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Recent Progress and Core Issues in the Science of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality

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In the 8 short years since the publication of the first edition of this handbook (Paloutzian & Park, 2005a), the science of the psychology of religion and spirituality has developed and expanded in many new and important ways. In this chapter, we convey the most pivotal and far-reaching of these recent developments. We do not elaborate on the central role of religiousness and spirituality in the history of human life or on the importance of psychological research on these topics today because these points were made in the 2005 *Handbook* and are amply confirmed by local and world events on a daily basis. Here, we review the professional and theoretical ideas that shaped the 2005 book and document and assess what has happened in the field since then in light of these ideas. In the companion chapter that closes the handbook, we examine the field's strengths and possible future contributions.

To show how the field has developed since 2005, we begin by documenting this progress in concrete terms. We document this progress because its magnitude, combined with the expanded audience engaged in it from other parts of psychology and allied disciplines, presents a compelling need for psychologists of religion to arrive at an unambiguous statement regarding what the central concern of this field is. It is important that the current generation of psychology of religion and spirituality scholars presents a more solid intellectual grounding to the next generation that is now emerging. These scholars need an intellectually clear and compelling framework through which to understand and integrate these recent advances and out of which their future research can flourish.

After illustrating this proliferation of information, we provide a framework based on the integrative themes (see Paloutzian & Park, 2005b) that structure both editions of the handbook to identify key issues that need to be resolved. We then elaborate on these issues in sections devoted to unresolved disagreements over what the foci of the psychology and spirituality are, developments in the model of religious meaning systems, and progress in integrating research across levels and between disciplines. We conclude with

a brief look at a few of the paths the field has taken and roles it is playing. This chapter then paves the way for intellectually rich chapters that follow. We begin with a look some concrete indicators of progress in the field since 2005.

RECENT PROGRESS

A Snapshot of Evidence

Progress in the psychology of religion and spirituality can be documented in a number of ways. These include an increase in the number of books published on the topic, the establishment of new journals specifically for material on the psychology of religion and spirituality, a marked increase in articles in this area published in other special topic and mainstream psychology journals, a noticeable increase in presentations on this topic at professional meetings, an increase in the number of scholars who list this topic among their areas of expertise and interest, and the contents of this handbook. Let us briefly elaborate on each of these.

Handbooks

Since 2005, new handbooks and reference books dealing with the psychology of religion and spirituality have been published (de Souza, Francis, O'Higgins-Norman, & Scott (2009); Dowling & Scarlett, 2006; Miller, 2012; Pargament, Exline, & Jones, 2013; Pargament, Mahoney, & Shafranske, 2013; Roehlkepartain, King, Wagener, & Benson, 2006; Saroglou, in press). With the addition of these recent books to this second edition, a number of comprehensive resources with different emphases on the psychology of religion and spirituality are available to students and researchers. This is far beyond what anybody would have expected as recently as 10 years ago.

Journal Page Space

Research in the psychology of religion and spirituality has almost doubled within standard subdisciplinary journals. Within psychology of religion itself, for example, *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* increased in size; *Mental Health, Religion, and Culture* doubled its number of annual issues; the *Archives for the Psychology of Religion* changed from annual to quarterly publication; and four new periodicals were established: *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality, Journal of Muslim Mental Health, Journal for the Cognitive Science of Religion,* and *Religion, Brain, and Behavior.* These new journals significantly increased the number of primary publication outlets for research in this field and significantly added to the page space already devoted to the topic in existing journals,[1] such as *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, *Review of Religious Research*, *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health*, *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, and *Journal of Psychology and Christianity.*

Special Issues and Flagships

Research in the psychology of religion and spirituality began to appear more frequently in flagship and discipline-wide journals and in topical high-end journals.[2] The third-ever

chapter concerned with the psychology of religion appeared in the *Annual Review of Psychology* (Bloom, 2012; Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003; Gorsuch, 1988). Special issues appeared on topics of the psychology of religion and spirituality in periodicals such as *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* (Saroglou & Cohen, 2011), *Personality and Social Psychology Review* (Sedikides, 2010), and *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* (Coyle & Lyons, 2011). Finally, publication of journal dialogues (i.e., a comprehensive lead paper followed by expert commentaries and then a reply to these commentaries by the authors of the lead paper) began to appear, such as that in *Psychological Bulletin* (Galen, 2012a, 2012b; Myers, 2012; Saroglou, 2012). As the above list illustrates, it has become more customary in this period to see research on the psychology of religion and spirituality treated within various subfields within psychology rather than as a separate topic segregated off unto itself.

Meetings

In addition to meetings designed to service the psychology of religion and spirituality (i.e., American Psychological Association [APA] Division 36 [Society for the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality] and the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion [SSSR]), other professional meetings have begun to devote more convention time to topics in the area. Also, the Society for Research in Child Development and the Society for Personality and Social Psychology began holding psychology of religion preconferences before their main meetings. The result has been an increase in cross-fertilization between the psychology of religion and spirituality and developmental and personality–social psychology researchers. In addition, scholarship in the area became more firmly established internationally through the biannual meetings of the International Association for the Psychology of Religion, whose 2011 meeting in Italy included participants from 27 nations and three continents (Scarpa, 2011–2012). Finally, one or more stand-alone conferences on various aspects of psychology of religion and spirituality were held in several countries, including Belgium, Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, Italy, Iran, Mexico, the Netherlands, Poland, Scotland, Switzerland, and the United States. These meetings, added to the annual events of SSSR and APA Division 36, suggest a dramatic increase in interest and activity in a short period of time.

