

State
of
the art

Religion

RELIGION presents a range of phenomena falling outside what is usually studied by psychologists, and for which there often appears to be no psychological explanation. Religious experiences are reported by one third of the population, sacrifice is practised in most religions, sudden adolescent conversion is common for religious attitudes, and some religious beliefs are remarkably non-rational. We need to understand these things.

Some psychologists have tackled the study of religion by trying to find the causes or correlates of religious phenomena, in the hope of explaining them (or perhaps explaining them away). These include the widespread reporting of religious experiences, the holding of beliefs, the practice of religious rituals and other behaviour, and their possible effects on health and altruism. We shall see that there has been partial scientific success; for example explaining religion in terms of normal social process, such as socialisation and conformity, but failure in other areas, such as providing explanations for sacrifice and some religious experience.

Psychological research can also accept religion at face value and analyse it in terms of constituent parts to try to understand it better. It is in this spirit that music students may have to take courses in physics – not to show that Bach is bunk but to understand how sound works. The next section gives an example of this approach – studying the nature of faith.

What is religious belief?

There are hundreds of surveys, for example showing that in Britain 69 per cent believe in God, 55 per cent in life after death, 28 per cent in Hell (Greeley, 1992). It has often been assumed that assenting to such propositions was a good measure of faith: failure to do so has got bishops into trouble, and in an earlier age burnt at the stake. However, a recent American national survey found that only 20 per cent thought that faith consisted of a 'set of beliefs', while 50 per cent thought that it was 'a relation with God'. Doctrines



MICHAEL ARGYLE reviews *psychological insights into religion, focusing on the Christian faith.*

and belief in them appear less important in Buddhism and other oriental religions. So what is faith apart from the tip of the iceberg of verbal assent?

If we take faith as a kind of attitude, we can break the iceberg into the three components commonly attributed to all attitudes in social psychology: cognitive, emotional and behavioural.

Cognitive This component could be thought of as the belief: belief that is largely irrational, requiring a 'leap of faith' on incomplete evidence. In an early study Thouless (1935) found that many were uncertain of whether 'tigers are found in parts of China', but his participants were quite certain Jesus Christ was the son of God. Faith has been likened to marriage or falling in love – in these cases too there is a leap of faith, and it needs to be followed by further efforts to make it work. Religious faith also involves the acceptance of inconsistency. For example, many people hold two images of God: as a kind of person and as an abstract creative force (Barrett & Keil, 1996). The problem of evil is another classic case of inconsistency: how can God be all-powerful and wholly good?

How people treat this lack of evidence or cognitive inconsistency is interesting from a social psychological perspective. For example, scientists sometimes experience conflict between their scientific views and their religious ones; 32 per cent of American Catholic graduates thought there was serious conflict over evolution (Lenski, 1963). This is resolved, not by giving up religion, but by moving to a less literal, more metaphorical kind of belief. Goldman (1964) found long ago that children of 13–14 made abstract and symbolic interpretations of Bible stories

like the burning bush (e.g. God was appearing in the fire, or it was a fire of love). However, we shall see later that it is 'strict' or fundamentalist churches, believing literal truths (for example that God made the world in six days and that evolution did not take place) that are expanding throughout the world. The certainty of belief offered, and therefore consistency in cognition, seems to be attractive.

However, these literal beliefs can often be challenged and predictions are not confirmed; for example, the world doesn't come to an end. Those involved do not seem to be worried by these problems; religious logic seems to work differently. When end-of-the world predictions don't come off there is sometimes a revision of the date, or the event is said to take place in some more abstract way. These instances of 'irrationality' may be seen as reduction of cognitive dissonance, but that theory does not predict how it will be done. Festinger *et al.* (1956) infiltrated such a group, and the first prediction failure was followed by a search for more members, supposedly to provide more social support for the group's beliefs. This apparent irrationality is less surprising when we realise that the cognitive component is only one aspect of faith; there are powerful emotional forces as well.

