmet and the contextual suggestions was functionally a placebo. There was no difference in reports of a sensed presence between those for whom the magnetic field from the helmet was turned on, compared to those for whom it was off. The only conclusion to draw is that the previous research reports were the result of a perfect mix of cues—the context, high credibility of the source of information (Dr. Persinger), and expectancy triggered by a helmet and its context as a functional placebo.

Granqvist's iteration of Persinger's study was carried a step further by Andersen, Schjødt, Nielbo, and Sørensen (2014), who created a mock God Helmet (see Figure 8.2), placing it on subjects' heads and giving them fictitious instructions including the information that they would experience sensed presences and sentient beings. There were three groups of participants: spiritists, followers of a "new age" religion, and those who were inexperienced with these ideas. Andersen et al. reasoned that they differed in their perceptual set, expectations, and readiness to "perceive" what the



FIGURE 8.2. The (fictitious) “God Helmet” used by Andersen et al. From Andersen, Schjødt, Nielbo, and Sørensen (2014). Reprinted by permission.

instructions described. There was no magnetic field for any group. But there were great differences among the three groups in the degree to which they reported a sensed presence and sentient being. The results were statistically significant for all comparisons, with the spiritist group providing the most reports of sensed entities, and the inexperienced group the least. This experiment demonstrates how the cues and context in a situation interact with personal variables like perceptual set to maximize awareness of the anomalous. The findings are exactly what is predicted by a predictive model of brain processes.

Rituals: Exercises and Groups

Rituals are routinized behaviors that are performed repeatedly, on either an implicit or prescribed schedule. There are ritual exercises, prayers, killings, feasts, fasts, protocols for grieving, protocols for celebrating, prescriptions for how to marry, prescriptions for how to divorce, ceremonies to perform upon the birth of a child, or to cast out demons, or to invoke the Almighty during battle, and an endless list of routinized daily habits. Rituals for the most part make life easier than it would be without them because one consumes less energy and needs less information-processing capability to navigate through life. The very existence of rituals, religious and nonreligious, is a statement of endorsement for the theory that humans can withstand only a certain amount of cognitive load. When we exceed the limits we set ourselves up for difficulties.

Practicing a group religious ritual helps to bind the participants together. Each person is aware of the others doing something regarded as special, sacred, uniquely for the in-group and endorsing its beliefs. The effect is to enhance the social organization and create a sense of community. There is a downside to these effects, however. The more an in-group mindset is fostered, the greater are the chances that those in the in-group will see others as the out-group, not one of us, and therefore negative (or at least less positive). Recall the uncertainty–identity theory of religion from Chapter 3. Rituals that enhance in-group identity and loyalty also foster out-group categorization, prejudice, and denigration (Hogg et al., 2010; Rowatt, Carpenter & Haggard, 2014).

There are many religious rituals with which most readers are familiar, such as attending Mass and consuming the Eucharist for Roman Catholics, daily prayers for Muslims, observing the Sabbath and keeping kosher for Jews, and meditating for Buddhists. They can foster strife between Catholics and Protestants, Muslims and non-Muslims, Jews and gentiles, and factions within Islam, especially when the religion is combined with political goals and ideology. Such strife is the offspring of religious group separateness (Paloutzian et al., 2014), and its effects are obvious on a daily basis to anyone who bothers to look. The psychological bases for these effects are well known. Thus, commenting on the above would yield little that is

psychologically novel, even though attending to the above problems is very important. Therefore, instead of summarizing research on the religious rituals with which you are familiar, I will put the accent on a ritual that is probably strange to you, as well as intense and dangerous.

In some areas firewalking rituals have a religious character. These include Anastenaria, in northern rural Greece, where Greek Orthodox people who, as part of the ordinary religious sentiment with which they venerate Saint Constantine and his mother Helen, walk across glowing red-hot coals (Xygalatas, 2012). In the small Spanish village of San Pedro Manrique (population 600), however, the fire walking itself is not explicitly religious, but the Catholic religion carries “tremendous importance for the locals” (Xygalatas et al., 2011, p. 735). Xygalatas studied firewalking in this village. Before a crowd of 3,000 onlookers (five times the size of the village), the participants walked across a bed of hot, glowing coals while holding another person, usually a loved one, on their shoulders. Xygalatas measured participants’ heart rate during and after the walking, had participants rate their degree of pain sensation, took photographs of them as they had their bare feet on the coals, and assessed their perceptions of their sensations several months later. Many interesting findings emerge from this research, but one of them gleaned from interview data was “a strong social desire in the participants to appear calm,” which was “further supported by anthropological data showing a popular opinion that getting burned was an indication of weakness or lack of divine protection” (Schjødtt et al., 2013; see also Park & Paloutzian, 2013).

Besides the processes unique to firewalking and other pain rituals, such as dissociation and or mental distractions from pain stimuli that facilitate unusual religious experience and behavior (Jegindø, Vase, Jegindø, & Geertz et al., 2013; Xygalatas, 2012), there is also the general process of *individuation* of the firewalker. In each performance of a pain-intensive religious ritual, the ritual actors are known, behaving in front of others, and subject to public evaluation. They are in a situation in which concern over what others will think of them if they do or do not perform the ritual heightens the probability that they will do so. Being identifiable in the context of a public commitment facilitates compliance with what is expected.

However, there are processes that operate within groups that facilitate normally restrained behavior when someone is in a state opposite to individuation. It is well known that being submerged in a group can make people more likely to participate in group behavior that they would hold in check as identifiable individuals. A key concept from social psychology that can help explain this is called *deindividuation* (Zimbardo, 1969). Factors that facilitate deindividuation include being submerged in a group, not being held responsible for one’s own actions, being anonymous and unidentifiable, and having an altered temporal perspective such as an expanded present-time sense in which past learning and future commitments are less able to regulate present behavior. Under these circumstances, someone may

behave in deregulated and extravagant ways; normally restrained behavior is released and behavior can become “wild,” chaotic, and (to the onlooker) bizarre. Research has shown that certain religious rituals that deregulate normally restrained behavior, such as glossolalic speech or “speaking in tongues” (see Chapter 9), are facilitated by being deindividuated in a group (Malony & Lovekin, 1985).

Entheogens: Psychedelic Drugs

Some rituals involve drugs. Entheogens, formerly called psychedelics, are drugs that can facilitate spiritual and religious experiences. The word *entheogen* has roots in Greek and literally means “becoming divine within.” Can entheogens facilitate or produce religious experiences? Answers vary according to the assumptions and understandings brought to the issue. For example, some previous thinkers rejected the notion that drug-induced mystical experiences could be genuine religious experiences (Leuba, 1896; Zaehner, 1957), precisely because the experiences were induced by a drug. A genuine religious or spiritual experience had to come about naturally or by means of training, ritual, or similar cultivation. Such a response, of course, raises the obvious question of what a genuine religious experience is, and anyway why can’t someone make an attribution of religious or spiritual meaning to a drug-induced experience? After all, certain Native Americans use a hallucinogen as a part of their formal religious practice. Subsequent research on these drugs suggests that the answer is yes, entheogens can facilitate or produce experiences deemed religious (Roberts, 2001), and there are similarities between the “religious experiences” that occur naturally and those that occur under the influence of an entheogen (Hood & Chen, 2013).

EXPERIENCES AND INTERDEPENDENCE: NEW SPIRITUAL MOVEMENTS

By now it is clear that experiences become labeled with the attributions that we ascribe to them and that those attributions are not necessarily of our own invention. They depend in part on the interaction between our social and cultural context and our idiosyncratic motivations to attribute meanings of any kind to the experiences we may have. Two excellent examples of the processes at work can be seen by examining people’s responses after coming close to death and examining how unusual mental events can lead to new religions and spiritual movements.

Near-Death Experiences and Afterlife Belief

One basic message of this book is that humans are constituted such that at multiple levels their systems strain to see wholes where there are parts, to

make meaning out of ambiguity. The biggest ambiguity of all, at any level, is death. What happens after we die? Many people, based on their religious or spiritual beliefs, claim that they know what happens after we die. But they do not. Nobody knows, although there are many religious and spiritual beliefs about it. It is crucial that you understand the difference between knowledge and belief. We believe many things but have knowledge of only a few.

One set of claims about what happens after we die is made by people who have had a so-called near-death experience (NDE). Although not a technical medical term, an NDE is said to occur when someone's essential bodily processes (heartbeat, breathing, brain waves) stop for a few seconds or minutes—a state that would lead to irrevocable death if it continued (Chapter 10). There are a few common (but not universal) characteristics of what someone experiences during an NDE. At the top of the list is the mental sensation of a bright light. Another common vision is of a tunnel through which the person is going, with a white light at the end of the tunnel. Other components of NDEs can include a picture of one's entire life as if in one snapshot, sensing a realm in which all knowledge exists, and feelings of peace and quiet (Greyson, 2014). The question for us is not about the veridicality of these experiences because, like the truth of religious claims about what happens after death, this is not known. The psychological question has to do with the processes by which those who go through an NDE come to a conclusion about what they think it means. That is, how do they make meaning (spiritual, traditionally religious, or otherwise) out of the ambiguity of an NDE?

In order to explore this question, an interdisciplinary research team conducted a multimethod research project in which they collected both ethnographic interview data and psychological response and test data from participants who reported having NDEs and from matched control subjects. Those who had NDEs were more likely to claim that if two events occurred at the same time it was definitely not a mere coincidence, but that the events were in sync due to various spiritual forces or powers. They also said, for example, when they saw a long, straight cloud in the sky with a small spherical cloud off one end separated from it by a small space (so that the whole configuration looked like an exclamation point), that it was not "just clouds," but actually a sign, such as a message from a participant's deceased son informing her that he was still there, alive in the afterworld and communicating with her. These and similar responses both fed and affirmed an increasing belief in an afterlife. It was common for extraordinary meaning to be attributed to ordinary events following an NDE. No control subjects gave answers of this sort in the interviews. Those who had experienced an NDE gradually developed into an afterlife movement (Kinsella & Barlev, 2014). These findings are consistent with others showing that paranormal and religious believers are more prone to illusory face perception than skeptics and nonbelievers (Riecki, Lindeman, Aleneff, Halme, & Nuortimo, 2013).

One hypothesis was that subjects in the afterlife movement would be more likely to have anomalous experiences. For example, in response to the question “On at least one occasion I have had the impression I was in direct contact with the spirit of a deceased person,” 78% of those in the afterlife movement said “Yes,” whereas only 57% of the control subjects did so. In other tests, the researchers had NDE and control subjects respond to various ambiguous stimuli to assess whether the NDE participants would be more likely than the controls to make paranormal attributions in situations in which an event or stimulus could be taken a number of ways. For example, stimulus items might include the following four statements:

- “In a life-threatening situation I have had the impression that my disembodied ‘self’ was moving along a tunnel toward a light.”
- “I have seen an envelope of light around a person, and the color of the light depended on that person’s mood or well-being.”
- “On at least one occasion I have had the impression I was in direct contact with the spirit of a deceased person.”
- “With someone I know intimately, I sometimes know what they are about to say before they say it.”

The general pattern of results for each question in succession (see Figure 8.3) shows that people in the afterlife movement, although they encounter ambiguous stimuli and events at about the same rate as everyone else, are more prone to make paranormal attributions to them. An implication is that people’s propensity to attribute meaning to ambiguity generalizes from the mundane (“seeing” meaning in a formation of clouds) to the profound (“knowing” what happens after death) (Barlev et al., 2015).

Experiences and New Revelations

The argument above suggests that claims of new revelations need to be understood in the same way that we understand other unusual experiences psychologically. After all, being the recipient of a new revelation would seem to constitute the epitome of an unusual mental event. But because such experiences cannot be well understood from only an individual or a group level of analysis, the interaction between both levels must be taken into account. Historical research on the social psychological roots of “new revelations” makes the argument for an interdependence model of “religious experience” or “spiritual experience” even more compelling.

Someone who claims to have a new revelation often does so after having had one or more unusual mental experiences—experiences to which supernatural, spiritual, or other special revelatory attributions are made (Taves, 2009a, 2016). Sometimes we assume that the unusual mental events are immediately and automatically interpreted as revelatory, without question, by the person who had them. However, Taves has shown that a claim

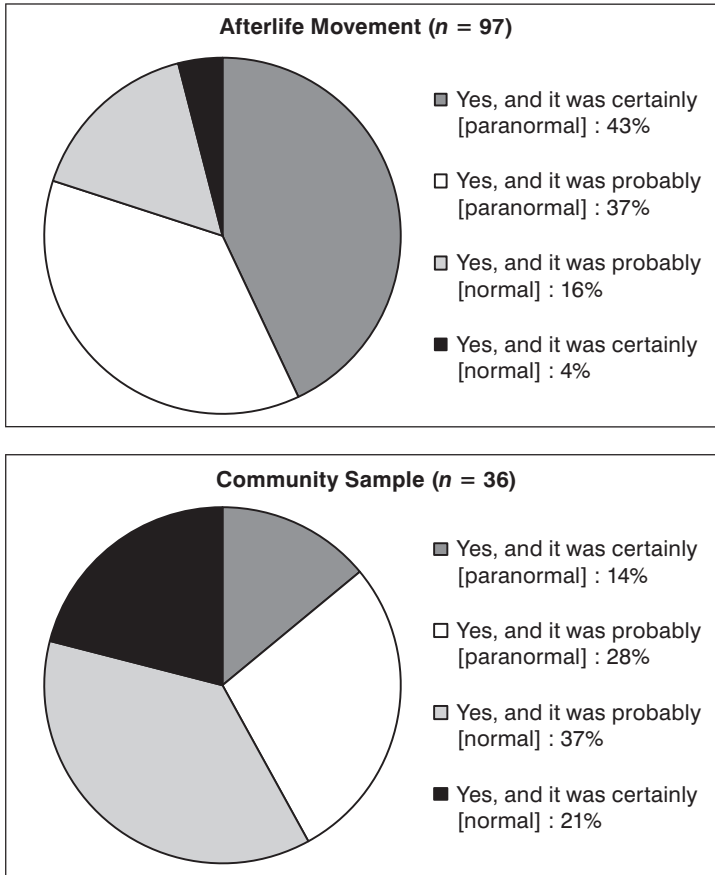


FIGURE 8.3. Degree of paranormal attributions made by members of an afterlife (near-death experience) movement and control sample. Proneness to abnormal attributions ($p < .001$; Cohen's $d = 1.34$): afterlife movement: 78% ($SD = 26\%$); controls: 35% ($SD = 37\%$). From Barlev, Kinsella, Taves, Paloutzian, and German (2015). Reprinted with permission from the authors.

of experiencing a new revelation is not an immediate conclusion that an individual arrives at. Nor is it arrived at merely because of group pressure to make such a claim, against one's backdrop of only ordinary states of consciousness. Instead, she argues that believing that one has received a new revelation is a consequence of having had one or more unusual mental experiences that are initially ambiguous and puzzling; subsequently, special revelatory attributions are made through interpretations and suggestions that emerge and become clear through dialogue with trusted others.

In two research reports, Taves (2009a, 2016) examined the cases of five people who claimed to have a new revelation, for which sufficient

documentary evidence from original sources is available for historical research: (1) Joseph Smith (1805–1844), founder of the Mormon Church, who, according to Mormon tradition, heard the angel Moroni tell him where sacred writings on golden plates were located, which he then translated by reading them through a peep stone; (2) Helen Schucman (1909–1981), who claimed that she “scribed” the voice of Jesus in writing *A Course in Miracles*; (3) Bill Wilson (1895–1971), who said he had a spiritual experience and went on to found Alcoholics Anonymous; (4) JZ Knight (b. 1946), who said she channeled the 35,000-year-old spirit warrior Ramtha; and (5) Jane Roberts (1929–1984), who said she channeled the spirit personality Seth.

In all five cases, the person in question apparently did have nonordinary mental experiences. However, in no case did the person immediately say, on his or her own, that this was a new spiritual revelation. Instead, the experiences, although they were noticed for being unusual, were ambiguous. They did not convey a self-evident meaning and were not straightforwardly understood. In each instance, the notion that the experience was a new revelation developed over time through interactions with, interpretations by, and encouragement from key others. Each “revelation” (and therefore the spiritual transformation that accompanied it) was eventually seen as revelatory because of the person’s interaction with a small group of trusted intimates. In no case was the new revelatory meaning a *sui generis* property of the experience itself. Instead, in all cases it was the interaction between the occurrence of the unusual mental experience, the individual, and the reactions and interpretations of the small group that resulted in new revelatory meaning being attributed to it. Extrapolating from this idea by one small step, we can extend the conclusions from Taves’s research on an interaction model of revelation to shed light on how individual, group, and interactive factors combine to produce spiritual transformation (Taves, 2016).

AN EMERGENT PROPERTY

One outcome of our attempt to discuss possible interrelationships between neurological and psychological processes in religiousness is that we end up with a picture of the human being that is different from the one we started with. This new picture is of the human being as an emergent property of nature (Paloutzian & Park, 2005b). A person’s mental and behavioral processes do not appear to be governed by unidirectional laws. Instead, the person is capable of shaping and molding the very principles and processes that govern him or her. This capability seems to be one of the gifts that came with the development of the conscious brain. It is this brain and the mental processes embodied in it that not only receive information and appraise it, but also respond to its source in a way that can change it and its effects on the person. This is an example of an emergent property.

Just as human meaning-making functions emerged within the brain as an expression of nature, those same meaning-making functions are able to appraise, foster, and regulate the very operations that give rise to the meaning-making mind in the first place. The implication is that such functions are emergent. If this is so, then humans can make nature mean whatever they want and thereby, given sufficient time and tools, change what it means to be its most meaningful product.

Recall the point I made at the beginning of this chapter. Why is your experience one of the two bottom lines in your life? Whatever develops from your life must in some sense be an emergent property of your experience. But what develops cannot be emergent from experience only; it can emerge only when you and your experiences engage in active interaction with the social, environmental, historical, and situational context in which you are imbedded. There is no such thing as raw or pure isolated experience having any meaning, religious or otherwise. It is only when experiences are interpreted, when individuals and groups attribute meanings to them, that they motivate, inhibit, or otherwise direct other behavior or experience.

In the end, it is hard to tell what “pure” experience is. It has been a matter of debate whether there is such a thing since Plato posed the question 2,500 years ago. Whatever may be the solution to that issue, there is evidence that experiences that are called unusual, strange, paranormal, spiritual, religious, and so forth may be similar in their raw uninterpreted roots, but that our eventual conscious perceptions of them take on different shapes and meanings due to the particular social context and frame within which we make attributions about them. It is to those percepts and attributions in context that we respond, not to the experience or stimulus itself. Thus an unusual mental event is labeled religious in one context, paranormal in a second, psychiatric or pathological in another, and a yearned-for spiritual state in yet another (Lindeman & Svedholm, 2012). And in psychology, an attribution of these mental states is among the most important we can make.

TAKE-HOME MESSAGES

- For purposes of psychological understanding, it is better that we talk about the attribution of religious or spiritual meaning to experience, or experiences deemed religious or spiritual, than about a “spiritual experience” or “religious experience.”
- Experience is one of two bottom lines in life. You and only you know your experiences in the intimate sense of knowing.
- Experiences in the religious and spiritual realm are ordinary and unusual, positive and negative, and anomalous. In all instances, however, the interpretation of them is processed through schemas

and rests upon what meanings are made of them by the human attributional and interpretative system.

- An integrative theory that combines aspects of a social cognitive approach seems sufficient to explain the processes involved in many religious or spiritual experiences.
- Social cognitive theory can be integrated with models of mind–brain processes. Most illuminating is the predictive model of brain processes. It indicates that brain activity will automatically adjust itself in order to arrive at a meaningful representation of the nature of a stimulus, and that it adjusts its search functions to detect those details of a stimulus that enable such meaningful constructions.
- Near-death experiences (NDEs) are mental sensations that happen when one has been close to dying but has lived. Common reports include seeing a bright light, a sense of oneness, a momentary panoramic life review, and going through a tunnel. People who report an NDE tend to attribute spiritual or paranormal meaning to it and to interpret coincidences as intended, nonrandom events, and may be prone to see patterns in a patternless stimulus.
- When a person experiences an unusual mental event and a small group of intimate others learn of and begin to interpret it, the combination of the experience and the group interaction, not only the claims of the experimenter, may evolve into a new spiritual movement.

FURTHER READING

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CHAPTER 9

Religion, Mental Health, and Well-Being

Portraits of the Religion–Akrasia Connection

Mental Health and Illness Are Relative and Multidimensional

Religion and Emotions

Religion and Psychological Disorders

Religion and Coping

Religion, Counseling, and Therapy

What Conclusions Can We Draw?

Take-Home Messages

Further Reading

A scene at a mental hospital:

DOCTOR (*to patient*): And who are you?

PATIENT: I, sir, am Napoleon Bonaparte.

DOCTOR: Who told you that you are Napoleon Bonaparte?

PATIENT: God did.

ANOTHER PATIENT, FROM THE NEXT ROOM: I did not!

Just as the research on intrinsic and extrinsic religious orientation (Chapters 6 and 11) can be interpreted to represent a “good” and “bad” way of being religious, analogous patterns emerge from the research on religion, health, and well-being. Religions are part of a larger constellation of factors that may be either positively or negatively related to mental health, depending upon the meanings they carry in one’s life and culture. The body

of research dealing with the question of how one's religiousness relates to mentally healthy versus unhealthy functioning yields few straightforward conclusions. Theorists have disagreed. Certain religious beliefs and doctrines affect people's behavior in a straightforward way (e.g., religious teaching against drinking alcohol produces sobriety, and therefore a low rate of alcohol abuse, among adherents). But whether a person with a particular type of psychological disorder, or people with disorders in general, are prone to be religious, is not clear. The relationships between religion and mental health have to be clarified by working through the relativism of the concept of mental health in addition to the concept of religion. Perhaps the most accurate claim is also the most ambiguous: most of the relationships hypothesized by theorists and researchers (e.g., that religion is associated with health and adjustment, as well as with pathology and maladjustment) are true for some people some of the time. This ambiguity underscores the lack of cohesion in the relations between religiousness and mental health. None of the hypothesized relationships between religion and psychopathology holds as an across-the-board generalization. Our knowledge about these issues has to be fine-tuned.

The main barrier to making sense of this material is that the field lacks a unified conceptual framework for making the available data coherent in a meaningful way. Therefore, in order to avoid merely presenting a list of findings without conceptual organization, it will be helpful to examine the research in a way that allows each topic to expand, qualify, or complement the previous ones. Let us begin by looking at illustrations that suggest there is a link between religion and pathology.

PORTRAITS OF A RELIGION— AKRASIA CONNECTION

Akrasia is a word from Attic Greek that means “weakness of the will”; apparently one of the gods could bring it on. The English word *crazy* is its descendent. There are two points that are useful to keep in mind when examining the relationship between religion and being crazy, more professionally termed mental illness or suffering from psychological disorder or disturbance. The first point is that mental disorder or milder forms of personal inadequacy sometimes do involve religious content and symbols. Religious meanings are present in some disorders; whether they are causal or consequential is another matter. The second point is that mental health is itself a relativistic concept—a feature that will forever require that we appropriately qualify and bracket what our science teaches us about how religion and mental health may be related. There are a few vivid pictures of different kinds of relationships, although none of them is typical as a norm.

Religion and Psychic Disturbance

There are a variety of pieces of information that, when taken together, can make it appear as if religion and abnormality, or psychological disturbance, might be related. Is this impression correct? Or, alternatively, how might its accuracy depend upon how mental health is defined?

Religious Symbolism in Psychotic Speech

One of the most vivid and intuitively appealing of these demonstrations is the common appearance of religious meanings in the language and symbols that can permeate the speech and behavior of psychotic patients. Reprinted in Box 9.1 is a letter written to me by one such patient. Examine it carefully

BOX 9.1. Letter from a Psychotic Patient

Dear Mr Paloutzian.

Your pain, at present, can easily turn into a GROWTH process —→
I define maturity as

I feel that you should correspond with me as I'm aware of your loss of employment and ETC. (my "LITTLE ONES" DID THIS—so do write or phone the above number. My/our GOD does not WILL that ANY SHOULD PERISH—I was, for over 5 YRS. AN Atheist—Now, after GOD taught me → I'm much; much HAPPIER AND I STILL LOVE PEOPLE, I STILL want them SANE, & I'm still a STUDENT of GENERAL SEMANTICS —→→

I feel that I should CAUTION you against HARMING yourself—just write or phone me.

I TRY TO NEVER GET IN A HURRY—

Would you phone your family and let them KNOW that I'VE written you a letter—I'm cautious in BEING OVERLY frank, much less candid, BUT "FEAR NOT"—.

I wish you kind Regards and I'd like to add that about 20 YEARS ago, I wanted to become a PSYCHOLOGIST—.

Prophet, _____

[On back of last page:]

I'm watching a NEW, FINE, T.V. PROGRAM FOR CHILDREN—ENTITLED CLUBHOUSE —→ I urge you to watch "it" as its' quite FINE, EXCELLENT and MOST instructive FOR CHILDREN & so-on—(ETC!)

as a child → I learned—"MERRIE MELODIES"! CARTOONS" BY Above TITLE.

O! GOD IS LOVE."

MANY MEANINGS, Above.

and note its religious content and biblical overtones in addition to its conceptual disorganization. This letter is a typical example of psychotic speech.

Several features of this letter warrant comment. First, it has no basis in reality and was unsolicited. I do not know “Prophet, _____,” and had never been in or heard of the town from which this letter was mailed. Nor had I lost my employment. I later learned that there is a mental hospital located in that town. I presumed that “Prophet, _____” was a resident there, because the printed stationery on which the letter was written gave detailed information about visiting hours. I do not know how Prophet learned of me and happened to write to me.

Second, the letter as a whole reflects the disorganized thinking present in some types of disorders. Each statement in the letter, taken by itself, seems coherent. But the overall organization of them, strung out together one after the other, makes no sense.

Third, and most important for the psychology of religion, is the repeated presence of religious symbols in the series of disconnected thoughts. What do they mean? There are references to Bible verses, hints at having been an atheist but now being taught by God, and a closing that says God is love. Even the writer’s title, “Prophet,” is suggestive of the religious meaning of his self-definition. In general, hospital files contain many cases in which the patients’ symptoms include religious symbolism, as is the case in Rokeach’s *The Three Christs of Ypsilanti* (1964). How these religious meanings became part of the cluster of symptoms for this particular patient is anybody’s guess. But the fact that they are there leaves an impression of the involvement of religious material in psychological disturbance.