Critical Mass

Consistent with the professional activity just mentioned, much of this activity is occurring outside APA Division 36, which provided the associational home for most of the previous generation of scholars. There is a growing generation of scholars concerned with the psychology of religion and spirituality who seem less likely to identify only with this subfield, compared with past leaders, and instead list this topic as one among several in their portfolio of interests regardless of their general area of specialization.

This Book

Finally, this second edition reflects a wide range of new developments. New or greatly modified topics include research on the relation between religiousness and spirituality and mindfulness (Levenson & Aldwin, Chapter 29), cultural psychology (Saroglou &

Cohen, Chapter 17), cognitive science (Barrett, Chapter 12), neurology (McNamara & Butler, Chapter 11), affect valuation theory (Tsai, Koopmann-Holm, Miyazaki, & Ochs, Chapter 14), goals and purposeful action (Emmons & Schnitker, Chapter 13), and evidenced-based professional practice (Shafranske, Chapter 30). There are fully reconceptualized treatments of religion and terrorism (Moghaddam, Warren, & Love, Chapter 32), workplace spirituality (Hill, Jurkiewicz, Giacalone, & Fry, Chapter 31), and fundamentalism and authoritarianism (Rowatt, Johnson Shen, LaBouff, & Gonzalez, Chapter 23). The list of new developments extends to the humanities with the inclusion of a chapter on the building blocks of sacralities and problems inherent in cross-cultural comparisons by a scholar of religious studies (Taves, Chapter 7, this volume).

Summary

The combined evidence makes it clear that this field has come a long way. It is no longer a stand-alone area but rather an area whose research and theory are increasingly integrated into the parent discipline of psychology. It has matured to the point where it has a firm footing from which to say some compelling things to the rest of the scholarly world and beyond. For example, the model of meaning systems may begin to address basic issues of theory relevant to the rest of psychology; also, Part V of this book presents material applicable to clinically related areas (e.g., health, coping, mental health) and social-cultural areas (e.g., workplace policy, religious violence). In Chapter 33, we explain why we think the psychology of religion and spirituality will become more integrated within the rest of psychology while at the same time remaining a distinctive subfield that will not simply disappear into the whole.

Integrative Themes

In our 2005 book, we proposed that five themes could be used to cut across topics and help integrate this field, whose scope goes from the micro (e.g., neuroscientific) to the macro (e.g., social psychological, group, and cultural) levels. These themes are foundational to the arguments in this and the closing chapter and are applied throughout the book. We summarize them next,[3] slightly changed from their original presentation and applied to current issues.

1. *Theory in the psychology of religion and spirituality: Core multilevel issues.* An ideal goal in the psychology of religion and spirituality is to create a theory, based on evidence, that captures the range of phenomena subsumed by the topic and that has at its center a critical, correct statement and scientific assessment of its core elements and the psychological processes that connect them. Since processes can operate on multiple levels, from the neurological to the social, a comprehensive psychological theory of religion must address the phenomena at multiple levels, bearing in mind the fundamental rule of science that the validity or utility of a concept or process has to be capable of being evaluated by evidence. We need to apply this logic to the core notions used to define this area.

2. *Religious meaning systems* (RMS). In the first edition of the handbook, we argued that "religion" should be conceived in terms of religious meaning systems, that is, as a subset of meaning systems in general. Meaning systems (MSs), as we understand them psychologically, comprise mental processes that function together to enable a person (religious

or not) to live consciously and nonconsciously with a sense of relative continuity, evaluate incoming information relative to his or her guidelines, and regulate beliefs, affects, and actions accordingly. We did not spend much time in the last edition explaining what we mean by "religious" or how RMS might be distinguished from MS in general, other than to note the myriad definitional options of religion and spirituality (see Oman, Chapter 2, this volume; Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005). In this edition, we confront that issue more directly. Thus, in the section on theory that follows, we argue that the term *religious* as an adjective modifying MS has no agreed-upon definition but instead designates a conceptually unstable subset of MSs that researchers operationalize in a number of different ways depending on the nature of their research. This instability will require that we talk not about religion in general but about particular religions or, better yet, about the particular aspects or features that have been operationalized. Even then, we need to realize that our operational definitions specify elements that are not necessarily present in all instances of religiousness, and that they may also be present outside in nonreligous realms.

3. *The multilevel interdisciplinary paradigm: Building theory by multiple-method data mapping.* Research on religiousness and spirituality needs to be conducted at all levels of analysis, the findings need to be related to each other, and the knowledge therefrom needs to be integrated. We need to move toward mapping evidence gained at one level with one method to its counterparts at the levels above and below. In this way, a multilevel interdisciplinary theory of religiousness and spirituality, anchored in the psychology of meaning making, can begin to take shape.

4. *Pathways of the psychology of religion and spirituality.* During the past 8 years, research in the psychology of religion and spirituality has been more fully integrated into research in psychology generally, and new research is reaching out to link additional subfields. We anticipate the expansion of this trend within psychology and its continued extension to allied disciplines as well.

5. *Roles of the psychology of religion and spirituality.* The psychology of religion and spirituality has various roles to play in service to psychology, scholarship generally, and human welfare. This means that the field has a role to play not only in the current so-called knowledge economy but also in the development of an applied psychology of religion. Both clinical and the nonclinical forms of such work would seem to be well positioned to make needed and worthwhile contributions.

