

**ATTACHMENT, EVOLUTION,
and the
PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION**

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Introduction

Religion, broadly defined, might be the most thought- and written-about topic in the history of human civilization. There are vast literatures devoted to religious beliefs, values, and practice—what people ought to believe and how they should live their lives as a consequence. Theologians and spiritual leaders attempt to ascertain the mind of God or the gods. Devotional literatures attempt to lead people to live satisfying and righteous lives. Philosophers debate religion’s logic and values, sometimes endorsing them and at other times tearing them down. Scholars in numerous fields document the variety of religious beliefs around the world and across time, in search of the elusive common thread running among them all. Social scientists examine empirical and theoretical relationships between religious beliefs, behaviors, and practices and other dimensions of human experience at psychological and sociological levels of analysis.

Behind all of these diverse perspectives are agendas; everyone has one. Wafting on the breeze blowing across this crowded territory is a symphony of grinding axes. Strategically or inadvertently, writers seek to promote their own preferred version of religion, undermine others, somehow integrate or reconcile seemingly disparate perspectives, or understand religious phenomena scientifically. This is all fine, so long as everyone is clear about what their agendas are and do not mistake one for another.

AN AMBITIOUS AGENDA

I too have an agenda. I believe that our goal should be: to formulate a *scientific, comprehensive, explanatory psychology of religion*.

I have no delusions about fulfilling such an ambitious goal in this book. Indeed, I doubt that anything like it will be achieved in my lifetime, much less within this (or any other single) volume. Nevertheless, I think it is extremely important to articulate, here at the beginning, the larger agenda to which this book is intended to contribute, for two reasons.

First, I want to be entirely clear up front about the matter. There are any number of goals one might have in approaching the study of psychology and religion, and the agenda I have specified is just one among them. As I will discuss shortly, divergent agendas in the psychology of religion are often confused with one another, to the detriment of all concerned. I am not going to offer any kind of defense of this agenda, but rather will assume its value is self-evident. I am not suggesting that other agendas are any less valid or valuable; I merely want to ensure that mine is not confused with others.

Second, I maintain that we must be cognizant of our long-term goal from the beginning in order to effectively develop a strategy for getting there. We do not currently have a “scientific, comprehensive, explanatory psychology of religion”—this much seems beyond debate—but, more important, I believe that the field is not currently on a path that will lead us to one. Instead, the field is meandering aimlessly with no clear direction. For reasons I will explain in this chapter, we must keep our eyes on the prize from the beginning in order to reach it, starting with a clearly identified goal.

Specifically, I contend that in order to eventually achieve a scientific, comprehensive, explanatory psychology of religion, we must begin with an outline—if only a preliminary, general one—of a large-scale framework within which to organize research and theory. That is, we need a rough sketch of what an eventual “big picture” might generally look like so we can work toward it. Had the proverbial blind men known in advance that they were investigating different parts of a large, terrestrial mammal, the subsequent discussion of their observations would have been infinitely more fruitful. The purpose of this book is, first, to provide a preliminary sketch of such a framework, at a level of analysis perhaps roughly equivalent to identifying the subject of investigation as

“a large terrestrial mammal,” and, second, to describe one part of the animal in some detail. With such a framework in place, we will be in a position to organize our observations according to what we know about large terrestrial mammals, fitting our observations into meaningful categories such as trunks, ears, and legs. In this sense I hope this book will provide an impetus and direction for future research in the field.

In the following pages I explain, term by term, exactly what I mean by a (1) *scientific* (2) *comprehensive* (3) *explanatory* (4) *psychology* of (5) *religion*, as well as describing some of the obstacles that stand in the way of constructing one. In the second half of the chapter I then provide a brief overview of my approach in this book, specifically regarding how it offers a potential solution to these problems.

Scientific

By *scientific*, I refer to an approach that treats religion as a topic of inquiry to be studied using empirical research methods and theories consistent with those both within psychology and within the sciences more generally. Religion, like any other topic studied by social scientists, is taken to refer to a suite of cognitive, emotional, physiological, social, and cultural human phenomena to be described, understood, and explained in terms of empirically testable theories and hypotheses. Irrespective of whether a particular religious expression or belief is thought to be true or false, or whether it is valued personally or socially as desirable or undesirable (more follows on these issues), a scientific approach to religion should ask the same kinds of questions it asks of any other human phenomenon. How can it be described in terms of broader principles? How does it actually happen, that is, what kinds of enabling or disabling factors are involved? Why does it occur, particularly relative to alternative beliefs or expressions that might otherwise occur? What are the commonalities and differences across individuals and groups, and across time within individuals and groups, in terms of processes and cause?

Unfortunately, however, this scientific agenda for the psychology of religion has long been conflated with other agendas with which it fundamentally has little in common, or with which it is strictly at odds. This is perhaps more true in the psychology of religion than in the “psychology of” virtually anything else. The term “psychology of religion” means many things to many people, but only one meaning refers to the kind of psychological science of religion I have in mind. These often-conflicting

agendas create deep rifts—some wide open and obvious, others hidden below the surface—within the field. The failure to clearly differentiate these highly disparate agendas has been a major factor throughout the last century in inhibiting progress in the psychology of religion. To do better, we need to be clear from the start whether the goal toward which we are working is scientific or otherwise.

