

PERSPECTIVE

## Psychology of Religion in Global Perspective: Logic, Approach, Concepts

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### ABSTRACT

From initial beginnings at the dawn of modern psychology about 120 years ago, the psychology of religion developed slowly during the 20th century, increasing at a modest pace by 2000; but strikingly so since 9/11. Psychological research on religiousness has been transformed from a small subfield of interest to only a few into a topic of broad interest within general psychology including the neuro-cognitive, developmental-personality-clinical, and social-cultural areas. At the same time, it has become increasingly internationalized with research now coming from many regions and cultures. Creative research with some surprise findings from various countries illustrates topics that go far beyond the field's often-critiqued humble beginnings in New England and a few isolated spots in Northwest and Central Europe. The research is multilevel within psychology and interdisciplinary. It not only acknowledges but also aims to understand the role of cultural context interactive with individual variables in religiousness and spirituality. How to proceed with psychological research across traditional disciplinary, international, and cultural barriers is addressed.

Several years ago a world-class psychology of religion colleague wrote, "Religion is rapidly disappearing from the face of the earth."<sup>1</sup> Some people in academia seemed to take it for granted that the West was in a "post-Christian era" and the world was in a "post-religion era." If these notions were true, studying the psychological processes in religiousness would be a waste of time. But in the wake of 9/11, it does not look like religions have gone away. To the contrary, although atheists are the world's third largest group when lined up with "religious" categories (Bullivant & Ruse, 2013; Lee, 2015), today about 85% of the world's 7+ billion people have their lives involved in or affected by a religion and/or spirituality in some way. About one half adhere to some version of an Abrahamic faith. There are also about 1 billion Buddhists. Add to this the religions and spiritualities native to East and South Asia, North and South America, and myriad smaller local and tribal beliefs and practices, and the vast scope of religiousness is plain for anyone to see. Its importance is amply confirmed by history and by local and world events almost daily.

Backing up half a century, when I was a student in the 1960s the psychology of religion did not exist as a recognized area of research. This topic was *never* mentioned; it had been called a "taboo topic." At that time, a student in psychology could study a vast range of clinically relevant topics, basic psychological processes, and an explosion of social issues, but not the psychological processes at the root of religiousness. An undercurrent assumption was that the only reason someone would think we should study this topic was that the person was personally religious (Malony, 1980). But the logic behind saying this is the same as the logic behind saying that the only reason to study aggression, prejudice, or depression is that you are personally aggressive, prejudiced, or depressed. It is no more necessary to be personally religious to study the psychological processes that mediate

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religiousness than it is to be personally a bigot in order to study prejudice and racism. Religiousness is an important human behavior. To not attend to it with the research and theoretical skills within the discipline of psychology makes no sense.

Fortunately (but for unfortunate reasons), things have changed. As a psychologist, I am not concerned whether people are or are not personally religious. My concern is that we need to understand the processes involved in this behavior because so much human behavior is tied up with it, for good or ill. Given the importance of religious factors in today's world, there is no doubt that this is one of the most important topics we could study. This is so both from the perspective of the discipline of psychology as a science (if we really want a science of *all* of human behavior) and in view of our collective need to solve problems at the individual, cultural, intranational, and international levels.

To help us appreciate the scope and importance of psychological research on human religiousness, let me explain four key points and close with a snapshot of my vision for future research in this area. Correctly envisioned, the path ahead is wide open. The four key points are as follows:

- (1) The evidence for and snapshot of a globalizing psychology of religiousness.
- (2) An explanation of the issues at the root of what religion, religiousness, and spirituality are or are not, with an accent on why concepts such as “The Sacred” are worthless for purposes of psychological knowledge.
- (3) An argument for why conceptualizing psychology of religion research in terms of the psychology of meaning systems can help synthesize our knowledge and clarify why it is an error to confuse believing with knowing.
- (4) An explanation of why research in this area can become more multilevel within psychology, as well as interdisciplinary and multicultural.

