

# The Psychology of Religion

**A SHORT INTRODUCTION**

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ONE WORLD  
OXFORD

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## AN OVERVIEW

I read about the following episode in a book by a British explorer in early twentieth-century Africa (Darley, 1972). It happened near the then Sudanese–Abyssinian border.

Two men lived close to each other. One had three strong adult sons, while the other, an old man, had one young grandson, age sixteen. All subsisted on a diet of game and honey, and their most important possessions were beehives and honey pots. The old man and his grandson caught the other family – four men – taking their honey pots. The four thieves shouted out that they would kill the old man and his grandson, and then ‘All the honey pots will be ours’. The first young man rushed at the very old man. As he did so, the young grandson lunged at the attacker and pierced him through the heart with his spear, killing him. The second brother stumbled over the body, and the young boy pierced him through the neck, killing him. The third son lunged at the young boy, who side-stepped and gashed him down the side, without killing him. The wounded man and his father fled, and never bothered the old man and his grandson – or their bees – again. Major Darley recounted that he saw the young boy a few days later and congratulated him on his prowess. The boy replied ‘How do you suppose it possible that a little boy like I am could kill two big men, and wound another, unaided? It was the act of God (*shauri ya Mungu*), for they were doing evil’.

Major Darley commented that he found that ‘all people who live near nature believe in God’. Those who do not are ‘too well-fed’ and protected from danger by the amenities of civilized living.

Here is a similar observation, made by Rampal, an Indian immigrant to Britain in the 1960s:

‘In India, there are many temples, mosques and churches. English people have no religion now. Few young people go to church, only the old men and women. Many English people even openly profess to have no belief in God, and take it very ill if you say to them, “Brother, it is good to pray”. They say, ‘What I believe is my own business; if I want to pray, then I will pray – if not, then I won’t.’ I suppose that English people have lost their religion because they lack no comforts. They are so well looked after by their government that they neither pray nor save; they take no thought for tomorrow. If the government were to declare that from next week no one would be allowed to draw National Assistance, then they would all surely run to church to pray to God for help.’

Quoted in Sharma, 1971

Both Major Darley and Rampal raise some issues that are fundamental to this book, but which psychologists have only recently begun to attend to. Their conclusion that material prosperity and the amenities of civilization breed Godlessness may have a grain of truth, but may be too simple. Nevertheless they raise the fundamental issues of why, when and how religious behaviours, ideas and feelings come about.

Students of history, sociology and anthropology are interested in people and groups of people, what they do and what they did – and why. It has always been recognized that religion is a powerful force in human society, associated with the strongest feelings and dramatic behaviour – sometimes admirable and sometimes horrible – and with powerful social forces. All serious students of the social sciences appreciate that they cannot reach any understanding of human society without knowledge of religion and religious institutions. But in the past, psychologists have generally stood apart from all others interested in religion and how it affects what people think and do.

This book looks first at the uneasy relationship that has existed between psychology and religion, and at how it has changed and developed. The psychology of religion is maturing as a field of study. Our understanding has progressed beyond the anti-religious polemics and pro-religious apologetics that were once often offered under the psychology of religion label.

The book then considers how the scientific psychological study of religious behaviour, thought and feeling has been affected by having been largely confined to the study of Western Christianity.

A detailed examination of religious behaviour includes a consideration of prayer, religious discourse, and other religious behaviour. We pay particular attention to religious conversion. Two chapters on the 'inner life' look at religious thoughts – beliefs, faith, experience – and religious feelings, including the emotional aspects of faith, and some of the negative emotions that might be associated with religion, such as guilt and shame. The second of these two chapters concludes by looking at the relations between religion and psychopathological states, particularly depression and schizophrenia.

Finally the book looks at some of the possible effects of religion on behaviour, thoughts and feelings. This includes an examination of the questions of how moral beliefs develop and affect behaviour, and, more controversially, how religion both makes and unmakes prejudice, and the relations between religion, identity and self-esteem.

# 1 PSYCHOLOGY AND RELIGION

## WHAT IS PSYCHOLOGY?

What is psychology? I believe that it involves observing people, recording those observations and trying to interpret what has been observed and recorded.

*The Hutchinson's Encyclopedia* supports this belief. It says that *psychology is the 'systematic study of human ... behaviour'*, and that psychology includes the study of 'the roles of instinct ... culture ... and the functioning of thought, intelligence and language' (Hutchinson, 1994). My dictionary of psychology dwells on its task of definition for several pages, but it starts confidently enough. It says that psychology is the 'branch of science dealing with behaviour, acts or mental processes, and with the mind, self or person who behaves or acts or has the mental processes' (English and English, 1958).

How, then, can we define the psychology of religion? Argyle and Beit-Hallahmi begin their classic textbook (in 1958 it was called *Religious Behaviour*, by Argyle alone, in 1975, *The Social Psychology of Religion*, and in 1997 the title was *The Psychology of Religious Behaviour, Belief and Experience*, with Beit-Hallahmi as first author) with the terse promise that they will 'present the main empirical findings from social surveys, field studies and experiments about religious behaviour, beliefs and experience' (Argyle and Beit-Hallahmi, 1975)

All of this would allow me to maintain that psychology is the study of behaviour, thought and feeling, and that the *psychology of religion is the study of religious behaviour, thought and feeling*. But in the late 1990s, am I allowed to be so simplistic?

For example, two important 1990s textbooks on the psychology of religion did not define psychology (Batson, *et al.* 1993; Wulff, 1997). Perhaps this was because the intended readers were psychologists, and needed no definition. But both these and other contemporary works in the psychology of religion struggled with a more difficult problem. What is the psychology of religion? This was seen to be a little problematic because of the range of approaches in psychology. It was seen to be very problematic because of the difficulties in defining religion.

## WHAT IS RELIGION?

Some scholars have suggested that defining religion is either impossible, or that it is such a major enterprise that we could not attempt it in a short book like this one. Wulff (1997) suggests that a ‘satisfactory definition (of religion) has eluded scholars to this day’, and that Smith (1963) has demonstrated that ‘the noun religion ... (is) not only unnecessary but inadequate to any genuine understanding’. Brown (1987) spent many pages – over 100 – on the problems of defining, analysing and measuring religion and its many parameters. Capps (1997) has argued that the definitions of religion offered by eminent scholars reflect the personal biographies of those scholars.

