USING PSYCHOLOGICAL MODELS TO EVALUATE HUMAN RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

The paper explores psychology in the context of its modal evaluation of religious experience and introduces readers to the psychological study of religion through a critical and reflective investigation of major psychological models to understanding religious beliefs, values and behaviour. The aim is to propose a psychology of religion that can address the pragmatic meaning of religious experience without making any assumptions about particular religious truths and values. The study reveals that psychology has a lot to offer to human understanding about people's religious beliefs, values, and behaviour and; that psychology and religion can function vis-à-vis each other at the applied science level and in relation to techniques and skills reflective of religious experiences.

Introduction

What is called religious experience is the perception of divine communication to single individuals or to humanity at large (Properzi, 2013; Cresswell, 2014). Divine experiences incorporate both a supernatural source of truth and a human receptor that can interprets and filters such message. In this sense, psychology appropriately plays a role in the study and analysis of these phenomena to arrive at a workable synthesis. Both psychology and religion are human activities. What then is psychology?

Etymologically, psychology is from the Greek word, *psychologia* meaning the "study of the mind" (*Wikipedia online Free Encyclopaedia,* 2009 cf. Fontana, 2003). It is defined by A.S. Hornby (2008) as the scientific study of the mind and how it influences behaviour (cf. Myers, 1990). It is also the scientific study of mental processes and behaviour. While psychology relies on symbolic interpretation and critical analysis, its traditions have tended to be less pronounced than in other social sciences such as sociology. Psychologists study such phenomena as perception, cognition, emotion, personality, behaviour, interpersonal relationship and the unconscious mind.

Psychological knowledge is applied to various spheres of human activity, including issues related to everyday life, namely: family, education and employment and to the treatment of mental health problems. Psychologists attempt to understand the role of mental functions in individual and social behaviour, while also exploring the underlying physiological and neurological processes.

The research findings of psychologists have greatly increased our understanding of why people behave the way they do. For example, psychologists have discovered much about how personality develops and how to promote healthy development. They have some knowledge of how to help people change bad habits and how to help students learn. They understand some of the conditions that can make workers more productive. A great deal remains to be discovered. Nevertheless, insights provided by psychology can help people function better as individuals, friends, family members, leaders, rulers and workers.

Psychology includes many sub-fields of study and applications concerned with such areas as human development, sport, health, industry, media, law and religion. Hence it incorporates research from the natural sciences, social sciences and humanities. The psychological study of

such phenomena as perception, cognition, emotion, personality, behaviour, interpersonal relationship and the unconscious mind in the context of religion is called psychology of religion.

Psychology of Religion: Meaning and Relevance

Psychology of religion is defined as the study patterns to be discussed in the emergence, development, operation, and dying away of religious phenomena in social groups and the individual's consciousness. The content structures and the orientation of those phenomena, their roles in religion in itself and influences as or sphere of activities outside religion are met for the individuals and society at-large. For the *Wikipedia online Free Encyclopedia* (2009), psychology of religion is the psychological study of religious experiences, belief, and activities. On the other hand, Mullin (1974cf. Cresswell, 2014) defines psychology of religion as the study of the (Christian) consciousness in regeneration and conversion. This definition is rooted in Christian theology.

Psychology of religion is the application of the theories and methods of psychology to understanding religion. In principle, psychologists of religion can practice their discipline without the consent of adherents and without regard to their own beliefs (cf. Cresswell, 2014). But this straightforward account in fact simplifies the situation. The very terms "psychology" and "religion" have often meant different things to psychologists of religion.

Psychology of religion introduces students and diverse readers to a wide range of different psychological approaches to the study of religion and thus, enables them to appreciate some aspects of the history of the field and the ways that history has influenced contemporary approaches to research in the context of religious pluralism and individual's religiosity. It provides the conceptual tools necessary for insight into the processes and meanings of religious experience, belief and behaviour in the lives of individuals and groups. Psychology of religion also enables students and other readers to develop a critical and evaluative understanding of different approaches to the psychological study of religion through the different options available. It develops a capacity to present a detailed study of particular topics. It also develop a perspective and to undertake research in the psychology of religion at an appropriate level.