These five themes,[4] which we offered in the first edition as a means of tying the handbook as a whole together, have been much more thoroughly woven into the individual chapters of the second edition, thus integrating the volume at a deeper level than the first edition. In preparing this second edition, however, we came to the realization that we could not refer to "religious meaning systems" without confronting the problem of defining religion more directly. We turn to this task in the next section.

THEORY: THE PSYCHOLOGY OF WHAT?

Although much of the scholarship in the psychology of religion and spirituality invokes a classical grand theory (e.g., Freud's psychoanalysis; see Corveleyn, Luyten, & Dezutter, Chapter 5, this volume, for updates) or one or more midlevel theories or mini-models such

as attribution, attachment, intrinsic/extrinsic/quest, spiritual intelligence, or variations of developmental models, the form of these theories and models today is substantially as it was in 2005. So long as they stand the test of time and evidence, the concepts that emerge from them can be synthesized within a RMS model and fit within an evolutionary psychology metatheory (Kirkpatrick, Chapter 6, this volume). Moving toward this synthesis will require much testing of idea against idea and mapping results with analog results across levels, and such research can yield useful findings. However, we need a clear idea about what the central focus of this area of research is in order to succeed at synthesizing those concepts. The central focus depends on answers to the fundamental questions of definition and meaning that cut across all chapters in this book and every theoretical orientation or mini-model. Solving these fundamental questions goes to the root of this field, and thus takes priority over subjecting one of the existing notions to yet another test. Thus, we begin this section by tackling the problem of how to define, describe, or characterize this field. This is the pivotal element of the core issues—It has been a continuing dilemma and source of confusion. The future of theory and research in this field hinges on how it is resolved.

Core Issues

The centerpiece of the problem is evident in recurring issues that surface as psychologists of religion attempt to conceptualize religion and spirituality. The tendency to think and talk as if the field is or must be about a singularity is the most problematic. It surfaces in discussions of whether the psychology of religion is about one thing or essential element, whether it is self-evident (*sui generis*), and whether it is a particular kind of experience, belief, activity, emotion, or motive.

The consequences of leaving these matters unresolved become more apparent when we ask, for example, whether we should be trying to study religion in the singular versus religiousness expressed through religions in the plural; whether religion and spirituality can be said to rest upon a singular notion such as "the sacred"; whether humans have a specific need for religion or spirituality or transcendence; whether we are studying whatever the "it" is or the processes by which "it" works; and the degree to which religion or spirituality has psychologically unique properties that are regulated through processes not found elsewhere in human behavior.

In our view, the focus of the subfield of the psychology of religion is a hard-to-define, probably inherently unstable subset of the larger need to make meaning exhibited by humans and other animals, sometimes consciously and often not. Efforts to specify this subset in terms of a distinctive, unique feature, such as "the sacred," are, in our view, misguided. What scholars characterize as "the sacred" most likely refers to a cluster of attributes that need to be teased apart and specified more carefully. These different attributes most likely are not distinctively religious, spiritual, or sacred, but—in various combinations—may often be perceived as such. Thus, we think the field needs to abandon the quest for a singularity. We hope the following discussion clarifies why and how.

Religiousness and Uniqueness

The question of whether religion and spirituality reflect a unique psychological process, one that is not present in any other human behavior, is a recurring one (for careful

examinations of this issue, see Baumeister, 2002; Paloutzian & Park, 2005b). Some definitions seem to presuppose the uniqueness of this process, thus unnecessarily or perhaps inadvertently protecting it from serious challenge (for a wide range of definitions, see Oman, Chapter 2, this volume; Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005). If definitions stipulate or presuppose that religion and spirituality require their own special explanatory principles and cannot by definition be explained in terms of general psychological processes (Pargament, 2002), then we are simply asserting their uniqueness. (And seeing something as unique is but an easy psychological step away from seeing it as inherently set apart and, therefore, sacred; see later discussion.) However, if religion or spirituality is genuinely psychologically unique, it needs no protection; if it is not, this should be forthrightly acknowledged rather than implicitly shielded (Baumeister, 2002).

One variation of this issue invokes the notion of religion or the sacred as *sui generis*, that is, a thing unto itself that constitutes the core of "genuine religion." In fact, religious studies scholars have hunted for such an experiential singularity that would be the central element to all religions for about 100 years and have generally given up the hunt. Many would now agree that there is no experiential or other singularity that defines religion or spirituality, but instead that religions and spiritualities seem to be made up of elements from among a menu of possible ingredients (Burris, 2005; see also Taves, Chapter 7, this volume). This means that there is not likely to be one experience, meaning, practice, belief, motive, or other thing central to religion or spirituality but a range of them, from religion to religion, from spirituality to spirituality, and from individual to group, whose elements are not necessarily the same.

The Sacred

Some psychologists of religion argue that the distinctive feature of religion or spirituality lies in its connection with a singularity, such as "the sacred" (see, e.g., Pargament, 2007). If, however, any object, motivation, or kind of experience can be regarded as the sacred, as many definitions of the sacred tend to assume (Durkheim, 1912/1995; Pargament, 2007; Pargament & Mahoney, 2005), then there is no agreement on what the essential ingredients of the sacred are.

Psychologically, sacrality is a quality that people ascribe to or perceive in something. As such, it is based not on the thing but on the beliefs, values, and meanings that people attribute to it. We need to understand processes of sacralization as a subset of the more general processes of meaning making and assessment. Thus, psychological definitions of religion or spirituality that rely on notions such as "the sacred" create an obvious and glaring problem: By asserting the uniqueness of religion and spirituality by association with a presumed singularity, they define the singularity itself as outside the realm of psychological study and preclude explanations in terms of psychological processes. The psychological processes involved in religion or spirituality may be partly unique or not, but if so, the unique aspects are on weak ground if they depend on being true by definition.

