

# Psychology and religion: the spiritual side to counseling

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Abstract: In today's society the field of psychology and the study of religion have hardly ever set will with one another. New information is being composed about the two fields working together, this paper is a brief description of those ideas and thoughts. The psychological study of religion in the United States illustrates tensions and opportunities that exist between psychology and religion. It also demonstrates the multifaceted views taken by psychologists as they address areas of living that have personal implications. Following the early period, American psychology's push toward behaviorism resulted in the neglect of spiritual matters. The reductionism methods of behaviorism left little room for matters of faith, or for any other theoretical constructs that were not measured directly. Consequently, psychology left religion for other topic that were considered to be more scientific and several decades of neglect ensued. Psychologist' interest in religion resumed in the 1950's. Gordon Allport's (1950) attempt to describe the role of religion in people's experience began his indelible mark on the field, and to this day his Intrinsic-Extrinsic distinction in religious motivation remains the most influential approach in psychological studies of religion in the United States. In the years since then, several developments have combined to suggest, according to the traditional view of psychology of religion, that the fields is experiencing a resurgence of interest. These include the establishment of professional journals giving an outlet to psychological study of religion, and the apparently increasing availability of college classes focusing on psychology of religion. Psychologists who study religion, however, address " an object whose reality can be received only in the state of faith" (p. 32). the act of belief is critical to religious knowledge and experience. In psychology, skepticism is an enduring value, but in <https://assignbuster.com/psychology-religion-the-spiritual-side-to-counseling/>

religion it is an intermediate step on the pathway to belief. This sets up a tension between psychology and religion, which results in psychologists having low rates of religious activity, when compared to other scientific and academic groups (Richards & Bergin, 1997). The methods and assumptions favored by psychology have appeared to be incompatible with the more subjective and experiential methods of religion despite recent efforts to harmonize the two (Richards & Bergin, 1997). Ralph Hood (1998), a major figure in American psychology of religion, suggests six psychological schools of thought regarding religion. The psychoanalytical schools draw from the work of Freud, and attempt to reveal unconscious motives for religious belief. Although Freud reduced religious belief to a natural, if ultimately flawed, attempt to cope with life's stresses; contemporary psychoanalytic interpretations are not necessarily hostile to religious faith. Analytical schools find their inspiration in Jung's description of spiritual life. Most psychologists, however, consider such descriptions to be undemonstrated by scientific research, and therefore it plays a limited role in psychology. Object relations school also draws from psychoanalysis, but focus their efforts on maternal influences on the child. Each of these three schools rely on clinical case studies and other descriptive methods based on small samples, which runs counter to the prevailing practice of psychology in America.

Transpersonal schools attempts to confront spiritually directly, often with the assumption that spiritual phenomena are real. They utilize a variety of methods in an attempt to study transcendent experience. Phenomenological schools focus on the assumptions underlying religious experience and on the commonalties of the experiences. They favor description and critical reflection over experimentation and measurement. Within the measurement

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tradition, Allport's intrinsic-extrinsic religious orientation model has shaped the field for over 30 years. Studies investigating the relations of intrinsic and extrinsic orientations to numerous social behaviors and attitudes are abundant. The intrinsic-extrinsic perspective serves as the conceptual basis for important studies conducted by Batson and others. Research investigating the role of religion in coping and in psychopathology also is common. Foremost among these is Pargament's (1997) work on the ways that people use religion to cope with stress. Developmental psychologists have investigated the possibility of stages of religious development. Attachment theory has received increasing attention in this area for example (Kirkpatrick, 1992) Spilka and his students and others have applied Cognitive psychology to religion. Social psychological theories, such as attribution theory, have been utilized in order to examine the conditions under which experiences are considered to be religious, or to understand religious conversion. Fear of death and its role in religious experience have been studied at length, as have the association between religion and psychotherapy. In each of these areas, the measurement schools have sought to apply traditional scientific methodologies of description, correlation and experimentation to religious phenomena. In doing this, they have demonstrated that religion is relevant to our understanding of human behavior and thought. Among research psychologists the tension in assumptions will, in all likelihood, continue. As neuropsychological, evolutionary psychology and other sub-fields continue to advance, the difference between knowledge gained by scientific and religious means will remain evident. Psychologists interested in religion may address these gaps by developing successful theory and research. For example, attachment

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theory can be seen in terms compatible with evolutionary psychology. The distinction between psychology of religion, which emphasizes how psychology enlightens our understanding of religion, and religious psychology, emphasizing religious interpretation of psychology, has been a long-standing issue in the field, and it is an issue that will not go away soon. The psychological study of religion is a meaningful area of psychology in America. It is relevant to our understanding of people because it addresses an important facet of life in America, with more than 90% of Americans professing belief in God, and the vast majority of citing specific religious preferences (Baston, 1996). It offers a rich source of material for the study of attitudes, coping, and altruism and may other phenomena of general interest to psychologists. It also challenges the psychologist's ingenuity to conduct research on constructs that cannot easily be studied experimentally. At a more abstract level, the link between psychology and religion helps psychology maintain its historical connection with philosophy. As psychologist seek to employ the techniques of the natural sciences, the psychology of religion reminds us that our roots are in philosophy, and that the assumption we make regarding our subject matter have important implication for our science. Bibliography Baston, C. D. (1996) You take the high road. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 6, 159-164. Bergin, A. E. (1980). Psychotherapy and religious values. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 48, 75-105. Hood, R. W. Jr. (1999, November). *American Psychology of Religion and the Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. Wulff, D. W. (1998) Rethinking the rise and fall of the psychology of religion. In A. L. Molendijk and P. Pel (Eds.), *Religion in the making: The emergence of the sciences of religion*, (pp. 181-202). .

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