

### Defining Religion: Is It Possible?

We have asked **some very** basic questions about the definition of religion and **come away** without the kind of answers that truly satisfy our scientific curiosity. Are we now to resort to that popular and vague saying, “I don’t know how to define it, but I know it when I see it”? Unhappily, this is not scientifically gratifying, and we cannot agree with such a proposition. The famous theologian Paul Tillich (1957) strongly believed that we need to clarify our muddled thinking about religion. He observed:

There is hardly a word in the religious language, both theological and popular, which is subject to more misunderstandings, distortions, and questionable definitions than the word “faith.” . . . It confuses, misleads, creates alternatively skepticism and fanaticism, intellectual resistance and emotional surrender, rejection of genuine religion and subjection to substitutes. (p. ix)

Despite his unhappiness with the terminology, Tillich (1957) could not find a substitute for “the reality to which the term ‘faith’” (p. ix) refers, and he devoted a volume to its exposition. We are confronted with a similar task, but our method and approach are different, and we hope that they will help to clarify Tillich’s “reality.”

Social scientists and religionists have teased out every abstraction, nuance, and implication in each word in any definition of religion that has ever been offered. We therefore agree with the sociologist J. Milton Yinger (1967) that “any definition of religion is likely to be satisfactory only to its author” (p. 18). Nevertheless, in a later book, Yinger (1970) struggled with the problem of definition in a very scholarly manner for some 23 pages. It may have been similar frustration that much earlier caused a noted psychologist of religion, George Coe (1916), to state:

I purposely refrain from giving a formal definition of religion . . . partly because definitions carry so little information as to facts; partly because the history of definitions of religion makes it almost certain that any fresh attempts at definition would necessarily complicate these introductory chapters. (p. 13)

We do not feel that the situation has basically changed in the nearly 90 years since Coe took his stand. We can, however, take the advice of another early scholar (Dresser, 1916) who claimed that “religion, like poetry and most other living things, cannot be defined. But some characteristic marks may be given” (p. 441). Let us therefore avoid the pitfalls of unproductive, far-ranging, grandly theoretical definitions of religion. We are simply not ready for them. Many are available in the literature, but the highly general, vague, and abstract manner in which they are usually stated reduces their usefulness either for illuminating the concept of religion or for undertaking research. Our purpose is to enable our readers to understand the variety of ways in which psychologists have defined religion.

Indeed, we are in a quandary. We deal largely in this book with the Western religious tradition (because that is where most research has been conducted), but we are saying that religion performs many functions for many different people. Though these functions may vary greatly in terms of their surface appearance, at their core we feel they represent the same elemental human needs and roles, about which we will have more to say. In order to understand the research on these issues, we utilize a class of definitions that at least yield clear criteria: “operational definitions,” which we discuss in detail later in this chapter. This is not

to say that there may not be debate about what operational definitions really represent, since their selection should be based on theory.

### Spirituality and/or Religion?

“Spirit” and “spiritual” are words which are constantly used and easily taken for granted by all writers upon religion—more constantly and easily, perhaps, than any of the other terms in the mysterious currency of faith. (Underhill, 1933, p. 1)

This observation is as significant today as it was 70 years ago. After reviewing the available literature on spirituality in 1993, Spilka, in his frustration, claimed that spirituality is “a word that embraces obscurity with passion” (p. 1). He further labeled the concept “fuzzy.” Though Daniel Helminiak (1987, 1996) has written a number of impressive scholarly psychological/philosophical treatises on spirituality, psychologists of religion have not taken his theoretical guidance and provided the kind of objective assessment we are stressing here. On the other hand, Gorsuch and Miller (1999) have suggested that the term “spirituality” can have meaning in the psychology of religion if clear operational definitions are made.

In the past decade, “spirituality” has become a popular word. It is now common to refer to “spirituality” instead of referring to “religion,” but without drawing any clear distinction between them. This has been sufficiently the case in treatment issues. Gorsuch and Miller (1999) employ “spirituality” predominantly in this practical sense. They review classical measures used within the psychology of religion as measures of spirituality. Little changes except that “spirituality” is substituted for “religion.” This substitution has also occurred in many assessment scales, in which, again, the term “spirituality” is used as a synonym for “religion.” There is some justification for the usage of these two terms as synonyms, since research has shown that most people see them as highly similar. When people report valuing religion, they also claim to value spirituality (Spilka & McIntosh, 1996; Zinnbauer, Pargament, Cowell, & Scott, 1996).

#### Psychometric Problems in Measuring Spirituality

This confusion further applies to the labels used to identify the various “spirituality” measures, as they are usually not distinguished from each other. Thus, for example, there are both objective and subjective measures of “spiritual well-being” (Bufford, Paloutzian, & Ellison, 1991; Ellison, 1983; Ellison & Smith, 1991; Moberg, 1984). There is also a multidimensional Spiritual Gifts Inventory, although it clearly needs more work (Ledbetter & Foster, 1989). Genia (1991, 1997) has offered a two-factor Spiritual Experience Index that looks promising. Unhappily, few of those who have constructed these scales provide data on relationships among their measures and others purporting to assess different or similar indices of spirituality. In addition, correlations with well-known scales of religiosity are lacking. With regard to the latter concern, Genia (1997), who provides much useful information, reports correlations as high as .84 between the Spiritual Support factor of her measure and a widely used measure of Intrinsic religion as defined by Allport. (See this chapter’s Appendix for an explanation of correlation, and Chapter 2 for a discussion of Intrinsic religion as defined by Allport.) Given associations of this magnitude, one may properly ask what the difference is between Genia’s measure of Spiritual Support and Allport’s Intrinsic religion. Clearly, we need much more assessment of these instruments.