Transcendence and Spirituality

Similar issues arise in relation to discussion of motives and needs related to religion. For example, let us consider the claim that people have a need for transcendence or a motive

for spirituality for which they must strive (Pargament, 2007). How are we to understand these claims? Are these distinctive needs and motives or instances of more general needs and motives (see Park, Edmondson, & Hale-Smith, in press)? These claims lead us right back to definitions of transcendence and spirituality and whether they are going to be defined in ways that set them apart as unique from the outset or instances of more general needs and motives. If, as Kirkpatrick argues (Chapter 6, this volume), we want to situate the psychology of religion within a larger evolutionary framework, we would need to identify the underlying evolved needs and motives upon which proposed needs for transcendence or motives for spirituality rely. This would allow us to consider the role that proposed needs or motives might play from a broader evolutionary perspective, either as an adaptation that might, for example, heighten performance by focusing goal-directed action or reducing anxiety or as a spandrel built on, for example, the need to overdetect predators and, by extension, other unseen agents in order to survive.

We think that the common use of these terms in much of the psychology of religion literature does not go deep enough because it does not account for the fundamental psychological processes at their roots; common narrations about them sound as if they are self-evident givens, instead of stating a compelling theory and research-based reason why they might be there. Insofar as motives or needs for transcendence and spirituality rely on the built-in, automatic processes by which living creatures make meaning out of incomplete and ambiguous stimuli, they rely on processes that are not unique to religion and spirituality but are an essential aspect of all healthy human functioning (Park, 2010). Meaning making and assessment, not religion and spirituality, are the core psychological processes, although religion and spirituality may be among their most elaborated cultural expressions (Park, 2005a, 2005b; Park, Chapter 18, this volume). People and other animals make meaning whether they feel motivated to do so or not.

Implications

We now return to our earlier proposal that we conceive of the focus of the subfield as a hard-to-define, probably inherently unstable subset of the larger need to make meaning exhibited by humans and other animals, as discussed next. Although researchers may, by definition, set religion, spirituality, and/or the sacred apart as distinctive processes, we think the psychological grounds for doing so are weak. Despite the difficulties involved in defining the elusive, multifaceted phenomena we refer to as religions and spiritualities and the diversity of psychological motives, proclivities, and processes we presume are at work in them, we are quite certain that processes of meaning making and assessment are involved. An MS perspective, in short, provides a powerful framework for analyzing the myriad forms of religiousness and spirituality, both local and global, that humans have created.

In saying this, readers should remember that there are many types of MSs, classified in disparate ways by different cultures, not all of which distinguish among religion, spirituality, and other constructs. Moreover, while MSs are implicated in the most sophisticated of human cultural creations, they are also operative at less conscious, more automatic levels of processing—biological, psychological, and social—that are utilized by many species in addition to humans. It is to the complex, multifaceted nature of meaning systems to which we now turn.

DEVELOPMENTS IN THE MODEL OF RELIGIOUS MEANING SYSTEMS

Meaning, Meaning Making, and Meaning Systems

It is crucial at this point to distinguish the concepts at the heart of this chapter—the process of meaning making and the MSs that result from this process—from philosophical considerations of authentic or real meaning, which is not of concern in this discussion. We highlight up front, therefore, that we are *not* talking about essentialist notions of meaning. We make no claims regarding "the true meaning." The science of psychology is neutral with respect to religious or other truth claims. We neither accept nor reject them. With Kirkpatrick (2005), we think scientific knowledge about psychological processes is orthogonal with respect to the veridicality of religious truth claims.

Briefly, this chapter is about the operation of an MS within the human mind (see Park, 2005a, 2005b; Park, Chapter 18, this volume)—and by extrapolation counterparts at more macro (e.g., sociocultural) and micro (e.g., neurological) levels of analysis—that enables the person to make meanings and evaluate information in light of them as a key process by which he or she regulates behavior, perceptions, emotions, and memories throughout life. It is these psychological processes that we are trying to understand.

In our conceptualization of the psychology of religion and spirituality, and of psychology as a whole, the notion of meaning systems applies to psychological processes inherent in cognitive mechanisms and appraisal processes as discussed by clinical and social psychologists, but also to psychological processes at more macro and micro levels of analysis. Anthropologists, sociologists, and cultural psychologists have used the concept of MS with the particulars pitched at their level of analysis (e.g., Alexander, Smith, & Norton, 2011; Bruner, 1990; Geertz, 1973; Purzycki & Sosis, 2009). Also, some of the more micro-oriented neurocognitive researchers allude to analogous processes at the level of neurological functioning (e.g., Azari, 2006; Frith, 2007; Inzlicht, Tullett, & Good, 2011; McNamara, 2009; Schjødt, Stødkilde-Jørgensen, Geertz, & Roepstorff, 2009). So the idea of MSs, and in this case religion as an MS, is, we propose, a unifying idea.