Mental Illness in Religious Innovators

Evidence of psychological disturbance in religious leaders and innovators also suggests a link between religion and disorder. Both depressive and excitatory types of disturbance have been documented. For example, Christians John Bunyan and Saint Augustine are reported to have suffered from severe melancholia and depression (James, 1902/1961). Most saints or founders of religious movements are reported to have had “their visions, rapt conditions, guiding impressions and “openings” (James, 1902/1961, p. 467). Two recent well documented cases include (1) Joseph Smith, who in 1823 reportedly had a vision of an angel in the middle of the night telling him where golden plates containing ancient scriptures were hidden in a box buried in the side of a hill in Palmyra, New York, a vision that led him to found the Mormon Church; and (2) Helen Schucman, who during the 1960s and ’70s reportedly scribed the voice of Jesus dictating *A Course in Miracles*, put forth as not quite a religion but as a spiritual “metaphysical thought system” (Taves, 2016). A quick-and-easy assumption for each mental state, not accepted by the experiencer, is that these experiences represent

hyper-vivid imagination, hallucinations, or other disordered psychological states. Recall from Chapter 8 that diagnoses of mental illness are based in part on our reports of mental experiences. Argyle and Beit-Hallahmi report that well-known mystics such as Saint Teresa had “marked symptoms of hysteria” (1975, p. 136). Or, more positively termed, these unusual states could be called abilities. The (faulty) argument based on any isolated case, such as these, is that because religion and disorder are associated in the lives of some religious leaders or innovators, they must also be related in the lives of ordinary religious followers.

Strange Behavior of Some Religious Followers

The unusual behavior of some religious followers also adds to the appearance of a connection between religion and abnormality. Some acts performed by religious people seem odd to the average onlooker. And it is all too easy to infer that odd behavior is symptomatic of psychological disturbance. Consider, for example, the “lite” charismatics studied by Luhrmann, described in Chapter 6. They say they talk with God (in the sense of audible conversation), have a cup of coffee or dinner with God (and set a plate for God at the table), and go out on a date with God. And many of them say God spoke audibly to them, although not all do, and the ability to hear God speak audibly seems to take time and effort (Luhrmann, 2012). An onlooker can write this behavior off as rooted in a too-vivid imagination or as high codependence on a fantasy figure, with a dose of excessive neediness and insecurity. The pattern can easily appear to reflect a relationship between religiousness and abnormality.

Or, consider other religious followers. Pentecostals engage in the practice of glossolalia (speaking in tongues) noted by some participants and researchers not to be a known human language but a verbal utterance that makes no sense linguistically (Malony & Lovekin, 1985). Here is a transcript of a sample of glossolalic “speech”:

*ke la la iy ya na now. key la la iy yey na yey now. key la la yey ir now.
key la la iy ya na key la ya a now. key la key la ho ra ya na yey la la iy ye
la ya na key la ya a now. . . .* (Jaquith, 1967, p. 3)

Such practices may appear to the nonparticipant as bizarre, that is, as abnormal and consequently symptomatic of pathology. The case is bolstered further by apparent weakness of the will displayed by some members of new religious movements (NRMs) who have purportedly become totally absorbed in their NRM to the point of isolating themselves from all past relations and following their leader’s instructions completely (Chapter 7). A famous and tragic example of this occurred in 1978 when over 900 people, members of the San Francisco church the People’s Temple, followed

cult leader Jim Jones to the jungles of Guyana and, at his direction, drank Flavor Aid mixed with poison. All died (“Nightmare in Jonestown,” 1978). None of these phenomena demands the conclusion that religious believers suffer from akrasia, but it is easy to infer that when one considers such vivid accounts.

Opinions of Experts

Expert opinion can also feed the impression of a link between religion and abnormality. For example, the founder of rational-emotive therapy, Albert Ellis (1962, 1977) argued forcefully that religion is bad for people. In a classic, milestone debate at the American Psychological Association, he gave a talk entitled “There Is No Place for the Concept of Sin in Psychotherapy,” which illustrates in plain terms his point of view as an influential expert (Ellis, 1960). He explains that applying the concept of sin to a patient conveys the message that “you are a bad person, a no-good-nik,” which can only harm the person by increasing feelings of debilitating guilt. The opinions of experts such as Ellis carry a lot of weight. The problem, however, is that when it comes to pronouncements about human nature, the experts do not always agree. O. H. Mowrer (1960, 1961) takes the opposite point of view from Ellis. Mowrer’s (1960) talk in the debate with Ellis was titled “Some Constructive Features of the Concept of Sin.” Of course, you should always examine the data for yourself, whether the experts agree or disagree.

What Is the Conclusion?

When we consider religious ideas in some psychotic speech, psychological disturbance in some religious leaders, abnormal (statistically, low-frequency) behavior in some religious followers, and the negative pronouncements about religion made by some psychological experts, must we conclude that there is a link between religion and psychological disorder? The answer is no. The finding that religious symbols appear in the language of some mental patients says nothing about the meaning of those same symbols in a psychologically healthy mind. That disorder may be present in some religious leaders tells us little about whether it is also present in followers. The unusual behavior of some followers does not necessarily mean that these individuals are suffering from pathology, or even if they are, that the same linkage exists between religion and disorder for other people. Taken together, the above examples can leave a strong impression of a connection between religion and disorder. However, there is no logical basis for that conclusion. Only by digging deeper into how mental health status and religiousness are multidimensional and how those dimensions interact with other variables can we learn whether and in what ways that conclusion does hold.

MENTAL HEALTH AND ILLNESS ARE RELATIVE AND MULTIDIMENSIONAL

I explained in Chapter 1 that religion is a multidimensional variable whose meanings differ across cultural contexts; it is not one thing but has many facets, which can be manifested in high or low degrees in various combinations. The same logic applies to the notion of akrasia.

It's All Relative

One problem inherent in examining relationships between religion and psychological disorder concerns the relativity and dimensions of concepts such as mental health, adjustment, and normality. This is an extremely difficult problem intellectually because, as you can extrapolate from Chapter 8 on religion and experience, for diagnostic purposes it can be difficult to know what is going on inside someone else's head. So we are left with attributions based on observed and verbal behavior.

We need to be able to specify what mental health or normality is in order to know how variations in religiousness relate to it. But when we ask, "What is mental health?" we are left with only a partial answer. One type of answer might be called a reverse negative: mental health is the absence of mental illness. Professionals generate lists of symptoms (anxiety, disorganized thoughts, obsessive thoughts of suicide, etc.) and say that if these symptoms are absent, then you're OK. Clearly, this approach tells us what mental health is not but still does not tell us what it is.

Early versions of some psychological theories summarized in Chapter 3 led to different recipes for what a mentally healthy, adjusted, "fully functioning" person should be like. Opinions differed on whether people should feel guilty about misbehavior (illustrated in the Mowrer vs. Ellis debate), whether we should regulate our actions by our feelings or our minds (humanistic therapists vs. cognitive theorists), and whether health is best conceived of as a congruent set of feelings or as a set of learned responses (humanist vs. behaviorist). Given such imprecision about what mental health is, it is not surprising to learn that although specific ways of being religious do have clear relations with certain mental health variables, there are no general relationships between the two.

There even used to be disagreement about whether it is healthy to have accurate perceptions. It had typically been assumed that perceiving the world accurately was mentally healthy (Jahoda, 1958). However, this view changed when Taylor and Brown (1988) summarized a large body of data arguing that seeing the world accurately tends to be associated with mild (not clinically significant) depression, whereas mental health tends to be found in people who see the world through positive illusions (popularly called rose colored glasses). Modern research on optimism and

resilience stems from this idea (Chang, 2001). Positive illusions are greater-than-warranted positive meanings that someone attributes to aspects of the world. When such meanings are imputed to oneself, they are akin to what social psychologists call self-serving bias. They equip someone to, for example, believe that even though there is a barrier ahead, it is not too big to overcome. This kind of believing enables people to feel hope and keep going. It also sets them up to not see their own flaws. This kind of believing is involved in the religiously rooted hope that because of one's religion, life will be OK and all will be well in the end.

Overall, it appears to be relatively easy to describe how people should *not* be: not guilty to the point of being paralyzed; not denying or defensive about true feelings; not harmful to oneself or others; not obsessive or compulsive to the point of being debilitated; not hopeless to the point of being unable to define and pursue a goal. But it is a lot harder to explain what people *should* be.

A closely related point that further broadens and complicates the issue is that the concept of adjustment (i.e., normal, therefore healthy) is culturally relative. Adjustment to what? Something that is abnormal (maladjusted) in one culture may be normal in another, just as a religious ritual such as walking on fire may be seen as un-Christian, primitive, and pagan to one religious culture and as an act of devotedness to the same Christian God in another (Xygalatas, 2012). The observation that a human activity or mental state can be deemed healthy and OK in one culture but symptomatic and not OK in another highlights the problem of the relativity of the concept of mental health as it relates to religiousness. People can make their beliefs and behaviors, as well as their sacred scriptures and the words of their priests, imams, gurus, and rabbis, mean whatever they need them to mean.

These problems are characteristic of many fields of science. Scientists observe covariation of variables, develop a primitive theory of how they relate, and yet have difficulty stating a clear definition of the key concepts. Having an imprecise idea of what a concept means makes it difficult to clarify how it relates to others. Such is the case with the concepts of "mental health" or "adjustment." For present purposes it is fruitful to conceive of mental health as a complex mixture of several variables. These components would include, perhaps, lack of debilitating guilt, a realistic perception and acceptance of one's limitations and faults, neither the absence of nor an excess of tension, effective coping mechanisms, a satisfying social life, a tendency to see the positive side of things, and an ability to feel a reasonable level of happiness. A good generalization might be to think of adjustment and health as the ability to function effectively within oneself and to live harmoniously with others.

Because religion and mental health are not specific concepts, we can expect research on their relationships to yield nonuniform conclusions. The

rest of this chapter illustrates that no singular overall relationships have been found. At present, we must be content to examine more narrowly focused research on the association between specific religious and mental health variables (Hayward & Krause, 2014).

Dimensionality and Directionality: It Goes Both Ways

For each specific way each religion can be believed and practiced, and for each dimension of mental health or illness, different possibilities exist for the relations between the religious and psychological variables. These possibilities can be subsumed under the general statement that certain facets of religiosity are associated with mental health and well-being, while other facets are associated with pathology. However, the special cases of these relationships need to be teased apart and closely examined.

One possibility is that people who suffer from some kind of psychological disorder are religious because it helps them cope. For example, a well-designed study of converts to four different religions (Jewish, Catholic, Baha'i, and Hare Krishna) found that compared to nonconverts, converts had more childhood trauma, an unhappier adolescence, and more personal stress during the 2 years preceding conversion (Ullman, 1982), data consistent with Freudian psychoanalytic theory. In another study, 71 percent of members of the Divine Light Mission (an NRM) reported the presence of symptoms on a psychological distress scale (e.g., anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, anomie, hearing voices, emotional maladaptation) "right before joining" the group (Galanter, 1989). Crucially and unfortunately, however, this study is suggestive, not definitive, because it was based only on current NRM members' memories of their preNRM experience and had no control group and no preNRM scores on the distress scale. Longitudinal data of this sort are hard to get. A research program based on attachment theory found that, overall, people with either anxious or avoidant attachment styles during upbringing were more likely to become religious as adults (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2004). Although by no means universal, but consistent with some of the theories summarized in Chapter 3, the data seem to indicate that if certain psychological needs are not satisfactorily met through one's developmental years, one may later gravitate to a religion as one way of servicing them.

Another possibility is that particular aspects of a religion's beliefs, practice, or context can appear to facilitate a psychological disorder in someone. To illustrate, I describe one case: I knew a young Orthodox Jewish man who was mentally healthy by any observable criterion. He then converted to Christianity—something that, according to the extraordinarily strict cultural norms of his upbringing, a Jew does not do. His family had a burial service for him; to them, he had died. He was no longer a member of the family and was regarded as literally dead. They had a funeral for him. There was no contact. After his conversion he became seriously mentally ill

and showed symptoms of schizophrenia. Although he hung on to his new faith, he never fully recovered. (Fortunately, such cases are exceptionally rare.) Did he become mentally ill because he converted? Did he have undetected mental illness prior to conversion, and did the conversion buffer him against even worse mental health? Unfortunately, a single case such as this does not tell us about the young man's prior state, and from it we can only infer (but not know) the impact of his social censure. It seems, therefore, that we cannot tell whether his switching religions was harmful, helpful, or irrelevant with respect to his mental health.

Finally, a subset of the facets of religiousness and mental health or illness may be positively associated and another subset of each be negatively associated. Too, the directionality of cause and effect may too often be assumed rather than demonstrated. Various findings show that whether or not someone is religious in a generic sense is not what is important. It is *how* someone is religious, *what* the person believes, and *how strongly* and *to what* the person is committed. Thus, one person may vow to give wealth to help the needy, while another keeps his or her wealth out of belief in the "prosperity gospel." One person may go to a region in the midst of military hostilities and care for refugees and the injured, while another may go that same region and kill others for the sake of a cause. All such acts can be equally religious and equally devout.

Fine-Tune Methods and Concepts

Let me summarize three take-home messages, illustrated above, about how researchers can split religiousness and mental health into dimensions in order to explore their relationships more precisely.

1. The researcher needs to stay alert to whether the hypotheses or findings describe positive linear, negative linear, or curvilinear relationships between the specific religious and mental health variables. Does the mental health variable go up as the religion variable goes up, or does the mental health variable go down as the religion variable goes up?

2. The research needs to explain how those relations are predicted to be a certain way or why they came out a certain way (whichever the case may be). The explanations need to be built on evidence-based concepts and principles that summarize the processes that are inferred to go on inside people's minds. You can think of this as a systematic way of following the rules of logic and evidence in order to state a valid attribution of the mental processes that mediate a psychological-behavioral event. That is what doing psychology is all about.

3. It is crucial to state the conceptual and operational definitions of the key variables with precision and design research based on them. It is no use to say you will study the effects of "religion." It is better to talk about,

for example, a characteristic of Christianity, Buddhism, or another religion: is it rigid or flexible, forgiving or punitive, strict or tolerant, affective or behavioral in emphasis, Catholic or Protestant or another variant (in the case of Christianity)? And it is important to identify those religious doctrines or behavioral mandates that are relevant to the problem of concern. For example, if the religious context under study is Islam or the Mormon Church, both of whom teach abstinence from alcohol, then it is important for the research to explicitly say so and explain why that feature of that religion is at issue in the investigation. Then the research design can include proper comparison data obtained from an alcohol-consuming control Muslim or Mormon group as well as control data from abstaining non-Muslims and abstaining non-Mormons. With an experiment so designed, it would be possible to tell whether or not any effect that was obtained was due to faith, to consuming alcohol, or to the interaction of the two variables. And in studies, care should be taken to be clear about whether the research can establish causal relationships versus simple associations.

RELIGION AND EMOTIONS

It stands to reason that so long as one takes one's religion or spiritual beliefs seriously, their effect will be sufficiently potent to affect one's emotional functioning and sense of well-being. An excellent approach to understanding the links between religion and emotion is provided by affect valuation theory (AVT; Tsai, 2007; Tsai et al., 2013). It begins by observing that religions are cultures that shape ideal affect more than actual affect. That is, one's beliefs may prescribe appropriate and inappropriate feelings, their level of intensity, and the social context in which one is expected to display them. For example, Christian charismatics are expected to display ecstatic emotions of seemingly trancelike joy when practicing glossolalia ("speaking in tongues") as a congregation. In contrast, the Armenian Apostolic Church may by custom assume that members will observe a certain period of mourning following the death of a loved one, during which time it is proper that the survivor grieve. The ideal affect is a kind of "measuring stick" or reference point against which people can check their emotions, especially if they are uncertain about how they "ought" to feel in certain situations (Burris & Petrican, 2014).

The emotional consequences that stem from the relative congruence or discrepancy between an "ideal" affect and the actual affect can vary along a spectrum from positive to negative. For example, believing that an infinite God feels genuine sorrow about one's personal problems and being able to appreciate what is good even in bad circumstances may prompt feelings of safety and gratitude and increase self-esteem. In contrast, believing that one's God is angry or disappointed because one has failed to live up to the ideal may trigger the emotion of fear and prompt self-degradation.

Positive Affect

Wholeness, Relief, Gratitude

One way people talk about their religion or their spiritual beliefs and practices is by describing how they make them feel whole. The notion is that without faith, the person felt tension, as if in conflict. Perhaps he or she had divided loyalties. For example, a teenager may desire to be loyal to both parents and peers but cannot do both. The conflict of loyalties can be felt as tension, a lack of a sense of harmony with no single direction or center of life. But if a religion serves as a superordinate guide to one's life, it may lead to an experience of having a central focus to life and a feeling of direction and harmony. The conflicts between different loyalties may be minimized if they are subservient to a higher commitment that serves as the superordinate, overriding, guiding principle of life (Frankl, 1963).

A corollary to the focus or sense of direction one can feel, summarized above, is some combination of a sense of surrender, relief, and gratitude. The sense of surrender is sometimes conveyed when a person has been struggling with whether or not to accept a faith. If one accepts, it can be accompanied by a feeling of "giving in" after putting up a fight. This may involve a sense of relief now that the person knows the struggle is over. This picture connotes a sense of release and freedom from burden. It often includes feeling gratitude toward the object of worship upon giving up one's own self in identifying with God or another higher power (Emmons & McCullough, 2004; Galanter, 1989).

Meaning, Purpose, Values

One of the most common and important things religious people say about how they feel because of their belief is that they experience a sense of meaning and purpose in life. Changes in values are also commonly reported. The concept of "purpose in life" or "meaning in life" is a nebulous one, difficult to describe with precision. We intuitively understand statements such as "my life has no meaning" or "life is full of meaning," but it is difficult to be objective about what is meant by them. The concept of meaning connotes significance and importance, that something matters. Thus, the idea of a "life full of meaning" includes the notion that life is significant because of something, that there is an important reason for it, and that there is something about it that matters for reasons other than chance.

This is no small matter, and professionals have dealt with it clinically. Working in a hospital, Crumbaugh and Maholick (1969) developed the Purpose in Life Test (PIL) based upon the concepts of existential psychiatrist Viktor Frankl (1963). According to this test, a life full of meaning is one that seems exciting, worthwhile, and satisfying. A person with a high sense of meaning has relatively clear goals, sees reasons for existence, sees himself or herself as responsible, is prepared to die, and perceives life as a

mission. A person with a low sense of meaning is just the opposite. Low purpose in life is said to represent a frustrated “will to meaning” (Frankl, 1963, 1975). The psychological state associated with this is called existential anxiety or an existential vacuum. People who are highly religiously motivated and people who are highly motivated in other ways, score high on the PIL. People who score low show signs of existential vacuum.

Crumbaugh (1968) reports that psychiatric populations, including alcoholics, people with neuroses who are outpatients or hospitalized, and people with schizophrenia and other psychoses, tend to score low on the PIL. Groups of college undergraduates tend to average within a normal/average range. Highly motivated people, those with definite purposes and goals, score high. When this research was extended to include the values associated with purpose in life in university students, four values in particular (pleasure, excitement, comfort, and salvation) were related to the PIL. When they were asked to rank-order these 4 values as part of a list of 18, only salvation was positively related to purpose in life. Pleasure, excitement, and comfort were all negatively related to purpose in life. People who ranked them high scored lower in purpose in life, and people who ranked them low scored higher (Crandall & Rasmussen, 1975; Paloutzian, 1981).

These findings offer a commentary on a materialistic philosophy of life. Taken as a cluster, the values of pleasure, excitement, and comfort can be thought of as materialistic values. They can be seen as mainline Western values, since part of the structure of the modern world economy rests upon production, distribution of goods, and striving for enjoyment, leisure, stimulation, activity, and prosperity. People who strive directly for these things apparently miss the sense of meaning that comes with prioritizing nonmaterial, nontemporal values. In contrast, the results suggest that people who espouse values that direct their attention beyond themselves gain a heightened sense of meaning as a by-product (Roccas & Elster, 2014; Van Cappellen & Rime, 2014).

At this point let us raise questions about the psychological meaning of the relationship between being committed to a religious faith and experiencing purpose in life. Is that the end of the story, or might high purpose in life also be found elsewhere? Does it have to come from commitment to a life-encompassing religious system or worldview, or will any major change (e.g., getting married) have the same psychological effects? The PIL validation studies by Crumbaugh and Maholick present data on groups that scored high as well as low on purpose in life. The high-scoring groups included those who were religious (active Protestant parishioners, a group of Catholic sisters) as well as those who were not (motivated businesspeople). These data suggest that high purpose in life is not unique to being religious or spiritual, although being so may foster a feeling of greater meaning, but is a response to any major life engagement. For example, the

motivated businesspeople who had high PIL scores may have engaged in their business activity not merely as a source of material gain but in context of whatever they believed in as a higher purpose.

Finally, what social psychological processes might account for the findings showing that religiously committed persons score high on measures of meaning? One explanation for this relationship assumes that the life of the religious individual is in fact more purposeful, in the sense of being more singularly directed, than that of his or her nonreligious counterpart. Another explanation, a uniquely psychological one, draws upon the notion that religiousness is like an attitude (Hill, 1994; Hill & Bassett, 1992). Attitudes are said to consist of three components: cognitive, affective or evaluative, and behavioral. A person's cognitive system tries to avoid any dissonance that might result from inconsistency among these three elements. One implication of this is that if a person performs a behavior (especially publicly) or makes a public commitment to believe something, afterward that person is not too psychologically free to do or believe the opposite. It is not easy, on psychological grounds, to reverse what one has done because the pressure is strong for a person to remain consistent, to move forward on the path he or she has already chosen. Rather, the person must find psychological ways to confirm his or her decision, and an excellent way to do so is to feel a sense of purpose as a consequence. That would be psychically easy and would feel very self-assuring. This notion, based on cognitive dissonance theory, is an intellectual predecessor to attribution theory, introduced in Chapter 3, which helps explain how people assign religious meaning to unusual states of consciousness (Chapter 8).

Negative Affect

For each positive affect discussed above, there is an equal and opposite negative affect that a believer may suffer or struggle with. It is useful to think of each affect and its counterpart as flip sides of a coin, or like opposite dimensions with the greatest positive and negative emotional intensity at the endpoints. When the emotional intensity is near the polar opposite extremes, it is felt as conflictual because it involves a discrepancy between what one wants and what one gets. The gap between what is expected and what happens in the real world can be hard to handle.¹

¹One day when I was an adult and had become a psychologist, I asked my mother (a wonderful, strong, hardworking Armenian woman), "Mom, why is life always a struggle?" She paused for a moment, focused her eyes straight on mine, and said, "Life is supposed to be a struggle." Hearing that, I felt one fleeting moment of intuitive insight into what she meant. Subsequent years would teach me her wisdom in spades many times over: Learn to know struggling by perceiving the world accurately instead of with positive illusions.

Struggle, Anger, Guilt

One kind of negative feeling can be described as a sense of coming apart and being let down, the opposite to feeling whole and complete with its accompanying sense of emotional and cognitive closure. Initially, the religious or spiritual system answers life's basic questions, but it also comes with challenges that can cause upset and struggle. One suffers, loses a job, has a child or spouse die, is treated unfairly by another or by the system, when believing enabled the person to imagine a life that would go well. The gap between what one expects and what actually happens can cause confusion ranging from mild to extreme. The wholeness, comfort, and positive outlook for the future may vanish, leaving a painful awareness of the discrepancy between the "ought" and the "is" in its wake (Exline, 2002; Exline & Rose, 2005, 2013).

Ordinary logic tells us that the challenge of suffering hinges on the question of whether or not God is to blame for the negative things that happen to us. I mentioned earlier that the problem of evil revolves around the question of why there is so much bad if God is so good and all-powerful. If God is all-powerful, then God can do anything. If God is good, then God can prevent all bad from happening and make only good happen. On an individual level, this means that if God actually is what he is claimed to be, then no bad things should happen to *me*. But they do, and not necessarily in small amounts. Thus, God apparently is to blame because, after all, God can do anything. This paradox is called the problem of *theodicy*, literally "God's justice." Can this paradox be solved?

The psychological issue that follows from this logic centers on what a believer does to make meaning out of the paradox. Two common responses are (1) the believer cultivates anger toward God and leaves the faith, modifies what it means to him or her, or sustains the angry feelings indefinitely, or (2) the person concludes that God caused the bad thing, but the badness was only apparent, as seen from human eyes—seen from God's perspective it was actually good because there is an ultimate purpose for it even though we don't know what it is. The first path, rooted in confusion and mistrust, includes the feeling that God is unjust, incorrect, and unfair; either the divided self returns or a new unified areligious self emerges. The second path, in contrast, is one of stronger belief and assurance that God is really there (Burris et al., 1997; Burris, Jackson, Tarpley, & Smith, 1996).

A second kind of struggle is over the negative things we do. The process of believing in a god or other spiritual agent typically includes a commitment, whether explicit or implicit, to behave in certain ways (e.g., love thy neighbor; do unto others as you would have them do to you). The struggle emerges in two contexts: (1) being faced with temptation to violate one's commitment, thus struggling with how to avoid doing so, and (2) struggling after having committed the violation, with its associated anger

and guilt (discussed below). Such struggling is common in the lives of most believers (Exline & Rose, 2005, 2013).

A third kind of struggle centers on whether to believe (or have faith) at all. Nonbelievers who are considering becoming a believer often struggle with whether the religious truth claims are true, whether the sacred texts can be trusted, whether reported miracles actually happened, and so forth. Also, both nonbelievers and believers can face struggles when learning of hypocritical behavior by clergy or other spiritual leaders (Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006), and when facing questions that appear to pit science and religion against each other (Hunsberger et al., 1993; see also Chapters 2 and 4 for discussion). The cascade of emotions implied above can lead to anger and guilt—anger at God for what occurred, anger at oneself for one’s own behavior, and anger at oneself for being angry at God. In Westernized religions, at least, anger toward God is common. In one study showing typical findings, 50% of a sample of undergraduate students who were asked to think of a negative event in which they thought God played a role expressed negative feelings about God (Exline & Rose, 2005). In another study, seeing God as cruel or distant was linked with feeling angry, doubting, and fearing God’s disapproval (Exline, Grubbs, & Homolka, 2015). When one feels guilty and the anger is self-focused, the anger can become compounded as a struggle with self-forgiveness. In the end, one must learn how to forgive oneself.