### **The Spirituality–Religion Debate**

The last few years have witnessed a growing response to the question of spirituality that draws some distinctions between spirituality and religion. It is as if a “critical mass” of vague definitions has been reached. This has stimulated a new concern with the conceptualization of spirituality that directs our thinking toward its objective assessment and application through research (Hill et al., 2000; Hood, 2000b; Miller, 1999; Pargament, 1999; Pargament & Mahoney, 2002; Zinnbauer et al., 1997; Zinnebauer, Pargament, & Scott, 1999). Many current thinkers are therefore attempting to create theoretical and operational definitions of spirituality that either distinguish it from personal religiosity or show how the two concepts are related.

A traditional distinction exists between being spiritual and being religious that can be used to enhance our use of both terms (Gorsuch, 1993). The connotations of “spirituality” are more personal than institutional, whereas the connotations of “religion” are more institutional, so spirituality is more psychological (and religion more sociological). In this usage, the two terms are not synonymous but distinct: Spirituality is about a person’s beliefs, values, and behavior, while religiousness is about the person’s involvement with a religious tradition and institution.

One may ask why the change from the term “religion” to the term “spirituality” is occurring now, rather than, for example, with the major research done in the early days of psychology. Two facts suggest a possible lead. The first is that only a minority of psychologists are religious in the classical sense of being affiliated with religious organizations, but many more see themselves as spiritual (Shafranske & Malony, 1985). This indicates that most psychologists, to whom religion is unimportant, have little wish to be identified with it. But spirituality is another matter; it can be part of one’s self-concept without a need to relate to any institution, or even to know anything about religion.

The second fact that may support the increasing use of the term “spirituality” is that, despite the negative reaction “religion” engenders in most psychologists, aspects of it have become recognized as important for major areas of life. These include the benefits of meditation (Benson, 1975; Benson & Stark, 1996), as well as the evidence that religious people are less likely to use illegal substances, abuse alcohol, or be sexually promiscuous (Gorsuch, 1988, 1995; Gorsuch & Butler, 1976). As a result, religious persons possess better physical health than those engaging in these undesirable actions (e.g., Larson et al., 1989).

Psychologists want what is good from spirituality, but, as noted above, they often do not want religion. A possible answer is that they can be spiritual without changing their views about religion. Some would say that this is “easy religion” or “cheap grace,” whereas others might claim that it is “separating the valuable from the superstitious.” Clearly, there is considerable debate regarding the potential separation of these concepts. Donahue (1998) forcefully claims that “there is no true spirituality apart from religion.” Pargament (1999) views the separatist trend with ambivalence, and offers guidance to prevent a polarization of these realms. Regardless of how the professionals phrase this issue, on the popular level the distinction may be sharpening, with spirituality the favored notion (Roof, 1993).

It is still an open question whether the practice of spirituality outside of religion can be adequately defined. If it can, will it then be found to relate to the same variables as religion? The proponents of Transcendental Meditation provide support that some effects of meditation are separate from those of religion (see Chapter 12), but this is a difficult area to research, for training people in a meditation style independent of a religion does not mean that

they practice meditation apart from their faith. No one knows at this point whether spirituality will be a more viable psychological construct than religion once it is operationally distinguished from religion.

### *Distinguishing Spirituality from Religion: Is It Possible?*

Defining “spirituality” in a manner distinct from “religion” can start from the past meanings of “spirituality,” which is an ancient and complex term. In Western thought, it has been a part of classical dualistic thinking that pits the material world against the spiritual world. The former consists of things we can see, hear, smell, or touch, whereas the latter consists of elements that exist in the mental world but can at best only be inferred from the material world. Non-Western thinkers have seen these two areas as more closely intertwined, but spirit still has the sense of being immaterial. For example, in Thailand a house must be provided for the spirits of a parcel of land before it can be used (many Thai restaurants in the United States have such houses); although the spirits themselves dwell outside of ordinary experience by the human senses, they must still be appeased by a physical dwelling.

A contemporary illustration of setting the spiritual apart comes from the way church governance is distinguished within the Disciples of Christ, the Christian Church movement, or the Churches of Christ (as this group of Protestant congregations is variously known). In these congregations, there are two governing bodies: the “deacons” and the “elders.” The deacons are concerned with the material aspects of congregational life, including physical property and taking food to the needy. The elders are responsible for the spiritual welfare of the church. This includes taking the comforts of the faith to the sick and grieving, and encouraging activities that enhance the members’ relationships to God. In other words, the elders are concerned with the inner being of the person, and the deacons with the more worldly aspects of existence. Members of these congregations never have a problem defining the “spiritual” matters of the congregations. But what these church members know, the psychology of religion (including the psychology of spirituality) needs to spell out—that is, to define operationally.

Another approach to defining spirituality from classical usage is to identify it with “spiritual disciplines.” These include such acts as prayer and meditation, but have also included fasting and doing penance for sins. For example, monks retire to a monastery to practice such disciplines, in order to lead a more spiritual life than is commonly possible outside the monastery. With the traditional Disciples of Christ (etc.) usage noted above and the set of spiritual disciplines, we could just divide the psychology of religion into personal practices (the spiritual) and communal practices (the religious). That is, we could employ both terms but would not use them synonymously.

There are other ways of defining spirituality that shift the construct to new grounds, and so allow testing of whether religion and spirituality are just interchangeable terms. Here is one: “Spirituality is the quest for understanding ourselves in relationship to our view of ultimate reality, and to live in accordance with that understanding” (Gorsuch, 2002, p. 8). It resembles Tillich’s (1957) notions as presented above, and many would say that Tillich was more concerned with spirituality than with faith or religion. Some differences between spirituality in this definition and a definition of religion include the following:

- Spirituality does not require an institutional framework.
- Spirituality is personal.

