

TARGET ARTICLE

The Psychology of Religion and Spirituality: How Big the Tent?

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In this article, we attend to issues central to the psychology of religion and spirituality, and promote intellectual perspectives that will enable this field to maximally contribute to psychology and allied fields. We address how to best conceptualize the field and conduct research in an increasingly international psychology of religion context. We advocate for clarity regarding the nature of questions answerable by psychological science, what a valid scientific explanation of religiousness is, and the intellectual and methodological boundaries of this science, which are matters rooted in the questions of what constitutes evidence and why knowledge is public with no private, unverifiable privileged positions. *Religion*, the original term used to designate this area of psychology, is a cultural concept and not a psychological term; thus, it does not connote mental or overt behavior or social relationships. The recognition that most of our scholarship does not focus on religion—rather it focuses on related psychological phenomena (i.e., *religiousness*)—will enable our field to mature with the rest of psychological science. Thus, we should strengthen our psychological identity and contribute our knowledge to interdisciplinary research via a multilevel meaning systems approach that is focused on the concepts at the roots of religiousness and spirituality. These steps will help integrate our knowledge across levels of analysis and situate our research within—and connect it to—the larger universe of knowledge.

Keywords: psychology of religion, spirituality, meaning, scientific evidence, knowledge

From time to time, questions are raised about what the “psychology of religion” is. Scholars grapple mightily with these questions, often generating puzzlement and disagreement and typically leaving no clear consensus about the field’s mission, boundaries, or fundamental goals. These questions have emerged in efforts to define religion and spirituality, explain their psychological roots, document the positive or negative effects of religions, and, occasionally, explain religious mental or behavioral phenomena by means not subject to the ordinary rules of scientific evidence (Paloutzian & Park, 2013a, 2013b; Pargament, Exline, & Jones, 2013; Pargament, Mahoney, & Shafranske, 2013).

The underpinnings of such questions are evident in how people who take different sides on answers to these questions have de-

scribed the possible relationship between psychology and religion: Is it the psychology of, and, for, in, or against religion, and is it *religion* or is it *religion and spirituality*? (See Paloutzian, 2003; Pargament, 1999). The list has included other words, such as *parallels* and *integrates*, and from time to time attempts have been made to create the psychology of religion preceded by the name of a particular religion, such as Christian, Muslim, or Buddhist, and bracketed by its teachings.

Some scholars profess to study the psychology of religion, when, in fact, the nature of their scholarship and thinking is not psychology of religion (or spirituality), but instead reflects one of the alternative wordings noted in the preceding text, such as “psychology and religion,” “integration of psychology and theology,” “Christian psychology,” or “Muslim psychology.” Importantly, the very names of our primary professional associations indicate what most scholars in the field ought to aspire to study: Society for the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality and International Association for the Psychology of Religion. Thus, Piedmont (2014) explicitly charged those doing research in this field to resolve the aforementioned issues, warning that otherwise this field might meander indefinitely, unsure of its own focus.

In this article, we illustrate some of these issues and lay out what this field, as an area of modern science, can accomplish if we (only slightly) increase the precision with which we speak. We assert that *religiousness* (understood as human behavior, including its affective, attitudinal, and cognitive aspects) is the preferred term to capture the primary focus of our research, given that religiousness refers to an individual’s or a group’s understanding, enacting, and

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being vis-à-vis religion, whereas *religion* is a broader construct referring to a set of doctrines, social forces, or institutions that may have many impacts on human lives, only some of which are manifest in an individual's or a group's own ways of being or relating (i.e., their religiousness). Further, religiousness can be best understood within a *meaning systems* (MS) conceptualization, which incorporates much of the current research in this field and helps to bring structure and clarity to future work. The MS approach is not about "the meaning of religion" or "in religion is true meaning." Rather, the MS approach is a model of fundamental psychological processes by which humans and other animals construct, evaluate, and respond to (mostly ambiguous) information, from the micro to macro levels of analysis, and the processes that connect that information across levels. Human religiousness seems to be one of the "higher" manifestations of this process, but it is certainly not the only one (Paloutzian & Mukai, 2017; Park, 2013; Seitz, Paloutzian, & Angel, 2018).

Adopting the MS approach could yield psychological knowledge about the behavior of all living things, including human religiousness, that will stand the test of time. This approach could lead to synthesized knowledge with far greater potential for individual and social applications than our past approaches. We focus on three specific issues.

1. **Clarity about religion:** We first highlight that neither religion nor spirituality is one thing with an essence that marks what it "truly" is. The field can progress only when its proponents let go of the idea that there is a singularity that makes all things called "religions" religion (Barrett, 2017; Paloutzian, 2017a; Paloutzian & Park, 2013b, 2014). Various phenomena called religions have core elements, some of which appear in more than one religion, but there is no one feature that defines them all (Pargament, Mahoney, & Shafranske, 2013; Taves, 2013, 2015). They are often defined by their culture (Saroglou & Cohen, 2011) rather than by their contents. This lack of commonality across all phenomena labeled *religion* has led some to advocate a prototype approach (e.g., Oman, 2013), which allows for religious attributions to be made about phenomena that contain sufficient prototypical elements, although the specific elements may differ.
2. **Clarity about psychological science:** Further, and at the core of all science, we explain why scholarship that goes beyond the boundaries of normal science to propose explanations not in principle subject to publically accessible evidence is not part of the psychology of religion or any other science and, thus, should not be called such. This means that claims about supernatural or otherworldly processes or those otherwise posited to be outside the world of nature, whether theistic, atheistic, or any specific variation thereof, have no bearing on the conduct or interpretation of psychological research on religiousness because psychology is neutral with respect to them (Kirkpatrick, 2005; Paloutzian, 2017a; Paloutzian & Park, 2014; Pargament, 2013; Pargament & Mahoney, 2005), although they may be appropriate or necessary in other forums or for other concerns, such as

relating psychological knowledge to the teachings of a particular faith.