## The psychology of religion landscape

### *Pre- and post-9/11*

#### *In the beginning*

When the psychology of religion began in the years surrounding 1900, the world of scholars in the field was notably small. After the turn of the century it mainly included James, Starbuck, Leuba, and Hall in the United States; the British Society for Psychical Research; Janet in France; and Flournoy in Switzerland.<sup>2</sup> This small group split ranks over issues related to spiritualism and communication with the dead at the 1909 International Congress of Psychology (Taves, 2014), leaving only a few doing what today is considered scientific psychology of religion research. After a few books and a smattering of articles, for all practical purposes the field died following the publication of Freud's (1927/1961) publication of *The Future of an Illusion*. Signs of the field's return emerged about 40 years later, during the 1960s. However, it would remain small, relatively self-contained, and primarily Western; it would not enter mainstream psychology in a significant way or become genuinely international for another 40 years.

#### *When things changed*

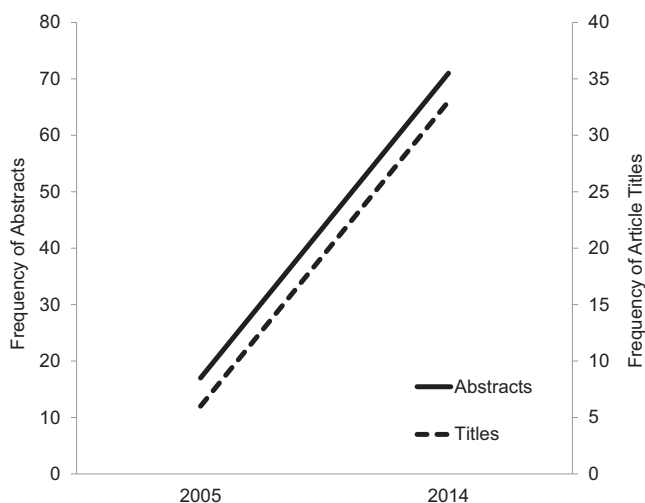
From 1998 to 2016, I edited *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion (IJPR)*. This is the period when the field's greatest expansion happened. I corresponded with authors worldwide every week for 18 years, with noticeable increasing frequency over time. There are far too many individuals and countries to list, but the geographical reach includes all continents and almost all major and many relatively minor countries on Earth. Nothing like this could ever be said before. This is not only new; it is remarkably recent.

<sup>2</sup>These were the most influential people. Others who wrote on psychology of religion include Wundt in Germany and the Dorpat School in Estonia. Also, the Internationale Gesellschaft für Religionspsychologie was founded later, in Germany in 1914, and published the *Archiv für Religionspsychologie* intermittently for some years. Its descendent is the International Association for the Psychology of Religion. (See Wulff, 1997, for more information).

When I first taught the psychology of religion in 1978, the number of textbooks one could use for course was 0. Thus, I wrote *Invitation to the Psychology of Religion* (1st ed., 1983, Scott, Foresman; 3rd ed., 2017, Guilford). In it I said this area is important and ought to be part of mainstream psychological research. I don't think most psychologists believed me prior to 9/11, but they did afterward. In a talk I gave to the Psychology of Religion division of the American Psychological Association (APA) shortly after 9/11, I said that although this topic had been on the professional sidelines, it may not be so in the future. This was because as ugly and horrible as it was that terrorists flew airplanes into the World Trade Center and killed 3,000 people and justified it in the name of their religion, the terrorists' act may have stimulated research in this area because people in the discipline of psychology might finally take this topic seriously (Paloutzian, 2002). And that is what happened. Although there is still much to do, since 9/11 the increase in research in the psychology of religiousness and spirituality by psychologists in the mainstream has accelerated on a steep curve (Myers, 2012; Saroglou, 2014). This trend includes international research by scholars not in the West and not in the Northern Hemisphere.