- A spiritual person is deeply concerned about value commitments.
- A person can be spiritual without a deity (although some would say that the “view of ultimate reality” always includes what Alcoholics Anonymous refers to as a “higher power”).
- Religiousness is a subset of spirituality, which means that religiousness invariably involves spirituality, but that there may be nonreligious spirituality as well.

In the current psychology of religion, there is no common acceptance of any of these positions on the meaning of “spirituality” as compared to “religion.” Furthermore, it is not our intention in this text to force any distinction on the profession. Instead, our point here is that the use of these two terms is highly ambiguous. Only by checking what an investigator actually measures can one be sure what, regardless of the investigator’s usage of these terms, is being researched.

### Defining Religion Operationally

It is not what psychologists claim to define as religious, but what they actually use to measure it in their research, that is crucial. “Operational definitions” literally focus on “operations”—the methods and procedures used to assess something. They are the experimental manipulations plus the measures and instruments employed. With respect to religion, what does it mean to be religious? How do we indicate religiousness? Operationally, we often identify people as religious if they are members of a church or other congregation, attend religious services, read the Bible or other sacred writings, peruse congregational bulletins, contribute money to religious causes, observe religious holidays and fast days, pray frequently, say grace before meals, and accept religiously based diet restrictions, among other possibilities. Many psychologists also look to the beliefs that the devout express, as well as the experiences they report. Frequently, respondents fill out questionnaires about these expressions, and the questions they answer are the operational definitions for that study. There are a great many such operations that illustrate commitment to one’s faith.

Basically, operational definitions tell us what the researcher means when religious language is used. For example, suppose we desire to evaluate the degree to which individuals believe in “fundamentalist” doctrines. We might then administer a questionnaire specifically designed to obtain agreement or disagreement with such principles. The Hunsberger Fundamentalism Scale might be selected, and we could report its scores for the sample tested (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992). Fundamentalism is thus operationally defined by this measuring instrument. Fulton, Gorsuch, and Maynard (1999) have used a somewhat different scale that they call Fundamentalism; using this scale provides a second operational definition of fundamentalism. When the same term is associated with two measures, it is important to examine both measures closely to determine how similar and how different their items are. Throughout this volume, we emphasize operational definitions of different aspects or forms of faith. This is the only way we can understand religion from a scientific standpoint.

The quality of an operational definition is evaluated by two criteria, both of which are discussed more fully in the Appendix to this chapter. The first is “reliability.” Once reliability is established, we know that a scale is measuring something consistently—but does it measure what we want it to? If so, the scale has “validity.” The validity of most psychology-of-religion scales is based on an expert’s evaluation of the content of the items (so-called “content validity”). For example, if we had a set of items all referring to whether or not the

Bible was dictated by God, then the scale questions would be considered valid as a Biblical Inerrancy Scale. But those same items would be invalid if they were used to measure Christian commitment, since many Christians hold that the Bible was *inspired* rather than literally *dictated* by God.

Gorsuch (1984) suggests that we psychologists have been quite successful in evaluating personal religion. That is, the scales developed for this purpose generally show both good reliability and good validity. In his eyes, while this is a boon, it carries with it a number of banes. Success itself is a bane if it prevents us from developing techniques other than questionnaires. Concurrently, another bane is that we may spend too much time and effort dealing with measurement rather than with the phenomena that should be assessed. Too many psychologists who begin to study religion fail to learn what measures are already available, and too often call the same operations by several different labels.

Unfortunately, many modern-day writers are attempting to create not only theoretical but also operational definitions of spirituality that neither distinguish it from personal religiosity nor show how the two concepts are related. Many aspects of spirituality are well measured by traditional psychology-of-religion scales. Any new scales should show empirically how they are superior to current scales.

The fact that we have, so far, mentioned only questionnaires does not mean that there are no other ways of gathering information about the place of religion in the lives of those we study. For example, valuable data can be gained from interviews. These need to be carefully developed and skillfully administered in a standardized manner. They can be of special significance in the study of religious experience. Sometimes projective tests, such as drawing pictures of God, have been successfully employed.

Defining and observing religious behavior (e.g., how often people pray, the nature of their prayers, when they are said, etc.) can tell us much about one's personal faith. Methodologically, we want to gather data with procedures that (1) are consistent and (2) clearly assess what we want to measure. These two points capture the ideas of reliability and validity, respectively, which are the cornerstones of good psychological measurement.

### Qualitative and Quantitative Research Methods

"Qualitative" data collection ranges from writing the biography of a religious person to chatting with several people about a religious topic, conducting interviews with open-ended questions, or having people tell a story about a picture they are given. For example, determining what people do in certain specific settings may call for a novel procedure. This could include observing missionary activity in a native village undergoing cultural change, or the behavior of congregants during a church service (Wolcott, 1994). In contrast, "quantitative" data collection techniques might ask people to rate how strongly they agree with a particular statement or to report how often they attend worship services. The major distinction is that quantitative measures give scores directly, but qualitative data must be processed by a rater (or, more often these days, by a computer program) for information.

A similar distinction can be made between qualitative and quantitative analyses of data. Qualitative treatment can involve a more or less subjective review that enables a scholar to make sense of the information and draw conclusions. A researcher employing quantitative analysis uses statistics such as means, standard deviations, significance levels, and correlations (defined in the Appendix to this chapter) in order to draw conclusions.