This is a bit depressing because it suggests that there is no way to start this book! Defining religion is too difficult, so we cannot say what the psychology of religion is about, if we follow the subtle understandings of Wulff, or Brown, or Capps. We will have to be more grounded.

Down to earth, English and English (1958) suggested that religion is ‘a system of attitudes, practices, rites, ceremonies and beliefs by means of which individuals or a community put themselves in relation to God or to a supernatural world, and often to each other, and ... derive a set of values by which to judge events in the natural world’.

Loewenthal (1995) suggested that the major religious traditions have a number of features of belief in common:

- there exists a non-material (i.e. spiritual) reality;
- the purpose of life is to increase harmony in the world by doing good and avoiding evil;
- (in monotheistic religions) the source of existence (i.e. God) is also the source of moral directives.

- In addition, all religions involve and depend on social organization for communicating these ideas.

Common features of religions thus included beliefs and behaviours about *spiritual reality*, *God*, *morality*, *purpose*, and finally the *communication* of these. Some would include atheism, agnosticism and ‘alternative faiths’ as religious postures involving a relationship with God (e.g. Rizzutto, 1974).

We are aware of differences between people with respect to religion. If I walk a few yards in the main street of the very polyglot area of North London in which I live, different styles of dress will proclaim many features of affiliation and piety. I see Muslim women, some with head covered, some with both head and face covered, and some with neither covered. I see Jewish women, some with a wig, some with a hat, some with both, and some with neither; Sikh men with and without turbans; Afro-Caribbeans who are identifiable (I think) as Christian (sober clothes), Rastafarian (dreadlocks), or neither. Jewish men wear fur or felt hats, white or black socks, surtouts, or other signs of affiliation to one of over a dozen different Hasidic sects which flourish locally. Sometimes I cannot translate the signs of identity and piety. But as a psychologist I do not have to rely on the language of clothes. I can ask questions.

In practice, the psychologist studying religion will often wish to assess religion, religiosity, or the extent to which a person engages in different kinds of religious behaviours and beliefs. One might start with a simple, single question about belief:

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### A SINGLE-DIMENSIONAL MEASURE OF RELIGIOSITY

Mark the line to indicate how true the statement is for you. Place your mark over to the left if the statement is completely true, over to your right if completely untrue for you, or anywhere in between to indicate how true or untrue the statement is for you.

**COMPLETELY TRUE**

**COMPLETELY UNTRUE**

I believe in God \_\_\_\_\_

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Is this too simple? Glock and Stark (1965) thought so. They suggested that social scientists might conceive of religious activity as involving five different ‘dimensions’, all of which might be independent of each other – at least in theory. For example a person who has a lot of mystical experiences may not necessarily engage in every prescribed religious ritual activity. Glock and Starks’ dimensions are:

- *experiential* – the extent to which the person has religious experiences;
- *ritual* – the extent to which the person engages in religious ritual practices;
- *belief* – the extent to which the person subscribes to commonly or traditionally endorsed beliefs;
- *intellectual* – the extent of knowledge about religious teaching, tradition, etc.;
- *application* – a fifth dimension reflecting the extent to which the first four are applied in daily life.

This sort of ‘dimensional’ approach has been quite hard to operationalize; that is, to define in such a way that meaningful measurements can be made. Some psychologists of religion have queried whether it really matters which aspects of religious behaviour, experience, belief, etc. we measure, since all tend to co-vary one with the other. Wearing and Brown (1972), for example, reported a general ‘religiosity’ factor underlying a wide range of measures of religious activity and beliefs. Sometimes, of course, it *is* important to look at particular aspects of religious activity or belief. But if we want a general measure of religiosity, the following are popular and reliable (Loewenthal, 1995):

- *affiliation* – whether the person belongs to a religious group;
- *identity* or *self-definition* – whether the person defines themselves as religious (or Christian, Muslim, Jewish or whatever category the investigator is interested in);
- *belief in God*.

These are simple measures that will give us little more than a yes/no answer to a single question. If we want to sample a *range* of behaviours and beliefs there may be problems because of the specificity of behaviours and beliefs endorsed by different religious traditions and denominations. For example, the Francis Scale of Attitude Towards Christianity

(Francis, 1993b) is widely used as a measure of religiosity. It includes items such as:

- I know that Jesus helps me;
- I (do not) think the Bible is out of date.

These could be inappropriate questions to ask people from other religious traditions. In the same vein, Littlewood and Lipsedge (1981, 1998) needed quite different types of questions to discover the extent of 'religious interest' in people from different religious groups. Here are some examples of the questions they needed for Christians and for Jews, followed by some further questions developed recently for Muslims by Hanifa Khan (in preparation):

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### RELIGIOUS INTEREST QUESTIONNAIRE

*Examples of questions for Christians*

- Did the miracles in the Bible really happen?
- Do you help with running your church?
- Before making important decisions do you consult the Bible or pray?
- To lead a good life is it necessary to have some religious belief?
- Would you say you have ever had a personal religious experience?

*Examples of questions for Jews*

- Do you attend the synagogue on the Day of Atonement?
- Do you generally eat kosher food at home?
- Do married women in your family generally wear a sheitel (wig)?

Littlewood and Lipsedge 1998

### RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY QUESTIONNAIRE

*Examples of questions for Muslims*

- Do you pray five times a day?
- Do you observe the dress code?
- Are you careful to eat according to religious rules?

Khan, in preparation

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To overcome this difficulty (of the specificity of rules in different religious traditions), and to enable comparisons to be made across different

cultural-religious groups, Loewenthal and MacLeod developed a short measure, shown here.

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### RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY QUESTIONNAIRE

How often do you attend (church, synagogue, mosque, place of worship)?  
(circle one)

**DAILY/ WEEKLY/ MONTHLY/ OCCASIONALLY/ NEVER**

How often do you study religious texts? (circle one)

**DAILY/ WEEKLY/ MONTHLY/ OCCASIONALLY/ NEVER**

How often do you pray? (circle one)

**DAILY/ WEEKLY/ MONTHLY/ OCCASIONALLY/ NEVER**

Loewenthal, MacLeod, *et al.*, 2000

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This measure has been quite useful, because it makes sense to people from different religious traditions. It is also reliable and valid; these two features are important for any psychological measure (Loewenthal, 1996; Jackson, 1996).

