Whither the Roots? Achieving Conceptual Depth in Psychology of Religion

Peter C. Hill[a] **and Nicholas J. S. Gibson**[b]

[a] Rosemead School of Psychology, Biola University
La Mirada, California, USA
peter.hill@biola.edu

[b] Psychology and Religion Research Group, Faculty of Divinity
University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK
njsjg2@hermes.cam.ac.uk

Summary

Should psychology of religion undergo a disciplinary renaissance and, if so, what might it look like? In this paper we explore that question by discussing the benefits of a better grounding of the field within mid-level theories from general psychology that provide it with greater conceptual depth. Such discussion will focus on three already existing and variously productive lines of research as case studies: attribution processes, attachment styles, and religious coping. These case studies represent lines of research at three developmental stages: 1) *infancy*, with little visible return but with signs of promise (attribution), 2) *adolescence*, with dividends already yielded but also with promise not yet fully realized (attachment), and 3) *maturity*, where a fruitful harvest has already been experienced but yet without decline (coping). Regardless of developmental position, it is argued that research in psychology of religion will be enhanced to the extent that it achieves conceptual depth by being framed in terms of mid-level theories.

Keywords

Psychology of religion, mid-level theories, conceptual depth, attribution, attachment, coping

If one were to take a snapshot of the psychology of religion over any decade since the 1970s, one would conclude that the field has undergone a major change. Up until the 1980s the field, at least outside of Europe, seemed to focus almost single-mindedly on intrinsic-extrinsic (I-E) religious orientation, and although religious orientation continues to be a variable of interest in much research, it no longer appears to be the dominant empirical framework that it once was. In fact, it was almost twenty years ago that people were beginning

to seriously question the ability of the I-E framework to carry the field forward (Kirkpatrick & Hood, 1990), largely because of a lack of theoretical clarity. Many other changes have also taken place. For example, research on conversion has given way to spiritual transformation, definitional debates on religiousness and spirituality have arisen with some general conclusions now having being drawn (see Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005) even as no overarching consensus has been reached, and the field has now made impressive entrées into such domains as the workplace (Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2003) and the counseling clinic (Shafranske, 2005). Such change is also reflected by the contrast of the only two reviews of the field in the *Annual Review of Psychology* (Gorsuch, 1988; Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003). In the 1988 article, Gorsuch stressed how the field had been consumed with the issue of measurement (see also Gorsuch, 1984) claiming it to be, at that time, the closest thing to Kuhn's (1970) notion of *paradigm*. By 2003, Emmons and Paloutzian proposed that the field's interests and operations would now be better served by what they called a *multilevel interdisciplinary paradigm*. This new paradigm suggests that for the study of religious experience to move forward, not only must psychological investigation at various levels be employed, but that the field can also benefit from the input of neighboring disciplines like anthropology, sociology, neuroscience and so forth. Of course, paradigms are less declared than they are evolved on the basis of their heuristic value, explanatory power, and predictive ability. Nevertheless, it is clear that the psychology of religion of a prior generation is not today's psychology of religion.

Such self-reflected description of the field is good and well but it still seems to avoid the central issue of the psychology of religion's inability to develop sustaining *substantive* theories or concepts that integrate multiple disparate lines of research. This, of course, is a longstanding critique of the field that dates back at least to Dittes' (1969) seminal article contending that psychology of religion's empirical tradition is a collection of data without a guiding theoretical framework. Park and Paloutzian (2005) have recently made the case that a meaning-based approach to the psychology of religion has the potential of integrating many distinct lines of research and may even be capable of providing an overarching theoretical framework; indeed, several of the chapters in their handbook (Paloutzian & Park, 2005) stressed religion as a meaning system. We agree with the promise of meaning as a theme that can be explored across multiple aspects of religion. We can also identify several other themes that could be similarly followed, such as religion as a system of ritual actions, or religion as a moral system. Presumably each of these would

bear considerable fruit to the extent that they allow commonalities between different aspects of religion to be explored.

However, we argue that what is needed for the advancement of the field is not an overarching construct such as meaning but rather a way of doing theory-driven research characterized by systematic and programmatic analysis of an area rather than piecemeal studies (Gorsuch, 1990; Hill, 2005). In other words, we think that the most profitable approach for the psychological study of religion would be to put attempts for a grand theory of religion on hold in favor of further developing mid-level theories that have already gained currency in general psychology.

