



# Psychology of Religion in the World

## *A Psicologia da Religião no Mundo*

**Raymond F. Paloutzian\***

Westmont College, Santa Barbara, California

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### **Abstract**

The psychology of religion used to be a small and little known field. Although a few pockets of work in the area were done when Psychology began, it was functionally nonexistent for 1/3 of psychology's history, and received little attention for most of the rest of it. However, in the past 20 years the field has become vast in scope. It now intersects all subfields of general psychology. Also, the psychology of religion no longer exists only in Western countries. It is now an international field with research being conducted worldwide. This article summarizes this trend and documents psychology of religion in the world and in Brazil as a part of it. The need for a multilevel interdisciplinary approach to research and theory is highlighted, as a way to synthesize knowledge of religiousness cross-culturally and trans-religiously. Future research should invoke a meaningmaking model in order to examine not merely observable religious behaviors, beliefs, or experiences, but their underlying roots, i.e., their meanings and attributions

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\* RFP: PhD in Social Psychology, e-mail: [paloutz@westmont.edu](mailto:paloutz@westmont.edu)

made about them. Such research can help us eliminate barriers between disciplines, cultures, religions, and nations.

**Keywords:** Psychology of Religion. Global Perspective. General Psychology. Interdisciplinary. International.

## **Resumo**

*A psicologia da religião era um campo pequeno e pouco conhecido. Embora alguns trabalhos tenham sido realizados nos primórdios da Psicologia, essa área era funcionalmente inexistente para um terço da história da psicologia, tendo recebido desta, muita pouca atenção. No entanto, nos últimos 20 anos, o campo tomou um alcance vasto e agora faz intersecção com todos os subcampos de psicologia geral. Além disso, a psicologia da religião deixou de ser uma área presente apenas em países ocidentais. Ela é agora um campo internacional, com pesquisas sendo realizadas em todo o mundo. Este artigo resume esta tendência e documenta a psicologia da religião no mundo (e também no Brasil). Destaca-se a necessidade de uma abordagem interdisciplinar em vários níveis, tanto para a pesquisa quanto para a teoria como forma de sintetizar o conhecimento transcultural e trans-religioso da religiosidade. Futuros estudos devem invocar o modelo de produção de sentido a fim de examinar, e não meramente observar os comportamentos, crenças ou experiências religiosas, mas as suas raízes subjacentes, ou seja, os significados e atribuições que são construídos sobre eles. Tais pesquisas podem nos ajudar a eliminar as barreiras entre as disciplinas, culturas, religiões e nações.*

**Palavras-chave:** *Psicologia da Religião. Perspectiva Global. Psicologia Geral. Interdisciplinar. Internacional.*

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

As recently as one generation ago, psychologists and academicians generally seemed to assume that the world was gradually moving beyond religions. The phrase “post-Christian” era was often heard in intellectual circles. This trend was reflected in the field of psychology by the absence of an area of research called the psychology of religion. It had not existed since the founding of the science of psychology in the years surrounding 1900 by William James and others, who did devote part of their psychological work to examining religiousness (see Wulff, 1997, for comprehensive treatment of the field’s history). But the science of the psychology of religion did not reappear until the 1960s.

## Psychology of Religion Then and Now

Psychology is the science of human behavior and mental processes, but the field seemed to study every important human behavior except the one called “religious”. To me this was a great puzzle. Given that religiousness in one form or another has been with humans as long as there have been humans, and that in human history it is among the most prominent issues and sources of both human caring, helping, and service to others, as well as human crassness, harm-doing, exploitation of others, why would the discipline of psychology ignore it? Why would psychology not study it in the same way it studies all other important human behaviors? In today’s world, about 85% of the world’s population either is personally religious or lives in a formally religious state. Thus the lives of most people are involved in a religion in some way. Fortunately, the recent past has seen a soaring resurgence of this area of research. Let us look at some of the evidence for this trend.

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<sup>1</sup> Author note: Based on talk given at the 10<sup>th</sup> Seminar of the Psychology and Religious Sense, Curitiba, Brazil, 10<sup>th</sup> November 2015. Variations given at Hong Kong and Mainland China, January, 2016. Portions of this article adapted from Paloutzian (2017a, 2017b) and Paloutzian and Park (2013, 2014).

