

PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON **RELIGION**  
**AND RELIGIOSITY**

**BENJAMIN BEIT-HALLAHMI**

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# PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON RELIGION AND RELIGIOSITY

Is religion to blame for deadly conflicts? Should religious behavior be credited more often for acts of charity and altruism? In what ways are religious and “spiritual” ideas, practices and identities surviving and changing as religion loses its political power in those parts of the world which are experiencing increasing secularization?

Written by one of the world’s leading authorities on the psychology of religion and social identity, *Psychological Perspectives on Religion and Religiosity* offers a comprehensive and multidisciplinary review of a century of research into the origins and consequences of religious belief systems and religious behavior. The book employs a unique theoretical framework that combines the “new” cognitive-evolutionary psychology of religion, examining the origins of religious ideas, with the “old” psychology of religiosity, which looks at correlates and consequences. It examines a wide range of psychological variables and their relationship with religiosity. It also provides fresh insights into classical topics in the psychology of religion, such as religious conversion, the relevance of Freud’s ideas about religion and religiosity, the meaning of secularization, and the crucial role women play in religion. The book concludes with the author’s reflections on the future for the psychology of religion as a field.

*Psychological Perspectives on Religion and Religiosity* will be invaluable for academic researchers in psychology, sociology, anthropology, political science, economics, and history worldwide. It will also be of great interest to advanced undergraduate students and graduate students across the social sciences.

**Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi** is Professor of Psychology at the University of Haifa, Israel.

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# PREFACE

Over the past century, academic research has produced many significant, non-intuitive findings about religion and religiosity which deserve to be shared with a wide audience of scholars and students. Over the past twenty years, a new psychology of religion has been formed, or a new social science of religion. The findings and ideas presented in this book have been produced not only by psychologists, but also by sociologists, anthropologists, historians, economists, political science scholars, neuroscientists, psychiatrists, epidemiologists, and even physicists. The reason is not only that religion attracts the attention of scholars in many fields, but that in the psychological study of religion, disciplinary boundaries and labels may be ignored on the road to better ideas. The phenomena we want to investigate do not honor disciplinary boundaries, and academic curiosity no longer follows them. That is why economists and physicists study religion and religiosity, and that is why the intended audience for this book includes students and scholars in all disciplines.

This book, future-oriented and theory-driven, offers a review and an analysis of questions, methods and findings in the psychology of religion and religiosity. It is selective by necessity, as one book cannot do justice to the many significant contributions on every aspect of religious behavior, and must focus on a few topics. Still, it aims at covering the most important issues raised by students of religion. The book will leave the reader with more questions than answers, and that's the way it should be in any serious academic work. It is hoped that these questions will then be pursued to the best of one's talents, tastes, and preferences.

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# 1

## DEFINING PSYCHOLOGY, DEFINING RELIGION

Religion as a sphere of human activity is regarded as especially challenging for academic research. It is tied to seemingly unique individual behaviors, together with strong collective commitments. The word religion brings to the mind's eye and ear haunting sounds and colors: The music of processions and festivals celebrating ancient (or recent) miracles and triumphs, the wailing of supplicants praying for mercy and asking for intercessions by spirits great and small, and then the silence of contemplation, as well as beautiful objects that were crafted to be worshipped while standing for invisible powers, believers dressing up to follow old traditions on joyful occasions, and barefoot monks begging for their food. It also brings to mind major historical events and upheavals, and many clear reminders of its central role in most human cultures. The resources humans have invested in religion make its importance obvious.

Can the cold (or lukewarm) prose and the dry statistics of academic research portray faithfully this wealth of human experiences? First, it is clear that the study of religion is not a reproduction or promotion of religious activities. There is no need for that. Billions of believers maintain and promote living traditions without any help from academics.

What the academic study of religion aims to do is go behind the actions and search for causes and explanations. With the help of ideas and findings produced by many capable researchers we can arrive at significant generalizations, interpretations, and explanations of religion and religiosity. To achieve that, the first task is the clarification of basic terms, which mark the boundaries of the phenomenon and the attendant explanatory concepts.

### **Defining psychology**

An academic field is defined by (a) a set of questions, and (b) a set of methods for studying these questions. The two sets, (a) and (b), create a unique field, whether

## 2 Defining psychology, defining religion

chemistry, sociology, or psychology. Psychology is an intellectual endeavor, today mostly based in academic institutions, that aims at understanding and predicting human behavior. In academic psychology the (a) set includes questions about regularities in human behavior, including both observable action and consciousness. Beyond looking for regularities, we seek to explain them through various methods covered under (b). These may consist of experiments, standardized tests (sometimes conceived as mini-experiments), questionnaires, and systematic observations.

Psychology is both a life science and a human science, guided by an evolutionary assumption that connects humans to other animals in terms of both physiology and behavior. It is ahistorical in the sense of looking for the building blocks of human behavior, which are assumed to be stable across time and space. Psychologists share many interests with researchers in the other human sciences, especially anthropology, sociology, political science, and history, but they also stand out in any encounter with other disciplines by aiming to approach the person through the study of individual differences and personality traits.

### Observing and defining religion

The whole point of a definition is the classification into two basic categories of human activities – religion and non-religion. There are those who suggest that defining religion is hard or impossible (Guthrie, 1993; Wulff, 1999), and we even encounter well-known researchers who declare that “what constitutes religion is unclear” (Sosis and Bulbulia, 2011, p. 348). This is puzzling, and there is enough reason to disagree. How and why do you study religion if you are not sure how to define it? Those who state that defining religion is impossible actually deal with the same topics and the same concrete phenomena that will be discussed in this book.

What do all religions have in common? What is common to Vietnamese Buddhism, Aztec religion, Roman paganism, the Tallensi tradition, Mormonism, and Hinduism? What is the unity, if there is one, behind this great diversity of behaviors and traditions? The definition must be inclusive and comprehensive. Observable differences among religions, obviously due to history and culture, are relatively marginal to psychology, because it seeks explanations for religion-in-general. That is why in this book, very little will be said about particular traditions, or about differences among denominations. Humans cannot believe in religion-in-general, but in a particular one, just as we don't speak a language-in-general, but in linguistics we can speak of language in general terms and define its essential properties. The concept of religion is an abstraction from countless concrete cases, but we can still talk about religion-in-general because there is a common denominator to all those systems. Concrete examples are considered representative of the psychological unity of all religions.