There are many ways to combine the terms “psychology” and “religion” in the same sentence to produce very different meanings. Similarly, the words “children” and “doctor” can be combined in many ways, but the sons and daughters of physicians have for the most part little in common with pediatricians. This fanciful example offers an analogy to one of the deepest rifts in the psychology of religion, characterized by Beit-Hallahmi (1989) as the distinction between “psychology of religion” as a scientific discipline and “religious psychology.” The latter serves as an umbrella term for a variety of ways in which personal religious belief is brought into the psychological fold, in the service of advancing the cause of religion in general or some particular religious viewpoint in particular.

Another increasingly popular way of combining “religion” and “psychology” in the same sentence involves the pursuit of some kind of higher-order metatheoretical (metaphysical?) framework for *integrating* psychology and religion. The interdisciplinary journal *Zygon* regularly publishes various attempts to “integrate” science and religion in sundry creative ways. Hood (1994) has argued for “a compromise position to get beyond the rift—neither a psychology of religion nor a religious psychology, but rather psychology *and* religion” (Hood, Spilka, Hunsberger, & Gorsuch, 1996, p. 445). Jones (1994), in a highly visible article in the prestigious *American Psychologist*, presents a proposal “for how religion could participate as an active partner with psychology as a science and as an applied professional discipline” (p. 184). Countless other examples could be cited as well, of course, from fields ranging from theology to philosophy to religious studies.

The blurring of these distinctions is evident in the organizations and publication outlets associated with the “psychology of religion” field. Division 36 of the American Psychological Association, now named Psychology of Religion, was until a few years ago Psychologists Interested in Religious Issues—a title which well represents the diversity of perspectives housed therein.¹ The Religious Research Association and its journal, *Review of Religious Research*, are similarly ambiguous in name. Although these are in part concerned with fostering scientific research

about religion as a topic of investigation, they do so within an applied agenda of providing information and resources to assist religious congregations and organizations.

The problem is not that these different agendas exist, of course, but rather that they are so easily and often confused with each other. For example, Beit-Hallahmi (1989) argues that an implicit religious-psychology agenda is responsible for the fact that so much of the empirical psychology of religion is driven by value-laden distinctions between “good religion” and “bad religion,” from James’s religions of the “sick-souled” versus “healthy-minded” to Allport’s “mature” versus “immature,” and later “intrinsic” versus “extrinsic,” religious orientations. Numerous theories and measures exist for studying “religious development” or “spiritual development” using stage-like models that begin with extrascientific assumptions about what “mature” (read “good”) religion should be. In the latest incarnation of this implicit good–bad dichotomy, “religion” is now viewed by many in the bad-guy role opposite the protagonist “spirituality” (Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003; Hill et al., 2000; Pargament, 1997). All of this gets in the way if the goal is to establish a scientific understanding of religious belief and behavior in all its forms.

A truly scientific approach to the psychology of religion should, of course, steer clear of such evaluative assumptions as much as possible. Whether religion is associated with particular forms of mental health, social relations, war or peace, and so forth are *empirical questions* and within the purview of scientific investigation. The questions of which kinds of psychological states or qualities of interpersonal relations are deemed desirable, or whether war is preferred to peace, reflect ethical, moral, and practical matters beyond the scope of science.

Moreover, the idea that religion is broadly “good” or “bad” is absurd on its face: Like virtually any aspect of human experience and behavior, it no doubt is *both* in myriad ways (and *neither* in other respects). It seems patently obvious from thousands of years of human history that religion can be a powerful force in promoting either peace or war, mental health or mental illness, prosocial or antisocial behavior, racism or universalism, happiness or misery. The role of science is to determine which of these is true under what conditions, and why and how it occurs. The question of how this knowledge might be put to use, and toward what ends, is an entirely different question, one I avoid entirely in this book.

Of course, one common basis for assumptions about whether religion is “good” or “bad” is whether one believes it (or some particular belief) to

be ontologically true: true belief presumably being “good,” of course, and false belief “bad.” It is often assumed that the scientific study of religion is inherently grounded in an extrascientific assumption that religious beliefs are false—that a scientific approach to religion must be inherently atheistic. This line of reasoning leads many people who are themselves religious to be (understandably) skeptical of, if not outright opposed to, a truly scientific study of religion. To explain religion is to explain it away, it is assumed. However, it is simply wrong to assume that a scientific understanding of why and how people come to believe in X has any bearing on the question of whether or not X is true. Philosophers have long referred to this misconception—that the truth value of a proposition can be determined by the source (genesis) of that proposition—as the *genetic fallacy*.

This is a big philosophical question about which I offer just a couple of brief comments. First, consider the fact that psychologists study the origins and causes of all sorts of attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge that are assumed to be true; they do not study only false beliefs. Developmental psychologists, for example, study the ways in which children learn everything from language to physics. Understanding the psychological processes and environmental conditions that contribute to a child’s learning that $2 + 2 = 4$ surely does not undermine our confidence in the accuracy of the sum. A psychological theory might explain that a person came to hold a particular attitude in part because of, say, exposure to a persuasive communicator with certain characteristics, quite independent of whether that attitude or belief or attitude also happens to be true—or whether there is a “right” or “wrong” answer at all. Likewise, a scientific understanding of how people come to believe they have a personal relationship with a loving God can be construed from an atheistic perspective in terms of the question of why and how false beliefs are constructed and maintained, or just as well from a Christian perspective of the enabling conditions that permit someone to successfully apprehend the true nature of God.

Second, any question about a belief can be easily turned around and asked in its reverse form: The question of why some people believe X is the flip side of the question of why other people do not, and any strong explanation for either must ultimately speak to both. Whichever version you personally believe to be true (i.e., X or not- X), half of the explanation is about what you consider false beliefs and half about what you regard as true beliefs. A researcher studying conversion (to religion) and

deconversion or apostasy (from religion) necessarily must see both sides of the coin, whether he or she personally feels the beliefs are better embraced or rejected.