The notion that humans are of necessity meaning makers is widely accepted in psychology and many other disciplines (see Baumeister, 1991; Proulx & Heine, 2006; Steger, 2009, for reviews). Frankl (1963) was an early proponent of this notion of a universal human "will to meaning." At the individual level, this process is generally described as a conscious or nonconscious need to make sense of one's experience and to feel that one's life has significance and purpose (Steger, 2009). Subsequent generations of researchers elaborated on this concept, expanding and broadening its reach (Newberg & Waldman, 2006; Stillman & Baumeister, 2009). At the cultural level, Geertz (1973) has made a compelling case that culture is not merely the sum of all of the variables that are operative; instead, those variables are all interactive in a complex web, and a culture and its meanings are understood through a process of "thick description" by the symbols within that web that constitutes the interconnected whole. Cultural meanings are found in the symbols in that web space, not in a mere algebraic weighting of the variables (see also Alexander et al., 2011), and there seems to be no developed human life without them.

Yet the specific understanding of what it means to say that humans have to make meaning is difficult to specify. For example, Baumeister (1991) described four needs that are met through meaning making—a sense of purpose, value/justification, efficacy or control, and self-worth (p. 29)—but this does not tell us how the process of meaning

making works. It can best be understood in terms of two interrelated processes: meaning construction and meaning appraisal. Meaning construction, in its most basic form, is the process through which organisms (1) perceive wholes where the stimuli are actually parts; (2) make pattern, connection, or implication out of ambiguity; and (3) extrapolate continuity where it is unclear that there is any (Park & Folkman, 1997). Meaning appraisal, in its most basic form, is the process through which organisms assess new information in light of the way they have processed past information (i.e., their past experience and the implicit meaning system already in place) (Park, 2005a, 2005b). These interrelated processes are operative in perception, learning, development, social interaction, personality development, and all healthy human psychological functions, and also in the more highly elaborated beliefs, practices, values, and worldviews we associate with religiousness and spirituality.

A Deeper, Basic Psychological Process

Given the prior argument, we contend that the diverse array of human motives that others view as driving religion (e.g., the need for transcendence or spirituality) can be subsumed under the notion that people need to make meaning, though they do so through automatic, nonconscious processes more often than not. Our claim that people need to make meaning is based on the assumption that people need a *coherent and well-functioning meaning system at the biological and psychological levels* (Park et al., in press). At the biological and psychological levels, meaning systems are thus broad frameworks through which people attend to and perceive stimuli; organize their behavior; conceptualize themselves, others, and interpersonal relationships; remember their past; and anticipate their future. Because of its essential role in meeting a number of specific demands, including those for coherence, mastery and control, the reduction of uncertainty, identity, existential answers, and behavioral guidance, we posit that a well-functioning meaning system is necessary for healthy human functioning (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986; Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006) and, from an evolutionary perspective, has ultimate survival value (Kirkpatrick, Chapter 6, this volume).

From an MS perspective, religion and spirituality are more or less coherent, culturally elaborated meaning systems embedded in and acquired through social relationships and institutions situated in complex natural and built environments. As such, they are built upon and interact with meaning-making processes operating at the biological and psychological levels. As highly culturally elaborated systems, they are visible and distinctive when viewed cross-culturally and, at the same time, predictable in their ability to respond to cross-culturally recurrent matters of human concern. Because of this visibility and functionality, what we think of as religion and/or spirituality has a central role in the consciously articulated meaning systems of many people in virtually every culture. Given their versatility, religious/spiritual perspectives may be particularly capable of adapting to meet some of these demands, such as those for coherence, control, uncertainty reduction, and existential answers (Hood, Hill, & Spilka, 2009). Given its breadth, we propose that the model of meaning systems is capable of containing the whole span of research topics and dialogue within the psychology of religion. Although the point applies to an array of topics in psychology and to chapters in this book, we point to only a few examples as illustrations.

1. Take, for example, the processes that regulate goals and purposeful action (Emmons & Schnitker, Chapter 13, this volume). A human being does not have goals or purposeful motives, let alone more lofty spiritual strivings, in a non-meaning-laden vacuum. Even a goal defined in relatively immediate terms, such as caring for a sick loved one, depends on factors beyond itself, such as the degree of love shown to the caregiver by the sick person in past times, time conflicts, skill to perform the necessary tasks, and the availability of help, all of which contribute to the person's evaluation of the desirability, practicality, and possibility of performing the task at any given moment.

2. The same point can be made with respect to what may appear to us as more microlevel processes common to humans and other animals. Thus, for example, we can consider (a) the way other animals learn to respond to ambiguous stimuli and learn the location of food in a maze (or their natural habitat). In the first trial run in a T-maze, a rat is in a completely unknown environment and has no clue whether food is located down the left or the right arm of the maze. After several trials and errors, however, the rat has made the "correct" meaning out of the ambiguous stimulus series to which it has been exposed and has learned to turn left at the choice point to receive food reinforcement (i.e., it has "connected the dots" between running down the runway, seeing the choice point, executing one turn and not the other, and food in the goal box). Operant conditioning, thus, is an instance of meaning making. At a yet more microlevel, (b) we can consider the way neurons generate patterns out of an ambiguous barrage of bits and pieces of information, some of which apparently create consciousness. Similarly, (c) neurons in the retina of the eye receive certain wavelengths of the electromagnetic spectrum, called light, which set off neural impulses in the retinal receptors and from which the visual system eventually makes meaningful percepts. Finally, (d) even the phenomenon of human memory is based on meaning making. It is now known that a memory is not "retrieved" in the form in which it was initially stored, but is instead "reconstructed" (i.e., a meaning-making process) and can actually be changed by that very process, i.e., the meaning that was made and called a memory can be reconsolidated and stored in a new form (Debiec, LeDoux, & Nader, 2002). These are meaning assessment and meaning making processes, and it is hard to imagine human or animal functioning at an ordinary, healthy level without them.

