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Exploring Psychology and Religious Experience: Relevant Issues and Core Questions

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Religious experience often involves what is perceived to be divine communication to single individuals or to humanity at large. Yet, since revelatory experiences involve both a supernatural source of truth and a human receptor who interprets and filters the message, psychology may appropriately play a role in the study and analysis of these phenomena. In this essay I provide some general suggestions on how psychology may contribute to the study of revelatory religious experiences, namely by exploring the descriptive, the pragmatic, and the functional-psychoanalytic dimensions of revelation. Indeed, by moving away from reductivist explanations and by framing analyses in the transcendent theological schemata of religious adepts psychology may assist the believer in sifting through the authentic and the inauthentic or between the human and the divine. In this context, this article focuses more on those core philosophical issues and questions that ground dialogue between psychology and religion than it does on specific examples and illustrations. It is a starting point for conversation and a broad optimistic framing of a historically difficult relationship, which still requires much sorting out.

It is puzzling that scholars of religion have not yet reached a firm consensus in defining what lies at the very foundation of their analysis. Indeed, depending on the scientific framework employed (whether historical, anthropological, psychological, philosophical, etc.) different scholars emphasize one particular aspect over others when stating or implying a working definition of religion (Hood, Hill, & Spilka, 2009). Yet, it seems that at least one aspect ought to be underlined as one of religion’s core components, without which it is difficult to justify labeling a belief, practice, or experience as religious. This aspect is what several religions call revelation, as well as its more nuanced associate inspiration, which usually is understood to be more accessible to non-prophetic individuals and to be more mediated in its lesser quality or intensity vis-à-vis revelation. In fact, regardless of the term used by a particular religion to describe this phenomenon, it is common for most religious perspectives to affirm that a Supreme Being, or even a depersonal-
ized universe or force, is a communicative subject that, at some point or another, manifests its will, power, characteristics, and love to humanity. Whether these messages are understood and heeded is a different matter, but what concerns us at this stage is the fact that most religions share the belief that something transcending humanity speaks to us and solicits our response.

To be sure, the manner and timing of these divine communications are as varied and distinct as are religious denominations. Broadly speaking, Christianity recognizes Christ’s Incarnation as the supreme and most immediate act of divine revelation. At the same time, because it shares a scriptural foundation with Judaism, Christianity accepts revelatory communications through the prophets of the Old Testament. Islam contributes to this prophetic picture by honoring Muhammad as its own prophet and the Koran as divine communication. But prophets and the incarnated Christ are not the only sources of transcendent messages in the universe. Most religions view the Creation as the manifestation of a Creator, thus deriving a natural theology from observing their surroundings or the order and beauty of our planet. Furthermore, many religions place humanity in a unique or supreme position among the creations, a position emphasized by the notion of human beings possessing an inner core—whether conceptualized as the Muslim Fitra or the Christian Imago Dei—that is especially revealing of God’s will and nature.1 In other words, the divine speaks both externally and internally to the human being, a distinction that often parallels the distinction between revelation and inspiration.

The Objective and the Subjective

Yet, even when we focus exclusively on divine manifestations in history (miracles, visions, etc.), which are external and, in a loose sense, objective, it is impossible to completely transcend the internal subjective dimension of the human being in relation to his or her reception of this external message. As a person listens to and interprets what the environment, culture, historical circumstances, and even religious community teach, he or she will bring personal desires, fears, aspirations, and general cognitive and emotional frameworks to bear on the acquisition of this religious content in such a way as to make it existentially relevant. Furthermore, the individual’s “soul” will further shape this knowledge through promptings of an inspiring or confirming nature that may be interpreted as having an external source or origin. In other words, the subjective and the objective unavoidably interact, and they do so in religious matters as they do in all behaviors. Indeed, the purely logical being who reasons and acts only according to perfect formulas of truth does not exist and is a mere illusion. To be human is to interact with information in such a way as to make it humanly relevant, or to apply it to beings who are social, rational, emotional, spiritual, and mortal.2