Emptiness, Distance, Alienation

The positive feeling of living with a faith can change into emptiness, a feeling of going nowhere and having no reason why life matters. As confrontations arise and doubts set in, a believer can become tired of “going through the same old motions,” feel pressured by the group to say and do the right things and put on the appearance of genuinely believing while the person is actually doubting. Reasons given for this include living through periods of time when God seemed distant, with an emotional void filling one’s consciousness. This might lead to deconversion (Chapter 7) because the religious life turned out not to be what was claimed. Such feelings might occur especially in religions (e.g., Pentecostal Christianity) that teach their believers to expect certain feelings, which sometimes occur and sometimes do not. They would be less likely in those religions (e.g., standard forms of Buddhism) that emphasize the opposite, a kind of detachment from clinging to the expectation of anything. In either case, when problems arise and the person needs to cope with them, various forms of religious coping can be invoked are discussed in the next chapter.

In all variations of spiritual struggle, however, the believer is beset with the same dilemma illustrated above in having to figure out how to make the apparent contradiction typified by the problem of evil psychologically

acceptable. Does it mean that one was wrong in believing at all or in how one understood the faith? Does it mean that there is no truth behind the faith to believe in? Only the individual can construct a meaningful answer to these questions.

RELIGION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DISORDERS

It seems clear that it is invalid to study one specific aspect of religion or mental health and then make a sweeping conclusion about religion or mental health. We can now apply that idea to a whole range of diagnostic psychological categories. The interdependence of religious and psychological variables becomes intellectually rich but very complex. It also makes simple practical application difficult. One fundamental variable is that religions differ greatly. Another is that causal relations between religiousness and psychological processes goes both ways—a mental health process can affect an aspect of religiousness and an aspect of one's religiousness can affect one's mental health status. Add to this that there are cultural norms regulating the manifestation of even the same religions across cultures, that religions are themselves cultures, and that situational contexts and cues can prime specific religious responses even without a person's awareness (LaBouff et al., 2012), and it becomes clear that a complicated mix of meanings interacts to produce religiously related mental health states. Simple formula-like answers do not work. The saying "It's just sin" or "If God wills" is worthless as an account for why human beings do not always follow their lofty ideals, religious or otherwise. Our need for accurate knowledge requires that we dig deeper, at a more specific level.

Anxiety

Given the complexities that I mentioned above, I would expect research to yield an array of relationships between aspects of religion and anxiety. Anxiety can significantly dampen one's normal level of functioning. It is a distressful generalized kind of bodily and psychic tension that at high levels can interfere with clear thinking, attention to tasks, and speed of reflexes, and that often includes a painful sensation in the chest. Its relationship with religiousness, however, is nonuniform. Different dimensions of religion and spirituality are related to anxiety in opposite ways. For example, a large-scale Canadian study found that the more people attended worship services, the less likely they were to suffer from panic disorder or social phobia. In contrast, the higher value they placed on their spirituality, the more likely they were to suffer panic attacks and social phobia (Baetz, Bowen, Jones, & Koru-Sengul, 2006). A comprehensive summary of the trends suggests the following:

People who are more anxious may be more religious (perhaps to cope with anxiety), although those who are religious are not necessarily more susceptible to anxiety (Koenig, 2009) . . . [and] . . . strong religious beliefs may protect people from existential issues and anxiety, while a search for meaning or spiritual struggle may lead to increased anxiety, at least in the short term (Baetz et al., 2006; Exline & Rose, [2013]). (Park & Slattery, 2013, p. 547)

These trends seem to suggest that how an aspect of religion is related to anxiety depends on what it does to or for the person, that is, the particular meaning it services in his or her psychological system. This allows for aspects of religion and anxiety to be related in opposite ways inside the same person at the same time.

Obsessive–Compulsive Disorder

The specific religion-related meaning of an act or thought becomes accentuated when we examine its role in obsessive–compulsive disorder (OCD). All religious systems have rules to regulate behavior, lists of acts to avoid, and virtues to cultivate. Guidelines of this sort become problems when they are applied so rigidly or absolutely as to foster exacerbating worry about potential misbehavior and guilt over an unwanted thought or deed. OCD may be illustrated by obsessively dwelling on sins or by compulsively performing a ritual to repent or cleanse oneself. If self-flagellation is part of the process, one can feel a great deal of distress and unworthiness, which may prompt low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression (Exline & Rose, 2005). The phenomenon of thought–action fusion (the belief that the thought of an act is equivalent to performing the behavior) can compound OCD symptoms because the “mere” thought of a prohibited act carries the same psychological meaning as if the person had actually performed the act—a difficult mix of obsessive thought tendencies combined with compulsive behavioral tendencies. Studies of U.S. Christians found that they tended to score higher on thought-action fusion than others (Abramowitz, Huppert, Cohen, Tolin, & Cahill, 2002; Abramowitz, Deacon, Woods, & Tolin, 2004); similar trends have been found in Italy (Sica, Novara, & Sanavio, 2002), which suggests some cross-cultural replicability of findings (see also Himle, Chatters, Taylor, & Nguyen, 2011, and Miller & Hedges, 2008).

Depression

The relationship between being religious and symptoms of depression or suicide typically, but not always, show a modest negative association—greater religiousness somewhat associated with lower depression and probability of suicide. Overall, however, when looking over the results of hundreds of studies, the probability of any particular study showing that

particular trend is only slightly over 50%. More refined analyses by Baetz et al. (2006) showed results that parallel those on the relation between aspects of religion and anxiety, noted above. When the religious variable was attendance at worship services, higher attendance predicted lower lifetime and current incidence of depression. However, when the religious variable was the value placed on one's own spirituality, higher value predicted more depression and mania.

The data are suggestive of some interreligion similarity in findings across religions. Because religions themselves vary across countries (e.g., Islam is the dominant religion in Turkey, Roman Catholicism in Italy) and the same religion can have different meanings to different peoples (Christianity can convey different meanings to U.S. African Americans than to Brazilians), looking at studies of the relations between religion and depression in different countries and subgroups helps to inform us of interreligious similar or different relationships with depression or other variables. A summary of findings from African Americans, Turkish adolescents, U.S. veterans with traumatic brain injury, and indigenous (First Nation) Canadian forensic psychiatric patients suggests that some relationships between religions and depression may be stable across religions and subgroups (Park & Slattery, 2013). There may also be a stable moderating influence of stressful life events on depression (Smith, McCullough, & Poll, 2003).

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

Research on the relationship between religiousness and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) shows a pattern approximating those for anxiety and depression. The overall trend in the results is mixed with a slight tendency for religiousness to be associated with fewer PTSD symptoms and greater coping with the trauma and its aftermath. But again, the results are nonuniform. The general trend is qualified by, for example, what praying for help means to the person.

Two studies are illustrative. First, a study of disabled Muslim military veterans from Iran found that those who were more religious showed fewer symptoms of PTSD than those who were less religious; importantly, the effects were due to religious coping (see the section below on coping; Aflakseir & Coleman, 2009). Second, a study of 110 U.S. military veterans from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars found that it was not being religious per se that was associated with fewer PTSD and depressive symptoms, but what invoking one's religion meant to the person. For example, after controlling for combat exposure, social support, and attitudes toward personal disclosure, praying in two ways (i.e., for assistance and for calm and focus) predicted lower levels of PTSD and depression symptoms. In contrast, praying to avoid the dilemma (asking for it to be taken away) predicted greater symptomatology (Tait, Currier, & Harris, 2016).

Psychoses and Bipolar Disorder

Schizophrenia and other psychotic disorders are the most serious types of mental illness and the most difficult to treat. The relationships between severe mental illness and religion takes forms that can look strange, and even bizarre, compared to how that relationship looks in cases of anxiety and depression. Look once again at the letter from “Prophet, _____” in Box 9.1. It contains some obvious religious symbols, but their context and use give us few clues to what they mean psychologically. It is entirely possible that although Prophet’s words are full of religious symbolism, they carry no religious meaning whatsoever inside his mind. In general, religious preoccupations seem to be commonplace among recurring themes in psychosis (Clarke, 2010).

People who suffer from schizophrenia but can nevertheless function well enough to navigate in the ordinary world have reported that their religion (mostly Christianity) helps foster a sense of meaning that includes accepting their symptoms as part of life, that it helps them cope, and that it helps decrease their substance abuse and probability of suicide (Huguelet, Mohr, & Borrás, 2009). In general, being involved in a religious group may aid people with schizophrenia (Koenig, 2009). Other research suggests some association between aspects of religion (e.g., adhering to an orthodox orientation) and various symptoms, including hallucinations and religious delusions (Siddle, Haddock, Tarrier, & Faragher, 2002). Delusory patients are also more likely to show symptoms of paranoia (and therefore less likely to trust psychiatric treatment) and to evidence negative effects of their religion on their symptomatology (Mohr et al., 2010).

Bipolar disorder is not a type of psychosis but can manifest some similar symptoms. The mood of a person with this disorder can alternate between manic and depressed, and symptoms during mania—such as delusions and hurried, anxious speech—often include religious elements and references. A manic episode might be prompted by a religious experience (Wilson, 1998). In a study of 147 bipolar subjects, 78% held strong religious or spiritual beliefs, and 81.5% practiced their religion frequently. The majority of them believed their religion helped them cope with and manage their symptoms (Mitchell & Romans, 2002).²

RELIGION AND COPING

Whatever struggles a person may have to face, whether psychologically healthy or not, there is a common denominator to them all: they all must be coped with. Coping simply means dealing with stress or difficulty. People

²It may be informative to compare these percentages with those in the general population.

turn to their religion to help them cope, especially when a tragedy or crisis occurs (Pargament, Ano, & Wachholtz, 2005; Pargament et al., 2013). A poignant example occurred after the attacks on the World Trade Center on 9/11. A national sample of Americans showed that 90% turned to religion for solace and support (Schuster et al., 2001). But events such as 9/11 are the exception, not the rule.

Nevertheless, people probably rely on their faith for help in all spheres of life. Because of this, the relationships between ways of being religious and effectiveness of coping have been among the most researched topics in the psychology of religion. By now it won't be a surprise to hear me say that the relationship between religion and coping is nonuniform. How effective religious coping is depends upon what using one's religion means to the individual in the context of solving a particular problem. Picking up a cue from earlier in this chapter, the problem to be solved will be some discrepancy between an ideal and an actual state of affairs—intrapersonal, interpersonal, or contextual. Both positive and negative forms of religious coping are common.

Positive and Negative Religious Coping

Religious coping concerns the degree to which a person invokes his or her religion as part of the process of dealing with unwanted or critical life events. Careful analysis, however, shows that *how much* someone involves his or her religion in coping is not the most important factor in its degree of effectiveness. Key factors include *how* the religion is involved, *who* (oneself, one's parent or clergy, a stranger) is doing *what* (praying, giving money, performing ritual), *when* (during or after a crisis, for months in advance), *where* (at the patient's bedside, at a temple, shrine, or synagogue), and *why* (to find meaning, gain control, cure an organic disease) (Pargament et al., 2013). This is a masterful way of teasing the facets of a religion apart to test the effects of each.

Both positive and negative religious coping styles have been identified through research that has explored the contributions of the facets in the above paragraph on religious coping (see Pargament et al., 2013, for review and synthesis). Positive religious coping may take on many forms, including benevolent religious reappraisals of why something happened (e.g., "This is part of God's plan"), seeking support from God (reassurance of God's love and care), and support from ministers, priests, rabbis, or imams (reassurance of love and care of clergy and congregation). Positive religious coping reflects a secure relationship with God and a spiritual connectedness with others and tends to benefit people undergoing stressful life events (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005). It is also associated with lower levels of depression, anxiety, and hopelessness.

Negative religious coping methods are more likely to be maladaptive. They could include, for example, reappraisal of the unwanted event as

punishment from God (“God gave me this disease”), reappraisals of God’s powers (“God can’t answer prayer, God is not all powerful or all good”), and demonic reappraisals (“evil forces are at work—this is caused by Satan or demons”). Negative coping methods tend to reflect an insecure relationship with God and are more likely to be linked to negative outcomes such as depression, anxiety, and callousness (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005).

Although most research on religious coping has been done on Christians, there are some parallel data on religion and coping in Hindus (Tarakeshwar, Pargament, & Mahoney, 2013), Jews (Dubow, Pargament, Boxer, & Tarakeshwar, 2000), Muslims (Ai, Peterson, & Huang, 2003), and other religious groups. Research on Muslim religious patients from Malaysia revealed that religious support, encouragement, and guidance helped them cope with bereavement (Azhar & Varma, 1995). For Muslims with generalized anxiety disorder, praying, reading the Qur’an, and discussing religious issues with others led to more improvement than a neutral support group (Azhar, Varma, & Dharap, 1994).

What are the overall conclusions about the relation between religion and coping? A large amount of literature on aspects of religion, various measures of mental health and well-being, and coping was examined by Pargament and Park (1995). Their overall conclusion is contrary to an older view that having a faith is associated with higher levels of ego defensiveness. It is based on careful examination of several bodies of information that Pargament (Paloutzian, 1994; Pargament et al., 2005, 2013) has summarized as follows:

- (1) Religious people faced with stressful life situations do not appraise their crises as less threatening or harmful than their less religious counterparts;
- (2) Religious items, when included in measures of coping activities, factor into active coping strategies . . . rather than passive ones;
- (3) Some styles of religious coping . . . are associated with high levels of personal initiative and competence;
- (4) Various measures of religious involvement and commitment have been tied to an internal rather than an external locus of control;
- (5) Seemingly passive religious strategies may be, in a paradoxical sense, quite active . . .
- (6) Even when defensive religious strategies are used, they may set the stage for more active religious coping to follow.

Pathways between Religion and Well-Being

Figure 9.1 presents a comprehensive model showing the pathways that mediate the relationship between religious dimensions and mental health and well-being. The diagram reveals that the causal direction can go both ways and that both positive and negative forms of each variable (e.g., positive and negative religious coping, positive and negative affect or religious attributions) contribute to the overall processes and outcomes. It is clear that simple overall statements about the relationship between religion and

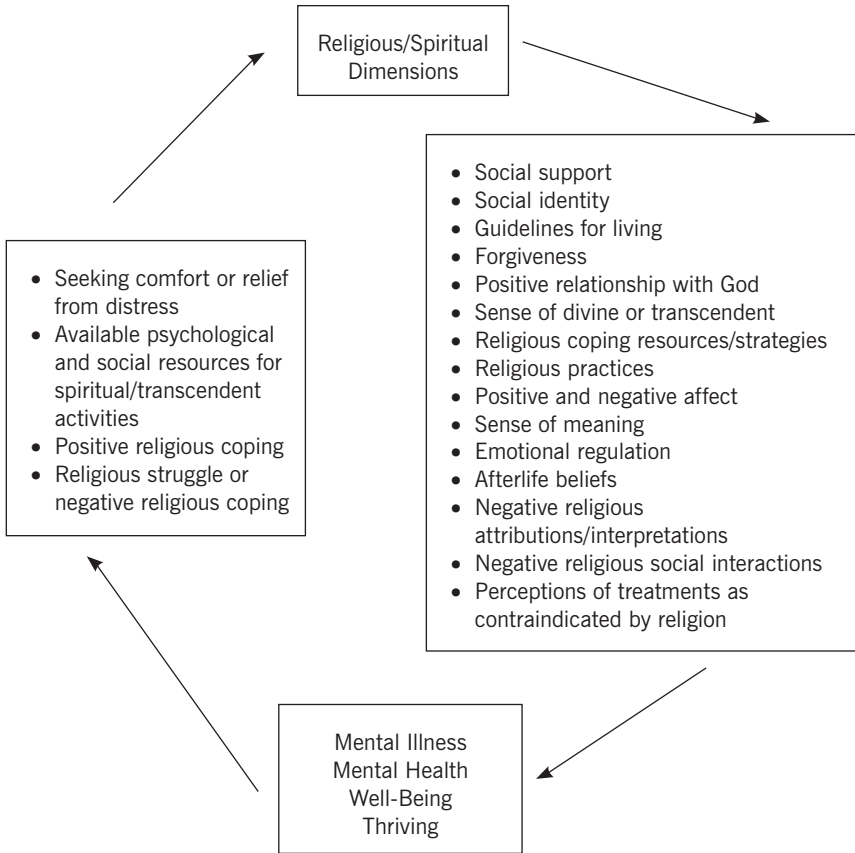


FIGURE 9.1. Model of proposed relationship between religious and spiritual dimensions and mental health, with proposed moderators (left, right). From Park (2013, p. 547). Copyright 2013 by The Guilford Press. Reprinted by permission.

mental health status cannot be made. Both variables must be fine-tuned and their possible relationships tested, as the sampling of research summarized in this chapter has illustrated. The model in Figure 9.1 can feed the clinical and counseling process nicely (see Park & Slattery, 2013).

RELIGION, COUNSELING, AND THERAPY

Professionals in religious work and in mental health fields can help each other. The days are long past when clergy in the West did not readily call upon psychological and psychiatric expertise when the need was there.

Religious workers in other regions of the world are increasingly doing the same. Analogously, psychologists now pay attention to the role that religion might play in our lives to a degree not before seen in the history of the profession. I take this to be a good sign, since most people in the world are involved in a religion in some way, and since the task of clinical and counseling psychologists and psychiatrists is to treat “the whole person” when that person is suffering from a psychological disorder.

Therapy as Meaning Remaking

Religious beliefs and values are often key issues in psychotherapy because religious meaning contributes to “making sense” of conflict and suffering (Shafranske, 2005). Because one’s religion is often central to one’s worldview and meaning system, there are times when a competent therapist needs to exploit it as much as possible for therapeutic benefit. One effect of this is that psychotherapy is in part a meaning-remaking process.

Biases and Assessment

One of the most important things for clinicians to do is to be aware of their approach and biases with respect to religion in general and the client’s religion in particular in the clinical setting. For example, a counselor or therapist who has a bias that might interfere with treatment of the client should either get over it or refer the client to another professional. Although clinicians may not intend for their views to enter the counseling room, their values and beliefs may affect the way they refer to spiritual matters, even in subtle changes in their tone of voice. Clinicians must be aware of their own religious beliefs and values and make sure that they have no place in the therapy room (Shafranske, 2005).

It may also be helpful for clinicians to conduct an assessment to better understand the religious and spiritual worldview of their clients and use this information to help in planning the course of therapy. Taking the time to get a “close-up” of clients’ religiousness and spirituality can help clinicians be more empathetic and sensitive to clients’ worldviews and detect the degree to which aspects of the religion are part of the psychological difficulties (see Richards & Bergin, 2014, and Shafranske, 2005, 2013, for in-depth information).

Ethics and Informed Consent

In all of psychology, and particularly clinical psychology, ethics are a top priority. Therapists should clearly describe religious or spiritual interventions to clients and get their permission (informed consent) before using them. Doing this also helps the therapist gain the trust of the client so that

all aspects of the therapeutic process can be successful. The treatment itself is then tailored to work within the client's value system or religious meaning system (RMS). Therapists should only use religious or spiritual interventions if they have competence and training with those methods and the methods are evidence based for the particular category of client (Richards & Bergin, 2014; Shafranske, 2005, 2013).

Integrating Religion into Therapy

Mindfulness

Mindfulness meditation is orthogonal—although its techniques have their roots in Buddhism and now Buddhist psychology (Ekman, Davidson, Ricard, & Wallace, 2005; Kwee, 2013; Levenson & Aldwyn, 2013; Wallace & Shapiro, 2006), it is not aligned with any one psychotherapeutic approach but is said to be capable of being adapted for use within any of them. In fact, some of the research suggests that mindfulness actually works through fundamental psychological processes that are also involved in cognitive, behavioristic, and depth psychotherapies (Hölzel et al., 2011). This also means that its use does not have to be based on trial and error but that it is anchored in an evidence base of known psychological processes (Cigolla & Brown, 2011; Davis & Hayes, 2011; Siegel, 2010). Mindfulness meditation is not a new therapy—it is an old tool that can be used in new ways with an array of already existing therapies (Fabrizio, 2009).

There are, however, possible downsides to mindfulness, Transcendental Meditation, and other forms of meditation. Farias and Wikholm (2015) reviewed the research on which many positive claims of the effectiveness of mindfulness and other meditative techniques are based; they found that only a small percentage of the hundreds of studies used a proper control group. This means that the data on the effects of meditative practices for psychotherapeutic benefit are not conclusive, and that well-executed experiments with proper controls are needed.

Implicit or Explicit Integration

Clinicians may incorporate religiousness or spirituality into therapy in subtle, indirect ways (implicit integration) or obvious, direct ways (explicit integration). As suggested by its name, implicit integration uses a more covert approach. The therapist doesn't initiate discussion about religion openly, use prayer or spiritual practices, or refer to sacred texts (Tan, 1996). Explicit integration is a more overt approach that deals openly and plainly with spiritual or religious issues in therapy. The therapist might have the client pray or read a scripture. Some Western clinical texts give examples of how this can be done (see, e.g., Richards & Bergin, 2004,

2005; Sperry & Shafranske, 2005; Frame, 2003; Griffith & Griffith, 2002; Nielson, Johnson, & Ellis, 2001), and suggestions for integrative therapy with specifically Muslim clients have been offered (Keshavarzi & Haque, 2013). Despite the positive tone of the literature listed here, there are concerns about its use and effectiveness (Tonigan, Toscova, & Connors, 1999).

An Experimental Test of Christianity Integrated into Therapy

Sooner or later psychology research has to test psychological proposals to see how well they work. Although individuals who have been helped by religious counselors understandably feel convinced that it was the special blend of religious teaching and counseling methods that helped them, the research question is whether this blend is more effective than counseling without religious components. Fortunately, Rebecca Propst (1992) has done an excellent experiment to test this question. One group of Christian counseling subjects received cognitivebehavioral therapy that included “Christian religious rationales for the procedures,” “religious arguments to counter irrational thoughts,” and “religious imagery procedures.” Another group received the same treatment without the religious material. Both treatments were done by both religious and nonreligious counselors. Overall, for subjects who were religious themselves, the combination of religious material plus the counseling technique was more effective in facilitating therapeutic movement and lowering depression. Interestingly, however, this effect was slightly better for the therapists who, themselves, were personally nonreligious but who used religious material during the counseling sessions.

WHAT CONCLUSIONS CAN WE DRAW?

What conclusions can be drawn regarding whether religion is associated with either positive or negative mental health? The results repeatedly conflict with each other. As a whole, religion may be slightly protective against mental disorders. However, when a religious person has bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, or obsessive–compulsive disorder, the symptoms may have religious content. In such cases, the religion mostly influences the expressed symptomology in individuals who have a psychopathology (Miller & Kelley, 2005).

Furthermore, trends are more ambiguous than consistent with respect to whether abnormal mental states or lack of well-being is associated with one religion more than another or with specific facets of religiousness. Certain aspects of being religious, such as negative religious coping or having a strict and punitive religion, appear to be associated with negative affect,

anxiety, and depression; however, being a patient in a mental hospital tends to be negatively related to religiousness as assessed by most measures. Finally, certain aspects of religions that make prominent the avoidance of death and suffering appear to reduce one major aspect of anxiety about death while mildly sensitizing people to other aspects of it. Some of these relationships about religion and death are explored in Chapter 10.

It seems clear, therefore, that religiousness has no general effects on mental health, only specialized positive or negative ones. Religious persons appear to be neither overall better nor overall worse off than other persons. They are only different—slightly better off and worse off in specialized ways.

TAKE-HOME MESSAGES

- In the past, people thought that being religious and having a psychological disorder must somehow go together, but this view was based on assumptions that don't reflect any actual relationships between facets of religion and facets of mental health or illness.
- Because the relationships between specific aspects of religion and specific aspects of mental health status are multidimensional and bidirectional, overall generalities are not warranted. It is necessary to fine-tune our knowledge about what is related to what, and why.
- A person's religion and his or her emotions can be intimately interdependent. Their relationship with each other can have positive effects such as wholeness, relief, gratitude, meaning, purpose, and values, or negative effects including struggle, anger, guilt, emptiness, distance, and alienation.
- The relationship between religion and psychological disorders is nonuniform; no one statement summarizes the whole set. Research illuminates the relationships between aspects of religion and aspects of anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, depression, PTSD, psychosis, and bipolar disorder.
- Positive and negative religious coping strategies exist, with the positive strategies being more helpful and the negative strategies being less helpful.
- Psychotherapy can be understood as a process of meaning remaking. This process should include caution regarding one's own biases, assessment of the client's spirituality, and professional ethics and informed consent.

FURTHER READING

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CHAPTER 10

Religion and Health-Related Issues

Religion–Health Issues

It’s All Psychological: The Model

Dying and Healing

Religion, Spirituality, and Living

Suffering and Well-Being

Miracles

Prayer and Health

Take-Home Messages

Further Reading

If prayer worked the way many people think it does,
no one would ever die.

—RABBI HAROLD KUSHNER,
When Bad Things Happen to Good People

Among the biggest concerns in human life is physical health. Taking care of it occupies our time, thoughts, affections, and money. All people need health, and, although there are extremes of disagreement about whether they need a religion, people nevertheless have to make meaning, belong, define themselves, and construct an identity, and adopting or participating in a religion are among the ways people do so. If we knew that religion and health were related, the implications would be important for people as individuals and for society as a whole.

The quote above by Rabbi Kushner is at the crux of a set of psychological issues at the intersection of religion and health. This chapter is about those issues. It faces them directly, objectively, holding nothing back. To be clear, this chapter is not a general survey of findings on religion–health relationships—for the latter, see the Further Reading section at the end of this chapter. This chapter confronts the fundamental questions raised by the juxtaposition of various religious views, on the one hand, and the essential philosophy of science orientation of scientific medicine and scientific psychology, on the other. The issues become especially vivid in the face of opposing views of the nature of truth that are commonly assumed by each.

Notions of how religions and health might be related have existed since ancient times. The gods of ancient Greece, Israel, Persia, and others were said to strike people with sickness or cause death and to cure them either miraculously or through earthly means. In our modern world we hear claims of faith healing, sacred texts that say that God cures disease, testimonies of miraculous cures, and proclamations by would-be healers, and we are easily left with the nagging question: Does it work? Is it true? Will it help me, my child, my loved one? If I pray for a cure and it doesn't happen, why not? Is it my fault? Is my religion true anyway? Is it OK to ask that question? Fortunately, the power of the scientific method has been harnessed to address whether religions affect health and well-being and what psychological processes are involved.

