PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION AND CULTURE

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Contents

Summary

After a brief introduction to psychology of religion as a scientific discipline, this article reviews psychological theories that propose explanations of religion as an individual and social reality, and provides information from recent empirical literature that, at least partially, confirms these theories. The theoretical and empirical evidence presented here encompasses a variety of psychological fields examining cognitive, emotional, relational, social, clinical, developmental, and personality dimensions of religion. Religion is thus seen as a set of beliefs, emotions, rituals, moral rules, and communal aspects. The article emphasizes, but is not limited to, a functionalist approach to religion; both a "defensive" and a "prospective" creative conception of religion are examined. The main arguments are that religion 1) is a specific quest for meaning but is not defined by it; 2) contributes to the strengthening of self-control; 3) is animated by the aspiration for unity, integration, and harmony; 4) provides personal empowerment and social support as well as clues for construction of identity as a continuity of

belonging; and 5) reinforces altruistic tendencies although it is not the source of morality. For every argument, positive (e.g. optimism, self-control, peace of mind, self-esteem, prosocial concerns) as well negative (e.g. fundamentalism, obsession, fixation on the maternal world, conservatism, out-group prejudice), consequences of religion for personal and social well-being are depicted. Special attention is paid to relations between religion and culture: consideration of religion as culture or sub-culture; regulation of the equilibrium between absorption by, and rejection of, culture; cultural-religious differences versus cross-cultural invariants in psychological aspects of religion. Finally, new challenges for the psychological understanding of religion (and modern spirituality), due to the combination of factors such as secularization, individualization, and globalization, are examined.

1. Introduction

Psychology of religion is the discipline that studies religion and religious phenomena using psychological theories, concepts, and methods. It is interested in how religion (of individuals and groups) interacts with personality, biology, and culture and with the multiple dimensions of human being and its development in society (i.e. cognitive, affective-emotional, relational, social, and moral dimensions). This discipline considers religion as influenced by psychological realities and as having an impact on these realities.

Its history represents a century of theoretical and empirical work. Two major traditions have contributed to the development of psychology of religion as a psychological discipline distinct from philosophy of, anthropology of, sociology of, and comparative study of religion. The first tradition is psychoanalysis (see *Psychoanalysis*), mainly the Freudian school but also the psychoanalysis and psychodynamic theories of Freud's successors. The interest of this tradition, as applied to religion and religious phenomena, has been to focus on 1) the relations between religion and a structural approach to the psychic world, seen as a continuum between normality and pathology; 2) the way religion interacts with psycho-sexual, affective, and relational development from childhood to adulthood; and 3) the links between religion, culture, and the progress of humans as cultural beings. The second tradition comes from "mainstream" psychology and dates from the beginning of the twentieth century. Within this tradition, psychology of religion has applied theories and methods from empirical psychology (interviews, case studies, questionnaires, experimental studies, content analyses of documents) (see *Methods in Psychological Research*) to religious realities (deconstructed as objects of psychological investigation such as behaviors, cognitions, emotions, motivations, attitudes, stereotypes). Consequently, psychology of religion interacts with questions emerging from many sub-fields of psychology: psychology of human development and education (see *Developmental Psychology*), personality psychology (see *Psychology of Individual Differences With Particular Reference to Temperament*), social psychology (see *Social Psychology: A Topical Review*), clinical psychology and psychotherapy (see *Clinical Psychology: A National Perspective on Origins, Contemporary Practice, and Future Prospects*), and "even" neurosciences and cognitive psychology (see *Cognitive Psychology*).

Many definitions of religion are possible and they may always be criticized as somehow influenced by philosophical, theological, and, in general, ideological conceptions of religion, as well as cultural and historical "incarnations" of religion. It may also happen that definitions of religion emphasize one or another psychological theory. For the purpose of the present article an operational definition of religion is maintained enjoying a certain consensus within psychology of religion: religion is a set of beliefs, ritual, community, moral codes, and emotional aspects.

It is impossible to summarize here the questions and achievements of psychology of religion in their entirety. Rather than offering an historical overview or an exhaustive survey of the many issues of this discipline, the present article attempts to present a comprehensive overview of theories and related empirical evidence that may be considered as answering the following question: Why, from a psychological perspective, are people (or why do they become or stay) religious (today)? The theoretical considerations presented here come from various psychological frameworks including psychoanalysis. Research evidence is provided, with an emphasis on recent studies and with particular attention paid, where possible, to studies in other than Christian environments. (Unfortunately, for historical reasons, most of the research in psychology of religion has been conducted in Christian environments.) Nevertheless, through the examination of this specific, but broad question (i.e. the psychological explanation of religion), several other subjects are treated here such as religion and mental health, religious personality, religious cognition, religion and culture, contemporary spirituality, ideal visions of human development, religion and society, and religion and values-morality.