Emotional The emotional component of religion could be seen as awe and reverence, both central to religion (Watts & Williams, 1988). Religious experiences can often be understood as emotional experiences, produced in the same way as other emotions. Following the tradition of Schachter (1964), who found that emotions are produced by a combination of physiological state and environmental

influences, Pahnke (1966) gave a pill to theological students during a Good Friday meditation. Those who had psilocybin (the active ingredient in magic mushrooms) had a classic religious experience, unlike those with the placebo. So in common with the production of other emotions, to have a religious experience you need to be in the right physiological state and the right environmental setting; but you also need to have had the right religious socialisation. This leads us to the behavioural component of religious attitude.

Behavioural Faith is commonly said to consist also of appropriate behaviour, such as praying or leading a certain kind of life. Anthropologists have found that religious behaviour is very widespread in primitive society. In modern society too it commonly includes worship, music, healing, prayer, and rituals, all symbolising religious beliefs and feelings (the cognitive and emotional components of the attitude). There is nonverbal communication, using bodily

postures, purification by water, red wine is used to stand for blood, and there are special costumes.

The behavioural component of religion can also be more inwardly focused, linking back to cognition and emotion. Although research in the psychology of religion has often used frequency of church attendance as a convenient behavioural measure of religiosity, this is not the same as religious commitment. This can be shown in perception of oneself as a religious person, accepting traditional beliefs, needing prayer and contemplation, and drawing strength and comfort from religion. Middle-class people go to church twice as much as working-class, but working-class people score higher on those measures of inner commitment (Gerard, 1985).

A dramatic form of religious behaviour is expanding in several parts of the world – charismatic Christianity, such as Pentecostalism. This consists of very expressive services, with drumming or other loud music, speaking with tongues,

public healing, prophesying, sometimes frenzied dancing, barking like dogs, and collapsing on the floor, known as ‘being slain in the spirit’. This has grown rapidly in Korea (where the ‘mega-churches’ may accommodate 100,000 each Sunday), Brazil, the USA, Africa, and on a smaller scale in Britain (Cox, 1996). The ‘Toronto blessing’ is an example of it, where there is ecstatic behaviour such as uncontrollable weeping, laughing and falling to the ground.

All this religious behaviour is highly social. Groups of members are directed by the priest, who is thought to have special powers. In charismatic religion there is generation of much shared excitement. The uniformity of behaviour in charismatic and other religious groups is evidence of conformity; church communities are very cohesive and great sources of social support, and this is one of the main reasons for the benefits of religion described later. Turner (1969) found that in primitive rituals of adult initiation those being processed formed close social bonds, a state which he called ‘communitas’, a religious and ecstatic condition in which people ‘are freed from the sins of selfish and hierarchical society’. This may be a common effect of sharing in religious rituals; as we shall see, religious experiences commonly include strong pro-social impulses.

Some pervasive religious behaviours are not so pro-social and are very hard to explain psychologically. Sacrifice was a normal feature of life in the ancient world and lives on in the Christian doctrine of atonement. Freud is one psychologist to have attempted an explanation, with his Totem and Taboo (1913) theory of killing and eating the totem animal, which symbolised the father and became a god. This extraordinary theory received some confirmation when Lienhardt (1961) found that the Dinka tribe regularly kill and eat an ox, their totem animal, describe it as ‘flesh of my father’, and identify it with God. Another theory is that sacrifice discharges aggression and stops the cycle of violence and revenge (Girard, 1972).

Where does religion come from?

There have been many studies of the correlations between holding religious beliefs and personality (e.g. Francis, 1992). The upshot is that there is little or no relation between religion and the main traits of the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire or the ‘Big Five’, like extraversion and neuroticism. However, there is some relationship with more

specialised personality traits: a negative correlation with the psychoticism factor, a positive one with empathy, with dogmatism for fundamentalists, and with schizotypy for religious experience. There is also the famous sex difference – women are considerably more religious than men, in the Christian world at least. The explanation is still not known (see Beit-Hallahmi & Argyle, 1997).

