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TOP SCHOLAR



Mana Tohu Mātauranga o Aotearoa
New Zealand Qualifications Authority

Scholarship 2023 Religious Studies

Time allowed: Three hours
Total score: 24

Check that the National Student Number (NSN) on your admission slip is the same as the number at the top of this page.

You should answer ONE of the questions in this booklet.

Check that this booklet has pages 2–20 in the correct order and that none of these pages is blank.

Do not write in any cross-hatched area (). This area may be cut off when the booklet is marked.

YOU MUST HAND THIS BOOKLET TO THE SUPERVISOR AT THE END OF THE EXAMINATION.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

INSTRUCTIONS

Write an essay about the psychology of religion and spirituality, in response to ONE of the questions below.

Space for planning is provided on page 4 of this booklet. Begin your answer on page 5.

EITHER: QUESTION ONE

"Spiritual emotions such as gratitude, awe and reverence, and love and hope are likely to be generated when people perceive sacredness in various aspects of their lives."

– Patrick McNamara, neuroscientist, and Robert Emmons, professor of psychology

"Our own words to God become sacred when they are spoken from the heart."

– Joy Cowley, New Zealand author

People committed to religious and spiritual traditions generally prefer to trust the inspiring leaders and texts from their own traditions as a guide to their religious and spiritual practice.

For whom, and to what extent, are findings from the psychology of religion and spirituality convincing and useful?

FINDINGS SAY THAT RELIGIOUSNESS & SPIRITUALITY
ARE UNIVERSAL!! AND THEREFORE NO DUE
TO BIOLOGY.

OR: QUESTION TWO

"While this work is ongoing, findings to date are unequivocal; various aspects of religion are strongly related to physical and psychological well-being in everyday life in general."

– Crystal Park, professor of psychology

"If one submits everything to reason, our religion will contain nothing that is mysterious or supernatural."

– Blaise Pascal, philosopher, mathematician, physicist

Researchers in the field of the psychology of religion and spirituality claim to clarify and expand our understanding of aspects of religious and spiritual experience.

What is it about religious and spiritual perspectives and experiences that makes them such a challenging yet rewarding area of study for researchers?

PLANNING

ONE.

Select (✓) ONE essay question to answer.

Question One

Question Two

QUESTION 1:

Patrick McNamara does not distinguish between specific religious traditions when he refers to peoples' ability to "perceive sacredness in various aspects of their lives", and that these instances generate "spiritual emotions" such as "gratitude, awe and reverence, and love and hope". This is significant because he seemingly highlights a universal capacity for spirituality ("spiritual emotions" he terms them) among humans. Whilst it is true that religious peoples prefer to adhere to the specific beliefs of their own individual traditions (be it Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and so forth), research into the psychology of religion has been convincing with regards to the universality of spirituality and 'religiousness' (a term that will be discussed further) such that every religious tradition rests upon the same spiritual foundations which are inherent in the human psyche and a product of evolution. In this way, research into this field is useful not only for every religious tradition, but for the entirety of humanity. The findings that have arisen have been both convincing and useful in displaying the universal human ability to "perceive sacredness", a result of evolution and biology, and thus the discovery of a universal core to all religious traditions—a realisation that could perhaps help solve numerous destructive divisions and schisms that have been a feature of humanity for centuries.

In affirming this thesis, a discussion of research into the psychology of religious experiences (using in particular the distinction between the 'perennialist' and 'constructivist' schools of thought and thinkers such as Wayne Proudfoot and William James) will highlight the human capacity to "perceive sacredness". Furthermore, the evolutionary origin of this inherent spirituality will be discussed through the theories of Jonathan Haidt and Freud.

It is necessary first to define the key terms, in order to outline the parameters on which this thesis it will be discussed. It is often agreed upon by scholars that the concept of spirituality can be defined somewhere in the vicinity of 'a human desire for higher fulfilment, through the finding of some sense of inner and greater purpose'. It is perhaps most succinctly defined by Professor Richard A. Roof who ascribes to it the idea of "personal integration". A search for greater understanding of one's self, or as eminent psychologist and pupil of Freud would likely describe it—the process of "individuation"; the merging of one's outer and everyday "persona" with an inner and deeper "shadow" to find some ultimate sense of "self".