For convenience of presentation, in this article the terms "religious people," "religiosity," and "religiousness" are used as equivalent, and refer to general, personal religiousness (traditionally also labeled as intrinsic religion). Of course, there are many classifications of different religious types and/or religious dimensions, but no broad consensus exists about them among psychologists of religion, and their introduction here would be confusing rather than helpful with regard to clarity. In addition, when scales measuring different religious dimensions are administered to samples representative of the general population (especially in secularized societies), they overlap because they all also tap into a common (more or less intrinsic) pro-religious attitude. Nevertheless, where it seems necessary, this article will present distinctions between closed-minded religion (such as religious fundamentalism) and open religion (e.g. questing religiosity), and between (contemporary) spirituality and traditional religiosity.

2. Religion as (Not Only) a Quest for Meaning

2.1. The Quest for Meaning and Religion: Positive and Negative Components

A first, common, way to explain religion psychologically is to consider its relation with the quest for meaning. People try to understand events that "happen" to them in their internal and external worlds. A complex process is to be expected behind this attempt at understanding. On the one hand—on a first level— human beings give a label to events (physiological reactions, for example, need labeling in order to be perceived as specific

emotions), attribute causal explanations to them, and consequently, establish links between otherwise seemingly disparate phenomena. On the other hand—on a second level—humans try to interpret these events by integrating them into broader sets of micro-theories that constitute a kind of "world view," theories that offer meaning (especially order and finality) to human destiny and to the world, both seen as wholes. Religious people, then, attribute religious meaning to events from the internal and the external worlds. They do so according to the context, the character (e.g. positive or negative, health problems or financial issues) and the importance (e.g. very or not important, important to me or to others) of the event. These attributions are often not spontaneous: they belong to and come from a cultural environment that precedes individuals and that offers already elaborated "solutions." Religion then appears as a mechanism useful for meaning. As a cultural system, it proposes beliefs, an explanatory discourse on reality, theories on humankind and the world; reality then seems meaningful as inserted into a rationale, a logic of finality referring to an origin and an end. For example, an event that is at first view neutral, like the death of someone close, may be seen, in a magic rationality of causality, as a consequence of divine punishment or as an invitation of this person by God to his kingdom. This death may also be experienced as a "calling," a vocation for the surviving person, and in any case it will be interpreted in a way that makes it meaningful within the life and history of the individual taken as a whole.

This process of construction-appropriation of meaning corresponds to two broad theoretical assumptions and related empirical evidence (not necessarily incompatible with each other). On the one hand, the quest for meaning within religion may reflect the desire of individuals for knowledge and may provoke a dynamic of creativity. History of art is an eloquent example of the impact of religious ideas and feelings on artistic creation: art and religion share not only the quest for the sublime, but also the will to look for an alternative meaning to the immediate perception of everyday reality. In addition, empirical research indicates that openness to, and interest in, spirituality as well as "mature" religiosity (but not intensity of religiosity per se) seem to be typical of people who are also open to experience, fantasy, imagination, and creativity (see the factor openness of the Five-Factor Model of personality). Finally, self psychology, humanistic personality theories, and contemporary "positive" psychology emphasize the idea that self-actualization, enhancement of one's own capacities and widening of the self, as well as satisfaction of higher level needs (as distinguished from lower level needs such as survival, nutrition, and protection) are inherent dimensions of human beings and their development. Within this framework of thought, religion has its place as contributing to this positive, prospective dynamic.

On the other hand, the quest for meaning may be regarded as a defense against negative situations: the more uncertainty, ambiguity, and doubt are inherent in events and reality, the more humans need to cope with these situations by looking for meaning; religion may then be compensatory and, at least, functional. Empirical evidence is strong enough in this direction. Situational factors such as personal crises (death of a loved person, serious diseases, failures, suffering, and frustration) favor the intensification of the quest for meaning and lead (in relation to personality and educational factors) to concrete decisions on religious issues such as having recourse to prayer or entering into a religious group. Religious representations about death and the afterlife may certainly be

considered as coping mechanisms to face death anxiety, as confirmed by several studies. Finally, recent empirical literature indicates than not only children but also adults are prone to magical (and religious) thinking when they lack information, in conditions of uncertainty, and in the face of inexplicable phenomena.

2.2. Specifics of the Religious Quest for Meaning

Affirming that religion can be understood as an attempt to look for meaning in life cannot be taken as a psychological *definition* of religion. Not everything in religion can be explained as resulting from a motivational need for meaning; the following sections will try to demonstrate this. Neither is religion the only psychosocial system of meaning: philosophical systems, political ideologies, and popular wisdom assume similar functions.