Study of the socialisation of religious beliefs and attitudes suggests that children and students have similar beliefs to their parents, especially if there is a close relation with them; this is the same as any other kind of attitude. But religion is different in the phenomenon of conversion, common in adolescence. It is partly due to attachment to a new group, a weak attachment to the home or previous group, and to the effect of emotional evangelical meetings. Some conversions are sudden, especially for those in a state of depression or guilt. Batson *et al.* (1993) suggested that conversion is a case of creative problem solving, like the figure-ground reversal in perception, stimulated by a special kind of discontent,

a loss of meaning in life. (The large research literature is reviewed by Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle (1997).)

Religious experiences

Surveys in Britain, USA and Australia find that about 34 per cent of the population say they have had a religious experience, though not often and they usually did not last for long. The question asked is often 'Have you ever been aware of or influenced by a presence or power, whether you call it God or not, which is different from your everyday self?' This is known as the 'Alister Hardy question', since he thought of it and it has been much used in the work of the Alister Hardy Centre for Religious Experience at Oxford (Hardy, 1979). At the Alister Hardy Trust we have a computer archive of 7000 answers to such questions. Jakobsen (1999) recently analysed experiences of evil; if someone wanted to look at experiences of 'angel voices', say, these could easily be extracted. There have been several national surveys, for example by David Hay (1990).

The most common triggers of religious experiences are music, prayer, nature,

church and distress. An American survey by Greeley (1975) found that common features were 'profound peace, sense of joy and laughter, a sense of the unity of everything, and a need to contribute to others'. But are universal features found in all periods and faiths? This is a matter of current controversy. Stace (1960) drew up a list of what he thought these features were, and this has been the basis of later research. Hood (1975) extended this list and factor analysed reported experiences, finding two factors – transcendent and immanent. Transcendent experiences are of contact with a religious being outside the self, immanent ones are of the spiritual unity of all things.

We have been studying a more common form of religious experience, the 'milder type', which some people have every Sunday. These are less dramatic, but are still religious experiences. We find these are very similar to the experiences induced by music (Hills & Argyle, 1998) and are composed of three factors – transcendent (e.g. reported contact with God), immanent or mystical (loss of sense of self, timelessness, etc.), and a social factor (e.g.

being united with other people) (Argyle & Hills, in press).

However, the presence of others is not always needed for a religious experience. Hood (1995) put subjects of varying religiosity in a sensory deprivation chamber and instructed them to think about various topics. Religious experiences were obtained by those high in intrinsic religiosity (those for whom religion is an end in itself) and who had been asked to think about religious topics. Sensory isolation was used by early mystics; the reason that it appears to work may be the quietening of the left hemisphere, so that the 'doors of perception' in the right hemisphere can operate. More right hemisphere activity is found in meditators, and people having out-of-body experiences (Fenwick, 1987).

Not all religious experiences have a positive effect. The Alister Hardy question elicits quite a number of reported psychic experiences – such as conversations with the dead, clairvoyance, and precognition – which are interpreted as religious by some of those who report them and may be negative. Another variety is 'near-death experience'. Such experiences are quite common, and interesting in their uniformity – most report that time stopped, that they felt an incredible peace, and saw a bright light of other-worldly origin (Gallup & Proctor, 1982).

The effects of religion

Does religion have any effect on people's lives? Moberg and Taves (1965) found quite a strong effect on happiness, but mainly for the old and socially isolated. In an American national survey Ellison (1991) found separate effects on happiness from social support, private devotions and certainty of beliefs.

The greatest effect of religion is on 'existential certainty', with optimism about the future and less fear of death. There have been experiments, no longer allowed by ethics committees, in which slides of corpses, dirge-like music and talks about the dangers of accidents and disease are presented in the lab. This appears to make believers less worried about death and more certain of life after it, but the reverse for non-believers (Osarchuk & Tate, 1973).

Life after death is a serious belief, and not very metaphorical. In one American survey 100 per cent of people over 90 said they believed in it (Cavan *et al.*, 1949), and devout individuals say they are looking forward to it. Its psychological explanation in terms of a protective mechanism looks obvious, but why do so many also believe in Hell?