3. **Clarity about religiousness within a MS conceptualization:** Finally, we make recommendations for future scholarship that are based on our premise that progress will be made when research focuses on the MS processes and specific meanings that behaviors, beliefs, and affects have for people rather than on their culturally laden "religious" or "spiritual" categories, definitions, or labels (George & Park, 2016; Park, 2005, 2013). One approach that could result in the productive long-term construction of knowledge is rooted in MS (Park, 2010). We also consider the possibility of combining a MS conceptualization with the multilevel interdisciplinary paradigm (MIP; Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003), a far-reaching approach capable of incorporating knowledge gleaned from psychological research to help us understand the varied meanings that underlie the human cultural categories of religiousness and spiritual expressions worldwide (Paloutzian, 2017b).

In addition to considering the appropriate boundaries of the basic science of the psychology of religion, we weave through our discussion our heightened awareness that though something can accurately be called *knowledge*, there are no privileged (i.e., private, unverifiable) positions, and we claim none as our own. Nothing is true merely because someone says so. If psychologists, including us, consider the principles and guidelines we elaborate in the following text, basic research in our field will likely generate new insights, rapidly advance, and enhance its applications to clinical practice and social relationships and its contributions to the enrichment of our theoretical concepts and to our understanding of the values and languages of specific religions.

Religion(s), Religiousness, Religiosity, and Spirituality

To illustrate how our field's use of the phrase "psychology of religion" has at times created consternation or at least puzzlement, let us draw on an example from our own work. In a set of commentaries on the second edition of our handbook (Paloutzian & Park, 2013a), some commentators complained that we did not define "religion" the way they do in their research (Beit-Hallahmi, 2014; Martin, 2015), that we only elaborated that trying to define religion consistently fails to produce consensus, or that we did not specify one as correct (Stausberg, 2015).¹ On this latter point, a chapter on definitions in our handbook provided detailed coverage of selected and representative definitions of religion and spirituality, describing them in 12 and 13 different ways, respectively (Oman, 2013).

The Psychology of What?

Religiousness. Scholars in our field tend to talk about religion imprecisely because we do not actually know how to study religion with the empirical methods of psychological research. Barrett

¹ See Sosis (2014) for all commentaries and our response.

(2017) has gone so far as to pose the question, “Could we advance the science of religion (better) without the concept ‘religion’?” (p. 282). Our field may be better off if we get beyond using that terminology. This is because the word *religion* implies that there is a singularity that constitutes “religion,” that we either know or can know what that singularity is, and that when we do research, we really are capturing or measuring “it.”

This imprecision became obvious to us during the 18 years I (Raymond F. Paloutzian) edited *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* and during the parallel years that I (Crystal L. Park) was associate editor of multiple journals. A vast number of articles were submitted that measured variables such as church, synagogue, or mosque attendance; content of belief; performance of rituals; degree of belief; importance of religion in one’s life; degree of reliance on God in coping with crises; intrinsic–extrinsic religious orientation; whether one was a convert; belonging to a religious group; and/or the equivalent measures of aspects of the concept of spirituality. Then the authors would attempt to conclude, “religion does this; religion does that.” But in few cases, if any, did the methods actually measure “religion.” In nearly all cases, the variables assessed were aspects of religiousness—whether behavioral, attitudinal, affective, or cognitive—all psychologically meaningful variables, but not comprising an entity termed *religion*.²

Precision in terminology. The problem summarized in the preceding text gets more complicated when we add “and spirituality” to the psychology of religion. Textbook authors (Beit-Hallahmi, 2015; Hood, Hill, & Spilka, 2018; Paloutzian, 2017a; Wulff, 1997) have to dance around the words *religion*, *religiosity*, *religiousness*, *spirituality*, *spiritual*, and *the sacred* when crafting their texts. Why?

This question puzzled Harris, Howell, and Spurgeon (2018) sufficiently to prompt them to conduct a definitional content analysis of religious concepts as used in peer-reviewed psychology of religion journals. They examined how the terms *religiousness*, *spirituality*, *faith*, and *the sacred* were defined in more than 470 articles. They found that the articles used 19 characteristics for defining religiousness, 20 for spirituality, 20 for faith, and nine for the sacred. To add to the confusion, and consistent with Oman’s (2013) summary, there was occasional overlap in that some characteristics were used to define more than one of them (e.g., beliefs or practices might be used in definitions of both religiousness and spirituality). Setting aside the oddity that if we count the frequency of words used to define a concept and then use those frequencies to develop a definition, we are essentially defining an important idea by vote, the definitions of religiousness and spirituality used in the literature as documented by Harris and his colleagues are woefully inadequate. *Religiousness* is said to be “ritual, institutional, or codified spirituality which is culturally sanctioned”; *spirituality* is said to be “a search for or relationship with the sacred”; *faith* is “a synonym for spirituality and/or religiousness”; and *the sacred* is “manifestations of the divine, existential meaningfulness, or an ultimate concern as perceived by an individual” (p. 1). For reasons on which we elaborate subsequently, these composite definitions, which were carefully generated and accurately reflect the language in the literature, do not solve the problem. They manifest it.

To be fair to our colleagues and ourselves, we know that it is possible for most psychologists-qua-psychologists to know only so

much about the myriad, diverse religions of the world. Similarly, religious studies scholars typically know relatively little about modern psychological science. This is why highlighting our strong psychological identity while contributing to interdisciplinary collaborative research is necessary and should be distinguished from that of scholars who merely write parallel statements about religion from different disciplines. Most American psychology of religion research has been conducted in the context of Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish believers, easily available in the United States, with some research on others during recent years (e.g., Bradley, Exline, & Uzdavines, 2015). European psychology of religion research is similar but somewhat more diverse, given the relatively greater geographic access to other religious populations. But psychological research in amounts adequate to sustain development of in-depth knowledge of religiousness worldwide is just now getting underway (Paloutzian, 2017b).