However, what appears as challenging for psychology of religion is that the quest for meaning within religion presents a series of particular characteristics. First, it is typically within religion that the quest for meaning focuses on the question of the origin and the end of the person and the world. In addition, religion offers concrete discourses and narratives that pretend to "explain" these enigmas, or, in other words, that attempt to fill in what objectively speaking may only seem like an absence.

Second, contrary to scientific rationality and philosophical thought, the construction of religious meaning is realized within a specific tradition. Independently of its likelihood for transformation and adaptation to historical changes (for instance, modernization), religious meaning has to stay, at least to a minimum extent, in continuity with a tradition, in conformity with an authority that is based (partially) on the past (revelation, religious institutions), or at least in conformity with what is extricated as a consensus from a group (religious orthodoxy).

Third, the religious quest for meaning is of a particular kind: it refers to the need for an interpretative system that is also an integrative one, a system that introduces order and coherence, a system that tends to integrate in a whole and harmonious way beliefs, world views, moral precepts, habits, traditions, behaviors, and experiences-expressions of emotions. As recent studies have found, religion is associated to the (motivational) need for (cognitive) closure, and especially the need for order and predictability. These two characteristics of religious meaning—conformity with something that precedes and preference for order and integration—may explain why not only closed-minded religiosity (e.g. religious fundamentalism) but also intensity of religiosity per se are to a certain extent related to dogmatism, conservatism, and authoritarianism (whose main components are authoritarian submission and conventionalism).

Four, when questioned, via interviews and questionnaires, religious people seem to be highly and actively interested in the quest for meaning and they report having found a purpose to their lives; they also believe in the existence of a just world. These studies indicate something specific to religious meaning: the affirmation that the world is meaningful and that life has a meaning and is worthy of being lived; the possibility of meaninglessness in life is excluded. This tendency may explain another strong empirical finding that religion is associated with optimism as a personality trait.

Finally, from a human development and socio-historical evolutionary perspective, religion (including contemporary not strictly religious spirituality) intervenes progressively more on what was above called the "second level" of meaning (i.e. looking for the final cause, the ultimate reason of things, meaning as orientation in life), and less on the "first level" of meaning, that is, causal attributions of a first kind in order to understand concrete events in life. In a childhood-like dimension and in ancient world-like societies, typically (but not exclusively) religion shares with magical thinking the tendency to attribute intentions to (divine) entities that combine properties typical of everyday experience (these entities are then familiar to people) with counterintuitive characteristics (i.e. characteristics that violate intuitive expectations); these entities are then attractive.

3. Religion as the Strengthening of Self-Control

3.1. Religion as Satisfying the Need for Control

Psychologically, religion may also be considered as a way to reinforce self-control. Individuals, in addition to the need for meaning, are characterized by the need for mastery of things and for self-control. Already, behind the need for meaning one can suspect a component that is related to the need for control of what in a given situation is a source of novelty, surprise, frustration, defeat, and, in general, a feeling of loss of control. Being informed of, understanding, and interpreting situations and events are mechanisms that contribute to the feeling of control. People desire to have things under control, to believe in their capacity to change a situation (primary control) as well as in their capacity to change themselves in order to change reality (secondary control).

It is as if religion both satisfies and animates this need. Faith, as an act of belief and confidence in things or beings that, among others, stand out because of their omnipotence and their providential care, implies the possibility and even the necessity of changing oneself and the world. Believing that "faith can move mountains" not only constitutes an attachment to a metaphor: the impact that faith and confidence in the capacity of changing oneself have on recovery from numerous physical and mental problems is an evocative illustration of this. Finally, every religious group and religious movement is concerned with this transformative dimension and can be classified according to its preferential tendencies: transforming the world versus first transforming oneself.

Of course, the type of religiosity and the type of relation with God (collaborative, self-directive, or deferring) may be a moderator of the relation between religion and the feeling of control (accentuating an internal or external locus of control). Nevertheless, in general, religion seems to satisfy the need for control. A first sign in this direction is that in adults, unlike in children, the link between conditions of uncertainty, absence of information, and the inexplicability of things, on the one hand, and recourse to magical thinking, on the other hand, is mediated by the feeling of lack of control. A second argument comes from a vast empirical literature providing evidence that religiosity is followed by many indicators of mental health, mainly highly subjective well-being and happiness, but also objective indicators of health such as absence of unhealthy-destructive behaviors (alcohol, drug, and tobacco use, suicide), and longevity. It seems

as if the benefits of religion for mental health are, to some extent, a consequence of self-control (i.e. healthy behavior): in the USA, among church members, the strictest religious groups, which have strong demands on behavior (Mormons, Seventh Day Adventists, Orthodox Jews, and Amish), have the greatest longevity. The review of the literature on the religion-mental health relation sheds light on the fact that religion has positive consequences on self-control in individuals in which control is lacking (under-control). However, the price to be paid for this seems to be a certain risk of over-control: religion also predicts rigidity of thought, if one refers to constructs such as dogmatism, authoritarianism, and need for closure.

