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**Psychology of religion and its
surroundings. Trends and themes.**

Mario Aletti, Alessandro Antonietti and Daniela Villani
Catholic University of Milan

This presentation addresses the issue of “New trends and neglected themes” by focusing on some changes that have taken place in the literature of the psychology of religion over the last twenty years. The overlapping between religion and spirituality challenges the object of the psychology of religion, its scope, its methods and, as a consequence, its distinctiveness within the mainstream in this field.

Within the title, the word ‘surroundings’ is meant ironically to emphasize that while religion has - or at least had - a fairly stable and precise definition in psychological literature, some authors today tend to include other concepts under the term ‘religion’, which are not always well defined. For example, spirituality, search for meaning, well-being and coping, mindfulness, resilience, positive thinking or even meaningless are all concepts whose relationship with religion is still unclear.

In recent North American literature, religion and spirituality are usually mentioned together. ‘*Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*’ sounds like a new ‘mantra’ (according to Beit-Hallahmi) that is positively considered by most of the authors - because it broadens and unifies the discipline (Pargament, 2013) - but negatively from others because it confuses its content and perspective.

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SCOPUS search

| <i>Years</i> | <i>Religion</i> | <i>Spirituality</i> |
|--------------|-----------------|---------------------|
| 1990-1999 | 1.602 | 275 |
| 2000-2009 | 4.162 | 1.598 |
| 2010-2019 | 7.025 | 3.231 |

Question: "Why are psychologists increasingly concerned with spirituality?"

Have a look at this table. Studies on spirituality have had a very high increase since the 2000s.

The term 'spirituality' shows a significant increase. This is also supported by the observation that it had, according to the PsychINFO database, only five citations in the sixties, 22 in the seventies, 543 in the eighties. Religion also increased in numbers of citations but to a lesser degree.

It should be noted that such a trend does not support the notion that ordinary people are now more involved in spirituality than in religion. This trend only mirrors the shift or increase of interest from the researchers. Thus, the appropriate question should be "Why are psychologists increasingly concerned with spirituality?"



Spirituality

- A “fuzzy” concept (Spilka, 1993)
- “A concept in search of its meaning” (Westerink, 2012, p. 3)
- “Religion after religion”? (Hood, 2012, p. 106)
- “Selftranscendence”? (Schnell, 2013)
- How to “place spirituality» (Archive, 2019)

The concept of *spirituality*, that Bernard Spilka (1993, p.1) considers ‘fuzzy’ - by defining it as “a word that embraces obscurity with passion” - is still unclear and ambiguous within the community of psychologists. According to Westerink who edited a special issue of the *Archive* in such a topic, it is “a concept in search of its meaning”.

The concept of spirituality is a vague, ambiguous, and problematic concept. Peter la Cour and colleagues (2012) show that the understanding of the word *spirituality* in the population of a country widely secularized (i.e. less "religious") like Denmark, is grouped around six distinct cores of meaning: the conclusion of these studies is that “a common understanding of the term spirituality does not exist.” In fact, in the last issue of *Archive*, 2019 we still look to “place spirituality”. In the absence of a clear definition of spirituality, there is a fear that many studies are tautological - for each author, *spirituality* is conceived and assessed by their own spirituality tests.



The relationship between *spirituality* and *religion* is problematic and controversial.

According to the recent sociological and psychological literature, the distinction between *spirituality* and *religion* would tend to correspond to a kind of bipolarization: individual/institutional, internal/external, emotions/beliefs, authenticity/truth, (self) transcendence/Transcendent.

In these bipolarizations, it is not difficult to see some is overlapping from the descriptive to the evaluative approach as to represents positive/negative (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005) and being perceived in a climate of positivity.



Superior/inferior side

Spirituality also came to mean the 'superior side' of religion, as the individual experience of the divine uncontaminated by its social and organized forms, its traditions and institutions (which represented the 'inferior side' of religion).

(Popp-Baier, 2010, p. 42)



Spirituality as a feature of human beings

- All human beings have a 'spiritual' life, atheists too: have values, search for meaning and narrative myths.
- If "spirituality is the life of the mind - as spirit" being spiritual means being human and...
- ...Psychology of Religion (reduced to a Psychology of Spirituality) ends to be Psychology in general.

