



Whither the Roots? Achieving Conceptual Depth in Psychology of Religion

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Summary

Should psychology of religion undergo a disciplinary renaissance and, if so, what might it look like? In this paper we explore that question by discussing the benefits of a better grounding of the field within mid-level theories from general psychology that provide it with greater conceptual depth. Such discussion will focus on three already existing and variously productive lines of research as case studies: attribution processes, attachment styles, and religious coping. These case studies represent lines of research at three developmental stages: 1) *infancy*, with little visible return but with signs of promise (attribution), 2) *adolescence*, with dividends already yielded but also with promise not yet fully realized (attachment), and 3) *maturity*, where a fruitful harvest has already been experienced but yet without decline (coping). Regardless of developmental position, it is argued that research in psychology of religion will be enhanced to the extent that it achieves conceptual depth by being framed in terms of mid-level theories.

Keywords

Psychology of religion, mid-level theories, conceptual depth, attribution, attachment, coping

If one were to take a snapshot of the psychology of religion over any decade since the 1970s, one would conclude that the field has undergone a major change. Up until the 1980s the field, at least outside of Europe, seemed to focus almost single-mindedly on intrinsic-extrinsic (I-E) religious orientation, and although religious orientation continues to be a variable of interest in much research, it no longer appears to be the dominant empirical framework that it once was. In fact, it was almost twenty years ago that people were beginning

to seriously question the ability of the I-E framework to carry the field forward (Kirkpatrick & Hood, 1990), largely because of a lack of theoretical clarity. Many other changes have also taken place. For example, research on conversion has given way to spiritual transformation, definitional debates on religiousness and spirituality have arisen with some general conclusions now having been drawn (see Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005) even as no overarching consensus has been reached, and the field has now made impressive entrées into such domains as the workplace (Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2003) and the counseling clinic (Shafranske, 2005). Such change is also reflected by the contrast of the only two reviews of the field in the *Annual Review of Psychology* (Gorsuch, 1988; Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003). In the 1988 article, Gorsuch stressed how the field had been consumed with the issue of measurement (see also Gorsuch, 1984) claiming it to be, at that time, the closest thing to Kuhn's (1970) notion of *paradigm*. By 2003, Emmons and Paloutzian proposed that the field's interests and operations would now be better served by what they called a *multilevel interdisciplinary paradigm*. This new paradigm suggests that for the study of religious experience to move forward, not only must psychological investigation at various levels be employed, but that the field can also benefit from the input of neighboring disciplines like anthropology, sociology, neuroscience and so forth. Of course, paradigms are less declared than they are evolved on the basis of their heuristic value, explanatory power, and predictive ability. Nevertheless, it is clear that the psychology of religion of a prior generation is not today's psychology of religion.

Such self-reflected description of the field is good and well but it still seems to avoid the central issue of the psychology of religion's inability to develop sustaining *substantive* theories or concepts that integrate multiple disparate lines of research. This, of course, is a longstanding critique of the field that dates back at least to Dittes' (1969) seminal article contending that psychology of religion's empirical tradition is a collection of data without a guiding theoretical framework. Park and Paloutzian (2005) have recently made the case that a meaning-based approach to the psychology of religion has the potential of integrating many distinct lines of research and may even be capable of providing an overarching theoretical framework; indeed, several of the chapters in their handbook (Paloutzian & Park, 2005) stressed religion as a meaning system. We agree with the promise of meaning as a theme that can be explored across multiple aspects of religion. We can also identify several other themes that could be similarly followed, such as religion as a system of ritual actions, or religion as a moral system. Presumably each of these would