To help develop such knowledge, we cannot focus on religion or spirituality as such, exporting them with the psychological ideas we have developed so far, or merely translate questionnaires developed in English into other languages. Rather, we must contribute the psychological knowledge we have in collaboration with psychologists internationally as well as with anthropologists, philosophers, and religious studies scholars to find ways to adequately understand the MS processes and the meanings made through them—the psychological building blocks of religiousness in people who espouse myriad religions in different languages, geographies, social contexts, and histories. This knowledge, whether combined with or compared with parallel information about the processes that mediate religiousness in our own culture, will constitute a major step toward our ultimate goal of understanding—from a psychological vantage—these social formations called religions.

Conceptual Twists and Turns

Given all of the preceding information and after our combined 70-plus years of scholarly writing in this area, we offer the following conclusions.

Religion is a cultural concept. *Religion* is an abstract noun, not a psychological construct. The concept does not work well for purposes of constructing psychological theory or gaining maximally clear psychological knowledge. Clarity and precision in the language we use can come through recognizing that psychological research is primarily concerned with the mental and behavioral processes involved in individual and group religiousness. These processes are made manifest by variables that, when taken as a whole, may reflect a set of beliefs, behaviors, affects, relationships,

² It may be useful to think carefully about how certain key terms used in this discipline are related to each other. For example, religiousness connotes a personal engagement with, interpretation of, and incorporation of a religion into one’s life. Even so, some topics are not focused on religiousness but are aimed at understanding “religion.” Thus, although most research focuses on religiousness, the field is broad. Other research has something to do with religions but is not psychology of religiousness. Examples include research in which someone is asked whether they think Religion is a force for good or evil, whether couples of the same or different faiths have equal marital satisfaction, or how religions prescribed health behaviors.

and cognitions that are involved in a person's religiousness—clearly related to but distinct from religion.

Religion and its recent companion term, *spirituality*, are complex cultural concepts (Taves, 2013, 2015) that have defied all efforts to identify an “essence” that makes one thing a “genuine” religion or spirituality and another thing not. For some people, being spiritual means devoutly adhering to a specific religion's practices and teachings, whereas others define being spiritual as distinct from being religious (e.g., “I am spiritual but not religious”; Hood, 2003). Further, the cultural meaning of religion is implicit in Saroglou's (2011, 2014) assertion that a person who is religious in the most complete sense is involved in processes of believing, bonding, behaving, and belonging. All four processes have myriad manifestations, and at least two of them (bonding and belonging) do not exist apart from specific cultural meanings.

Meaning(s). In addition to the words *religion* and *spirituality* being used to convey a variety of meanings that often overlap to varying degrees (Oman, 2013; Streib & Hood, 2016; Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005), the same words can be used in different religions to convey very different meanings. For example, *prayer* may connote one set of meanings to a Charismatic Evangelical Protestant in a Latin American country and quite another to a traditional Middle Eastern Arabic-speaking Muslim for whom prayer is one of the Five Pillars of Islam (Sevinc, Coleman, & Hood, 2018). Thus, it would be a methodological error to simply measure frequency of prayer in a Protestant and a Muslim sample, compare the two on some outcome variable, and conclude that a resulting difference was due to differences in prayer frequency, because prayer frequency is confounded with prayer meanings. The important psychological variables whose effects matter are found in the meanings of a behavior such as praying, not merely in a surface manifestation such as the number of prayers performed per unit of time.

The search for an essence. Although there are many things called religions, there is no specific, essential element among them all. In fact, some of them are diametric opposites of one another. Not all postulate a god or another otherworldly being or force, not all require ritual, and not all involve strict doctrines. Some mark experience as the essence of “genuine religion” and as revelatory and authoritative, some look for ritual performance, and others highlight good deeds as the final valid manifestation. Others claim that killing or being martyred is the supreme act of devotion to God, reflects the one true religion, and is guided by the teaching that all people everywhere must believe and practice exactly the proclaimed one true religion or die (McCutcheon, 2003).

Religious studies scholars have tried for over 100 years to define religion and have not come to consensus about what, if anything, the essence of “it” is. The odds that we psychologists will do so seem low. Phenomena called religions contain a subset of various components, even though none of them appears to be essential to all things called religions (Oman, 2013; Pargament, Mahoney, Exline, Jones, & Shafranske, 2013; Taves, 2013, 2015). As a consequence, psychological researchers face the difficulty of translating the concept of “religion” into testable operations (that ideally would represent deeper meanings). Thus, psychologists should resist generalizations about religion (and by extension, spirituality) and retreat from overarching conclusions to more focused statements about particular meanings and their implications. As well-stated by religious studies scholar Burris (2005), “Generalization

within and about particular religious traditions has become difficult; generalization about the nature of religion has become almost impossible” (p. 1871).

Sacred, no “the.” It is of course desirable that authors include in their work a definition of the phenomenon they are discussing. Thus, for approximately one generation, articles in the psychology of religion have frequently relied on Pargament's (1992) definition of religion as “a search for significance in ways related to the sacred” (p. 204). This statement has an attractive, authoritative ring to it. But these qualities also make it easy to cite without integrating it into a through-line that carries the article from beginning to end. Instead of grounding articles on that definition, many authors have succumbed to the temptation to cite it and then proceed to document any number of methods, measures, and variables, providing little or no rationale regarding how or why those methods, measures, or variables are related to that (presumably central) definition. It appears to have become de rigueur to state this definition without realizing that it can be problematic without careful explication. How so?