Although quantitative methods have been typical of data collection and analysis in the sciences as well as in the psychology of religion, there is no doubt that they miss something. A description of a sunset in terms of physics is quantitative, but none would argue that a painting of that sunset is replaced by the physical description. Physics has never claimed to contain the whole of human experience regarding physical phenomena; nor does the psychology of religion claim to contain the whole of human experience regarding religion. Just as a personal experience with a sunset is meaningful in addition to the physics of a sunset, so a personal religious experience cannot be replaced by the psychology of that experience. In like manner, psychology does not cover the history of religions, the biographies of religious leaders, nor the anthropology of religions. The psychology of religion is an application of scientific methods to enhance our psychological understanding of religion.

The acceptability of both quantitative and qualitative methods within the psychology of religion depends on whether they can be shown to meet the scientific criteria of reliability and validity. For example when Ponton and Gorsuch (1988) used an instrument called the Quest scale in Venezuela, its reliability was low, so the authors were hesitant to draw any conclusions from it.

**Qualitative measures also need to demonstrate reliability.** Do different persons or judges agree in their observations and/or interpretations? If they reach different conclusions as to whether a person feels God's presence during meditation, then they not only do not communicate well with each other; there is no reliability.

Once it has been shown that the qualitative or quantitative method is reliable, validity must then be established. Usually "content validity" is used, as noted earlier. This means that psychologists examining the method agree that the items or interview or rating criteria are appropriate for whatever descriptive term is employed.

Since both qualitative and quantitative methods are acceptable if they meet the standards of being reliable and valid, why are quantitative methods so popular? One important problem is that **reliable qualitative methods are rather expensive to use.** Consider the question of how a victim becomes a forgiving person after major harm has been done to that person. Using an interview-based qualitative approach, a researcher might ask each of 100 people to describe a time when a person harmed them, and then, in their own words, to explain how they forgave that person and how their religious faith was a part of that process. The interviewing would take about 300 hours (including setting up the interviews, doing the interviews, finding new people to reduce the "no-shows," transcribing the interviews, etc.). Then the interviews would need to be rated by two people trained to use the same language to describe the processes that were reported, and **differences would need to be reconciled with the help of a third rater (all this would take another 300 hours).** At this point, a total of 600 hours would be needed for collecting and scoring the data.

By contrast, in quantitative measurement utilizing a questionnaire, a group of 100 people might take 2 hours to fill out the questionnaire. Scoring these responses would take another 4 hours. The quantitative approach would thus take an estimated 6 hours, versus 600 hours for the qualitative approach. Which procedure would you rather use in a research project?

In some cases, qualitative methods are the only ones we currently have to tap into the psychological processes being studied. It is, for example, difficult to understand children's concepts of God without using their drawings of God, which are then rated. And in models where a person makes a choice, it is also a problem to find out what options *spontaneously* occur to that person without utilizing at least somewhat qualitative methods. When quali-

tative research that has demonstrated reliability and validity is available, we include it in this text, just as we do quantitative research that has demonstrated reliability and validity.

## PERSPECTIVES ON THE PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION

### Psychology in Context

The sociocultural context is the external foundation for religious beliefs, attitudes, values, behavior, and experience. The essential psychological point here is that psychologists of religion do not study religion *per se*; they study people in relation to their faith, and what this faith may mean to other facets of their lives. Whereas sociologists and anthropologists look to the external setting in which religion exists, we psychologists focus on the individual. Ours is an internal perspective. Even while we adopt the psychological stance, we must never lose sight of the fact that people cannot really be separated from their personal and social histories, and that these exist in relation to group and institutional life. Families, schools, and work are part of the "big picture," and we cannot abstract a person from these influences. They constitute a large part of what we discuss in the following chapters.

### The Objective/Empirical Position

From what has been said above about the scientific and empirical viewpoint, it is obvious that this is the perspective we authors take in this volume. We desire to minimize subjectivity by stressing objective methods of investigation and research. As also noted above, psychologists must be flexible in creating appropriate instruments to measure the variables we select for research. Our primary concern is to obtain data that can be objectively treated, quantitatively analyzed, and confirmed when the studies are repeated.

Quantification within this framework invariably means that findings will be statistically analyzed. Ideally, we would like to phrase our results in terms of causes and effects. This would, however, entail the construction of experiments in which independent, dependent, and control variables are rigorously defined operationally. Unfortunately, the psychological aspects of religion have rarely been amenable to such treatment. Since we may not be able to construct experiments, we can sometimes conduct "quasi-experimental" research, in which we study naturally occurring groups (Batson, Schoenrade, & Ventis, 1993; Cook & Campbell, 1979). Though there are many different quasi-experimental research designs, an example for the psychology of religion might compare two seemingly equivalent groups of churchgoers; however, the members of only one of these groups might have had religious mystical experiences. Differences between the two groups might then be assessed. Work of this nature has been undertaken (Spilka, Ladd, McIntosh, & Milmoie, 1996).

The dominant methodology used by psychologists of religion is "associational." For instance, the fact that couples who take their children to church have more religious children does not necessarily mean that attending church produces religious children. It could be the modeling of religion by the parents in the home that is important, or the social networks created through church attendance. All we know is that the variables are associated.

With other variables, a correlation coefficient may be used to describe the association. This approach may tell us that our personal religious measures vary together, meaning that if one changes, so does the other. If engaging in prayer (Variable 1) makes people feel better



(Variable 2), it usually means that the more they pray, the better they feel. Technically, maybe the better they feel, the more they pray. Since we use theory and evidence to decide which choice is probably true, the data tell us that people pray much more when they are in distress. This could be a simplification, for there are likely to be people for whom an extremely high frequency of praying could reflect psychological problems. Under such circumstances, it might be wiser to say that "on the average," as the frequency of prayer increases, so does one's feeling of well-being.