Religions claim exclusivity, uniqueness, and originality, but the similarities among traditions of supernaturalism are too obvious, and sometimes found in identical or highly similar texts. Thus, the Flood story in the book of Genesis is obviously similar to the story of Deucalion in Greek mythology, and to hundreds

of flood accounts found all over the world. It actually shares some phrases with the Mesopotamian Gilgamesh text of the seventh century BCE. What can be observed is clearly not unity, but uniformity and similarity among religions. We may speak of a multiplicity paradox: Tens of thousands of religions express similar ideas, and, as observers, we may even conceive of one basic religion shared by humanity (Bulbulia, 2005).

Religion is not a realm of psychological functions or structures; it is defined by content, and not by process; by what rather than by how (Beit-Hallahmi, 1989). The essentials appearing in tens of thousands of belief systems lead to the definition: Religion is a belief system which includes the notion of a supernatural, invisible world, inhabited by gods, human souls, angels, demons, and other conscious spirit entities (Beit-Hallahmi, 1989; Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle, 1997). Religious claims and narratives are immediately recognized through their content and special rhetoric. Belief systems will be defined as religions only when those committed to them make specific references to supernatural agents or interventions, and specific assertions about the spirit world. Religious actions are defined solely by their relation to the realm of the spirit world.

A definition of religion delineates what is universal in all the concrete experiences and behaviors that are designated by the actors involved as constituting religion. This designation may not be formal or written. Religious acts are construed in reference to spiritual entities, and being religious is about a particular affirmation of the invisible spirit world and its constituent entities. What we observe every day, in every culture, is individuals discussing souls, spirits, ghosts, gods, ancestors, or demons, who are assumed to inhabit another sphere of existence than ours, but sometimes are reported to be in contact with living humans. This is the irreducible common core, the supernaturalist premise, which unites tens of thousands of religions and billions of believers: "It is the premise of every religion—and this premise is religion's defining characteristic—that souls, supernatural beings, and supernatural forces exist. Furthermore, there are certain minimal categories of behavior, which, *in the context of the supernatural premise*, [italics in the original] are always found in association with one another and which are the substance of religion itself" (Wallace, 1966, p. 52). These minimal (or more than minimal) activities are the derivatives of supernaturalist beliefs. Because the supernaturalist premise is the beginning of all religions, the terms supernaturalism and religion could be used interchangeably.

In the above definition, souls precede other beings, and this is a reflection of their centrality in religious discourse. A supernaturalist belief system does not have to refer to gods, but it does always refer to spirit entities (ancestors, ghosts, angels, etc.) which have some power over humans and can affect their lives.

Rituals are about contacts and negotiations with spirit entities. When we ask participants or officiants at religious rituals to explain the meaning of their actions, they will always refer to beliefs about spirits and contact with them. Prayers and incantations inspire awe, even when they are being pronounced in a language the believers do not understand, as they are believed to reach powerful spirits.



#### 4 Defining psychology, defining religion

The definition presented here follows the tradition of modern research on religion, started in the nineteenth century. According to E. B. Tylor, the “minimum definition of religion” is the belief in spiritual beings. Such beings,

are held to affect or control the events of the material world, and man’s life here and hereafter; and it being considered that they hold intercourse with men, and receive pleasure or displeasure from human actions, the belief in their existence leads naturally, and it might also be said inevitably, sooner or later to active reverence and propitiation.

(Tylor, 1871, I, p. 381)

They include the “souls of individual creatures, capable of continued existence after the death or destruction of the body” and “other spirits, up to the rank of powerful deities” (Tylor, 1871, I, p. 424).

Twenty-five years later, William James stated: “Religion has meant many things in human history: but when from now onward I use the word I mean to use it in the supernaturalist sense, as declaring that the so called order of nature, which constitutes this world’s experience, is only one portion of the total universe, and that there stretches beyond this visible world an unseen world of which we now know nothing positive, but in its relation to which the true significance of our present mundane life consists” (James, 1897/1956, p. 51).

James G. Frazer emphasized that,

[b]y religion, then, I understand a propitiation or conciliation of powers superior to man which are believed to direct and control the course of nature and of human life. Thus defined, religion consists ... a belief in powers higher than man and an attempt to propitiate or please them ... belief clearly comes first, since we must believe in the existence of a divine being before we can attempt to please him.

(Frazer, 1922, pp. 65–66)

Similarly, Meford Spiro stated that “the belief in superhuman beings and in their power to assist or to harm man approaches universal distribution, and this belief—I would insist—is the core variable which ought to be designated by any definition of religion” (Spiro, 1966, p. 96). More recently, a leading sociologist of religion, Rodney Stark, stated that “[t]he core of any system of religious doctrine is a *general account of existence predicated on a description of the supernatural*” (Stark, 2000, p. 305; italics in the original). Saroglou (2011, p. 1323) stated that “[a] set of some or many beliefs relative to what many people consider as being an (external) transcendence—and its ‘connection’ with humans and the world—is a basic universal component of religion.” The emphasis on the supernaturalist premise in defining religion gives us first a clear distinction between religious and secular acts, valid cross-culturally, consistent with believers’ experience, whether they are Hindus, Moslems, Sikhs, Baha’is, Buddhists, or members of any other religious group, and including the

phenomena of witchcraft, possession, and the modern “New Age.” Observed differences among traditions and historical situations are publicly expressed through different assertions about the spirit world. Different assertions serve as the starting point for different group identities and intergroup conflicts. Adherents to the same religion or to different religions may disagree, and believers may argue about what the spirits want, but they all share a faith in the existence of such entities, which they aim to communicate with and whose presumed wishes they follow.

Religion is not, as sometimes suggested, about “non-empirical” claims. For the believers, gods and angels are as real as any other object. Harris and Koenig (2006) state that “children quiz adults in approximately the same way whether they are grappling with a question about liquids or a question about angels” (p. 518). Not only children, but also some adults may think about liquids and angels in a similar way. William Blake made it clear more than 200 years ago:

Scoffers

Mock on, mock on, Voltaire Rousseau;  
Mock on, mock on; 'tis all in vain!  
You throw the sand against the wind,  
And the wind blows it back again.

