

THE GOALS AND TASKS OF THE PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION

Aziza SAIDOVA

Psychologist of the International Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan

E-mail: saidovaaziza985@gmail.com

Abstract. This article examines the psychology of religion as an independent field of scientific knowledge located at the intersection of psychology, religious studies, and the social sciences. The historical development of the discipline is outlined, from the pioneering works of William James, Edwin Starbuck, and Théodore Flournoy to contemporary empirical research. Particular attention is paid to the way the object and subject of the field have been defined and to the methodological principle of the exclusion of the transcendent. The article systematizes the main goals of the psychology of religion, namely description, explanation, prediction, and practical application, and identifies its central tasks: clarifying the concepts of religiosity and spirituality, studying religious development across the life span, analyzing religious experience, investigating the links between faith, coping, and mental health, understanding the social consequences of religiosity, and distinguishing healthy from destructive forms of religious life. The significance of these tasks for the multi-confessional society of Uzbekistan and for preventive work among young people is discussed.

Keywords: psychology of religion, religiosity, spirituality, religious experience, religious coping, religious development, methodology, mental health.

INTRODUCTION

Religion has accompanied human beings throughout their history. It shapes how people understand the world, how they respond to suffering, how they build families and communities, and where they draw the line between what is permitted and what is forbidden. For this reason, religion has long attracted the attention of philosophers, theologians, historians, and sociologists. Psychology came to this subject relatively late, but it brought with it a distinctive question: what actually happens inside the person who believes, prays, doubts, or converts?

The psychology of religion is the discipline that tries to answer this question with the tools of empirical science.

Today the field is represented by professional associations, specialized journals such as *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* and *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, and a considerable number of handbooks. According to Emmons and Paloutzian, by the beginning of the twenty-first century the discipline had moved from the margins of academic psychology closer to its mainstream, and its research began to address problems that concern psychology as a whole (Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003: 378). At the same time, the growth of the field has sharpened old debates about its boundaries. What exactly should the psychology of religion study? What should it aim for? Which of its tasks are primary, and which are secondary?

These questions are not purely academic. In societies where religious identity is being revived after decades of state atheism, as is the case in Uzbekistan and other Central Asian countries, a clear understanding of the goals of this discipline is necessary for education, counseling, and the prevention of radicalization. The purpose of this article is therefore to analyze the formation of the psychology of religion, to clarify its object and subject, and to systematize its principal goals and tasks on the basis of classical and contemporary literature.

The Formation of the Discipline

The psychology of religion as a scientific field emerged at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, mainly in the United States and Western Europe. One of its first systematic works was Edwin Starbuck's study of conversion, which was based on questionnaires completed by hundreds of respondents. Starbuck argued that religious phenomena, like any other mental events, follow regular patterns that can be observed and described (Starbuck, 1899: 21). His teacher at Clark University, G. Stanley Hall, had already drawn attention to the connection between adolescence and religious awakening, and Starbuck developed this line of inquiry much further.

The most influential early work, however, was William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. James deliberately set aside questions of church organization and systematic theology and concentrated on personal religion, understood as the feelings, acts, and experiences of individuals in their relation to whatever they regard as divine (James, 1902: 31). His distinction between "healthy-minded" religiosity and the religion of the "sick soul," together with his analysis of conversion, saintliness, and mysticism, set the research agenda for decades.

In Europe a somewhat different tradition took shape. Théodore Flournoy in Geneva formulated two principles intended to protect the young science from both theological and anti-theological bias: the exclusion of the transcendent and the genetic, or developmental, approach (Flournoy, 1903: 38).

Psychoanalysis added yet another perspective. Freud treated religious belief as an illusion rooted in the child's longing for a protective father (Freud, 1927/1961: 30), whereas Jung saw in religious symbols an expression of the collective unconscious and regarded a religious attitude as essential to psychological wholeness (Jung, 1938: 6). Despite their obvious differences,

both approaches confirmed that religion is too deeply embedded in the psyche to be ignored by psychology.

After a period of relative decline between the 1930s and the 1950s, when behaviorism dominated academic psychology, interest in religion revived. Gordon Allport's *The Individual and His Religion* and his later distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic religious orientation opened the way for measurement-based research (Allport & Ross, 1967: 434). From the 1970s onward the field became increasingly empirical, and a large number of scales, experimental paradigms, and longitudinal designs appeared (Wulff, 1997: 15). Contemporary scholars also emphasize the contribution of Muslim thinkers who, long before the emergence of academic psychology, analyzed the soul (nafs), the heart (qalb), and the stages of spiritual purification; the works of al-Balkhi, Ibn Sina, and al-Ghazali are frequently mentioned in this regard (Haque, 2004: 359).