At the same time, to stress the unavoidable interaction of the objective and the subjective is not the same as to advocate a relative or arbitrary dimension of truth. Instead, the focus on the interaction perhaps recognizes in the first place that truth is always wider than that which can be subjectively digested by a single individual. Indeed, truth includes multiple subjective interactions with various external objective realities that give rise to several formulations of that one truth (Pareyson, 2009). Within the realm of the study of religion and its relationship with psychology, the interaction of the objective and the subjective is an issue of no minor significance. In fact, distortions of truth are inevitable when one dimension is emphasized excessively to the detriment of the other. Hence, it is possible to identify several instances in the study of religion where the subjective and the internal are highlighted to such an extent as to eliminate even the possibility of an association with an objective and external reality. According to this line of reasoning, religious experience is explained only in terms of a subjective issue, with no external referent that may be called real.3 This approach to religion, which explains the whole religious phenomenon as a mere sum of its identifiable anthropological or psychological processes, is reductive, or in other words, a form of reductionism applied to religion. Ironically, a reductionism of this kind attempts to make a statement with objective force by explaining everything as subjectively determined.

On the other side of the equation, some forms of religious fundamentalism deny any subjective influence in the context of religious revelation or inspiration. One may think, for example, of the orthodox view of Koranic revelation, in which the prophet Muhammad functions as a sort of human megaphone selected to report the divine word, which is eternal and uncreated in both content and form. The implication is that even with a different messenger and in a different time and place, the
Koran would have emerged in every detail as exactly the same text as revealed through Muhammad. In Christianity, understandings of revelation that deny the presence of any human filter are found in exclusively literal readings of the biblical text, with hermeneutical assumptions rooted in scientific positivism.

**Psychology and the Study of Religious Experience**

Does this intricate intersection between the external and internal dimensions of revelation force us to renounce any claim to objectivity when it comes to the study of religion, and particularly of religious experiences? While the complex dynamics already referenced should at least warn us about too facile interpretations and conclusions, we do not need to go this far. A century after William James it is now possible to view his desire to develop a proper scientific study of religion as somewhat naïve because it was excessively rooted in the scientific positivism of his age. There will always be some dimensions of religion, particularly the metaphysical aspects, that do not lie within the scope of scientific inquiry and that will require different epistemic methods and assumptions to be addressed. Yet, even in the context of religious experiences, there is value in psychological studies that analyze their patterns or dynamics and reflect upon their significance.

In this context, psychology’s central function is not to spread doubt on the authenticity of religious experiences. It can certainly fulfill this purpose when warranted, but an a priori assumption of this kind would clearly raise serious questions about the legitimacy of its endeavors.

As others have indicated, the philosophical foundations employed in interpreting psychological data on religious phenomena often shape conclusions, sometimes in quite anti-theistic directions (Slife & Reber, 2009; Nelson & Slife, 2010). In the present setting, rather than continuing the critique and engaging the complexity of this discussion I would like to highlight some potential areas of benefit in the “psychological” study of religious experiences. Specifically, I can think of three primary ways in which psychology may contribute to the study of religious phenomena of various intensities and claims: a descriptive focus, a pragmatic focus, and a functional-psychoanalytic focus.

**The Descriptive Study of Religious Experience**

To begin, psychology can study the extent of revelatory religious manifestations, underline their similarities and differences, and map their characteristics across cultures and across religions. This idea was probably one of William James’s greatest contributions as he attempted to complete a collection and interpretation of this very nature in his *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902/2004), a study that is likely to remain a vital force in the psychology of religion. Still, much more remains to be explored in this area, with studies that would likely need to consider the socio-psychological and anthropological dimensions of human life. Indeed, the cognitive study of religion is a present attempt to deepen our understanding of religious experiences in this particular direction. The highly popular subject of emotions in phenomenology and psychology also has relevance in this context, as does the neuro-biological side of its exploration.