At this point I should probably acknowledge that the idea of an *evolutionary* psychology of religion strikes many people as ironic to the point of amusing. The joke, of course, is that evolutionary theory and religion are perceived as diametric opposites. But this is not at all the case, except perhaps for a tiny fraction of particular beliefs that directly contradict evolutionary theory (e.g., that our planet is only a few thousand years old) held by a tiny fraction of the population. In part the confusion stems from the genetic fallacy, and in part from a failure to acknowledge that there is nothing internally inconsistent about the (widely held) belief that, for example, evolution is one natural process through which God works. The crucial point is that the theoretical perspective I adopt in this book in no way rests on any particular assumptions about the truth or falsity of the religious beliefs I am trying to explain. Indeed, I will make an even more ironic claim in the final chapter: that the evolutionary perspective I have adopted is *especially* well suited to the task of examining religious beliefs scientifically without any presumption about their veridicality.²

Comprehensive

By *comprehensive*, I mean two things. First, of course, I mean that I want to understand everything about religion: not just images of God, or religious attributions of causality, or spiritual experiences, or religious development, or prayer—all of it. I am intellectually greedy.

It might seem completely self-evident that a scientific agenda in the psychology of religion, or any other domain of psychology, would seek a comprehensive understanding in this sense. I doubt many researchers explicitly choose to investigate one particular topic and deliberately exclude other related topics. However, this is another place in which I believe we must make the goal explicit so we can keep our eyes on the prize. The problem is that if we focus narrowly on one small piece of the puzzle, we are likely to wind up with a theoretical understanding that is largely specific to that piece. When we move on to a different phenomenon it becomes necessary to start over from scratch, or, perhaps worse, the theory spun in the context of one problem needs to be squeezed, twisted, or otherwise distorted to make it fit another.

This leads to my second meaning regarding the goal of a “comprehensive” psychology of religion: I want to understand it all in terms of a *coherent, integrated* perspective. This is not to say that we should be seeking a single, specific theory that will explain it all; as I discuss later, “religion” is far too complex and multifaceted for that. However, I am not satisfied with a compromise position that simply acknowledges the need for multiple theories and perspectives to understand different aspects of the problem. I do indeed think this is true, but not just any old set of theories and perspectives will do. All of the parts of the explanatory framework must fit together into an organized, singular whole that gives me a sense of true understanding.

One way to say this is that if a new aspect of the phenomenon, for which an explanation was not already extant, were to appear, we would have a clear plan for approaching the problem, conceptually based on a larger framework. Informed from the outset that he was examining part of a “large, terrestrial mammal,” one of the proverbial blind men could certainly conduct a thorough and accurate investigation of an elephant’s foot. The independent investigations of tusks, trunks, and ears by others could later be discussed and assembled by the group into a comprehensive report. To use a less fanciful example, a paleontologist has a broad framework in mind when she discovers a new, unidentified piece of bone. She brings to bear on the problem an anatomical framework of the ways in which skeleton parts tend to be arranged, and a comparative framework regarding differences between mammalian skeletons and reptilian skeletons. She has a historical framework that, once the bone piece is dated, narrows the search for viable candidates. These background perspectives provide powerful tools for quickly developing an understanding of the particular skeletal part from which the piece comes and the kind of animal to which it belongs. Specifically, the larger frameworks provide a wellspring of hypotheses to be tried out and empirically tested, and simultaneously constrain the hypotheses worth examining.

In a word, what we need for a comprehensive psychology of religion in this sense is what Kuhn (1962) famously referred to as a *paradigm*. In a paradigmatic discipline, researchers have at their disposal a general, big-picture view of the entire puzzle in terms of what it generally contains and the kinds of methodological and theoretical approaches to be applied to it. One of the benefits of such a paradigm is that each new puzzle piece can be viewed as just that, rather than as a new puzzle altogether. It probably goes without saying that the psychology of religion currently

lacks such a paradigm, but I want to go ahead and say it and suggest some reasons why this is the case, to provide a context for the solution to be offered in this book.

The first impediment to a comprehensive paradigm for the psychology of religion concerns the organization of contemporary psychology and related disciplines. Simply put, the psychology of religion is organized around a *topic* or phenomenon—religion—but the principal organizational and institutional structure of psychology is not. Psychology departments recognize historical boundaries (for better or worse) between such areas as developmental, social, personality, cognitive, and clinical psychology, which are defined more along lines of theoretical, metatheoretical, and methodological approaches rather than content or topic. Graduate programs, course schedules, and introductory psychology textbooks, as well as many of the most prestigious conferences and journals, are largely divvied up along these lines as well.

This structural disconnect is problematic for several reasons. First, the psychology of religion has no natural home within the larger discipline of psychology: It is a square peg and the holes are all round. An academic psychologist must be a developmental or social or clinical psychologist first, and then approach the topic of religion from within that subdiscipline. It seems as if there are no generalists anymore, which is more or less what one would need to be in order to obtain the bird's eye view required for a truly comprehensive psychology of religion. At a more practical level the problems are legion: What kind of graduate program should an aspiring psychologist of religion attend? Which journals are appropriate for publishing research in the field? Where does psychology of religion fit into the teaching of psychology? An Introductory Psychology text, for example, contains chapters on developmental, social, cognitive, and other subdisciplines within the field. Where would material on religion go?³

This structural issue would not pose much of a problem if the various domains of psychology were conceptually well integrated within a clearly defined metatheoretical framework or paradigm to facilitate effective cross-fertilization and truly collaborative work across the subdisciplines of psychology. Students should be forgiven for wondering what, if anything, the various chapters in their Introductory Psychology textbooks have in common with each other. Such texts reflect the reality that contemporary psychology comprises a host of only loosely connected subdisciplines. If psychology itself were paradigmatic, the paradigm could

be adapted for the study of religion. An integrated psychology of religion needs to be based on an integrated psychology, and we do not currently have one.