Here, we explore three such mid-level theories, each reflecting a different developmental stage in terms of their return on scientific investment. We argue that attribution theory, though it has been around a while in the psychology of religion, has yet to provide much yield but that it remains a promising avenue for research. Attachment theory, on the other hand, has yielded considerably more than attribution theory but has yet to realize its full potential. The psychology of religious coping, in contrast, has provided a framework with a long record of valuable research and remains productive with no immediate signs of slowing. Thus, we find three mid-level theories in the psychology of religion at different stages in the developmental process: the healthy infant with many signs of promise (attribution), the adolescent with limited yield but with considerable room for growth (attachment), and the mature adult who has contributed much but remains active (coping). Regardless, however, of their developmental stage, we are convinced that each of these theoretical structures are capable of 1) sustaining productive empirical research programs, 2) providing a cross-fertilization of ideas within the psychology of religion (heuristic value), and 3) entering into meaningful dialogue with mainstream psychology. We contend that, by meeting these three criteria, mid-level theories such as these offer great potential value in moving the field forward and therefore are theories worthy of further devoted attention by researchers.

Attribution Theory

Attribution theory covers a set of social psychological theories about how people explain events (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Jones, Kanouse, Kelley, Nisbett, Valins, & Weiner, 1971; Kelley, 1967). Attributions are made in terms of events' underlying causes; candidate causes include internal factors, such as the personality, emotions, or motivations of any actor involved in the to-be-explained

behavior; and external factors, such as the environment or situation in which the to-be-explained behavior or event took place. A desire (in healthy individuals) to maximize confidence about—and controllability of—the future motivates the attributional process, and the specific choice of causal attribution varies as a function of the characteristics and context of the attributor and the characteristics and the context of the event being explained.

Sustaining Empirical Research

The application of attribution theory to religion has generated surprisingly little research in the last forty years, given the enormous impact that it has had on social cognition research during the same period (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). An initial attributional account of religious experience was given by Proudfoot and Shaver (1975), and later expanded into a more general theory by Spilka, Shaver, and Kirkpatrick (1985). We are unaware of any advance on—or revision of—this model since that time. Unfortunately, Spilka and colleagues' model is not a sturdy foundation for research into religious attribution, representing as it does a normative model, rather than a descriptive model, of the way in which people make causal attributions. That is, as with a number of early attribution theories within social psychology, their model describes how people *should* make attributions, not how people *actually do* make attributions. For example, the model's prediction that people will make attributions that maintain and enhance self-esteem does not allow for the tendency of depressed individuals to make attributions that maintain and enhance negative views of the self (e.g., Beck, 1976). A lack of conceptual grounding therefore makes this theory inappropriate for generalizing to clinical populations or indeed for research into religion and mental health (Gibson, 2006). Indeed, it may be these very inadequacies of the theory that have limited the theory's capability to generate much empirical research.

These misgivings about extant conceptual work notwithstanding, we see considerable promise from the use of attribution theory as a mid-level organizing theory within psychology of religion. What is needed is a theoretical foundation grounded in the social cognition and cognition and emotion literatures from which psychologists of religion could engage in a programmatic study of who makes religious attributions, why people make them, when they make them, how and why the content of religious attributions varies, and what the cognitive processes are that underlie religious attribution.

Cross-Fertilization of Theory

A deeper understanding of how religious attribution functions would enrich our understanding of other research strands within the psychology of religion. For example, research on religious coping has investigated what the consequences are of attributing a negative event to a specific religious cause, such as punishment from God or an act of the devil (Pargament, Ano, & Wachholtz, 2005). Little attempt has been made to integrate such research with an understanding of the processes underlying why people make the religious attributions that they do.

One area in urgent need of integration within the psychology of religion is the burgeoning field of cognitive science of religion (Gibson & Barrett, 2008; Reich, in press). Attribution theory provides an ideal bridge for work in these two disciplines. One common area of interest is people's representation of God in mind. While psychologists of religion have tended to focus on the character of God (for review see Moriarty & Hoffman, 2008), cognitive scientists of religion, by contrast, have focused on the representation and transmission of the supernatural or counterintuitive properties of gods (Barrett, 2000, 2004), but this without much consideration of how believers construe their relationship with God or gods (Gibson, 2008). Research into why people make automatic attributions to God's character rather than to his powers for failing to prevent a tsunami (Exline & Rose, 2005; cf. Barrett & Keil, 1996) would enrich our understanding both of anger toward God and of how and when people use concepts such as omnipotence and omniscience.