Health is much better for church members, who are found to have longer life expectancy; seven years longer in a recent American demographic study (Hummer *et al.*, 1999), mainly due to

better 'health behaviour' (less drinking, smoking, and promiscuity). Hummer *et al.*, among others, have also reported an effect of social support, and an effect of the positive emotions church services can create on the immune system.

Healing has been a traditional religious activity, and some churches hold healing services. Several studies have found that most of those treated feel much better, but that there is no medical change (e.g. Pattison *et al.*, 1973). Perhaps there is a change in subjective health because those concerned think about their health in a wider sense, including emotional well-being, to which the body is irrelevant.

The effect of religion on mental health is less clear, but most studies have found that intrinsic religiosity correlates with reduced depression and other distress. Batson *et al.* (1993) found this in a meta-analysis of 115 studies. Prayer can also ease depression, through what has been called 'religious coping' (Pargament, 1997) – taking God as a partner in dealing with the problem. Suicide rates are much lower for church members, and not just for Catholics, as Durkheim believed.

Religion affects many other spheres of life. In any one religion divorce rates are a lot lower for frequent church-goers, but partners should go to the same church; Protestant–Catholic mixed marriages are twice as likely to fail as couples who belong to the same faith (Heaton & Goodman, 1985). Sexual behaviour is affected too, with less extramarital intercourse (though 71 per cent of the very religious have premarital intercourse) (Janus & Janus, 1993). These effects of religion have been falling in Britain and America during the period that such research has been done – 66 per cent of American Catholics now use contraception.

Studies of helping and altruism show quite strong effects of religion. Average donations to charity in Britain are much higher: £23.75 a month for those who said religion was very important, compared with £7.94 for those who said it was not (Halfpenny & Lowe, 1994). Church members do a lot more voluntary work; 44 per cent of voluntary workers said 'It's part of my religion or philosophy of life to help' (Lynn & Smith, 1991).

What about the negative effects of religion? The main one is prejudice. Church members are more prejudiced against racial minority groups, though this is sometimes found to be curvilinear, so the most religious are less prejudiced

(Schverisch & Havens, 1995). Part of the explanation for this ethnocentrism of church members is that some churches are identified with national or other social groups. Rokeach (1960) found a lot of evidence of the closed mind – dogmatism and rejection of those whose beliefs were different, members of one church would not want to marry or make friends with members of others. This is particularly strong in members of strict fundamentalist churches. Fundamentalists are often rigid and authoritarian and have strong guilt feelings, but are also high in optimism (Sethi & Seligman, 1993).

There may be another cost of religion,

the loss of freedom to think for yourself, what Batson *et al.* (1993) called ‘cognitive bondage’. However, we have seen that a leap of faith and consequent commitment are central features of religion, and this ‘loss’ may not be experienced as such.

Implications for psychology

Religion is a very pervasive part of human behaviour and experience, in all lands and all historical periods. Church-going may have declined in Europe, but it increased in the USA during the 20th century, and is now increasing in the East and Africa. It is very much a social phenomenon, conducted in cohesive social groups by leaders.

Psychology can explain religion, in part, and in earthly terms. It can explain some of the findings; for example, religious beliefs and behaviour are much affected by socialisation. On the other hand, there is constant rebirth of new churches, and there are those who initiate or follow new visions – these cannot be accounted for by socialisation. There is also support for Freud’s idea that God is a projected father figure; on the other hand, there are other

religious objects which are not at all father-like. There is support for Marx’s idea that religion is compensation for deprivation, but there are many religious individuals who do not seem to be deprived at all. And as we have seen, there are phenomena for which psychology has so far no explanation – sacrifice, religious experience, and sudden conversion, for example (Argyle, 2000).

Perhaps the best psychology can hope for is to study the causes, correlates and effects of religion, but may not be able to explain it. Penrose (1995) offered mathematics as a parallel – it is discovered in the mind, and then found to be true in the world. There is no psychological explanation of mathematics. The same applies to music, chemistry and other spheres of human activity and experience. We have to accept that these are spheres with their own validity, and perhaps religion is the same.

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