Having discussed some of the difficulties of definition and measurement, and having offered some solutions, it is tempting to finish this introduction. But let me just pass before you three cans of worms – not wide open, but just enough to glimpse inside.

### A SHORT HISTORY OF THE UNEASY RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PSYCHOLOGY AND RELIGION

The relationship between psychology and religion has been a very unhappy one for most of the twentieth century. Each domain has been seen as exclusive: if you are a psychologist you cannot take religion seriously, and if you are religious you cannot take psychology seriously. This has made for a climate in which the psychology of religion is seen as a paradox, an impossibility, or at best, an irreverent exercise which will undermine belief. Conversely, it has sometimes been seen as a ludicrous misapplication of science to something which is not worthy of scientific attention. I shall pick out two themes in tracing the origins of this unhappy and confrontational state.

The first theme is, simply, *Freud*. Freud's is probably the best-known name in the history of psychology, yet, paradoxically, hardly attended to in psychology courses in British universities. Freud was the inventor of the 'talking cure' – psychoanalysis – defined as a method of treating neurotic illnesses. His theories and clinical judgements shifted and developed in the course of his work. They were – and remain – controversial, and perennially fascinating. Freud was a keen and expert polemicist, and wrote a large number of very entertaining books intended for popular consumption, as well as many articles for medical and scientific readers. Several articles touched on religious issues, and four of his books (1927, 1928, 1930, 1939) were devoted entirely to the analysis of religion, often apparently to the great detriment of religion. For example *Totem and Taboo* traces the origins of religion and religious customs to a (historically) dubious single primal horde of people. The theory involved a bunch of males fighting over a bunch of females (plausible), which led to a taboo on incest (possible) and totemism, which was somehow collectively imprinted or transmitted to all later generations (muddled and much less plausible). Freud was good at telling a likely tale, and by the time he had finished with it, religion was written off as a bunch of primitive superstitions, neurotic rituals, and an illusion, which might have been comforting at one time, but which is no longer necessary in these enlightened times. Well-known outrageous statements by Freud include religion as a 'universal obsessional neurosis', which has succeeded because it spares the individual the labour of developing his or her own neurosis. Freud described God as a projection of the image of the father, and 'a system of wishful illusions together with a disavowal of reality, such as we find nowhere else but in amentia' (Freud, 1907, 1927). None of this endeared Freud to the orthodox religious establishment. Freud's other crime was to try and bring both sexuality and child abuse under psychiatric scrutiny. Child abuse was hastily withdrawn when the medical establishment of a century ago responded with an astonished, outraged and clearly disbelieving silence. Freud was conscious of being ostracized. However, sexuality stayed on the agenda and to this day, Freud's popular reputation rests on his supposed emphasis on sexuality. The following was quoted to me from a recent humorous newspaper article, and I offer it here because it epitomizes Freud's modern reputation:

Why did the chicken cross the road?

It depends who you ask.

Why did Freud say the chicken crossed the road?

Freud said that the reason you are interested in why the chicken crossed the road is because of your hidden sexual conflicts.

Describing some Christian attitudes to psychotherapy, Esau (1998) suggested that evangelical Christians may feel that the ‘psychological perspective of Freud ... was outside the realm of faith. It was viewed, alongside Darwinism, as the enemy of faith and the believer’. ‘Spiritual counsel was the means (of help) ... that was where deliverance would come ... evangelicals believed they were defending their faith by considering that the emotionally disturbed had sinned in some way ... the faithful had to remain faithful; the enemy was clear.’

In a nutshell, then:

- *Freud equals psychology.* Although psychologists scantily teach his theories, and many psychologists are doubtful about the scientific value of his theories and the clinical efficacy of his methods, he is still the best-known psychologist.
- *Freud is disreputable.* He wrote a lot about the importance for psychiatry, medicine and science of understanding sexual urges, therefore he was interested in sex.
- *Freud is anti-religious.* He actually said some very perceptive and positive things about religion, and Bettelheim (1983) has even argued that Freud’s entire psychoanalytic oeuvre was a spiritual venture. But Freud said too many naughty, though witty and plausible, things about religion to suit many of the devout, and fairly enough, the general thrust of his writing was not seen as sympathetic to religion.

We could say that Freud was the single most important force in creating a gulf between psychology and religion, and in causing any ventures in the psychology of religion to be seen as irreverent and destructive to religion.

However, we could also say that Freud was expressing and responding to a *Zeitgeist*. In the intellectual climate of the first half of the twentieth century, science was seen as concerned with the observable, and religion with the unobservable.

Therefore the second theme in the history of the relationship between psychology and religion is the view that *scientific psychology and religion cannot be reconciled*. There are several angles on this. The simplest is that empirically, religion was described (‘scientifically’) as a disappearing phenomenon, therefore not worth studying. It was (and to some extent still is) seldom written about in psychology books (see Figure 1.1). Religious behaviour and religious influences on behaviour

are not seen as worthy objects of scientific attention. Most psychology textbooks simply do not index religion. Psychiatry and religion have a parallel history of discord (Foskett, 1996).

In my undergraduate psychology degree, I can only recall one brief discussion of religion. I did my degree a very long time ago, in the early 1960s. At that time, Skinnerian psychology was considered quite important. I remember we had a lot of lectures about it. In the opening lecture, the lecturer explained carefully that a hungry rat could be placed in an apparatus called a 'Skinner box' (named after its inventor, B.F. Skinner). This box was a bleak and callous environment, with blank metal walls, relieved by (normally) just one lever, and one food box. A really exciting Skinner box might have two bars, or even deliver painful electric shocks through the floor, but normally one bar and one food box was the limit of entertainment. When the rat pressed the bar, a food pellet appeared. The lecturer explained that when the 'operant behaviour' (bar-pressing) was reinforced (with food) regularly and frequently (continuous reinforcement), the rat would bar-press rather slowly. If however reinforcement were random and *infrequent*, the rat would bar-press rapidly, eagerly, even frenziedly. My recollection is of the lecturer turning to the audience and smiling triumphantly. He said he thought that enthusiastic religious behaviour could be explained in terms of the reinforcement contingencies he had just described. In religion, rewards were random and infrequent, leading to eager or frenzied behaviour. I do not recall any other discussion of religion or religious behaviour in my undergraduate psychology course.