Object and Subject of the Psychology of Religion

Any discussion of goals and tasks must begin with the question of what the discipline actually studies. The object of the psychology of religion is the religious person, both individuals and groups, in their real psychological functioning. Its subject is narrower. It includes religious consciousness, religious feelings and motives, religious experience and behavior, the psychological mechanisms of religious development, and the influence of religiosity on other domains of mental life.

Here an important clarification is required. The psychology of religion does not attempt to decide whether the objects of faith exist. Flournoy's principle of the exclusion of the transcendent means that the psychologist neither affirms nor denies the reality of God, but studies how belief in God functions in human life (Wulff, 1997: 43). This position distinguishes the discipline from theology, which proceeds from revelation, and from militant

atheistic criticism, which proceeds from the assumption that religion is false. Hood, Hill, and Spilka stress that precisely this methodological neutrality allows researchers holding different worldviews to work within one scientific community (Hood et al., 2009: 7).

Another difficulty concerns the very definition of religion. James preferred a broad, experience-centered definition, while later researchers observed that too wide a definition dissolves religion into any system of values. In recent decades the question has become even more complicated because of the spread of the term "spirituality." Some authors treat spirituality as the personal and experiential side of religion and religiousness as its institutional side. Others warn that such a polarization is artificial, since for most believers the two are inseparable (Hill et al., 2000: 64). Zinnbauer and Pargament suggest understanding spirituality as a personal or group search for the sacred, and religiousness as a search for significance that takes place within a traditional sacred context (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005: 35).

The debate is far from resolved, but it clearly shows that conceptual clarification is itself one of the tasks of the field.

The Main Goals of the Psychology of Religion

Like psychology in general, the psychology of religion pursues several interrelated goals. Following the tradition of empirical science, they can be grouped into four: description, explanation, prediction, and practical application. These goals do not exist in isolation; each subsequent goal depends on the successful realization of the previous one.

The descriptive goal consists in a careful and unbiased record of what religious people actually experience and do. This includes the frequency of prayer and worship, the content of beliefs, the forms of religious emotion, the images of God held by children and adults, and the experiences believers

themselves consider sacred. James's work was largely descriptive, and its enduring value lies in the richness of the personal documents he collected. Without such descriptions, any theory runs the risk of explaining phenomena that nobody has observed.

The explanatory goal is more ambitious. It seeks to understand why people become religious, why some remain faithful throughout their lives while others abandon faith, and why the same tradition can produce both compassionate and intolerant believers. Explanatory models draw on various psychological theories. Attachment theory, for example, suggests that the relationship with God may function as an attachment relationship, either corresponding to or compensating for early experiences with caregivers (Kirkpatrick, 2005: 127). Cognitive and evolutionary approaches look for the mental structures that make religious concepts easy to acquire and transmit, while meaning-making theories emphasize the human need to find order and purpose in life.

The predictive goal relies on accumulated data to anticipate how religiosity will be related to other variables. Meta-analytic research shows, for instance, that positive forms of religious coping tend to be associated with better psychological adjustment, whereas negative forms, such as feelings of divine punishment or abandonment, predict greater distress (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005: 473). Findings of this kind allow psychologists to identify people at risk and to understand under which conditions religious resources are likely to help.

Finally, the applied goal concerns the use of knowledge in education, health care, pastoral and psychological counseling, social work, and public policy. It is here that the discipline meets the needs of society most directly.

The Principal Tasks of the Discipline

The general goals are realized through a set of more specific tasks. The overview below is not exhaustive, yet it reflects priorities that recur in the major handbooks and review articles of the field (Paloutzian & Park, 2013: 4).

Conceptual and methodological clarification

The first task is to clarify the basic concepts of the field and to develop reliable ways of studying them. Religiosity is a multidimensional phenomenon. Glock and Stark identified ideological, ritualistic, experiential, intellectual, and consequential dimensions (Glock & Stark, 1965: 20), and later authors proposed other models, such as Saroglou's "Big Four" of believing, bonding, behaving, and belonging (Saroglou, 2011: 1323). Each model implies different research instruments. A related problem is cultural bias. Most scales were created in Protestant Christian contexts, and their direct transfer to Muslim or Buddhist populations may distort the results. The development of culturally sensitive measures, including instruments designed specifically for Muslims, is therefore an urgent task (Abu-Raiya et al., 2008: 293).