Offering Something Back to General Psychology

The psychology of religion is considerably strengthened as a discipline when it is able to give something back to mainstream psychology (Hill, 1999). Attribution research on locus of control provides an example of where this has already occurred, albeit in a preliminary way. Early research on individual differences in attributional tendencies noted that people varied in their propensity to attribute the cause of an event to themselves, to luck or chance, or to powerful other individuals (Levenson, 1974; Rotter, 1966, 1990). Religious populations were shown to be biased against luck items (Gabbard, Howard, & Tageson, 1986), however, and Welton and colleagues (Welton, Adkins, Ingle, & Dixon, 1996) argued that God control represented an additional control construct to those observed by Levenson (1974). Indeed, they found that God control was independent of belief in chance and powerful others' control;

furthermore, God control was found to be positively related to well-being, benefits normally only associated with internal control (Myers & Diener, 1995). This discovery has so far led to the creation of the God Locus of Health Control Scale (Wallston et al., 1999), which has now been used in multiple studies exploring connections between religion and health. Considerably more work is required here, however, especially to explore the relationship between anger toward God and locus of control.

If God control functions independently of powerful others' control, a broader question is whether attributions toward God more generally function outside of the bounds of general social psychological models of attribution. Exploration of this question was initially hampered by an assumption that attributors must choose between a religious (or supernatural) cause and a non-religious (or natural) cause for an event (Spilka et al., 1985). Not only is this assumption culturally naïve (Saler, 1993), it also does not fit with the stated experiences of believers who argue that "God is not an alternative to natural causes but a supplementary cause of a different kind" (Watts, Nye, & Savage, 2002, p. 10). Indeed, recent empirical work suggests that religious explanations are often invoked in conjunction with—rather than as an alternative to—natural explanations: proximal causes are conceived in natural terms, while distal causes may be conceived in religious terms (Lupfer & Layman, 1996; Miner & McKnight, 1999; Weeks & Lupfer, 2000). Further work is needed to understand the relationship between proximal and distal causes and what the implications of these findings are for how people understand God's actions in relation to them.

Attachment Theory

The concept of attachment emerged from Bowlby's (1969, 1973) hypothesis of a behavioral system dedicated to maintaining proximity between infants and their caregivers so as to increase infants' chances of survival. Through experience with adult caregivers, an infant develops an internal working model of relationships between self and others. These working models, some of which reflect an attachment organization that is secure while others are insecure (of either an avoidant or ambivalent nature), then become templates for understanding and experiencing human relationships. Today, attachment theory is widely used as a theoretical framework for understanding the socioemotional development of the child and is increasingly applied to adult functioning (Cassidy & Shaver, 1999; Colin, 1996).

Sustaining Empirical Research

The word "religion," which comes from the Latin root *religio*, signifies a bond between humanity and some greater-than-human power or deity and has historically been used to designate a commitment to that supernatural power, a feeling present in the individual who conceives such a power, and the ritual acts carried out in respect of that power (Wulff, 1997). The three major monotheistic religions (Christianity, Islam, Judaism), as well as many other religious traditions, frequently stress important components of human existence in relation to a specific deity. So, it should come as no surprise that a theoretical framework that stresses the relational character of being human could be of potential value to the psychology of religion.

Attachment theory is, therefore, a good illustration of a mid-level psychological theory capable of maintaining a sustained empirical research program and, indeed, attachment theory has already borne fruit in our understanding of religious development. For example, a prominent line of research has considered whether one's relationship with the numinous best reflects a *correspondence* to one's working model of human relationships or serves some *compensatory* function. While some initial work (e.g., Beck & McDonald, 2004; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990) seemed to support a correspondence perspective, other research (e.g., Granqvist, 1998; Kirkpatrick, 1997) suggested that compensation motives, especially in the context of sudden religious conversions, are also heavily involved. Granqvist (2002) proposed that the apparent disparate findings may reflect a God-relationship that is, for some, a *socialized correspondence* and, for others, an *emotional compensation*. That is, among those individuals with secure attachment histories, relationship with God is predicted by parents' level of religiosity; however, among those with insecure attachment histories, relationship to God is motivated to maintain felt security and to regulate affect. A subsequent meta-analysis (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2004) generally supported Granqvist's model and found, as the model suggests, that those with secure attachment histories and a socialization-based religiousness (the correspondence hypothesis) were linked with gradual conversion experiences whereas those with insecure histories and an emotionally-based religiousness were associated with more dramatic and sudden conversions. While there is more to understand about the relationship between parental images and religious development, attachment theory has clearly proved itself as a useful theoretical framework within which to conduct research.