And every sand becomes a gem  
Reflected in the beams divine;  
Blown back they blind the mocking eye,  
But still in Israel's path they shine.

The Atoms of Democritus  
and Newton's Particles of Light  
Are sands upon the Red Sea shore,  
Where Israel's tents do shine and bright.

(Blake, 1804/1905, p. 108)

Just like Blake, who affirmed the reality of the mythological Exodus, believers today have no doubts about thousands of miraculous events, such as the Virgin Birth of Buddha, Krishna, Zoroaster, or Jesus, or about the ability of saints and ancestors to grant their wishes for a better life. Subject to culture specifics, the human mind is easily capable of imagining witches casting spells designed to harm unsuspecting victims, heaven and hell, or the trajectories traveled by prayers and offerings as they create their effects. The immediate experience is that of representations, images, and ideas, attached to supernaturalist references. Representations of supernaturalist images are universal. Even “the nonbeliever ... must also have a God representation” as the result of exposure to religious ideation (Rizzuto, 1979, p. 42). In the globalized twenty-first century, it is hard not to have representations of Krishna, Jesus, Moses, Muhammad, or Buddha.

## 6 Defining psychology, defining religion

Beyond the conscious representations, religions involve the individual in a unique commitment and in a unique network of relationships, concrete as well as imagined. While religion is unique in terms of content, its consequences cannot always be distinguished from that of other ideologies. Other belief systems, tied to commitment, emotion, ecstasy, and transformation, constitute secular ideologies. Some of the more dramatic aspects of religious behavior, including ecstasy or acts of extreme devotion culminating in total self-sacrifice, can be found in secular settings, motivated either by private love or by public nationalism.

While every religion claims to be connected to the unseen world, it operates through visible objects and acts in this world. Some material objects, from temples to prayer beads, holy books, and amulets, are believed to radiate power. It is *mana*, a power that emanates from sacred objects, and humans seek closeness, or physical contact, to such objects, leading to touching them, or to pilgrimage to the locales of relics and tombs. Household shrines, which take the form of sacred objects kept in the home and offering a focus of worship, possess *mana* and are common in many religions.

Pilgrimages were known already in ancient Egypt, where believers went to the tomb of the god Osiris, and the Middle Ages were the heyday of pilgrimage in Europe. Great masses of people take part in pilgrimages, which connect them to *mana*. Voyages to special locations all over the world are initiated in the hope of finding miracle cures, visiting relics (a hair from the beard of the prophet Muhammad or a tooth of Buddha) or tombs, places in which apparitions have been reported, or just mountains considered sacred since time immemorial. Some of them have survived for millennia. The best known is the Kumba Mela, a pilgrimage held every three years in Northern India, which is considered the largest gathering in the world, with tens of millions attending. The pilgrims believe that bathing in the Ganges River will ensure their happiness and salvation, but many of them are likely to contract infectious diseases or get injured in accidents.

Other pilgrimage traditions are much younger, but can be quite powerful in mobilizing the masses. On June 24, 1981, six young individuals reported apparitions of the Virgin Mary, of Christian mythology, in the small village of Medjugorje, not far from the resort city of Dubrovnik, Croatia. They went on to report visions and excursions to heaven and hell. This started a mass pilgrimage which has attracted tens of millions, and is likely to attract millions more in the foreseeable future (Bax, 1995; Berryman, 2001).

Belief in *mana* creates many practices, such as the custom of hanging rags or clothes on the branches of sacred trees, common among Moslems in West Asia and North Africa:

Holiness is, indeed, to the Palestine peasant a sort of liquid which may be absorbed by physical contact. The man who hangs a rag upon a tree will take from it and wear about his person another rag which has become soaked with the virtue of the place by hanging there.

(Rix, 1907, p. 32; see also Dafni, 2002)

Similar practices, based on the belief in sacred trees which possess *mana*, have been observed all over the world. Charles Darwin reported tree worship, including the hanging of rags, in South America in August 1833 (Darwin, 1839/1965).

## The substance of religion: pantheons and souls

The supernaturalist premise unfolds by enumerating the entities in the spirit world. In all religions, there is a hierarchy of spirit entities and the population of the invisible world consists of millions of gods, angels, and demons, as well as saints, humans promoted to a divine or semi-divine status. The spirit world is at the top of a hierarchy which involves humans, with “our” group placed higher than others, and gods placed above humans (Demoulin, Saroglou and Van Pachterbeke, 2008; Meier *et al.*, 2007). The invisible spiritual forces are envisaged anthropomorphically, sharing human qualities, and are usually thought of as male (Carroll, 1979). Various hypotheses have been proposed to account for the denizens of the pantheon in different traditions, and connections have been found between social structure and the spirit world (Underhill, 1975). Swanson (1960) found that high gods, supreme deities in the pantheon, are likely to be worshipped in societies where there are three or more sovereign groups (Peregrine, 1996). When monarchy used to be tied to religion, rulers not only had religious roles, but became gods, sometimes while still alive. In Japan traditional Shinto beliefs include the assertion that the Japanese emperor is descended from the Shinto sun goddess Amaterasu-o-mikami.

Among mortals, the boundaries of human communities extend beyond physical existence. Most spirit entities are human souls before birth or after death, and there is constant contact between spirits and humans, between the living and the dead. In religious mourning, “acknowledgement of the permanent absence of the deceased ... ultimately comes to coexist with belief in the permanent presence of the deceased—but now on another plane of experience, in the afterworld, part of the cosmos and the place to which the bereaved will ultimately repair” (Lutzky, 2008, p. 152–153).

In the religious imagination we find an intimate interaction and movement between life and death, and heaven and earth. Gods and spirits descend to earth, sometimes taking human form, while humans ascend to heaven, sometimes becoming divine. There are stories about sex between gods and humans, and the semi-divine human children of the gods. Here is a story from the book of Genesis (6; 1–4, 6):

That the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives of all which they chose. There were giants in the earth in those days; and also after that, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bare children to them, the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown.

This sounds like a summary of many Greek stories about the sexual intercourse of gods and women and its products, but we find it in the Hebrew Bible.