Within this broad framework, psychology and its allied fields of scientific and socio-scientific knowledge can help us address several important questions about the nature and extent of the “religious propensities,” to quote James (1902/2004). For example, some have recently come to theorize the existence of a God-gene (Bailey, 1998), while others have advocated the universal existence of religiosity as a human characteristic that is implicitly manifested even in a variety of non-religious settings and activities (Hood, 2009). Clearly, differences continue to exist as far as explaining or defining the source or utility of these deep-seated drives. Non-believers often explain the presence of these propensities in terms of a by-product of natural selection that is made redundant within the milieu of a modern scientific world. In any case, psychology and other scientific fields of inquiry have at least highlighted the universality of religion and its significance for humanity at large. By so doing, at least in my opinion, they have legitimized its study and given some credence to its claims of transcendence. Thus, we can affirm with Mircea Eliade (1978) that “the sacred is an element in the structure of consciousness, and not a stage in the history of that consciousness” (p. xiii).

**The Pragmatic Study of Religious Experience**

A second dimension of religion for which psychology may provide an epistemic contribution is the exploration of the consequences of religious experiences. This pragmatic dimension, again highly emphasized by William James, is perhaps the most widely observable aspect of religious experience and therefore particularly favor-
able to scientific analysis. At the same time, if pragmatic consequences are, on the one hand, somewhat visible, it is particularly difficult to determine, on the other hand, whether such consequences should be attributed to religious or to other kinds of experiences and behaviors. In some cases, such as in studies pertaining to the effect and consequences of prayer, particular religious behaviors are isolated from other experiences of the individual (Hood, 2009). In other cases, it is easier to begin by measuring general levels of religiosity in specific subjects and subsequently analyze the quality and characteristics of individuals’ lives in relation to particular variables of a greater or lesser general nature. For example, studies have addressed such variables as mental health, physical health, marital satisfaction, sociability, and job performance in association with specific degrees of religiosity. While it is true that correlations alone may be extracted from such findings, the findings of these studies may still provide useful indications about the value of religion in people’s lives. These studies may also offer valuable information about forms of religiosity that are generally dysfunctional (such as extrinsic as opposed to intrinsic religiosity).

In this context it is important to reflect on the extent to which measures of happiness and health either validate or invalidate a particular religious path of existence. Indeed, to my knowledge, there is no religion that promises uninterrupted joy or avoidance of illness during this mortal realm of existence; on the contrary, some religions emphasize the necessity of suffering and the need to seek eternal rather than present happiness. An additional challenge involves the realm of definition. While there is no question that religious and non-religious people often define happiness differently, it is often the case that even people of similar religious persuasions hold different views on what it means to be happy. Hence, it is particularly difficult to recognize a universal standard of happiness that can be used to measure the pragmatic consequences of people’s religiosity or of their religious experiences. We therefore have a normative problem that underlies a descriptive difficulty. The same challenge is perhaps even more evident when using mental health as a standard. In fact, psychology has been a discipline much more concerned with demarcations of mental illness than with demarcations of mental health so that creating a model of the ideal mentally healthy individual is no easy endeavor. Furthermore, within a religious frame of reference, it is not a universal expectation that mental health necessarily accompanies religious life.

Still, there are characteristics in people’s lives that reflect, to some extent, the nature of their religious beliefs and actions. Certainly, followers of most religions typically possess within themselves some pragmatic measure of authentication of their religion, which often focuses on the signs or fruits of belief. These measures include actions that reflect essence—doing that manifests being or, more properly, becoming. Hence, it is only natural that an individual who serves and loves others will ultimately become a loving individual and that such an attribute will become apparent in several areas of his or her life. On the other hand, a person who, for example, quickly moves from one sexual relationship to the next or who abuses children while professing belief in Christianity does not embody the fruits of his faith. Therefore, by measuring specific areas of people’s lives, including social interactions, emotions, commitments, and coping mechanisms, psychology may at least bring focus to the gap between the professed and the actual, or between the ideal and the real. By so doing, psychology can shed light on positive or negative patterns of religiosity, and it may often be able to do so without needing to distance itself from the very normative framework of the religion at stake.