This sense of "self" transcends our everyday "persona" to what Emil Durkheim would consider the human capacity for a sense of the "sacred". This is because he believed humans were "Homo Duplex" (two-layered beings) which had the capacity to exist on a shallow everyday "profane" level, but also could ascend to a "sacred" level of spirituality (through "personal integration"). This is where religion arose. It provides a physical and earthly framework for a person to ascend to the sacred; a framework for "personal integration" or spirituality. Pamela King defines it as such in her work *Searching for the Sacred*; a set of "beliefs, practices, rituals and symbols" which (a) serve to facilitate and individual's closeness to the sacred" and (b) aid in "understanding an individual's relationship and responsibility to others living in community".

Psychology can generally be defined as 'the study of the human mind and behaviour', however it is vital to discuss a definition given by Raymond Paloutzian of specifically the 'psychology of religion'. He considers it to be the study of the processes that "mediate human religiousness". "religiousness"? This is an important term as it denotes the universality of the psychology of religion—that it is not a psychological study of specific religious traditions, rather it is a psychological study of "religiousness" which Paloutzian defines to be the behaviours that feature in all religious traditions, such as prayer, worship of a divine god, and so forth.

The findings of the psychology of religion have helped to reveal a clearer picture of the universality of religiousness. Perhaps the most revealing in this regard, has been research into religious experiences. Religious experiences have been various in nature and have occurred across many religious traditions, as well as in atheists or non-religious peoples. This highlights its relevance and importance to the entirety of humankind. What must be addressed is how convincing research into this phenomenon has been, and how it has been useful in furthering the significant conclusion of the psychology of religion aforementioned. Two schools of thought on religious experiences have

shone through the debates, namely the 'perennialists' and the 'constructivists'. Fraser Watts in his book *Psychology, Religion and spirituality* defines broadly the ideas of each. The perennialists (including the likes of William James and Robert Forman) highlight the universality of religious experiences through their phenomenology (the sensations the generate) thus leading to the conclusion that they indicate a universal human ability to reach Durkheim's "sacred". Comparatively, the constructivist thinkers (notable Wayne Proudfoot and Steven Katz) have challenged this conclusion with the idea that religious experiences, due to their content (the religious framework they fall under), are merely a product of the person's surrounding culture—inferreing that the phenomenon of religious experiences are not useful in highlighting a universal spiritual drive in humans.

The perennialist standpoint is perhaps best defined by William James in his eminent book (and the first major work on the psychology of religion), *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). He focuses on the universal phenomenology of religious experiences as definitive of a universal human spirituality, by examining many various cases of religious experience. He even distinguishes four hallmarks of this phenomenology; that religious experiences are (a) ineffable (indescribable), (b) noetic (generate a sense of enlightenment or divine knowledge), (c) passive (occur at random) and (d) transient (occur for a certain period of time). When one examines an example of a religious experience, the plausibility of these distinctions seemingly become apparent. Take for instance the Christian biblical example of Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus (Acts 9). Saul is merely walking along a road, and the experience has a certain start point and end point in time—so it is both transient and passive. The noetic quality and the ineffability of the experience are harder to determine, but Saul's subsequent conversion to Christianity (after having persecuted and hated Christians his entire life) certainly points to a noetic aspect of the experience. It is impossible to determine whether the experience was indescribable, since Saul does not mention it as such, but words can only go so far with respect to describing sensation. The only way to fully understand such an experience would be to feel it yourself—thus it is plausible to conclude a quality of ineffability was present. Furthermore, according to the eminent British-Indian philosopher Bimal Krishna Matilal the quality of ineffability is "unanimously accepted" amongst scholars on mysticism; the "supreme joy or happiness is something that cannot be put into words". From examining this experience, the idea that a phenomenological universality is present in all such experiences, seems a relatively logical conclusion. The assumptions that this argument and William James' theory makes however is certainly evident in his omission of discussion about the religious framework that many experiences fall under.

