

## CHAPTER 1

# Religion in Psychological Perspective

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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; Krysincka 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”<sup>1</sup>

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

<sup>1</sup>Reprinted 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.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>This 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

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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.

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## DIMENSIONS OF RELIGIOUSNESS

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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).<sup>3</sup> 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

<sup>3</sup>These 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

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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; Fejerman, 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).<sup>4</sup>

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

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<sup>4</sup>*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?

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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**



**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.

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

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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

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- 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

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

- Beit-Hallahmi, B. (2014). *Psychological perspectives on religion and religiosity*. London: Routledge.
- Hood, R. W., Jr., Hill, P. C., & Spilka, B. (2009). *The psychology of religion: An empirical approach* (4th ed.). New York: Guilford Press.

### ***Religiousness and Spirituality***

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