During the years prior to the killing of approximately 3000 innocent civilians by terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City on 9/11/01, the field had come back “online” somewhat. A division of the American Psychological Association had been established and designated for the study of it in 1976 (APA Division 36), the beginnings of the newly reconstituted International Association for the Psychology Religion (IAPR) was in its infancy in the 1990s, and a few textbooks books began to be published (see Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003, for a summary of this history). But the field was still relatively self-contained; psychologists of religion pretty much talked mainly among themselves, with relatively little communication about their research with those in the rest of psychology. Mainstream psychology paid little attention to it and a scant amount of convention time was devoted to it at professional meetings.

This changed dramatically following 9/11. Beginning shortly thereafter, research, talks, and publications on psychology of religion issues started to accelerate on a steep curve (Paloutzian, 2017a, 2017b; Saroglou, 2014). The terrorist attacks, although not necessarily motivated by a particular religion per se, seemed to be justified in the name of the religion of the terrorists. One consequence was that scholars in the mainstream areas of psychology began to do research on the psychological processes involved in various forms of religiousness. This included research on religious fundamentalism (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 2005; Rowatt et al, 2013), prosocial and antisocial behavior (Galen, 2012), terrorism (Moghaddam et al., 2013), and myriad other forms of socially relevant behavior.

Two research notes document the increased research in this area. First, Saroglou (2014) examined publications in personality and social psychology journals and found that the frequency of use of the word “religion” or “spirituality” in article titles and abstracts increased by a factor of approximately 3-4 over the previous couple of decades. Second, Paloutzian (2017b) examined article abstracts and article titles for all items in the PsycInfo database and found that from 2005 to 2014 the frequency of the words “religion” or “spirituality” both abstracts and titles increased 6-fold.

Two general trends are apparent in the above two studies. First, there was some modest increase in interest in the psychology of religion (and at the later stages, in the psychology of spirituality) in the years prior to 9/11.

This can be accounted for by a new generation of psychologists who decided that this topic was important, manifestations of which include the advent of APA Division 36, IAPR, and the early writings on the cognitive science of religion. Second, there is the abrupt upward turn in publications in this field shortly after 9/11. Given its timing and context, there is no explanation for this latter dramatic increase other than the global and local aftereffects of 9/11/01. Psychologists who previously did not do research on this topic were finally convinced that the psychological roots of religiousness should be researched in a serious way, just as any other behavior, if we were ever going to create a comprehensive, valid theory of all human behavior.

## **A Global Snapshot**

### **Countries**

Beginning in 1998 and continuing for 18 years, I edited *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* (IJPR). During this time, the field's greatest expansion happened. I correspond with authors worldwide every day – from all over Europe to other continents. The list includes Alaska, Australia, Austria, Brazil, Canada, China, Czech Republic, Denmark, England, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hong Kong, Iran, Israel, Italy, Japan, Jordan, Kenya, Kurdistan, Latvia, Netherlands, North Ireland, Norway, Malaysia, Malta, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Taiwan, Thailand, Turkey, Ukraine, United Arab Emirates, and others. This is completely new; nothing like this could ever be said before. It is likely due to the combined onset of religiously justified terrorism and the creation of internet communications.

### **A Brazilian Example**

Page space makes it impossible to give an example of research or name a researcher from every country in which psychology of religion scholarship is being done (see Paloutzian, 2017a, for further examples.) But I do have space to document one exemplar case that happens to come from Brazil.

Several years ago Brazilian Professor Luciana Marques and I communicated about research with the Spiritual Well-Being Scale (SWBS; Paloutzian & Ellison, 1982; Paloutzian, Bufford; Wildman, 2012) in research. Her research was successful (Marques, L. F., Sarriera, C.; Dell'aglio, 2009). Later, as editor of IJPR, I decided to invite someone to write an article for the journal that would be a status report to document the research on the psychology of religion that is occurring in Brazil. The outcome was that Professors Marques and Mary Rute Esperandio accepted my invitation and collaborated to write the article. It was published in the October 2015 issue of IJPR (Vol. 25, no. 4) and is titled "The Psychology of Religion in Brazil." Importantly, it is not a mere documentary of descriptive information about who has done what and where. It is instead anchored in the psychological and theoretical substantive issues that underpin the research. Therefore, it not only informs people about what is going on in Brazil, but it also speaks to psychological issues common to psychology of religion research by counterpart researchers in other countries and languages. I have communicated about this example to other scholars in other countries many times, suggesting that they write an article documenting the status of the psychology of religion in their country following the example set by Esperandio and Marques. The stage is set for international collaboration with psychologists of religion in Brazil! And with our modern electronic tools, it is not only possible; it is also fun.