3. A similar argument applies to religious conversion and spiritual transformation (Paloutzian, Murken, Streib, & Rößler-Namini, Chapter 20, this volume). A person does not accept a different belief or begin a new religious or spiritual practice without at some level—conscious or nonconscious—appraising his or her current needs and the degree to which they are being met and evaluating that appraisal in relation to the perceived alternatives and the anticipated effects of making a change. The person's final change or lack of it depends on his or her appraisal of the status quo in comparison to the perceived match, and benefits and costs, of sticking with what is or changing to something else. Technically, we can say that the person is responding to the meanings he or she makes of the options, not to the options as such.

4. Consider also the phenomenon of spiritual struggle (Exline & Rose, Chapter 19, this volume). Whether or not a person feels spiritual conflict between, for example, option *A* and option *B*, depends not on the two options as raw stimuli but on the person's perceptions, processing of those percepts, and evaluation of the consequences of his or

her possible choices in view of the higher order spiritual principles, purposes, or being(s) held in a superordinate position, possibly in a position of ultimate concern (Emmons, 1999). Thus, a person does not experience spiritual struggle or solve one by merely recognizing options but by working through a process of assessing what they might mean within his or her overarching meaning system.

5. Finally, the same argument applies to an idea called the Hyperactive Agency Detection Device (HADD; see Barrett, 2004; Barrett, Chapter 12, this volume), a clever concept that comes to us from the cognitive science of religion. This is the notion that the brain/mind is wired so that it is predisposed to detect agency in an object whether or not it is actually a property of that object—a process with survival value since it would prompt animals to flee when they encounter ambiguous stimuli that might possibly be preditors. However, the general idea that the mind detects agency needs clarification. Technically, the process is not "detection" but making meaning out of ambiguous stimuli. This seems straightforward when it is said that the HADD detects agency even if it is not there—something not possible. One can imagine it, hallucinate it, pretend it, have a sensory/perceputal illusion of it, but one cannot "detect" something that is not there. Insofar as we have no direct access to the minds of others, the general process is always inferential whether agency is present or not and, therefore, is one of meaning making via attribution of certain properties upon encountering an ambiguous stimulus complex.

Moreover, because meaning systems consist of much more than religion/spirituality, encompassing all the assumptions and goals that make up an individual's understanding of reality, we suggest that the meaning system concept is powerful enough to contain not only the psychological processes that regulate religiousness/spirituality but those that regulate much of human behavior.

Research on Religious Meaning Systems (RMSs)

Research interest in meaning has been proliferating in recent years. As of this writing, volumes on meaning edited by Markman, Proulx, and Lindberg and by Shaver and Mikulincer are forthcoming from APA, and the second edition of Wong's (2012) edited volume has recently been published. Research on meaning is being conducted in many domains of psychology—for example, including those concerned with trauma (e.g., Park, Mills, & Edmondson, 2012), health (e.g., Vehling et al., 2011), and terror management theory (e.g., Davis, Juhl, & Routledge, 2011)—and articles and books on many aspects of meaning are being published more broadly, including those concerned with philosophical matters (e.g., Flanagan, 2007; Hurford, 2007) and with meaning in culture (e.g., Alexander et al., 2011). Laboratory studies are also being conducted on meaning systems (e.g., Proulx & Heine, 2006). Some of this attention to meaning systems focuses specifically on religious/spiritual issues, but not much. For example, in Wong's (2012) edited book, only one chapter explicitly focuses on a religious component of meaning, within a Buddhist context. Further, with few exceptions, little research in the psychology of religion and spirituality has taken a meaning systems perspective. In Chapter 18 of this volume, Park reviews the research related to religious meaning systems, noting that most of this research was not explicitly conducted from this perspective.

MULTILEVEL INTERDISCIPLINARY PROGRESS

Why Multilevel and Interdisciplinary?

The multilevel interdisciplinary paradigm (MIP) was so named by Emmons and Paloutzian (2003) and elaborated by Paloutzian and Park (2005b) because the psychology of religion needed an idea to encourage researchers to operationalize their concepts at different levels of analysis within psychology and to compare their findings with those from other fields. If such comparisons are made and the findings are consistent, then the principles that connect them can be taken as more robust, and the eventual outcome has a greater chance of being a valid comprehensive theory of religiousness.

However, making progress toward a valid comprehensive theory of religiousness requires thinking in a new way, borrowing ideas from different fields, because in order to understand human behavior, especially a behavior so vast, rich, varied, and sometimes self-contradictory as human religiousness, research in psychology must be integrated with research from allied disciplines that study religion. Anthropologists, historians, neuroscientists, evolutionary biologists, sociologists, linguists, and religious studies scholars all study religiousness and spirituality in different ways, and all have specialized knowledge that they can share through collaboration. Thus, we think that expanding our reach under the umbrella of the MIP is essential, not optional, if we want to make progress toward genuine understanding.

We Challenge Us

We take seriously our own challenge to invoke the MIP. For example, in this second edition, we have expanded our scope to include far-reaching topics such as the cultural and cross-cultural psychology of religion (Saroglou & Cohen, Chapter 17) and religiousness and international terrorism (Moghaddam, Warren, & Love, Chapter 32). We widened our analytical reach from the cognitive psychology of religion in the first edition to the cognitive science of religion (Barrett, Chapter 12), an emerging area with a scope ranging from neuroscience to cultural anthropology. Noteworthy regarding this second edition is diversity of contributors, including a neurologist, coauthor of the chapter on the neuropsychology of religious experience (McNamara & Butler, Chapter 11); a scholar of public health, with an enlightening chapter on the meanings of religiousness and spirituality, bringing in historical as well as contemporary psychological and cross-cultural perspectives (Oman, Chapter 2); and a scholar in the field of government. Going into the humanities, we invited a past president of the American Academy of Religion to write about the most fundamental issues in the field through the eyes of a religious studies scholar (Taves, Chapter 7).