The study of religious development

The second task is to trace how religiosity emerges and changes across the life span. Children's ideas about God, adolescent doubt and the search for identity, conversion in youth, the stabilization or crisis of faith in middle age, and the role of religion in old age are all subjects of developmental research. Fowler's theory of faith development, which describes a sequence of stages from the intuitive-projective faith of early childhood to the universalizing faith of rare mature individuals, remains one of the best-known frameworks, even though its universality has been questioned (Fowler, 1981: 122).

For educators, knowledge of these patterns is essential. A teacher who knows that adolescent questioning is a normal developmental phenomenon will respond to it quite differently from one who sees in it only a threat.

The analysis of religious experience

The third task concerns religious and mystical experience itself. Researchers try to describe its structure, identify its triggers, and understand its consequences for personality. Hood's work on mysticism showed that such experiences have a recognizable core, including a sense of unity, timelessness, and sacredness, although believers interpret them in the language of their own traditions (Hood, 1975: 31).

Religion, coping, and mental health

The fourth task, which has grown considerably in recent decades, is the study of the connection between religion and psychological well-being. Pargament has shown that people turn to religion especially in situations of stress, loss, and illness, and that religious coping is not a single strategy but a whole family of methods: seeking spiritual support, benevolent religious reappraisal, collaborative problem solving with God, and, on the negative side, spiritual discontent or a sense of punishment (Pargament, 1997: 272). Large reviews indicate that religious involvement is, on average, associated with lower rates of depression and substance abuse and with greater life satisfaction (Koenig et al., 2012: 145). Yet these associations are neither automatic nor universal. Smith, McCullough, and Poll found that the link between religiousness and fewer depressive symptoms becomes stronger among people facing stressful life events (Smith et al., 2003: 626). The task of the psychologist, then, is not to promote or discourage religion, but to understand which forms of religiosity support health and which may harm it.

The social consequences of religiosity

The fifth task relates to the social side of religious life: prosocial behavior, forgiveness, family relationships, tolerance, and prejudice. Allport noticed a paradox that still motivates research. Religion teaches love of one's neighbor, yet in some studies religious people displayed more prejudice than non-religious ones. His solution was to distinguish intrinsic religiosity, in which faith is the master motive of life, from extrinsic religiosity, in which religion is used as a means to other ends such as status, comfort, or security (Allport & Ross, 1967: 441). Batson and colleagues later added the "quest" orientation, characterized by openness to doubt and complexity, and showed that the relationship between religion and helping depends heavily on the type of orientation (Batson et al., 1993: 169).

Distinguishing healthy from destructive religiosity

In the modern world religion is sometimes used to justify violence, manipulation, and the psychological control of individuals. The psychology of religion is called upon to identify the personal and group mechanisms that make people vulnerable to destructive movements: uncertainty of identity, a need for simple answers, social isolation, perceived humiliation, and dependence on authoritarian leaders. Distinguishing a mature, integrated faith from rigid and fanatical forms is perhaps the most socially significant task of the field. Allport's description of the mature religious sentiment as differentiated, dynamic, consistent in its moral consequences, comprehensive, and heuristic still serves as a useful point of reference (Allport, 1950: 57).

Cultural and cross-cultural research

The last task named here is to study religiosity in its cultural context. Belzen argues that religious experience cannot be understood apart from the language, rituals, and social practices through which it is lived, and that the

psychology of religion should therefore become, to a considerable extent, a cultural psychology (Belzen, 2010: 23). For Central Asia this means taking into account the Hanafi-Maturidi theological tradition, the Sufi heritage, the Soviet experience of secularization, and the religious revival that followed independence.

Significance for Contemporary Uzbekistan

The practical relevance of these goals and tasks becomes especially clear in the context of Uzbekistan. The country is home to representatives of more than a hundred ethnic groups and several religious confessions, while the majority of the population identifies with Islam. Since independence, religious practice has become an open part of social life, and the state has declared a policy of enlightened Islam, religious tolerance, and interfaith harmony.

In such conditions, psychologists, teachers, and religious educators need scientifically grounded knowledge about how young people form their religious identity, how they cope with stress and uncertainty, and why a small number of them become receptive to radical ideologies. The psychology of religion provides precisely this kind of knowledge. It helps to design educational programs that strengthen critical thinking and moral reasoning, supports counseling that respects the believer's worldview, and informs preventive work that addresses not only ideas but also the emotional and social needs that extremist groups exploit.

Equally important is the preparation of specialists. At present, courses in the psychology of religion are taught at only a limited number of institutions in the region, and there is a clear shortage of validated research instruments in the Uzbek language.