Some authors believe that the psychology of religion could broaden its scope thanks to the concept of spirituality. But the more the boundary of concepts expands, the more unidentifiable its content becomes, which in this case fades into a kind of generic humanistic anthropology.

So what about the psychology of religion? If "Spirituality is the life of the mind - as spirit" (Schnell), being spiritual means being human, and Psychology of Religion (reduced to a Psychology of Spirituality) stops to be Psychology in general.

Spirituality is a typical feature of human beings who – without exception – have a "spiritual" life. Atheists, too, have their own form of spirituality, their own experience of the absolute and often their own forms of mystical experience (Comte-Sponville, 2000).

As human beings, we all have values, search for meaning, elaborate explanatory narratives myths and devotion



Religion and Psychology of Religion

Referring to ordinary people's meaning of religion
(*shouldn't it be the same for psychologists?*):

Religion is a social and cultural phenomenon, identified in feelings, beliefs, rituals, and practices that make reference to the (lived or believed) **Transcendent**.

Psychology of religion has its own distinctiveness as a sub-discipline of psychology by safeguarding the object of its study: relation to the Transcendent (person).

Defining religion is not a matter without importance. "How and why do you study religion if you are not sure how to define it?" (Beit-Hallahmi, 2015, p. 2). The psychologist recognizes that religion is not just a set of psychological functions or structures. The psychology of religion is defined by content and not by psychological processes.

It seems important that psychologists respect the idea of religion that the cultural tradition attests in the experience of ordinary people who, due to its delimitation, give us the specific object of psychology of religion. Thus, one should not stimulate the study of a concept, but the "material religion" (Wulff) as a concrete, an observable cultural phenomenon.

According to all masters of the psychology of religion, religion is considered a relationship with Transcendent or superhuman beings, as ordinary people do. This is true starting from the seminal work by James (1902) to the latest manual by Beit-Hallahmi, which specifies that "Religion is a belief system that includes the notion of a supernatural, invisible world inhabited by gods, human souls, angels and other conscious and spiritual entities" (Beit-Hallahmi, 2015, p. 3). Moreover, - at least within the three great Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) - this Transcendent being has human characteristic through which people can forge personal relationships which are mediated, facilitated but also articulated and enriched by shared beliefs, rituals and behaviours. Of course, the symbolism of the Transcendent changes from culture to culture and from religion to religion. We must ask ourselves if the situation of the 'real' believer is sufficiently represented and respected by our conceptualizations, our research methods and tools, the reduction of religion to spirituality, and the rarefaction of the Transcendent in the 'immanent' self-transcendence.

In our opinion, religion is specific and historically determined cultural fact. What is universal is a search for meaning. The question is universal; the religious response is particular and determined. Instead, some scholars look for a comprehensive formula of religiousness that is prior to any culture and that expresses a "human universal", a "homo religious" or a "natural religiousness". This concerns, above all, the "religious professionals" who are interested in the discipline with philosophical, apologetic, pastoral and even therapeutic aims by assuming that "religions supports wellbeing" as noted by David Wulff, "As in other fields associated with religious studies, psychologists of religion have to this day served more as caretakers than as critics of religion" (Wulff, 2003, p. 28).