A leading psychological anthropologist commented that by itself psychological research on religiousness can be characterized as yielding knowledge that is good but "thin," because it tends to not account for the myriad complex cultural interactions that determine the phenomena "in vivo" (Luhrmann, personal communication, April, 2009). In light of this, we regard the integrative ideas in this book as showing great promise for contributing to the synthesis of knowledge about religiousness and spirituality.

Mapping Evidence to Adjacent Levels

It seems obvious that the lofty vision that we describe here can be accomplished only as data and concepts from one area of research map onto those from the levels of analysis immediately above and below it. In the ideal scenario, the multilayered maps of corresponding data and concepts would themselves be integrated with their counterparts at other levels. The eventual outcome would be comprehensive multilevel interdisciplinary theory.

To illustrate, we begin with some of the current research on brain processes in experiences that people deemed religious (see McNamara & Butler, Chapter 11, this volume, for a review). Unless one assumes that there are certain neural processes that are *sui generis* religious and to which no other meaning can possibly be attributed, a proposition for which there is no evidence, one must understand that our explanation of an experience about which a person makes a religious attribution cannot go directly from the behavior of neurons to a culturally defined meaning (e.g., "my mental experience was a real vision of the Virgin Mary") without also accounting for the attending psychological and social processes (see, e.g., Barrett, Chapter 12, this volume; Geertz, 2010). A complete explanation must be multilevel and interdisciplinary and requires that the evidence from various levels of analysis be consistent. Knowledge of the behavior of neurons cannot be mapped directly onto knowledge of cultural processes; the connection between them requires (at least) psychological and sociological knowledge as intermediate mapping steps. In general, the replication of findings across levels is the only way to confirm that the evidence is robust. Therefore, an explanation that works cannot skip essential levels of analysis that lay between those at the more micro and more macro levels.

By conducting research and developing theory that are collaborative, multilevel, and interdisciplinary, psychologists of religion will eventually be able to map knowledge among levels of analysis and invent more integrative theoretical concepts than are presently available. An explanation that works in a complete way will not skip levels of analysis but will instead show how they are interrelated. Meaning system processes are central to this endeavor because they connect what is happening at one level with what is happening at another. The model of religion as a meaning system, when properly applied to the formation and testing of research questions and to the interpretation of results from one level of analysis compared with its counterparts from adjacent levels, can yield a comprehensive, evidence-based theory capable of accounting for human religiousness.

Methodological Highlights and Directions

In Chapter 33, as we look to the future, we elaborate at length on a set of methodological highlights and offer suggestions and cite examples of how various kinds of research might proceed, the main points of which we now briefly introduce.

During the past 8 years, a number of methodological advances from the laboratory and the field have been used in search of valid psychological knowledge about religiousness (see Hood & Belzen, Chapter 4, this volume). The list of tools and techniques includes, but is not limited to, refinement in the use of questionnaires, priming in the laboratory and the field, so-called qualitative methods that involve in-depth interviews and validated methods to code the verbal transcripts to tap the deeper meaning of the person's thoughts, social neuroscientific techniques, and various methods (some used by

nonpsychologists) of studying religiousness "in the wild," so to speak, which can involve adapting a laboratory technique to a field setting, testing ideas derived in humanities research in experimental ways, and going after unusual local manifestations of religiousness in contrast to those that reflect the more well-known world religions.

Used together, these techniques provide interesting alternative ways to vary the measures of constructs and offer variations in degree of external validity inherent in the findings. In combination with triangulation, they can yield robust multilevel findings. It is this combination that allows for comparison of results from research at different levels of analysis and that yields the mapping of findings with findings when a principle tested across levels demonstrates its robustness. The psychology of religion is ready for such integrated approaches in order to build theory at a level that has not yet been attained.

PATHS THE PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION IS TAKING: A SAMPLE

In what ways has this field evolved in the 8 years since the *Handbook* was first published? Although a detailed discussion is beyond the scope of this introductory chapter, it is important to at least briefly explore a few of the broader paths that the psychology of religion and spirituality has taken that affect the wide span of specific topics in the field.

1. Scholars have taken initial steps away from defining religion in only one way or only in a way that fixes its meaning for their particular study. The trend toward acknowledging the need to study religions and spiritualities that comprise groups of elements that are not necessarily homogeneous has begun, setting the stage for better cross-cultural research.

2. There have been some substantial theoretical advances especially within the orbit of midlevel theory. Most notable is attachment theory (see, e.g., Richert & Granqvist, Chapter 8, this volume).

3. Overlapping the domain of psychology, the cognitive science of religion (CSR; Barrett, Chapter 12, this volume) and the neuropsychology of religion (McNamara & Butler, Chapter 11, this volume) have emerged as distinct entities; the former with sufficient support to establish the International Association for the Cognitive Science of Religion (IACSR) and its *Journal for the Cognitive Science of Religion*. Scholars from the cognitive science and neuroscience of religion come from a variety of disciplines, although their concerns largely overlap the psychology of religion. Scholars in these three areas began to communicate to and collaborate with each other, creating rich grounds for cross-fertilization.