The aforementioned definition has contributed greatly to the psychology of religiousness. The words gave scholars an idea from which to take off, phrases to describe an idea difficult to capture, which is why this definition has stood the test of 25 years. However, psychologically, the property of sacredness does not exist in the thing “out there.” Sacredness is a meaning attributed to an object, and it can be assigned to anything, although the number of objects commonly deemed sacred is generally relatively circumscribed (Pargament, 2013). And because sacredness is a meaning that has been made by a person or group, it can also be withdrawn and remade, either toward the same object but in a different way or to one or more alternative objects, ideas, values, or posited beings. As Pargament and Mahoney (2005) made clear that their psychological approach “focuses on the perception of what is sacred” and that the question of the origin of what is sacred “falls outside the scope of psychology” (p. 183). Further, “Psychologists have nothing to offer the debate about the ontological validity of the sacred. We can, however, examine *perceptions* of the sacred and emotions, cognitions, and behaviors that precede, accompany, and follow these perceptions” (Pargament, 2013, p. 260).

Social, cognitive, and emotional motivations can all guide and shape these attributions, such that “my rock” or “our belief about our prophet or group” is deemed sacred to someone, whereas “your rock” or “your belief about your prophet or group” is not. Regardless of what may or may not be occurring out there in “ontological reality,” as far as psychological processes are concerned, the property of sacredness is an attribution of a particular meaning made by the perceiver (Paloutzian & Park, 2013b, 2014). This point becomes central in the following discussion about the nature, methods, and boundaries of the science of psychology.

We are not arguing that we should discard the concept of sacredness in research in the psychology of religiousness. But we must be more exacting in our language and thinking about how we talk about it. Sacred is an important human attitude and feeling, and objects or phenomena perceived as sacred are set apart for special personal or social-cultural reasons. Therefore, understanding that humans often regard something as sacred seems essential. But this does not mean that all things deemed sacred are created equal. Confusion thus arose because once stated, many scholars

began to refer to “the” sacred. At this point, however, because of the ambiguity fostered by such terminology, what research has gained by using it is outweighed by the imprecision it introduces. It is time to increase the rigor of our use of key words such as *sacred* so that the wording allows only our exact intended attribution of meaning to be understood by the reader.

Researchers who study perceptions of sacred things have developed a conceptual framework that defines what is sacred to someone, according to two kinds of characterizations: (1) that an aspect of life is imbued with divine significance (i.e., theistic sanctification) and (2) that an aspect of life is imbued with a prototypical set of qualities that describe what people seem to mean by sacred, including transcendence, ultimacy, and boundlessness (i.e., non-theistic sanctification; Pargament, 2013). This approach is consistent with our assertion that sacredness is an attribution, and it helps us clarify what may generally be meant as qualities of sacredness (Pargament, Oman, Pomerleau, & Mahoney, 2017). What can people deem sacred? Items commonly included in lists of things that people can regard as sacred include traditionally religious concepts such as God, supernatural, and divine (Durkheim, 1912/1995; see Pargament, Mahoney, Exline et al., 2013, and Pargament & Mahoney, 2005, for examples). In addition, however, the explanations and examples make it clear that not all things deemed sacred must be things commonly seen as religious. To the contrary, the lists are nonspecific and open-ended and explicit in the notion that anything can be considered sacred for someone. This means that sacrality can be attributed to a piece of ground (e.g., a piece of land deemed holy); a stick or stone (e.g., a totem); an idea or value (e.g., love); a child or nonhuman animal, a dead ancestor, or anything else. Pargament, Mahoney, Exline et al. (2013) correctly listed “war” and Kripal (2014) listed a “run over beer can” as things that can be held sacred.

There is no requirement that something deemed sacred have a connection with something generally considered positive, otherworldly, divine, or specifically supernatural, or that it contain divine-like qualities such as transcendence, ultimacy, and boundlessness. This conceptualization is flawed because making something sacred means to set it apart; that is, although one may regard it, hold it, or use or protect it for special purposes or reasons, this does not require that it be perceived as having divine-like qualities. Kripal’s (2014) illustration of a run over beer can seems plain enough to clarify this point, although perhaps tongue in cheek. A more obvious example might involve a mother’s love for her children. Her children may be sacred to her. This does not mean, however, that she perceives them to have any of the “divine-like qualities” noted earlier. To her they may be fully natural, nontranscendent, temporary and temporal, and very bounded, even though, like other nondivine things, they may play an uncompromisingly central and sacred role in her life. Psychologically and functionally, it is entirely possible to hold something or someone as sacred with no perception, conscious or unconscious, of them as having divine-like properties.

Thus, as we have previously noted (Paloutzian & Park, 2014),

this inclusivity means that there is no one essence, no singularity, that constitutes “the sacred.” Psychologically speaking, the property of sacredness is not inherent in an object. There is no “the” there. This field will take a step forward when scholars stop using terminology that suggests that there is. (p. 53).

In other words, pursuit of the sacred kicks the can down the road a bit, but when we get to defining sacred, we once again encounter the lack of consensus. Leaving the word “the” out of the search at least allows scholars to get a sense of what people usually define as sacred without connoting that there is one source or that this source is external to the perceiver assigning the meaning.

The value of the word *sacred* may appear to be undermined if a seemingly endless number of things can be deemed sacred. But it is not. We should not throw away research on why people make attributions of sacredness to things. Just as the focus of much of the research in this field is more properly on psychological processes in religiousness, not religion, so also understanding why people adhere to a particular religion instead of others or none may more properly include understanding why people attribute the property of sacredness to some things and not to others (even if the possibilities are technically infinite), not looking for a singular “the” that defines the myriad things deemed sacred. The verbal and logical dilemma at issue in the above discussion may be largely solved by simply not placing the word *the* before the word *sacred*.

To press the point to its limits, using “the” to refer to a category of “the sacred” in the same way one might refer to a category for when “the automobile” was invented promotes confusion rather than clarity. This confusion is because in common usage, the language is not understood that way. For example, if one is looking for an automobile to buy, one does not say he or she is “searching for the automobile.” Likewise, it is awkward and unclear to say that he or she is “searching for the sacred.” Speaking with greater precision will promote greater understanding.