RELIGION–HEALTH ISSUES

Case Examples

One of the strangest cases I have witnessed occurred when my son was at the children's hospital of a major medical school. A little girl on the ward with my son had cancer and was dying. Her mother believed the little girl was a "miracle child" whom God would heal in order to show his glory and power. When the girl died, the mother refused help from the staff psychiatrist and instead continued to play the nearby piano, sing God's praises, and wait to take her daughter home, raised and cured. She informed the nursing staff that God allowed the girl to die for a purpose—so that God could then raise her from the dead, ever more strongly demonstrating God's care, control, and love. She told the nurses that they "just didn't understand" how God works. The little girl remained dead and her corpse was removed from the ward. The mother sustained her unwavering belief in God's supernatural healing.

Not long ago I was a guest on a National Public Radio news program. The discussion was about a man and woman who refused medical help for their 22-month-old son because their religion taught that the only real

source of healing was God, and that the way to invoke God to heal the sick child was through prayer. Their religion was a somewhat strict variant of conservative Christianity. So the child was prayed for (only prayer, no doctors allowed) and died. The legal authorities then charged the parents with manslaughter and endangering the welfare of a child. The physicians explained that the boy had hemophilia and would have been saved had the parents taken him to the hospital. The parents continued believing that God alone cures illness.

Psychological Questions

The issues embedded in these two cases raise important questions of both a generic and specific sort. What are the relationships between religion in general, particular religions, or specific religious and spiritual variables and health, if any? If there is an association, is it constant across religions or unique to certain ones? Does the association work through natural means, or is there evidence of supernatural cures? Does a supernatural agent or other paranormal spirit or force answer prayer? Does a person who is prayed for have better odds than one who is not? What about knowing that one is being prayed for, or praying for oneself, or not knowing that one is being prayed for? We can easily generate the various combinations of variables and situations in order to state the many possible scenarios.

There are also legal issues. Should a parent have the right to withhold life-saving medical care from a child because of the *parent's* (not necessarily the *child's*) religion? Where do we draw the line between the parent's right to practice his or her religion and child's right to life?

IT'S ALL PSYCHOLOGICAL: THE MODEL

Should we base our conclusions about these issues on public opinion, religious scriptures, or testimonies of true believers? No. The only basis for knowledge on these issues and the social policy that follows from it is sound scientific research, evidence validly gathered and correctly interpreted. Fortunately, we now have evidence that provides the beginnings of answers to some of these questions.

In order to understand the effects of religion on mental and physical health and well-being, it is essential to grasp that they depend on, even derive from, the social, psychological, and biological processes that mediate them. Psychology is the science of mental and behavioral processes, and if a religion has effects it has them through these mechanisms. This does not rule out supernatural agency in the process, or some special role of religiousness. But it does mean that psychological and biological processes are what they are, and that it is at these levels of analysis that we can

understand the processes involved in health and well-being. There may be overarching theological or other ideas or principles within which knowledge of these processes can be integrated. But from the point of view of good psychology, good biology, and good science, these are the levels of analysis at which our knowledge can be meaningfully constructed.

In order to convey my picture of the possible ways that religion and health can be related, the rest of this chapter will present a “working model” of the psychological processes that would have to mediate the relationships; profile some research on the topic; and explore the limits of the model and the scientific boundaries of our questions. (When do we no longer ask meaningful scientific questions?).

A model of the pathways through which aspects of religiousness might affect physical disease is illustrated in Figure 10.1. It presents two interdependent paths. One, going from top to bottom down the left side of the diagram, is obvious and is called the direct, or behavioral, path. The other is nonobvious and is called the social cognitive path. Its nondirect “psychological” root begins with a religion schema just as does the behavioral path, but it makes a loop to the right through social cognitive processes that affect mind–body interactions at macro and micro levels. Through this second pathway, the positive outlook on life provided by one’s religious beliefs may contribute to physical well-being, but the paths by which this occurs are indirect. In truth, each pathway involves both behaviors and social cognitive processes, and the processes invoked within each path interact with those in the other. But I give each its particular name because that is where the accent is best placed for correct understanding of how that path works. It is clear that one’s religiousness can have consequences for disease and health, but, as we discussed with religion and mental health, the relationships are nonuniform.

The key aspect of how the behavioral path works is doing what a religion prescribes: any health-related effects follow in a straightforward way. For example, a person’s religious beliefs may dictate exercise, diet, or alcohol avoidance, and such behaviors would facilitate physical health as measured by reduced heart disease, better weight control, and a lower probability of liver disease or death by auto accident due to alcohol abuse.

In contrast, the key aspect of how the social cognitive path works is in the meanings associated with the acts, groups, beliefs, and thoughts associated with the process. The mix of information that emerges from the interaction of these factors is processed, and the output is in the form of psychological health-related effects. The second pathway lies in the perception of life events in the context of a larger meaning system, combined with having positive illusions (Chapter 9; Taylor & Brown, 1988) or a positive outlook on the world provided by one’s religious beliefs. For example, one’s ability to cope with negative life events may be enhanced by seeing them as part of God’s larger plan or as a stimulus to personal growth, as well

as believing that one has control over the events through invoking God’s agency. A combination of these factors can foster an optimistic outlook and promote health-related behaviors. It can also enhance cognitive control over microscopic physiological processes, for example, influencing the levels of T cells and NK cells in the blood or secretory immunoglobulinA in the saliva (Ader, Felton, & Cohen, 1991), both of which are part of the psychoneuroimmunologic system. Therefore, the second pathway linking religion to physical health may be through the medium of social cognition.

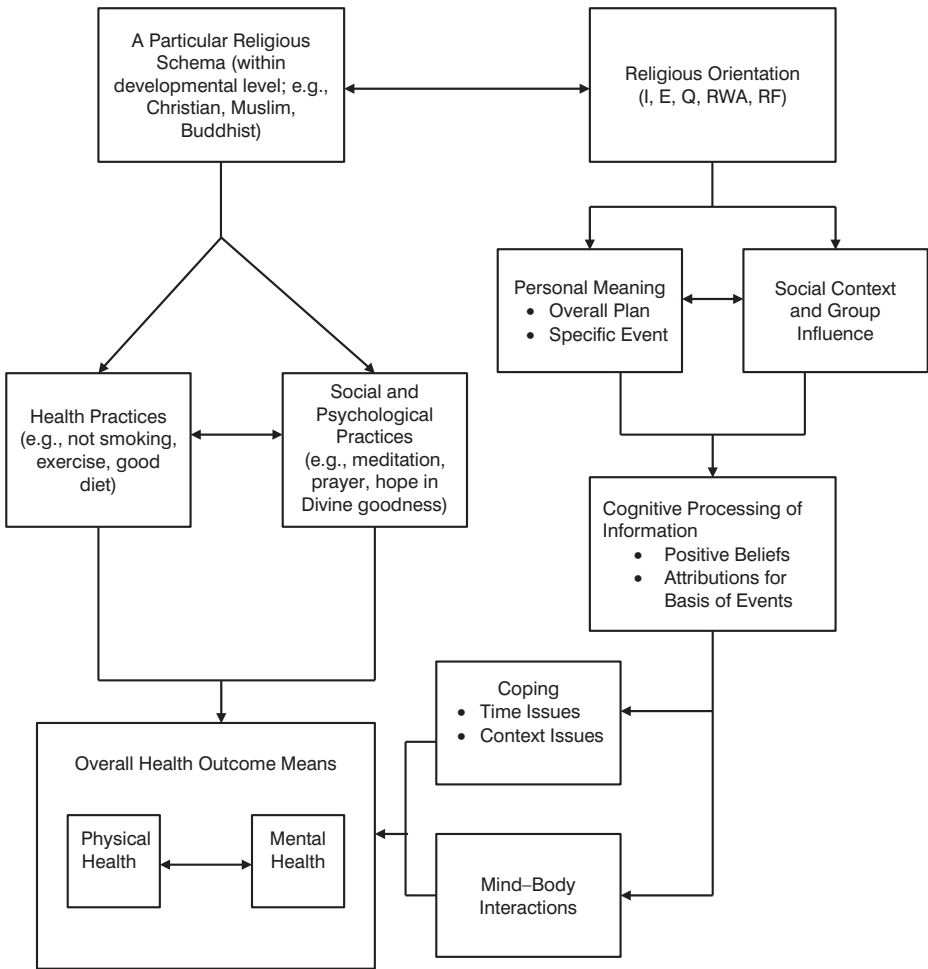


FIGURE 10.1. The religion and health connection. For the abbreviations in the upper right box: I, intrinsic religious orientation; E, extrinsic religious orientation; Q, religion as quest; RWA, right-wing authoritarianism; RF, religious fundamentalism. Based on Dull and Skokan (1995).

DYING AND HEALING

Of utmost importance in navigating the pathways in the model is a clear understanding of key medical terms. For example, if we want to know how religion relates to death, we need to know what *death* means. It turns out that there is an important difference between technically being medically dead and being permanently, irrevocably dead. In Chapter 8, I discussed near-death experiences (NDEs) and noted that people who have NDEs often claim to know what happens after we are dead because they have been there, seen it, and come back. But having an NDE is not being irrevocably dead, even if one was technically medically dead (defined as cessation of breath, heartbeat, and brainwaves). This is because a body that is technically medically dead for a few seconds or minutes can sometimes be revived, if its organs still have sufficient oxygenated living tissue. An irrevocably dead body cannot revive because tissue decay and cessation of biochemical activity have progressed too far. This distinction is important for research on the relationship between religion and death, healing, and death anxiety (discussed later in this chapter).

An analogous distinction is important for research on the relationship between religion, treatment, and healing. Medical treatments involve tangible procedures such as injections, surgery, and instructions for healthy behavior. Certain forms of religion involve the use of medical language or procedures analogous to those in medicine, but they do not seem to demonstrate curative effects. For example, some variants of Christianity emphasize faith healing. Sometimes a person who is ill or injured is expected to believe strongly enough, and have enough absolute faith in God, for healing. In other instances, the person is touched, pushed over, or blown on by a “faith healer” as a means of invoking a cure. In either case, when a healing in the sense of cure of a purely organic disease or injury doesn’t happen, it may nevertheless be claimed that a miracle did occur: God did perform a healing but it was a “spiritual healing,” not a physical healing. But for our purposes (and for those seeking a cure of an ailment), “healing” refers to the restoration of something, such as a broken bone, cut in the skin, or infection in the lungs, back to its original healthy condition. When prayers for healing are offered on behalf of a sick person, they are offered with the physical malady in mind. If the physical condition remains unchanged, even though a different “healing” is purported to have occurred, the word *healing* is being used in a way that was not initially intended. Spiritual healings of this sort are not healings, for our purposes; the physical malady remains as it was.

What about when someone prays for someone else to get well? Prayers are given with the hope that something will happen to the sick person’s body because the prayer prayed, which would not happen if the prayer did not pray. Is prayer, therefore, a medical intervention, a treatment? We examine the heart of this issue in the last section of this chapter.

RELIGION, SPIRITUALITY, AND LIVING

The most fundamental question to ask is whether religions, or certain features of religions, are related to living and dying. But serious life-or-death medical conditions can also involve profound psychological states and processes. Because of this, I have organized this section into two categories of research. The first section presents research that explores religious variables in relation to physical health outcomes. The second section presents research on religiously related psychological processes that are often involved in physical health conditions. These two bodies of knowledge help our understanding of their interrelationships as well as the issues at their intersection.

Physical Outcomes

Mortality

Research on whether religiousness is related to mortality yields a generally consistent pattern: being a regular participant in one's religious organization, in particular, shows a positive relationship with good health and a negative relationship with early mortality (Oman & Thoresen, 2005). This makes sense, since such participation includes ample social contact and social support and reduces isolation and loneliness. For example, a comprehensive review and reanalysis of data from 40 independent studies involving over 125,000 people found that frequent participation in the activities of one's religious organization was a predictor of living longer (McCullough, Hoyt, Larson, Koenig, & Thoresen, 2000). Specifically, in an 8-year follow-up of 20,000 adults, people attending religious services more than once a week had a life expectancy 7 years longer than those who never attended services, a difference similar to how much longer women live than men on average (Hummer, Rogers, Nam, & Ellison, 1999). The life expectancy of African Americans attending religious services was about 14 years longer than that for nonattendees. This relationship remains strong even after adjusting for socioeconomic status and demographics (Powell, Shahabi, & Thoresen, 2003).

The finding that it is a religious participation variable (in contrast to other variables such as what one believes or ratings of the importance of the religion) that is associated with longevity is consistent with other research that associates general participatory activity with health. The relationship is bidirectional: the more healthy someone is, the more he or she can be involved in church, and the more actively involved someone is (whether in church or anything else), the more healthy the person is likely to be. Such findings are consistent with the behavioral path shown in Figure 10.1. The research summarized above focuses on Western populations; future studies in other regions and cultures will illuminate the degree of robustness of these findings.

Cancer

A snapshot of work on the relationship between religion and cancer shows that both the behavioral and social cognitive paths drive the research agenda. Studies of factors that increase or decrease risk of breast cancer are modeled on the behavioral path. For example, it is known that women in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS, or Mormon) have lower breast cancer rates than women in the general population, and they abstain from using alcohol and tobacco (Daniels, Merrill, Lyon, Stanford, & White, 2004). These findings suggest that it is not necessarily believing LDS doctrines, but rather behaving in healthy ways such as not smoking, which happen to be prescribed by the church, that leads to the lower breast cancer rate in LDS women. To further explore this trend in the data, a follow-up national health survey of American women compared the probability of having risk factors for cancer. Women who never attended religious services were seven times more likely than those who attended once or more per week to have four or more risk factors (Gillum & Williams, 2009). These and other studies suggest that one's religion can affect risk for cancer through the behavioral pathway by influencing ordinary "nonreligious" behaviors such as smoking, activity level, and maintaining a generally healthy lifestyle.

Psychological adjustment to a cancer diagnosis, on the other hand, seems to rely heavily on processing information through the social cognitive pathway. In one illustrative study, various health behaviors were examined in relation to religious and spirituality variables in a group of cancer survivors (Park, Edmondson, Hale-Smith, & Blank, 2009). Spiritual experiences and religious struggle were associated with health behavior, while attendance at religious services was not. Having more daily spiritual experiences was associated with eating more vegetables and fruits, getting moderate or vigorous exercise, and following the doctor's instructions. In contrast, the more religious struggle one had, the less the person followed the doctor's instructions or took medications properly and the more the person used alcohol. Consistent with these findings, another study found that people diagnosed with cancer who reported higher levels of meaning also made more positive changes in behavior following diagnosis (Hawkins et al., 2010).

Heart and Cardiovascular Disease

Religious activity level and style of coping have been investigated in relation to various kinds of cardiovascular disease (CVD). Illustrative studies include the following: Compared to people who frequently attended religious services (more than once per week), those who never did so were more than 1.5 times as likely to die of CVD, a ratio found after demographic and health variables were accounted for (Hummer et al., 1999). Controlling

for sex, age, sociodemographic group, and other factors, Oman, Kurata, Strawbridge, and Cohen (2002) found that death due to CVD was significantly more likely for people who attended services less than once per week than for those who attended weekly. In other research that examined cardiac surgery patients, positive religious coping predicted higher psychologically functional outcomes, and negative religious coping predicted worse outcomes. Positive coping effects were mediated by hope, optimism, and social support, findings consistent with the social cognitive pathway (Ai, Park, Huang, Rodgers, & Tice, 2007a; Ai et al., 2007b). Finally, Park and colleagues (Park, Malone, Suresh, Bliss, & Rosen, 2008a; Park, Moehl, Fenster, Suresh, & Bliss, 2008b) examined whether religious or spiritual variables might be associated with congestive heart failure. Religious commitment was associated with an increase in the likelihood that a patient would do what doctors instructed during the subsequent 6 months. But in another study (Park et al., 2009), positive religious coping and social support predicted healthier outcomes, but negative coping and struggle predicted symptoms of depression and reduced self-efficacy. (See Masters & Hooker, 2013, for a review.)

In general, research on how religious and spiritual variables might relate to coronary and cardiovascular disease seems to parallel the pattern of results for cancer. Both the behavioral and social cognitive pathways are involved, and the results tend to be suggestive rather than conclusive. Variables such as degree of activity in the religious realm tend to be associated with positive cardiovascular outcomes. Variables such as positive versus negative religious coping and spiritual struggle tend to be associated in now predictable ways with psychological states such as hope, coping, depression, and optimism. It is crucial, however, that we keep all possible causal links in mind for a correct understanding of what the data do and do not mean. The results are correlational, not causal. Using the behavioral pathway to illustrate, for example, this means that just as being religiously active predicts that one will also be healthy, being healthy predicts that one will be more active.

HIV and AIDS

One's religiousness can contribute to coping with AIDS but not in prescribed, simple, or uniform ways. Jenkins (1995) studied 422 HIV-positive military personnel and found that what mattered most in coping effectively with AIDS was not belonging to a particular religion, but what that religion meant to a person and how it was used in the process of coping. For example, one large subset of his subjects involved God as a collaborator in coping with HIV, with God as the dominant partner—illustrative of Pargament's positive religious coping (Chapter 9). They did better in dealing with AIDS than those whose coping style was akin to Pargament's

negative religious coping. A variant of the same conclusion emerged in other research on the relationship between spiritual struggles and HIV variables. For example, Trevino et al. (2010) found that those who were in the midst of spiritual struggles had more negative outcomes a year later as measured by viral load, lower reported quality of life, and an increase in symptoms of HIV and depression. In general, and consistent with our knowledge of the social cognitive pathway, it appears that it is the personal meaning and commitment to one's religion or source of spirituality that is important, not denominational affiliation or even belief per se.

Psychological Process Emphasis

Alcohol and Substance Abuse

Differences in how someone is religious or spiritual have been shown to affect how well he or she does in overcoming alcoholism or substance abuse. For example, Gorsuch (1995) found that if someone's Christianity was of an accepting and nonpunitive sort, he or she was more likely to be successful. But if the person's Christianity emphasized the negative and was punitive, he or she was more likely to continue alcohol abuse. Such findings illustrate how a religion can either help solve or exacerbate a problem, depending on the form the religion takes for the individual and the meanings it invokes in the social cognitive path.

Let us fine-tune our knowledge of this issue by examining the nature of success or failure at alcoholism recovery for groups and ideologies that say they are "spiritual but not religious." One well-known organization of this sort is Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), which emphasizes the need to depend upon "God or a Higher Power" in recovery from alcoholism. These are religious-sounding words. And some commentators insist that AA is a religion, whether or not AA admits it. In contrast, AA insists that (1) it is not a religion, (2) there is no requirement that you believe in God, (3) one can be an atheist and be in AA, and (4) your Higher Power (HP) can be literally anyone or anything, whether "vertical" (e.g., God or any other HP to which one looks "up"), "horizontal" (e.g., the interconnections one feels with other members of the group), or both. Such have been the dilemmas and disagreements in efforts to define "religion" and "spirituality." In any case, AA also insists that you can't recover from alcoholism by yourself; if you wish to recover through AA, participating in their small groups is essential. Consistent with these points, a subgroup of AA members is comprised of atheists and agnostics. What, then, are the aspects of AA and its procedures that facilitate recovery from alcoholism, and why?

In a longitudinal study of alcoholics seeking treatment in outpatient and aftercare programs, Kelly, Stout, Magill, Tonigan, and Pagano (2011) found that AA attendance led to an increase in spiritual beliefs and practices

and a decrease in drinking, and that spirituality mediated the effect of AA attendance on drinking outcomes. While the researchers noted that spirituality is just one of many mechanisms through which AA likely produces its effects (others include changes in social networks, coping styles, and self-efficacy), the magnitude of spirituality's mediational effect was comparatively large, "suggesting that AA's mobilization of [spiritual/religious] beliefs and behaviors may be important" (p. 461).

Developmental Disability

Most discussions of relations between religiousness and health focus on the effects aspects of a religion might have on health. When examining possible religion–health relationships in people with developmental disabilities (DD), the dynamic is reversed, and researchers focus on how one's physical and mental health condition might affect aspects of one's religiousness. Like other conditions that have strong medical and psychological components, DDs range from inconsequential to severely debilitating. In order to explore how religiousness might be related to degree of disability, Bassett, Perry, Repass, Silver, and Welsh (1994) measured perceptions of God among persons with three levels of mental retardation—mild, moderate, and severe/profound. The rationale followed straightforwardly from our knowledge of what a development disability (or mental retardation) is: by definition, it is a lack of mental development. One would expect that those with the lowest degree of DD would be most likely to show evidence of abstract thinking when asked to select from among a set of pictures those that reminded them of God. Bassett's subjects were shown 15 pictures (e.g., king on a throne, bearded man, angel, mother holding baby, heart, Bible, crosses on a hill) and were free to select as many or as few as they wished. The data revealed that for the severe/profound group, all of the pictures that reminded the subjects of God were scenes that involved people. In contrast, subjects in the mildly disabled group were likely to select an even mix of pictures that included symbols and people. The implication is that the more severe the developmental disability, the less a person is able to include symbols with abstract meanings in his or her God concept. This kind of relationship between a health variable and a religious variable differs from most others in that the important question becomes, not how an aspect of religion affects health, but how a health condition may significantly alter the perceived meaning of the central symbolic focus of a person's faith.

Afterlife Beliefs and Fear of Death

Most religions have doctrines and teachings that speak to the process of dying and to afterlife concerns. Whether it is heaven (Christianity), the hereafter (Islam), rebirth in another form (various religions), or existence in

a spirit form (various spiritualities), many religions and spiritual paths offer something to help people accept physically dying. Like other concepts with which we are dealing, fear of death (also called death anxiety) is nonuniform. It is comprised of several facets that do not necessarily vary together. Fear of death includes fearing at least some of the following aspects of the overall process of dying: being dead, the decomposition of one's body, one's consciousness coming to an end, being in pain after one is dead, being in pain during the process of dying, not existing, losing one's identity, not having a memory of this life, being forgotten by others, the unknown. Reading this list makes me think that yes, death is The Big Ambiguity that people need to make meaning of. It is of sufficient magnitude that in a sample of over 40,000 people in the United States, 38% of Protestants, 43% of Catholics, 35% of Jews, and 33% of those without an affiliation not only believe that there is an afterlife but include being "really in touch" with a deceased person in their own experiences (Benore & Park, 2004).

Research on fear of death has not teased the factors apart in the way that I have illustrated above. Some findings show that believing in an afterlife tends to predict greater existential certainty and lower anxiety (Ellison, Burdette, & Hill, 2009). A broad generality is that about two-thirds of the studies conclude that people who have a religion (usually in a Western sense) tend to score lower on measures of death anxiety than people who don't. But about one-third of the studies show either no relationship or the opposite trend. Digging slightly deeper, some research suggests that believing in an afterlife is associated with lower fear of what happens after one is dead but can also make people concerned and slightly more sensitized to the process of dying (Hoelter & Epley, 1979).

A social psychological approach to generating testable hypotheses about death anxiety is called terror management theory (TMT; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt, Schimel, 2004). The general procedures involve an experimental manipulation in which (in the simplest two-group experimental design) something is done or told to the test group that increases mortality salience, and something else is done or told to a control group that does not. Then measurements are taken on, for example, the degree to which the subject adjusts beliefs or actions in ways that reduce fear of death. One way this can be done by people who believe in a religion that includes afterlife beliefs is to feel more assured and think more firmly that their religion is correct. The results of these experiments have been summarized by Sedikides and Gebauer (2014) and Rowatt et al. (2014).

Forgiveness and Loneliness

Two affective variables, forgiveness and loneliness, interact with both religiousness and health. Research on their relationships reveals this interdependence. For example, forgiveness is considered a spiritual value in varying

degrees by different religions (Chapter 6). Forgiving a person for a wrong done to oneself is also known to reduce rumination about the wrong and thereby lower the probability of depression, and to lower physical tension and thereby reduce the risk of the negative health effects of stress. Forgiving helps reduce the amount of time people dwell on anger and other aversive emotions and promotes feelings of harmony and comfort, emotions that are associated with lower blood pressure and greater relaxation. In contrast, unforgiving thoughts can produce higher facial tension, skin conductance, heart rate, and blood pressure (Oman & Thoresen, 2005; Worthington et al., 2013). These processes work primarily through the social cognitive pathway. Therefore, the more a person performs the behaviors involved in forgiving, thus following the behavioral pathway, the more processes in the social cognitive pathway, such as the stress-reduction benefits of increased psychoneuroimmunologic activity, are set in motion. This illustrates how one's religiousness and health can be related through both pathways.

An analogous process works to create a modestly inverse relationship between religiousness and loneliness—known to negatively affect physical health. Practicing one's religion is usually a social act. Because of this, people who participate in their religion automatically do so with others. A consequence of this is that actively religious people average slightly lower scores on measures of loneliness than nonreligious people (Peplau & Perlman, 1982). This does not mean that nonreligious people have no social contacts, but only that a religion typically provides a regular, secure time when like people gather together. The frequency and reliability with which these meetings and activities occur provides a kind of psychological security that needs for human contact will be met, friendships will be made and continue, and intimacies will be maintained. Lower loneliness follows directly from these circumstances. Lower loneliness, then, constitutes some buffer against the ill effects of high loneliness, such as a lowering of immune system function, fewer NK cells in the blood, more susceptibility to infections, and greater risk of heart disease (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008).

End-of-Life Care

All of us will face dying when we are old unless something bad happens to us first. A person who is old, especially when suffering with terminal illness, looks at life differently and asks different questions of it than when young and healthy. The two reasons for this are time and bodily decline. With decrease in bodily capabilities, there is less one can do, and when an old person looks through time, most of what one sees is in the past. As to what the old ill person sees in the far-off future, there are myriad beliefs about it, but the truth is that nobody has knowledge about what happens after we are irrevocably dead. These factors create special problems for end-of-life care that involve, in particular, the topics discussed in the preceding

and following sections of this chapter. Afterlife beliefs and fear of death, bereavement and loneliness, and suffering and well-being are all intimately involved in caring for people whose lives will soon end.

Books on palliative care give guidance and recommendations for proper treatment of end-of-life patients (Dow, 2006; Kuebler, Heidrich, & Esper, 2007). For example, if someone has already decided what he or she wishes to believe about what happens after death, it is the caregiver's responsibility to accept it on behalf of the patient and allow the patient to gain as much peace and comfort from it as possible. This response is for the patient's well-being and comfort; it should have no relation to any views the caregiver may hold. If the patient shows appreciable signs of agony or discomfort over such matters, tools such as the Views of Suffering Scale and the Spiritual Well-Being Scale (see below) or related instruments (Büssing, 2012; Fitchett, 2012) may be used by qualified professionals to help the patient work through unanswered questions.

