State-of-the-Art

What Psychologists Might Tell Us About Religion

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Many people interested in religious studies or actively engaged with a religion expect psychology to help their understanding. However, they have trouble with the variety of approaches, and find that a great deal of current work in the psychology of religion seems naive, esoteric, or irrelevant. Perhaps that is why current research findings in the psychology of religion are not widely known. The current research perspectives on what religions might involve psychologically are expected to have been empirically validated and following those results usually requires a knowledge of the methods and practices of general psychology.

Contemporary approaches to the psychology of religion are also closely tied to the basic processes that have been identified by social and experimental psychologists. They are therefore data-driven rather than conjectural, and can be applied to a range of religious phenomena. While some commentaries on religion have been derived from these analyses (Bowker, 1987, Davis, 1989), there are major differences between the psychology of religion, and religious interpretations that appeal to psychological assumptions. But to apply a broadly Piagetian theory to a Christian, and rather Protestant view of what a 'mature faith' should be like, makes Fowler's (1986) theory of faith development, for example, moralistic and perspective.

That contemporary psychologists of religion rely so heavily on data is also a barrier to their results reaching those in the other social sciences, who are similarly bound by their own methodological and theoretical prejudices. This does not mean, however, that psychologists of religion continue to focus on strictly 'behavioral' analyses. While our studies often report the defects of religion through well-designed quasi-experiments, they rely on controller measures of fairly obvious psychological and religious variables.

This approach adopts an observer's perspective on what people might do or say about themselves, with data gathered through standard answers, rather than in

autobiographical accounts. Such accounts or explanations are often polemical justification that involve 'telling more than we can know' (Nisbett and Wilson, 1977), since a religious stance can itself be a useful way to justify one's actions and their consequences. But non-psychologists continue to ask 'why' people believe in God, or 'when' God is appealed to for an explanation (Lalljee, Brown and Hilton, 1990), and they are confused by psychological analyses of the general character and effects of religious behaviour, experiences or beliefs.

Most psychologists who have examined religious phenomena inductively, have found either a single factor or dimension, or sets of well-defined variables, depending largely in the characteristics of those who have been studied, and the methods by which the specific variables were assessed. That single religious factors might vary across strongly anti- to strongly pro-religious attitudes, while the nests of separate variables might refer to experience, belief and practice, literal and mythological interpretations, or healthy minded and sick souls.

The great differences between outsiders' and insiders' perspectives on any religion probably correspond to our public and our subjective attitudes to it. To define those sets of attitudes requires some consensus about what religion covers and its 'standard meanings'.

Classical descriptions of religious problems were directly concerned with the support that might be relied on to withstand an enemy or support particular opinions (cf I Kings 18, 19), or to understand apparently eccentric behaviour (Acts 2, 15). Quantitative evaluations of the religious issues have, however, always been controversial because they seem to challenge the Deity, or deities. Although the psychology of religion should not be confined within a Christian perspective, for pragmatic reasons most of our data have come from Christians.

It is, however, likely that the tradition-bound nature of the effects, and reactions to religion is one of the most striking psychological findings about them, despite a popular, but largely unsupported, belief that the process supporting different religious orientations are personality-based. That it seems hard to escape from those prejudices is itself a powerful reason for pursuing an empirically-based psychology of religion.

Deconchy (1985) pointed to an ambiguity in many attempts to explore religious variables because of an inherent uncertainty about their underlying mechanisms. He therefore argued that our expressions of religion oscillate between their personal or subjective effects and the social or institutional processes that mediate the transcendental attitudes they involve. Other 'types' of religion contrast sacred against secular, church and sect, and orientations that are intrinsic or extrinsic and committed or consensual. These contrasts over-simply crucial problems about the interaction between any religious orientation, its social location, and the support it can draw. This problem is not, however, solved by entering a religious 'enclosure', or accepting Bonhoeffer's challenge to develop a 'religionless Christianity' because even those individual 'actions' are embedded in social and religious traditions.

Deconchy (1991) has continues to search fir the 'psycho-social mechanisms' that might drive the tension between a religion or its doctrines, the social contexts or institutions through which they are expressed, the carriers or adherents that they must depend on, and their

demands, as well as the conclusion of those who would study those things 'scientifically'. He makes it clear that that task must have an adequate phenomenology to support the systematic analysis of whatever independent or dependent variables are examined. While it is hard to identify during a scientific analysis of it (and which could derive from ideology itself).