Fundamentals

Let us dig deeper to understand the psychological processes underlying the kinds of human strivings implied by the above attempts at definition. Because all humans are engaged in processes of believing (Angel, Oviedo, Paloutzian, Runihov, & Seitz, 2017), whether implicitly or consciously and explicitly, and because religions probably have roots in many specific meanings (Park, 2005, 2013), we need to understand the psychological fundamentals of believing in the context of MS processes.

Believing and MS processes. In response to the aforementioned dilemmas, some scholars have argued that it would be better to conduct research that involves specific fundamental psychological processes that underpin our broader concerns. Believing is one such fundamental psychological process, including how it feeds and is fed by affective and behavioral processes. These scholars maintain that, in addition to behaviors, all humans have beliefs of many kinds; neither believing nor performing ritual behavior is restricted to religions or spiritualities; and the believing process occurs moment to moment, mostly unconsciously, at multiple levels about all manner of things (Angel et al., 2017). Paloutzian and Mukai (2017) made a compelling case that a belief is a meaning that has been made, whether culturally called religious, spiritual, or neither. In fact, “non-belief” or “unbelief” (including atheist and agnostic) is the third largest category of religious affiliation in the world, following Christianity and Islam (Bullivant & Ruse, 2013; Lee, 2015). Further, recent research has begun to explore the degree to which being an unbeliever religiously is not an act of avoidance or rejection, but is instead a psychologically positive act, analogous to actively believing in a named religion.

For example, nonbelievers often adhere to many of the same moral values, accept those values as transcendent from themselves, work for humanitarian causes, and practice the same standards of social behavior as do believers in a named religion, although their fundamental philosophical reasons for doing so (i.e., the meanings those behaviors hold for them) may differ. Our understanding of religious believing, behaving, and feeling would likely increase if our research were expanded to include examining those same processes in nonbelievers of named religions (Farias, 2013).

A belief appears to be relatively static but is actually a more fluid instance of meaning making. Beliefs often appear and feel relatively fixed but are actually flexible because of the nature of MS processes (Angel et al., 2017), just as other meanings are made, appraised, and remade in modified form (Park, 2010). The processes that interact to produce and regulate beliefs, with corresponding behavior and affect, range across levels of analysis and disciplines from at least the neurological to the social. On the basis of this range of disciplines, progress has been made to conceptualize the processes involved in believing within an MIP (e.g., see Seitz et al., 2018 for examples). Research into believing as a fundamental psychological process may help illuminate issues in all of psychology and other areas of life that hinge on understanding reality and interpreting experience.

Meanings made and remade. Psychologically speaking, many of the mental and behavioral phenomena we aim to study— aspects of religiousness—are the results of fundamental MS processes in which we make, appraise, and remake meanings in response to information entering the system, a process that operates at least from the level of the eye to the human brain (Paloutzian & Mukai, 2017). We therefore assert that focusing on the fundamental processes by which humans make, appraise, and remake meanings will lead to scientific and theoretical progress in the psychology of religiousness and spirituality. Such processes constitute the foundations upon which human behaviors are imbued with various meanings, including those labeled *sacred*, *religious*, or *spiritual*. They are not necessarily absolutes, truths, falsities, or unique psychological categories. Rather, these processes are the mental, affective, evaluative, and behavioral aspects that the human cognitive–emotional–behavioral system combines to create (psychologically) what people may call their religion.

The meaning of “meaning” can cause confusion. In our context, *meaning* is neither a singularity nor necessarily a mental state. In ordinary language, saying that something has meaning or is meaningful is always in reference to something else. It is a tautology to say that x means x . But to say x leads to y is meaningful. Thus, to say that x means something is to say that x implies that thing, is like it, precedes it, defines it, causes it, is related to it in some manner, predicts it, was predicted by it, or connects in some specifiable way to something else. Meaning “connects things” (Baumeister, 1991, p. 16). Meaning-making processes are the foundational ways that such connections are made. For example, something (e.g., a meaningful percept) is made out of bits of information—such as how the eye receives ambiguous configurations of electromagnetic radiation while it saccades, and through transduction in the retina, transmission through the visual nervous system, and the interaction of bottom-up and top-down processes produces a meaningful percept in the mind/brain of a thing (e.g., an apple) presumed to be “out there.” Paloutzian (2017a) and Paloutzian and Mukai (2017) described the evolutionary development of

MS processes that, at the “higher,” more complicated end of the phylogenetic spectrum, lead to the human mind and consciousness.

Therefore, instead of beginning our inquiry with a stipulated definition, scientists should begin by studying the fundamental processes out of which all behaviors emerge. This latter approach will not only identify the factors that combine to produce those phenomena that people call religious or spiritual, but also help to explain why people ascribe special (religious or spiritual) status to them. The fundamental psychological building blocks must be the meanings that people ascribe to whatever constitutes religion and its elements (i.e., their individual religiousness). This can be said another way: The question of religion is a question about “what life is fundamentally about.” We elaborate on this point after clarifying the logic and boundaries of the field.

Questions, Boundaries, and Methods

Like all science, the psychology of religion begins with the classical guiding rule—there are no privileged (private, publically inaccessible) positions—that is rooted in the founding document of the field of epistemology, Plato’s (1997; Visala & Angel, 2017) *Theaetetus*. Believing can be private, but knowing cannot; that is, anything properly called *knowledge* is, in principle, accessible as public knowledge. The implications of this simple rule cover all aspects of psychology of religion, psychology as a whole, and the rest of the sciences. Let us unpack the implications of this principle for the science of the psychology of religion.

Knowledge Is Public

Insofar as the researchers who study human religiousness do so as psychologists, they are bound by the rules of logic, guidelines, and philosophical assumptions of psychology and, thus, of science more generally (Carnap, 1966; Johansson, 2016; McCain, 2016; Rosenberg, 2012). These guidelines and assumptions are predicated on the idea that under study are the processes of the natural world. They include the principle that a theory or tentative explanation must be capable of being studied using empirical tests, so that conclusions, and the theory constructions that follow, are based on publicly accessible evidence and can be modified by future evidence. Hypotheses must be empirically disprovable. Thus, the science of the psychology of religion lives by the same rules as do all sciences. In this sense, there is nothing special about it. Nor there should be.