In recent years, as we shall see, psychologists have taken a much more sophisticated interest in religious behaviour, thought and feeling. Spilka *et al.* (1981) studied references to religion in introductory psychology textbooks in the 1950s compared to the 1970s. The mean number of citations of work about religion per volume was small – 4.6 in the 1950s, and even lower (2.6) in the 1970s. They detected two significant changes in the quality of treatment of religion between the 1950s and 1970s. There was a significant rise in the amount of neutral, objective treatment of religion, and a significant fall in negative explanations. There was also a small rise in the amount of actual research reported.

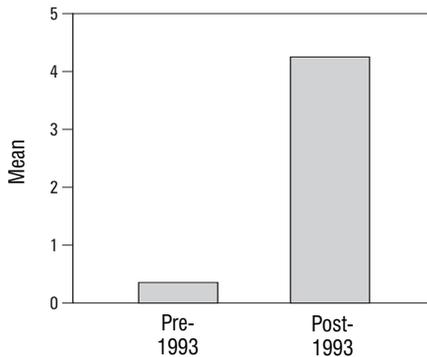
There are other signals of growing reconciliation between psychology and religion:

- A number of comments about psychology's (and psychiatry's) past neglect of religion have appeared, and concern that this neglect

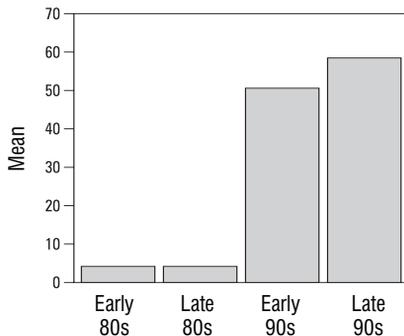
should be rectified (Neeleman and Persaud, 1996; Paloutzian, quoted in Hester, 1998).

- The number of references to religion and religious issues and influences is growing in psychology textbooks. Although Spilka *et al.* detected a drop between the 1950s and the 1970s, described above, there has been a rise since then. Thus my perusal of the indexing of religion in ten undergraduate textbooks on social psychology and on personality – two areas of psychology in which one would expect religion to be attended to – suggested an interesting change in the first half of the 1990s (Figure 1.1).
- The number of publications on psychology and religion is growing. Figure 1.2 suggests a surge in the first half of the 1990s, similar to the surge suggested in Figure 1.1.

*Figure 1.1 Mean number of references to religion per book, in undergraduate textbooks on social psychology and personality*



*Figure 1.2 Average annual number of publications in religion and mental health, 1991–1996 (based on Dein and Loewenthal, 1998)*



- There has been a number of recent attempts to integrate aspects of religion and psychology. One ambitious attempt is Watts and Williams (1988) *The Psychology of Religious Knowing*, in which the authors explore the relationship between contemporary cognitive psychology and religious knowing. Another is Spero's (1992) careful argument that one may need to accept God's existence to explain the facts of people's relationships with God. Grace and Poelstra (1995) produced a special edition of the *Journal of Psychology and Theology* exploring the integration of psychology and theology in undergraduate psychology courses.
- The psychology of religion can be seen as a genuine social scientific activity, and courses in this area are undertaken by students of any or no religious background. To quote an exchange between Paloutzian and Hester (Hester, 1998):

(Hester) 'Does one have to have religious beliefs to study the psychology of religion?'

(Paloutzian) 'Whether or not one holds personal religious beliefs, one can study the psychology religion. Doing research in the psychology of religion does not require holding religious beliefs yourself. The leading scholars in the area include those who are religiously neutral, Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Mormons, atheists, and unknowns. You no more have to be religious to study psychology of religion than you have to be depressed in order to study depression, or to be prejudiced in order to study racial attitudes'.

In essence, the initially poor relationship between psychology and religion has made it difficult for the psychology of religion to develop. However, an improvement in the relationship has caused – and is signalled by – a growing quantity and improved quantity of work on the psychological aspects of religion, and on the impact of religion.

## SPIRITUALITY AND RELATED ISSUES

Eventually, after a troubled start, the psychology of religion began to develop and flourish during the 1970s and 1980s. But as one trouble receded, another loomed, or is beginning to loom. The new set of difficulties concerns the issue of spirituality, and the view that it is something different or separable from religion (Zinnbauer *et al.* 1997).

Signs include Wulff's (1997) argument that spirituality is possibly a contemporary alternative to religion in today's pluralistic society.

Spirituality might be what all religious-cultural traditions have in common. But it may also be a divisive issue.

Helminiak (1996) argued that the study of spirituality can be undertaken scientifically, and is 'different from the psychology of religion as generally conceived'. Zinnbauer *et al.* found a number of features that distinguished adults who defined themselves as religious (and also spiritual), from adults who defined themselves as spiritual but not religious. The most noteworthy differences were that those who said they were spiritual but not religious were more likely to engage in New Age religious beliefs and practices, but were less likely to be engaged with the beliefs and practices of traditional religions.

These suggestions are indicative of the growing feeling that spirituality is possible outside the context of organized or traditional religion.

## GENDER

Public life and published life are predominantly masculine. This applies to the religious domain as well as to other areas. Saints and prophetesses and nuns can be female, but in the public arenas of religion, and in leadership roles, women are a minority. My desk is covered with books and journals and articles on the psychology of religion: over 80 per cent of the authors are men. Social-scientifically, the consensus seems to be that women's experiences may differ from the (masculine) 'norm'. Women's experiences of religion are private-domain, and they are harder to access.

In psychological studies, participants are often women, but the possibility of gender differences is often ignored. Where they have been attended to, gender differences are often described in ways that are pejorative to women. Notorious examples include Freud's suggestion that women's moral and religious development is weaker and more tenuous than that of men, and Kohlberg's (1969) claim that women's moral development is often less advanced than that of men. Gilligan (1993) made the vigorous claim that women's moral values were founded differently to those of men – men live in a world of individualistic assertion, women live in a world of caring. With good reason, Reich (1997) has asked if we need a theory for the religious development of women.