Some of the chasms between subdisciplines and approaches are old and all too familiar. One is the ancient nature–nurture morass (in its various forms, such as genes vs. environment, biology vs. culture, hardwired vs. learned, etc.), which continues to muddle thinking in many subdisciplines and specific research areas. Although most social and personality psychologists would explicitly endorse (or at least give lip service to) an “interactive” model, the fact remains that most researchers tend to look for causes of behavior primarily or exclusively on one side or the other. Even within specific subdisciplines there is frequently a lack of a single unifying, integrative framework. In social psychology, for example, there has long been a strong underlying tension between the social-cognition camp, which appears to have gained precedence in recent years, and other areas dealing with emotion, relationships, and so forth. Given this disconnect between (and within) psychology’s subdisciplines at a deep conceptual level, the prospect of bringing together multiple psychological perspectives on a topic as diverse and complex as religion is daunting at best.

This lack of a coherent paradigm in psychology (and the social sciences generally) is problematic in many ways not specific to the psychology of religion. However, these problems are exacerbated in the study of religion by the nature of the topic itself. One would be hard pressed to identify a topic for social-scientific research with greater inherent complexity and breadth than religion. From the standpoint of psychology alone, virtually every subdiscipline has a legitimate claim to the topic: Changes in religious understanding and belief across childhood, and across the lifespan generally, call out for a developmental perspective; the structure and nature of religious beliefs, attributions, and reasoning is the province of cognitive psychology and/or social cognition; the many interpersonal processes involved in religion, including group dynamics, require a social-psychological perspective; the adaptive and maladaptive causes and effects of religious belief, as well as the role of religious belief in therapeutic contexts, is of interest to clinical psychologists. The causes, consequences, and other correlates of individual differences in religiousness, as well as the place of religion in grand questions about human nature and what it means to be human, offer religion a natural home in personality psychology. Like other psychological processes, how religion

“works” inside the brain raises fascinating questions for neurology and cognitive neuroscience. But none of these approaches alone could begin to provide a comprehensive theory of the psychology of religion.

Cross-cutting these disciplines are numerous general categories or foci of psychological investigation, all of which represent important aspects of religion. The psychology of religion poses questions about motivation, emotion, cognition, phenomenology, and behavior. It undoubtedly includes both conscious and unconscious processes, and both rational and irrational ones. There are as many questions about religious change (e.g., conversion) as there are about stability across time (e.g., enduring personality characteristics). Any comprehensive theory of religion must be capable of addressing all of these issues.

For all these reasons, the contemporary structure and sociology of psychology is poorly suited for the goal of constructing a comprehensive theory of anything, much less something as complex and multifaceted as religion. We need a paradigm for psychology in general, which we can then apply to religion. In the second half of this book I argue that the needed paradigm is currently just beginning to emerge, and demonstrate how it might be usefully applied to the psychology of religion.

Explanatory

By *explanatory*, I mean that I want to understand the answers to the deep, tough questions about religious phenomena. I want to know *why* religion has throughout history been universal in human societies; *why* on the one hand religious belief takes on such a remarkable diversity of forms, but on the other hand certain common themes seem to emerge consistently; *why*, in many modern societies, people differ quantitatively and qualitatively with respect to religious belief. It is often said that the three principal goals of science are description, prediction, and explanation. I do not want to quit after the first two.

Empirical research in the psychology of religion, however, has long been strong on description but weak on explanation. A disproportionate amount of research has been devoted, for example, to developing questionnaire measures and determining the factor-analytic structure of God images, religious orientations or motives such as Allport’s intrinsic–extrinsic framework, or religiousness broadly defined, independent of any theoretical context. Gorsuch (1984) identified this prevailing approach to psychology of religion as its “measurement paradigm.” But this is not a para-

digm in the Kuhnian sense, because it is utterly devoid of theory. We may know how many factor-analytic dimensions God has (actually, we have many answers to this), but we do not know why or wherefore.

I believe that this state of affairs derives in large part from the structural problem, outlined in the previous section, regarding the organization of the field. The fact that the psychology of religion is defined by its topic of investigation, rather than by a theoretical or metatheoretical approach, encourages researchers to approach it from a “bottom-up,” inductive perspective. That is, they begin with the *of religion* part which, for whatever their personal reasons, is what interests them. They then cast about for ideas about how to study it. This is a perfectly reasonable thing to do, but I think it is largely responsible for having bogged the field down theoretically.

If you start with the topic, the first reasonable step to take is to define what it is exactly that you mean. You have to define it before you can study it, right? (Actually, I think not, but we will come to that shortly.) And as we all know, defining “religion” is a black hole: Scholars of all stripes have been trying to nail down exactly what it is that makes religion “religion,” as distinct from other human phenomena, with little consensus in sight. Consequently, we have yet to move far beyond this first step.