The constructivist would argue that Saul's experience was a product of the Christian religious culture that surrounded him and occupied his thoughts, through Wayne Proudfoot's idea of the "problem of intentionality" (Stephen S. Bush; *Concepts and Religious experiences*). The problem that arises is thus; one cannot experience something if a concept of it is not already present in their mind. Bush uses the example of a late bus—you cannot experience a bus being late and all the stress that comes with it, if you did not first have the concepts "late" and "bus" in your mind. Jesus could not say "I am Jesus whom you persecute" to Saul, if Saul did not have the concept of Jesus in his mind. This is similar to Sigmund Freud's idea of religion as a projection of one's own life and surrounding culture. It is a very plausible response to the perennialist standpoint—that ultimately religious experiences must be a 'trick' of the mind as a result of ardent belief in some religious culture or tradition. This would also support the numerous religious experiences that do in fact fall into some kind of religious framework.

Bush however, provides a succinct explanation as to why Wayne Proudfoot also makes an oversight in his argument. He uses the example of a school bully whacking a boy over the head with a bat. The boy after being hit would likely feel anger, humiliation, hatred, sadness and more—all of which are concepts in his mind (for example he might be thinking "I hate you" because he has a concept of the word hatred). However, Proudfoot in his intentionality argument seemingly ignores the sensations of a religious experience altogether. Bush furthers his metaphor to depict this omission discussing how the school boy would feel pain first (something that he does not have a concept of in his mind when it happens; he does not think "I am going to feel pain" and then feels the pain, nor would he want to) it is merely an innate biological response to the whack of the bat over his head. In the same way, Bush asserts the idea that religious experiences have some kind of "unintentional" phenomenology (outlined by William James) that is not touched upon by Wayne Proudfoot in his arguments. Bush even describes Proudfoot's argument as "incomplete", whilst Proudfoot acknowledges himself that religious experiences have a "felt quality", but he does not go on to address it.

Whilst the perennialist approach seems to ignore the very plausible cultural influence on certain religious experiences, the constructivists tend to ignore the undeniable “felt” sensations of such experiences. Despite this, nothing as of yet in the psychology of religion has thus been able to disprove the fundamentals of the perennialist argument; the presence of a universal ‘sensation(s)’ to all religious experiences. Thus nothing has disproved their use in revealing an innate human ability to experience (the sensations of) Durkheim’s “sacred”. In this way research into this particular area has been to a large extent convincing in this regard and thus useful in creating a start point for investigation into *why* this is the case.

Research into *why* this is the case is the next stage which must be discussed. Many scholars on spirituality have tried to synthesise an answer to the question of how humans have evolved to be innately spiritual (as proved notably through psychology on religious experiences). Fr Teilhard de Chardin is one such scholar, and his theory of “complexity-consciousness” asserts that with greater biological complexity, humans developed consciousness and eventually the ability to sense some sort of “sacred”. Jonathan Haidt on *Religion, Evolution and the Ecstasy of Self-Transcendence* furthers the ideas of scholars such as de Chardin, and comes to a possible concrete evolutionary answer to this question. He examines the case of Stephen Bradley from William James’ *Varieties*, because after Bradley’s religious experience in 1820, he desired the “welfare of all mankind”. Why after many experiences of the sacred do people feel, as Patrick McNamara says, “spiritual emotions such as gratitude, awe, reverence, and love and hope”? Haidt asserts the answer to lie in a concept coined by Charles Darwin known as “group selection”.

Haidt raises the idea that when we do good things for another, we give a part of ourselves to the other (be it our time, money, love and so forth) and in a way they become in part made up of us. We unify in a sense with them. Haidt asserts this desire to be a product of an ancient human tendency to want to be in groups and unified with others that is due to evolutionary “group-selection”. The stronger the group, the more likely it was to survive, and group strength comes from unity and common purpose. If everyone in the group was in the “same boat”, everyone would cooperate and be unified and successful. This has been seen throughout history—mass human movements for change such as the civil rights movement in America with Martin Luther King Jr, as well as the global conflicts such as WWII and WWI, and more recently the Black-Lives Matter movement, have all been a result of group selection. The members in each movement were unified through their shared purpose; they were all in the “same boat”—because unity as a group brings about greatest success. In the same way, humans have sought a sense of unity through “personal integration” (spirituality) which is furthered by religion. This overwhelming and biological desire for unity (call it the ‘unity theory’) has thus driven, according to Haidt, human spirituality and religiousness throughout the entirety of the humankind’s existence (a) because spirituality brings with it a sense of unified inner purpose and (b) because “spiritual emotions” like love, help to bring people together to some sense of unity and shared existence.