The Functional-Psychoanalytic Study of Religious Experience

Closely related to a pragmatic study of religious experience is the functional-psychoanalytic study, which can be specifically linked with both the revelatory claims of personal religious experience and with the psychoanalytic dimension of psychology. As previously mentioned, since it is possible to identify religious beliefs and behaviors in all cultures and at all times, it is appropriate to ask whether such naturalness of religion constitutes an advantage or an obstacle to its very claims and purposes. In other words, does the functional aspect of religion—its fulfillment of internal drives, aspirations, hesitations, and needs—facilitate or obstruct its epistemic evaluation or any possible judgments that relate to its objective nature? Whether or not the question is philosophically (or, more properly, phenomenologically) suitable, it is certain that psychology, and especially psychoanalysis, may shed light on religion’s functionality by gathering data about its functional dynamics and then by proposing a psychoanalytic interpretation of that data.
Indeed, the core of the issue is the kind and the degree of religion's internal functionality rather than the question of functionality itself. If it is possible to view any kind of psychological functionality as suspect (because it is potentially associated with psychosis at worst or neurosis at best), then it is also possible, and in my view more likely, to understand psychological functionality as the potential foundation of a deeper truth that transcends rational articulation. By this I mean to say that judging humanity as being prone or receptive to religious impulses may underlie theistic claims of a God who has created us as particularly driven to turn to Him and to believe in Him. At the same time, if religion is shown to be functional in those aspects that are ultimately contradicted by its claims, such as in fulfilling desires of domination, Strengthening fears of social interactions, or solidifying self-centered behavior, it is apparent that such psychological dynamics, although real in the sense of reflecting the true experience of the individual, are at the same time illusory or mistaken in their explicit association with religious beliefs and claims. Therefore, by judging which internal drives are activated by particular forms of religious conceptualizations and behavior it may be possible to begin to form an evaluative picture of these supposedly religious claims through the psychoanalytic indications provided by scholarly studies.

In this context I can briefly highlight two scholars who have contributed significantly to this field of inquiry—namely Ana-Maria Rizzuto and André Godin. Rizzuto (1979) has brought focus to the importance of “God-representations” as explained in terms of “the totality of experiential levels obtained from the life of an individual, which under the aegis of the human capacity to symbolize are gathered by a person under the name God. The representation always includes visceral, proprioceptive, sensorimotor, perceptual, eidetic, and conceptual components” (pp. 122–123). Furthermore, she has followed Freud in stressing the significance of parental figures for the child’s earliest development of God’s representations (although, unlike Freud, she has given more significance to the mother), has underlined the psychic utility of such representations for the child’s protection of self-respect and parental relationships, and has emphasized the continuation but “elasticity” of God-representations throughout an individual’s lifetime. Rizzuto has also recognized that God, as a “transitional object representation,” may be accepted or rejected, because “to believe or not to believe is always an act of fidelity to oneself and to our mental representations of those to whom we owe our past and present existence” (p. 117).

To my knowledge, Rizzuto (1979) does not go beyond this psychological understanding of God to inquire about its correspondence with external objective reality (a task that lies beyond the limits of psychology—or of any science for that matter), although she clearly disagrees with Freud’s evaluation regarding people’s need to overcome these representations when reaching maturity. Instead, in psychological terms she underlines that “God is a potentially suitable object, and if updated during each crisis of development, may remain so through maturity and through the rest of life” (p. 209). In other words, we need certain kinds of God-representations for our own mental health because they are psychologically functional, meaning that they are real within a particular epistemic framework of reference.

Yet, there remains a fundamental question about a possible bridge between psychology and theology—or the lack thereof. Godin (1985) comes to our aid with an analysis that makes this dimension more explicit as he critiques those psychological dynamics of religious experiences that specifically clash with accepted Christian theology. In short, Godin underlines the negative functionality of religion in theological terms and highlights the degree to which authentic religious experience is in conflict with natural psychological propensities.