Closely related to the definition problem is the measurement problem. Once you have defined the phenomenon of interest, you then have to figure out how to measure it. The two problems are closely intertwined, however, because measurement results—in particular, from factor-analytic research—often drive definition. The consequence of this is the current “measurement paradigm,” the result of which is that we have lots of religion measures all dressed up with nowhere to go. We have been so tied up with this task that few have actually put these measures to use in the service of asking substantive, theoretical questions.

The solution to this problem, in my opinion, is to import solid explanatory theories from psychology into the psychology of religion—to start with the explanatory framework and then apply it to the topic of interest rather than the other way around. In other words, the field needs to shift its focus away from the “. . . of religion” half of its rubric to the “psychology of . . .” half. A scientific understanding of religion must ultimately be situated within a larger psychology of human beings generally. Questions about, for example, why people are religious, or are religious in certain ways versus others, must be considered in the context of why peo-

ple do *anything*. To understand religious motivation, we need to begin with a good theory of motivation in general. To understand how people conceptualize personal relationships with deities, we need to begin with a good theory of personal relationships in general. To understand why religion appears (at least to many) as somehow inherent in human nature, we need to begin with a good theory of human nature.

Psychology of . . .

By *psychology of* (religion), I mean to emphasize an approach in which theory and research about human psychology—including all its behavioral, cognitive, and conative dimensions—plays a central role in the attempt to understand religion. A strong scientific psychology of religion must be first a strong scientific *psychology*, within which our approaches to describing and explaining religion are deeply embedded. Indeed, an ideal approach to psychology of religion would begin with a comprehensive, scientific, explanatory psychology, and then apply this psychology to the topic at hand (in this case, religion). This would be “psychology of” in its most extreme form.

I have already noted that such an integrated, paradigmatic psychology does not currently exist, and that because psychology of religion is defined by its topic, it has no natural home within the discipline of psychology. Both of these factors have contributed to the field’s “of religion,” rather than “psychology of” orientation. In turn, these problems are further exacerbated by the fact that this “of religion” focus is now institutionalized. Perhaps in response to its estrangement from the rest of psychology, the field packed up and left home to create its own professional organizations, meetings, and journals. Within psychology, Division 36 of the American Psychological Association provides a home for the psychology of religion, which meets annually as part of the larger APA convention, at which it organizes its own program of symposia, paper and poster sessions, and plenary addresses. Several specialized journals are devoted to the topic, including the *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, the *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, and the (relatively newer) *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*. In addition, psychologists of religion participate in a larger specialized discipline of “the scientific study of religion,” including the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, its cousin the Religious Research Association, and their respective journals (the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* and the *Review of Religious Research*).

Unfortunately, there is no more conceptual integration and paradigmatic agreement under the psychology-of-religion tent than there is within the discipline of psychology generally. The psychology of religion has inherited all of the traditional subdisciplinary distinctions and the deep theoretical rifts therefrom. Most of its practitioners are, back home, developmental or social or clinical psychologists, and they have much more in common with colleagues in those subdisciplines than with psychologists of religion trained in different subdisciplines. In many ways, a blind man studying elephants has much more in common with other blind men than with deaf men studying elephants. Consequently, the psychology of religion has no greater theoretical or conceptual integration than psychology as a whole.⁴ It sounds like a wonderful idea to bring together researchers from disparate backgrounds under the same tent, introducing one another to alternative perspectives and celebrating diversity, but it does not solve the fundamental problems necessary to propel the field in the direction my agenda points.

In some ways, the existence of societies and journals dedicated to the psychology of (or scientific study of) religion has created more problems for the field than it has solved. By institutionalizing its estrangement, the psychology-of-religion field has come to provide a context in which research on religion can thrive despite being poorly informed by psychology generally. Major conceptual approaches too often have little in common with the theories of mainstream psychology. Allport's *intrinsic-extrinsic (I-E)* religious orientation framework, which has dominated the psychology of religion for some time, exemplifies this problem. Although originally situated within a broader theory of personality, I-E has taken on a life of its own without any clear theoretical guidance. (There is an enormous body of research in social psychology on the topic of "intrinsic" versus "extrinsic" motivation in general, but the I-E tradition in the psychology of religion is almost completely unrelated to it.) Such work would be extremely difficult to publish in "mainstream" psychology journals because editors and reviewers demand that new ideas be connected closely and explicitly to existing ones. Without such constraints, the research tradition has gradually drifted further and further from the remainder of psychology. Independence has become isolation, and the influx of theoretical ideas to the field from the rest of psychology has slowed to a trickle.

I hasten to add that my reasons for adopting a *psychological* perspective are not because I think psychology, as a discipline, is any

better or more important than sociology, anthropology, or political science. Indeed, the framework I adopt in this book very much emphasizes the need for interdisciplinary cooperation to achieve the goal of a comprehensive scientific understanding of religion. We will need to integrate levels of analysis ranging from biology, through individual psychology, to the sociology and anthropology of groups, societies, and cultures; each of these levels of analysis is important. Situated at the nexus, if you will, between biology “below” it and sociology and political science “above it” (in the traditional vertical representation of these levels of analysis), psychology must play a pivotal role—the lynchpin, so to speak—in such an integration. (See Tooby & Cosmides, 1992, for a discussion.)

With respect to the long-term agenda I have laid out, the only solution to this self-perpetuating and destructive cycle is to reinvigorate the scientific study of religion with a fresh batch of theoretical ideas from psychology. The purpose of this book is to provide some direction for doing so.

