

## SIGNIFICANCE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL MODELS IN EVALUATING HUMAN RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

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### ABSTRACT

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The paper explores psychology from its modal evaluation of human religiousness by introducing readers to major psychological models to understanding religious beliefs, values and behaviour. The aim is to propose a psychology of religion that can address the pragmatic meaning of religiosity that can develop the human person without making any assumptions about particular religious truths and values. The researcher employed the descriptive and evaluative methods of gathering information with the aid of secondary sources. The paper revealed that psychology has a lot to offer to human understanding and about people's religious beliefs, values, and behaviour which can lead human religious development. The paper concludes that psychology and religion can function together at the applied science level and in relation to techniques and skills reflective of human religious experiences.

**Keywords:** Psychological, Models, Human, Religious, Experience

### INTRODUCTION

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What is called religious experience is the perception of divine communication to single individuals or to humanity at large (Properzi, 2013; Cresswell, 2014). Divine experiences incorporate both a supernatural source of truth and a human receptor that can interpret and filters such message. In this sense, psychology appropriately plays a role by analysing these phenomena to arrive at a workable synthesis. In this sense, religion and psychology are human activities. What then is psychology?

Etymologically, psychology is from the Greek word, *psychologia* meaning the "study of the mind" (Wikipedia online Free Encyclopaedia, 2009 cf. Fontana, 2003). Hornby (2008) defines psychology as a science that studies the mind. This definition explains further, how it influences behaviour (cf. Myers, 1990). From a scientific point of view, it means the study of mental processes and behaviour. While psychology relies on symbolic interpretation and critical analysis, its traditions have tended to be less pronounced than in other social

sciences such as sociology. Experts in the field of psychology study human activities such as emotion, behaviour, unconscious mind, perception, personality, interpersonal relationship, cognition, etc.

It is worth noting, that knowledge gained from psychology can be applied to many areas of human life. These areas may include human health, livelihood, the family, education, etc. For instance, experts of psychology in their researches have helped to make humans understand the development of the human personality including the promotion of human mental health. Psychologists also help people to understand their habits in order to effect changes seen to be bad. They understand some of the conditions that can make workers more productive. A great deal remains to be discovered. Nevertheless, insights provided by psychology is capable of helping human beings to function more effectively as individuals, friends, family members, leaders, rulers and workers.

### **FINDING RELEVANCE IN PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDY OF RELIGION**

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Studying religion psychologically implies a study pattern in the emergence, development, operation, and dying away of religious phenomena among individual's consciousness and social groups. The content structures and the orientation of those phenomena, their roles in religion in itself and influences as or sphere of activities outside religion are met for the humans in the society. Wikipedia online Free Encyclopedia (2009) defines psychology of religion as the psychological discourse of religious phenomena. On the other hand, Mullin (1974cf. Cresswell, 2014) defines psychology of religion as the study of the consciousness in regeneration and conversion. This definition is rooted in Christian theology.

On the other hand, Mullin (1974 cf. Cresswell, 2014) defines it from a Christian perspective as a study that deals with the human consciousness in terms of regeneration and conversion. This definition is rooted in Christian theology. More technically, psychology of religion is a theoretical and methodical application of psychology in the understanding of religion. These specialists in psychology do so without the consent of religious adherents and with objectivity in term of their own belief (cf. Cresswell, 2014).

But this straightforward account in fact simplifies the situation. Religion and psychology may mean something different even to those who are experts in the psychological study of religion. Studying religion psychologically introduces one to different psychological principles which enable one to study religion and appreciate in-depth. It also enables one to appreciate many areas that concern the history of the subject and how such history has influenced contemporary approaches to research, especially in the field of religion and psychology, including in understanding pluralism in religion and individual's religiosity. Psychological thinking about religion provides the conceptual insights that are necessary to looking in-depth into the processes and meanings of religious experience, belief and

behaviour in the lives of individuals and groups.