To check this trend, I conducted three searches on the PsycINFO database. I first searched journals in all areas of psychology for use of the words "religion" or "spirituality" in the article titles. I then conducted the search for the same words in abstracts, and a third time for the same words in book titles. The recent trend is steep (see Figure 1). The number of articles with "religion" or "spirituality" in the title in 2014 was 6 times greater than in 2005; the same trend appears for use of these words in abstracts. This six fold increase appears to be partly due to APA establishing a journal on the topic during this period.<sup>3</sup> The latter detail could make it appear that the increase was due merely to the journal being established. However, the journal was created only when the need became great enough; a journal is created in response to a demand, not in advance of it. Further, an examination of the same trend for books makes it look compelling that the trend was due to the topic itself. The number of psychology books with "religion" or "spirituality" in the title showed a similar trend from 2005 to 2014.

Professional organizations followed suit. The psychology of religion division of the APA (Division 36) became an official organization in 1976 but functioned in a more or less self-contained way. Then, following 9/11, mainstream psychology scholars began doing research in the area and publishing it in



**Figure 1.** The frequency of the words "religion" and "spirituality" in psychology journal article titles and abstracts in PsycINFO, showing an approximately six fold increase from year 2005 to 2014.

<sup>3</sup>The journal *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* was launched by the APA Division on the Psychology of Religion in 2009.



**Figure 2a.** The stars on the map indicate where psychology of religion research was being conducted in the years surrounding 1900.

standard journals, in addition to the psychology of religion journals. Concurrently, scholars from several countries reconstituted the former Gesellschaft and formed the International Association for the Psychology of Religion (IAPR). The IAPR is on a firm footing, meets every other year during August, and has become an affiliate of the International Congress of Psychology.<sup>4</sup> The psychology of religion is global.

### **International snapshot**

What does this global picture look like? Page constraints preclude me from presenting a representative short list of the vast and varied psychology of religion research being done globally. And to present the research of an arbitrary list of individual authors would be misleading and lengthy. Thus the reader should go to the relevant journals<sup>5</sup> to see international research close up. However, I can present a comparative picture of the whole scene. How did it look in 1900 and how does it look today?

Figure 2a is a map with a star placed at the major locations where psychology of religion research was being done in 1900. Figure 2b is a map of the world with a star placed where research in this area is being conducted today. It is based on published research, conference presentations, and my extensive correspondence with international authors in editing *IJPR*. This picture is but the tip of an iceberg. Even so and especially because the psychology of religiousness and spirituality (R/S) is becoming genuinely global, it is necessary to understand how to best conceptualize religiousness and spirituality for purposes of creating valid cross-cultural and international psychological knowledge (Streib & Hood, 2016).

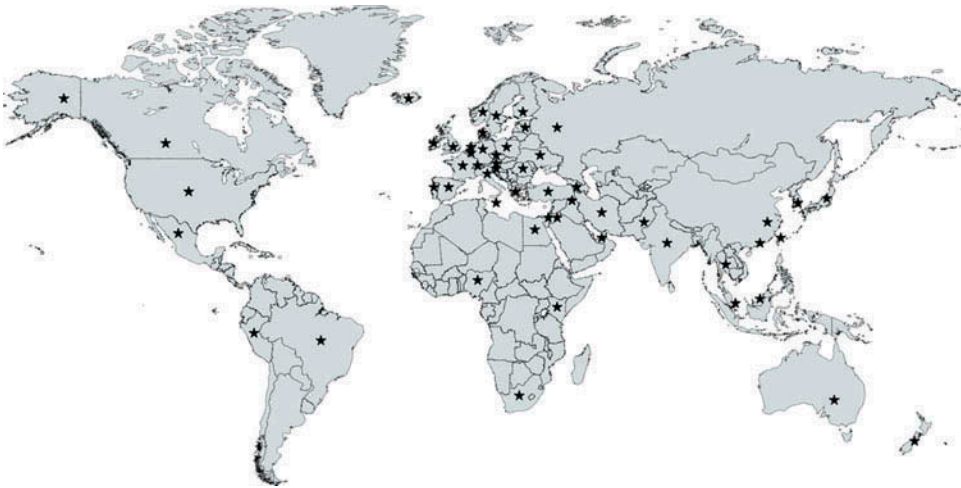
## **Conceptualizing global R/S psychologically**

### **Religion**

Every attempt to define religion for purposes of psychological knowledge has failed. Across various academic fields, there is no agreement on what “it” is, even among scholars whose lives are fully engaged in the topic. Some say the essence of religion is belief in a god or other supernatural agents, the practice of rituals, or a special experience related to the divine, but religious studies scholars have tried these ideas for about 100 years and failed. Because of this well-known lack of consensus over defining religion or spirituality (see Oman, 2013, and Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005, for reviews), perhaps Malony (1980) said it best: “Religion can be God, Country, or Yale!”

