

Chapter 23

THE SOCIAL-PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION

Using scientific methodologies to understand religion.

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ABSTRACT. Religion plays a vital role in the formation of communities and the interaction of cultures, yet is largely ignored in psychological texts. Contemporary religious trends across the globe are rapidly changing. For example, less people are adhering to traditional forms of religious practice. Atheism and secular beliefs are becoming increasingly common and valid, and acts of terror are commonly perceived as motivated by religion. This chapter discusses the operationalization of religion as a variable in scientific research (i.e., religious affiliation vs. use of religion in daily life) before discussing how this operationalization impacts our existing understanding of the relationship between religion and intra- (e.g., coping, personal decision making) and inter-personal (e.g., attitudes and behaviours towards outgroup members) psychological processes. The chapter closes with a discussion of challenges for the future of this field and recommendations for the measurement of this complex variable.

Keywords: (religion, religious, religiosity, spirituality, religious fundamentalism, theistic)

1. INTRODUCTION

The psychology of religion comprises the use of scientific methods to understand the effects of religious traditions, practices, and beliefs on religious and non-religious individuals from a psychological perspective. In the specific case of social psychology, understanding the effects of religion on beliefs and behaviours is paramount given the pivotal function that religion plays in the formation, functioning, and interactions of societies (Durkheim, 1965/1915). This chapter has two broad aims: to discuss methods of operationalizing religion for use in social psychological research, and then to discuss the implications of these operationalizations by reviewing trends resulting from their use in the existing literature. Before approaching these aims, I will first give a brief overview of the history and purposes of the psychology of religion. After addressing the central aims of this chapter, I will close by discussing future challenges to the field and presenting a discourse on implications for the future of this important sub-discipline of social psychology.

1.1 The History of the Psychology of Religion

The trajectory of scientific investigations into religion has oscillated across the years from being considered a core research variable with profound societal implications, to being effectively ignored by mainstream psychology (for reviews, see Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003; Gorsuch, 1988). Indeed, much of the theoretical and empirical work in the early days of social psychology (e.g., Hall 1904, 1917; James 1902; 1907; Starbuck, 1899) was motivated by an innate drive, almost an obligation, of researchers of the time to understand psychological aspects related to religion (see Wulff, 1998). The psychoanalytic zeitgeist of the decades following the 1920's saw many theoretical contributions to the broader field of psychology, which often encompassed religion (e.g., Adler, 1925; Freud 1927; Jung, 1938, etc). This acted as a catalyst for hypothetical and speculative frameworks on the on the topic, but did little to further related empirically based understandings of religion.

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