Psychological study of religion also enables one to develop a critical mind and reason objectively about religious phenomena with the aim of understanding them through the help of psychological models and other options available. In this sense, it develops a capacity to present an objective evaluation of specified topics. It also develops a perspective or template on which studies on religion from the perspective of psychology can be carried out appropriately. Psychology of religion emphasizes plethora of religious experience. That is, the normal religious experience in which all the spiritual elements in human nature are combined in due proportion to produce genuine religious experience. Also, it shows the prevalence of law in the subjective religious experience of human beings.

This is because religion as has been connected vitally with what is known in psychology as the “subconscious mind” (Hampson, 2005). Psychological study of religion is very relevant because it suggests the working of a divine energy in human religious experience. This is because in most cases the presence of law and order in human religiosity has led human beings to infer purely natural causes for all the effects produced. It seeks to buttress and defend religion apologetically by trying to describe, if not prove, its psychological necessity or inevitability. For instance, to show that mental health or stable human relations rest on engagements in religion, either the writer’s preferred religion or any religion or piety.

Psychology of religion seeks to make subjective and private experiences objective and public by providing them with psychological understanding, fine description, or explanations. For example, works on mysticism tend to possess this category of objective. It is also postulated that to study religion from the perspective of psychology exposes religion as an “atavism” (or anachronism) by focusing on its archaic origin, its continuous anachronistic practices, its primitive methods and action, the thought control it fosters, or the unreasoned on which it is allegedly rooted (Pruyser, 1987). Again, psychology vindicates the spiritual view of man (Mullin, 1974 cf. James, 1982; Hampson, 2005). This is because the parallelism that exists between the human brain and mind is a “common-place” for religious truth in the views of modern psychologists.

### **AN OVERVIEW MEANING OF HUMAN RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE**

From time immemorial human beings have associated themselves with the Divine. They have always described or postulated the supernatural being from their own experiences. What then is religious experience? This divino-human phenomenon is universally conceived to mean the encounter or experience of the Supernatural Being or deities. This description of religious experience agrees with the explanation of Schleiermacher (1963) who described it as “the consciousness of being absolutely dependent, or which is the same thing, of being in relation with God” (p.12). Feuerbach (1957) sees religious experience as a natural experience contrary to Schleiermacher’s interpretation of religious experience. According to

him, “that on which man feels himself to be independent is not God,... but nature” (p.30). Human religious experience according to Campbell (1957) is:

*a state of mind compressing belief in the reality of supernatural being or beings endowed with transcendent power and worth, together with the complex emotive attitude of worship intrinsically appropriate thereto (p.248).*

The above definition corresponds to James (1960) explanation of religious experience as:

*the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men [human beings] in their solitude, so far they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine (p.50).*

Otto (1959) sees religious experience as numinous, mystery, awesome, fearfulness and attractive. In this sense, religious experience can be described to mean a bi-polar, subject-object encounter (Omoregbe, 1993). Religious experience is far different from phenomenon such as revelation, dreams about God, hallucination, mystical experiences, psychological experiences, etc. In the context of this discussion, religious experience is simply human encounter with God or gods who is believe to exist in the mind and reality. This encounter with the divine manifests physically and spiritually in the general behaviour and way of life of the person including his desires, habits, emotions, spirituality, and relationship among others. These attitudes coloured by a person’s encounter with the divine can be measured or assessed with the aid of psychological models.

### **Using Psychological Models to Evaluate Human Religious Experience**

Mainstream scientific psychology has more empirical and objective methodologies in their approach to issues. However, there are variants in the prepositions and presuppositions in these methods that make their findings different, especially concerning information about religion. Many years ago, subjective and objective methods have been combined for the purpose of enriching each other. This means that researches in the field of psychology of religion are more successful when two or more methods are combined together. If the above assertion is correct, it is proper to exercise caution. I will now proceed to discuss some of the explanatory models of psychology that can be used to evaluate human religiosity.