But no psychological findings, especially about religion, are epistemologically neutral, and psychologists are still expected to be critical of religion when they contrast its ostensive basis against the deeply psychological or social structures that could have produced it. Common strategies that are used to distance any unacceptable interpretation include those identified in Festinger's (1957) experiments on the cognitive dissonance that is experienced most strikingly when any prophecy is unfulfilled. Biases in reasoning, especially under conditions of uncertainty, are important tools for understanding the strong and apparently irrational beliefs that confuse any observer of the practitioners in unfamiliar religious traditions. Misinterpretations could also be linked to Langer's 'illusions of (personal) control' when we try to make sense of out experience, and in which religious ideologies can have an important place.

At an earlier period, Piaget's (1932) work on 'children's philosophies' helped to understand another set of 'errors' of interpretation and to solve the question, 'From which point of view can we say that one religious experience is superior to another?' Piaget found an answer in the development of children's thinking which recognises the validity of others' points of view.

The pious religious beliefs among adults is another important, if neglected feature of religious ideologies, that draws criticism both from religious outsides and from the insiders who can not accept literal interpretations. Building on Piaget's development psychology, and with a psychoanalytic perspective, Godin (1971) identified four psychological tasks that religious people must work through. First they must achieve, an historical consciousness and a symbolic sense, especially in their prayerfulness. Their second task is to transform a 'primitive' or magical and superstitious mentality into a sacramental attitude, and the third replaces moralism by an ethic of forgiveness. Finally, a mature concept of God should be purified of its parental images.

Deconchy's (1991) most recent analysis proposes another set of processes that could be involved in structuring tha religions of adults. He first identified dogmatism, and the rigidity of its associated belief-disbelief systems then the pressure to an 'ideological orthodoxy' (Deconchy, 1980) through which individuals and groups accept the external regulation of their beliefs, and the control of them by an external regulation of their beliefs, and the control of them by an external reference group.

With respect to orthodoxy itself, Deconchy (1980) had previously enunciated the principle that the rational fragility of information (in terms of the validation and verification of the related belief statements) is protected by the strong social control over it, so that the greater the fragility of any beliefs, the more strictly are they regulated. He has also shown that orthodox ideology systems try to neutralise empirical research, and the scientific analysis of their modes

of operation, simply by disregarding or attacking them.

Those specific example show how religious beliefs can be supported psychologically, without appealing to their explicit content, which was a major difficulty with earlier theorise such as Freud's theory of God as a projected father figure and his analysis of religion as itself an illusion.

Another unfortunate example of bias is found in the prescriptive use of poorly validated measured of personality traits, including the Myer-Briggs Type-Trait Inventory that is derived from Jungian theory, for selection or training. These tests not only give invalid results but they disregard the evidence that are culturally imposed.

Conclusion

While psychologists have clarified the nature of religious practice, belief, and experience, some aspects of which have been described here, few of their findings have been incorporated into the everyday awareness of what religion involves psychologically. But psychological theories are changing. An emphasis on good coping and other social skills is replacing the expected interaction between inherent personality traits and the appeal of particular religious forms. That parental models are a crucial determinant of their children's payer (Francis and Brown, 1991), but also of their later 'apostasy' (Hunsberger and Brown, 1983), emphasises the importance of social learning for religious practice.

But we do not yet know what helps to make any religion credible, beyond the explicit social recognition and support it is given. Social psychological effects ale seem difficult to accept as the basis for all forms of religiousness, especially when internal or subjective characteristics that are congruent with naive opinions locate most of the psychology of religion 'in the head'. Not only is that one-dimensional view too restricted, but it fragments the necessarily social nature of the alignments that are a crucial feature of any religious tradition.

The fundamental suspicion, among those who have not read the current literature, about psychological interpretations that are expected to rest on subjective factors is gratuitous. It not only disregards finding that have been supported, but continues to hold, for whatever reasons, interpretations that are confirmed only in principle or with reference to single case studies. For example, while religion is seen to stand as a process that preserves an established order, it is also criticised for being identified with weakness and dependence. Nevertheless, categorical thinking like this is not constructive, and a good task for psychologists of religion could be to develop an integrative perspective that makes it unnecessary for anyone to over-simplify the variety of forms of religious expression. Psychologists of religion could help to find new places to look for the neglected characteristics that might support particular religious structures and reactions.

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