Psychology of religion emphasizes the varieties of religious experience. That is, the normal religious experience in which all the spiritual elements of our nature combined in due proportion to produce genuine religious experience. Also, psychology of religion shows the prevalence of law in the subjective religious experience of human beings. This is because religion as a phenomenon has been connected vitally with what is known in psychology as the "subconscious mind" (Hampson, 2005). Psychology of religion is very relevant because it suggest the working of a divine energy in human religious experience. This is because in most cases the fact of the presence of law and order in religious experience has led human beings to infer purely natural causes for all the effects produced.

Psychology of religion seeks to buttress religion and to defend it apologetically by trying to describe, if not prove, its psychological necessity or inevitability. For instance, to show that mental health or stable human relations rest on engagements in religion, either the writer's preferred religion or any religion or piety. Psychology of religion also seeks to make subjective and private experiences objective and public by providing them with psychological understanding, fine description, or explanations. For example, works on mysticism tend to possess this kind of objective.

It has also been asserted that Psychology of religion is aimed towards the exposition of religion as a whole and as an "atavism" (or anachronism) by focusing on its archaic origin, its continuous anachronistic practices, its primitive modes of thought and action, the thought control it fosters, or the unreasoned on which it is allegedly rooted (Pruyser, 1987). Again, psychology vindicates the spiritual view of man. This is because the parallelism between the brain and mind states is a "common-place" for religious truth in the views of modern psychologists (Mullin, 1974 cf. James, 1982; Hampson, 2005).

Psychological Models to Evaluate Religious Experience

Some approaches to psychology such as the depth psychological ones, can be characterized as primarily subjective and interpretive. Other approaches, especially those from mainstream scientific psychology, are more nearly objective and empirical. The differing presuppositions and methods of these approaches yield different kinds of data and understanding about religion. From the earliest days there have been attempts to combine subjective with objective approaches in order to enrich each, but it seems improbable that psychology of religion will ever operate with a single, unified body of theory and method. In referring to the psychology of religion; one therefore must specify which psychology is involved in any particular case. If it is of religion, a similar caution is very necessary. I proceed to discuss some of these psychological explanatory models:

Psychometric Model

Since the 1960s psychologists of religion have used the methodology of psychometrics to assess different ways in which a person may be religious example of this is the Religious Orientation Scale of Allport and Ross (1967).In this approach, psychologists of religion use the methodology of psychometrics to assess a person's religious experience. An example is the use of questionnaires to assess or measure respondents' opinions on the religious life of believers. Hypotheses that form the focal points of the questionnaires may include: religion as means; religion as end; and religion as quest. The aim is to assess the spiritual support and spiritual openness of religion as expressed by adherents. Proponents of this methods or approaches include Allport and Ross, Schonrade and Ventis, Gorsuch and Venable where they distinguish religion from spirituality (Batson, Schoenrade & Ventis, 1993).

Anotherexampleis the use of a survey also called a public opinion poll. It is a study that measures people's attitudes and activities by asking the people themselves. Surveys provide information on religious views and habits, and many other activities of life. A psychologist of religion conducting a survey prepares carefully worded questions to achieve his goals. The researcher may interview participants personally or post questionnaires to them. If he wishes to form general conclusions, the survey must collect responses from a representative sample of individuals.

Developmental Model

This model mainly focuses on the development of the human mind through the life span and seeks to understand how people come to perceive, understand and act within the world and how these processes change as they age. This may focus on intellectual, cognitive, neural, social, or moral development. Researchers who study children use a number of unique research methods to make observations in natural settings or to engage them in experimental tasks (Kelemen, 2004). Such tasks often resemble specially designed games and activities that are both enjoyable for the

child and scientifically useful, and researchers have even devised clever methods to study the mental processes of small infants.