In addressing the magical dimension of belief in God, which is closely linked to the most elementary kind of religious faith, Godin denounces the concept of a God who is simply there to punish, to reward, to fulfill our greatest desires, and to calm our anxieties. He affirms that such a God . . . is a useful reinforcement of their (the parents’) authority when it falters. In spite of the efforts of an updated catechesis . . . the great mass of parents, Christians though they may be, continue to use God in this way. Half bogey-man and half Santa Claus; these roles, which are hardly appropriate to the God of the Gospels . . . help to transmit elements of what we must call a folklore Christianity . . . In many ancient societies religious myths fulfilled this function of supporting the existing social power. On this point the resistance to a specific character for the Christian God . . . is and will continue to be very strong. From a psychological point of view, man thus appears to be spontaneously religious but is far from being spontaneously Christian. (Godin, 1985, p. 21)
Thus, Godin advocates the need for the growth and development of one’s faith—a faith that must transcend its most elementary impulses and become mature in line with its theological and scriptural conceptualizations. Clearly, the criteria of authenticity applied will vary in relation to the specific religious doctrines and claims that form the beliefs of the individual. This is not a matter of imposing one particular religious perspective in evaluating psychological dynamics of all religious experiences. The point is one of internal consistency where religious experiences are squared against the theological framework that is supposed to explain them as opposed to a supposedly superior interpretative framework of a scientific kind. Godin, as a Jesuit speaking to other Christians, obviously made use of a Christian theological perspective in his psychoanalytic analysis of Christian religious experiences, but Muslims, Hindus, or Buddhists may do the same by employing their own religious framework of reference.

Conclusion

The relationship between psychology and religious experience clearly requires extensive examination, which obviously lies beyond the scope of a single article. Yet, even though I have only scratched the surface of the subject, I hope to have provided some useful analytical foundations that may be employed for the continuing exploration of this fascinating area of study. Psychology may indeed come into dialogue with religion and assist in shedding light on the dynamics of religious experiences. It can do so by analyzing the nature and scope of their manifestations (the descriptive study), by studying the consequences associated with their expressions (the pragmatic study), and by engaging their function within the psyche of the individual vis-à-vis the normative ideals of the specific religious framework of explanation that the individual has embraced (the functional-psychoanalytic study). Therefore, any evaluative statement on the reality, truth, benefit, or goodness of any religious beliefs and behaviors may not take place while wholly transcending the framework of reference advocated by that religious perspective. Indeed, since both psychology and religion propose, more or less explicitly, a particular descriptive and normative worldview, it is not appropriate for psychology to apply its own epistemic and normative assumptions on religious experiences without at least bringing those assumptions into interaction with the epistemic/ontological foundations of the religious views under examination. Godin provides a useful example in this direction because, while building his analysis on psychoanalytic insights, he makes use of Christian theology (his own interpretation of it, to be sure, but one that is hardly controversial) to discern and evaluate between positive and negative religious experiences.

As a person with a passionate interest in dialogue, whether among different religions, cultures, or philosophies, or between religion and science (and religion and psychology in particular), I have come to recognize the centrality of mutual respect in both interpersonal relationships and interdisciplinary communicative endeavors. Yet, religion has not always been respectful of psychology and psychology has not always been respectful of religion or of religious experiences. In this article I have attempted to highlight some general principles in the psychological study of religious experiences that emphasize the potential usefulness of psychology without suggesting its hegemony or epistemic imposition. To be sure, many more details need to be worked out at the micro level of interaction. Still, it is the broader theoretical picture or the macro level of explanation that usually shapes and informs attitudes and approaches in engaging interdisciplinary studies of all kinds, and the interaction between religion and psychology is certainly no exception.

References


Endnotes

1. This soul-like entity 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.

2. Johnson-Laird (2006) stated, “The process of [mental] construction is unconscious, but it yields a representation, and this mental model enables us to draw a conclusion, by another unconscious process. . . . In other words, all mental processes are unconscious” (p. 53).

3. In psychology, Freud popularized the notion of religion as illusion in The Future of an Illusion (1928/1989). Even if one concedes this point, however, illusion or imagination is not necessarily the contrary of reality. Regarding this point Kierkegaard (1938/1958) stated, “Imagination is used by Providence to draw men toward reality, toward existence and to lead them far, deep, or low enough into existence. And when imagination has helped them to go as far as they can, that is precisely where reality begins” (p. 243).

4. This orthodox view may be contrasted with more modernist perspectives such as the one expressed by the Iranian theologian Abdolkarim Soroush, who recognized the significance of the prophet Muhammad in the production of the Koran (Tabaar, 2008).

5. For a good introduction to the extension and depth of the study of emotion see Lewis, Haviland-Jones, and Barrett (2008).


7. See Matthew 7:16, 21; Mark 16:17; and Galatians 5:22 in the New Testament for examples of the source of this idea within Christianity.