## **Psychology of Religion for Global Scholarship**

### **Religion, Spirituality, and The Sacred**

It is necessary to distinguish between a psychological way of talking about religion or religiousness, and a generic or overall humanities and social science way of doing so. In common, every day language, people talk about religion and it seems as if everybody understands what it means. Unfortunately, however, there isn't much agreement about what "religion" is, even though there are historical, sociological, and even legal principles by which some individuals or nations define the concept. Some scholars say it refers to God, gods, or other supernatural or "otherworldly" entities such

as spirits, saints, and dead loved ones who are still really “alive” in an afterlife or spirit world. Others say no such otherworldly belief is required. They point out that Buddhism, for example, typically considered one of the “world religions,” does not postulate a god. Also, things called religions differ markedly about what they put the emphasis on. For example, Protestant Christianity places emphasis on believing the correct doctrine, Roman Catholic Christianity places emphasis on confession and acceptance of the Church’s tenants and participating in the Eucharist, Judaism focuses less on the content of beliefs and more on performing the prescribed rituals, and Islam puts the accent on the so-called “5 pillars of Islam.” Thus, although there may be some common elements among them, “religions” are not all about the same thing, something well known within the field of religious studies itself (Taves, 2013).

Attempts to define “religion” or “spirituality” for purposes of psychological research fare no better. The most commonly stated definition in Psychology says that religion is “a search for significance in ways related to the sacred” (Pargament, 1992). But such attempts at definition also say that anything can be sacred for anybody. For example, Pargament et al. (2013) has said that not only things such as one’s god, a “spiritual” value, or other personally meaningful thing can be sacred for someone, but even that war can serve someone’s “spiritual” need. This means the phrase “the sacred” is a misstatement, because there is no “the” there. A person can attribute the property of sacredness to anything. The logic of this implies that anything can be a religion for anyone. There is no common essence to the attempts to define what “it” is. It is probably best to describe (not define) religion as a complex cultural concept (Taves, 2015) whose specific meanings vary from culture to culture, and even from person to person. And it is those meanings, not the “religion,” that psychological research on religiousness aims to understand. This does not mean that psychologists should settle for an “anything goes” notion of what religiousness is, but it does mean that we need to dig deeper into the psychological meanings that undergird it.

### **Meaning Making, Religious Meaning Systems, and Change**

In order to understand religious and other meanings psychologically, we need to understand what is meant by the concept of “meaning making”

and “meaning system”. Meaning making is the process by which a system receives information of varying degrees of ambiguity and processes that information so that the output of the process is some whole that can be perceived, appraised, or responded to. That output is the meaning that has been made out of the barrage of ambiguous information. Such outputs may be attributed with meanings deemed religious, spiritual, or irreligious.

There are relatively simple and relatively complex examples of how our systems make meaning. A relatively simple example occurs when certain wavelengths of the electromagnetic spectrum enter the human eye through the pupil, strike rods and cones in the retina, and trigger neural impulses through which the visual system produces a percept in human consciousness. Technically speaking, for example, the human eye never “sees” an apple sitting on the table. Actually, the eye merely transmits ambiguous information to the next layer of neural tissue in the visual system of the brain, and those brain processes eventually produce a percept of a thing “out there” to which we give the name “apple.” But the apple that we “see” is one that is produced by our meaning making system, not the one that is (presumably) really “out there.” The meaning making process summarized above is operative, in various forms and fashions, all through the human system, from the micro to the macro levels (Paloutzian, 2017a; Paloutzian & Mukai, 2017).

If a human behavior as simple as seeing involves making meaning out of ambiguity, just imagine the processes that must be involved in how a whole human or a large collective body of them make meaning out of the myriad ambiguities of life as a whole. Or the ambiguity felt when one looks at the stars or contemplates what the whole cosmos might be like. Or when they face the ambiguity of death. Is there *any* or *only one* meaning to any of this? Are there many meanings? Is there a “correct” meaning for me but a different “correct” meaning for you? These are timeless questions. They have been asked since antiquity. Psychology cannot answer them, but psychological knowledge can help us understand how the processes involved work.

So it is with religious meaning systems. Such an entity is a cognitive network comprised of things such as values and goals, larger purposes, sense of identity, overall worldview, processes of appraisal by which new information is evaluated and retained or rejected, some implicit or explicit locus of ultimate concern, and functional feedback loops that allow the system to

assimilate new information or change and adapt to it, as one goes forward in life. For religious people, typically the religion itself or its ultimate values constitute the locus of ultimate concern. It is under its umbrella that the rest of the person's system functions (Park, 2010).