Because science is empirical and evidence-based, propositions about causality that are not, in principle, testable or disprovable or that are based on claims of evidence that are not, in principle, publically accessible, are not scientific propositions. They are not part of the psychology of religion, although they might (or might not) be an important part of the beliefs of an individual or group. The claims made by such propositions cannot be addressed by the methods of science. We are not able to scientifically conclude whether they are false or true, invalid or valid. Instead, these are metaphysical claims, outside of the realm of empirical science.

A scientific equation? Let us imagine that someone proposed a theory of religious conversion that includes the activity of a supernatural agent (e.g., God) who has a choice about whether to cause a person to convert from Religion 1 or from “none” to Religion 2. Given this much information, we would have to write

an equation or a statement of the processes proposed to mediate the conversion in a form, such as

$$BR1 + Px + Py \dots + SC + Pz \geq BR2$$

where BR1 = person believes in Religion 1, BR2 = person believes in Religion 2, Px, Py, and Pz = processes x, y, and z, respectively; and SC = done by God.

Although it may appear somewhat tongue in cheek, the logic imbedded in the preceding equation is exactly what some scholars and practitioners may implicitly (and occasionally explicitly) presume, believe, or say is “confirmation” of how their god is at work in someone’s life or in a denominational or social movement.³ The same logic is operative if, for example, a psychotherapist intending to speak as a scientific psychologist says that God (as an actual otherworldly being, not merely as the client’s personal sense or sincere belief about God’s ability or activity, which are subject to ordinary psychological examination) lowered a client’s anxiety. The problem is that the equation and underlying theoretical proposition are not within the orbit of scientific logic, including the logic of psychology. The equation is outside the boundaries of the psychology of religion because whether there is a god, and if that god is active or passive in processes that mediate anxiety reduction or any other human behavior, is not testable or knowable—that is, neither falsifiable nor confirmable—by methods of science.

Foundations of evidence. The preceding examples illustrate the foundations on which scientific conclusions can be based. A conclusion about the processes that mediate a conversion to a religion requires evidence that is, in principle, subject to test by publically accessible evidence. The same criterion for evidence applies to a conclusion that a god (as an actual agent, not as the client’s sense, impressions, feelings, or beliefs about a god-agent) causes improvement in psychotherapy.

So, how does one test whether God causes an effect? Psychologists cannot. They can, however, test whether believing in a god causes an effect. Asking a person whether he or she thinks, believes, or feels that God did something is not sufficient as evidence that God did something because the truth-value of the claim cannot be scientifically evaluated. A person may feel strongly that God did something (and feelings of this sort can be psychologically investigated), but such feelings rest upon personal believing, not on knowable evidence. And the principle that there are no privileged positions means that psychologists, as outside scientific observers, can study what the person says about beliefs, interpret his or her description of the experience, examine brain scans, record and content-analyze the person’s in-depth interview transcript, measure the person’s ratings of the potency of the experience, and rate the degree to which the person feels certain that an actual god actually acted—all of which are data in the ordinary sense of psychological science. In sum, scientists cannot test whether God does things.

In the most widespread theologies, God presumably makes his, her, or its own decisions. This assumed, could we experimentally manipulate God or test the equivalent process in vivo in order to either rule in or out the notion of God’s activity in causing a human behavior? God’s activity or inactivity constitutes a variable. How can we measure that variable if we construe it as causal—that is, as an independent variable? To our knowledge, no attempt by scientific methods to manipulate or assess whether a god is or is not acting in a situation has been successful in documenting it by

measurements or by an experimental manipulation check (although researchers have tried; see, e.g., Roberts, Ahmed, & Davison, 2009). Yet nobody knows what ought to be measured, and even if they did, nobody knows how “it” should be measured. Scientists cannot manipulate God into acting versus doing nothing.

What data can confirm or disconfirm the “god hypothesis”? Whatever else God is or isn’t, the god to which most religious people pray presumably has the property of choice—if not, then why bother asking God to intercede? That is, God can do whatever he, she, or it wishes; is not obligated to let people or any particular person know about his, her, or its existence; and can act or not over any time frame, via any medium, and with or without human awareness. This means that no matter what a person or people bring to God as a prayerful request, and even if the outcome is exactly what was requested, it is not possible to demonstrate that God acted—or that there is a god but that god did nothing, or that there is no god to have acted—because God cannot be tested experimentally or otherwise.⁴

Limits of evidence. There is one additional topic, important to some and given little attention by others, implicit in what we stated earlier, but that we now address explicitly. It has to do with variations of what some call “theistic psychology” (TP). Broadly stated, TP represents the apex of the issue of whether a god is actively involved in the world and whether we can, through our psychological research, gain knowledge about such activity. The answer to this issue is probably already clear on the basis of what we put forth in the preceding text. But let us pose the following question: Does the concept of TP raise a problem in need of a solution? That is, can this concept help to illustrate what is and is not appropriate to say within the orbit of psychological science in this and in other scientific journals?

Some proponents of TP say that an important element of their approach to treating a client in psychotherapy is to state their own belief in God—as both full disclosure and as a way to affirm their individual religiousness. Although some psychologists may prefer not to talk about their own religiousness, there is nothing inadmissible about doing so, just as there is nothing inadmissible about noting that one prefers quantitative or qualitative methods in research. These are ways of making clear one’s assumptions, with which others may agree or disagree.

However, it may be easy for a proponent of TP to slide beyond the limits of scientific evidence. For example, the person might begin by making psychologically appropriate statements such as, “This person believes God spoke to him”—a report about a per-

³ For a far more clever visual presentation of the problem with this equation, see the cartoon in Paloutzian (2017a, p. 58).