#### **Psychometric Model**

Since the 1960s psychologists of religion have used the methodology of psychometrics to assess different ways in which a person may be religious example of this is the Religious Orientation Scale (OS) of Allport and Ross (1967). The psychometric model is one of the earliest models that psychology of religion experts have used to examined the different behaviours of religious adherents. One of the tools for this model is the Religious Orientation

Scale of Allport and Ross (1967). In this approach, the OS through its psychometric method evaluate a person's religious experience. This includes the use of structured questions in questionnaires to assess or measure respondents' opinions on the religious life of believers. Hypotheses that form the focal points of the questionnaires may include: religion as means; religion as end; and religion as quest (Batson, Schoenrade and Ventis, 1993).. The aim is to assess the spirituality, support and openness of religion as expressed by adherents. Proponents of this methods or approaches include Allport and Ross, Schonrade and Ventis, Gorsuch and Venable where they distinguish between religion and spirituality.

Another example is the use of a survey also called a public opinion poll. This is a tool that measures people's attitudes and activities by asking the people themselves. Surveys provide information on religious views and habits, and other human activities. A psychologist of religion conducting a survey prepares carefully worded questions to achieve his goals. He interviews participants personally or post questionnaires to them. If he wishes to form general conclusions, the survey must collect responses from a representative sample of individuals.

### **Developmental Model**

This model mainly focuses on the development of the human mind through the life span in under to understand how people come to perceive and understand the activities around them by focusing on cognitive, social, intellectual, neural, moral or neural development. Researchers who study children use for instance, various unique research methods to make observations in natural settings or to engage them in experimental tasks (Kelemen, 2004). In this area of study, researchers have devised more intelligent ways of investigating infants' mental stages of development.

In this sense, the application of stage models like that of Piaget and Kohlberg is necessary in order to show the way children develop their perception about the supernatural or God and religion in particular general (cf. Medin, 1998). By far the most well-known stage model of spiritual or religious development is that of Fowler (1971). Fowler himself has proposed stages of faith development which cut across the human life span in a holistic orientation following the pattern of Piaget and Kohlberg. This is done in connection to the relatedness to what is called the universal. The stages include: intuitive-projective; symbolic literal; synthetic conventional; individuating, paradoxical (conjunctive); and universalizing. Studies have revealed children that are with the age range of twelve tend to be in the first two of the stages mentioned above. It is also revealed that adults over or with the age range of sixty-one do show considerable difference in displays of qualities of stages three and even beyond.

Fowler's model has generated some empirical studies, and fuller descriptions of this

research (and of these six stages) can be found in Wulff (1975 cf. Reber, 2006). However, this model possesses some methodological weaknesses from a scientific point of view. Using this as a paradigm, soul-like entity in religious experience is then further elevated from its natural position through more direct divine interventions (Properzi, 2013). Examples of such religious conceptualizations include the redemptive doctrine of grace in Christianity (theosis in Eastern Christian thought) and the notion regarding the “universal” or “perfect”.

### **Humanistic Model**

The humanistic model which can be used to evaluate human religiosity is rooted in humanistic psychology. Researchers using this model argue that human beings are under the control of their personal choices and values with or without the environment playing any significant role. In this wise, this perception agrees with that of the behaviourists and psychoanalysts. Hence, the ultimate aim of the humanistic model is to enable human beings fulfil their unique potentials and function actively in their environment.

By using phenomenology inter-subjectivity and first-person categories, this approach seeks to x-ray the totality of the person including his/her personality and cognitive functioning. This model is like humanism which deals with human issues such as identity, freedom, loneliness, death, meaning of life, etc. Some factors that prompt the distinctiveness of this model from psychological models include rejection of determinism, subjective order, and emphasis on positive growth instead of pathology (Neisser, 1994; Slife, and Reber, 2009). Due to its influence it became known as the “third force” within psychology, along with behaviourism and psychoanalysis.

