

Positive Psychology as a theoretical framework for studying and learning about religion from the perspective of psychology

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Abstract

Psychology of religion is now a well acknowledged branch of psychology that uses the theoretical framework and methodology of mainstream psychology to examine religious sentiment and behaviour - collective and individual. The paper begins by reflecting on the dilemma that the psychological study of religion faces: between a measurement paradigm and seeking an overarching theoretical framework. The second part of the paper focuses on one contemporary movement within mainstream psychology, namely, positive psychology that engages with existential questions like wellbeing and happiness, with an empirical grounding. Moreover, research and intervention within positive psychology are led by a catalogue of core virtues and character strengths that have strong religious underpinnings. The paper discusses the viable use of the theoretical and methodological framework of positive psychology in the study of religion, and considers the added value that positive psychology brings to teaching and learning about religion in secular contexts.

1. Psychology of Religion

Early psychologists were concerned with the impact of religion on human behaviour and wellbeing. However, Freud's negative conclusions about religion may have had their toll on the relationship between psychology and religion. More importantly, as psychology itself began to be influenced by the behaviourist approach, religion was largely neglected within psychological enquiry in the early half of the 20th century. For instance, psychology text books hardly included 'religion' in their indices (Spilka 1978; Spilka et al. 1981). Among many other reasons, it is also possible that there was a case of throwing out the baby with the bath water (Coon 1992): in an attempt to purify psychology of its spiritualism and psychic contents that popular psychology in the US had come to be identified with in the turn of the 20th century, matters of religion and spirituality were also thrown out. Fortunately, in the past four decades or so there has been a revived interest among psychologists in the study of religion. Allport's (1950) *Individual and his Religion* could be cited as one possible turning point. Psychology of religion became a division within the American Psychology Association (APA) in 1976. By the late 1980's scholars were optimistic about how religion began to feature in psychology textbooks even if the situation was still far from the ideal (Lehr & Spilka 1989).

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Basically, there are three major strands in studies that bring together psychology and religion (Spilka et al. 2003): (a) Religious Psychology discusses psychological findings within the discourse of religion; pastoral psychology as an offshoot of this approach draws insight from psychology for use in ‘caring ministry’; (b) Psychology *and* Religion attempts to facilitate a dialogue between the two fields while maintaining their independent discourses (Hood 1994); and, (c) Psychology *of* Religion uses the theoretical framework and methods of general psychology to study religious phenomena and their elements, thus seeking an opportunity to contribute to mainstream psychology. Psychology of religion (PR) itself studies religious processes and phenomena within the three major interests of psychology: the experimental psychology, test-and measurement psychology, and therapeutic psychology.

2. In search of a theoretical and methodological framework for psychology of religion

Discussion on theoretical and methodological issues related to PR has been ongoing (Emmons & Paloutzian 2003; Gorsuch 1988; Hill & Gibson 2008; Jonte-Pace & Parsons 2001; Spilka et al. 2003; Wulff 1997). In its recent history, PR has moved from the religious orientation model of 1970’s and 80’s (Allport & Ross 1967), through a measurement paradigm (Gorsuch 1988) to “a multilevel interdisciplinary paradigm” (Emmons & Paloutzian 2003). While the measurement paradigm could only yield “a collection of data without a guiding theoretical framework” (Dittes 1969 as cited by Hill & Gibson 2008: 20), the attempts at seeking an overarching theoretical framework, like the meaning-based approach proposed by Park and Paloutzian (2005), end up stressing only a limited aspect of religion. Therefore, Hill and Gibson (2008:20) point out that PR still suffers from an “inability to develop sustaining substantive theories or concepts that integrate multiple disparate lines of research.”

Moreover, every science has its own methodology, and research in contemporary psychology is largely empirical, even if this presupposes ideographic and nomothetic theorizing (Haslam & McGarthy 2003). Embracing the empirical approach would provide scientific rigour to PR. However, there is a need for variety within the empirical framework; for instance, an

increased use of qualitative methods could facilitate a greater dialogue between cultural contents of religion and spirituality in the psychological study of religion (Belzen 2010; Hood 2010).

This openness would protect psychology of religion from naïve realism and postmodern anti-realism, and help remain within the framework of critical realism (McGrath 2004:195; see also, Bhasker 2008). Within critical realism then, a balance between inductive and deductive processes is needed. This presupposes also the possible use of existing theoretical frameworks.

