Psychology of religion investigates

- religious behavior, thinking and experience
- function of faith in a person’s world
  (individual, social, cultural)
- centers on individual (in contrast to anthropology, sociology), but takes into account social context
- empirically oriented
- intersections with (socio)biology, anthropology, sociology
Psychology of religion to be distinguished from

• science of religions
• psychology for pastoral care
• application of psychology in a specific religious group
  (religious education, counseling, realization of pastoral goals)
introductory literature


recent review:
STARTING QUESTIONS:

→ What is religion?

→ Psychology and correctness of religious assertions

→ What can we know about the origin of religion?
What is religion?

Definitions of „religion“ mostly include

• a notion of the transcendent, often, but not always, in the form of theism
• a cultural or behavioural aspect of ritual, liturgy and organized worship, often involving priesthood, and societal norms of morality and virtue
• a set of myths or sacred truths held in reverence or believed by adherents
Many extremely different kinds of religions:
belief in ghosts, ancestors, one or several gods, demi-gods, angels, demons, saints, holy (totem) animals, objects with souls, etc., also animism, shamanism

„spirituality“
since about 1990 often used as synonym to „religiosity“
often used to designate the personal religiosity in contrast to kind of formal religion
**superstition:**

„any belief or attitude, based on fear or ignorance, that is inconsistent with the known laws of science or with what is generally considered in the particular society as true or rational; esp., such as belief in charms, omens, the supernatural, etc.“ Guralnik (1986)

Religious believers often see other religions as superstition. Likewise, some atheists, agnostics, deists, and skeptics regard religious belief as superstition.
According to Spilka et al (2003), most large recent religions do not meet the criteria of superstition (well-developed theologies make religious behavior rational, independent from their truth)

( → Not all researchers accept that point of view )
Factor analyses found separate factors in questionnaires for religion and superstition

Religious behavior **may** be influenced by superstition
(as other types of behavior)

Superstition related to lack of control
(Gibbs, 1994; Vyse, 1997)
Most religions involve the following elements
(different importance for different elements) Hinde (1999)

- Structural beliefs (gods)
- Narratives („stories“)
- Religious practices
- Moral code
- Religious experience
- Social aspects
Structural beliefs

• Entities (gods) outside our world, but related -
  - have at least some improbable or counterintuitive properties (e.g., can move through physical objects, can heal sick people without medical treatment, can be at several places at once, create the world), are usually independent of time
  - have „standard“ properties of people, e.g., gods perceive, remember, are angry or have other emotions, act to bring about desired states of affairs)

• Often, belief in life after death
Narratives („stories“)
concern usually the entities with improbable properties
may include teachings and experiences of lesser religious figures
(e.g., Gospels about Jesus include stories about his disciples)
Religious practices

rituals, prayer, sacrifices, etc.

may include recitation of creeds (*credo*, 
*Glaubensbekenntnis*)

may use texts concerning structural beliefs and narratives

may be conducted by religious specialists (priests)
**Moral code**

concerning personal or group conduct
with implicit or explicit value system
may be related to conventions, behavior norms, or ideology of (sub)society
may be different for different subgroups of religious group (e.g., different moral code for religious specialists/priests)
Religious experience

religious emotions, feeling of security, being protected, feeling the presence of god(s),
ecstatic states, being deeply moved, chills, …
( analogous experiences in non-religious areas: e.g., charismatic political leader, moral principles of a political movement)

→ most people do not have extraordinary religious experiences
Social aspects
In-group – out-group
socialisation in acquisition of religion
Religion as a socially accepted system of beliefs
Religion and social power
Ideologies like Communism or National-Socialism have some aspects common with religion (e.g., ritual, moral code, socialization, initiation rites), but not others (e.g., gods, narratives)

Pawlow: “A Bolshevik does not need a belief in god, because he has another religion – communism”
Distinctions

Theism
Belief in personal god(s) who care about humans, are accessible by prayers, who punish and reward

Deism
abstract god(s), who do not care about humans (after creating the world)

„Belief“ in **basic principles (of physics)**
(no real religion in the usual sense of „religion“)
exponent, e.g., Einstein
Official religious doctrine (e.g., catholicism, …)
- „Folk“-religion (spirituality, …) of same religion
  („popular piety“ in catholizism)

Other distinctions

Sect
cult
paganism/schamanism
superstition – can also be nonreligious
Other distinctions

Grom (p.272 ff) proposes as general term: „spiritual group“

can be sect, cult, mixture between religious group and psycho-group, etc.
Overview: Approximate distribution of religions

Christianity (including Catholic, Protestant, Eastern Orthodox, Pentecostal, Anglican, Monophysite, AICs, Latter-day Saints, Evangelical, SDAs, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Quakers, AOG, nominal, etc.)