Religion: substantive vs functional

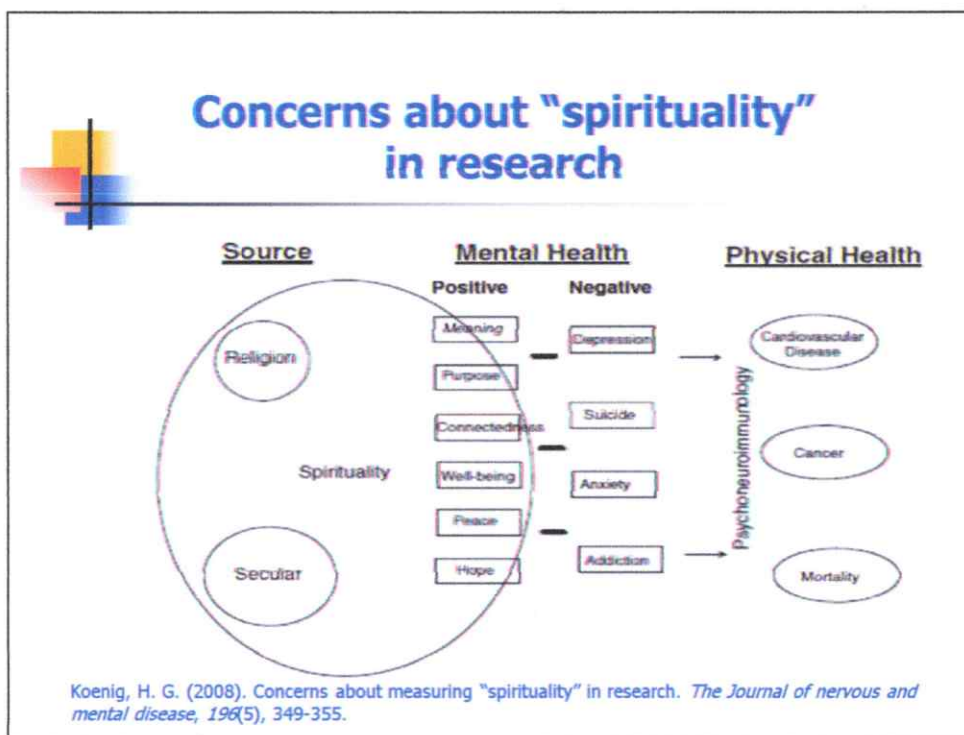
The substantive view ("What is religion?") specifies religion as a unique relationship with the Transcendent, the Superhuman through a cultural-symbolic specified system: images, worship, rites...

The functional view ("What is religion for?") includes religion in the ideologies or worldviews, while any ideology is a particular type of religion (a 'secular', or 'analogical' or 'civil religion')

The need for a definition of religion is sought by those who argue that the distinctiveness of the discipline involves safeguarding the specific object (Aletti & Antonietti, 2015). In literature, the opposing definitions of religion are "substantive" and "functional" also called "exclusive" and "inclusive". The substantive view asks what religion is, what a conscious and unconscious relationship the person establishes with the divinity and the Transcendent. The functional vision answers the question "What is religion for" and investigates what are benefits for individual and social daily life. The former respects the religion lived by ordinary people who define themselves as religious and has more scholars in Europe while the latter is certainly closer to the concept of spirituality and today is becoming more widespread in research, especially in the USA.

From a functional point of view, religion is considered as a particular type of ideology, or rather, some ideologies take on the features of a particular type of religion (a 'secular', or 'analogical' or 'civil' religion). In the substantive view, there are the attempts to define religion with the help of criteria such as the 'supernatural', the 'invisible', the 'superhuman' as well as worshipping, rites, and shared behaviours (Lambert, 1991, p 73).

Nowadays the functionalist view is prevalent in empirical research. Many studies emphasize the importance of spirituality / spiritual matter for the well-being or quality of life and consequently often recommend the importance of 'spiritual care'. Among the perplexities, which accompany the term 'spirituality', there are those about the coping functions that spirituality can play; especially when individuals have to deal with situations of illness, grief, and loss.



According to the view suggested by Koenig (2008), the actual version of spirituality includes both religious and secular, such as atheists and agnostics, and extends out to include positive mental health and human values as part of its definition, as we can see in the figure represented in the slide.

Quote: "Spirituality includes not only religion and positive indicators of mental health as part of its definition but also the secular. As part of this model, everyone is spiritual including atheists and agnostics. since there is no one left to compare this all-inclusive category of spiritual individuals with, research is impossible and relationships with mental or physical health cannot be studied" (Koenig, 2008, p. 350)



Some methodological issues

To distinguish Religion, as relation with Transcendent, from its surroundings and the *functional correlatives or derivatives* of religiosity.

To avoid tautology spirituality-wellbeing: define theoretical frameworks for high quality non overlapping measurements.

To study 'lived religion' and to query beliefs, rites, practices of the believers.

In our opinion, Religion should be distinguished from Spirituality and meaning-system, search for meaning, mindfulness, well-being, and 'religious coping'. All these concepts refer to *functional correlatives or derivatives* of religiosity. But calling them all 'religious' conflicts with natural language.