## 8 Defining psychology, defining religion

The soul is the means for every human to connect directly with the spirit world. A related idea, prevalent in many religious traditions, is reincarnation, the transmigration of souls. Similar stories about the migration of souls from humans to animals are found in strikingly different settings. According to beliefs among the Wari', an Amazon basin tribe, the spirits of the dead go to an underground world, and return in the form of fish or peccaries, pig-like animals that are a major source of meat for the tribe. Later on, the ancestor-peccaries seek out hunters from their own families and offer themselves to be shot, ensuring that their meat will go to feed the people they love (Conklin, 2001). Among Hassidic Jews, members of a tradition which started in Eastern Europe in the eighteenth century, there has been the belief in the souls of just men transmigrating into kosher beasts, which Jews may eat. These beasts need to be slaughtered only with the sharpest knives, otherwise causing the just men unnecessary suffering. In the fourth century BCE, Pythagoras took a more radical position and advocated the avoidance of meat, because what one eats may come from the body of an animal inhabited by a friend's soul. Such notions express confidence in continuing relationships with the dead, gratitude for their aid, and guilt about animals being killed to feed humans.

In many traditions, belief in an eternal soul, which travels to the world of the spirits, is tied to a belief in spirit possession and to the practice of exorcism. A possession is a special kind of incarnation, and a conflict between the dead and the living, when a hostile soul or a demon takes over a human body because of sins or its own needs. The possessing entity may be the soul of a dead person, a demon, or a unique possessing spirit. Exorcisms are designed to end possession states by driving out the entity that had penetrated a human body, and are practiced today in various traditions, from Maoris in New Zealand, to Hindus, Roman Catholics, and Pentecostals, sometimes resulting in the death of the possessed (Mercer, 2013). A case that attracted much media attention was reported by the American politician Bobby Jindal, the 55th governor of Louisiana, who reported being involved in an exorcism at age twenty-three (Jindal, 1994).

Rituals which consist of negotiating with the souls of animals can be found in cultures which rely on hunted or domesticated animals for survival. This involves apologizing to the hunted species and expressing hope for its preservation and its continuing fertility. Thus, members of the Yurok tribe were described praying to the salmon:

Tearfully they assured their prey that they meant no harm to his essence, that they were eating only that fleshy part of him that he could well afford to lose, and that they would let his scales return downriver and out into the ocean where they came from, so that from them new salmon could grow—and continue to come into the Yurok's nets.

(Erikson, 1964, p. 104)

There is much evidence of guilt over the killing of animals, expressed in taboos and rituals among hunters (Luckert, 1975). Ideas about the fear of revenge by the souls

of slaughtered animals lie at the root of hunting and slaughter rituals, which are best known today in Islam and Judaism (Frazer, 1922).

## Belief variations

Brown (1991) collected a list of some 200 “human universals,” among them many that are directly relevant to the psychology of religion: Anthropomorphization, taboos, rites of passage, death rituals, beliefs about disease, beliefs about fortune and misfortune, belief in supernatural/religion, myths, and divination. The universality of these ideas demonstrates the psychological unity of humans, who share the same mental mechanisms and face similar challenges.

In the academic study of religion, all beliefs and traditions must be treated equally. The psychology of religion does not need such terms as “primitive,” “cult,” or “magic” and assumes one unified, psychological realm of experience. Durkheim (1912/1995) already emphasized the unity of “primitive” and “modern” religions. Strenski (1998) describes “a longstanding rejection of invidious distinctions between cult and religion or superstition and religion among students of religion” (p. 360), and Atran (2002) similarly makes no “distinctions between magic and myth, between primitive and modern thought, or among animistic, pantheistic, and monotheistic forms of religion” (p. 8).

There is much psychological and cultural continuity between “official” religious beliefs and para-religious beliefs, which are part of folk tradition and popular practices in every culture. Para-religious beliefs are most often transmitted unofficially and orally, but the unofficial lore is as well known in a given culture as official doctrines. Driskell and Lyon (2011, p. 389) stated that institutional religions and “New Age” share “beliefs regarding the existence of transcendent entities (i.e., the soul or spirit).” Boyer (2001) stated that the realm of religion included both “official” religious ideas, as well as “unofficial” narratives about Santa Claus or witchcraft, produced by the same psychological processes.

“Official” doctrines and “unofficial” popular beliefs and practices are united by a subjectivist worldview (Zusne and Jones, 1982) based on non-materialism. Both religions and para-religious belief systems, such as beliefs in “telepathy,” astrology, or communication with the dead, posit a causal system which is both cosmic and personal, challenging the impersonal reality of nature. Events in nature are presumably tied to a coherent, comprehensive system of causality with humans at its center. “New Age” beliefs and practices reflect this kind of supernaturalist thinking (see Chapter 9).

Studies which tried to assess whether believers in orthodox traditions were also likely to hold popular occultism have led to inconsistent results (Bader, Baker and Molle, 2012), but there is a body of research which points to some continuity (Canetti-Nisim and Beit-Hallahmi, 2007; Francis *et al.*, 2013; Francis, Williams and Robbins, 2009; Glendinning, 2006; Mencken, Bader and Kim, 2009; Rice, 2003; Weeks, Weeks and Daniel, 2008; Willard and Norenzayan, 2013; Zusne and Jones, 1982).

Witchcraft beliefs involve claims about the manipulation of evil supernatural forces and entities. Pedro Espada, Jr., a politician on trial for corruption in New York City, claimed that “evil spiritual powers” were acting against him, and so he “held up rosary beads and said, ‘We Catholics fight that off with this’” (Secret, 2012, p. A28). Mr. Espada went to prison for five years. In the twenty-first century, witchcraft accusations directed at individuals are still heard all over the world, leading to individuals (mostly women) being killed in Africa, India and Papua New Guinea.

The notion of the “primitive” in beliefs and social systems is simply an expression of bias. It is clear that pre-literate cultures possess highly complex social structures and belief systems. We may find in such cultures beliefs which may appear strange, together with others which seem familiar and quite similar to those in the advanced industrial nations of today. The Kurelu people of New Guinea have been described as living in the Stone Age, and that is understandable given their rudimentary technology, but their culture consists of thousands of complex beliefs and customs. The Kurelu believe in friendly and unfriendly ghosts, as well as purification rites to remove the impurity of death. There are exorcisms to drive away ghosts and remind the dead members of the tribe to move on, and during funerals an arrow is shot into the dead body, releasing the soul. Divination is performed by cutting up the innards of small animals (Matthiessen, 1962). Such beliefs and practices have been known in many cultures. Practices of telling fortunes by “reading” animal entrails were well known thousands of years ago among Babylonians, Hittites, Etruscans and Romans.