The humanistic model rejects the notion that defines man as a mechanism controlled by external stimuli or consciousness. This is because; man is believed to be capable of influencing his environment. This model’s emphasis at this point is on human selfhood rooted in individual subjective experience and perception of the self. However, in the course of individual’s religious development, certain human and societal factors come into play (Shweder, 1991). These factors include man bodily needs or organic desires; man’s temperament and mental capacity; man’s psycho-genic interests and values; man’s pursuit of rational explanation; and man’s responses to immediate cultural conformity.

### **Behavioural Model**

Behaviourism was introduced in 1913 by Watson (Vattimo, 2002), an American psychologist. Watson and his followers postulated that the core source of authentic data about human beings is the observable human behaviours which are not internal experience. This postulation deemphasizes the introspective theory called structuralism.

This model emphasizes the relevance of the human environment and its influence on human

behaviour. They chiefly looked for connections between observable behaviour and stimuli from the environment (Fox and Austin, 2009). Behaviourism became popularized because experimentations based on laboratory and also due to the psychodynamics theory of Sigmund Freud that was difficult to test empirically.

Moreover, in contrast with early psychologists Wundt and James (1985), who studied the mind via introspection, and argued that the contents of the mind were not accessible to the scrutiny of science and that scientific psychology ought to be concerned with the study of observable behaviour only. In this sense, consideration of internal representation of the mind is absent.

### **Psychoanalysis Model**

Psychoanalysis was founded during the late 1800's and early 1900's by the Austrian psychoanalyst, Sigmund Freud (cited in Norenzayan, 2012). It is a theory which asserts that behaviour is controlled by complex inner forces rooted in the unconscious part of the human mind. Freud explained that repression of unacceptable desires and needs to them or society start from early childhood. He explained further that the repressed feelings are capable of causing disturbances in human personality which can lead to self-destruction of behaviour including other physical symptoms. Freud in his model used many techniques to subject repressed feelings to a conscious state of human awareness. This includes free association technique whereby a patient freely discusses anything which easily come into his/her mind with a standby therapist listening to understand the person's inner feelings. In this model psychologist also the technique of dream interpretation which they considered to be rooted in the reflection of conflicts and unconscious forces.

The aim of these techniques is to enable the patient to understand and accept he/her repressed feelings and figure out ways of coping with them. In this wise, meditation is an important tool. In order to allow diversity in experience, meditation methods tend to share a common objective of moving away from habitual ways of perceiving and thinking.

Many religious and spiritual traditions that employ meditation assert that the world most of us know is an illusion. In this sense, several religious traditions that subscribe to meditation believe that human life exist in a world of illusion. Illusion in this sense is believed to be the property of habitual method of differentiation, classification and marking of human experiences perceptually. Religious meditation is empirical in that it involves direct experience (cf. Cresswell, 2014). Even though meditation is subjective, the person who experiences it can be conscious of it even though he or she cannot explain such experience in words. On this Atkinson (1990 cf. Hood, 1975) opined that an induced state of consciousness that is marked by a loss of awareness of extraneous stimuli can be caused by concentrative meditation.

## **Cognitive Model**

Behaviourism dominated American psychology in the 20th century. However, as time go by, this was replaced by cognitive psychology. The domination of cognitive psychology was occasioned by the emergence of computer science and artificial intelligence processing machines. This was combined together with mental representations that exist through which laboratory experimentations opened the way for cognitive psychology and became very popular psychology model to evaluate the conscious and the unconscious mind. Research in cognition is also backed by the aim to gain a better understanding of weapons operation since World War II (cf. Pyysiainen, 2002). This shows that the cognitive model is an important research tool to study human cognition especially in the area of human religiosity.

This model is distinct from other models of psychology in several ways. One aspect where it is differ is its acceptance of scientific approaches such as the psychodynamics model of Freud. It is also differ from others in that it appreciates and recognizes the existence of inner mental conditions, for instance, belief, motivation and needs (or desires whereas behaviourism for instance, does not.