Islam (Shiite, Sunni, etc.)

Other

Buddhism

Chinese traditional

Primal-indigenous (incl. African Traditional/Diasporic)

Hinduism

“Nonreligious” (incl. agnostic, atheist, secular humanist, + people answering ‘none’ or no relig. preference. Half of this group is “theistic” but nonrelig.)

Judaism (0.22%)

Sikhism (0.36%)

NOTE: Total adds up to more than 100% due to rounding and because upper bound estimates were used for each group.
Source:
www.Adherence.com
(retrieved Jan 7, 2009)

major source for these estimates:
Encyclopedia Britannica (including annual updates and yearbooks)
World Christian Encyclopedia
PSYCHOLOGY AND CORRECTNESS OF RELIGIOUS ASSERTIONS

Generally:
Even if psychology could explain why people believe, this would not tell anything about the correctness of the involved religious beliefs.
In some cases:
contradiction between a religious belief and psychology

• Dualism (independent body and soul)
• Free will: at least, psychology can show instances where free will is doubtable (e.g., what do we like?)
• Creationism/intelligent design
• Obsession by demons, etc. as explanation of psychic disturbances; exorcism as therapy
WHY ARE HUMANS RELIGIOUS?

necessary distinction:

- Individual people
- Humankind
• Why are individual people religious?

  Learning (model learning, learning by instruction, …) intrinsic – extrinsic motivation
  sometimes: religious experience, extraordinary events
  thinking processes
  …

  most people do not question their religion,
  stay with religion
  changing or giving up religion is deliberate act
• Why is large part of humankind religious? What is the origin of religion?

Specific need for religion?

Religion developed because it serves other basic needs:
  need for security, need for knowledge, for control, for social relationships,…

Religion as a by-product of psychological mechanisms (ways of thinking, cognitive components, motives) that have been evolved for other purposes
For some religious positions:
Religiosity as consequence of how gods created humans.
Gods implanted a desire for gods, a basic knowledge of gods,
Knowledge possibly transmitted by some kind of epiphany (Offenbarung, révélation divine)

In this context, a psychological explanation is at least unnecessary

However, not all religions make such an assumption,
(for example, people with deistic beliefs)
WHAT CAN WE KNOW ABOUT THE ORIGIN OF RELIGION?

Species Homo: developed about 2-3 Mio years ago
Modern mankind (Homo sapiens):
  about 200‘000 BC (200‘000 – 150‘000)
  oldest findings from about 160‘000 years ago
  findings outside of Africa: about 100‘000 years ago
Findings indicating some kind of religion

Burials and burials with grave goods from about 130,000 to 300,000 – 30,000 body paints, ritual body defleshing,

Artefacts that may be interpreted as gods or supernatural entities from about 35,000 ago

for example
Lion-man statuette  
(Hohlenstein-Stadel,  
Schwäbische Alb,  
Germany)  
about 32'000 BC  

(material:  
tusk of mammoth)
Venus von Willendorf
24‘000 - 22‘000 BC
(material: limestone)
Mother Goddess flanked by two lionesses
(Çatalhöyük, Turkey)
about 6000-5500 BC
material: clay
(Museum of Anatolian Civilizations in Ankara)
(16.5 cm)
Religious writings

Taking into account that modern mankind originated 200'000 – 150'000 years ago:

Religious writings appear quite late
Examples

To distinguish:
1 Dating of physical text (e.g., clay tablet)
2 Dating of ideas expressed in this text (may be much older) (distinction is important when comparing the ages of texts)

3‘300 – 3‘150 BC Pyramid texts from ancient Egypt (about resurrection of the king) (oldest findings)

2‘150 – 2’000 BC Epic of Gilgamesh / Sumer (oldest tables)
Egypt: Book of the Dead (papyri from 1600 BC on)  
(moral - judgment of the dead)

1’000 – 600 BC According to theory: oldest elements of Bible were written in this period  
(oldest material texts stem from about 200 BC)

Gods mentioned already in earlier nonreligious texts,  
e.g. Monument bleu (Louvre), clay tablets  
ca. 4‘000 BC: Sumer  
Text describes brewing of beer,  
beer is sacrifice for goddess of fertility
Conclusion:

not much information about religion in prehistoric times therefore: Theories about origin of religion difficult to test
Main topics:

• Psychological theories of religion
• Religious attitudes
• Morality
• Mind-body problem
• Natural dualism
• Cognitive mechanisms
• Religious experience
• Religion – health & death
• Dealing with gods