⁴ Experimental attempts to test God: A few psychological experiments have attempted to test activity of god via prayer manipulation. The exemplar studies are illustrative. They typically have tried to test effects of so-called distant prayer (e.g., prayer for a person’s health when the prayed-for person is not aware of the prayer, and when the pray-er and pray-ee have no contact and do not personally know each other). With this procedure, if the prayed-for group gets well faster, better, or in greater numbers than the not prayed-for control group, the difference could not be explained by social contact between the pray-er and pray-ee or by the patient knowing of the pray-er (i.e., not by ordinary psychological processes). Thus, one might wish to explain it via God’s agency in response to prayer. Such studies show null results, with overall chance effects. (See Spilka & Ladd, 2013, for comprehensive review of research on distant prayer.)

son's belief, a legitimate piece of evidence—and then later making a statement such as, “This person heard God speak to him”—a statement that is not in principle testable. It is the second of these two statements that is beyond the limits of psychological scientific evidence. It is not our aim to confirm or disconfirm such claims, but we must make clear that statements of the second sort are extrascientific statements. They are instances of the “God did *x*” component of the scientific equation illustrated earlier. Psychology can neither affirm nor deny their veridicality, which is why they do not belong within psychological science.

Finally, let us illustrate a subtle point that seems to stand exactly on the boundary between the science of the psychology of religiousness and an applied “integrative” TP. Suppose we wanted to examine the differential effectiveness on client outcomes between therapists who say that they use an integrative TP approach and therapists who say that they do not use such an approach. Would an investigation so crafted belong within psychology? Yes, so long as the measures are of a standard psychological sort; the experimental treatment or known-groups assessment of the TP and non-TP groups are, in principle, publically accessible and replicable; and the interpretation of any results explain that the findings are due to differential beliefs in clients (or therapists), without making claims of having evidence of extranatural agents or actors.

Believing and Knowing: No Privileged Positions

Our description of the logic and rules of the science of psychology, described earlier, fall under the umbrella of elementary principles of epistemology. Here we present one final statement to make clear the difference between believing and knowing. There is no misrepresentation of the facts if someone says, “I had a dream last night in which I had a mental picture of someone, and a voice from that someone said it was the angel Gabriel, so now I believe that Gabriel talked to me.” A statement so framed is accurate; it labels a belief about a memory of a mental event as a belief, not as a fact, and not as knowledge. However, if the sentence had added, “. . . so now I know what God wants me to do, because the Angel told me,” the truth value of the statement would have changed. It is no longer accurate or reliable if by “know” the speaker intends for someone else to be bound by what he saw or to think the same thing he thinks about it. In this case, what is “known” is private only. It is not something that is transmittable to anyone else; thus, no one else is obligated to accept it as valid. The only thing someone else knows is “[t]his is what the other person says” (Paloutzian, 2017a, pp. 373–374).

The lesson for us is to make sure that we carve people's claims of knowledge at the joints. Let us be meticulously clear about the process of believing versus having knowledge. The difference matters greatly for us, individually and for all people everywhere, especially in circumstances in which one person claims to have God's knowledge and aims to impose it upon another person or upon all other people.

Models, Meanings, Theory, and Explaining

Given these divergent views about definitions and boundaries within the psychology of religion, we offer suggestions for moving forward.

The Clear Road Ahead

First, as psychologists, our research and theorizing on religiousness should be conducted according to the ordinary scientific guidelines described in the preceding text. This does not mean that some psychologists cannot do part of their applied work outside of those guidelines (e.g., integrating psychological knowledge with specific religious teachings for treatment of a client of that religion who requests it, a context of a client–therapist relationship), but it does mean that *integration* in this sense should be called what it is—integration of psychological knowledge with specific religious teachings in a context of application. It should not be called psychology of religion because it is outside the orbit of what psychological science is.

Second, psychologists interested in religious behavior will benefit by drawing on two emerging paradigms that help to integrate the vast research that has been done and, perhaps more importantly, guide future work. These paradigms are the multilevel interdisciplinary paradigm (MIP) and the MS conceptualization. The MIP posits that there is no way to fully understand what we call human religiousness by using only psychological methods and concepts, an important point in light of the cultural connotation of *religion*. The tools we have available at present yield knowledge about individuals and groups that is valid, but only within our own relatively narrow domain. Thus, psychological knowledge is essential but not sufficient; it must be complemented by knowledge from other disciplines at a more micro level (e.g., biology, neuroscience) and at a more macro level (e.g., sociology, anthropology). Thus, psychology should retain its identity and special focus on human mental processes and behavior, emotions, cognition, and relationships, but we should also collaborate with scholars in allied fields. This is because a comprehensive understanding of religiousness requires extrapolation of the MS model—that is, the degree to which our data and evidence for what they mean, and the theoretical concepts that emerge therefrom, map onto the levels of analysis immediately above and below psychology. That can happen only when the meanings of what is studied are the same, at those levels. When meanings of data match each other from one level of analysis to another, synthetic knowledge is the result (Gilmcher, 2011). A clear understanding of the nature of MS processes that relate data and theory among adjacent levels of analysis will facilitate progress.

MSs and Meaning Making

The approach rooted in MS processes posits that a person's religion—along with other factors—informs the individual's global MS (beliefs, goals, values, identity, sense of purpose) and how those meanings interact with encounters in the world (Park, 2005).⁵ To understand an individual's MS, including whatever religious meanings they embrace, we must investigate the individual's own idiosyncratic understanding of the self, the world, and the self in the world.

The MS model holds particular importance for moving our knowledge forward because it can help us see different lines of research synthetically. For example, MS approaches can integrate

⁵ *Global* used in this context connotes “over-arching psychologically,” with no intended geographical connotation.

the literature on how religious beliefs, relationships, behaviors, and experiences influence our understanding of who we are, why things happen as they do, how we are supposed to behave and the consequences when we do or do not behave that way. In so doing, the MS model provides a comprehensive perspective on being human that facilitates the synthesis of knowledge from many areas of psychology, including clinical phenomena, attributions, personality, cognition, morality, coping, decision making, neuroscience, identity, values, health, and social relationships.