<sup>4</sup>IAPR website: <http://www.iaprweb.org/>

<sup>5</sup>The *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion; Mental Health, Religion, and Culture; Archive for the Psychology of Religion; Psychology of Religion and Spirituality; Review of Religious Research; Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*; journals with emphasis on psychological issues in major religions such as Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism; and many mainstream psychology journals.



**Figure 2b.** The stars on the map indicate where psychology of religion research is being conducted as of 2015.

Many scholars of religion pragmatically stipulate their preferred definition and say it works for their research, and it may. But doing this leads to theoretical nowhere in terms of psychological knowledge because the definitions are not written, nor can they be construed in terms of psychological processes. Such definitions typically require acceptance of some kind of supernatural or otherworldly concept; they usually are not aimed at psychological understanding but at a cultural category—because “religion” is a complex cultural concept (Taves, 2015), not a psychological concept (Barrett, *in press*). Because of this, a stipulated definition can work for one’s own research in history, anthropology, or religious studies but fail to capture the psychological processes that are of concern in building a theory to explain religiousness as a human behavior. They talk about “religion” in the abstract and may debate what its essence “truly” is, whereas the psychological concern is to understand religiousness and spirituality in the same way we wish to understand all human behavior, at the level of actual humans behaving on the ground, in ordinary life (Paloutzian, 2017; Paloutzian & Park, 2014).

### **Spirituality**

In recent years *spirituality* has come to refer to a vast sweep of beliefs and practices, some of which do and some of which do not include beliefs about otherworldly states or entities. For many people, spirituality is a substitute word for religion (Spilka, 1993; see Ladd & McIntosh, 2013, for elaboration and assessment), and, paradoxically, for others it means that they are decidedly *not* religious (Hood, 2003). And some split hairs over the distinction, as my student said: “I am a spiritual Christian BUT NOT religious!” (Paloutzian, 2016; Paloutzian & Park, 2013).

The term can refer to “religious” things but also point other things. For example, Piedmont (1999; Piedmont & Wilkins, 2013) conceptualized spirituality as a sixth dimension of personality (after the Big 5). Pargament (2007, 2013) argued that it is an irreducible human motive manifest as a search for “the sacred.” Emmons (1999, 2000) proposed that “spiritual intelligence” should be added to Gardner’s (1993) theory of multiple intelligences. For others it is an alternative system of beliefs and practices that functions the same way as a traditionally understood religion does for someone else. Not infrequently, those who find such alternatives attractive emphasize that they personally have no god or otherworldly beliefs and eschew any notion that they are religious. For still others, spirituality comprises values, principles, or priorities, all of which can refer to concerns that are this-worldly-only. Anything can be one’s spirituality nowadays, apparently.

## The sacred

Many discussions of religiousness and spirituality in psychology refer to “the sacred.” Although lists of things that people can regard as sacred are often stated in traditionally religious terms such as God, supernatural, and divine (Durkheim, 1912/1995; see Pargament, 2007, 2013, and Pargament & Mahoney, 2005, for examples), the lists also make it clear that what is sacred for someone does not have to be something commonly understood as religious. In fact, the lists are stated in nonspecific, open-ended terms that allow the sacred to be anything. The potential pool of sacred things could include a geographic location, a stick or stone, an idea or value, a child or nonhuman animal, a dead ancestor, or anything else (even war [Pargament, Mahoney, Exline, Jones, & Shafranske, 2013] or a run-over beer can [Kripal, 2014]), whether traditionally religious or otherworldly or not. This inclusivity means that there is no one essence, no singularity, that constitutes “the sacred.” Psychologically speaking, the property of sacredness is not inherent in an object. There is no “the” there. This field will take a step forward when scholars stop using terminology that suggests that there is (Paloutzian, 2016; Paloutzian & Park, 2014).