Religion

Finally, by *religion* I mean. . . . Actually, at this point I am not going to tell you what I mean. This is not because I do not know how to define it (although it is true that I do not), nor because I am hiding some kind of special, unusual definition of religion to spring on you later. I assure you that I generally mean by “religion” pretty much what most people mean by the term, but I refuse to attempt to define it.

I expect most readers will be surprised by this. It is so typical for writers to begin any work related to religion by offering a working definition of religion that we assume it must be a necessary first step. However, I maintain that this is not the case. Indeed, not only is it unnecessary to define religion formally at the start, but it would be (and frequently has been in the past) counterproductive to do so.

I suggested earlier that if you start out conceptualizing the psychology of religion terrain in terms of the “of religion” part, you find yourself obligated to first define exactly what you mean by it. Because the problem of defining religion in a satisfactory manner appears to be intractable, the field has been unable to get out of the starting gate. Where, for example, does “religion” end and “spirituality” begin? Does belief in magic constitute religion? What about astrology? But if we start instead

from the other direction, beginning with a theory (and/or metatheory) of psychology first, and then apply it to religious phenomena, the nagging problem of finding a precise definition of “religion” simply goes away.⁵ A general psychological theory can be imported into any specific domain and applied to any particular phenomenon of interest, and it does not make a bit of difference whether you call the phenomenon “religion” or not. If you want to explain a highly specific phenomenon, you may be able to accomplish the task by drawing upon one or two specific theories; if you want to explain a broader range of phenomena, you will reach for a broader array of theories and components of the metatheory.

For example, certain specific aspects of (especially Christian) “religion,” such as perceptions of having a personal relationship with a parent-like deity, can be well understood as manifestations of an evolved psychological system called the *attachment system*. Other qualitatively different aspects of “religion,” such as religion-based morality, sacrifices to gods, and religiously motivated warfare, can be explained in terms of other (i.e., than attachment) psychological systems. Later in the book I try to show how the same psychological theory can be applied as well to topics at the margin of “religion,” such as beliefs about parapsychology and other things supernatural, and then to other forms of belief and thought that clearly are not within the purview of what most people would call “religion.” In the end I say a few things about how this science of psychology might be turned on science itself.

The point is that if you begin from the “psychology of” direction rather than the “of religion” direction, the definitional boundaries of those topics are irrelevant. But as we all know, there is no such thing as a free lunch. In this case, one problem is traded for another. Although the theory-driven approach circumvents the problem of defining the boundaries of “religion,” it creates the problem of defining the boundaries of your *theory*. That is, if you begin by showing that the theory neatly explains a narrow range of observations, and then you broaden your scope and ask about related phenomena, you sooner or later run up against the question of the limits of generalizability of your theory.

So why would you want to make this trade? Judgments about the boundaries of a theory are not inherently easier to make than ones about the boundaries of topical definitions. This is where the importance of a paradigm, or *metatheory*, comes to the fore. If a specific theory represents one functionally distinct component of a coherent metatheory, there is no need to push the generalizability of a theory any further than its clear

range of applicability. It is assumed from the outset that different psychological processes, explained by different specific theories, will be required to understand different phenomena. You can then render unto Caesar what is rightfully Caesar's.

Of course, this is not going to be as easy as it sounds: For many if not most phenomena, there will be multiple theories or components of the metatheory that all offer viable alternative solutions to the problem. But, to borrow a phrase from computer programmers, this is a feature, not a bug. It is much better to have too many hypotheses than too few. To the extent that the metatheory provides multiple hypotheses, you have some clear direction as to how to proceed in designing your empirical research, testing these competing hypotheses directly against one another.

A NEW DIRECTION

At least partially because of the kinds of reasons outlined earlier, the psychology-of-religion field has made sadly little progress toward the ambitious, long-term goal of a comprehensive scientific understanding of religion. This is not to say, however, that we have not learned anything, but rather that we have bits and pieces that overlap in some ways and fail to fit together into any kind of meaningful framework. What we *have* learned is this: From the endless debate over the definition of religion, it is clear that the topic of investigation is enormously complex and multifaceted; thus, any comprehensive theory will have to be commensurately multifaceted to accommodate it. From the measurement work in psychology we have learned that beliefs about God, religious motivation, and other psychological aspects of religion are similarly complex and multifaceted, again pointing to the need for a large-scale, all-encompassing framework. Cutting through the countless debates over interpretation, we have learned from anthropology that religion is (in some form or another) universal across human societies, yet also is highly variable in specific form across cultures. Again setting aside the details, we have learned from sociology that religions more often than not involve groups, which compete with one another, splinter, and evolve in various ways over time. A comprehensive approach to religion will have to provide a framework for dealing with these issues as well.

In this book I propose a couple of starting points: first, one particular psychological theory that I believe is useful for understanding a wide

range of religious phenomena, and then a larger metatheory within which the theory fits and which provides a paradigm for organizing and integrating psychology in general as well as the psychology of religion in particular. In this section I briefly preview these two starting points and the ways in which they promise to forward the proposed agenda.

Attachment Theory

In the absence of a complete and comprehensive explanatory psychology from which to operate, the next best place to start will be a strong explanatory psychological theory that is sufficiently broad and deep to cover a lot of important ground. *Attachment theory*, as introduced by John Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980) and since extended by a host of researchers in developmental, social, personality, and clinical psychology, provides a good place to start.