These are flickers of concern in an area of investigation in which the differences in quality between the social worlds and the experiences of women and men, girls and boys have often been overlooked.

## SUMMARY

Psychology of religion was defined as the study of religious behaviour, thought and feeling, but some difficulties of definition were noted. Difficulties in defining and measuring religion were also noted, and some examples of general measures of religiosity were given. Finally, three problematic areas for the psychology of religion were described: the so-called conflict between scientific psychology and religion, the new claim that spirituality and religion are distinct issues, and the lack of attention given to possible differences between the religious experiences and behaviours of men and women.

# 2 RELIGION AND PSYCHOLOGY

## THE INFLUENCE OF WESTERN CHRISTIANITY

Is the psychology of religion the psychology of Western Christianity? This question first came into my mind some years ago, when I first began reading on the psychology of religion. Based on his theories of personality and conditionability, H.J. Eysenck had suggested that religious attitudes and beliefs would be associated with introversion and neuroticism (Eysenck and Eysenck, 1985). Introversion involves low sociability and impulsivity, and neuroticism involves anxiety, depression, low self-esteem and tension (Eysenck, 1998). H.J. Eysenck thought that neurotic introverts would be conditioned more easily than other people, and thus be more susceptible to injunctions of all kinds, including religious injunctions. Numerous tests of H.J. Eysenck's suggestions were made, including those of Siegman (1963), who reported in the *British Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, that among Protestant students religiosity was associated with extraversion, while among Jewish students religiosity was associated with introversion.

For me this was a nice clear example of how relations between 'religion' and 'personality' could be quite different in different cultural-religious groups. In this case, Siegman reported exactly *reversed* relations between religion and introversion-extraversion among Protestants and among Jews.

As a postscript to Siegman's study, I should quote M.W. Eysenck's (1998) conclusion that when sex differences are partialled out, 'there is practically no convincing evidence that either extraversion or neuroticism is related to religiosity'.

But the moral of Siegman's early study may point to an enduring underlying difficulty in studying the psychology of religion. The difficulty is that the meanings of behaviours vary in different cultural-religious settings. Thus the interpretation and understanding of religion may be difficult for those with a 'Western' cultural framework, and, on a more subtle level, for those using the concepts and methods of 'Western' (Christian) psychology of religion (see box).

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### THE MEANING OF BEHAVIOUR IN DIFFERENT CULTURAL-RELIGIOUS SETTINGS

Loewenthal (1995) describes the following misunderstanding between orthodox Jews and mental health professionals. Mr and Mrs B had a son who was having some difficulties in school. He was not keeping up with the class, was very restless and disruptive, and was being difficult at home. The school suggested they should take their son to see a psychologist. Mr and Mrs B were very indignant at this suggestion because someone else that they knew had done this, and had met with a total misunderstanding of the behavioural norms and values of the community. Mr and Mrs B had heard that a psychologist had come to watch this other boy and saw him swaying backwards and forwards over his book. This is normative behaviour in strictly-orthodox Jewish boys' schools. It is encouraged particularly when boys are praying and studying religious texts. The psychologist was reported to have said that she thought the boy was disturbed because of the way he was swaying. When the parents of the swaying boy pointed out that all the boys do it, the psychologist was alleged to have said, 'Perhaps they are *all* disturbed'.

Firth (1997) describes the importance to Hindus of the good death, one for which adequate preparation has been made, and which takes place at a good time and in a good place. It is better to die on the ground than on a bed, and Firth describes the tragic contretemps that can happen in British hospitals when a dying Hindu manages to get out of bed in order to die. Harassed nurses rush to replace the patient in the correct place (bed), while the dying victim becomes deeply depressed or agitated that the efforts they are making to die properly are being thwarted by the uncomprehending medical staff.

An early twentieth-century view of a black woman's religious activity resulted in the following horrifying misinterpretation. Evarts (1914) described a young Afro-American woman working in domestic service. She developed a stomach disorder and could not afford an orthodox medical practitioner, so she went to a West Indian herbalist. The herbal treatment was unsuccessful, and the herbalist was reported to have made unwelcome sexual advances. The young

woman's behaviour became disturbed and she was sent to her sister's home, but did not calm down: '... She now became very sure that the herb doctor had put a spell on her and she read her Bible constantly to exorcise it. She was admitted to the Washington Asylum Hospital. While there she persisted in her refusal to eat or talk. She now thought the food was unholy and the people about her unholy. She read her Bible, and prayed all day long ...' Evarts continues with further details of this 'patient's' religious activities, with the strong implication that these were all indicative of 'dementia precox' (a diagnostic category roughly corresponding to schizophrenia). Even more chilling, is Evarts' comment that the case 'shows very well the primitive (sic) character of these people'.

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Are different religious traditions so different from each other that there can be no common ground in the ways in which psychologists understand them?

## RELIGIONS AND THEIR ACCOUNTS OF BEHAVIOUR, THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS

In the remainder of this chapter different religious traditions will be considered with respect to:

- the kinds of qualities and behaviours that might be valued, and considered healthy and normative;
- how these qualities and behaviours might be misjudged by outsiders;
- how this might affect psychological understanding of religion in that particular religious tradition.

Of course it is difficult to consider themes in major religious traditions without stereotyping, over-simplifying, and ignoring important variations and minority views within religious traditions. These dangers have to be risked in the hope of offering some useful generalizations.

Finally, we will consider whether there are any common themes in the different religious traditions, and if so, what they might be. Commonalities between different religious groups might make it possible to test conclusions and ask similar questions across different groups.

### *Buddhism*

Buddhism is one of the two major religious traditions of the East, with an estimated 150–200 million adherents worldwide. Although images of

saints and statues of Buddha are revered by Buddhists, this is not a polytheistic religion. In fact there is some scholarly debate whether Buddhism is theistic at all. Buddhism began about 1500 years ago in India, as a reaction against the instrumental, formalized, caste-dominated polytheism dominant at that time.