In this sense, attempts have been made to apply stage models, such as that of Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg to show how children develop ideas about God or the divine and about religion in general (cf. Medin, 1998). By far the most well-known stage model of spiritual or religious development is that of James Fowler (1971).He follows Piaget and Kohlberg and has proposed a stage development of faith (or spiritual development) across the lifespan in terms of a holistic orientation, and is concerned with the individual's relatedness to the universal.

The study contains a framework and ideas considered by many to be insightful and which have generated a good deal of response from those interested in religion, so it appears to have at least a reasonable degree of face validity. Thus, James Fowler proposes six stages of faith development as follows: intuitive-projective; symbolic literal; synthetic conventional; individuating, paradoxical (conjunctive); and universalizing. Although there is evidence that children up to the age of twelve years do tend to be in the first two of these stages, there is evidence that adults over the age of sixty-one do show considerable variation in displays of qualities of Stages 3 and beyond.

Fowler's model has generated some empirical studies, and fuller descriptions of this research (and of these six stages) can be found in Wulff (1975 cf. Reber, 2006).However, this model has been attacked from a standpoint of scientific research due to methodological weaknesses. Of Fowler's six stages, only the first two found empirical support, and these were heavily based upon Piaget's stages of cognitive development. Using this as a paradigm, soul-like entity in religious experience is then further elevated from its natural position through more direct divine interventions. Examples of such religious conceptualizations include the concept of redemptive grace in Christianity (*theosis* in Eastern Christian thought) and the concept of the "Universal" or "Perfect" Man in Shia Islam (Properzi, 2013).

Humanistic Model

Humanistic model to evaluate human religious experience is rooted in humanistic psychology. It is developed as an alternative to behaviourism and psychoanalysis. Humanistic psychologists believe that individuals are controlled by their own values and choices and not entirely by the environment, as behaviourists think, or by unconscious drives, as psychoanalysts believe. The goal of humanistic psychology is to help people function effectively and fulfil their own unique potential.

By using phenomenology inter-subjectivity and first-person categories, the humanistic approach seeks to glimpse the whole person--not just the fragmented parts of the personality or cognitive functioning. Humanism focuses on uniquely human issues and fundamental issues of life, such as self-identity, death, aloneness, freedom, and meaning. There are several factors which distinguish the humanistic approach from other approaches within psychology. These include the emphasis on subjective meaning, a rejection of determinism, and a concern for positive growth rather than pathology. It became so influential as to be called the "third force" within psychology, along with behaviourism and psychoanalysis (Neisser, 1994; Slife, & Reber, 2009).

The humanistic model rejects the concept of man as a mechanism controlled by external stimuli or consciousness. This is because; man is believed to be capable of influencing the world around him. This model's emphasis at this point is on human selfhood rooted in individual subjective experience and perception of the self. Worth noting, is the fact that in the course of individual's religious development, certain human and societal factors come into play. These

factors include man bodily needs or organic desires; man's temperament and mental capacity; man's psycho-genic interests and values; man's pursuit of rational explanation; and man's responses to immediate cultural conformity (cf. Shweder, 1991).

Behavioural Model

Behaviourism was introduced in 1913 by John B. Watson (in Vattimo, 2002) an American psychologist. Watson and his followers believed that observable behaviour, not inner experience, was the only reliable source of information. This concentration on observable events was a reaction against the structuralists' emphasis on introspection. The behaviourists also stressed the importance of the environment in shaping an individual's behaviour. They chiefly looked for connections between observable behaviour and stimuli from the environment. Behaviourism arose partly due to the popularity of laboratory-based animal experimentation and partly in reaction to Freudian psychodynamics, which was difficult to test empirically because, among other reasons, it tended to rely on case studies and clinical experience, and dealt largely with intra-psychic phenomena that were difficult to quantify or to define operationally (Foxand Austin, 2009). Moreover, in contrast with early psychologists Wilhelm Wundt and William James (1985), who studied the mind via introspection, the argued that the contents of the mind were not open to scientific scrutiny and that scientific psychology should only be concerned with the study of observable behaviour. Here there is no consideration of internal representation or the mind.