3. Positive psychology: its sources and contents

In 1998, when Martin Seligman was elected as the president of the American Psychology Association (APA) he extended a clarion call to psychology to focus on wellbeing and happiness as it does on pathology and psychological disorder (Seligman 1999). The stream of psychological accent that followed is referred to as ‘positive psychology’. Its interests are similar to that of humanistic psychology, but it differs sharply from it in that positive psychology embraces an empirical approach. It sees happiness and wellbeing as an outcome of pleasant life: “pursuit of positive emotions about the present, past and future”, good life: “using your strengths and virtues to obtain abundant gratification in the main realms of life”, and meaningful life: “use of your strengths and virtues in the service of something much larger than you are” (Seligman 2003:127). On a deeper level, positive psychology has begun to explore wellbeing using the parlance of Greek philosophical terminology of *hedonia* and *eudaimonia* (Deci & Ryan 2008). While *hedonia* refers to those aspects of wellbeing that flow from pleasure oriented activities, *eudaimonia* refers to fulfilment of our potential as human beings. Positive psychology literature makes further distinction between subjective, psychological and social wellbeing (Diener 1984; Keyes & Lopez 2002; Ryff & Keyes 1995).

Research and intervention based therapy (Seligman, Rashid & Parks 2006), within positive psychology are led by a catalogue of core virtues and character strengths (Peterson & Seligman 2004), which are also referred to as ‘Values in Action’ (VIA; Peterson 2006b). This catalogue of virtues lists 6 core virtues and 24 character strengths that are said to contribute to

human wellbeing and happiness: Creativity, Curiosity, Open-mindedness, Love of Learning, Perspective, Bravery, Persistence, Integrity, Vitality, Love, Kindness, Social Intelligence, Citizenship, Fairness, Leadership, Forgiveness, Humility, Prudence, Self-regulation, Appreciation of beauty, Gratitude, Hope and Humour.

4. Studying and learning about religion within the framework of positive psychology

Religion and spirituality are in the domain of “human experience beyond the material” (Miller 2010: 35). That is why, Wulff (1997:5) proposed the inclusion of the ‘Principle of the Transcendent’ in the psychology of religion. Without due consideration of the transcendent, the psychological study of religion, or any study and learning of religion for that matter, that uses positivist methods, runs the risk of materialism and reductionism (See Gualtieri 1989). There is a need, therefore, for a fine balance between the outsider approach of *explaining* religious processes and the insider approach of *understanding* religious phenomena (Tite 2004). I suggest that positive psychology movement could offer not only a possible meaningful dialogue between the insider and outsider perspectives, but also to study and learn about religious phenomena as an insider respecting the methods of psychology, and also to explain religious sentiments and behaviour as an outsider.

For instance, virtues and character strengths which have been hitherto largely the subject matter of theology and philosophy have become now a central framework for positive psychology (Dahlsgaard et al. 2005). One of the criteria applied in the original selection of the candidate strengths to the catalogue of the VIA was their ubiquity across cultures and religious traditions (Peterson & Seligman 2004; Peterson 2006). Even if this is still a work in progress, this attempt creates a lot of possibility for psychology of religion.

Recently, Belzen (2010) has suggested that psychology be culturally sensitive, particularly when studying religious phenomena. Positive psychology shows this sensitivity to cultures. Haidt (2003:275) had invited scholars within positive psychology to look “to other cultures and other historical eras for ideas and perspectives on virtue and the good life.” In a

similar vein, Maltby and Hill (2008) see religion as a fertile ground for positive psychologists to study systematically the “common denominators” of virtues and character strengths. There have been other similar efforts in facilitating a dialogue between positive psychology and various religious traditions, either in support, or in critique, of positive psychology and its constructs (Chu & Diener 2009; Delle Fave & Bassi 2009; Sundararajan 2005; Joseph et al. 2006; Watts et al. 2006; Vitz 2005; Zagano & Gillespie 2006).

As regards the empirical approach that would provide psychology of religion with its scientific rigour, positive psychology has much possibility. Several questionnaires that are used currently within positive psychology examine constructs related to spirituality. Qualitative methods are also increasingly being used in cross-cultural studies in positive psychology (Delle Fave and Bassi 2009). Ong and van Dulmen (2007) consider the possibility of integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches in positive psychology. These, besides other reasons, can support the viability of positive psychology as a theoretical framework for the study of religion.

How suited is positive psychology for the teaching and learning of religion with an outsider perspective? People in Western society are developing a way of identifying their ‘religious affiliation’ in terms of being ‘spiritual-but-not-religious.’ Positive psychology feels very much at home in this context. For instance, the most of the reported research projects on the psychology of mindfulness have the approach of spiritual-but-not-religious (Hamilton et al. 2006; Styron 2005). The same is true of the study of virtues and character strengths. Teaching and learning about religion could take place in several non-religious contexts: school education, higher education (Tolliver & Tisdell 2006), legal education (Chisholm 2010), training of personnel in medical profession (LoboPrabhu & Lomax 2010), just to cite a few examples. Rightly or not, the underlying epistemology of learning about religion in these contexts is even an exaggerated attempt to keep away all ‘God-terms’ and expression of the Super-natural. A good alternative of spirituality-talk in these contexts is to take the path of purpose and meaning (Speck 2005). And positive psychology provides ample set of concepts, language and empirical methodology for such a discourse.

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