3.2. Religion as Demanding Self-Control

Not only does religion seem to satisfy the need for control, but it is also as if it animates this need. An overview of the ideals that are dominant among many different religious traditions points out the importance of the ideal of self-control. In many traditions, religious persons are supposed to master not only their actions, but also their words and thoughts. The Christian spiritual ideal of self-mastery has been so extended that it has embraced even spontaneous, natural phenomena such as dreams and laughter. Both of the latter are seen with suspicion, certainly in medieval, but sometimes also in contemporary, Christianity, because they constitute phenomena that escape control: during the dream the "intellect" travels without the individual's control (for example, John Climacus, seventh century) and excessive laughter is not indicative of a "well-regulated soul" and of self-mastery (for instance, Basil the Great). In fact, all the realities characterized by Christian spirituality as vices may be understood as failures of self-control and the corresponding virtues can thus be seen as the proof of establishment of self-mastery.

It is in the religious ritual that this tendency towards over-control may be observed in a clear way. This was the subject of the first psychoanalytic description of religious phenomena by Freud. According to Freud, religious ritual presents many similarities with the ceremonial character of the obsessive individual: stereotypical repetition, meticulous character of the observance, unconscious motives, defense against guilty feelings, repression of sexual drives, return of what is repressed. Freud concludes that religion in general should be considered as a universal obsessional neurosis (just as neurosis may be seen as an individualized "religion").

It is necessary, of course, to place these conceptions into their historical context, that of a religion with a strong emphasis on the repression of sexuality, on feelings of guilt, and on divine punishment from a God represented as a severe judge. Contemporary research indicates that such a representation of God has heavily declined. Moreover, although Freud's description of religious ritual can be applied to a very specific type of religiousness (i.e. an obsessive neurosis of religious culpability), a simple extension of his approach to religion in general is problematic. In a recent review of empirical literature, it was found that religiosity does not express obsessive *symptoms* (in terms of psychopathology). However, and this makes Freud's considerations original and still interesting, the studies reviewed indicate clearly that religious people present obsessive personality *traits*: a general spirit of orderliness.

Indeed, various studies using other theoretical frameworks converge on the conclusion that self-control is important in the religious personality (without leading necessarily to psychopathology). Religious individuals tend to be high in conscientiousness (a broad factor in the Five Factor Model of personality) and low in impulsiveness. The dominant place of the need for control in the religious life can also be approached, at least partially, through another reality constant in various religions: the embarrassing status of sexuality, a dimension of life where enjoyment necessarily implies loss of control. Despite the sexual liberation of the 1960s, and regardless of the contemporary discourse giving value to sexuality and body in many religions, empirical research constantly, even in the 1990s and among young people, confirms that religiosity is followed by conservative practices in sexuality, discomfort with nudity, and, in general, low importance attributed to hedonistic values (for instance, hedonism and stimulation in studies using Schwartz' values model).

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Biographical Sketch

Vassilis Saroglou is assistant professor at the Department of Psychology of the Catholic University of Louvain (since 2001) where he teaches psychology of religion and psychology of human development. After his degree in theology (1988, University of Athens, Greece), he studied philosophy (1990, bachelor) and psychology (1994, degree) at the University of Louvain (Belgium) with fellowships from the Onassis Foundation (Greece) and the Catholic Commission for Cultural Collaboration (Vatican, Italy). He earned his Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Louvain after having been doctoral research fellow of the National Fund for Scientific Research (Belgium, 1995–1999). He has been visiting lecturer at the Department of Psychology of the Catholic University of Lille (France, since 1997), visiting Fulbright scholar at the Department of Psychology of the College of William and Mary (USA, 2000), and postdoctoral researcher (1999–2001) and director (since 2001) of the Centre for Psychology of Religion of the University of Louvain (Belgium). His research interests focus on religious personality and especially closed-mindedness, sense of humor, attachment styles, and prosocial behavior as related to religion but include also social psychological aspects of religion (stereotypes and cross-cultural differences). In addition to articles published in psychology, theology, and scientific study of religion journals, he has published two books: *Paternity as Function: Structuring the Religious Experience*, Amsterdam/Atlanta: Rodopi, 2001 (original publication in French, 1997), and *Religion et Développement Humain: Questions Psychologiques* (co-edited with Dirk Hutsebaut, Paris: L'Harmattan, 2001). In 2002 he was elected member of the Académie Internationale des Sciences Religieuses.