Measures of religion/spirituality should be aware of the aforementioned distinction and recognize whether they are measuring the religiosity of the subjects or its surroundings, or its pragmatic utility.

According to Hood and Edwards (2013), it is possible to describe measures on spirituality and religiosity by making a distinction between:

- Substantive measures, which focus on individuals' religious tendencies, beliefs, behaviours, or other individual traits or actions. Substantive measures can be further divided into dispositional categories (general religiousness, beliefs or religious preferences, religious or spiritual commitment, religious motivation, relational spirituality, and religious and spiritual development) and behavioural measures;
- Functional measures, which assess how religious activities and characteristics function in individuals' lives. Such measures conceive religion as a source of meaning and values. In this perspective, researchers are interested in evaluating the function of religiousness or spirituality in helping people cope with physical, psychological, and social stressors.

In the research of the beneficial impact of religion/spirituality on well-being, we should be careful about avoiding tautology.

In an exploratory survey of eight well-cited journals, Garsen and colleagues in an *article on Examining why the Spirituality predicts subjective well-being: how to avoid tautology* found that 26 out of 58 studies used a spirituality scale that contained 25% or more of well-being items to examine whether spirituality predicts well-being or distress. Specifically, the authors noted that these scales contained items referring to spiritual or emotional well-being (SWB or EWB). Thus, these spirituality questionnaires would be more appropriate for the assessment of spiritual well-being and should not be used to investigate the causal relationship between spirituality and well-being or emotional well-being. Authors suggested only using spirituality questionnaires of which less than 25% of the items refer to emotional well-being.



Recommendations

Research should not merely be a survey on the concept of religion and spirituality, nor a study of religion 'in general'.


Combine explicit self-report measurement technique with implicit measure tests.

It should be a study of 'material religion' through concrete observation of various symbolic systems in churches, synagogues, mosques.

Be aware of some possible (unconscious) 'hidden agenda' of apology of religion.

It is necessary to study the "material" religion (Wulff), the religion concretely lived by people who live in a certain cultural context and face with "one" specific religion. We stress "one" because one cannot study religion "in general". This implies the need to study religion with instruments that investigate beliefs, private and public practices, rituals, attitudes, ways of prayer and significant symbols that refer to the relationship with the Transcendent, in that specific context. Psychological understanding of believers' religious experience means empirical and phenomenological observation of real, concrete manifestations of religion and this implies, metaphorically speaking (though not overmuch), entering churches, entering synagogues, entering mosques.

Psychologists should not be philosophers, or neurobiologists, or sociologists of the religion, nor theologians or apologists of religion. In the psychological perspective, an individual's religion is not a kind of natural, almost innate, transcultural and pre-cultural ("homo religious", religiousness) characteristic and it is not even a vague sense of spirituality or sacredness, of orientation to values, meaning system or simple search for meaning. Religion is one (even though not the only one) of the possible - and so not necessary - answers to search for meaning. The question of meaning is universal, characteristic of the human psyche, while the religious response is determined. Furthermore, religion is not only a system of meaning: for the believer, it is a personal and affective relationship, whose psychic effects should be considered by the psychologist regardless of the question of the truth of the content.



When a person says God...

...what are they really saying? What does it implies?

Neurobiological processes, relational imprinting, parental representations, projective and defensive mechanisms, socio-cultural learning, cognitive and attribution processes, autobiographical narrative...

We should consider religion as "lived" by real people.

Let us come to some conclusions.

When someone/people says God, what is it that one is really saying?

This question should be a/one of the starting point of the psychology of religion.

When someone, for instance, says "God our/the Father", what is it that one referring to, who is it that speaks inside him? When people speak about God, when they pray him, when they blaspheme their God, what does happen in their psyche?

This/Being religious/saying God implies many specific characteristics of the individual person For example: neurobiological processes, relational imprinting, parental representations, projective and defensive mechanisms, socio-cultural learning, cognitive and attribution processes, autobiographical narrative...

As psychologists we look at religion as it is "lived" by real people in his/their present world, within his own indigenous culture and language. Even if the beliefs [condivisi] shared/believed by religious people were strange, (up to being possibly/eventually delusions) they exist and have a relevance in the subjects' psyche. This is regardless [not to mention] the theological problem of the correspondence between the language about God and the reality of God.