Because sacredness can be attributed to anything, when religion is defined as “a search for significance in ways related to the sacred” (Pargament, 1992, p. 204), it means only that religion is whatever one does in looking for something that matters (i.e., is significant) in some way related to something else that is set apart (i.e., sacred). But because anything can matter (i.e., be significant) to someone and anything can be set apart (i.e., the property of sacrality can be attributed to anything), religion can be anything. Attempts to define religion by such reasoning break down: They are circular: One’s religion is whatever the person says it is, because the person says so.

Instead of beginning with such a definition, it is better to begin by understanding the fundamental processes out of which all behaviors emerge. This latter approach will yield knowledge of the factors that combine to produce, among other things, what people call religious or spiritual. It will also help us explain why people use the labels *religious* or *spiritual* for them. It is the approach to psychology of religion research and theory that can be successful.

Because the truth value of essentialist definitions of religions and spiritualities are inherently uncertain and typically incomplete, insisting on only one’s own way to construe a phenomenon does not help psychological knowledge or theory construction. Because of this, I recommend that we keep in mind (with good humor) an assertion made in the pre-psychology of religion era by Yinger (1967): “Any definition of religion is likely to be satisfactory only to its author” (p. 18).

## Religious meaning systems, believing, and knowing

To understand the psychological processes involved in religiousness and spirituality, we need a framework that provides the language that can work to pull the layers of information together. At what level(s) of analysis should we try to understand religiousness? Remember that religion is not a psychological construct but a complex cultural concept. Thus, as psychologists, how can we best approach the task of understanding the processes that mediate religiousness as a human behavior at the individual, group, and cultural levels?

### What a meaning system does

The proposed human motives that some view as driving religions and spiritualities (e.g., the “need for transcendence” or “spirituality,” or “need for meaning”) can technically be better understood by saying that people’s systems are evolved such that they need to *make* meaning (Paloutzian & Mukai, 2017; Park, 2010), not by saying that people have a need to feel a sense of meaning. A feeling may sometimes be a by-product of the process of making, in the minority of instances in which the process comes to conscious awareness. But this is the exception. The processes are mostly automatic and unconscious; we are aware of them only a small proportion of the time. Therefore, it is important that we not confuse the need to make meaning



with a “need for meaning” as if to refer to a feeling or special state of consciousness. The argument that people need to make meaning is based on the principle that people need a *coherent and well-functioning meaning system at the biological and psychological levels* (Park, 2010, 2013). At the biological and psychological levels, meaning systems are broad frameworks through which people attend to and perceive stimuli; organize their behavior; conceptualize themselves, others, and interpersonal relationships; remember their past; and imagine and anticipate their future. Because of its essential role in meeting a number of specific demands, including those for coherence, mastery and control, the reduction of uncertainty, identity, existential answers, and behavioral guidance, a well-functioning meaning system is necessary for healthy human functioning (Markman, Proulx, & Lindberg, 2013). From an evolutionary perspective, it has ultimate survival value (Kirkpatrick, 2013; Paloutzian, 2016; Paloutzian & Mukai, 2017).

### ***A deeper, basic psychological process***

Although the point applies to an array of topics in psychology and to psychology of religion, next are four examples as illustrations, all intimately part of the psychology of R/S and the rest of human behavior.

First, take, for example, the processes that regulate religious conversion and spiritual transformation. A human being does not undergo such a change in a nonmeaning-laden vacuum. A person does not accept a different belief or go down a new religious or spiritual path without at some level—conscious, nonconscious, or a complex but uncertain blend of the two—the person’s system appraising his or her current needs and the degree to which they are being met and evaluating that appraisal in relation to the alternatives and the implicitly or explicitly anticipated effects of making a change. The person’s final change or lack of it depends on the individual’s appraisal of the status quo in comparison to the assessed match, and benefits and costs, of sticking with what is or changing to something else. In all of this, the person is responding to the meanings they make of the options, not to the options as such (see Paloutzian, 2014, and Paloutzian, Murken, Streib, & Rößler-Namini, 2013, for review).