The Nuer of East Africa believe in a supernatural world controlled by one supreme deity, Akuj, and offer him sacrifices of cattle designed to ensure prosperity and divine blessings. Some members of the tribe are recognized as prophets, who may have contacts with the supernatural world (Evans-Pritchard, 1970). Similar beliefs are found among the Dinka, Himba, Igbo, and other African cultures. To Western observers, they all appear similar to common Biblical ideas.

Ancestors play an important role in many traditions all over the world as denizens of the spirit world. Events in one’s life, and especially death and misfortune, are explained as resulting from ancestors’ wishes and acts. Fortes observes the virtual identity of African and Chinese ideas about filial piety: “The Tallensi would accept the Confucian ideal of pietas as consisting in ‘serving one’s parents when alive according to propriety; in burying them when dead according to propriety and in sacrificing to them according to propriety’ ... or ‘according to ritual’” (Fortes, 1961, p. 179).

In many cultures, paying respects to dead ancestors is believed to ensure a happy life and a good afterlife, and it is better to be on good terms with them (Ahern, 1973; Traphagan, 2004). Here is an example from Taiwan:

the deceased’s spirit needs to be supplied with goods from the world of the living, which is done by burning spirit money and presenting offerings. If the spirit receives these sacrifices, s/he is appeased. If not, the spirit becomes a

hungry ghost, whose ability to wreak vengeance surpasses the good an ancestor can render.

(Gries, Su and Schak, 2012, p. 626)

The Western version of such beliefs is reported among students in the United States, who believe that “rituals carried out after your death affect your afterlife” (Lester *et al.*, 2002, p. 117).

Sometimes, holidays are set aside to honor dead ancestors and relatives, in the expectation that they in turn will protect the living. In the Chinese festival of Qingming (“tomb sweeping day”), the living burn fake money notes and leave cigarettes, oranges and beer at the graves of relatives, which have been cleaned and tidied up. These acts are believed to ensure a good life for the living, and happiness in the afterworld for the dead. The Qingming holiday is similar to Western traditions, such as All Souls Day in its many forms.

## The language of miracles

Most religious traditions are transmitted through miracle narratives, which prove supernaturalism in the most literal way by suggesting that religion overcomes the limitations of life and nature. Countless miracle narratives have been circulated in human history, many obviously reused and recycled. They are often defined as events which seem to violate our sense of the “laws of nature” or the “order of nature,” but the point of the supernatural premise is to tell us that the true order of nature includes entities and actions which transcend mundane experiences.

For the believers, a myth is a true report of real and important events, proving the power and mercy of the gods, and any interpretation follows from that assumption. Faith is sustained by narratives of past glories and promises of future triumphs. Miracles are always naturalistic claims presented as evidence for the power of spirits and the power of those connected, or obedient, to them (Beit-Hallahmi, 2001a). Their most important characteristic is that they take place in this world, not in the invisible world of the spirits. They are believed to occur through the intercession of benevolent spirit entities, but their effects are totally material, palpable, and provable (at least to the believers) in naturalist terms. When the claim is made that somebody has been cured of cancer, the alleged cure happened right here on earth, and not in the spirit world. In explaining disease and cures, what is unique about miracles is not a deficient knowledge of physiology, which can be found in many purely secular assertions, but the claimed intervention by the great spirits.

Some humans are believed to be miracle workers, having special powers, and claims about individuals with such powers are made in many traditions. Dan Stratton is the pastor of the Faith Exchange Fellowship, a fundamentalist Christian congregation in New York’s financial district. His wife Ann has been described as a born-again miracle worker, “whose prayers once supposedly raised a German au pair from the dead on the street in front of the Blue Moon Mexican Cafe in



Englewood, N.J. ... Today that woman's alive and well in Germany." Ann Stratton also stated that thanks to her prayers, "[a] woman with brain cancer was healed, another was saved from a hysterectomy and a man came out of a seemingly permanent coma ... a little deaf boy regained his hearing ... her prayers replaced a blind eye in a woman's socket with a healthy, perfectly matched green eyeball" (Chafets, 2006, p. 21).

Many religious narratives contain both supernaturalist and naturalist claims (Beit-Hallahmi, 2001a). Naturalist claims are often found in religious discourse, but do not convey the unique character of religious thinking. While a claim such as "[a] man named Jesus was born in Judea under Herod," is straightforward, naturalistic, and lacking any supporting evidence, it is part of a religious narrative that is anything but naturalistic.

Disasters and miracles are both believed to be part of a divine plan, and a cosmic calculus is evident in both. Humans are believed to be subject to rules of reward and punishment, administered meticulously by the great spirits. Within a religious framework, both disasters and miracles serve to persuade us, not of the reality of the world of the spirits in general, but of one particular belief system and one particular claim to authority, which is better and stronger than those worshipped by other collectivities. "Our" miracles are clearly superior to theirs. Superiority and self-esteem are vital psychological supplies, provided by religions and other ideologies.

Mythologies, written or transmitted orally, present the cosmic order and the centrality of humans in it. This human role, of course, is miraculous, and so is the revelation telling us about it. Humans are naturally attracted to the idea of being at the center of the universe, sharing a cosmic mission. There exists a cosmic plan in which the believer and his group play a central role, and this human role can be understood only within the context of the cosmic script. While many religions report foundational revelations, events which led to their founding, some traditions report confirmatory revelations, which reinforce and sustain long-held beliefs. Through these apparitions specific messages from the spirit world are conveyed, or the presence of spirits and gods directly felt.

### **The substance of religion: sacrifice**

Sacrifice is a way of negotiating with the spirit world which involves a fantasy of reciprocity, with believers asking for intercession and forgiveness. Offerings may take many forms, from mutilating one's body to avoiding speech for long hours, and a great variety of materials are offered to the spirits for their nourishment, from bananas to sheep. Sacrificing one's hair as a part of an initiation rite or a mark of devotion is found in some traditions. Among ultra-Orthodox Jews, all married women keep their hair short and wear a hairpiece (in some groups they shave their heads). In India both men and women sacrifice their hair to the gods. In a rare case of unwitting religious cooperation, hair collected at Hindu temples has been used in recent years for hairpieces purchased by ultra-Orthodox Jewish women.