The assumption that this argument makes however is that all humans desire spirituality and religion to achieve a sense of unity. This is a naïve assumption because there are many other and perhaps more significant reasons why a person might turn to religion. Most significantly suffering. Freud in his assertion that religion is a “wish-fulfillment” or “illusion” highlights something very important in this response to Haidt. Freud considered his views on religion to be “personal and not psychoanalytic theory” (in a letter to his friend Oskar Pfister), and the significant negativity of these ideas were likely due to the atheistic climate of Vienna at the time, as well as having grown up with an extremely harsh Christian nanny. Despite these biases, Freud does identify something very important in his “wish-fulfillment” theory—that humans often seek religion as an answer and refuge for their troubles. This is undeniable, and seemingly undercuts Haidt’s ideas at face-value, that human spirituality arose most significantly from a desire for unity. But when one looks at the deeper reasoning for religion as a ‘refuge’, Haidt’s argument is not to be discounted after all.

Seeking a divine god or gods for support in the troubling waters of life comes down to what one sees in these beings that will comfort them, and answer their questions. Gods are more often than not omnipotent beings which are all-knowing and all-encompassing—as Jerome Groopman asserted; “absolute unitary beings” (*God on the Brain*). The two largest religions in the world (Christianity and Islam) are monotheistic and feature such a god as their divine being and figurehead. Why would one seek in such a god protection and refuge? Because of exactly Haidt’s

assertion. The idea that religion and spirituality provides the prospect of unity, and as mentioned already, with unity comes (a) strength and (b) safety. It is these qualities that a person turns to for support in hard times, and it is thus that unity is the reason for this, and Haidt's argument is more relevant than ever.

Research into why humans tend to be spiritual has led to many various debates and discussions, Haidt's conclusion is convincing, and in light of significant research is plausible. However, it is not a discussion that will end anytime soon, and Haidt is not the only one with an answer. However, what is becoming clear through research into the psychology of religion is the idea that (a) humans have always tended to be spiritual and (b) that this is most likely a product of our biology, such as Haidt's unity theory. The extent to which these conclusions have been convincing is significant.

To conclude, it is evident that findings from the psychology of religion and spirituality in the field of human religiousness and spirituality have been convincing with regards to investigation into innate human spirituality, and the idea that the origin of this is ultimately biological and stems from evolutionary processes. This has been in light of discussion on how convincing religious experiences are as indicators of an inherent human spirituality, as well as the extent to which the evolutionary origins of this spirituality has been a convincing line of thought (in particular using Haidt's 'unity theory'). These are of course not the only findings from the psychology of religion and spirituality, but are arguably the most important because their relevance is wide-reaching and ultimately global, concerning a universal human condition of "religiousness". The use of such conclusions as to the biology of human spirituality, is undeniably ground-breaking, the implications of which would blur religious divisions and refute the common belief that one religion is greater and more truthful than another. It would instead bring about the idea that all humans have the capacity for the same "sensations" of spirituality, whichever religion helps in furthering this process is merely up to the individual's preference—what matters is that the fundamentals are universal. Perhaps with further conclusive evidence, the future may hold an end to religious conflicts, and a worldwide acceptance and embrace of all religions. This is a long way off yet, but research into the psychology of religion and spirituality is heading in this direction.

Acknowledgements

Material from the following sources has been adapted for use in this assessment:

Page 2

First quote: Emmons, R. A., and McNamara, P. (2006). Sacred emotions and affective neuroscience: Gratitude, costly signalling, and the brain. P. McNamara (Ed.), *Where God and science meet: How brain and evolutionary studies alter our understanding of religion* 1, (p 12). Praeger Perspectives.

Second quote: Cowley, J. (2018). *Veil Over The Light – Selected Spiritual Writings*, (p 65). FitzBeck Publishing.

Third quote: Park, C. (2005, November 16). Religion as a Meaning-Making Framework in Coping with Life Stress. *Journal of Social Issues*, 61(4), pp 707–729. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.2005.00428.x>

Fourth quote: Pascal, B. *Pensées*, Fragment 162:II, 602. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pascal/sourced> 2/03/2023