As psychologists we are not interested in the objective truth of beliefs, but as psychologists we are interested in what happens in/inside the mind (we prefer the term "psyche") of a person who believes into/to a transcendent entity. Religion is too complex to be considered only as a spirituality, a meaning-system or an ideology. And religiosity, that is, the personal appropriation of institutional religion, cannot be reduced to an adaptation or coping strategy.

We prefer a real and substantive definition rather than theoretical and functional one. In our opinion/ studies religion is defined for its content, not as a psychic process. The discriminating and inescapable element is the relationship with the Transcendent.



Why study religion?

- The functionalist view: for the beneficial effects of religion. But these are mediated by psychic processes that are not specific to religion.
- The substantive view: because religion does exist, as a historical and cultural fact and as a unique relationship with Transcendent.

The question of the method and the object of research poses a more basic question: Why should psychologists study religion?

The functionalist view, that looks practically at the beneficial effects of religion on physical health and mental well-being, on social life, on the (hoped for) enhancement of love and world peace, and on universal peace, appears to be unconvincing, although often proposed. Such a functionalist justification has its weakness. If among the components of religion there are some "active ingredients" (Funder, 2002, p. 213) useful for well-being, it is easy to recognize that the beneficial effects are mediated by psychic processes that are not specific to religion. Healthy or pro-social or coping behaviours, or even love, or ideal peace facilitators are not specific and unique to the religious source. If there is something specific about religion, it does not consist of its beneficial effects. In conclusion, the justification of the psychology of religion - "because religion is helpful" – should be a concern as it undermines the specificity of the disciplinary object.

The most appropriate answer to the question about why study religion should be "because religion exists". It is a historical and cultural fact, in which the psyche of people finds expression. More than two-thirds of the world's population attests that they belong to an established institutional religious tradition (Barrett, 2001). Billions of people believe in a transcendent being that has to do with their existence; thousands of people are today willing to give and even lose, their lives to testify, divulge or impose their religion. This is a phenomenon of great personal, social, cultural, historical and political importance. The psychologist is asked to study the psychic processes that underpin religion; what happens in the minds of individuals and communities of believers and non-believers, when they relate to a being believed to be transcendent.



Freud to Marie Bonaparte (1928)

"One is in danger of overestimating the frequency of an irreligious attitude among intellectuals. I get convinced of that just now on observing the reactions to my [Future of An] Illusion. That comes from the most varied drinks being offered under the name of 'religion', with a minimal percentage of alcohol – really, non-alcoholic; but they still get drunk on it. The old drinkers were after all a respectable body, but to get tipsy on pomerit (apple juice) is really ridiculous."

Curiously, psychologists often study marginal, unusual religions, 'non-religions', partial forms, the surroundings of religion, the functional correlatives or derivatives of religiosity or the theoretical concepts of religion and spirituality, rather than the religion lived by the ordinary people, which would be easier to observe. Nevertheless, the religions that have an impact on the identity of the subjects and the shared forms of social life are the great historical religions: Islam, Judaism, Christianity, or, in other socio-cultural contexts (and therefore probably to be studied with other parameters and methods), Shintoism, Hinduism, etc.

Even Freud - with the intention of facing the religious illusion, a belief based on desire, and as such not demonstrable and not refutable but, after all, a dangerous inebriation for man - believed that it was worth taking it out on only real believers, those in which there is a full proof of the psychological incidence of religion.

In a letter to Marie Bonaparte, dated 19th March 1928, Freud wrote: "One is in danger of overestimating the frequency of an irreligious attitude among intellectuals. I get convinced of that just now on observing the reactions to my [Future of An] Illusion. That comes from the most varied drinks being offered under the name of 'religion', with a minimal percentage of alcohol – really, non-alcoholic; but they still get drunk on it. The old drinkers were after all a respectable body, but to get tipsy on pomerit (apple juice) is really ridiculous." (Jones, E., 1957. *The life and work of Sigmund Freud*. Vol.3, p. 524)



Thank You!

mario.aletti@gmail.com

alessandro.antonietti@unicatt.it

daniela.villani@unicatt.it