Sacrificing one's private life is a dramatic religious act. Religious ideals of renunciation, which involve giving up attachments and family ties, are found in many cultures, and individuals are invited to make a major offering by consecrating their lives as clergy, monks, or nuns. In South Asia we find the phenomenon of middle-aged men committing themselves to severing all personal attachments. Laungani (2007) discusses the case of a former High Court Judge in India, who has renounced the material world, abandoned his large and loving family, and has become a sanyasin in search of enlightenment and nirvana. The consecration of virgins is an ancient tradition, re-established by the Roman Catholic Church in 1970. As of 2011, there were 400 consecrated virgins in Italy (Turina, 2011). Consecrated virgins make a public promise of perpetual virginity during a special ceremony, conducted by a bishop, which celebrates marriage to the mythical Jesus Christ. They live alone or with their families, have regular jobs, and are part of the community.

Public infliction of suffering as a form of sacrifice is found in some traditions. Sitting Bull (c. 1831–1890), a Lakota Sioux holy man, pierced his body with skewers when performing the sun dance in honor of the goddess White Buffalo Woman (Uttley, 1993). Piercing with skewers can be observed today among Shiite Moslems in West Asia and Hindus as well as Buddhists in South Asia. Blood shedding in the genital mutilation of children is practiced in various cultures as part of puberty or pre-puberty initiation rites, and is sometimes sanctioned as a religious duty.

Animal sacrifice is a dramatic part of many traditions. The relationship with the sacrificial victim is often complex and ambivalent, as the animal may be worshipped as well as sacrificed. An example is the worship of bull-god, found in Mediterranean cultures as well as in South Asia. Bulls were deified, but sometimes also killed, and worshipped while being consumed. The ritualized killing of a bull survives to this day in a secular form in Latin America, in Spain, and in Southern France as bullfighting.

Animal sacrifice is most common today in Islamic and African cultures, as well as in Afro-Caribbean and Afro-American traditions, such as Voodoo, and its rules are similar to the Old Testament rules, where for each transgression there is a sacrificial atonement. The tradition of the mythological scapegoat, described in Leviticus 16, lives on in Orthodox Judaism, where the custom of sacrificing a chicken on the eve of the Day of Atonement for every member of the family (hens for females and roosters for males) is still prevalent, and hundreds of thousands of fowl are sacrificed every fall in Jewish communities all over the world. The belief is that human sins are transferred to the animal, which will pay for them with its life. In this case, as in others, the projection of sins on a victim is conscious.

The majority of Christians, numbering more than one billion, celebrate the Eucharist, a ritual involving ideas of sacrifice and cannibalism. Participants ingest a piece of bread and drink some wine or grape juice. The believers insist that they are actually engaged in the eating of human flesh and the drinking of human blood. In the words of Pope Paul VI, the ritual involves “the marvelous change of the

whole of the bread's substance into Christ's body and the whole of the wine's substance into his blood" (1965, pp. 7–8). Outsiders see only wafers and wine, but the fantasy is powerful and the ritual is at the center of the tradition. This is a case of theophagy, a celebration which involves god-eating, and is found in ancient traditions (Frazer, 1922; Griffiths, 1980). In some preliterate cultures, such as the Ainu of Japan, the bear is considered a god, and rituals of bear sacrifice, in which the celebrants share meat, play a major role in religious traditions (Kitagawa, 1961). Determining the actual emergence of the Eucharist in antiquity is impossible, but similar practices have been observed recently. Zivkovic (2014) described how followers of the Tibetan lama Bokar Rinpoche (1940–2004) ingested red and white pills containing his blood and semen during funeral ceremonies following his death, and stated that in this way they can “merge with his mind” (p. 121).

In the early days of Christianity, this ritual gave rise to rumors and accusations of child sacrifice and cannibalism (McGowan, 1994; Schultz, 1991). In 177 CE, Christians in Lyon were accused of the ritual sacrifice of infants. Their slaves confessed to the truth of the allegations and the entire community was massacred (Cohn, 1975). The accusation that Jews use the blood of Christian children in baking unleavened bread for the Passover holiday, known as the Blood Libel, has been interpreted as growing out of the Eucharist. Simmel (1946) suggested that the anti-Semitic Christian accuses the Jew of the crime which he unconsciously commits when he eats the holy wafer. Dundes (1991) argued that the Blood Libel was a projective inversion of the Christian communion. Those who acted out ritualized cannibalism in the communion selected Jews as their scapegoat, a sacrificial victim. The Jewish Passover celebration, named after the mythical killing of the Egyptian first-born and the survival of the Israelite children, has been interpreted as originating in human sacrifice (Schlesinger, 1976).

A unique worship ritual which involves animals and the loss of human life is that of snake handling. This is a Christian ritual native to the United States, and observed since the early twentieth century among poor Whites in Appalachia. It has led to scores of fatalities. The worshippers defy death and secular authority in proving their devotion (Hood and Williamson, 2008). In 2013, the practice became the subject of a regular television program in the United States, known as “Snake Salvation.” On February 15, 2014, one of the show's stars, Jamie Coots, died of a snake bite during a church service. He had refused medical care (The Associated Press, 2014).

## Death and religion

Religion's most unique claim, which combines the two worlds, that of nature and that of the spirits, is the denial of death. Avoiding the recognition of death as the end of any individual existence is one of religion's strongest compensators (Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle, 1997). There is evidence of probable afterlife beliefs during the middle Paleolithic period, between 120,000 and 40,000 years ago. The material evidence is of intentional burials, and archaeologists suggest that only ideas about death as a

transition can explain them. The oldest burials are found in the Middle Palaeolithic in West Asia (Ronen, 2012). What we find in them are grave goods, i.e. articles left with the body, mostly food. The investment in grave goods is interpreted as reflecting a wish to help the dead person survive, so to speak, in this new stage of existence. These early humans thought that death was not the end, and the difference between one bowl of food left with a dead child 100,000 years ago and the tombs of Egyptian pharaohs 5,000 years old is just quantitative. The belief animating both is identical: We have to invest in creating the right future for the dead.

