Religion, if nothing else, is a profoundly human phenomenon, and therefore amenable to study by psychologists. In his 2002 article for The Psychologist, Michael Argyle proposed treating religious faith as an attitude – something with cognitive, behavioural and emotional components, and he strongly emphasised the social dimension of all of these. In the last five years one aspect of religious cognition – belief in God – has come under unparalleled scrutiny (Wolf, 2006). In his 2006 polemical book The God Delusion Richard Dawkins questioned why intelligent human beings persist in holding beliefs that are seemingly irrational or inconsistent with empirical evidence. As any cognitive therapist will recognise, this is at its heart a psychological question, and Dawkins indeed draws heavily on the relatively new field of cognitive science of religion (see the article by Justin Barrett and Emily Reed Burdett on p.252) to inform his answer. The ensuing debate continues to fascinate and divide public opinion. Psychologists have the potential to make a positive contribution to this debate by clarifying some of the basic conceptual assumptions, carrying out good empirical research, disseminating it effectively and, perhaps most of all, by ensuring that it is interpreted appropriately on all sides.

Turning to religious behaviour, it is regrettable but understandable that religious violence, including hate crimes against religious groups, has captured the attention of the press and government agencies. It was in this context that the AHRC/ESRC Religion and Society Programme’ was launched in 2007. This initiative supports interdisciplinary research in the arts, humanities and social sciences aimed at better understanding the complexities of interaction between belief, culture and society, with a view to informing social policy in this area. In its first phase alone it was responsible for over £3 million of research funding, supporting projects in sociology, education, anthropology and geography, which examined prosocial as well as troubling aspects of religious faith. Psychology barely features among the funded projects, perhaps because psychology of religion has such a low public profile in Britain. (There is a promising psychological literature on religious fundamentalism and the separate phenomenon of religious violence, but it is largely American; see, for instance Ginges et al., 2009; Hood et al., 2005; Jones, 2008).

What of religious emotion? This seems increasingly identified with the phenomenon of ‘spirituality’. Spirituality is often contrasted with religion (e.g. Koenig et al., 2001), with the former usually thought to be more individualist than collectivist; more emotion-focused than practice-focused; more inwardly than outwardly directed; more informal than highly structured, with self-actualisation more important than sacrificial demands and duties; and more anti-authoritarian than religion is.

All the great faith traditions incorporate spiritual practises aimed at feeding the inner life, and many find this separation of spirituality from religion objectionable (Pargament, 1999). On the other hand people in Western society are developing a well-documented tendency to describe themselves as ‘spiritual-but-not-religious.’ Results of a recent cross-cultural study indicate that 40 per cent of American respondents and 20 per cent of German respondents fall into this group, which includes atheists (Csosf et al., 2009). This seems to be a postmodern phenomenon involving the privatisation and individualisation of certain aspects of religion, particularly altered states of

**References**


consciousness. These are valued as means of enabling self-transcendence and supporting personal growth.

Psychologists are no exceptions to this social trend. As a group we are famed for our low levels of religious beliefs and affiliation (Ecklund & Scheitle, 2007). Yet in recent years there has been an explosion of our interest in meditation techniques, particularly ‘mindfulness’, as a therapeutic resource, to the extent that it is beginning to feel somewhat like a panacea. In 1997 the creation of the Consciousness and Experimental Psychology Section of the British Psychological Society established a home for the growing numbers of psychologists interested in the ‘inner life’ aspects of human spirituality.

In 2002, at the time Argyle was surveying the field of psychology and religion, the first meeting of the European Network of Positive Psychology was taking place at Winchester, rapidly followed by a special issue of The Psychologist devoted to this emerging area, which has since grown exponentially. Positive psychology has an extremely close relationship with the psychology of religion and spirituality, for both are concerned with personal growth and meaning. As if to demonstrate this, Argyle himself had an interest in both areas, publishing his book The Psychology of Happiness in 1986, long before the term ‘positive psychology’ was coined.

Positive psychology, which is influenced by Aristotelian ethics, concentrates on those aspects of human behaviour that are thought to contribute to personal and community flourishing. These are conceived of as universal character strengths or habits, such as integrity, forgiveness, kindness and gratitude (Peterson, 2006). Crucially, these character strengths were originally identified with reference to the virtues espoused by the great faith traditions of the world. Positive psychology talks of these character strengths as originally ‘mindfulness’, as a therapeutic resource, to the extent that it is beginning to feel somewhat like a panacea.

This is a theme that I was able to explore at more length when delivering the inaugural Michael Argyle Public Lecture on Psychology and Religion in Oxford in 2008. The lecture came at the end of a one-day conference for British psychologists working in the areas of religion and religious spirituality. Following on from a first meeting in 2006, a Psychology and Religion UK network had been set up, and it was clear that much exciting work is taking place in the areas of research, teaching and practice, some of it showcased in the articles in this special issue of The Psychologist.

None of these challenges was seen as insuperable. Indeed, their identification has provided a useful agenda for the further development of the psychological study of religion in Britain. As part of this, closer links with the related-but-distinct enterprises of positive psychology and consciousness studies are to be encouraged.

As might be expected in a more religious culture, the situation in the USA is rather different from that in Britain. The APA Division 36 ‘Psychology of religion’ has been established for over 30 years. This may in part be attributable to the fact that the founding father of modern American mainstream psychology, William James, had an intellectual fascination with religion, while remaining personally agnostic. His systematic studies are described in the Gifford Lectures of 1901–02, written up as The Varieties of Religious Experience. In this highly readable book James identifies with amazing prescience the questions that still exercise psychologists who study religion today:

What is the relationship between institutionalised religion and personal spirituality?

What is the difference between functional religion and dysfunctional religion (what James calls the ‘healthy minded’ and the ‘sick soul’)?

How can empirical psychologists avoid philosophical reductionism (what James calls ‘medical materialism’) in their study of religion?

Is religion an area of human behaviour just like any other that can be studied with the usual methods and theories, or does it require a special approach?

Should we be talking about universal religion or local religions or both?

As I struggle with these compelling issues in my work, my answer to the question ‘Why study religion?’ becomes clear: because it’s relevant to urgent questions facing society; because without it we have an impoverished understanding of human spirituality; but most of all, like Mount Everest, simply because it’s there.

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