Cross-Fertilization of Theory

One area of great but not yet fully realized potential is the relationship of religious attachment to other research domains in psychology of religion. Kirkpatrick (2005) has set out an agenda for interrelating attachment with evolutionary psychology of religion. Understanding religious attachments may also be helpful to the study of religious coping (Belavich & Pargament, 2002). For example, Granqvist (2005) found support among a Swedish sample for the compensation hypothesis—that an insecure attachment history was linked to more involvement of God in the coping process, particularly at low levels of parental religious involvement. As Granqvist pointed out, this initial finding is but a start; religious coping theory and attachment theory are potentially integrated at more specific process levels (such as primary and secondary appraisals) that may be at work when religion is invoked in coping.

Giving Back to General Psychology

The strong theoretical grounding of attachment theory within mainstream psychology could allow psychology of religion to give something back to its parent discipline. For example, to date little research in mainstream psychology has looked at attachment processes beyond child-parent and romantic partner relationships. Psychology of religion is in the unique position of considering other important relationships, actual or perceived, that may involve similar or different attachment processes. Indeed, to the extent that other objects may be of relational value to the individual, research in the psychology of religion has much to offer the field as a whole such as how attachment to other objects may supplement, reinforce, or even make up for less than optimal human attachments.

Religious Coping Theory

Identifying the study of religious coping as one of the more mature and active domains of research among psychologists of religion will come as no surprise to most readers. The most thorough and productive theoretical framework on religious coping is found in the work of Ken Pargament (1997). The success of his conception is largely because it is so well grounded in the empirically supported traditions of coping theory found in mainstream psychology(e.g., Antonovsky, 1987; Klinger, 1977; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Tyler, 1978); that is, an understanding of religious coping must be rooted in our under-

standing of coping processes in general, including such considerations as the underlying motive of seeking significance or meaning in stressful circumstances (Klinger, 1977), how appraisals (both primary and secondary) are construed (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), how people carry a general *orienting system* with them including when they encounter stress (Antonovsky, 1987), and how people translate that general orienting system into specific coping strategies and techniques that both conserve (maintain) and transform (change) the individual in his or her significance search (Tyler, 1978). Here again is an indication that those theories well rooted in mainstream psychology are the ones most likely to maintain well-developed and meaningful research programs when applied to religious phenomena.

Sustaining Empirical Research

A brief review here cannot do justice to the research fertility of this theoretical framework; what is clear, however, is that the primary research question is no longer *whether* people use religion but rather *how* they make use of their religious resources as a way, in the words of Koenig, Pargament, and Nielsen (1998), "to facilitate problem-solving to prevent or alleviate the negative emotional consequences of stressful life circumstances" (p. 513). Research on religious coping strategies has been applied to such varied topics as coping with war trauma (Ai, Peterson, & Huang, 2003), dealing with the loss of a child (e.g., Anderson, Marwit, & Vandenberg, 2005) and other sources of bereavement (e.g., Pearce, Chen, & Silverman, 2002), facing terminal illness (e.g., Tarakeshwar, Vanderwerker, & Paulk, 2006) including caregiver coping (Pearce, Singer, & Prigerson, 2006), dealing with chronic pain (Greene Bush, Rye, & Brant, 1999), and reacting to natural (Smith, Pargament, & Brant, 2000) as well as human-induced disasters (Meisenhelder, 2002) among others.

One of the major strengths of the religious coping framework has been its pliability in explaining what is surely a complex process. For example, Butter and Pargament (2003) proposed that no single method of coping is always effective or ineffective; instead they provided what they call a *Process Evaluation Model* of religious coping that considers how well integrated are the components of the coping process. What defines effective and ineffective coping is the 'goodness of fit' of the particular strategy with the specific stressor. Religious coping strategies, be they helpful or harmful, are less specific techniques as much as they are an efficient integration of the demands raised by the stressor, the social system within which the experience of stress occurs, and the

person's beliefs, emotions, values, and behavior (including those religious) embedded within one's general orienting system. This attention to process variables has been conceptualized and measured in terms of a proper matching of *means* and *ends*, both within the self as well as between the self and the social system surrounding the self. Hence, only the extent to which there is a good match between the ends themselves and the means to achieve those ends (both intrapsychically and interpersonally), is there effective religious coping.