First, attachment theory is a fundamentally *psychological* theory. It was developed initially as a theory of infant social development, particularly focusing on the ways in which experience with caregivers shapes subsequent behavior and social relations; it was in no way developed specifically for the purpose of describing or explaining religion. Applying the theory to religion thus illustrates the process of importing theory from psychology to the study of religion, and offers a theoretical context for understanding religion in terms of the same processes and principles as other domains of motivation, emotion, and behavior. Such a theory has the potential to help reintegrate the psychology of religion with its parent discipline in a way that promises not only to benefit the psychology of religion but to feed back new observations and applications of the theory to psychology more generally.

Second, attachment theory is more *comprehensive* than most alternatives currently extant in the psychology of religion. It is one of few theories whose influence has been felt across many subdisciplines of contemporary psychology: From its initial (and continuing) powerful effect on developmental psychology, attachment theory has fanned out into clinical psychology, social psychology, and personality psychology in various ways, thus providing one path toward a psychology of religion that integrates numerous subdisciplines within psychology. It is not a theory about emotion, behavior, cognition, or physiology; it is a theory about all of these and, most important, about how all of these are integrated in an organized, functional way. The theory includes both normative and

individual-difference components, which are needed if we wish to answer both normative questions (Why are people religious?) and individual-difference questions (Why are different people religious in different ways?) about religion.

Third, attachment theory is deeply *explanatory*. It does not merely describe how infants interact with their mothers, or adult romantic partners with one another, but purports to explain *why* humans are built in such a way that they behave this way. It not only provides a descriptive typology for conceptualizing individual differences in people's orientations toward personal relationships and intimacy, it purports to explain *how* these differences come about and *why* the system works in this rather than some other way. This functional, process-oriented approach enables its application to other phenomena such as religion, offering a basis for addressing questions about both the causes of and individual differences in religious belief and behavior.

Fourth, attachment theory is unambiguously a *scientific* theory. It has been supported by countless empirical studies reflecting a multitude of methodologies and populations, meaning not only that we can have considerable confidence in it, but also that it has clearly been demonstrated to be amenable to empirical testing. Perhaps equally important, however, is the fact that its application to religion is not laden by evaluative baggage. In contrast to earlier psychoanalytic formulations that presuppose religion to be inherently infantile, regressive, and mentally unhealthy, attachment theory provides a more value-neutral theoretical basis for understanding many of the same aspects of religious belief in which Freud was interested. Like Freud's theory, attachment theory focuses on human concerns about comfort and protection, and God is psychologically represented as a kind of parent figure. However, from an attachment theory perspective, there is absolutely nothing assumed to be "infantile" or "regressive" about any of this. As Bowlby argued cogently and other researchers have subsequently explored in depth, attachment system processes are designed to operate across the entire lifespan. Attachment theory thus provides a scientific view of how humans are designed with respect to these issues in a way that is inherently neither pro- nor anti-religious.⁶

Finally, there is one additional reason why attachment theory is particularly valuable for the psychology of religion, in the context of my pie-in-the-sky goal of a comprehensive theory. It is that attachment theory fits comfortably within a much larger and broader metatheory that has

begun to emerge over the past decade or so, one that has the potential to be the overarching, paradigmatic framework that truly can integrate the many diverse areas and topics across the various subdisciplines of psychology.

Evolutionary Psychology

As broad and deep as attachment theory is, however, it is by no means a “comprehensive” theory of psychology, and thus is an unlikely candidate for a comprehensive theory of religion. I hope to convince you in the coming chapters that it can potentially explain a great deal about religious belief and behavior, but even if we stretch the theory to its limits, it will leave enormous chunks of religion untouched. Once we have exhausted the explanatory power of attachment theory, then what? Where will we go from there?

I propose the emerging paradigmatic framework of *evolutionary psychology* as the solution to this problem. In short, evolutionary psychology refers to an approach to psychological science that begins by acknowledging that the brain—the organ primarily responsible for producing and organizing all thought and behavior—is, like all other organs and physiological systems, the product of eons of evolution by natural selection. As such, it is assumed to have evolved to perform particular functions that reflect solutions to adaptive problems entailing (directly or indirectly) survival and/or reproduction. Much as the remainder of the body is well understood in terms of functional systems—a heart for pumping blood, a liver for detoxifying blood, lungs for exchanging gases with the atmosphere, and so forth—the brain/mind can be understood as a complex aggregation of evolved functional systems or *psychological mechanisms*. The “design” of these systems, then, should reflect the principles of natural selection as they operated on ancestral humans and prehumans, thus providing a wellspring of hypotheses for investigating thought and behavior in functional terms.

Evolutionary psychology, as the moniker suggests, is ultimately a *psychological* approach to understanding human behavior and experience. As noted earlier, it is about brains and minds: how they are organized, what they do, and how and why they do it. Moniker notwithstanding, however, the evolutionary paradigm itself is actually much broader than this: It has the potential not only to organize and integrate the various subdisciplines and diverse issues within psychology, but also to provide a

foundation for organizing and integrating the social sciences as a whole. A proper understanding of the specieswide architecture of the human mind—as viewed from a functional perspective focusing on the question of what brains/minds were “designed” to do—is the fulcrum on which this organization pivots. On the one hand, the approach ties psychology to biology and ethology, from which it takes its fundamental theory. On the other hand, this model of the human mind provides a basis upon which other social sciences such as anthropology and sociology can be firmly founded. (See Tooby & Cosmides, 1992, and Wilson, 1998, for discussion.)

Moreover, evolutionary psychology is inherently *explanatory*, as it is organized around questions of *function*. The fundamental premise of the approach is that our species-universal psychological architecture—our “human nature,” if you will—evolved to *do something*, namely, to solve the many specific adaptive problems of survival and reproduction faced by our distant ancestors. Evolutionary theory provides a guide for generating and testing hypotheses about what these problems were, and what kinds of solutions natural selection is likely to have produced in response. It is, in general, a (meta)theory about the *functions* of brains/minds, not only predicting and describing what they do but also explaining why this is the case.

