

The Psychology of Religion: A Short Introduction

Kate Loewenthal, Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 182 pp.

The areas of psychology and religion have been traditionally viewed as mutually exclusive and the relationship between them seen as one of paradox and impossibility. The book under review offers a wide coverage of the subject from its troubled history to the latest developments in the field in easy to understand language.

In an overview of the book, the author points out how religion can be a powerful force in human society leading to admirable and often horrible consequences. Citing a few research studies, the author shows how the situation has changed over the years and how the psychology of religion is emerging as a completely new field of study. The book is divided into seven chapters.

Chapter one begins with the daunting task of defining both psychology and religion from the author's own perspective, after a review of some popular definitions. After presenting a couple of questionnaires to measure religious beliefs, the author presents a short history of the uneasy relationship between psychology, religion and discusses the concept of spirituality. The author points out that although spirituality is common to most religions and cultural traditions, it can be a divisive issue and is actually outside the context of organized religion. Concern is raised by the author regarding the lack of attention given to the possible differences between the religious experiences and behaviors of men and women.

Chapter two focuses on how traditions outside of the western Christian context, e.g. Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism view the psychology—religion relationship. This chapter also describes "Syncretic Religions" in which different religious traditions are blended, and the new religious movements starting in the 1960s. The chapter stresses that although psychological emphases and consequences may differ, psychological themes are common to all or most religions, and these emphases and consequences need further investigation.

Chapter three discusses religious behavior and examines in detail the effects of prayer. The author gives definitions and quotations of prominent scholars and cites empirical studies showing effects and perceived effects of prayer. The use of

language and the function it plays is analyzed from religious contexts. Especially interesting is a section on religious conversion that includes questionnaires for the types and motives of people in changing their religions. Methods adopted by religious missionaries in converting others into their folds are given, including what types of persons are likely to convert. Two socio-psychological perspectives on conversion are discussed, including when people would exit their own religious group.

On the subject of religious thoughts, chapter four distinguishes between religious behavior and beliefs, contending that they are different things. The author presents psychological studies and tables that depict beliefs quantitatively and qualitatively, showing how religious beliefs change in people over their life spans. This chapter covers theoretical explanations on this topic by scholars like Piaget, Goldman, Erikson, Kohlberg, Fowler, and Spero and includes a long list of quotations on the role of religion in coping with stress and depression.

Chapter five starts with a description of the early origins of religious feelings as explained by the psychoanalytic theory of Freud, the object-relations theory of Melanie Klein, and the attachment theory of Bowlby. Other issues examined are the importance and nature of childhood religious experiences and their influence on later life. Positive religious feelings including mystical experiences, religious visions, and near death experiences as well as negative feelings including guilt, shame, and anxiety are covered, citing recent psychological literature. A separate section on religion and psychopathology, addressing depression, psychoses, and demonic possession from different cultural perspectives, is included.

Chapter six is the longest of all and covers the effects of religion on behavior, thoughts, and feelings in areas of morality, happiness, distress, and prejudice. Morality is defined and different psychological perspectives on the development of morality are offered. The influence of religion on child-rearing practices and on the development of personality and morality is presented. The author calls religion and prejudice one of the greatest paradoxes. Quotations of Allport's writings on this topic are given, including a critical analysis of Allport's research using the popular extrinsic and intrinsic orientation scale. A smaller section covers the social identity theory dealing with in-group phenomena leading to superiority feelings over out-group individuals. The issue of religious identity is discussed in relation to how it may heighten spiritual awareness.

The concluding chapter argues that although psychology has generally neglected the study of religion in the past, the present-day scenario is different. There is a continued increase in empirical research, showing the significant impact of religion on human personality and behavior. Mental health, inter-group relations, and interpersonal relationships are identified as the three main areas needing emphasis in modern psychological research. The author contends that the task of psychology is not only to understand what people do, think, and feel, but also to