Second, although perhaps less obvious, the same point can be made with respect to more microlevel processes common to humans and other animals. For example, consider the following well-known psychological phenomena that must involve some kind of meaning system processes (see Paloutzian, 2016, and Paloutzian & Mukai, 2017, for elaboration):

- (a) The way nonhuman animals learn to respond to ambiguous stimuli and learn the location of food in a maze (or their natural habitats). 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 learns to make the “correct” meaning out of the ambiguous stimulus series to which it has been exposed; it has learned to turn left at the choice point to receive food reinforcement. To do this, it has to “connect the dots” that involve running down the runway, seeing the choice point, executing one turn and not the other, and detecting and eating food in the goal box. Operant conditioning involves making meaning out of an initially ambiguous stimulus complex. To this understanding of the process someone may say, “That’s just operant conditioning,” to which I would respond that of course it is operant conditioning, but by means of what processes does that “just” happen? Operant conditioning is one among many processes by which dots are connected, pattern is detected (more accurately, a pattern is constructed in the perceptual system of the organism), and meaningful connections are made and responded to. Without it, there would be no operant conditioning.
- (b) Similarly, neurons in the retina of the eye receive certain wavelengths of the electromagnetic spectrum, called light, which set off neural impulses in the retinal receptors, from which the visual system eventually makes meaningful percepts.

Eye-tracking studies show that no two of us “see” the same picture, apple, or person—normally taken to be concrete visual objects—let alone “see” the same purportedly invisible objects such as

spirits or gods. The human eye saccades; it bounces around about every .5 seconds and detects bits and pieces of the light rays bouncing off of parts of the stimulus object. The neural processing that follows creates an image of a whole out of these bits and pieces of information. We do not “see” the whole thing. The mental picture, and therefore its meaning, is constructed out of myriad bits and pieces (Goldstein, 2010a, 2010b; Wolfe, Kluender, & Levi, 2009).

- (c) Even the phenomenon of 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. The meaning that was made and called a memory can be reconsolidated and re-stored in a new form (Debiec, LeDoux, & Nader, 2002).
- (d) These are all special cases of meaning making, assessment, and remaking. And just imagine—if our systems make meaning when confronted with relatively small or microlevel stimuli such as an apple, just think of what they do when looking at the stars, the cosmos, and all of humanity. Meaning-making processes are essential not merely in religiousness and spirituality but in all the rest of life from the micro- to macrolevels. Moreover, I find it impossible to imagine human or animal functioning in an ordinary, healthy way without them.

Third, and more immediate to the psychology of religion, the same argument applies to an idea called the Hyperactive Agency Detection Device (Barrett, 2004, 2013)—a clever concept that comes to us from the cognitive science of religion. This is the notion that the brain/mind is wired so that it is predisposed to detect agency in an object whether or not it is actually a property of that object—a process with survival value, because it would prompt animals to flee when they encounter ambiguous stimuli that might possibly be predators. However, the general idea that the mind detects agency needs clarification. Technically, the process is not “detection.” It is making meaning out of ambiguous stimuli. This seems straightforward when it is said that the Hyperactive Agency Detection Device detects agency even if it is not there—something not possible. One can imagine it, hallucinate it, pretend it, have a sensory/perceptual illusion of it, but one can’t “detect” something that is not there. Insofar as we have no direct access to the minds of others, the general process is always inferential whether agency is present or not, and therefore is one of meaning making via attribution of certain properties upon encountering an ambiguous stimulus complex (Paloutzian, 2016; Paloutzian & Park, 2013).

Fourth, the heart and soul of religiousness and spirituality: The process of believing is the process of making meaning out of ambiguous information. A belief is a meaning that has been made—whether it is a belief about God, an apple to eat, or a chair to sit on (Paloutzian, 2016, Paloutzian & Mukai, 2017; Paloutzian & Park, 2014). Seitz and Angel (2012, 2014) provided insightful ways to consider some of the constructs within the meaning system. Their focus concerned not whether believing is about religious, spiritual, or secular things, but the process of believing as such (Seitz, Paloutzian, & Angel, *in press*). An analysis of their approach suggests the following.