SUFFERING AND WELL-BEING

Theodicy: The Search for Reasons

Implicit in much of what has been said is that human beings suffer, and religions typically include teachings and practices that try to address human suffering. Theodicies, discussed in Chapter 9, are ways that people, whether as individuals or through religions, arrive at beliefs about suffering. Just as there are many religions, there are many dimensions to beliefs about suffering. Ten such dimensions were uncovered in the process of developing the Views of Suffering Scale (VOSS; Hale-Smith, Park, & Edmondson, 2012). The VOSS, therefore, has 10 subscales, each designed to assess the amount of weight (high, medium, or low) that its dimension carries in the overall profile of what suffering means to someone. A sample of items from the VOSS appears in Box 10.1.

In general terms, the VOSS taps notions related to traditional Judeo-Christian teachings, unorthodox theistic beliefs, karma, and the belief in chance, as well as beliefs related to Hinduism, Islam, and Buddhism. The dimensions include such things as the degree to which a person believes that there is divine responsibility for a negative life event, whether God suffers along with the human sufferer, the degree to which negative life events are random, whether they occur in retribution for something someone did, the degree to which the suffering is given as a challenge, whether a divine exists that is non-omniscient or non-omnipotent, and whether there is no divine behind the suffering. The VOSS has many research and clinical applications, especially in connection with issues in end-of-life care, bereavement, loss, and the life-threatening medical conditions discussed above.

BOX 10.1. Sample Items from the Views of Suffering Scale

1. God could prevent evil and/or suffering from happening, but God chooses not to because God isn't entirely good.
2. God is all-good and all-powerful, but God is not obligated to relieve suffering.
3. No one knows why bad things happen to good people; it's all pretty random.
7. By praying and having faith we can take control over suffering.
8. When we suffer, God is suffering along with us.
9. Suffering is intended by God to be a source of personal growth.
10. Everything that we experience—including suffering—is planned in detail by God.
18. The most important thing to remember about human suffering is that God is above and beyond it all; we might never get answers to our questions.
23. Suffering just happens without purpose or underlying reason.
30. Individuals experience suffering as a result of their past wrongdoing.

From Hale-Smith, Park, and Edmondson (2012). Copyright 2012 by the American Psychological Association. Reprinted by permission.

Spiritual Well-Being

A generation ago, it seemed useful to develop measures that could track the quality of life for various populations, regions, incomes, and other variables. At first the measures were based on tangible or countable goods, services, and behaviors suggestive of life quality, such as number of visits to the medical doctor, access to libraries, possession of convenience appliances, and so forth. The argument was then made that, psychologically speaking, the quality of life lies in the experience of life. Researchers then began to develop measures to assess the subjective quality of life experience. The Spiritual Well-Being Scale (SWBS; Paloutzian & Ellison, 1982) was among them. It is not a measure of spirituality (i.e., how spiritual someone is), but an outcome measure of one's perception of well-being in terms that people typically use to explain what "spiritual" means to them. There are two general senses of this—a religious sense and an areligious existential sense. Therefore, SWBS has two subscales; one taps religious well-being (RWB) and one taps existential well-being (EWB). These two are moderately correlated; the psychological dimensions assessed by them overlap somewhat but are more independent than not. Thus, someone can score high or low on either subscale, so that there are four combinations of scoring patterns (high high, high low, low high, low low) on the two dimensions. These scores may predict how well one responds to other health indices in different ways. A sample of items from the SWBS appears in Box 10.2.

BOX 10.2. Sample Items from the Short Version of the Spiritual Well-Being Scale

1. I don't know who I am, where I come from, or where I am going.
2. I believe that God/a Higher Power loves me and cares about me.
3. I have a personally meaningful relationship with God/a Higher Power.
4. I feel very fulfilled and satisfied with my life.
5. I don't get much personal strength and support from God/a Higher Power.
6. I believe that God/a Higher Power is concerned about my problems.
7. I feel good about my future.
8. My life doesn't have much meaning.
9. My relationship with God/a Higher Power contributes to my sense of well-being.
10. I believe there is some real purpose for my life.

From Paloutzian and Ellison (1982). Reprinted by permission.

The SWBS has been widely used in the field of nursing and in research examining relationships between religious and existential well-being and healthcare. Its relationships with health-related variables are associational, not causal. Higher scores on the SWBS, or on either the existential or religious subscale, have been found to be associated with ideal body weight, blood pressure, and perceived health. The scores do not appear to predict whether people have physical diseases, but they do show associations with lower pain and anxiety in cancer patients, hardiness in coping with AIDS, and acceptance of hemodialysis and kidney disability. SWBS scores also predict lower depression, greater internal locus of control and self-esteem, and lower general stress and psychopathological tendencies (Ellison & Smith, 1991; Paloutzian et al., 2012). Such trends tend to be stronger for the EWB subscale than for the RWB subscale.

MIRACLES

Perhaps the most common claim of an inexplicable phenomenon—one that confronts (or perhaps confounds) explanation—is that a miracle occurred. Maybe because I study psychology of religion, I have heard a great many reports of health-related events performed by God. These include, for example, that someone was instantaneously cured of a disease, that military tanks in a high-risk battle fired a great many rounds of ammunition that they did not have, and that people have been raised from the dead. In all instances, it was emphatically reported that the event actually occurred

and that God caused it, often, although not always, following prayer. Claims of this sort force three questions upon us: (1) What sorts of events are said to be miraculous? (2) Did the event actually occur? (3) If the event occurred, what caused it? Let me unpack and try to address each question with an eye toward health-related issues (see Paloutzian et al., 2008, for further elaboration).

What Is a Miracle?

First, miracle attributions are given to both ordinary and unusual events. Attributions to these two kinds of events differ but both are of concern. When the term *miracle* is used to refer to ordinary events, it becomes worthless for purposes of addressing the three questions above. When someone says that the sunshine is a miracle, the grass growing in the fields is a miracle, a new baby born is a miracle, good crops this year are a miracle . . . everything is a miracle!, the person may or may not intend to invoke supernatural agency as causal, but the language used makes the term *miracle* impossible to distinguish a miracle from any other event.

It is the unusual, nonordinary events given miracle attributions that require greater attention. I separate them into two categories, Type N and Type I. Type N unusual events are, in principle, consistent with known natural processes. For example, when the book of Exodus says that a hot desert wind blew, parted the red sea, and the Israelites crossed on dry ground, it is describing the behavior of wind, heat, water, and people in terms consistent with known natural processes. Hot, strong wind can part water and dry a seabed sufficiently for human traffic, so long as the water is shallow enough. A god may or may not have had something to do with it, but there is nothing about what is purported to have occurred that is inconsistent with our understanding of how nature works. Most of the 10 plagues in the book of Exodus, portrayed as God-performed miracles against the Egyptian pharaoh, are of this sort—a red-colored form of algae or bacteria capable of making a river look like blood, swarms of flies, hail, frogs, boils on human skin, and locusts in swarms sufficient to destroy vast crops. In these cases, natural processes were at work whether or not a supernatural agent was at work.

However, it is with Type I unusual events that the question of supernatural involvement is pressed to the limit. This is because Type I miracles are inexplicable. They are not consistent with any known natural process, cannot in principle be understood scientifically, and require supernatural or some other special account. Examples of this type include Jesus turning water into wine (there is no known chemical process for this), Jesus walking on water (there is no known gravitational process for this), and a corpse buried in the ground for several days becoming alive again (there is no known biological process for this). Similarly, Muhammad is said to have multiplied food, and Buddha is said to have risen in the air, divided his body, and rejoined the pieces (Woodward, 2000). I call these “zap” or

“presto” miracles because they are the sorts of things that a superhuman agent could presumably do by a snap of the finger or by merely speaking the event into happening. The only word I can think of to describe the process is *magic*. People who believe in Type I miracles believe in magic, as far as accounting for the processes is concerned.

Did the Event Actually Occur?

Second, occasionally an event given a miracle attribution is in the public domain and everybody knows it occurred. In my 40-plus years of observation, these were Type N events in every instance. For example, someone was sick with cancer and undergoing medical treatment, and friends were simultaneously praying that the person would get well. And the person got well. The friends, and perhaps the patient, attributed the cure to God, while at the same time the cure is consistent with the known probability of success for that kind of treatment. The people are making a miracle attribution for an event that has a known probabilistic explanation. Many people's faith directs them to do so. In any case, I strongly recommend that prior to doing so, a person first understand that calling something a miracle neither explains it nor reflects understanding of the process. It is attributing causality to a process that cannot in principle be assessed.

If So, What Caused It?

Third, the toughest question is how to explain a Type I event. For example, suppose that a person who was dead and buried for 12 months did come back to life, that someone did literally walk on top of a lake or the ocean, or that an amputated arm or leg grew back. How could we explain it by any known process? We couldn't. Our only recourse would be to invoke a miracle-like explanation. The reason this is the toughest sort of question is that, to the extent that humans know anything, nobody knows if Type I events actually occur.

I have listened to many claims, but have found not one *in vivo* publicly verifiable confirmation. Without exception, every account of a Type I event has been second-, third-, or fourth-hand. Almost all are claims of medical cure or of a dead person buried in the ground coming back to life, and almost all are reported to have occurred in places far away from modern civilization, in rural areas with scant modern medical care, and in mostly non-Western contexts. I have traced such reports and hunted for the actual healed or resurrected person. In no instance was one ever found; none was traceable. Setting aside my attempts, Paldam and Schjødt (in press) examined the claims of 936 reported miraculous healings by Danish Charismatic Christians. The results replicate my solo effort. Every report of a miracle of Type I was set in a faraway location, and in no instance was there firsthand, publicly verifiable evidence. I end up having to conclude that, although it

is technically possible that Type I events are occurring, there is no evidence that they are, and I have no basis for thinking so. And it is upon evidence, not hopes, wants, beliefs, or doctrines, that scientifically valid conclusions about psychological processes must be based. My inclination to reason tells me that a miracle attribution of Type I, although it is one way to make meaning out of a report of an event, is a misattribution.

Now let me fine-tune the question one more time by setting aside reports of individual cases of the sort summarized above and instead looking at over a century of aggregate data on miracle cures from a “world religion” denomination that is approximately 1 billion strong. Astronomer Carl Sagan examined one version of this issue by analyzing the rate at which people recovered from diseases after visiting a famous Roman Catholic shrine in search of a miraculous cure. He noted that over the past 136 years approximately 100 million people had traveled to Lourdes, France, to be healed from disease. During that time, 64 cases of miraculous cures were said to be authenticated by the Catholic Church. This means that the probability of cure is approximately 1 per million, similar to the odds of winning the lottery or dying in an airplane crash. It may even be that one is better off not going to Lourdes. For example, Sagan calculated that the rate of spontaneous remission from cancers is somewhere between 1 in 10,000 and 1 in 100,000. The rate of getting well by doing nothing in such cases is higher than the rate of reported miraculous cures for those who visit Lourdes (Sagan, 1994).

In sum, there appears to be little scientific evidence that religious faith has a causal curative effect on purely organic disease. We don't see an amputated leg grow back because of prayer; most terminally ill people who are prayed for die. What is clear, however, is that belief in supernatural healing can help to temporarily relieve suffering from the symptoms of a physical disease. That is to say, belief in healing can help reduce pain and improve the general perception of well-being.

PRAYER AND HEALTH

A discussion of miracles almost always leads to thoughts about the possible curative effects of prayer. Experiments to test whether prayer cures diseases or facilitates physical healing have been done. Space constraints do not allow me to give you the whole picture of this interesting and controversial body of research, but certain core issues run through all of it. I wish to highlight them by discussing two well-known experiments.

Prayer Experiments

The first is an example of what not to do, because the publication reporting on this experiment makes extravagant claims that neither the methods

nor the data support. The second gives a clear answer to its basic question and wisely leaves other concerns to other experiments (see Spilka & Ladd, 2013, for comprehensive review).

The Byrd Study

Byrd (1988) claimed a significant curative effect for distant prayer. The subjects were coronary patients at San Francisco General Hospital who were randomly assigned to two groups. The experimental group (192 patients) received the prayer treatment, and a control group (201 patients) did not receive it. The pray-ers were “born-again” Protestant and Catholic Christians. They did not know the patients, and knew only the first name, diagnosis, and physical condition of each patient they prayed for. From three to seven pray-ers prayed to the “Judeo-Christian God” for each patient in the experimental group each day. They asked for “a rapid recovery and . . . prevention of complications and death.” They did not pray for the control group. The patients were measured on 26 health-related variables. Byrd claimed that the distant prayer resulted in a statistically significant lowering of heart disease compared to the control group.

However, there are problems with this conclusion that stem from flaws in the way the study was conducted. There was no way to ensure that there was no prayer at all for the control group, nor was the “dosage” of the prayer to the “treatment group” assessed (as the dosage of a physical medicine would be), and there were not enough data for several of the analyses on which the conclusions were based. Such problems make for weak interpretation.

The most glaring flaw, however, concerns an elementary statistical matter. Byrd reports significance tests comparing the experimental (prayer treatment) and control groups on 26 variables and finds 6 of them to be statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level. From this he concludes that the distant prayer resulted in fewer heart disease symptoms in the prayer group. But there are two major flaws: First, the tests were supposed to be independent of each other, but some of them involved overlapping variables—congestive heart failure, diuretic and antibiotic therapy, pneumonia, need for intubation or ventilation, and cardiac arrest. Instead of being independent, these tests are redundant measures of the same central condition. Second, due to the overlapping variables, the number that were actually significant is not 6 out of 26 but closer to 1 in 20, a result that is no better than chance.

The Benson Study

Benson et al. (2006) conducted a 10-year study of the effects of long-distance intercessory prayer on coronary artery bypass graft (CABG) patients in six

U.S. hospitals. A total of 1,800 participants were divided into groups of approximately 600 each. One group was told they might or might not be prayed for and did receive prayer; a second group was told they might or might not be prayed for and did not receive prayer; and a third group was told they would be prayed for and did receive prayer. The pray-ers prayed for a “successful surgery with a quick, healthy recovery and no complications.” They did not know the patients but were told the first name and first letter of the last name for each patient they prayed for. The results showed that “intercessory prayer itself had no effect on complication-free recovery from CABG, but certainty of receiving intercessory prayer was associated with a higher incidence of complications.” This latter finding was not interpreted to mean that the prayer itself had harmful effects, but that the knowledge of being prayed for in this intercessory circumstance may have exacerbated the stress that was already present by focusing attention on the seriousness of one’s condition, thus increasing the appearance of symptoms (see Brown, 2012, and Spilka & Ladd, 2013 for reviews).

When the Psychology of Religion Becomes Meaningless

One way the question about the relation between religion and health is posed does not make psychological sense scientifically. Recall two figures from Chapter 2: Figure 2.1 (“The process of scientific inquiry”) and Figure 2.2 (the cartoon captioned “A scientist on a learning curve”). A crucial insight can be gained by combining the lessons of these two figures—one that illustrates something a scientist cannot ever accomplish.

Stated as research hypotheses, the questions posed in the preceding summary of studies on possible health effects of prayer make scientific sense within a theoretical model (e.g., that depicted in Figure 10.1) so long as it is possible for evidence (i.e., data) to falsify it. The logic of science requires this falsifiability. There must be a means of assessing the degree of fit between the results anticipated by a model and the actual data. Such assessment makes sense only if it is possible to conclude that the model is wrong. If that cannot in principle be concluded, then whatever is being done is not science. In science, the findings either do or do not fit some model. If they do, that is evidence that the model is on the right track. If they do not, then the research should conclude that the model is wrong, revise it, and conduct a study to test the revised one. This process applies to experiments testing the effects of prayer on health so long as they are conducted within scientific logic. This means that a theoretical model should be stated in terms that do more than merely predict effects. The model should state why such effects are predicted, that is, the processes by which they occur. Such statements would include how the effects are mediated by psychobiological process, which can be put into the form of a scientific explanation and shown by the evidence to be supported or not. The process

is at the heart of good science. The goal of the process is to generate good theory (explainable and also falsifiable by evidence) to account for a religion's effects on health and psychological well-being.

However, there is one kind of question about religion and health that goes beyond this approach and, although asking it is honest and people have their beliefs or disbeliefs about it, it is in principle not answerable—so we will never attain closure on it. This type of question is illustrated by the Byrd experiment described above, testing whether prayer cures disease or makes people psychologically healthier if they don't know that are being prayed for. I call this the “experimental theology of miracles” (see Figure 2.2), and it is the perfect illustration of an experiment with no meaning. Testing for the effects of long-distance prayer amounts to conducting an experiment to test whether a miracle will happen. I do not think doing so can ever answer the questions in the minds of those doing the testing. Posing a question this way is not good science because we cannot state a psychobiological theoretical model of what might mediate any “effects” that happen to occur. We can't study whether miracles work, when by their nature, miracles operate through unknown processes. We have no way to evaluate miracles experimentally.

Another illustration is evident in a paper submitted to the journal I edited.¹ I'll change the particulars, but the gist of the story is true. The authors collected data on whether praying for someone to behave and feel differently on the job (without the target person knowing he or she was being prayed for) produced changes in how that person felt and behaved, compared to a control group that was not prayed for. Although the differences between the groups were small enough to be due to chance, the paper could have been scientifically interesting—except that there was no way the authors could write a non-miracle-laden psychological model for why such effects would be hypothesized. Were effects to be found, what social psychological processes would explain them? If no effects are found, what theory is falsified? Science is a game of creating good theory, but it is not possible to create a good scientific psychological theory about the effects of prayer in this particular context (i.e., testing for distant prayer effects). This is because of the nature of what is prayed for (a miraculous event or outcome), what prayer is in most theologies, and to whom the prayers are addressed.

Predictions must be falsifiable. This means that if the data come out in a way that is opposite to one's hypothesis, one must be able and willing to say, “My idea about the process was wrong” (see Chapter 2 for review). This means, for example, if the hypothesis is that the prayer group will get well faster or in greater numbers than the nonprayer group, it must be possible to produce data that would discount the model of the process (miracles)

¹*The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, for 18 years (1998–2016).

said to be involved. The problem with this peculiar “experimental theology of miracles” is that in most theologies the god to whom the prayers are addressed (whom the “model” speculates produces the miraculous effects only in the prayed-for group) can decide to do anything it wants; it has a choice and is presumably never wrong.

The problem becomes clearer when we realize that when people pray to God to heal their sick loved one, they almost always include saying “if it be your will” or something like that. The moment this is added to the prayer all bets (and scientific tests) are off, because now it is God’s will, not a test of a theoretical process, that counts. All psychological or scientifically valid bases for hypothesizing any outcome are gone. God can presumably answer a prayer by either granting or denying the request, with or without the awareness of the person praying (i.e., God doesn’t have to inform someone of the answer or whether there is one), at any time (now, many years from now), over any time period (2 days, 2 years), via any method, through any vehicle, and with or without the prayer’s knowledge. In other words, by the very nature of the Being to whom the prayers are addressed, one gives up having any basis (scientific or otherwise) for presuming to empirically test for an outcome. No matter how the data come out, they are not interpretable within the framework of any scientifically valid psychobiological model because the validity of the process cannot be discounted or confirmed. Such a “model” is illustrated in Figure 2.2 (“A miracle happens here!”). Not only is this bad theory from a scientific research point of view, it is not theory at all.

Conclusions

It is clear that the relationships between religion and health are many, that the questions about their relationships are subject to standard tests of good science, and that both positive and negative relationships can be documented. What about the effects of specific beliefs or practices, in contrast to generic spirituality? Does that make a difference? The answer is “This is a good scientific research question and is in principle answerable by standard research methods. Were differences to be found in measures of psychological or physical health between those who hold a specific religious belief versus a generic spirituality, those differences would have to be accounted for by a psychological model that explains the differences in the process involved for these two sets of outcomes.” Can we explain how someone’s religiousness affects his or her health, for example, what processes link the various facets of religiousness (including prayer) to various health and well-being outcomes? Yes, so long as our explanations are at a psychological and biological level of analysis. Therefore, we can do experimental psychobiology on religion–health relationships, but we cannot do experimental theology on miracles.

TAKE-HOME MESSAGES

- The two routes through which religiousness can affect health are the direct path and the social cognitive path. These paths run in parallel, although the processes can interact with each other in determining health outcomes.
- When we talk about death, it is important to be precise about what we mean. *Near-death experience* is not a medical term but is popularly used to mean many things. Being technically medically dead means that the heart, lungs, and brainwaves have stopped. An irrevocably dead person's body cannot be revived, but sometimes a medically dead person's body that has not reached the irrevocable stage can be revived.
- The interactive effects of psychological processes and religious variables can affect length of life and health outcomes for major medical illnesses, including cardiovascular disease, cancer, HIV infection, and others. Although there do not seem to be any broad, general effects, there does seem to be a slight positive association between certain forms of religiousness and some health variables.
- Psychological processes such as purpose in life, spiritual well-being, and a strong sense of faith can help some people deal with suffering. Their primary benefit seems to be helping provide a sense of meaning, psychological comfort, and the ability to cope with suffering with some sense of peace.
- Miracles can be either Type N or Type I. Type N includes events that are consistent with natural processes. Type I miracles are inconsistent with known natural processes. There is no evidence that miracles occur in the sense of having a causal curative effect on purely organic disease.
- Science becomes meaningless when its methods are used to test the effects of a process whose operations are not subject to test, such as invoking a supernatural agent to make an event happen when the agent has a choice in the matter. The decision making of a supernatural agent is not a process subject to scientific test.

FURTHER READING

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CHAPTER 11

Religion, Social Attitudes, and Behavior

The Acid Test

Religion's Grand Paradox

Religion, Self, and Others

Religion and Social Behavior

Conclusion

Take-Home Messages

Further Reading

I believe that I am acting in accordance with the will of the Almighty Creator:
By defending myself against the Jew, I am fighting for the work of the Lord.

—ADOLF HITLER, *Mein Kampf*

At the beginning of Chapter 8 on religion and experience I said there are two bottom lines in life, your unique mental experiences and your social behavior. In this chapter I hope to convey why your social behavior is a bottom line regardless of what your inclinations might be with respect to religious or spiritual issues. It is this bottom line that, in the end, reveals what you are really about.

I make the following points explicit right up front:

1. Because how humans behave toward each other is so important (see, e.g., Burris & Rempel's [2012] discussion of good and evil in religion), I wish to stretch my use of the meaning-making model to its logical end-point in psychology, and that means applying it to what people actually do,

not just what they think or believe or say. So long as humans wish to live in groups of two or more, what they do with, to, and for each other is the thing that matters in the most fundamental sense.

2. I come to this discussion with a bias—namely, that I believe the proof of who you are is what you do, not what you think, believe, intend, or feel. You can make any attributions you need to about your and others' internal mental and emotional states. But it is their actions that either do or do not enable people—couples, families, groups, organizations, nations—to live with mutual respect, health, safety, and love. (See Paloutzian, 2010, for my explanation of the non-negotiable importance of this.)

3. The concepts of human goodness and hypocrisy arise in this discussion, more than in other chapters, because in this chapter the arguments developed in previous chapters are pushed to their limits. This chapter is about the relationships between believing and behaving—where they are consistent, and where they are inconsistent.

This chapter raises the question “What difference does religion make?” Of course, that question has been in the background many times as we explored how religions' effects vary according to their doctrines, behavior expectations, purposes, clientele, youth, oppositions, histories, societies, and, of course, individual participants. The picture we end up with is far bigger and more complicated than the one we began with, with many more interesting psychological details. It is also far more varied. This variedness may require that we restate our assumptions and conclusions in order to come to grips with the lessons we learn about the psychology of religion as human behavior. In doing so, we will at least be equipped with better knowledge to make our decisions, and we can have greater depth of thought about the issues than we were capable of at the beginning—resources we can use to make our own decisions with greater wisdom.

THE ACID TEST

One question about the relation between religion and behavior arises again and again. It is a variant of the problem of evil developed in earlier chapters: If people believe a religion is true and are committed to its teachings, and that religion teaches the good, why do they also do bad things? Do religions truly affect what people actually do, and if so, how? Are religious people in general or those of any specific religion more honest, caring, and giving than others? Do they make better citizens and elected officials and do they practice what they preach? Under what circumstances is there congruence between their beliefs and behavior, and when not? Are they living lives worth living, whereas secular people are not? If so, is it because their religion gives them a privileged view of life, the world, and what it means?

What the research findings might mean to each of us hinges on what I call the acid test: After all doctrine is proclaimed, and pronouncements and promises are made, what difference, if any, do religion or specific religions make in how people treat each other?

In order to cover all the necessary behavioral ground, it is essential that we also explore how religion relates to people's beliefs, attitudes, and claims, but not merely so that we know their states of mind. Our attention goes to how these mental processes are related to people's actions, which of course returns us to key themes that have run through the book.

Here's a short list of those themes:

1. Religion as a multidimensional variable and as both personal and social.
2. The meaning systems language and model of how to make sense of religion, spirituality, and irreligion.
3. The multilevel interdisciplinary paradigm (MIP).
4. The evolutionarily rooted development of the psychological substrates of meaning systems.
5. Dispositional-situational interaction in determining behavior.
6. The attribution of meaning to mental events whether deemed normal or unusual.
7. The role of small groups in interpreting events and forming new movements out of them.
8. The interdependence of religious or spiritual, personal, and contextual factors in affecting mental and physical health through the behavioral and social cognitive pathways.

Overriding all of these themes has been my insistence that our conclusions cannot be based merely on a religious scripture such as the Bible or Qur'an¹ or on someone's memory, claims, or oratory, or even on an esteemed source such as Einstein or a rock star or famous rocket scientist. We ought to base our conclusions only on the evidence, validly obtained and publically verifiable. There are no privileged positions.

Most of the topics we have discussed in this book include some kind of social aspect because that is how most human behavior occurs; in that sense, all psychology is social, just as all psychology is developmental. But so far we have not yet asked whether, how, and in what ways social context, pressure, persuasive influences, stereotyping, and other social psychological process and motivations might affect our actions in ways both consistent and inconsistent with what we believe we would do. The lessons to be learned from exploring these matters can be of lifelong importance. I

¹Including this book. Nothing I say is true just because I say it. Always go examine the evidence and issues for yourself.

can illustrate this point by summarizing a true story about two of the most famous psychology experiments of all time—for which I summarize a psychology of religion variation later in this chapter.