The two main forms of Buddhism are Theravada, which is regarded as a more classical and orthodox form of Buddhism, and Mahayana. Zen (meditative) Buddhism is a variety of Mahayana first practised in China and then developed in Japan. This form of Buddhism is perhaps the most widely known to many Westerners since it has been popularized in many English-language writings. The priestly life is esteemed in Buddhism, and this involves asceticism, discipline, and spending very large amounts of time on prayer and meditation. Most forms of Buddhism prescribe specific rituals and practices.

The fundamental teaching of Buddhism involves viewing an attachment to the world and its pleasures as the cause of pain. Self-mortification is also an extreme to be avoided. The founder of Buddhism, Gautama Buddha taught the 'middle path'. Life is fundamentally a process of suffering. As in Hinduism, transmigration and rebirth are not seen as progressive, and the central aim of religious belief and practice is to be liberated from attachment to the material. It is desire for the material that causes suffering. The eight-fold ('middle') path to freedom from suffering includes right thought, speech, action and mental attitudes. These lead to the cessation of pain, and to enlightenment, and nirvana, wherein the soul will not be reborn to further suffering.

Buddhist psychology is quite popular in the West (Valentine, 1989; de Silva 1996). In fact I passed a London bus yesterday advertising a perfume called Zen: the slogan suggested that if I bought it, I would be 'calm amid the chaos'. It has been suggested that religious practices and thoughts will enhance psychological well-being. Manne-Lewis (1986) describes the cognitive changes involved in enlightenment, which entails a profound cognitive restructuring and ultimately a state in which 'all personal constructs have been eradicated'.

De Silva (1996) describes two forms of Buddhist meditation. First, *samatha* (tranquillity), which involves progressive distancing from both external and internal stimuli, and second, *vispassana* (insight), which involves concentration exercises focusing on specific objects, and maintaining an undistracted mindfulness by which one becomes aware of all phenomena, and the impermanence of all things.

De Silva (1996), Shapiro (1982) and others have described various features of Buddhist psychology which are of interest to psychologists, and of possible therapeutic benefit. These include features of meditation, and methods of behaviour change such as using rewards to promote desirable behaviour.

Scotton (1998) has pointed out that Buddhist patients ‘seek to understand the meaning of (their) problem(s), and what failed in his or her consciousness that led to that difficulty’. Buddhist patients may place more emphasis on psychological–interpersonal–spiritual context in understanding psychological difficulties. Scotton also mentions that Buddhist patients with psychological problems may present what seems like a pathological passivity – in the eyes of the Western observer.

One might wonder whether the emphasis on achieving a state of enlightenment in which attachment to materiality is eliminated, and in which personal judgements are not valued, might lead to states which could be seen as indifferent and too unreactive – to observers from other cultures and religious traditions. Are the concepts and measures appropriate to Western psychology of religion appropriate to Buddhism? For example, would the following have similar meanings and values to Buddhists, as to the Christians for whom the items were devised:

- ‘I try hard to carry my religion over into all my other dealings in life.’ This item assesses intrinsic religiosity (chapter 6). It is from the Allport-Ross (1967) religious orientation scale. To what extent does Buddhism offer a way of relating to ‘other’ dealings in life, other than detachment?
- ‘What religion offers me most is comfort when sorrow and misfortune strike.’ This is an extrinsic religiosity item from Allport and Ross. Here we might ask whether ‘comfort’ is a category alien to Buddhism? Further, a Buddhist might comment that ‘sorrow’ and ‘misfortune’ are only the result of faulty perception.

### *Christianity*

Christianity provided the context for the development of the psychology of religion, and has by far the most adherents of the major religious traditions, with about 1,000 million people identified as Christians, mostly in Europe, the Americas and Australasia. Thus, Christianity dominates the economically dominant, ‘developed’ countries.

The major divisions of Christianity are into the Eastern and Western churches, and within the latter, into the Roman Catholic and the Protestant churches. The Protestant churches have fewer explicit regulations and doctrines than Roman Catholicism and Eastern Christianity. Protestantism is said to place greater emphasis on individual responsibility.

The fundamental belief is in the unity of God. The doctrine of the trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) is also central, as is the idea that the death of Jesus atoned for the sins of humanity. Jesus is seen as especially chosen by God. Roman Catholics, and many other Christians, also accept the 'Ten Commandments', involving belief in one God and prohibiting idol worship, murder, theft, envy and sexual immorality. The Ten Commandments are a noteworthy legacy from the Judaic origins of Christianity. Other Jewish (Old Testament) writings are also valued in Christianity.

Catholics are religiously obliged to fast on prescribed days, attend mass and abstain from unnecessary work on Sundays and holy days, confess sins regularly, contribute to the support of the Church and observe marriage laws. In Britain and the USA, several varieties of Protestantism have overtaken Catholicism in terms of numbers of adherents, and in terms of political influence. The fundamentals of Christianity, as just described, are not disputed in Protestantism. The main differences between Catholicism and Protestantism are that specific religious obligations are less firmly insisted upon in Protestantism. There is less investment of authority in the Church hierarchy, and greater emphasis on individual conscience. Between Protestant denominations, there are differences in doctrines, for example about the origins of sin, and how it is forgiven, and in emphasis upon love and joy.

There are a number of Christian groups distinguished by high degrees of active participation in group worship, including behaviours such as glossolalia ('speaking in tongues'), displays of grief at sinfulness, joy at being saved, and singing and dancing. Such evangelical/charismatic groups have a high proportion of Afro-Caribbean membership. One example of such a group is the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, which broke away from mainstream Methodism in the late eighteenth century as a result of race prejudice experienced by black church members. This charismatic style of Christianity is becoming increasingly popular among white people, and religious joy is a valued emotion in

many Christian circles. A number of new charismatic-style Christian religious groups have emerged in recent years, and it can be argued that Christianity has a historical tradition of giving rise to such groups (Bainbridge, 1997).

Another important psychological aspect of Christianity relates to dogmas regarding sin. Sin is seen as the result of the misuse of human freedom. Human wilfulness is to have and to enjoy, to turn to self and to the things of this world and away from God. Suffering is the result of sin. Salvation involves justification, the removal of sin and its effects by one or more of penance, indulgence, confession, absolution and forgiveness. (Dodge, Armitage and Kasch, 1964; Solomon, 1965; Eliade, 1985). Although suffering is not seen as a desirable end in itself, it is seen as a gateway to renewal and rebirth. Guilt and forgiveness are thus important processes in Christian psychology.