“To judge by archaeological evidence ... some of the most gigantic constructions, some of the most splendid and extravagant works of art, some of the most complex rituals have all been devoted to the internment, housing and equipping of the dead, in preparation for the journey of the soul beyond the grave” (Stone, 1978, p. 22). What other explanation can account for the massive investment of resources in activities and artifacts which have no direct bearing on survival, at a time when human communities were small and always in danger of extinction? We can speculate about early humans because they had the same brains and the same minds as ourselves. This is the first time we can refer to the denial of death by humans, and this is the beginning of religion.

To say that religion is an expression of death denial is a truism. As Carson McCullers put it, religion is about “the future of the dead” (McCullers, 1940, p. 188). Every day, all over the world, humans are saying farewell to dead relatives, friends, and colleagues. If we ask about the meaning of their acts, whether it is a burial, cremation, or a Zoroastrian ceremony in which the body is devoured by carrion birds, the meaning, we will be told, in most cases, is in the departure on a journey to the spirit world, where the deceased may undergo transformations, but the soul will survive to live on in another container or return to the same body when resurrected.

The illusion of immortality is one reaction to the inevitability of death, the universal threat to every individual human. Within the religious framework, death is not a singular event occurring only once in the history of the individual, but a transition from one form of existence to another. All religions state that dying is only a passage, a transition point in the existence of the soul, as it comes out of a particular human body.

Frazer described religion, with “the almost universal belief in the survival of the human spirit after death” (Frazer, 1933–1936, p. v) at its center, as resulting from the fear of the dead, which is the fear of death itself (Beit-Hallahmi, 2012). Another analysis states:

Religion, whether it be shamanism or Protestantism, rises from our apprehension of death. To give meaning to meaninglessness is the endless quest of religion ... Clearly we possess religion, if we want to, precisely to obscure the truth of our perishing ... When death becomes the center, then religion begins.

(Bloom, 1992, p. 29)

The terror of death leads to the creation of prominent cultural mechanisms (Becker, 1973; Greenberg *et al.*, 1995; Pyszczynski, Greenberg and Solomon, 2003), with religion being the most important.

And indeed, denying death is part of the daily practice of all religions: “I can testify to the entire world that I know that life is eternal, that it is everlasting, that the grave is not the end, that those who die young or old shall go on living” (Hinckley, 2001, p. 2). This is how a President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints expressed his faith, which he shares with billions around the globe, of all traditions.

The idea of the soul expresses the denial of death (Roheim, 1932). One can find claims not only about the soul’s state of perfection after death, but about the body. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, a well-known spiritualist, proclaimed that “[p]eople after death become complete again. The blind can see, the deaf can hear, cripples are no longer crippled after all their vital signs have ceased to exist” (quoted in Rosenbaum, 2001, p. 267). Some of the activities attributed to the dead in heaven seem to require working bodies, and not just souls. David Brandt Berg (1919–1994), the founder of Children Of God (known since 2004 as The Family International), reported in 1985 that he had ascended into “the spirit world” and discovered that there was great sex in heaven: “No exhaustion, no tiring, no surfeiting, no impotence, no failures, no dissatisfactions! All was pure joy & love & endless fulfillment, hallelujah! Thank you, Jesus!” (quoted in Kent, 1994, p. 183).

While religions have promised their followers everlasting life through the immortality of the soul, some religious leaders promised their followers literal, physical immortality, and some followers claim to accept that promise. In the 1930s in the United States, a man known as Father Divine was supposed to have given his followers everlasting life: “many of us who are in this place will never lose the bodies we now have. God is here in the flesh, and he is never going away from us, and we will remain here forevermore. This is heaven on earth” (Fauset, 1944, p. 105).

Connecting death and the sacred is found in most religious belief systems. Personal immortality, whether through the rise of one’s soul to heaven, or through some form of reincarnation, as well as various promises of resurrection, has been described and promised in religious traditions for many thousands of years, and is indeed the most important function of religion for the majority of believers. It was William James who stated that “[r]eligion, in fact, for the great majority of our own race, means immortality and nothing else” (James, 1902/1961, p. 406). The spirit world is usually the afterworld, or afterlife, which are clearly euphemisms for death and a denial of its reality and finality.

Every encounter with death is a reminder of the spirit world. Atran (2002) reported that people have a pronounced tendency to associate the word “God” with death and sadness. The souls of the dead have always been regarded with fear, to be propitiated or conjured up, but reminders of death are used to shore up religious faith through assurances of immortality. This is what Christianity has promised: “The trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and

We shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption and this mortal must put on immortality” (I Corinthians 15: 52–53).

All religions offer us descriptions of the soul’s trajectory following physical death and every one of these is an attempt to deny and diminish reality, as it has been witnessed by humans since time immemorial. The most common expressions of the “normal” religious denial of death consist of accounts of the soul’s travels through heaven, hell, incarnation and reincarnation, rebirth, and eventually nirvana or resurrection. Redefining death is a way that preserves the self’s integrity, as identity is stable through all migrations. The person’s real self will experience what happens after death and will preserve his/her unique identity. The connection between each individual soul and the cosmos offers what might be called existential confidence.

It has been pointed out that in some religious traditions, the afterlife is characterized by suffering and darkness. But even in these cases the belief is that death is only a transition to another stage, and another state, of existence. Thus, the finality of death and the finality of life are denied. The dead still have a future, even if it is a bleak one.

## Defining the psychology of religion and religiosity

The psychology of religion aims to account for individual religious thinking and its meanings. It applies psychological hypotheses, explanations, and concepts to religious ideation and actions. When an individual refers to Allah, Jesus, hell, or heaven, what are the associated processes, emotions, and motives? What are the associated images? The phenomena to be explained include religions across space and time; not just religions we are familiar with, but all religions, including extinct and ancient practices from the Stone Age to ancient Egypt, Greece, or Rome.

Research on the psychological foundations of religion may rely on experiments, where conditions are controlled and causality is supposed to be determined. Thus, experimenters may create death anxiety in respondents and observe its effects on different beliefs. Many experiments have used priming, which is “the temporary activation of an individual’s mental representations ... and the effect of this activation on behavior in an unrelated subsequent task” (Hadnes and Schumacher, 2012, p. 692). Religious priming means the activation of religious ideas by various means, consciously or unconsciously, and its effects are measured.