The computation of correlations is probably the most widely employed statistical method used in the empirical psychology of religion. But some readers may be inexperienced with correlation coefficients and the factor analyses that are often used with them. These are explained in the Appendix to this chapter, along with other essential concepts for understanding the many research findings we present in this book.

## A FRAMEWORK FOR STUDYING THE PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION

In each succeeding edition of this book, we have tried to make our framework for understanding the psychology of religion more inclusive. The attributional approach that we employed in earlier editions is now subsumed under a more general perspective that stresses a search for meaning. For all religious people, religion is indeed a struggle to comprehend their place in the scheme of things and what this entails for their relations with the world and others. Though this frame of reference is applicable to all of the chapters that follow, those dealing with religion and biology (Chapter 3) and with religion, coping, and adjustment (Chapter 15) are probably most explicit in its utilization.

Despite the serious problems of definition with which we wrestled earlier, our approach assumes that religion is truly a worldwide phenomenon. Invariably, behavior, experience, and belief express different aspects of this complex unity wherever it is found. As we indicate in Chapter 3, genetic and evolutionary arguments and data are part of this problem. On the level of psychology, we ask what human characteristics appear to be universally applicable, in one of the three general realms of cognition, motivation, and social life. Our framework suggests that these three realms offer us the directions necessary for a rather "grand" psychological theory for understanding the role of religion in human life. When we look to cognition, we are concerned with meaning. Motivation focuses us on the need of people to exercise control over themselves and their environment. Social life, which we encapsulate in the concept of "sociality," recognizes that people necessarily exist within relationships. They must relate to others to survive and prosper. In other words, people need people.

### The Need for Meaning

Aristotle's dictum "All men by nature desire to know" (McKeon, 1941, p. 689) set the stage for a host of philosophers and psychologists to stress the importance of knowledge in coping with the world. In the psychological literature, the concept of meaning has been tied not only to knowledge, but also to a variety of other overlapping (if not identical) notions, such as "information processing" and "cognitive structure." Though there is a kind of scientific vagueness to the idea of "meaning," no other word seems to capture as well its inherent significance, and thus we employ the term without concern. In essence, people need to make

sense out of the world in order to live; it must be made meaningful. When we turn to religion, we focus on higher-level cognitions and some understanding of ourselves and our relationship to others and the world. The result is meaning—the cognitive significance of sensory and perceptual stimulation and information to us.

### • *The Attributional Aspect of Meaning*

For over 40 years, attribution theory has been a staple of social psychology (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Heider, 1958; Hewstone, 1983). In the mid-1980s, it became a significant basis for research in the psychology of religion (Spilka, Shaver, & Kirkpatrick, 1985). Attribution theory is concerned with explanations—primarily causal explanations about people, things, and events. These are expressed in statements and ideas that assign certain roles and influences to various situational and dispositional factors. For instance, we might attribute a person's getting lung cancer to being exposed to the smoking of coworkers, to his or her own smoking, or to the view that "God works in mysterious ways." All of these are attributions. Research examining such meanings and their ramifications became the cornerstone of cognitive social psychology, and attributional approaches were soon extended to explain how people understand emotional states and much of what happens to them and to others (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). As an effort to acquire new knowledge, the attributional process appears to be a first step in making things meaningful (Kruglanski, Hasmel, Maides, & Schwartz, 1978). Among the factors that may be involved in understanding the kinds of attributions people make are situational and personal-dispositional influences; the nature of the event to be explained (whether it is positive, negative, or neutral); and the event domain (e.g., medical, social, economic). We will also want to know what cues are present in the situation. For example, does the event take place in a church, on a mountaintop, or in a business office? In like manner, when we turn to personal-dispositional concerns, we may need to get information on the attributor's background, personality, attitudes, language strengths and weaknesses, cognitive inclinations, and other biases. Research Box 1.1 presents a representative attributional study in the psychology of religion.

### Religion and the Search for Meaning

Argyle (1959) claims that "a major mechanism behind religious beliefs is a purely cognitive desire to understand" (p. 57). Similarly, Clark (1958) asserts that "religion more than any other human function satisfies the need for meaning in life" (p. 419). A number of sociologists have further conceptualized "religion as a form of knowledge . . . which answers pre-existent and eternal problems of meaning" (Budd, 1973, p. 79). On one level, religion fills in the blanks in our knowledge of life and the world, and offers us a sense of security. This is especially true when we are confronted with crisis and death. Religion is therefore a normal, natural, functional development whereby "persons are prepared intellectually and emotionally to meet the non-manipulable aspects of existence positively by means of a reinterpretation of the total situation" (Bernhardt, 1958, p. 157).

### The Need for Control

Like the idea of "meaning," the idea of "control" has a long history in both philosophy and psychology. Control in the sense of power is central in the philosophies of Hobbes and

### Research Box 1.1. General Attribution Theory for the Psychology of Religion: The Influence of Event Character on Attributions to God (Spilka & Schmidt, 1983a)

This research focused on the components of events that occur to people. When seeking explanations, is a person influenced by (1) whether the event happens to oneself or others; (2) how important it is; (3) whether it is positive or negative; and (4) what its domain is—economic, social, or medical? Given these possible influences, the emphasis of this study was on the degree to which attributions are made to God.