Still, however, some coping strategies (e.g., spiritual connectedness, seeking spiritual support, collaborative religious coping, benevolent religious reappraisals) are overwhelmingly positive while others (e.g., spiritual and interpersonal religious discontent, punishing God reappraisals) are almost universally negative. The results of a meta-analysis of 49 studies (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005) suggested that positive religious coping strategies are moderately associated (average effect size of +.33) with positive psychological adjustment and negative religious coping strategies demonstrate small to moderate effect sizes (+.22) with negative psychological adjustment. Though negative religious coping is not associated with positive psychological adjustment, a small negative association (average effect size of −.12) was found between positive religious coping strategies and negative psychological adjustment such as depression, anxiety, apathy, and so forth. Taken together, these results suggest that how religion is used as part of coping is an important predictor of psychological adjustment.

Cross-Fertilization of Theory

We have already suggested that religious coping is connected with both attribution and attachment processes. Consider, for example, the relationship between how one attributes causality to God and religious problem-solving styles. Most research to date suggests that collaborative coping (sharing with God problem-solving responsibility) is a more positive coping strategy than either deferring (God alone is responsible for solving the problem) or self-directing (the person alone is responsible for solving the problem) coping. Indeed, employing any one of these styles may reflect attributional judgments about how supernatural and natural causation relate to one another (Lupfer & Layman, 1996; Welton et al., 1996). Furthermore, there may be circumstances where one of the other coping methods is a better fit for the presenting problem and determining such circumstances may require a certain attributional logic. For example, a deferring method, such as self-surrender, may be a better fit under conditions that are perceived as beyond the person's control. A self-

directing coping style may reflect an attributional judgment that God does not get personally involved in human affairs or it may reflect disappointment with an abandoning God (Phillips, Pargament, Lynn, & Crossley, 2004), perhaps based on attributions of causality from prior experiences with God.

The integration of religious coping is not, of course, limited just to the three theoretical traditions that have been the focus of this paper. Coping may also, potentially, be a theoretical partner with the religious regulation of emotion (Thayer, Newman, & McClain, 1994), the development of specific virtues such as forgiveness (Pargament, 1997) and gratitude (McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001), and with specific religious rituals and practices (Spilka, 2005).

Giving Back to General Psychology

"In times of crisis, religion usually comes to the foreground" (Johnson, 1959, p. 82; cited in Pargament, Ano, & Wachholtz, 2005). To the extent that Johnson's claim is correct, psychologists of religion have an unusual opportunity to integrate their object of study with mainstream psychological (as well as other social and health sciences) research. But how might the psychology of religious coping contribute positively to more general coping models by suggesting new modes of thought or helping shape new perceptions of the data—as Hill (1999) claimed that the psychological study of religion should be capable of doing? *First*, coping itself may be experienced at multiple levels, including a level of 'ultimate concern' (Emmons, 1999) that is not addressed well by general coping models. Thus, religious coping may be uniquely capable of predicting such global personal issues as general life satisfaction (Tix & Frazier, 1998) and global meaning (Park, 2005). *Second*, the meaning of some events is best addressed, at least for some, through religious lenses. For example, in coping with 'natural' disasters, such as a tsunami, or other forms of human suffering such as the loss of a child, one may not think of the stressful agent in naturalistic terms at all. How one explains such acts of human suffering allowed by an omnipotent and loving God (the question of *theodicy*) may involve coping mechanisms not addressed by general coping theory (see Exline & Rose, 2005; Hall & Johnson, 2001). *Third*, religions are frequently placed in an unusually privileged position to determine right from wrong and good from bad (Park, 2005) and, in many cultures, may be the supreme source of values (Baumeister, 1991). Thus, religious coping may be unusually capable for some of handling certain stressful events that require a strong and unequivocal value system.

Conclusion

The lack of substantive theory that can generate and maintain systematic research programs remains a troublesome constant in a field that has otherwise undergone tremendous change. The irony should not go unnoticed. Despite the many new and encouraging developments in the psychology of religion, our concern echoes that of Dittes (1969) almost forty years ago. The surge of interest in religion and spirituality in culture as a whole, including psychology and related disciplines, provides an unbridled opportunity for psychologists of religion. No longer is our work irrelevant to those beyond a small scholarly community. That means, however, that psychologists of religion must step forward to provide research of interest and value to a larger constituency.

Our goal for this article has, therefore, been quite modest. We have not proposed a bold new theory nor have we charted a new direction for the psychology of religion. Rather, we have simply identified three promising exemplars of mid-level psychological theories: attribution, attachment, and religious coping. Though the three theories have varied in their value to the psychology of religion to date, all three are well grounded in psychological theory, are able to generate new ideas within the psychology of religion, and are able to offer something back to psychology as a whole. Such theories, we have argued, are worthy of research investment.

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