Psychoanalysis Model

Psychoanalysis was founded during the late 1800's and early 1900's by the Austrian Sigmund Freud (in Norenzayan, 2012). Psychoanalysis was based on the theory that behaviour is determined by powerful inner forces, most of which are buried in the unconscious mind. According to Freud and other psychoanalysts, from early childhood people repress (force out of conscious awareness) any desires or needs that are unacceptable to themselves or to society. The repressed feelings can cause personality disturbances, self-destructive behaviour, or even physical symptoms.

Freud developed several techniques to bring repressed feelings to the level of conscious awareness. In a method called free association, the patient relaxes and talks about anything that comes to mind while the therapist listens for clues to the person's inner feelings. Psychoanalysts also try to interpret dreams, which they regard as a reflection of unconscious drives and conflicts. The goal is to help the patient understand and accept repressed feelings and find ways to deal with them.

The large variety of meditation techniques shares the common goal of shifting attention away from habitual or customary modes of thinking and perception, in order to permit experiencing in a different way. Many religious and spiritual traditions that employ meditation assert that the world most of us know is an illusion. This illusion is said to be created by our habitual mode of separating, classifying and labeling our perceptual experiences. Meditation is empirical in that it involves direct experience (cf. Cresswell, 2014). Though it is also subjective, in that the meditative state can be directly known only by the experiencer; and may be difficult or impossible to fully describe such experience in words. Concentrative meditation can induce an altered state of consciousness characterized by a loss of awareness of extraneous stimuli, one-pointed attention to the meditation object to the exclusion of all other thoughts, and feelings of bliss (Atkinson, 1990; Hood, 1975).

Cognitive Model

Behaviourism was the dominant paradigm in American psychology throughout the first half of the 20th century. However, the modern field of psychology largely came to be dominated by cognitive psychology. With the rise of computer science and artificial intelligence, analogies were drawn between information processing by humans and information processing by machines. This, combined with the assumptions that mental representations exist and that mental states and operations could be inferred through scientific experimentation in the laboratory, led to the rise of cognitivism as a popular model of the mind. Research in cognition was also backed by the aim to gain a better understanding of weapons operation since World War II (cf. Pyysiainen, 2002).

Cognitive psychology differs from other psychological perspectives in two key ways. First, it accepts the use of the scientific method, and generally rejects introspection as a method of investigation, unlike symbol-driven approaches such as Freudian psychodynamics. Second, it explicitly acknowledges the existence of internal mental states such as belief, desire and motivation, whereas behaviourism does not. In fact, like Freud and depth psychologists, cognitive psychologists are even interested in unconscious phenomena, including repression; but cognitive psychologists prefer to explore these phenomena in terms of operationally-defined components, such as subliminal processing and implicit memory, that are amenable to experimental investigation. Moreover, cognitive psychologists have questioned the very existence of some of these components. For example, American psychologist Elizabeth Loftus has used empirical methods to demonstrate ways in which apparent memories can be brought to light via fabrication rather than through the elimination of repression.

According to Slife and Reber (2012), the cognitive is conceived as a human thought and action. This type of narrow psychological approach may carry on complete activities that psychologists cannot see. This approach may be considered inadequate in the psychological study of religious experiences. This is because the psychology of religion does not consider individualistic conscious experience. This approach attempts to investigate into the events inside a person's body particularly between the brain and nervous system. This approach tries to reduce or study observable behaviour and thoughts and emotions to assess human's religious experience.