Another strong tradition in Christianity of considerable psychological interest is mysticism, described evocatively by a pioneer in the psychology of religion, Rudolf Otto (1917), as the awesome experience of the numinous. Mystical experience is the topic of many tracts and poetic works by Christian saints and mystics (Wulff, 1997). Awe and religious ecstasy are valued states in the Christian mystical tradition.

Some pioneers of modern psychiatry and humane psychiatric treatment were strongly Christian-influenced, for example Tuke, a Quaker. The psychology of religion itself evolved in the context of Christian (generally Protestant) culture. Notable and influential figures in the psychology of religion who were heavily influenced by their Christian background included William James (1902), Rudolf Otto (1917), Paul Tournier (see Cox, 1998), Gordon Allport (1950) and C.G. Jung (1958). Mormons (Latter-day Saints) have taken a keen interest in the development of the psychology of religion. Barlow and Bergin (1998) have suggested that some psychopathologies may be fostered by the Mormon lifestyle and beliefs, such as being a member of a minority group, mistrusting orthodox medicine, authoritarianism, and superstitious spiritualism. Defection may also lead to adjustment problems. However, alternatively, they suggest that Mormon beliefs and lifestyle may promote psychological health. Many of these observations might apply to other Christian groups.

### *Hinduism*

Hinduism is the religion of India, and in its broadest sense much of India's 500 million plus population may be said to be Hindu. There are

also Hindus scattered around the Far East and many other countries where Indians have settled.

Hinduism developed from earlier religions of the Indian subcontinent, and there are many varieties. Hinduism is a pluralistic religion, tolerating a wide range of beliefs and practices. Its chief characteristics are its polytheism, overlying a fundamental monotheism wherein the lesser divinities are subsidiary aspects of one God. This infinite principle (God) is truly the sole reality and the ultimate cause and goal. There is a rigid religiously sanctioned caste system, now said to be becoming more flexible.

Religious worship (*puja*) is carried out in a shrine in the home, usually by women. Regular prayer, fasting, good thoughts and deeds, pilgrimage and reverence for elders are all aspects of the religious duties of the pious Hindu (Juthani, 1998). Transmigration of souls and reincarnation are important aspects of Hindu belief. The ultimate goal is infinity (God), and the attainment of this goal is prevented by *karma* (rebirth); following death and a sojourn in heaven or hell, the soul is reborn into a physical form determined by actions in the previous incarnation. This process of rebirth (*samsara*) is seen as potentially endless, and not progressive in any way. Misfortunes are seen as an aspect of *karma*. *Karma* may be escaped by *marga* – emancipation. There are different types of *marga* suited to various types of individuals. The principal types of *marga* are duty, knowledge and devotion.

Possibly the most striking features of Hinduism of interest to the psychologist are:

- *attitudes to misfortune*, which could appear stoical, patient and resigned to observers from other cultures;
- *treatment of mental illness*. In rural communities, where most (80 per cent) of India's population live, tolerance for bizarre behaviour is very high. A mentally-ill person will be taken to a healer within the community, and Hindu tradition and texts offer a wide range of possible therapeutic interventions (Bhugra, 1996). If such treatment is not successful, it is regarded as the family's duty to bear with the person. Craissati (1990) observed that use of Western psychiatry is rare. Champion and Bhugra (1998) describe some of the belief systems and practices used by healers in India. Mental illnesses may result from life stress, or the 'evil eye' (envy, ill-will from others), spirit possession, or the consequences of a previous life. Treatments include prayer, herbal- and aromatherapy, and music.

## Islam

There are about 350 million Muslims, most of them Sunni. Another important group within Islam is the Shi'ite, with a third, smaller, mainly North African group, the Khawarij. Islam originated in the Middle East, where it is still the prevalent religion, but there are substantial numbers of Muslims in the Indian subcontinent and in some Far-Eastern countries, and there are said to be growing Islamic minorities in many developed countries. In Britain it is numerically the largest non-Christian religion (Clarke, 1988).

Islam is a monotheistic religion, and therefore by definition belief in God is a central tenet. In Arabic, Islam means submission to the will of God. There is a clear core of religious duties (the five pillars of Islam; Husain, 1998), which are relatively straightforward to specify. These include belief in God and the prophets, prayer, giving away a proportion of one's goods, fasting in the month of Ramadan, and pilgrimage. Modern Islam is said to originate with the prophet Mohammed, who is seen as a continuation of a line of prophets beginning with Adam, the first man.

The central feature of the Islamic view of sin is that sin involves forgetfulness of divine unity. The root of sin is pride and self-sufficiency. Reason is seen as playing an important role in the choice of right.

Islam has a long tradition of interest in mental health. The earliest recorded psychiatric institutions – established over a thousand years ago – were in Muslim countries. The mentally ill are viewed as 'the afflicted of Allah'. In the last decade a number of publications on the psychological aspects of Islam have appeared (El Azayem and Hedayat-Diba, 1994; Geels, 1996; Kose, 1996a, 1966b; Hedayat-Diba, 1997). One feature of some of these writings has been the emphasis on the psychological benefits of Islamic practice: 'Islam(ic) ... teachings have reference to care for the family, divorce and polygamy, concern for the welfare of parents and the aged, and concern for learning and work. Proscriptions against suicide, sexual perversions, crime and racial discrimination ... Muslims can enjoy healthy and balanced lives by following these teachings' (El Azayem and Hedayat-Diba, 1997). Muslims report that regular prayer (*salat*) is experienced as beneficial psychologically (Cinnirella and Loewenthal, 1999), and may prefer to try prayer and other religious means to alleviate psychological distress (Husain, 1998)

Esmail (1996) has argued that Islam offers 'a vision of community, self and self-realization which differ ... from the dominant philosophy of

the modern West'. Esmail emphasizes the relative importance of community and communal ties in Islamic life.

### *Judaism*

Numerically the smallest of the major religions, Judaism has had important influences on the development of the numerically and politically powerful traditions of Christianity and Islam. Worldwide there are 10–12 million Jews, mostly living in Israel, the USA and the former USSR, with smaller communities in many other countries.