A total of 135 youths from introductory psychology classes and from a church participated in the study. Twelve short stories were written to depict various social, economic, and medical occurrences. Of the four stories in each of these domains, two described minor to moderate incidents, and two described important happenings. One of each pair was positive, and one was negative. In half of the stories, the referent person was the responder; the other half of the stories referred to someone else. The participants were thus dealing with variations in incident domain, plus the dimensions of importance, whether the occurrence was positive or negative, and whether it was personal or impersonal. In addition, each participant was able to make attributions to (1) the characteristics of the person in the story; (2) possible others, even if not present in the story; (3) the role of chance; (4) God; or (5) the personal faith of the individual in the story. Lastly, two experiments were constructed. In the first, all of the participants filled out the forms in a school setting; in the second study, half the participants were in a church and half in school. This was an attempt to determine situational influences.

No situational differences were found, but all of the other conditions yielded significance. Attributions to God were mostly made for occurrences that were medical, positive, and important. Many significant interactions among these factors occurred, and though the personal–impersonal factor per se was not statistically significant, it was in its relationships to the other effects. Other research on attributions to God has revealed similar influences (Gorsuch & Smith, 1983).

Nietzsche. Reid (1969) spoke of power as one of the basic human desires. Adler termed it “an intrinsic ‘necessity of life’” (quoted in Vyse, 1997, p. 131). Though the ideal in life is *actual* control, the need to perceive personal mastery is often so great that the *illusion* of control will suffice. Lefcourt (1973) even suggests that this illusion “may be the bedrock on which life flourishes” (p. 425). Baumeister (1991) believes the subjective sense of personal efficacy to be the essence of control.

### The Attributional Aspect of Control

We have noted above that the process of attribution reflects a search for meaning, a need to know. It also represents a need for mastery and control. One of the central figures in attribution theory and research, Harold Kelley, stated: “The theory describes processes that operate as if the individual were motivated to attain a cognitive mastery of the causal structure of his environment” (Kelley, 1967, p. 193). Especially when threatened with harm or pain, all higher organisms seek to predict and/or control the outcomes of the events that affect them

(Seligman, 1975). This fact has been linked by attribution theorists and researchers with novelty, frustration or failure, lack of control, and restriction of personal freedom (Berlyne, 1960; Wong, 1979; Wong & Weiner, 1981; Wortman, 1976). It may be that people gain a sense of control by making sense out of what is happening and being able to predict what will occur, even if the result is undesirable.

### *Religion and the Need for Control*

We have seen that religion helps people make sense out of their personal worlds by offering them meaning for virtually every life situation, particularly those that are most distressing, such as death and dying. Often when people obtain such "information," they feel that they have a measure of control over their lives. Various techniques strengthen a person's feeling of mastery—for example, prayer and participation in religious rituals and ceremonies. An argument can be made that religious ritual and prayer are mechanisms for enhancing the sense of self-control and control of one's world. Gibbs (1994) claims that supernaturalism arises when secular control efforts fail. Vyse (1997) further shows how lack of control relates to the development of and belief in superstition and magic. Indeed, the historic interplay of magic and religion has often been viewed as a response to uncertainty and helplessness.

Earlier we have noted the remarks of Lefcourt (1973) and Baumeister (1991) with regard to the importance of the illusion of control. We have further noted that the conception of control that is personally significant is subjective. Many times in life, people must recognize that their secular attempts at control are limited (e.g., when a death is impending). When such events occur, people need that illusory, subjective sense of control—and they frequently turn to their faith, possibly by prayer, to regain the feeling that they are doing something that may work. The subjective feeling of control is thus enhanced. They hope that turning to the source of ultimate power, in whatever way they define that source, will work. The notion of mastery is often powerful, however, and though it may not be objectively efficient, there is no doubt that it can offer people the strength they need to succeed.

## Sociality: The Need for Relationships

### *Defining Sociality*

A truly fundamental principle is that we humans cannot live without others. We are conceived and born in relationship and interdependence, and, throughout our entire lives, connections and interactions with others are indispensable to life. "Sociality" refers to behaviors that relate organisms to one another, and that keep an individual identified with a group (Brewer, 1997). Included here are expressions of social support, cooperation, adherence to group standards, attachment to others, altruism, and many other actions that maintain effectively functioning groups. Faith systems accomplish these goals for many people, and in return the cultural order embraces religion.

### *Religion and Sociality*

Religion connects individuals to each other and their groups; it socializes members into a community, and concurrently suppresses deviant behavior. As Lumsden and Wilson (1983) put it, religion is a "powerful device by which people are absorbed into a tribe and psychi-

cally strengthened" (p. 7). In this way, both religious bodies and the societies of which they are a part strengthen themselves in numbers and importance.

There is a circular pattern in this linking of social life to faith. Religion fosters social group unity, which further strengthens religious sentiments. Current data show that church members possess larger social support networks than nonmembers do; in addition, there is more positive involvement in intrafamily relationships among the religiously committed than among their less religious peers (Pargament, 1997). Many of these observations have been attributed to enhanced feelings of social belonging and integration into a community of like-minded thinkers. This may mean that church members and those reared in churchgoing families also join more social groups than nonmembers in later life. Data support this inference (Graves, Wang, Mead, Johnson, & Klag, 1998).

Moreover, the importance of marriage and reproduction is invariably stressed by religious traditions (Hoult, 1958). Expectations to marry and have children probably influence reproductive success in couples where both spouses attend the same church, as such couples generally show high birth rates (Moberg, 1962). There is a strong need for new research in this area, as there may be much variation across different religious bodies. It does seem to be true of some growing conservative groups, such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (also known as the Mormons). This mutually reinforcing pattern is also likely to limit access to those whose religious beliefs differ, and could contribute to relatively high divorce rates plus low marital satisfaction when people of diverse religious affiliations marry (Lehrer & Chiswick, 1993; Levinger, 1979; Shortz & Worthington, 1994).