A “belief” is what exists in the human mind once meaning system processes have produced something. But beliefs are not fixed or static entities. Like memories, they are in flux and can affect change elsewhere in the system or be changed by other processes in the system. Because of this ability, it is better for purposes of psychological analysis to understand the processes of believing, not “belief” in a fixed or static sense, for the same reasons that a memory is neither fixed nor static but is instead known to be made and remade in the brain (Cabeza & Nyberg, 2000; Debiec et al., 2002).

### ***Believing versus knowing: No privileged positions***

People believe what they claim to know. As examples, people can accept as “knowledge” 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 bush that was on fire but did not burn up, or that there is no god and nothing else beyond this material world. But they do not *know* these things—although they may *believe* one of



them enough to die for it. Whether or not this point is taken as an affront to someone's personal and perhaps deeply held beliefs, it is crucial to understand the difference between believing and knowing.

The following illustration may clarify the difference and why it matters: 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 someone who said it was 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 that someone else is bound by or ought to think the same thing about it as does the speaker. 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 and be bound by it. The only thing someone else knows is "this is what the other person says."

The lesson for us is to make sure we carve people's claims of knowledge at the joints. Let us be meticulously clear about the process of believing versus having knowledge. The difference matters greatly—for each person individually and for all people everywhere, especially in circumstances in which one person claims to have God's knowledge and aims to impose it upon another person, or upon all other people.

### ***Meaning system change***

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 a meaning system: (a) constructing a belief—meaning made initially, (b) holding and reconstructing belief—continuity, meaning maintained (sustained via all activity in the dynamic appraisal and feedback loops among the meaning system elements), and (c) changing a belief—meaning modified (changed or dropped via all the dynamics in the appraisal and feedback loops). It matters not whether the activity within the system is triggered by stressors (Park, 2005a, 2005b, 2013), or by some other kind of input to the system (e.g., advertising, persuasive communication, interpersonal relationships, personal failure or success, a work of art); the processes involved in believing that are set in motion function to construct, sustain, or change belief. The principles that operate in these processes are derivations of cognitive processes known to operate in the context of stress and coping from clinical psychology, as well as those involved in attitude formation and change from social psychology.

### ***Multilevel interdisciplinary paradigm***

Using the language of meaning systems to conceptualize our research enables us to relate various kinds of ideas and findings to one another. In particular, it facilitates conversations between research and theory at different levels of analysis within the discipline of psychology, and between psychology and allied disciplines. It is by such engagement that the psychology of religion and spirituality can continue to develop as a synthetic global field of knowledge.

### ***Thick and thin knowledge within and across disciplines***

A few years ago anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann (personal communication, 2009) explained the difference between thick and thin knowledge to me. In discussing the kinds of knowledge created in our two disciplines, she said psychological knowledge is good and can be accurate in specific ways, but it is "thin." By "thin" knowledge, she meant that it may not apply very well to much beyond the relatively narrow (often, psychology student subject filled laboratory) source from which much data come. I countered that not all psychology research is of this sort, although much of its history is so. Anthropology, in contrast, she said, produces "thick" knowledge because, for example, a researcher may go out to a real village; live there for a year; become intimate to the mores, values, and practices

of the people; and collect data of any and all sorts through the process. Then the researcher comes home and writes it up. I complained that this “live-in-the-field” procedure includes no control group, no controls on measurement, and was an  $N = 1$  study, the fieldwork equivalent of a clinical case study. These methods are good, but they do not by themselves constitute more valid or more complete science. What hypothesis is tested? What theoretical idea is at stake subject to being disconfirmed? How is researcher bias assessed and controlled? (See Bernard, 2011; Hood & Belzen, 2013; and Reis & Judd, 2000, for comprehensive presentations of research methods.)