Meaning systems are normally relatively stable, but they can also change. A religious meaning system to which one is committed in a devout, consistent way (so that the person behaves in a way consistent with the purported beliefs) provides the continuity necessary for seeing life across a time span. Thus decisions are made under the umbrella of, or with perceived guidance by, the concerns, values, identity, and ultimate concern of the system. This reflects the principle that people need a *coherent and well-functioning meaning system at the biological and psychological levels* (Park, 2010, 2013). Of course, meaning systems need not be religious; there are atheistic and agnostic counterparts that psychologically may function in the same way that religious meaning systems function for religious believers (Bullivant & Ruse, 2013). This suggests that at the root of meaning systems are fundamental processes of human believing – not necessarily religious believing, but believing as such. (See Angel et al., 2017, for an elaboration of the many facets of the processes of believing.) This means that the psychology of religion is not an isolated field unto itself. It is intimate to all of psychological science; and in fact it is intimately connected to knowledge from disciplines at more micro and more macro levels. Thus, as one illustration, because religiousness is both an individual and a cultural phenomenon, in order to fully understand it we must integrate knowledge from both psychology and anthropology. And the argument extrapolates from there.

### **Multilevel International Interdisciplinary Paradigm**

Eventually, our knowledge of human religiousness would not be restricted by discipline. Instead, we would create knowledge under the umbrella of a multilevel international interdisciplinary paradigm. This means we would do whatever research was needed, using many methodologies, to understand the root meanings that religious beliefs, rituals, rules of conduct and association, and so forth have for people; and we would learn such things across all cultures and religions worldwide, with contributions from biology, psychology, anthropology and related fields. Knowledge at such an

expansive level is at this point an ideal. But the need to achieve it is compelling. The following two problems that from time to time emerge in psychology of religion scholarship illustrate the need for a common framework, not many frameworks, in which humans can move forward.

## **Two Problems Related to the Psychology of Religion**

There are two perennial and very important problems to avoid, which can surface especially when researching the psychology of religion internationally and trans-religiously. I highlight them so that we do not fall into their traps. The first concerns something the work of any of us can be plagued with – biases and agendas that don't belong in science; their practical consequences can be devastating. The second can lead any of us down the road of attributing a psychological result to a process that can never be tested; this means doing non-science instead of good science. We cannot afford either error.

### **A Religions Psychology is not Psychology of Religion**

On the 1<sup>st</sup> anniversary of 9/11 *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* published a special issue of the journal titled *From Conflict to Dialogue: Examining Western and Islamic Approaches in Psychology of Religion* (Paloutzian & Reich, 2002). It was based on an international conference on the psychology of religion in which scholars from both Western and Islamic countries presented their research. I want to use one element in this special issue to illustrate the differences in meaning that people can bring to the table when trying to discuss something that, in principle, ought to be sitting on common ground. Two of the articles in this special issue contain a discussion between Sebastian Murken and Ashiq Ali Shah (Kahlili et al., 2002; Murken & Shah, 2002). In the dialogue, Murken is speaking from an a-religious framework as a clinical psychologist and professor of the psychology of religion in Western Germany; Shah is speaking from a fixed “religious psychology” framework as a Muslim psychologist from Malaysia. Here are a few excerpts from their discussion.

*Shah:* The Islamic approach to psychology focuses upon the Islamic principles and moral code of life as described in the Qur'an (the Revealed Book) and the Sunnah (the Sayings of the Prophet, SAW), and aims to achieve a balance (equilibrium) between the worldly and spiritual needs [...] Unlike a secular Western approach to psychology of religion [...] the Islamic approach to psychology examines and explains human mental processes, personality, and behaviors from an Islamic perspective; it is a religious psychology.

*Murken:* Modern sociology understands society as the result of major subsystems each with its own structure and internal logic. Some of the subsystems are shown in: [...] Religion, then, has no privileged position. [...] For the psychology of religion, as distinct from a religious or theological psychology, [...] the truth claims of religions are not matters of scientific inquiry.

*Shah:* In contrast, secularized individuals serving as prototypical research in the West use pure scientific empiricism. The consequences of this have included gay and lesbian marriages, older persons confined to old-age homes, premarital sex, children with unmarried parents, and crushing the weak and exploitation of others ...

*Murken:* Scientific methodology demands that the testing itself leaves the result open. For example, if one wants to explore the interrelation between religion and depression, a hypothesis could be about (a) religion-induced depression [...] [or] [...] (b) religion-induced resilience [...] Constructing a theory built on either hypothesis [...] would be supported by whichever evidence is better. This is obviously not possible if the issue has been preempted by working with a single unfalsifiable assumption.