One may thus view religious faith as strengthening ingroup bonds, welfare, and positive social evaluation. In addition, religion appears to eventuate in heightened reproductive and genetic potential. Obviously, religious affiliation opens important social channels for interpersonal approval and integration into society on many levels.

### Framework: Directions and Implications

Our framework has been presented in this chapter in an introductory and rather condensed manner. In the following chapters (particularly Chapters 3 and 15, as noted earlier), these ideas are expanded. Relative to biology, reference is made to the evolutionary and genetic possibilities underlying our scheme. When all of these framework views are put together, the result is a general psychological theory of religion that is quite useful in understanding how people relate to their faith.

## OVERVIEW

This chapter's brief introduction to the psychology of religion has attempted to distinguish the major dimensions of the discipline. Just as a standard introductory textbook in psychology overviews the major facets of the field, each of the areas cited in this chapter has resulted in volumes that analyze and treat the specifics of the issue in question.

We have also presented an orientation that stresses theory and objective measurement. We seek knowledge that is both public and reproducible. Our aim is to achieve a scientific circumscription of the psychology of religion, and to convey the importance of such a framework. The next chapter describes this approach in further detail. When this effort has been

completed, we show how religion relates to biology, as well as to individual development throughout the lifespan; describe the experiential expressions of religion; and finally discuss the significance of faith in social life, coping, adjustment, and mental disorder. Simply put, religion is a central feature of human existence, the psychological appreciation of which we try to communicate in these pages.

From a scientific point of view, the most important feature of our integrating framework is that it is testable. In brief, measures tapping the need for meaning, control, and sociality should relate positively to religious commitment, and we hypothesize that they will evidence stronger genetic involvement than religious devotion currently demonstrates. Statistically removing these needs from data supporting the genetic component in religion should significantly reduce indications of direct genetic influence on religion, or even cause them to disappear. Such findings cannot prove that religion totally originates from the needs specified here. However, they will speak strongly to the idea that religion is a powerful factor in meeting human needs for meaning, control, and sociality. Needless to say, the expression of these needs will be shaped by culture.

## APPENDIX: STATISTICAL PROCEDURES AND CONSIDERATIONS

As we have stated in the chapter text, this book emphasizes the empirical psychological study of religion. Frequent references are made throughout the book to various statistical procedures, the chief ones of which are correlation, factor analysis, and reliability and validity. To aid readers, we offer a brief explanation of these techniques.

### Correlation

"Correlation" is a procedure that determines the strength of a relationship between two variables. The statistical calculations result in a number called a "correlation coefficient." This number can range from  $-1.00$  through  $0$  to  $+1.00$ . A correlation of  $0$  means that there is no relationship. The higher the correlation coefficient, meaning the closer it is to either  $-1.00$  or  $+1.00$ , the stronger is the relationship between the two variables being studied. Correlations are important, for they imply prediction. Using the appropriate formulas, the researcher can use the correlation coefficient to predict how a person might respond in one area from how that individual reacts in another area. Of course, the closer the correlation coefficient is to either  $-1.00$  or  $+1.00$ , the stronger the predictions that can be made.

If the computed correlation coefficient is in the  $0$  to  $+1.00$  range, the association between the variables is said to be "positive." As the values of one of the variables increases, so do the values of the other variable. Stated differently, the scores of the two measures increase and decrease together. To illustrate, we know that perceptions of a loving God correlate positively with church attendance. The more one believes that God is loving, the greater is the likelihood that one attends church. If everyone who believed in a loving God always attended church, while none of those who did not believe in a loving God ever attended church, the correlation would be  $1.00$ . Of course, "always" and "never" leave out such possibilities as these: Illness might prevent some from attending church, despite believing in a loving God; a male atheist might go to church to "get in good with a very attractive girl"; and some people might always interpret the question differently than the rest of us do. So correlations never reach  $1.00$ , and in fact seldom reach  $.50$ .

Is a correlation of .50 worthwhile? Speaking in a probabilistic way, yes, it is. If we square the .50, we get .25, which might be interpreted roughly as a percentage that tells us we can predict something at 25% above chance level. If the correlation between church attendance and belief in a loving God computes at .50, we can predict at 25% above chance level the degree of such belief from knowing how often a person attends church.

Note that the relationship is not perfect. Part of the imperfection would result from inaccuracies in our measures. Our sample might contain people who attend church from once a year to once a week or even more frequently. We may fail to account for every response possibility in our question. Respondents may include under "church attendance" being at church suppers, attending board meetings, taking courses, and so on. Also, there are numerous other variables affecting church attendance, in addition to belief in a loving God. Still, the .50 correlation shows a meaningful relationship between the two indices.

If the coefficients are in the  $-0.1$  to  $-1.00$  range, the relationship between the variables is said to be "negative." This means that as the value of one of the variables increases, the other decreases. In other words, the scores of the two variables are related in opposite directions. For example, the variable of extrinsic religion may correlate negatively with self-esteem, so a person who rejects extrinsic religion is more likely to have higher self-esteem.

The psychology of religion has commonly found correlations of .20 between various aspects of religious belief or motivation. A .20 correlation is relatively low, but it may nevertheless be meaningful and useful.

The interpretation of a correlation coefficient is also a function of the size of the sample in which the relationship between the variables was calculated. The larger the sample, the smaller the coefficient that can be said to be "statistically significant." When a correlation is statistically significant, even though numerically low, it indicates an association that has a very low probability of arising on the basis of chance alone. When this probability is less than, say, 5% (or  $p < .05$ , as it is usually expressed), we are inclined to infer that the association (relationship) between the variables exists in the population; the variables are then assumed to be related. In other words, suppose we observe that intrinsic faith and the likelihood of having a religious mystical experience are positively correlated (e.g., .40). If the sample is large enough to show that this is a statistically significant correlation coefficient, we are likely to infer that the more one is intrinsically religious, the greater the chance that a person will have had or will have a religious mystical experience.