4. The cross-cultural and cultural psychology of religion and spirituality has been added to the plate (Belzen, 2010; Saroglou & Cohen, Chapter 17, this volume). Consistent with this, psychology of religion and spirituality journal editors are receiving a greater number of papers submitted from outside the United States and beyond European borders, including Middle Eastern and East Asian countries. This international activity creates the potential for a rich future for cross-cultural comparisons.

5. Scholars in the fields of anthropology and religious studies have begun to look seriously at modern empirical psychological research methods and to incorporate them

within their (inherently) interdisciplinary approaches to the topic (see, e.g., Slingerland, 2008; Taves, 2009; Taves, Chapter 7, this volume).

6. An interesting and potential-laden menu of methods for research in the psychology of religion and spirituality has developed that seems to create a wide open door for new research and theoretical thinking that can exploit the potential apparent in myriad combinations of methods, cultures and religions, and questions that go from the micro to the macro levels.

7. Substantial progress has been made on the model of meaning systems (Park, Chapter 18, this volume). The combination of methodological and broad area innovations sets the stage for serious posing of multilevel interdisciplinary theory in the psychology of religion and spirituality, whose subtopics are held together by the processes at the heart of the meaning system model.

This list reflects only those ideas and trends whose effects automatically reflect or would be reflected in developments across large swaths of the areas of research in the psychology of religion and spirituality. However, this field has shown remarkable developments across the board. A very short and perhaps particularly conspicuous list, with collateral chapters in the current volume, includes research work into mindfulness (Levenson & Aldwin, Chapter 29), cultural psychology (Saroglou & Cohen, Chapter 17), religious studies (Taves, Chapter 7), evidence-based practice (Shafranske, Chapter 30), and completely new treatments of religious violence and terrorism (Moghaddam, Warren, & Love, Chapter 32), workplace spirituality (Hill, Jurkiewicz, Giacalone, & Fry, Chapter 31), and religious conversion and deconversion (Paloutzian, Murken, Streib, & Rößler-Namini, Chapter 20). In truth, however, if the new paths traveled by specific areas were to be added to the list, it would, in effect, mean that the entire table of contents would be reproduced here because each topic shows many new advances. Taken as a whole, this is a lot of movement in a mere 8 years.

ROLES THE PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION IS PLAYING: A SAMPLE

There are two kinds of contributions that any field of scholarship should *want* to make: (1) applying the material to real human problems and (2) effecting the communications, dialogue, and developments in research and theory within one's own scholarly field and beyond. In other terms, these amount to helping others and advancing knowledge. We close this chapter with an exceedingly brief snapshot of a small number of ways the psychology of religion and spirituality has made such contributions in the recent past.

A prominent area of contribution is in clinical and counseling psychology and their role in mental and physical health care. It is now more common for psychologists to be prepared see any patient, at least on an initial basis, regardless of religious or spiritual orientation and to be sensitive to those variables in a manner similar to the way one would be sensitive to and take into account patient differences based on ethnic or racial group, national origin, or gender or sexual orientation. Concurrent with this, a greater number of professionals are being trained within various specialized population groups,

thus making it easier for a person within a specialized group to receive competent mental health care treatment from a professional within that same group. Consistent with these and related applied trends, various chapters in the 2005 edition of the *Handbook* made important research-based contributions to the crafting of the *APA Resolution on Religious, Religion-Based, and/or Religion-Derived Prejudice* (American Psychological Association Presidential Working Group, 2008).

Scholarly evaluation of analogous research issues has not lagged behind. For example, the *Psychological Bulletin* recently published a journal dialogue on the issue of whether or not religion promotes prosociality (Galen, 2012a, 2012b; Myers, 2012; Saroglou, 2012; see also Nielsen, Hatton, & Donahue, Chapter 16, this volume). After centuries of debate in the proreligious/antireligious, philosophical, theological, and popular arenas about whether religion is good or bad, it is time to set aside rhetoric that protects one's own point of view and derogates the other. It is, instead, time to examine the empirical research on the question, draw whatever conclusions might emerge from that examination, and carry on the research in order to arrive at greater understanding of and applications to the problem. This is a genuine journal dialogue by three of the finest experts on the topic; it promises to be a milestone.

Looking back at the entire scene of the recent past, it is clear that the psychology of religion and spirituality has seen great change. This second edition of the *Handbook* documents this progress and offers a vision of what the future might hold..

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NOTES

1. The*Journal of Psychology and Judaism* was published quarterly for about 20 years but ended early last decade.
2. Space constraints do not allow citation of every article in every journal, but a selective list of flagships and discipline-wide journals includes the *American Psychologist*, *Science*, *Psychological Science*, *Psychological Bulletin*, and *PloS ONE*. Topical high-end journals include, but are not limited to, the *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *Journal of Personality*, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *Political Psychology*, *Journal of Happiness Studies*, *Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics*, *Journal of Cognition and Culture*, *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, *Personality and Individual Differences, Journal of Clinical Psychology, Journal of Adult Psychological Development, Pain Medicine, Developmental Psychology, Attachment and Human Behavior, Journal of Psychopharmacology,* and *Health Psychology*.
3. These themes are more fully elaborated in Chapters 1 and 30 of the 2005 *Handbook*.
4. The themes are substantively identical to those presented in the 2005 *Handbook*. There is one slight rearrangement in that the discussion of methods is moved from its pairing with theory to the discussion of the multilevel interdisciplinary paradigm.

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