Notice the relationship between what the two psychologists said to each other and the two graphic representations, one of a secular society and culture and one of a religious society and culture. Shah spoke about a closed system in which all aspects of the culture and society are subsumed within the religion. Compare this to what Murken said speaking from an open system in which religions are part of the set of aspects of the overall cultural milieu but neither subsume all else within them nor are placed above or below them. The contrast between these two systems does not mean that there is no discussion in the closed system. In the closed system in which all

things are subsumed within the religion, there may still be plenty of openness and debate but only within the boundaries of the theological system. The two worldviews are fundamentally incompatible.

Understanding differences such as these, which allow stating of points of view but not movement toward common ground, enables us to better understand why it can be difficult for genuine dialogue to occur between, e.g., a strict fundamentalist believer in any closed system and a person discussing from an open system. In the open system, all options are on the table and open for debate, evaluation based on evidence, and adoption or rejection as the parties think wise. In the closed system, all options are off the table except those that conform to the rules derived from the scriptures deemed sacred and true. I have found it almost impossible to have genuine dialogue when the two parties are so concocted. When they have been so, they could engage in verbal combat, but they could not discuss, converse, or mutually evaluate. But discussing, conversing, and evaluating are requirements, not options, if humans wish to live in peace with each other, their religions, and their cultures in groups of two or more. (See Green, 2010, and Tint, 2010, for elaboration on the need for and implementation of effective dialogue.)

### **The Test of Evidence is Non-Optional**

A related problem comes to the surface when someone wishes to make a supernatural attribution about the process involved in a behavior or experience, such as one person showing loving behavior to another, a momentary state of consciousness felt as divine, or anxiety reduction following someone's prayer that he or she would feel less anxious. It is not uncommon that people who have developed the habit of talking about events in the world in terms of God or "spiritual" language, or people who believe that God or "spiritual forces" cause all things, may attribute a loving act, a felt "divine" experience, or anxiety reduction following prayer for lower anxiety, as due to God's activity. Such reasoning and interpretations of events may help people live more comfortably than they otherwise might. However, they have no place in science or a good understanding of the processes that mediate these behaviors because they are not subject to the test of evidence. The alternative is not an option.

This does not mean that psychology is biased against religion, any more than it means that psychology is biased towards religion. Psychology, like any science, is in principle neutral and orthogonal to religious and spiritual issues (Paloutzian, 2017a), even though some individual psychologists may show a pro-religious or an anti-religious bias. That is, the ideal of psychology, just as the ideal for any science, is that it is bound by the rules of logic and evidence – not by personal or traditional preference, pre-held beliefs or lack of them, or anything else that may foster improper bias. If we hypothesize that a certain effect is due to the operation of certain processes, it has to be possible for us to conduct research in such a way that the process can be disconfirmed based on the evidence. But the operation of a supernatural being cannot be so assessed, thus can never be confirmed or denied based on the kinds of evidence and observations available to science. One way to explain this is to say that, e.g., a scientific equation does not work if one step in the equation contains the proposition “this part of the process is due to God’s activity,” because a proposition so stated is not subject to evidence to either support or refute it. Thus conclusions about supernatural or “spiritual” processes are not knowledge, they are attributions. Therefore, although the psychology of religion studies the psychological processes involved in all religious believing, behaving, experiencing, and attribution-making, it cannot study the operation or nonoperation of supernatural or “spiritual” agents. (See Paloutzian, 2017a, for fuller explanation.)

## Conclusion and Directions

By avoiding the above two intellectual errors and by rooting the future of our research in a meaning systems model and the multilevel interdisciplinary paradigm, we automatically invoke both qualitative and quantitative methods that in combination get at the depth of knowledge that we need. This will enable us to formulate a genuine international and trans-religious psychology of religion whose intellectual reach can expand the globe. Thus, we will not need one psychology of religion for North American Christians, another for Arabic Muslims, and others for Brazilians of various religious stripes. We will have created a comprehensive theoretical framework that goes

psychologically to the deepest levels of meanings. The consequence could be a trans-religious psychological understanding of religiousness and a-religiousness globally. This is the task for the next generation of psychology researchers. And Brazil has already taken a step in this direction (Esperandio & Marques, 2015). Further, our modern tools can help this happen. With internet conferencing and instant communication at our fingertips, we have been given a passport to collaboration (Au, Hertwig, Klatzky; Tang, 2016). We can collaborate in real time from Brazil to California! The possibilities are beyond the wildest imagination of scholars only a generation ago. Let us begin.

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