Following World War II, during which Adolf Hitler was wildly successful at using methods of persuasion and social pressure to get people, including devoutly religious people, to behave the way he wanted them to, social psychologists began doing research on the power of social influence. One kind of social influence that was studied was conformity pressure. Solomon Asch's (1951, 1956) experiments used deception. He told subjects that the research was about judging lengths of lines, when it was actually set up to see whether subjects could conform and say something they did not believe. When a subject came to the laboratory, he or she sat in an assigned chair in a row of people (experimental confederates, not real subjects) who had arrived earlier. Each person was to state which of three lines was the same length as a standard line—a question with only one obviously correct answer, which was easy to see. The experimental confederates gave an obviously wrong answer—for example, they said line C when the correct answer was line B. When people are told about these procedures and asked to predict their own responses as if they were in the same situation, almost none say they would conform and give an answer they do not believe. Almost all people say they would state what they truly believe. But fully one-third of Asch's subjects' actual responses in the lab were conforming: in a situation of social pressure, these subjects said what they did *not* believe. For a mere trivial verbal response, this is an extraordinary difference between what people believe they would say and what they actually say. The lesson applies to religious belief and speech just as to any other realm. Believing, no matter how sincere, does not on its own secure speaking or behaving in accord with what is believed. We don't believe the probabilities in Asch's results apply to us. But they do, and they apply to religious individuals, groups, organizations, and nations too.

Stanley Milgram (1963, 1965, 1974) modified the Asch procedures to create a situation in which the subject was ordered by a person in charge to comply and do something he or she did not want to do—push a switch that purportedly gave an electric shock to another person, a “learner,” after the learner made an error on a learning task. The subject was told to go up one level each time the “learner” gave a wrong answer. As the supposed shock level increased, the learner's protests increased so that eventually the subject heard “ouch,” grunts, and eventually screams coming from the cubicle in which the learner was purportedly making errors. There were 30 switches on the (fictitious) shock box.²

²There was no real learning task or learner. This was all arranged as part of the theater, to find out what the real subject would do. The sounds, grunts, and screams came from a tape recording. Nobody actually received an electric shock in this experiment.

I have asked my students many times whether they would follow the experimenter's orders fully and press the 30th switch on the board. Approximately 1% says yes. In Milgram's research reports, about 0.1% say they would do so. The data, however, show that 60% of the subjects obey the orders fully and press the 30th switch on the board. This percentage is relatively stable across cultures (e.g., about the same in Germany as in the United States), subject type (college students and the general public), and various dispositional variables. This means that how sincere someone is or how genuinely someone believes he or she would behave a certain way is *not* the best predictor of what the person would actually do. The social situation is more powerful than the individual—a lesson of great importance for those concerned with belief–behavior congruity, something of central concern in context of religiousness.

Strangely, however, the famous inventor of the concepts of intrinsic and extrinsic religious orientation, Gordon Allport (see Chapter 6), being a personality psychologist and perturbed at the use of deception in some social psychology experiments, said to a young social psychologist, “Why do you guys go through all that rigmarole? Why don't you just ask the participants what they would do?” (Tavris, 2014). And that, of course, is the point. If you ask people (like yourself) what they would do, they will tell you that they would defy the experimenter's orders, and they would honestly believe this is what would happen. They would also tell you that if they were in the Asch experiment they would say only what they truly believed about the length of a line. In all of this there is no lying; they are speaking honest feelings. Almost nobody believes the probabilities in the data apply to ourselves. But those *are* the data, and they come from ordinary people like you and me. This discrepancy between actual versus believed or predicted behavior is one of the big lessons of social psychology, and its application to individuals and religions is of obvious importance. The reality of the situation can produce verbal and overt behaviors that people believe they would never engage in, including behaviors that would violate deeply held religious teachings.

When one's religious or spiritual beliefs and behaviors are consistent with each other, we tend not to ask questions about the processes involved. But when they are inconsistent with each other, questions about the psychological reasons for the discrepancy come to the surface.

RELIGION'S GRAND PARADOX

The Paradox

In Chapter 3 on theory, I invoked a few examples of strange things that some religious people do; this chapter elaborates on another one. In Chapter 6, I introduced the research of Allport when discussing intrinsic–extrinsic

(I-E) religious orientation. Allport used the phrase “grand paradox” to summarize an unexpected relationship between specific aspects of religion and racial prejudice in U.S. churches. Since then, Allport’s “paradox” has expanded into a more complete model called a “circumplex” (summarized below) in which there are far bigger and farther-reaching problems to solve that go beyond racial prejudice only.

Churchgoers Are More Prejudiced

Studies in the 1940s and ’50s showed repeatedly that, in general, people who go to church score higher on measures of racial and ethnic prejudice than people who do not (Allport & Kramer, 1946; Gorsuch & Aleshire 1974). Allport called this finding a grand paradox because racial prejudice is so contrary to clear teaching on compassion, humanitarianism, and love for other people in the Christian denominations represented in those studies. Why is it, he asked, that the people who receive teaching about love for others are at the same time the most intolerant in racial matters? Common sense would dictate the opposite—those who receive the religious input should be less prejudiced. The obtained and nonobvious relationships are illustrated in Figure 11.1. An extension of this paradox is that the same religion has been used to justify two opposites—inhumane bigotry and the battle for equal rights.

Churchgoing and Prejudice: The Curvilinear Relationship

Allport was perplexed and wanted to explore the relationship more deeply in order to discover why it existed and whether it held true for everybody who attended worship services. As it turned out, the relationship was not

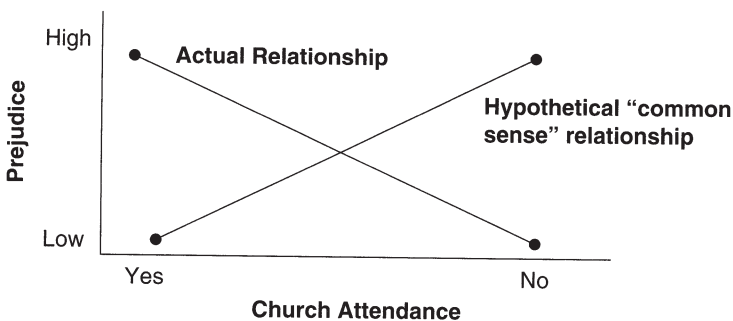


FIGURE 11.1. Hypothetical “common sense” relationship and actual relationship between churchgoing and prejudice.

so simple. Two types of attendees were discovered. It was not the case that all attendees were more prejudiced; only some of them were. Some were the highest in prejudice of all groups, and others were among the lowest. The latter typically scored about the same in prejudice as nonattendees. This meant that people at both extremes, the most and least prejudiced, were inside the same church walls (Allport & Ross, 1967; Gorsuch, 1976; Gorsuch & Aleshire, 1974; Spilka & Reynolds, 1965).

The degree of prejudice was related to how frequently someone attended church services, but the relationship was not linear. The low prejudice persons were the most devout of all in terms of attendance. Not only did they attend on Sunday, they went to other services throughout the week. The prejudiced people, on the other hand, were inconsistent, “hit-and-miss” attenders whose attendance pattern was thought to reflect a less devout, more casual way of being religious. Figure 11.2 illustrates this curvilinear relationship between church attendance and prejudice. The group that had earlier been lumped together as “churchgoers” was split into two groups, the consistent attenders and the hit-and-miss attenders. The latter were the racially intolerant group.

I-E and Prejudice

In addition to church attendance, intrinsicness and extrinsicness were also related to prejudice. Allport and Ross (1967) gave the I-E scale to 309 subjects from six mainline U.S. denominations—Catholic, Lutheran, Nazarene, Presbyterian, Methodist, and Baptist. Each subject was then categorized as intrinsic (I), extrinsic (E), or indiscriminately proreligious (I-Pro). The I-Pros were people who answered “Yes” to both the I and E items; they

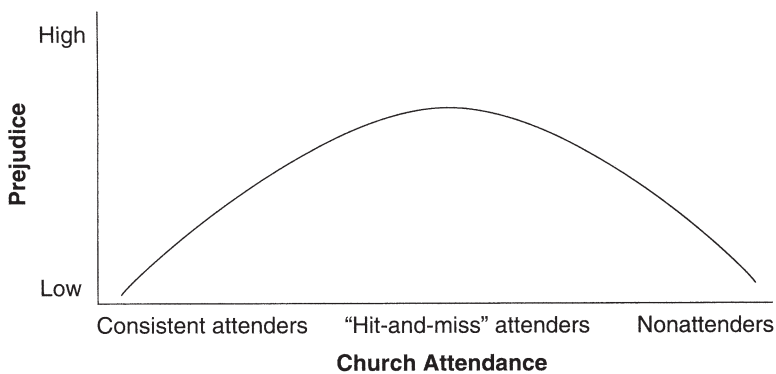


FIGURE 11.2. Curvilinear relationship between church attendance and prejudice.

agreed with statements like “My religious beliefs are what lie behind my whole approach to life,” and with statements like “Although I am a religious person I refuse to let my religion influence my everyday affairs.” He also gave them questionnaire measures of prejudice against African Americans, Jews, Asians, and others. The results show that I’s were the lowest in prejudice of all groups, E’s were high, and I-Pros were on average the most prejudiced. When we overlay this relationship between religious orientation and prejudice on to the previous relationship between church attendance and prejudice, we find that Is tend to be the consistent attenders, and E’s and I-Pros tend to be the “hit-and-miss” casual attenders. This finding suggests that the same psychological mechanism is correlated with both attendance and intrinsicness (Gorsuch & Aleshire, 1974; Krauss & Hood, 2013).

This illustrates that, as when researching the relationships between aspects of religion and other variables, it is a mistake to lump all church attenders, all people of one religion, or all religions together into a single category and stereotype them as if they are all basically alike. It is important to differentiate between levels of religious variables, even if they are as simple as I-E orientation or how often someone goes to organized services, or as complex as shown in extensive comparisons of all religions on the world’s stage. Doing so uncovers relationships that make paradoxes more understandable. Untangling I-E and prejudice was barely a beginning. And importantly, most of this classic research was based on self-report, not behavioral measures.

Personal Needs, Cognitive Style, and the Paradox

How can we understand the psychological nature of the I, E, and I-Pro associations with prejudice? Allport approached this problem by invoking a social cognitive model. He concluded that one psychological process was operating for the E’s, and a different one for the I-Pros.

One proposal was that E’s have personal needs for security, comfort, and status that are served by their religion. These would be the same sorts of needs prejudicial attitudes can also serve. Just as you can get security, comfort, status, and ego building from a religious affiliation, you can get them by seeing yourself as “above” others. Hence, the relationship between E and racial intolerance is due to their common utilitarian life orientation. As Allport and Ross (1967) put it, “A life that is dependent on the supports of extrinsic religion is likely to be dependent on the supports of prejudice.”

To explain the high prejudice in I-Pros, it was proposed that they have an undifferentiated mode of thinking, so they see the world in blanket categories. And that is part of the essence of racial prejudice—a negative prejudgment based upon a stereotyped overgeneralization to the whole group. Attributes that are assigned to one are assigned to all. This “blanket

category” thinking is referred to as *closed cognitive style* and constitutes an undifferentiated way of thinking, believing, and perceiving the world. The style is ripe for stereotyping: all religion is good; all “others” are bad. It is also the hallmark of what is commonly referred to as “fundamentalism.”

The I’s did not subordinate either their religion or minorities to personal needs and did not lump all religion or all minorities together into undifferentiated categories. Instead, they subordinated other needs and their treatment of people to the religious commitment. It was said that the I’s escaped the trappings of casual religion and like their nonreligious counterparts had a capacity for independent decision making in racial and religious matters.

It was later discovered that the I-E measure did not assess a single bipolar dimension with I at one extreme and extreme E at the other. It is really made up of two unipolar subscales. One measures I and the other measures E. The bidimensional nature of the scale is illustrated in Figure 11.3. People can score low or high on each dimension. This results in four possible combinations of being high or low in I and E. Someone who agrees with I statements and disagrees with E statements is classified as a pure intrinsic. Someone who disagrees with I statements and agrees with E statements is classified as a pure extrinsic. Someone who agrees with statements of both types is classified as indiscriminately proreligious. A person who disagrees with all items is classified as nonreligious.

An enormous amount of research followed Allport’s pioneering work. For our present purposes, two lines of it need to be highlighted. First, others developed variations of the I-E measure as well as alternatives to it. These

		Extrinsic Items	
		Disagree	Agree
Intrinsic Items	Agree	Pure intrinsic	Indiscriminately proreligious
	Disagree	Nonreligious or Indiscriminately antireligious	Pure extrinsic

FIGURE 11.3. 2 × 2 matrix indicating intrinsic–extrinsic combinations.

variations and alternatives were used to explore whether other psychological dimensions might be better predictors of prejudice, homophobia, and ethnocentrism as well as positive dimensions such as helping, altruism, forgiveness, and the like—discussions of which follow below. Research was also done on the cognitive style of I's, E's, and I-Pros, whether they scored differently on measures of complexity of moral reasoning, and whether they were uniquely religious variables or not (see Donahue, 1985, and Krauss & Hood, 2013, for comprehensive reviews).

Second, because I-E research began in a Western country, researchers wanted to know whether any aspect of it could be replicated in other religions, peoples, and cultures. Were these dimensions cross-religiously robust? Did they exist in countries where other religions were dominant, where the language was anything other than English, and where people were not used to filling out paper-and-pencil questionnaires? The good news is that a great deal of research on such questions has begun. It is being conducted in Iran, Israel, Poland, Italy, Belgium, Germany, France, China, Malaysia, Brazil, the Netherlands, Australia, Thailand, France, Portugal, Sweden, Germany, Romania, and elsewhere.³ Exploring these issues across religions and internationally shows the far reach of the paradox and what can happen when one line of research is triggered.

The Paradox Magnified

It eventually became obvious that the paradox had a farther reach than one might imagine. A simple way to think of the model of I-E religiousness is that it is an effort to understand selfless-prosocial and selfish-antisocial religious attitudes and behavior; nobody needs to be told that both types exist. This implies that the paradox may be relevant to more than the racial attitudes of a few people in a few U.S. Protestant and Catholic churches. It may have implications, more broadly, for how religions affect the way people perceive and treat each other. Thus, its implications may extend to the relationships between religions and war, sexual behavior, stereotyping and treatment of out-groups, economic behavior, political power, distribution of resources, blood donations, authorizing use of one's organs for transplantation when one dies, allowing or forbidding medical help for one's children, how far one will go to save someone else's life—the list is endless. Religions are involved in all these things and more at all social levels from individual to global, and whether someone has an intrinsic or an extrinsic orientation to his or her religion may affect one's treatment of others in any of these domains.

³Space constraints preclude listing references to research in all of these countries. To see examples, look through recent issues of *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion; Mental Health, Religion, and Culture*; and *Archives for the Psychology of Religion*. These three journals specialize in publishing international research.

It may seem puzzling that some roots of the paradox can be found in sacred texts themselves:

- The saying “Love your neighbor as you would love yourself” originates in the Hebrew Bible, Leviticus 19:18. However, its context is not love of all humans—it is about the in-group, fellow Israelites. Those are the neighbors to whom the statement applies. The people were commanded by God to love others in the tribe as they would love themselves.
- The Qur’an has much to say about peace and love. But just like the Bible, the Qur’an has a few texts that can be interpreted to mean that one can treat non-Muslims differently from Muslims. For example, Christians and Jews are allowed to live in an Islamic state so long as they pay an extra tax. And their word in court may be regarded as of inferior validity compared to the word of a Muslim.

History has a seemingly infinite number of illustrations similar to the two I have noted above, but there is no benefit to belaboring the point. Suffice it to say that “there is something about religion that makes for prejudice, and something about it that unmakes prejudice” (Allport, 1966, p. 447). How can opposite effects stem from what is purportedly aimed at the same thing: the roots of human goodness? In order to expand our psychological understanding, let us explore some reasons beyond the somewhat narrow confines of I-E measurement.

Evolution

To understanding why the paradox exists, we can begin by looking again at the evolutionary processes that made humans capable of creating religions. Let us begin by picking up some threads from the Prelude to Part II and from Chapter 3 on theory. The evolution of meaning construction and assessment processes includes the human capacity to imagine, an essential part of how religious psychological processes work. No one to my knowledge actually sees gods, but plenty of people “see” gods in their mind’s eye and “hear god’s still, small voice” telling them to do this or not do that. Imagining would enable humans to face ambiguity and attribute either a possible big and powerful source of danger to it, which serves as a guide for what to do (escape to safety), or a big and powerful source of benevolence and favor that also serves as a guide for what to do (believe or do as god wishes and reap rewards). The process is attributional whether that source is “really” there or not. But the gods postulated to be present amidst the ambiguity are not benevolent only or dangerous only. The historically more recent moralizing gods (or their surrogates in the form of beliefs about next-life embodiments) that came into being during the Axial Age

(approximately 800–200 B.C.E.) are typically both benevolent and dangerous depending upon whether the individual or group fulfills the purposes the god(s) assign them (Bellah, 2011).

Notice that as we step beyond trying to explain the relationships between religiousness and prejudice by moving beyond dispositional variables such as I-E, the analysis automatically expands to invoke historical-cultural, cognitive, and social psychological processes. Religions as we know them came into being as group, not individual, phenomena.

Groups and Commitment

Groups evolved in a fashion similar to individuals, except that in the case of group evolution, natural selection favored the survival of the group, not the specific individual (Dunbar & Barrett, 2007). Although it was the fittest individuals who continued to survive and reproduce, occasionally one or more group members might have to die (e.g., in battle, since the gods decided the outcome, or in sacrifice to the gods) in order for the group to continue. Such are the roots of positive in-group values like altruism, forgiveness, and loving thy neighbor. But these evolved capacities that favor the in-group come at a cost. With in-group ethnocentrism, in-group bias, and related self-serving biases come out-group prejudice, lower inclination to help an “other” in need, a greater tendency to “walk by on the other side,” and, in extreme cases, belief that one should kill the infidel. In the large transcultural religions, the religious mega-groups developed not around genetic inheritance but around transmission and continuity of symbolic cultural formations. The religion itself was the most important item to be sustained. The outcomes of such processes include beliefs that one’s group is right and other groups are wrong, and therefore one’s group must continue and that the others are either second rate or expendable and should be eliminated. One need not look too long at the present world to see that these ancient, deeply rooted biases are operating in high gear in today’s technically modern world.

Groups work in part by means of the commitment of individuals. This means that in addition to group processes being important for the development of religions as we know them, the psychological processes operating inside the minds of individuals also have to be taken into account. It is here that cognitive processes become especially important because they enable people to infer the content of other people’s minds (theory of mind [ToM]), guide their own responses to others based on what they infer, and feel perfectly comfortable about behavior they perform even when it contradicts their creed. One can make attributions of sacrality (their mosque sits atop our sacred rock, and *that rock is ours*), live with contradictions (I love God, who loves all and wants me to love all, but atheists are a terrible lot and I

hate them), and slaughter others in assurance that it is what the (good) God wants.

In such cases I think one crucial psychological processes undergirds this: People do not generally study their religious teachings and derive what to do from them by raw Aristotelian logic; that is, the process of believing that leads to acting is not purely rational or deductive. To the contrary, people typically decide or “know” (whether implicitly or explicitly) what they want, what they will fight for, or what they will insist is God’s will before they consult the central teachings of their religions. The guidance from these teachings is usually ambiguous, so people make meaning out of it in accord with their inclinations that are already in place (Haidt, 2001). That is, people do what they and their group want (for whatever reason, whether generic social conservatism or wanting the infidel’s land in order to establish their own religious state), and then they justify it in the name of their religion (Batson, Kobryniewicz, Dinnerstein, Kampf, & Wilson, 1997; Batson, Thompson, Seufferling, Whitney, & Strongman 1999; Batson, Thompson, & Chen, 2002). Reading of a scripture in hindsight makes justifying actions by religion easy.

Finally, consider that, although all religions want believers to be sincere and committed, there is a danger in being too committed to things like religions, ideologies, governments, and similar causes. The moment a person becomes “totally committed” it is too easy to become blindly committed. Believing that something is Truth Absolute constitutes believing that anything else is a Lie Absolute. With such a mental set, one is no longer able (or willing) to honestly evaluate the possibility that one’s view might be even slightly incorrect. One easily begins to see the world in strict all-or-none, us-versus-them categories. With that mindset, one is then set up to believe in religious group separateness. Remember the mere group effect in which the existence of separate groups sets up the people in each one to perceive their own group as more positive and the other group as more negative, or at least as less positive.⁴

Intrinsic-Extrinsic, Right-Wing Authoritarianism, and Religious Fundamentalism

Let us come back to the ways of understanding religious orientations. In response to the I-E line of research, whose concepts were conflated with

⁴I think an intelligent commitment to a group or an idea is always tentative and held in check, never blind, totalistic, or absolute. The minute one falls into the latter pattern, one makes oneself available to be a deployable agent doing the bidding of someone else. An important lesson is that our minds are better off with flexible meaning systems than with absolute ones.

tinges of both religious conservatism and liberalism, and whose measures had difficulties (e.g., the extrinsic subscale has both a personal subfactor and a social subfactor; Kirkpatrick, 1989), researchers developed alternative ideas with which to conceptualize and measure ways of being religious. Most important among them were the religious fundamentalism (RF) scale (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992) and the right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) scale (Altemeyer, 1988, 1996; Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 2005), which is not a measure of religion but is associated with RF. These latter two concepts and measures became major additions to understanding the relationships between religiousness and social attitudes and behavior, and it is easy to see how they could have developed out of the evolutionary and group-commitment processes sketched above.

As we discussed in Chapter 6, Altemeyer conceptualized RWA as a syndrome that blends three elements:

1. Authoritarian submission to established leaders.
2. Authoritarian aggression perceived as sanctioned by authorities.
3. Conventionalism as a high degree of adherence to societal rules.

This set of attributes ought to be measurable, and if measurement is done well, then the scores ought to predict other social attitudes and behaviors. Sample items from the RWA scale are “It is always better to trust the judgment of the proper authorities in the government and religion than to listen to the noisy rabblers in our society who are trying to create doubt in people’s minds”, “Our country will be destroyed someday if we do not smash the perversions eating away at our moral fiber and traditional beliefs”, and “Obedience is the most important virtue children should learn.” The RWA instrument contains 30 items of this type.

Altemeyer and Hunsberger (1992) reasoned that, given the dogmatic and closedminded orientation of people who score high on the RWA scale (RWAs), authoritarianism ought to correlate with fundamentalism. In their research, fundamentalism is defined as

The belief that there is one set of religious teachings that clearly contains the fundamental, basic, intrinsic, essential, inerrant truth about humanity and deity; that this essential truth is fundamentally opposed by forces of evil which must be vigorously fought; that this truth must be followed today according to the fundamental, unchangeable practices of the past; and that those who believe and follow these fundamental teachings have a special relationship with the deity. (p. 118)

This way of conceptualizing fundamentalism was an important step forward. In the past it had been operationally defined by questionnaires containing doctrinally orthodox statements particular to one religion. For

example, questionnaires measuring Christian fundamentalism invariably contain statements about Jesus's resurrection, the virgin birth, the literalness of scripture, original sin, the reality of hell, and so on. Defined in this way, according to content, it was difficult to distinguish a measure of fundamentalism from a measure of Christian orthodoxy. Also, proceeding in this way would require that a separate fundamentalism measure be created for every religion. Fortunately, Altemeyer and Hunsberger's RF measure assesses the dogmatic mindset with which believing is sustained rather than the content of beliefs. For example, people who score high on fundamentalism agree with statements such as "Of all the people on this earth, one group has a special relationship with God because it believes the most in his revealed truths and tries the hardest to follow his laws." They tend to disagree with statements such as "Different religions and philosophies have different versions of the truth, and may be equally right in their own way." Items on the RF scale can be answered by a believer in any religion in which a deity is postulated, and thus transreligious comparisons are possible that do not require specific ideological content. This benefit has resulted in research comparing the RF mindset among Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and others (Hunsberger, 1996), a good step forward for the international psychology of religion.

One important question needs to be addressed. Is the kind of mindset assessed by the RF scale a specifically religious mindset, or is it something else? In careful subsequent analyses, Altemeyer and Hunsberger (2005) have concluded that the kind of mind that produces high RF scores is not unique to religious persons. It is actually a religious manifestation of RWA; the typical size of the correlation coefficient between RWA and RF is $+0.7$.^{5,6}

A number of other psychology of religion measures have been developed (Hill, 2013; see Chapter 4 for review). Each one aims at tapping a slightly different facet of religiousness. They could remain in the literature as a long list of seemingly disparate measures, sometimes correlating with each other and sometimes not. However, a model called the religion circumplex has recently been offered as a way to conceptualize several of the major dimensions of concern.

⁵A correlation coefficient (r) of $+0.7$ means that as scores on one variable go up, the scores on the other variable also goes up. In this case, as RWA increases, RF increases. Because r can vary in absolute value from 0 to 1, an r of $.7$ means that the relationship between RWA and RF is fairly strong.

⁶Research potential emerges here: This correlation raises the possibility that the RF scale may not capture the full range of psychological meanings or nuances embedded in all variations of holding to "the fundamentals" of a religion, but may instead specifically measure authoritarian fundamentalism, which has been Altemeyer and Hunsberger's focus. Future research will tease such nuances apart and find out whether they have practical implications.

The Religion Circumplex

Reviewing the scholarly efforts to unpack the psychological processes that mediate various associations between religiousness and social attitudes and behavior tells us that measuring one or two aspects of religiousness is insufficient for us to understand its impact on social attitudes and behavior. To borrow from Krauss and Hood (2013), that would be like trying to make a map of the world with information only about Hong Kong, New York, and Sao Paulo. The map would be a little better if Los Angeles, Nairobi, and Cairo were added, but obviously a good map of the world requires representations of many more places and features. Similarly, the complexity of social attitudes and behavior demands that we use a complex set of measures if we want to find reliable and substantial relationships between them. The commitment–reflectivity circumplex (CRC) looks like a useful model with which to conceptualize some of the variables of concern, and the Circumplex Religious Orientation Inventory (CROI) looks like a substantial step forward as an instrument to assess multiple dimensions of religiousness (Krauss & Hood, 2013).

The CRC is designed on a model with two bipolar orthogonal axes (Figure 11.4), and the CROI is constructed so that its dimensions fit within the CRC. The vertical axis goes from committed at the top to uncommitted at the bottom. The horizontal axis goes from unreflective (i.e., not thinking too deeply about it) at the far left to reflective (i.e., deliberative thought, interest, and understanding) at the far right. The consequence is that there are four quadrants designed to capture a number of ways of being religious, from a great deal to almost none at all, and with deep and serious thought to almost not bothering to analyze or understand it at all.