Cognitive psychology deals with unconscious occurrences in human being such as repression including exploring them as components that are operationally defined. For example, some psychologists have used this method to show that a person's memory can be activated through fabrication rather than through the elimination of repression. According to Slife and Reber (2012), the cognitive is conceived as a ordinary reasoning and action. In this sense, narrow psychological approach may carry on complete activities that psychologists cannot see.

This approach may be considered inadequate when studying human religiosity psychologically. This is so because; studying religion psychologically does not consider individualistic conscious experience. This approach attempts to investigate into the events inside a person's body particularly between the nervous system and the brain. This model reduces observable behaviour and emotions in order to assess human's religious experience.

In his book, *Religion Explained* Boyer (see Simon, 1998) postulated that religious consciousness lacks simple explanation. According to Boyer, explaining the various psychological methods involved the acquisition and transmission of notions about the deities. He builds on the ideas of cognitive proponents such as Sperber and Atran (cited in Neisser, 1994 cf. Simon, 1998), who argued that religious cognition represents a bye-product of several evolutionary adaptations, including folk psychology, and purposeful violations of innate expectations about how the world is created and make religious cognitions striking and memorable.

It should be noted that religious adherents possess religious practices and ideas via social



exposure. For example, a child from a Buddhist family may not become an active Christian or a Fulani warrior without the relevant cultural exposure (cf. Kelemen, 2004). While mere exposure does not cause a particular religious outlook, a person may have been raised a Roman Catholic but leave the church. However, most exposure seems required.

Cognitive approach enables one to understand the psychological mechanisms that account for these manifest correlations. In so doing, it helps to understand the nature and reality of religious belief and practice (Atkinson, 1990; Slife and Reber, 2012). To this extent mechanisms controlling the acquisitions and transmission of religious concepts rely on human brain. These mechanisms are opened to computational analysis with all thoughts computationally structured, including religious thought. In this way, presumably, computational approaches can shed light on the nature and scope of human religious cognition.

### **Naturalistic Observation Model**

This involves watching human attitude or behaviour and other animals in their natural environment. For example, a researcher might study the activities of a monkey in the zoo. In this way, the psychologist seeks for the cause and effect elements in behaviour. Psychologists conducting such studies try to observe a group large enough and typical enough to reflect accurately the total population. Such a group is called a representative sample (McCauley, 2011). Observers also attempt to keep their personal views from influencing the study.

Observers also attempt to keep their personal views from influencing the study. As a result, psychologists use naturalistic observation chiefly as an exploratory technique to gain insights and ideas for later testing. The way a person interprets an experience depends on his or her state of mind, cultural and religious setting including his or her worldview and prior beliefs.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

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From the foregoing, knowledge of humankind's on going engagement in religion and literature about it can be helpful in the formation of learned and astute psychologists. This will occur if only the amount and variety of soul-searching that religion will traditionally foster as well as the large margin of pathology it will always produce. Interestingly, psychology's questions and findings about how minds work, how feelings affect cognition and how thoughts entail feelings, how behaviour is motivated and shaped can hardly be ignored today by religionists with scholarly ambition and a sense of intellectual responsibility.

It is also interesting to know that psychology and religion can function vis-à-vis each other at the applied science level and in relation to techniques and skills. Barring syncretism and fusion, it can be said that clinical psychology and counselling practitioners can benefit from

knowing how religious practitioners make their amelioristic interventions in the lives of troubled people, and how religionists assess their changing behaviours, thoughts, feelings, or needs. In the other way round, religionists can benefit from studying how applied psychologists make their assessments of people's needs and also make their amelioristic interventions.

Psychology of religion therefore, is an important link between psychology as a biological, social or human science, the different religious traditions and the practice of contemporary theology and philosophy. In this sense, psychologists may indeed come into dialogue with religious scholars to assist in shedding more light on the rudiments and dynamics of human religious experiences. This can be done through the analysis of the characteristic nature and scope of their manifestations and by studying the consequences associated with their expressions including engaging their functions within the psyche of the individual vis-à-vis the normative ideals of the specific religious framework of explanation that the individual has encountered.

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