Evolutionary psychology is inherently *scientific* in several important ways. Like any scientific approach, it provides a source of hypotheses to be tested empirically using established social-scientific research methods. Moreover, it provides a perspective from which to approach religion that is not inherently value laden. Indeed, one of the most important insights of an evolutionary approach is the identification of a small number of clear principles by which natural selection distinguishes (reproductively) successful from unsuccessful designs; these criteria reflect nothing more and nothing less than the degree to which the genes producing alternative designs are differentially successful in producing copies of themselves in future generations. There is nothing inherently “good” or “bad” about the products of this process, including modern humans. However, when we judge these products in the context of our own moral, ethical, and practical criteria, we find that some aspects of human nature are more desirable to us than others. The same evolutionary processes that enable parents to love and nurture their children and romantic partners to love one another, for example, have also enabled humans to deceive, cheat, and wage war. Analogously, the aspects of evolved human psychology

that enable religion run this entire gamut, giving rise to both its admirable and seamy sides.

For the purposes of my long-term agenda, however, the most important and unique characteristic of evolutionary psychology is its provision of a *comprehensive* and (especially) *integrative* framework for approaching the study of human behavior. The paradigm is not organized around any particular topic, and indeed is potentially applicable to any aspect of psychology one desires to study. Moreover, this framework is inherently interdisciplinary: It draws upon theory and observations from biology, ethology, primatology, anthropology, archaeology, and other sciences, bringing them together into a coherent perspective from which to view human behavior. In contrast to the *multidisciplinary* scientific study of religion, evolutionary psychology is truly *interdisciplinary*. This is the kind of approach we will need to construct a truly comprehensive science of religion.

THE PLAN OF THIS BOOK

My goal in this book is to sketch a “big picture” of what, ultimately, a comprehensive psychology (and to some extent, a social science) of religion might look like, based on evolutionary psychology. I have no hope of painting the entire picture, given our current state of knowledge in the field (and my own limited knowledge in particular). Instead, I provide a general outline of the entire picture, and fill in just one small part of it.

I try to do this in what may seem an unnatural sequence. I paint one corner (attachment theory) of the picture first, drawing in a fair amount of detail and even adding color and texture. Then I turn to the remainder of the canvas and splash across it a few broad, sweeping strokes, to provide a general impression of the outlines of some of the other parts and where they will go.

To be more specific: Attachment theory is introduced in Chapter 2, and Chapters 3 through 6 show how the theory might explain a variety of aspects of religion, particularly Christianity. Chapters 3 and 4 lay out the general theoretical arguments, and Chapters 5 and 6 review and organize the extant data. After briefly introducing evolutionary psychology (and showing where and how attachment theory fits within it) in Chapter 7, I revisit attachment theory in Chapter 8 to discuss some recent theoretical developments that have been motivated directly by an evolu-

tionary perspective, and their implications for the attachment theory of religion.

The remaining chapters then turn from attachment theory in particular to evolutionary psychology more generally. I argue that the attachment system is just one of a large number of evolved behavioral systems that collectively comprise human nature, and that different aspects of religion reflect, to varying degrees, the operation of these various psychological mechanisms. In the second half of the book I introduce a number of other such systems and mechanisms and illustrate some ways in which this evolutionary-psychological perspective can organize our thinking about both the universality and the diversity of religion. This general approach is sketched out in Chapter 9 and contrasted with some alternative approaches.

The next two chapters examine other specific theories within evolutionary psychology, which are each briefly reviewed and accompanied by a variety of examples—drawing heavily upon the work of a handful of recent researchers whose work fits together nicely within this framework—of how the particular theory might be applied to various religious phenomena. Chapter 10 is comparable to the earlier attachment chapters in suggesting theoretical explanations for the specific forms that religious beliefs take; Chapter 11 digs down a bit more deeply to address the question of the very origins of religious belief in our evolved psychology. In Chapter 11 I discuss the application of this same theoretical framework, first, to other kinds of beliefs that are related to, but not typically included under the rubric of, religion, and, second, to science itself in order to demonstrate the generality of the approach.

If we ultimately are to achieve the goal of a truly comprehensive scientific account of religion, this general evolutionary–psychological model must be placed within a still broader framework. The design and organization of human brains/minds provide a crucial psychological foundation for religious belief and behavior, but the myriad ways in which these beliefs and behaviors actually play out and become distributed within and across populations involve a host of other processes that must also be understood. In Chapter 12 I sketch a framework for conceptualizing processes such as individual learning, complex reasoning, social learning, and cultural transmission as manifestations of higher levels of analysis layered on top of an evolutionary-psychological foundation—neither reducible to principles of evolutionary psychology nor alternatives to it.

It might well occur to you that the order of presentation would make more sense the other way around: that is, to start out with the broad, sweeping-outline strokes (evolutionary psychology), and then zero in on one particular area (attachment) to develop in more detail. I confess that in many ways this would indeed be a more sensible organization. But there are advantages to the order I have chosen as well, one of which is that it follows the progression of my own thinking over the last decade in more or less chronological order. By leading you along the same path I have taken myself, I hope it will be easier to show the way because I already know it. Nevertheless, in the final chapter I will provide a retrospective review of the book, this time telling the story in the other direction. You can then decide for yourself which version you prefer.