Finally, we must state that if a correlation is not statistically significant, the two variables are considered to be "independent" of each other; that is, they evidence a correlation that for all practical purposes is equal to 0. No meaningful relationship is said to exist.

## Factor Analysis

"Factor analysis" is a useful tool in deciding whether several variables measure a single construct or different things. Let us assume that we have administered six religious motivation items to 100 people. Should we keep the items separate, or should we add them together to give a single score for each person? Adding them together would give us a more simple description, but would we lose valuable information? Factor analysis might give us the answer.

Let us also assume that we have a large set of items. A subset of the items might intercorrelate well among themselves, but these questions might correlate little with those constituting another set that shows high correlations among its variables. For illustrative purposes, let us assume that the items in the first set are variations on the theme "I pray to commune with God." For that reason, factor analy-

sis might group them together, and we could label the set Intrinsic Religious Motivation. We would conclude that being intrinsically motivated leads to the responses on these items.

As for the second group of intercorrelated variables, which correlates poorly with the first set, we could group them together as well. A typical item is "I am religious so I can meet nice people." We might call these items Extrinsic Social Religious Motivation, for the motivation producing these responses is extrinsic to religion and revolves around a social benefit that can be gained from acting as if one were religious.

In this example, we have identified two factors of religious motivation, Intrinsic and Extrinsic Social, and we can measure each by scoring its items.

Factor analysis is a statistical procedure that does mathematically what we have just done logically. It groups together those variables that correlate most highly and calls their common element a factor. If there are several sets of items that can be represented by several factors, then factor analysis does so.

Factor analysis is used primarily in scale development to identify which items are sufficiently alike so that they might be scored together as an inventory and other items that might be tallied similarly for another scale. Obviously, if we have two variables, we have one correlation; if we have three variables, we have three intercorrelations. Given  $n$  variables, the formula  $n(n-1)/2$  tells us how many correlation coefficients there will be. Fifty items produces a table with 1,225 correlations. Examining 1,225 correlations to subjectively identify which go together and should be considered a factor would produce more eyestrain and headaches than factors.

Fortunately, today we have computers to do the complex calculations that explain the large numbers of correlations through a much smaller number of underlying factors. It is possible that five or six factors might result from the analysis of the 1,225 correlations among the 50 variables noted above. This approach was used by many of the researchers whose various dimensions of religion are discussed throughout the text.

A major danger in factor analysis lies in grouping together variables from different domains. A "domain" consists of an area within which the psychological principles are expected to be the same. For example, "belief" (defined as the probability that a statement is true) differs from "affect" (defined as emotions). The phrase "The saints believe in God and rejoice; the Devil believes in God and shudders" shows how a conclusion in one domain (belief in God) does not always generalize to another (affect). Factoring different domains together mixes "apples and oranges." One historical example is Allport's Religious Orientation scale (Allport & Ross, 1967). It mixed items from several domains—for example, religious motivation as to why one prays, and behaviors such as participating in worship services. It could not, therefore, aid in understanding the relationship between domains of religious motivation and religious behavior. When correlations were found between this scale and another variable, no one could tell whether it was associated with religious motivation for prayer, or worshipping, or both. (If both correlations and factor analysis are new topics for you, mark these sections and refer to them later when the discussion uses one of these constructs.)

## Reliability and Validity

As noted in the chapter text, there must be some assurance that psychology-of-religion measures really accomplish what they are intended to. We have briefly alluded to the two criteria of "validity" and "reliability."

Unfortunately, there are some very basic arguments about the possible discrepancy between "real life" and what the inventories tell us. Though we are unable to respond to this issue in detail, we do have reason to believe that questionnaires usually get at the information researchers seek. This last inference deals with the concept of validity: Does the test measure what it is supposed to measure?



Probably the best way of determining this is by employing the test to confirm what theory says it should confirm.

Validity presupposes reliability—namely, consistency in the measure's assessment. This consistency may occur over time, or over the test items when the scale has been administered only once. Do they all measure the same thing? If a test is reliable, it may still not be valid, but not vice versa. Reliability has been termed "poor person's validity." If one cannot demonstrate reliability, the questionnaire must be invalid, so this is a good place to start. (Though we refer primarily to questionnaires in this discussion, the other procedures mentioned in the chapter text may also yield reliability coefficients.)

Reliability and validity can be evaluated by a variety of statistical procedures akin to correlation, so we may speak of reliability and validity coefficients. For the former, we would like these to be above .75, but for research purposes sometimes we go as low as .60, and then try to find out how to improve scale reliability. For example, we may write more items, or edit and improve those in use. There are no guidelines for the size of validity coefficients. We simply start by hoping to have these attain statistical significance, and the higher they are, the better.

When we have a questionnaire that demonstrates good reliability, we term it a "scale." This generally refers to a set of items that are summed to give a score for that scale. But this label has other meanings in mathematics and the social sciences, so the interested reader should look to other sources and references for further information. Here we are concerned with the realm of "psychometrics," which treats issues of psychological measurement such as those just mentioned.

We have just touched on a few statistical and psychometric concepts among many that are pertinent to work in our area. To be a psychologist, especially an empirical researcher, means that one must become familiar with a wide variety of other statistical concepts and procedures. It is our hope that our presentations in this volume will not be too abstruse and difficult. You may want to make a list of psychometric and statistical terms that appear in these pages, and check them out in greater depth than we can do here.