Ten dimensions of religiousness are tapped within the CROI:

1. The degree of doubt about one's religion.
2. Feelings of obligation.
3. The degree to which the religion is central.
4. Tentativeness.
5. The religion's function as a social outlet.
6. Whether one sees the religion as a source of potential gain.
7. The degree to which the religion is personal.
8. How interesting the religion is.
9. How strongly one is concerned that being religious includes a risk of punishment.
10. Whether one welcomes dialogue about the religion.

This array of factors obviously carries the logic behind the original I-E research a big step forward. It is not perfect, but it captures far more of the facets and complexities of what religiousness can mean to someone.

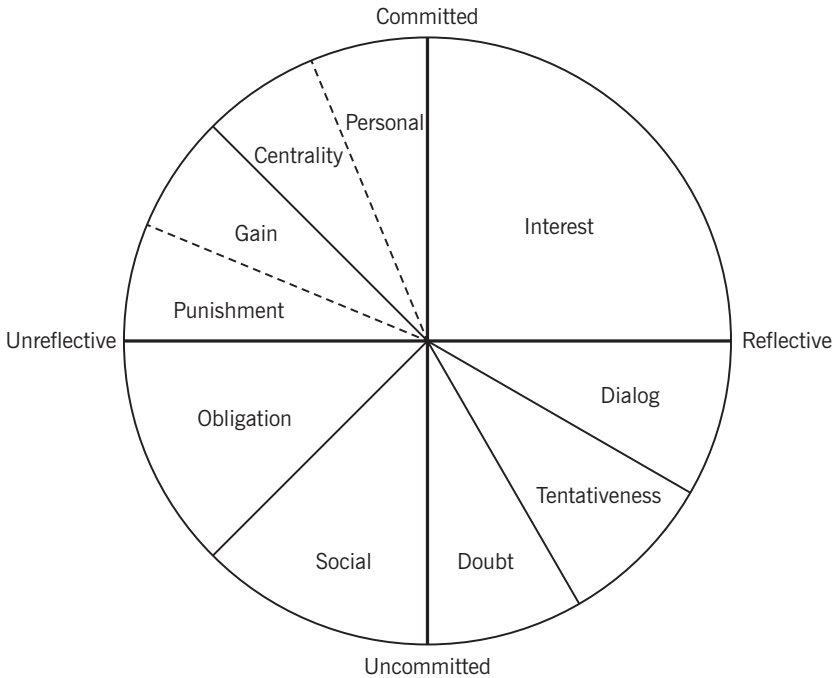


FIGURE 11.4. Theoretical structure of the Circumplex Religious Orientation Inventory (CROI) showing the committed–uncommitted and reflective–unreflective axes, and the various kinds of religious orientations that may be manifest at varying degrees of each axis. From Krauss and Hood (2013, p. 119). Reprinted with permission from Koninklijke Brill.

You can conceptualize some of the psychological underpinnings of these dimensions by examining their locations inside the circumplex in Figure 11.4. Using our geographical analogy once again, although this model may not present a complete picture of the religious field, it at least brings more of it into focus than the measurement attempts that preceded it. (See Krauss & Hood, 2013, for a comprehensive review and research results from the United States and Romania.)

These are some of the intellectual roots of psychological research on religious orientation and racial prejudice. However, this brief introduction to the circumplex model of religious orientations may suggest that the research extends to far more human phenomena than racial and ethnic prejudice. In fact, what began with puzzles and questions about religiousness and prejudices has expanded greatly to include explorations into the psychological processes involved in how religiousness relates to a great many social behaviors. So, now let us expand our view and look at some

research findings on some aspects of religiousness associated with various prosocial and antisocial attitudes and behaviors. The initial focus on racial prejudice need not get lost; it is one piece of a far bigger puzzle.

RELIGION, SELF, AND OTHERS

Recall our earlier discussion of the evolutionary roots of meaning system processes and the role of meaning making in religiousness in individuals and groups. What predictions stem from that discussion? If people have developed so that making meaning out of ambiguity is a fundamental process, then the global meaning system that has been constructed as part of each person's cognitive processes will receive, assess, and respond to new information relevant to his or her religiousness. The new information will be accepted, rejected, reinterpreted, modified, or parsed according to this global meaning system. The cycle of inputs of new information, assessments of it, and reactions to it via feedback loops occurs instantaneously and automatically, with results manifested in self processes.

Self Processes

A *self* has many functions (Chapter 6). Among them are self-regulation, self-efficacy, self-control, self-observation, self-correction, self-enhancement, self-derogation, and self-justification. The self can be deviant, conforming, powerful, or weak. It can also succeed or fail and therefore feel praise or blame. Two of the self's functions are so basic that they oversee and guide the others: self-evaluation and self-justification. Both function under the umbrella of one's global meaning system.

Self-Evaluation

When one pursues a goal, the directive aspect of the self is not aiming "just anywhere" but has selected one specific direction out of many because pursuit of that particular goal is consistent with what meaningful behavior *is* at that time for that person. This meaning is the overarching point of behaving; it is why the behaving matters. The subservient functions noted above are invoked to observe one's trajectory, correct one's direction or procedures, detect when the goal has been achieved, or define an alternative goal if necessary. Thus the self is able to detect discrepancies (e.g., between what it wants and what it is likely to get) and adjust its motivation or goal-directed action as a corrective measure.

Self-evaluation is a fundamental aspect of the "detective" process. It is not necessarily conscious, but it is intimate with the other self-processes. It is acutely alert to discrepancies between the *ought* and the *is*. For example,

if you believe you ought to have sacrificed something for your church or the poor and you did not do so, the self-evaluative process “knows” it. As a consequence, it may act by prompting feelings of guilt. A good generality is that guilt is one of the most powerful motivators for moral behavior for people with a healthy personality because our self-system detects discrepancies between our beliefs and our attitudes and actions (Geyer & Baumeister, 2005). In fact, guilt is one of the biggest behavior regulators in our psychological system (Zell & Baumeister, 2013).

Self-Justification

One extremely important self-process can either involve a kind of self-deception (Burris & Navara, 2002) or it can involve clear perception. I am referring to self-justification for what most people would consider negative behavior. Such behavior can be discrepant from one’s religious beliefs or, to turn it around, one’s religious beliefs can in principle be consistent with and lead to one’s negative behavior. Either way, self-justification looms large especially for large aggregates of people.

An unusually blatant use of self-justification occurred as this third millennium began. On September 11, 2001, Islamic jihadists flew hijacked U.S. airliners into New York’s World Trade Center buildings and the Pentagon, killing nearly 3,000 people. This was a political act, but it was justified in the name of Islam. History provides myriad examples of this phenomenon—from the Hebrew Bible, in which the Israelites slaughtered others in the name of their (then) tribal god, to Christians who conducted the Crusades in God’s name, to others that are more contemporary and (unfortunately) not infrequently in the news. Suffice it to say that self-justification in the name of one’s religion is invoked today at individual and group levels as it has been for millennia.⁷

Fundamentalistic Processes

The kinds of meaning system mechanisms that underpinned the evaluative and justification processes at work in motivating the Crusades are also involved in people’s liking, disliking, and evaluation of others. Information consistent with one’s meaning system is incorporated, information that is not is rejected, and the myriad cases between those two extremes are appraised, and responses develop out of the assessment and feedback loops. We can see the workings of the processes most clearly when we examine extreme cases. RF is a dominant example: How do fundamentalists

⁷Hostile acts carried out in the name of one’s religious faith are not necessarily disingenuous. It is possible that the actors make no distinction between political and religious ends. Also, prosocial acts are often justified via religion as well.

respond when confronting people whose religious beliefs, views on nonreligious issues, and behavior differ from their own?

Gentle Fundamentals

Before addressing this question, it is necessary to untangle the various connotations of the word *fundamentalist*. My discussion so far has referred to fundamentalism in accord with the way this concept is used in almost all of the research and as characterized by Altemeyer and Hunsberger (1992, 2005). It paints the fundamentalist as the religious person whose way of believing is not only firm but also mixed with militancy and hostility toward other views and people who hold them. However, a different way of conceptualizing fundamentalism anchors the concept in people's strictness about the text of a scripture (whether the Bible, Qur'an, Torah, or other) being the only valid source of truth. This view of fundamentalism is based on the principle of intratextuality (Hood, Hill, & Williamson, 2005). According to this principle, all answers are to be found within the scriptural text and nowhere else. Thus, for example, comparing what the Bible says to any extra-biblical source, whether scientific, poetic, inspirational, personal, or from another religion, is irrelevant. According to this understanding, a fundamentalist need not be like the characterization of the term in most of the research, with its negative connotations. If fundamentalism is defined according to the principle of intratextuality, the term could describe not only militant extremists or confrontational protesters, but also any others who approach life exclusively according to the precepts set forth in their sacred texts.

One Christian group that approaches life according to what they take intratextually as the fundamentals is the Amish. They are strict, separatist, and regard other views as invalid. Yet they show none of the characteristics of the negative stereotype of fundamentalists as confrontational, militantly defensive, and Bible thumping. This documents that there are different ways of believing in fundamentals and putting them into practice. In their analysis of varieties of intratextualism, proponents of the intratextual concept questioned whether the Amish should be called fundamentalists, noting that they do not fit the classic stereotype (Hood, Hill, & Williamson, 2005). One important piece of information is illustrative. In 2006 a shooting occurred at an Amish school in Pennsylvania. The gunman shot ten young girls, killing five, before killing himself. The families of the victims immediately opened up to the mother of the gunman and forgave the murderer and all his acquaintances. The reason they stated was simply that the Bible said that is what they should do—a straightforward demonstration of belief-behavior consistency. The forgiveness and reconciliation this Amish community exhibited was the subject of stories in the media, and also a

movie and several nonfiction books (Kraybill, Nolt, & Weaver-Zercher, 2007).

Fundamentalism

Far more visible and confrontational than the Amish are those that are closer to the classic characterization of authoritarian fundamentalism by Altemeyer and Hunsberger. For example, there is often a double standard evident in such fundamentalists' line of thinking, such as saying they want freedom of religion for "us" but opposing freedom of religion for "them." Some revealing research has been done looking into how fundamentalists of this kind tend to respond to ideas, people, or proposals that are not their own.

First, Altemeyer (2006) put the following question to people all across the religious spectrum: "Suppose a law were passed requiring the strenuous teaching of religion in public schools. Beginning in kindergarten, all children would be taught to believe in God, pray together in school several times each day, memorize the Ten Commandments and other parts of the Bible, learn the principles of Christian morality, and eventually be encouraged to accept Jesus Christ as their personal savior. How would you react to such a law?" The results in Altemeyer's own words: "A great majority of people in my samples, including most of the Christians, say that would be a bad law. But most fundamentalists like the idea, for this is exactly the kind of education they would like to see public schools give to everyone's children. When I ask fundamentalists about the morality of imposing this learning on the children of Hindus, Jews, atheist, etcetera, they respond along the lines of, 'This is a Christian country, and the majority rules. If others don't like it, they can pay for private education or leave.'"

Altemeyer then continues, "What do you think happens when I ask people to respond to this parallel scenario? 'Suppose you were living in a modern Arab democracy, whose constitution stated there could be NO state religion—even though the vast majority of people were Muslims. Then a fundamentalist Islamic movement was elected to power, and passed a law requiring the strenuous teaching of religion in public schools. Beginning in kindergarten, all children would be taught to believe in Allah, pray together facing Mecca several times each day, memorize important parts of the Koran, learn the principles of Islamic morality, and eventually be encouraged to declare their allegiance to Muhammad and become a Muslim. How would you react to such a law?' Again, a great majority of my samples think this would be quite wrong, but this time so do a solid majority of Christian fundamentalists. When you ask them why, they say that obviously this would be unfair to people who help pay for public schools but want their children raised in some other religion. If you ask them if

the majority in an Arab country has a right to have its religion taught in public schools, they say no, that the minority has rights too that must be respected. Nobody's kids should have another religion forced upon them in the classroom, they say."

Altemeyer (2006) closes the section:

So do fundamentalists believe in majority rights or minority rights? The answer is, apparently, neither. They'll pull whichever argument suits them out of its file when necessary, but basically they are unprincipled on the issue of school prayer. They have a big double standard that basically says, "Whatever I want is right." The rest is rationalization, and as flexible as a reed blowing in the wind. (pp. 115–117)

The kind of thinking and behaving at issue here is no small matter. To extend the point to regions of international importance, as the present volume goes to press certain expressions of global religions and political conflicts are clear and obvious manifestations of fundamentalism. Each side irrevocably insists on having its own way; the posture of absolutism makes the goals of the combatants irreconcilable.

My own view is that we are better off living without any manner of behaving, such as fundamentalism, that is rooted in thinking that is absolutistic, divisive, dogmatic, or exclusive, or that puts barriers between human beings (Paloutzian, Shankar, & Luyten, 2014). We will be wise to outgrow such tendencies. This is because where fundamentalism in anything predominates, people are threatened and forced to live within the chains of someone else's design. Having said this, an honest question is "How should readers respond to a pronouncement like this? Aren't you just arguing for fundamentalists to live within the chains of your worldview?" The answer is no, because in the world of the lovers of freedom, fundamentalists have a place and are free to be who they are, but in the world of the strict fundamentalist the freedom lovers and others have no place because all must conform to one prescribed teaching and set of values.

Atheism

Even with the majority of the world's population being religious in some way, a growing minority of people seem to be moving toward not believing in any higher power (Bayer & Figdor, 2014; Bullivant & Ruse, 2013; Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006; Williamson & Yancey, 2013). What makes an atheist become an atheist? Most atheists were raised in a religious family and church environment but later turned their backs on the church. Why? The three main reasons atheists give are (1) weaknesses in religious teachings, (2) science and logic, and (3) hypocrisy within the church (Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006). Whether the Bible refers to the story of

creation, miracles, or other purported religious explanations for phenomena, apostates typically cannot accept such accounts at face value. Pushing their minds to understand scriptures on rational, scientific grounds means abandoning the faith in which they were raised.

Interestingly, the top reason atheists gave for leaving the church is hypocritical behavior by fundamentalists, including those who were in positions of church or spiritual leadership (Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006). Whether the discrepancy between what one ought to observe among church leaders and what actually occurred was sexual, financial, or other, observing people whose behavior was inconsistent with their religious teachings was the primary straw that broke the back of the camel for these apostates. In fact, some of those who were raised religiously but became atheists said that it is precisely because their religious parents or teachers didn't believe, and therefore failed in the test of their faith, that they became an atheist or agnostic.

RELIGION AND SOCIAL BEHAVIOR

Earlier in this chapter I said that the commandment in the Hebrew Bible to love your neighbor as yourself applied primarily to the in-group. Hundreds of years later, when Jesus spoke to a crowd and said that this was the second-greatest commandment (the first greatest was to love God), he was bluntly confronted by a person who asked (whether mockingly or seriously, I do not know), "And who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29). What followed was the parable of the Good Samaritan, typically put forth as the supreme all-time example of helping behavior. Not only was the act of helping self-sacrificial in that it cost the helper (Samaritan) time, effort, attention, and money. But also, the Jewish listeners were being told to behave as a Samaritan (the lowlifes of the day) did, and this was unacceptable. They were "unclean," in the view of most Jews at that time. The priest and the Levite, who in the parable pass the injured man, staying on the other side of the road, did what was normal for them. This instance of Jesus's teaching was radical in part because it implied that human beings were all one group.

Loving Thy Neighbor

The parable of the Good Samaritan unavoidably raises psychological questions about the relationship between being religious and prosocial behavior. The workings are not straightforward. Preston, Salomon, and Ritter (2014) present a clear picture of research on the relationships between religion and prosociality by posing three questions. Using helping as the example of prosocial behavior, they are:

1. *Who* helps?
2. *When* do they help?
3. *Why* do they help?

Both field and laboratory experiments have given us clues to how the relationships work.

The Good Samaritan Experiment

To what degree is your behavior the result of your personality traits rather than environmental forces? This issue was translated into a landmark experiment by Darley and Batson (1973). It was designed to test whether thinking about the Good Samaritan parable would facilitate helping a victim in a “Good Samaritan” situation. This was the first hypothesis of the experiment. A second hypothesis was that the priest and Levite, both being in socially prominent positions, might be in a hurry to get to their appointments and keep up with a busy schedule. The Samaritan, being less important, would not have important meetings and not be in a rush. The hypothesis was that people who are in a rush are less likely to help than people who are not in a rush.

A Good Samaritan situation was set up on the campus of Princeton University. The subjects were students at Princeton Theological Seminary. They were sent from one building to another down a particular alleyway in which they encountered a “victim” (actually a confederate of the researchers) who appeared to need help or medical aid: From the research report: “When the subject passed through the alley, the victim was sitting slumped in a doorway, head down, eyes closed, not moving. As the subject went by, the victim coughed twice and groaned, keeping his head down.” What would the passerby (subject) do?

Subjects’ thinking was manipulated by asking half of them to go to the second building and give a talk on the parable of the Good Samaritan. The other half were asked to give a talk on jobs for seminary graduates. The degree to which the subjects were rushed was manipulated by telling one-third of them that they had to hurry to get to the second building on time. Another third were told that there was no hurry. A middle group was told that only moderate speed was necessary to reach the second building on time.

Of the 40 subjects, 16 (40%) offered some type of aid to the victim; 24 (60%) did not. When these overall findings are broken down according to treatment conditions, interesting details emerge. For example, 63% of the subjects in the low rush condition helped, 45% in the medium rush condition helped, and only 10% in the high rush condition helped. Importantly, this trend was statistically significant but did not depend upon whether the subject was going to talk about (and therefore would be

thinking about) the parable. One conclusion is that being in a rush lowers the probability that you will help a victim whether or not your religion is on your mind.

The results were equivocal on whether those who were going to talk about the Good Samaritan parable, compared to the control group, would show greater helping. The would-be “parable speakers” were more likely to offer aid (53%) than those going to talk about jobs (29%), but the difference fell just below statistical significance, and therefore could be considered chance. Darley and Batson concluded that “a person going to speak on the parable of the Good Samaritan is not significantly more likely to stop to help a person by the side of the road than is a person going to talk about possible occupations for seminary graduates.” However, an independent analysis of the data suggests the opposite conclusion (Greenwald, 1975).⁸ I conclude that the results fall right on the knife edge, and thus are suggestive if not definitive in either direction. (See Saroglou, 2013, for an excellent review and summary of research on religion, spirituality, and altruism.)

Priming Helping and Honesty

Do other research techniques, such as priming a subject with a specific idea or cue, produce more definitive results? Priming subjects with a religious versus a control cue is a technique used in many experiments to test how triggering a religious thought affects prosocial or antisocial behavior.

An important idea about who a religious person is most likely to help is called *limited prosociality*. As applied to religion, it suggests that a religious person is most likely to give help to proximal targets such as members of his or her family, the same religious body, and similar in-group members, but not toward distal targets (Saroglou, 2006). This idea is consistent with the evolutionary meaning systems arguments in this book. For example, when experimental subjects were primed by briefly exposing them to religious words, they showed less aggression and more helping behavior, responses manifested especially to members of their in-group. In parallel research, similar trends were confirmed by peers (Saroglou, Pichon, Trompette, Verschueren, & Dernelle, 2005). The same trends have been found in studies of the relation between religiousness and forgiving (Nielsen, Hatton, & Donahue, 2013); and for the priming effects of being in a religious context (attending synagogue) compared to being in a fitness class or at a music performance, in which case the synagogue attendance triggered increased trust and helping compared to the fitness class or music performance (Ruffle & Sosis, 2010).

⁸Greenwald’s (1975) technique is called a Bayesian analysis and can be examined in various statistics books.

Snapshots of similar experiments can be summarized as follows:

1. Extending the I-E line of research, Batson has shown that the religion-as-quest (Q) measure predicts actual helping behavior, whereas the intrinsic (I) measure predicts a tendency to appear helpful (Darley & Batson, 1973; see Batson et al., 1993, for review).

2. One kind of finding has been called the *Sunday Effect* because the findings show that there is an increased likelihood that a person will help when, for example, primed by walking in front of a church on Sunday (Malhotra, 2010).

3. Extending the findings noted above about limited prosociality, it has been found that RF yields less helping of out-group members and more helping of in-group members (Blogowska & Saroglou, 2011).

4. Randolph-Seng and Nielsen (2007) found an increase in honesty and a decrease in cheating when subjects were primed with religious words, findings consistent with those of Shariff and Norenzayan (2007), as well as Shariff and Norenzayan's (2011) assertion that viewing God as both punishing and observant of you leads to less cheating, and Norenzayan's (2013) theory about the psychological effects of believing that God is watching you (see Chapter 3).

Religion and Prosociality

An important trio of journal articles on research about religious prosociality was published by Luke Galen (2012a, 2012b), David Myers (2012), and Vassilis Saroglou (2012). Galen wrote an exhaustive review of the literature and concluded that religious people say they are more honest and help others more in a way that is, in effect, consistent with the limited prosociality explanation. On the other hand, some priming studies show that the same effects happen whether or not the individual is actively religiously involved. Overall, Galen concludes that the apparent prosocial effects of religion are artifacts of their correlations with other variables. For example, he points out that some of the research on the positive effects of spirituality have been found not because spirituality has such effects but because the researchers have mistakenly used a measure of well-being and my measure of spiritual well-being (Paloutzian & Ellison, 1982; Paloutzian et al., 2012) and found a positive correlation between them—which means only that well-being is associated with well-being (Galen, 2012a).

Overall, there seems to be no magic bullet explanation, let alone a clear picture, of the relationship between the myriad aspects of religiousness and the equally large number of prosocial and antisocial variables. A reasonable generality is that believing that an otherworldly agent is always observing you increases self-observation, and thus self-evaluation,

regulation, and control. The output of this chain of events can be more pro- than antisocial. A companion generality is that group identity facilitates morality within the group but not necessarily outside of it (Graham & Haidt, 2010).

However, as Norenzayan (2013) has hypothesized, in order for primes to trigger greater prosocial behavior, they do not need to be religious. Both civic primes and religious primes decrease cheating, indicating that the psychological process is a general, not a specifically religious, effect (Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007). Similarly, Graham and Haidt (2010) argue that the positive effects of religiousness are not unique to it but are due to more general influences within social aggregates. These points seem consistent with the idea of religion's adaptive value as a social control mechanism, but not because of specifically religious content but because of a more generic reflecting of a prosocial value.

Priming in the Field

A question arises from priming studies such as those summarized above. Can priming effects be observed in real-world settings? For example, was the circumstance in the Good Samaritan experiment an example of priming? Maybe. But if so, the results of the experiment should be carefully interpreted.

What, exactly, did walking from one building to another mean to the subjects who were to talk about the parable? Was it "I should put the lessons in this story into my own behavior at the earliest opportunity"? Not likely. It was probably more like "Oh my, I've got to give a talk; I feel anxious and nervous about it; what if I really mess up?" A key question is "For these subjects, what specifically does going to give the talk mean?" Because of such concerns, I don't think we can straightforwardly conclude that having the Good Samaritan parable on one's mind, as such, affects people's helping behavior. What matters is what it means to the person at the time, not merely whether it is there. In addition, the subjects were helping the experimenter by going to the other building to give the talk. The procedures were set up not as a help versus nohelp tradeoff, but as a conflict between two helping situations (i.e., helping the victim or helping the experimenter). In either case, however, the potency of the degree-of-rush variable is clear evidence in support of situational factors influencing helping behavior.

These findings suggest that religious people are just like everybody else. In this instance, people who have Good Samaritan thoughts in their minds behave mostly the same as those who don't. They are affected by time pressures in the same way everybody else is. In light of this, the "trivial" finding that the situational variable (degree of rush) significantly affects helping is actually not trivial at all. It means that religious persons (or in this instance,

persons who have a religious thought on their mind) are subject to the same pressures as everybody else and that just because they think religiously (or, just because they believe in their particular religion) does not mean they are immune from those pressures. They should appreciate the lesson of this because doing so can give them greater ability to regulate their behavior in the face of future pressures. This is in direct opposition to the oft-stated belief, or teaching, that such a person is either under special otherworldly guidance or less susceptible to pressure. There are situations in which social pressure is of maximum importance.

Obedience to Authority

Anyone alert to the problems in today's world that involve religion and violence is aware that in many cases people give orders to others to do something they do not normally do. In the most grievous cases, the behavior in question is to threaten, harm, or kill someone, or to kill oneself by suicide bombing. Bock and Warren (1972) designed an experiment based on the Milgram procedure summarized above in order to explore whether being high, medium, or low in religiousness would affect the tendency to obey an authority who gave orders to hurt somebody. The subjects were from a generally Christianized area of the U.S. population.

Bock and Warren hypothesized that the religious moderates would be the most likely to defy an authority who gave orders to inflict harm. They also predicted that people who are deeply committed to their faith and non-religious people would both be more obedient. Their reasoning was that institutional religion emphasizes people's responsibility to obey legitimate authority, even though religious teaching places a primary emphasis on people's responsibility to treat a fellow human being with respect and care. They thought that believers in the United States have often placed primary emphasis on obedience, relegating compassion to second place. Thus they predicted that the most religiously committed persons would also be most likely to follow orders unquestioningly and hurt someone on command. They also reasoned that people at the nonreligious extreme have their own self-interest value structure that serves as their authority. Therefore, they hypothesized that the nonreligious subjects would obey in a manner similar to the most religiously committed subjects.

On the other hand, Bock and Warren reasoned that the religious moderates have their values more in balance. Although moderates see obedience to authority as important, they balance this with a concern for human welfare. The prediction was that religious moderates would disobey harmful orders sooner than either the high or low religious extremes. The procedures for measuring the degree of destructive obedience were those developed by Milgram (1963, 1965).

Bock and Warren gave their subjects two scales to measure degree of religiousness. One test was designed to discriminate between the religious stances of believer and nonbeliever. The other measured degree of doctrinal orthodoxy or “fundamentalism-humanism.” By using these instruments, they classified the subjects as strong believers, nonbelievers, or moderates.

The results were the exact opposite of what Bock and Warren expected. The religious moderates were the most obedient, and the strong believers were more resistant in their obedience (see Figure 11.5). They explain these findings by drawing a parallel between their subject categories and those of Allport and Ross’s (1967) I-E religious orientation. They propose that (1) their own strong believer category corresponds to Allport’s I’s, who are the most frequent church attenders, (2) their moderates correspond to Allport’s infrequent attenders, and (3) their nonbelievers correspond to the nonreligious category in the I-E classification system. Therefore, just as I’s (frequent churchgoers, strong believers) are the least prejudiced, they are also the least obedient to orders to harm others. And just as infrequent churchgoers (moderates) are the most prejudiced, they are also the most likely to obey orders to harm others.