Pascal Boyer is one of the leading figures in the cognitive psychology of religion, a new field of inquiry that is less than fifteen years old, which accounts for the psychological processes that underlie religious thought and practice. In his book Religion Explained, Boyer shows that there is no simple explanation for religious consciousness. Boyer is mainly concerned with explaining the various psychological processes involved in the acquisition and transmission of ideas concerning the gods. Boyer builds on the ideas of cognitive anthropologists Dan Sperber and Scott Atran (in Neisser, 1994 cf. Simon, 1998), who first argued that religious cognition represents a by-product of various evolutionary adaptations, including folk psychology, and purposeful violations of innate expectations about how the world is constructed (for example, bodiless beings with thoughts and emotions) that make religious cognitions striking and memorable.

Religious persons acquire religious ideas and practices through social exposure. For instance, the child of a Zen Buddhist will not become an evangelical Christian or a Zulu warrior without the relevant cultural experience (cf. Kelemen, 2004). While mere exposure does not cause a particular religious outlook (a person may have been raised a Roman Catholic but leave the church), nevertheless some exposure seems required - this person will never invent Roman Catholicism out of thin air. Cognitive science can help us to understand the psychological mechanisms that account for these manifest correlations and in so doing enable us to better understand the nature of religious belief and practice (cf. Atkinson, 1990; Slife & Reber, 2012). To

the extent that the mechanisms controlling the acquisitions and transmission of religious concepts rely on human brains, the mechanisms are open to computational analysis. All thought is computationally structured, including religious thought. So presumably, computational approaches can shed light on the nature and scope of religious cognition.

Naturalistic Observation Model

This involves watching the behaviour of human beings and other animals in their natural environment. For example, a researcher might study the activities of chimpanzees in the wild. The psychologist looks for cause-and-effect relationships between events and for broad patterns of behaviour .Psychologists conducting such studies try to observe a group large enough and typical enough to accurately reflect the total population. Such a group is called a representative sample (McCauley, 2011).

Observers also attempt to keep their personal views from influencing the study. In addition, psychologists try to prevent their presence from affecting the behaviour being observed. A careful scientist hides from sight or remains on the scene long enough to become a familiar part of the environment. Naturalistic observation is a valuable source of information to psychologists. The research itself has less effect on the subjects' behaviour than a controlled experiment does. But observation alone seldom proves a cause-and-effect relationship between two or more events. As a result, psychologists use naturalistic observation chiefly as an exploratory technique to gain insights and ideas for later testing.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, knowledge of humankind 's on going engagement in religion and world's literature about it can be helpful in the formation of learned and astute psychologists. This will occur if only the amount and variety of soul-searching that religion will traditionally foster as well as the large margin of pathology it will always produce. Interestingly, psychology's questions and findings about how minds work, how feelings affect cognition and how thoughts entail feelings, how behaviour is motivated and shaped can hardly be ignored today by religionists with scholarly ambition and a sense of intellectual responsibility.

It is also interesting to know that psychology and religion can function vis-à-vis each other at the applied science level and in relation to techniques and skills. Barring syncretism and fusion, it can be said that clinical psychology and counselling practitioners can benefit from knowing how religious practitioners make their amelioristic interventions in the lives of troubled people, and how religionists assess their changing behaviours, thoughts, feelings, or needs. In the other way round, religionists can benefit from studying how applied psychologists make their assessments of people's needs and also make their amelioristic interventions.

Psychology of religion therefore, is an important link between psychology as a biological, social or human science, the different religious traditions and the practice of contemporary theology and philosophy. In this sense, psychologists may indeed come into dialogue with religious scholars to assist in shedding more light on the rudiments and dynamics of human religious experiences. This can be done through the analysis of the characteristic nature and scope of their manifestations and by studying the consequences associated with their expressions including engaging their functions within the psyche of the individual *vis-à-vis* the normative ideals of the specific religious framework of explanation that the individual has encountered.

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