Conclusion

The psychology of religion has travelled a long path from the questionnaires of Starbuck and the personal documents of James to multidimensional scales, experiments, and cross-cultural studies. Throughout this history its core purpose has remained the same: to understand religion as a lived psychological reality without claiming to judge its ultimate truth.

The analysis presented in this article allows us to conclude that the discipline pursues four general goals, namely description, explanation, prediction, and practical application. These goals are realized through several principal tasks: clarifying concepts and developing culturally valid methods; studying religious development; analyzing religious experience; investigating the links between religion, coping, and mental health; examining the social consequences of religiosity; distinguishing healthy from destructive religious life; and taking cultural context into account.

For Uzbekistan, the development of this field is not a matter of theoretical interest alone. It can contribute to the spiritual education of young people, to the psychological support of believers, and to the preservation of interfaith harmony. Future research should concentrate on adapting and creating measurement instruments for the Uzbek population and on studying the religious development of youth in the specific historical and cultural setting of the region.

REFERENCES

1. Abu-Raiya, H., Pargament, K. I., Mahoney, A., & Stein, C. (2008). A psychological measure of Islamic religiousness: Development and evidence for reliability and validity. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 18(4), 291–315.

2. Allport, G. W. (1950). The individual and his religion: A psychological interpretation. Macmillan.
3. Allport, G. W., & Ross, J. M. (1967). Personal religious orientation and prejudice. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 5(4), 432–443.
4. Ano, G. G., & Vasconcelles, E. B. (2005). Religious coping and psychological adjustment to stress: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 61(4), 461–480.
5. Batson, C. D., Schoenrade, P., & Ventis, W. L. (1993). Religion and the individual: A social-psychological perspective. Oxford University Press.
6. Belzen, J. A. (2010). Towards cultural psychology of religion: Principles, approaches, applications. Springer.
7. Emmons, R. A., & Paloutzian, R. F. (2003). The psychology of religion. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 54, 377–402.
8. Flournoy, T. (1903). Les principes de la psychologie religieuse. *Archives de Psychologie*, 2, 33–57.
9. Fowler, J. W. (1981). Stages of faith: The psychology of human development and the quest for meaning. Harper & Row.
10. Freud, S. (1961). The future of an illusion (J. Strachey, Trans.). W. W. Norton. (Original work published 1927)
11. Glock, C. Y., & Stark, R. (1965). Religion and society in tension. Rand McNally.
12. Haque, A. (2004). Psychology from Islamic perspective: Contributions of early Muslim scholars and challenges to contemporary Muslim psychologists. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 43(4), 357–377.
13. Hill, P. C., Pargament, K. I., Hood, R. W., Jr., McCullough, M. E., Swyers, J. P., Larson, D. B., & Zinnbauer, B. J. (2000). Conceptualizing religion and spirituality: Points of commonality, points of departure. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 30(1), 51–77.

14. Hood, R. W., Jr. (1975). The construction and preliminary validation of a measure of reported mystical experience. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 14(1), 29–41.
15. Hood, R. W., Jr., Hill, P. C., & Spilka, B. (2009). *The psychology of religion: An empirical approach* (4th ed.). Guilford Press.
16. James, W. (1902). *The varieties of religious experience: A study in human nature*. Longmans, Green, and Co.
17. Jung, C. G. (1938). *Psychology and religion*. Yale University Press.
18. Kirkpatrick, L. A. (2005). *Attachment, evolution, and the psychology of religion*. Guilford Press.
19. Koenig, H. G., King, D. E., & Carson, V. B. (2012). *Handbook of religion and health* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
20. Paloutzian, R. F., & Park, C. L. (Eds.). (2013). *Handbook of the psychology of religion and spirituality* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.
21. Pargament, K. I. (1997). *The psychology of religion and coping: Theory, research, practice*. Guilford Press.
22. Saroglou, V. (2011). Believing, bonding, behaving, and belonging: The Big Four religious dimensions and cultural variation. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 42(8), 1320–1340.
23. Smith, T. B., McCullough, M. E., & Poll, J. (2003). Religiousness and depression: Evidence for a main effect and the moderating influence of stressful life events. *Psychological Bulletin*, 129(4), 614–636.
24. Starbuck, E. D. (1899). *The psychology of religion: An empirical study of the growth of religious consciousness*. Walter Scott.
25. Wulff, D. M. (1997). *Psychology of religion: Classic and contemporary* (2nd ed.). John Wiley & Sons.
26. Zinnbauer, B. J., & Pargament, K. I. (2005). Religiousness and spirituality. In R. F. Paloutzian & C. L. Park (Eds.), *Handbook of the psychology of religion and spirituality* (pp. 21–42). Guilford Press.