The task of explaining the psychological processes that underlie these results can be approached in at least three ways. A first way is to resort to the I and E motivational concepts. A second interpretation (Gorsuch, 1976;

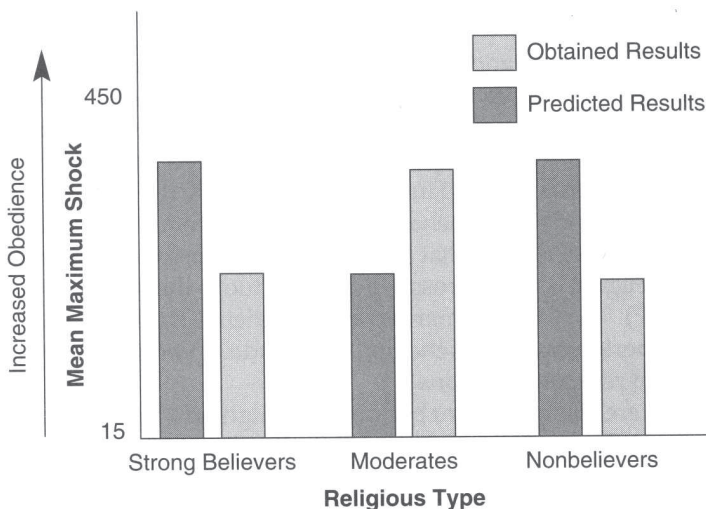


FIGURE 11.5. Degree of obedience in delivering electric shocks for strong believers, nonbelievers, and religious moderates. From Bock and Warren (1972). Copyright by the Religious Research Association. Reprinted by permission.

Gorsuch & Aleshire, 1974) is that the extrinsic/prejudiced/obedient people regulate their lives by conventional American values, which emphasize the supremacy of authority and conformity to norms. The intrinsic/tolerant/disobedient people and the nonreligious/tolerant/disobedient people have a greater capacity for independent decision making. I's and the nonreligious are more able to regulate their lives for reasons that transcend the values of conventional society.

A third way to understand the psychological roots of these data goes back to the possible evolutionary development of the mental abilities that enabled religiousness to exist. As a group process, religiousness evolved along with societal development so that people who were individually religious would, like others, conform to the prescribed norms. However, not all people are the same. They range from those whose minds automatically invoke the highest powers of imagination (and who therefore imagine a religious world or imagine applying their religion to the real world in ways that the ordinary religious person does not) to those at the other extreme who reject religion but whose use of their imaginative abilities enables them also to imagine and respond to alternative (possibly ideal) worlds compared to the real world that is in front of them. It may be, therefore, that the I's and the nonreligious (who were most likely to disobey orders to harm another person) were able to transcend the pressures of the moment and respond to their vision of an ideal world instead of succumbing to the negative pressures of this world. The degree to which this notion can be borne out in real-world circumstances is subject to future research. One significant limitation of this research is that there was no attempt to make religion salient or to link (dis)obedience to one's religious identity.

Terrorism

When we come to the phenomenon of terrorism justified in the name of a religion, things become far more complex than merely a matter of an authority figure ordering a subordinate to inflict harm on a third party. A lot has to happen for the potential terrorist to arrive at that step, not to mention the behavior the person must sustain in order to plan and execute a terrorist act. (See Reicher and Haslam [2016] for an exceptionally clear snapshot of the social psychological principles involved.) An excellent model of the process by which a person goes from being "nothing" to being a violent terrorist is called the staircase model (Figure 11.6; Moghaddam, 2005; Moghaddam et al., 2013). It will help us understand the process if we go up the steps (so to speak) of this model keeping in mind the conceptual tools gleaned from this book.

The lower part of the diagram (the ground floor) is wide, whereas the top of the diagram (the highest floor) is narrow. This discrepancy between

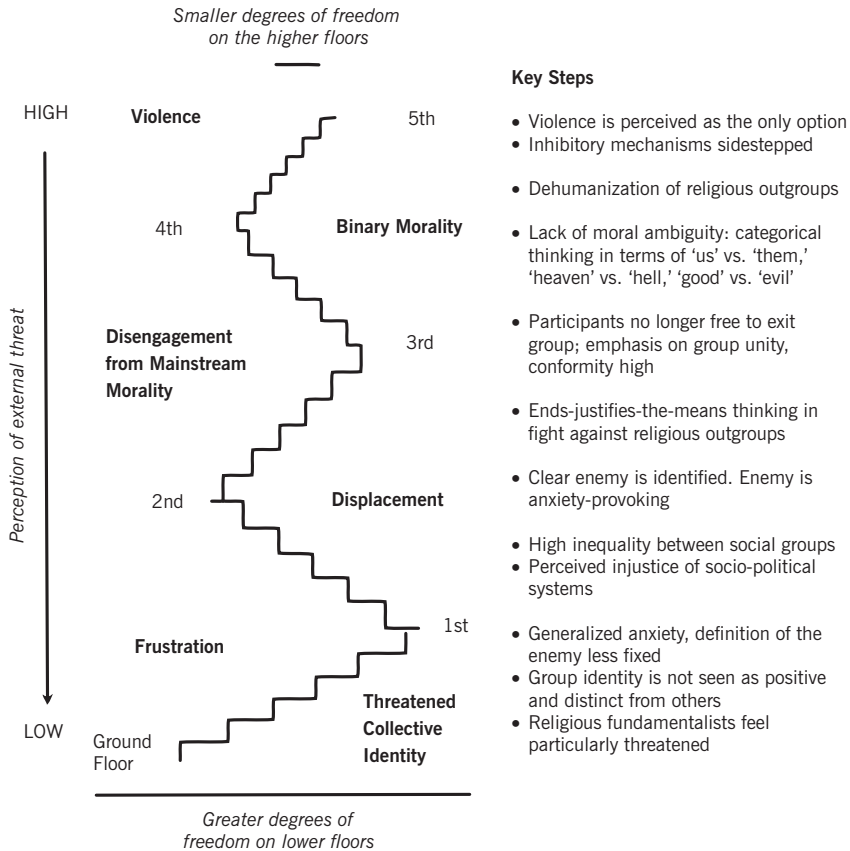


FIGURE 11.6. Staircase to terrorism with associated psychological processes indicated at each step. From Moghaddam, Warren, and Love (2013, p. 638). Copyright by The Guilford Press. Reprinted by permission.

the width of the bottom and top floors illustrates the relative flexibility of choices (statistically, degrees of freedom) someone has, or feels he or she has, at the bottom and top stages. On the ground-floor level, a person may feel some frustration with life, religion, employability, or identity, but it is in the normal range, and the person does not see a particular enemy and does not necessarily identify with a hostile group. Tension is relatively low because the person does not perceive much threat.

The circumstance is the opposite in all respects at the top of the staircase. The religious fundamentalist has bought into a worldview in which there are only two sides—"ours," which is good, and the "other," which is bad, evil, and downright satanic. This means that there is no ambiguity

about who is right and who is wrong in the thought processes of a person at the top step. “Us” is the side of morality and right; “them” is the side of evil and wrong. It is clear who the enemy is, and there is no question about what needs to be done. The enemy, who is totally evil, needs to be erased. And because we realize this, it is our responsibility to do it. The barriers to violent action—normal psychological inhibitory mechanisms—are either nonoperative or sidestepped. And then? The person kills people in a terrorist act while believing it is the will of God.

Moghaddam’s model provides clues to where in the process interventions might be made to lower the probability that someone might climb the steps. Testing the effectiveness of those possible sites of intervention leads to an impressive and (to me) intellectually rich set of ideas to research. Ginges, Hansen, and Norenzayan (2009), for example, describe the role of religion in support of suicide attacks with a set of factors subject to test.

Rescuers

Two facets of the Good Samaritan situation and Darley and Batson’s (1973) research warrant further mention. First, the emergency requiring aid was in both cases a medical emergency in which there was relatively little danger, time loss, or risk for the helper involved. This being so, one wonders about nonmedical emergencies and emergencies that take a great deal of time or that place the helper in danger. In this latter case, is a person equally likely to lend aid although high personal risk is involved? Also, which personality traits, if any, constitute the profile of a Good Samaritan? True accounts of a few events from the 20th century’s first two (but, unfortunately, not last) genocides are illustrative.

Armenians, Ottomans, and Turks

I have massacres in my own family background (Paloutzian, 2010). In 1895, only 20 years before the Ottoman Empire, established in 1453, collapsed during World War I, the village of Parchanj near the northwest bend in the Euphrates River, in what was ancient Armenia but then under Ottoman control, underwent a mass killing. The sultan ordered his army to kill Armenians in Eastern Anatolia. They killed 38 men in the village where the Paloutzian family, including my grandfather, his brothers and sister, their parents, and other relatives lived. The soldiers rode into town on horses, used swords and rifles, and put the dead bodies in a pile in the middle of the village. This occurred over a 3-day period. My grandfather was 17 years old at the time. He told me how the Ottoman soldiers forced the Armenian men to stand facing a fence and gave them a choice. They

could either hold one finger up, indicate their allegiance to Allah, the Muslim religion, and the sultan, and live, or they could hold three fingers up and declare their faith in the Holy Trinity. The men held up three fingers indicating their Christian identity, they were shot dead, and their bodies were added to the pile. One of the 38 men was Hagop Paloutzian (Dzeron, 1937/1984).

My grandparents saw these events. These poor Christian people and my other immediate old-country relatives survived because their genuinely caring Turkish neighbors, believers in Islam, helped save them by hiding them—in their basements, attics, anywhere the Ottoman military would not find them. After these events, “my” half of the only Paloutzians left on earth migrated to California, where I was born, grew up, and got the benefits of an amazing education the likes of which my family could never imagine. I was the lucky one in the lucky half of the family. The unlucky half stayed in the village after 1895. They died at the hands of the Ottomans as part of the Armenian genocide in 1915.

I learned never to see someone through the eyes of prejudice or stereotypes. I learned that it is false that all Turks are enemies of Armenians or that all Islamic people are hostile. These things are no more true than that all Christians, Jews, or atheists are good and never do wrong. Such all-or-none thinking about religious categories is completely contradicted by research documenting that there are both loving and unloving people in all groups. In fact, Turkish friends and neighbors saved Armenian lives. And the Ottoman military under orders from the government murdered them. The crime was committed not by the Turkish people but by the Ottoman government, an entity that ceased following World War I. The lesson is timeless, and it conveys a truth that almost cannot be spoken.⁹

Jews, Nazis, and Europeans

A report by Perry London (1970) regarding some of the Christians who hid Jews from the Nazis during World War II provides information pertinent to the our discussion, although hiding Jews in World War II could obviously be very dangerous, costly, and time-consuming compared to helping someone who needs medical aid, as in the Good Samaritan experiment. London’s research was designed to discover any common factors in the lives of persons who took the dangerous step of hiding Jews.

London sought out and interviewed 27 “rescuers” who had emigrated from Europe to the United States since the end of World War II.

⁹In August 2015, I visited Parchanj and the houses where my grandfather and grandmother grew up. Special thanks go to Zeynep Sagir, a Turkish doctoral student in psychology of religion, for inviting me to visit the village and for being my host.

The interviews were designed to get information about such things as their reasons for helping the Jews, their backgrounds, degree of sociability, personal opinions and qualities, and so on. Although more precise data would be desirable, such data are rarely available.

London presents a cluster of three traits that seem to be common among the rescuers:

1. A spirit of adventurousness. The rescuers seemed willing to take risks and pursue challenges. This is not to be confused with foolhardiness, however.
2. Social marginality. The rescuers had a sense of being on the margin of society rather than being in the mainstream.
3. Moral identification with parents. Rescuers had a close and moralistic upbringing by parents who were themselves morally committed.

The verbal statements of the rescuers reflected a strict sense of right and wrong. One Dutch rescuer, who described himself as mildly anti-Semitic, when asked why he hid Jews, said simply that it was a Christian's duty—invoking a direct path from schema to behavior. Recollections by another of London's rescuers illustrates the type of moral upbringing common to the rescuers:

"You inherit something from your parents, from the grandparents. My mother said to me when we were small, and even when we were bigger, she said to me . . . , 'Regardless of what you do with your life, be honest. When it comes to the day you have to make a decision, make the right one. It could be a hard one. But even the hard ones should be the right ones.'" (p. 247)

According to London, this rescuer "went on to talk about his mother in glowing terms, about how she told him how to live, how she had taught him morals, and how she had exemplified morality for him" (p. 247). Whether these same qualities are present in people who offer help in Good Samaritan-type medical emergencies is a researchable question. In general, it appears that personal factors are important in helping behavior, and that these are rooted in one's moral upbringing (Huston & Korte, 1976). A larger study of 406 rescuers and 126 nonrescuers (Oliner & Oliner, 1988) emphasized that parental modeling of caring behavior was the distinguishing feature of the rescuers. As to a hypothesis about whether these rescuers would have been disobedient in Bock and Warren's (1972) experiment, I say this is a good question that deserves a well-executed experiment in order to find out.

CONCLUSION

Social psychological research has demonstrated the power of social influence to affect what we do, including our religiously motivated and religiously discrepant actions, to a degree that may seem uncomfortable. We like to think that what we do is always a reflection of what we believe, but that is clearly false. Our morally relevant behavior is a consequence of the interaction between our individual proclivities (intents, abilities, motives, religious or spiritual beliefs) and the social and other contexts within which we are embedded. We are not independent. We are interdependent.

TAKE-HOME MESSAGES

- All of the key ideas, principles, and themes in this book apply to issues of how religion relates to behavior. These include that religiousness is (1) multidimensional, personal, and social; (2) mediated through meaning systems; (3) interactive at multiple levels of analysis; (4) evolutionarily rooted in the psychological substrates of meaning systems; (5) a function of dispositional–situational interaction; (6) subject to evaluation based on evidence—there are no privileged positions.
- The “grand paradox” originally named by Allport is vastly bigger than initially noted. It extends from a discrepancy between certain ways of being religious to all aspects of life and behavior to which religions lay claim.
- Self-evaluation and self-regulation are two functions of the self that are integral to meaning system processes. They mediate the appraisal of incoming information and the nature and degree of responses to it.
- Field experiments and laboratory priming studies of the effects of religious variables on prosocial and antisocial behavior document how religious cues can prompt behaviors that are helpful, honest, and caring, as well as harmful, dishonest, and selfish.
- The staircase model of terrorism summarizes the factors (many of them beyond one’s control) that can lead a person to join a violent cause justified in the name of a religion.
- Rescuers who have faced great personal risk to save the lives of innocent people from malevolent political forces have sometimes done so even though the people they saved were of a religion different than their own. When humane treatment of one’s “neighbor” is extended to define all people as neighbors, and taught as a value, genuinely heroic deeds can be manifest.

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PART III

THE BIG PICTURE

PRELUDE TO PART III

The last chapter of this book contains my statement to student readers as well as a few remarks for my colleagues, in light of the question “So what? Why study this?” At the end of the day, what can thinking through the material in this book do for you?

The psychology of religion is no small topic. Nor is it a temporary passing fad. This book has dug into the core issues at the root of the psychology of religion and spirituality; it has not been a mere summary of research. The latter is easy to write (e.g., “A did B and found C”), but this book has gone to a level of depth wherein the issues that underpin the research and what it means are dealt with, and occasionally pushed to their limits. Those issues are sustained over time, apply to other fields, and keep coming back. They matter in my life and yours, regardless of the future work you may do. The lessons contained in this book are for keeps. I want them to stick with you. Chapter 12 gives you a snapshot of why.

CHAPTER 12

And in the End . . .

Why Study This?

Religion and Spirituality

Of Believing and Knowing: No Privileged Positions

A Life of Examination

Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind.

—RALPH WALDO EMERSON

The unexamined life is not worth living . . .

—SOCRATES

Although at the outset I promised you could read this book in any order, in this chapter I lay out some summative points that have their foundation in the rest of the chapters. These points shift my presentation from relating research findings to offering both my take on those findings, and what I think of as big ideas that derive from them. Some of these big ideas are personal, others have to do with our field of study.

If you've read the chapters leading up to this one, the issues I raise here will be familiar to you. Now we need to look at them one last time and glean some essential ideas, which I offer as take-home messages.¹ I hope you find them useful.

¹Thus, I write this chapter as an essay without the clutter of citations. Points for which citations could be added already have sufficient documentation in the earlier chapters. The reader is referred to those places to follow up anything said.

WHY STUDY THIS?

Not long ago—a little before the turn of the millennium—a world-class scholar and colleague of mine wrote that religion was “rapidly disappearing from the face of the earth.” He and others took it for granted that the West was in a “post-Christian era” and the world was in a “post-religion era.” Some concluded that the psychology of religion was a waste of time. Now, a few years into the 21st century, it does not look like religions have gone away, and few people question its complex entanglement in human affairs. What does this mean for students generally and for professionals in the psychology of religion?

Citizens of the World

In the past it was the norm to be a citizen within only one country and culture. Those days are rapidly disappearing. We all are citizens of the whole world now, whether we want to be or not. By “citizenship” I mean belonging to and being subject to forces in the world as a whole.

For students who wish to enter the modern world with wisdom and understanding about global and local issues that affect their lives, a basic understanding of the psychology of religion is essential. Religious influences are pervasive, and they affect religious and irreligious people alike. No one is immune from religiously initiated or religiously justified hostilities. Social policies whose roots stem from religious dictates still govern much of the world. People alive today are interdependent, and it is becoming untenable to think in terms of an in-group and an out-group. Knowing what we know, you and I bear the onus of nudging the world from intergroup conflict toward harmony.

Although it is exceptionally enriching and educational to live in our world with its tapestry of ways of believing, doing, and being, I hope that in time people will also be identified with all of humanity, so that no one will need to be treated as “the other.” In the meantime, only if people belonging to various religions work toward that end can intergroup conflict cease. Human beings are still evolving, and I think we are wise to decide to evolve together as one, not as many competing groups, each believing it alone follows the One True Path. Studying the psychology of religion can give us insights that will enable us to do that.

Examine Everything

Religions and spiritualities are sometimes promoted to us as if they were products, like toothpaste, at least in those countries that protect religious freedom by law. Promoters are out to draw you into their group, belief system, and set of practices, and to use your money. By learning about the psychological processes that result in changes in meaning systems, you

have knowledge that can equip you to observe the approaches of different religious persuasions and then reject or appropriate them according to your personal priorities. Thus you retain your power to choose the beliefs and values by which you guide your life, rather than simply following the pressures or encouragements of someone else. Examine everything, so you'll be better equipped to make decisions about life's basic issues.

At a personal level, you need to understand the psychology of religion if you are to approach your life with knowledge and understanding—and if you are to be ready to grapple with tough issues that confront you. As you progress through your life, consider these questions:

- Were you a convert to your religion or spiritual orientation? By what processes did this change occur? How much choice did you have, and how much were you under pressure?
- Were you socialized into the religion or spirituality of your family? If so, do you feel you had a real choice in the matter? What is your own decision about what principles, beliefs, and values you hold most dear?
- Think about the stage models of moral decision making, generic faith development, and making religious judgments, which were discussed in Chapter 5 on developmental processes in religiousness and spirituality. Where are you along those steps? Is “higher” on those step models equal to “better”? Why?
- Which is of higher value to you—doing what you decide after thoughtful, in-depth consideration or doing what your priest, rabbi, imam, guru, or even your best friend, tells you? Why?
- To what degree are what you know and what you believe congruent? Is your honest answer (to yourself, not necessarily your public answer) that what you really believe includes an element of blind faith? If so, is that OK, or do you want to change? If you want to change, how?
- Whether you are a believer or “hoper” in something, an atheist, or anything in between, do you doubt? Do you have secret doubts, those you have never told anyone else about? Why?
- If your religion teaches that if you have genuine faith in God, you will not be anxious, but you feel you do have faith and at the same time do feel anxious, how do you account for this? What, if anything, do you do about this?
- If what you believe includes prosocial values such as taking care of people who are needy and less fortunate, and a circumstance occurs that provides such an opportunity, how probable is it that you will do what is necessary to help someone? Given what you have learned, how sure are you of that probability? Should it be adjusted? What does this mean to you?
- Does your behavior really matter, or is it finally more important that

you carry the correct doctrines around inside your head? What truly matters, with respect to how you live your life?

With knowledge from the psychology of religion, you are better equipped to wrestle with such questions and answer them for yourself. Fundamentally, you are better able to know more about how religions work generally, and how your religion or its functional equivalent works in your life. Knowledge of this kind increases your personal freedom. It also gives you a broader view of the range of worldviews out there, and the unavoidable collisions among them.

Examine everything. We cannot afford to live with a mindset that we are safe in our own little worlds and our own religions as locally manifested. In today's world a religious event anywhere can affect your life and the lives of your neighbors and your loved ones.

A current example: as I write this, a grotesque and bloody war conducted in the name of Allah is going on in Syria and Iraq. This is a religiously rooted conflict pursued by an extremist militant group. It has decimated much of two countries and threatens others both nearby and far away. The perpetrators have killed hundreds of thousands of innocent people (mostly other Muslims), produced over 3,000,000 refugees, and deployed agents to execute terrorist bombings in France, Belgium, the U.S., Turkey, Libya, and elsewhere. The personal, geopolitical, and military implications for those targeted countries as well as for Jordan, Israel, Iran, Lebanon, much of Europe, and other nations yet unknown, are staggering.

Recent examples: Not long ago, a young white man, Dylann Roof, shot and killed nine black people while they were praying in their South Carolina church; he selected that religious site for the murders because of its historic and symbolic significance in promoting rights and citizenship for African Americans. A few years ago, a cartoon of Muhammad published in a Danish newspaper caused questions to be raised about free speech worldwide. In the U.S., Christian fundamentalists have shot medical doctors to death for performing legally prescribed abortions because they believed that doing so was unbiblical.

Sadly, my generation is giving you, the next generation, problems like these to manage and solve. I hope you do a better job at dealing with them than we have.

RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

In writing this book, I have used both terms, *religion* and *spirituality*. The distinction between the terms may matter a lot to you. I will never forget my student's proclamation that she was definitely a spiritual Christian *but not* religious. Why does someone care about a label? To me, the distinction

doesn't matter, either personally or professionally. But for others, it is of grave importance.

Some scholars, as well as lay individuals, see a clear difference between religion and spirituality. It is true that different but overlapping meanings for the two terms are current parlance, but we don't need to codify these differences for the sake of psychological knowledge. Both "religion" and "spirituality" are complex cultural concepts. As far as psychological functioning is concerned, there is little difference between what one person may call spiritual and another person may call religious. The two can easily be manifestations of the same thing. Thus, in 1993 Bernard Spilka said it correctly at a meeting of the psychology of religion division of the American Psychological Association: the word *spirituality* is little more than a substitute for the word *religion* for people who don't like what religion typically connotes.

Functionally, both religions and spiritualities range from the broad and generic to the specific and narrow. Individuals' mindsets on both of them vary from open minded to closed minded. People can be fundamentalist, moderate, or liberal about a doctrine, belief system, practice, worldview, political ideology, or hypothesis about an afterlife. Believing or practicing one set of teachings can do for one person what believing or practicing another set can do for someone else.

There are theological and atheological versions of both, political and personal expressions of both, and group and individual dimensions of both, as well as emotional and cognitive dimensions of both. Thus, be content to use the language that you are most comfortable with, and respect anyone else who happens to prefer terminology that differs from yours.

OF BELIEVING AND KNOWING: NO PRIVILEGED POSITIONS

Knowing probably matters to you. You may need to "know" that Jesus rose from the dead, that Muhammad heard Allah say things to him inside a cave for 20 years, that Moses heard God talking from a burning bush that did not burn up, or that there is no god and nothing else beyond this material world. You don't *know* these things—although you may *believe* one of them enough to die for it. Why do I say this, something that can be taken as an affront to someone's personal and perhaps deeply held beliefs? I say it because it is crucial to learn the difference between believing and knowing. What is this difference, and why is it so important?

Claiming to believe something is fine so long as you are aware that that is what you are doing, and you are not using force or deception to inculcate those beliefs in others. For example, there is no misrepresentation of the facts if someone says, "I had a dream last night in which I had a mental

picture of someone, and a voice from that someone said it was the angel Gabriel, so now I believe that Gabriel talked to me.” A statement so framed is accurate; it labels a belief about a memory of a mental event as a belief, not as a fact, and not as knowledge. However, if the sentence had added “. . . so now I know what God wants me to do, because the Angel told me,” the truth value of the statement would have changed. It is no longer accurate or reliable if by “know” the speaker intends for someone else to be bound by what he saw or to think the same thing he thinks about it. In this case, what is “known” is private only. It is not something that is transmittable to anyone else; thus no one else is obligated to accept it as valid. The only thing someone else knows is “This is what the other person says.”

Let us be meticulously clear about the process of believing versus having knowledge. The difference matters greatly—for you individually and for all people everywhere, especially when one person claims to have God’s knowledge and aims to apply it to another person, or to everyone else.

A LIFE OF EXAMINATION

If you were taking my psychology of religion course, in the final lecture I would encourage you to go on and study this topic in more depth. But more important, I would make a promise about the benefits of truly understanding yourself, others, and the processes by which you interrelate. Examine your life with abandon; hold nothing back.

Therefore, let us be honest with ourselves and recognize that we are inevitably biased. Because of the human default tendency toward self-serving bias (positive illusions), let us *ask* for perspectives that differ from our own. Let us live out our desire to understand religiousness with discipline and humility. Perhaps this will help us bridge some of the divides that exist in the world. Maybe we will behave more lovingly toward one another and approach strangers with more flexibility and curiosity, and less judgment. We may even find satisfying, mature, generative, intimate relationships with people whose ancient culture stories differ from our own. We may be more humble and less susceptible to our own ego trips, and not regard those who are “other” as inferior or in need of correction, or as people to be condescended to. We might even stop trying to kill them, and they us.

Some version of that pitch has run through this book. It flows from my point in Chapter 11 that behavior is the acid test of a person’s purported beliefs and any claim to righteousness or integrity. Psychology itself cannot resolve the conflicts in the world, but it can help remove some of the faulty assumptions that kindle the conflicts.

This chapter began with the words of Emerson and Socrates. You ought to now be better able to implement them.

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