A second kind of research is concerned not with the foundations of religion, but with religiosity and the effects of religiosity in secular spheres of behavior. When individuals tell us that they espouse a certain belief system, what can we say about the relevant psychological antecedents, and about the relevant behavioral consequences? What does belief in hell or heaven lead to? The question is “Does religiosity make a difference?”, and the answer is given in terms of both individual and collective behavior.

What is done first is to measure religiosity, the importance of the supernaturalist premise in an individual’s life. For most individuals, this will be expressed in a

conscious adherence to any of the many thousands of religions currently in existence, and derivatives such as participation in rituals and meetings or monetary donations. For some individuals, it will be a more eclectic or nebulous commitment to supernaturalism (Chapter 9). Religiosity is a continuous, rather than a discrete, variable. This means that for most humans, investment in beliefs and practices is not an all or nothing question, but a matter of degree. Religiosity measures reflect one's investment of resources in supernaturalism.

## Assessing the dimensions of religiosity

Glock (1962) proposed five dimensions for the measurement of religiosity in modern society: ideological, intellectual, ritualistic, experiential, and consequential. This idea has been applied in hundreds of studies.

### *Dimension 1: Ideological, covering religious beliefs*

Support for particular religious beliefs is the main measure of religiosity, which is then related to other beliefs, and to psychological and behavioral indicators (Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle, 1997). Belief is the main measure used in the literature, because that is how every religion measures its successes or failures. It is the content of beliefs that gives meaning to religious acts and everything around them.

A public statement of faith is considered sufficient for membership in many religious groups, and this makes sense from a social-psychological point of view. A public utterance of a creed means a public commitment, and that is what any group, secular or religious, would wish to have. Particular traditions frame beliefs in a credo or a single sentence. Repeating such sentences aloud is a ritual and an act of public commitment. Examples of such are the Kalimat al Shahada ("There is no God but Allah") of Islam, or the Buddhān saraṇaṃ gacchāmi ("I take refuge in the Buddha") in Buddhism. Data about beliefs are not based on official dogma, but on what believers say and how they respond to religious concepts (Cohen, Shariff and Hill, 2008).

Here are some examples of belief items: In the General Social Survey (GSS), a nationally representative survey of the United States population, six response options are provided for the question:

"Which statement comes closest to expressing what you believe about god?"

- 1 I know that god exists and I have no doubts about it;
- 2 While I have doubts, I feel that I do believe in god;
- 3 I find myself believing in god some of the time, but not at others;
- 4 I don't believe in a personal god, but I do believe in a higher power of some kind;
- 5 I don't know whether there is a god, and I don't believe there is any way to find out;
- 6 I don't believe in god.

Such items are relevant only to religious systems with a concept of a supreme god, but this means a large part of humanity.

“Which one of these statements comes closest to describing your feelings about the Bible?”

The Bible is an ancient book of fables, legends, history, and moral teachings recorded by man.

The Bible is the inspired word of God but not everything should be taken literally, word for word.

The Bible is the actual word of God and it is to be taken literally, word for word.

(Davis and Robinson, 1999b, p. 1659)

This item is relevant to nominal Christians and Jews.

“What do you think happens after your body dies?”

An afterlife of some kind.

Reincarnation.

Nothing. Death is the end of personal existence.

I don't know.

I don't think about it.

“Does man have a soul that can exist independently from the body, for example after death?”

(Belyaev, 2011, p. 358)

These two items are relevant to all humans.

Asking individuals whether they believe in an immortal, immaterial soul seems just as useful in assessing religiosity as asking about belief in a god. Afterlife beliefs appear to be associated with the idea of an immaterial essence, potentially dissociable from the biology of life and death. Richert and Harris (2008) found that students who believed in the existence of the soul were also likely to report attitudes reflecting the stance of religious groups in the United States on issues such as stem-cell research.

## ***Dimension 2: Intellectual, covering religious knowledge***

Religious knowledge, that is the knowledge of a religion's scriptures and traditions, is not always a good measure of religiosity, simply because many believers seem to be quite ignorant of what are considered basic elements of the religious tradition they claim as their own. There may be a negative correlation between beliefs and knowledge in some traditions. Discussing the United States, two leading researchers stated: “The public on the whole is amazingly ignorant ... For example, 79 per



cent of the Protestants and 86 per cent of the Catholics could not name a single Old Testament prophet” (Glock and Stark, 1966, p. 161). Such ignorance is found in many denominations and assuming that nominal members are familiar with their group’s doctrine is risky. Limited knowledge by religious Americans extends even to such basic matters as their own religious affiliation, as observed by two sociologists, who claimed that “attempting to classify people by the denomination is problematic given that many people are poorly informed about their actual affiliation” (Driskell and Lyon, 2011, p. 387).

In 2010, a survey in the United States found that atheists and agnostics were the most knowledgeable about religious concepts and traditions, even after controlling for education, compared to those identifying with a religion. Mormons and Jews were in third and fourth places. Afro-American Protestants and Latino Catholics had the lowest scores. Overall, the survey showed that religious knowledge was quite limited. Fifty-three percent of American Protestants did not connect Martin Luther with the Reformation (Pew Forum, 2010).

All these findings demonstrate that the knowledge dimension cannot serve as an effective measure of religiosity, and that data about knowledge should be used with caution.

### ***Dimension 3: Ritualistic, covering participation in religious rituals***

Here is an example of a Dimension 3 item:

“How often do you go to a place of worship to pray?”

More than once a day.

Once a day.

Several times a week.

Once a week.

Less than once a week.

Once a month.

Less than once a month.

Never.

Frequency of attendance in religious services is a common index of public religious commitment. Most studies using data on attendance at religious services rely on self-report, which raises the obvious question of reliability. Should we trust what people tell us about their public worship attendance? In the United States more than 40 percent of the population were reporting having attended services (“in the last seven days”) until recently. Many have thought such findings physically impossible (i.e. not enough space in places of worship to accommodate 100 million attenders). Using actual time-use diaries, rather than self-reports, researchers found that a more realistic figure would be about 26 percent (Presser and Chaves, 2007).