Both of us are correct. There is thick and thin knowledge; some psychological knowledge should not be relied upon for real-world application until it is validated in the field. And some ethnographic findings leave grossly unclear those confounding processes that were probably at work; they may seem to psychologists as good thick description but not so good scientific explanation. Religiousness and spirituality are topics highly prone to these unclaritys. Do questionnaire responses and actual religious/spiritual behavior correspond? That is a good researchable question—by coupling the thin methods of psychology and the thick methods of ethnography in one study. The psychology of religion needs research based on ethnographic and psychological collaboration. It is the kind of research that promises to successfully reach across national and cultural boundaries.

The multilevel interdisciplinary paradigm (MIP; Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003) was so named because the psychology of religion needed an idea to encourage researchers to operationalize their concepts at different levels of analysis within psychology and to compare their findings with those from other fields. If such comparisons are made and the findings are consistent, then the principles that connect them can be taken as more robust and the eventual outcome has a greater chance of being a valid comprehensive theory of religiousness.

Anthropologists, historians, neuroscientists, evolutionary biologists, sociologists, linguists, and religious studies scholars all study religiousness and spirituality in different ways, and all have specialized knowledge that they can share through collaboration. Thus, I think that expanding our reach under the umbrella of the MIP is essential, not optional, if we want to make progress toward genuine international and interreligious understanding.

### ***Mapping evidence to adjacent levels***

The lofty vision that I have described can be accomplished only as data and concepts from one area of research map onto those from the levels of analysis immediately above and below it. In the ideal scenario, the multilayered maps of corresponding data and concepts would themselves be integrated with their counterparts at other levels. The eventual outcome would be comprehensive multilevel interdisciplinary theory. As an example, let me illustrate by beginning with some of the current research on brain processes in experiences that people deemed religious (see McNamara & Butler, 2013). Unless we assume that there are certain neural processes that are *sui generis* religious and to which no other meaning can possibly be attributed, a proposition for which there is no evidence, we must understand that our explanation of an experience about which a person makes a religious attribution cannot go directly from the behavior of neurons to a culturally defined meaning (e.g., It is not OK to say, “My mental experience was a real vision of \_\_\_\_\_”) without also accounting for the mediating psychological and social processes. A complete explanation must be multilevel and interdisciplinary and requires that the evidences from various levels of analysis be consistent (Glimcher, 2011). Knowledge of the behavior of neurons cannot be mapped directly onto knowledge of cultural processes; the connection between them requires (at least) psychological and sociological knowledge as intermediate mapping steps.

### **Vision**

Let us be more explicit about how to make progress envisioned by the MIP. In my imaginary ideal world, there are diminished disciplinary boundaries and more frequent genuine conversations among scholars in different fields. Department and institutional reward structures are refashioned

to encourage this. Universities and research institutes make public, explicit, long-term commitments to promote such work. The increased openness facilitates scholarship consistent with the MIP by individuals and groups within each institution. Modern capabilities such as Internet conferencing and instant transmission of information result in collaboration among scholars at multiple sites, including across national boundaries. We can collaborate directly from anywhere on Earth to anywhere else; we have been given a passport to collaboration (Au, Hertwig, Klatzky, & Tang, 2016). What better way is there for people who are experts on what is presumed to be the same phenomenon but who are in diverse cultures with different languages to find out whether what each is researching is fundamentally the same? The preceding is my wish list. It is also possible.

What steps can we take to facilitate it? Simple steps can include inexpensive events (given the tools available today in most universities), including discussions and working meetings with colleagues in and out of our discipline, joint projects with colleagues of a different gender or from a different country, interdisciplinary lab sessions for our research working groups, and so forth.<sup>6</sup> We can talk, write and publish, and speak in this direction with funding sources, editors, publishers, and professional conference organizers. With persistence, we may facilitate a gradual shift toward our ideal vision. The combination of the aforementioned developments is a big undertaking; probably the best each of us as an individual and each current working group can do is to take the next step.

The field has grown and matured in ways beyond our wildest imagination only a generation ago. This would not be happening if the field was not on solid footing. The psychology of religion now stands on a firm platform. It is ready to begin.

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<sup>6</sup>For example, the REM (religion, experience, and mind) Lab Group at the University of California Santa Barbara, in addition to UCSB doctoral students in religious studies and in psychology, has also included postdocs, doctoral students, and visiting scholars from Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, Brazil, and the United States.

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