The MS conceptualization is uniquely suited to helping researchers navigate the definitional issues of religiousness and spirituality within the boundaries of science in their efforts to capture individuals' own internal experiences that can only be conveyed through self-reports. Thus, individuals' own definitions of what is spiritual or religious to them can be defined by those individuals rather than having a definition imposed by a researcher. In essence, individuals can report on their own ways of being religious or spiritual as they understand and experience it (i.e., their religiousness). If one individual defines his religiousness as high involvement with a religious institution while another defines her religiousness as frequent communication with a divine presence, then we as scientists must take up the challenge of assessing these divergent experiences with measurement approaches nuanced enough to capture individuals' points of view. The bottom line is that we as psychologists cannot (and should not attempt to) preemptively define or delimit what religiousness or spirituality is and impose it on our participants or clients; rather, we should be alert to the limitations of our definitions and proactively engage their experiences as guides to what we refer to as *religiousness* or *spirituality*, and our theoretical constructs and definitions should develop from them.

Similarly, attention to people's meaning systems can frame studies of their interior experiences deemed religious in ways that respect the perceived veracity of those experiences while remaining solidly within the bounds of empirical science. Such a perspective allows and, in fact, encourages research with people holding diverse religious views and considers those views to be individuals' understanding of truth rather than as truth per se. Returning to our earlier example, if someone experiences a conversion and ardently believes that God has directly intervened in her life and spoken directly to her, then for her, this interpreted meaning is the unit of analysis. We cannot determine, within the bounds of science, whether God did or did not speak to her, but such a determination is unnecessary; the unit of analysis is the perceived meaning. Such a perspective is the only one that science permits, given that metaphysical truths are beyond its boundaries. As psychologists, focusing on our participants' own understanding of the nature of reality is the best we can do and is central to our knowledge of human behavior. Although science does more than just describe (i.e., it also predicts, controls, and explains), it is not able to extend and elaborate what religion or spirituality are in ways that go beyond naturalistic conceptualizations of the concepts.

How might this work in practice? In truth, we are not far from this approach even now; many psychologists do explicitly examine participants' meanings as the basic units of analysis (e.g., Ahmadi, Ahmadi, Erbil, & Cetrez, 2016; Krok, 2014), and many others implicitly refer to these meanings (e.g., Pargament & Lomax, 2013). In fact, nearly 20 years ago, Pargament, Koenig, and Perez,

(2000) noted in the context of coping, "it is not enough to know that an individual prays, attends church, or watches religious television," rather, they emphasized the importance of understanding "how the individual is making use of religion to understand and deal with stressors" (p. 521). These scholars highlighted that religion—and any specific manifestation of it, such as prayer—can serve a variety of functions in both day-to-day living and in times of stress. They highlighted five functions: existential meaning (frameworks for understanding and interpretation), control (avenues to achieve a sense of mastery and control, even if indirect), comfort/spirituality (reductions in individuals' apprehension about living in a world in which disaster can strike at any moment, desire to connect with a force that goes beyond the individual), intimacy/spirituality (facilitation of social cohesiveness, social solidarity and social identity, closeness with a higher power), and life transformation (assistance in making major life changes). This functional approach may provide psychologists attempting to understand the implicit or underlying meanings of aspects of someone's religiousness—such as self-reports of prayer or service attendance or sense of spiritual awareness—with a way to understand the explicit meanings apparent in individuals' religious expressions and experiences.

Further, some psychologists acknowledge that settling on a singular, indisputable, and final definition of religion, religiousness, or spirituality is not only impossible, but also unnecessary (e.g., Barrett, 2017; Oman, 2013). For the MS approach to more usefully inform the field, psychologists need to give more thought to their own use of definitions: Rather than referring to some vague notions of "the" sacred, it is imperative that we understand what people mean when they discuss their religiousness or spirituality and design studies that allow us to inquire into these phenomena.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The issues at the heart of this article lead to the focus on religiousness, not religion. They also tell us that interdisciplinary approaches are not only appropriate but essential and that the MS model has the potential to provide the synthetic tools and common ground that have eluded the field. Psychology of religiousness as a topic will continue in its level of importance, and the future of the field will be a part of (perhaps the most important part of) the psychology of MS processes. As such, it can take its place amid the fundamental psychological processes such as learning, motivation, perception, and development.

We recommend the following simple, relatively easy adjustments in how we proceed in some of our professional affairs:

1. When referring to what someone holds as sacred, be clear that the sacred object or thing is sacred in this person's purview rather than possessing some quality of inherent or universally agreed-upon sacredness.
2. As appropriate for proper expression in English, in our books, articles, the DSM, commentaries, and other publications, and when communicating our research in this field with scholars in other disciplines, use the wording of greatest precision to convey exactly what is meant. Often this means using the term *religiousness* instead of the term *religion*.

3. When reviewing journal or book articles for editors and publishers, help the authors, editors, and publishers facilitate this adjustment in our wording by giving appropriate guidance. Often, giving a simple example of how the author can make the change from their term *religion* to the term *religiousness* will help.
4. When we give conference presentations, write notes and e-mails, and in casual conversation, we must avoid the ambiguity of *religion* and invoke the term with the more valid psychological connotation, *religiousness*, when that is what we mean to indicate.

Let us implement these simple adjustments to improve our precision to think about and do research on the psychological processes in religiousness, and to improve our ability to communicate with precision with each other. If we do, we will see that various refinements in our research and theory, some of which are illustrated above, will emerge. Basic research in our field will generate new insights, rapidly advance, and enhance its applications to clinical practice and social relationships. It will also enrich our theoretical concepts and our understanding of the meanings that underlay the values and languages of specific religions and individuals.

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