Judaism is the oldest of the monotheistic religions. By definition, a central tenet is the belief in the unity of God. Jewish people are seen as the bearers of this belief. The Jewish people are obligated to practise a large number of different religious commandments, governing more or less the total life-style. Diet, sexual behaviour, work, business ethics and worship are among the areas to which religious law applies. Different Jewish groups may vary in degree of observance and in specific customs. A Jew is defined as one born from a Jewish mother, or who has converted according to Jewish law. Judaism is unusual among religions in that proselytization is generally not encouraged. Proselytization is not seen to be necessary for human betterment. Non-Jews are said to be righteous and to merit heavenly after-life if they believe in the unity of God and do not worship idols, are just, sexually moral, avoid cruelty and theft.

In recent years, world Jewry has come into conflict with the former Communist and Arab nations, and is beset with problems of secularization. However, there are signs of religious fervour in some sections, and of widespread strong attachment to Jewish tradition and history.

Religious scholarship is valued in Jewish tradition. There is a wide range of Jewish texts, ranging from the Pentateuch, through the Talmud and other legal texts, to the Kabbalistic and mystical literature. Most contain discussions of psychological and psychiatric interest.

Misfortune is seen as a warning to the individual to improve, and as a divine test of the individual; also as part of an overall divine plan in which everything is for the ultimate good. Misfortune is seen in Jewish mystical thought as part of a process involving reincarnation in which errors in previous incarnations are repaired – this repair process will achieve Messianic completion.

Features of contemporary Judaism that might have psychological impact include the beleaguered state of modern Israel, combined with the history of dispersion and persecution. Also important is the detailed

nature of practical religious law (whether accepted or rejected by any given individual), the value placed on scholarship, and the importance of marriage and the family for religious life (Levitz, 1992; Loewenthal, 1995; Cooper, 1996).

It is also important to note that Jews are heavily represented in the psychiatric and psychological professions, and much writing in the psychology of religion is by Jews. The psychology of religion may often be at least as much about Judaism as it is about Christianity. The classic works of Freud (1907, 1927, 1930), Erikson (1958), Maslow (1964) and Fromm (1950) are well-known examples.

### *Other religions*

There are many other traditional religions that have either fewer adherents or lesser impact on the world outside the community of adherents. They will not be considered here.

Other forms of religion include *religious syncretism*, in which beliefs and practices from different religious traditions in contact are blended. Syncretic religions have been described in parts of South America and the Caribbean, where some Christian practices have been combined with those of African (or other) religions, as in Cuban *Santería*. Perez Y Mena (1998) suggests that the European-Christian influence on such religions has been exaggerated.

Finally, we should mention *new religious movements (NRMs)*, ('cults') in which there has been rapid growth since 1960. Typically these have charismatic leaders, who require total devotion from followers, and that they give up their connections with family and friends, and many habits such as smoking, alcohol, promiscuity. Many of these movements involve communal living, and earnings are given over to the movement. There is often strong emphasis on meditation, mysticism and spiritual 'highs'. (Paloutzian, 1983; Galanter, 1989). Examples include the Divine Light Mission, the Universal Church of the Reverend Sun Yung Moon ('Moonies'), Rashneesh, and forms of Wicca (which claims to be a development of traditional witchcraft). The latter is one of several so-called manifestations of 'New Age spirituality', and attracting current interest are a number of millennial groups. Some New Religious Movements are based on the Far Eastern religions, and many are surrounded by strong controversies. Bainbridge (1997) offers excellent descriptions and discussions of several recent and contemporary religious movements (see box).

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Robert and Mary Ann originally trained as psychotherapists-clergy. They went on to attract friends into a form of psychological-spiritual therapy called Compulsions Analysis. Gradually the group formed close ties with each other, breaking away from the extended social network, and forming a tightly-knit group 'free from the social control that enforces conformity to the norms of the larger society'. Their new beliefs and practices centred around the central idea that people would 'naturally have the powers and wisdom of gods if these had not been stolen from them' perhaps in the intermissions between past lives. The right spiritual technology – psychological therapeutic exercises – can restore the person. The group renamed itself The Process, and Robert wrote a book describing how humanity is doomed, but 'we must be free', 'we shall be of the New Beginning'. The group relocated in the Bahamas, then returned to London to rescue under-age members who had been kidnapped by their indignant families. The group developed during the 1960s, flourished during the 1970s, and eventually fizzled out.

Bainbridge, 1997

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A number of suggestions have been made about the psychological implications of belonging to a new religious movement. Some claim that members are weaned off destructive habits (such as drugs and sexual promiscuity), and that there is no evidence that the members are psychologically unbalanced before or after (see e.g. Richardson, 1985). Opponents accuse NRMs of brainwashing their members, and exploiting them, sexually, financially and otherwise. In recent years, several NRMs have been responsible for killings – either mass suicide as in Jonestown, or 'terrorism' as when the AUM movement killed a number of members of the public in the Tokyo subway system. NRMs have distinct social-psychological characteristics. The most important are probably the salience of group identity, and the speed and totality with which fundamental social, cognitive and life-style changes are demanded. Barker (1996) has discussed the mental health implications of these and other features of NRMs.

### *Common themes*

We preceded this account of different religious traditions by asking whether the different religious traditions are so different from each other that there can be no common ground in the ways in which psychologists

understand them. The account of the different religious traditions has tended to emphasize what is distinctive about each tradition. But this should not be taken to mean that there is no common ground. Here are a few salient themes that can be found common to most, though not all, religious traditions:

- spiritual reality exists, and it is important to cultivate an awareness of this, for example by prayer, study, contemplation and other practices
- the source of spiritual and material reality (God) is also the source of guidance to the right way to live (religiously-based moral and ethical injunctions); more specifically this includes –
  - justice, kindness and sexual morality should be practised in social and family relationships;
  - psychological disequilibrium can be improved by attention to one or more of the above.

## SUMMARY

This chapter looked at the question of whether the psychology of religion is possible outside the Western Christian context. It is the case that the relations between psychological and religious variables differ in different cultural–religious contexts. It is also likely that some psychological measures might have different meanings in different cultural–religious contexts.

Given these provisos, it would appear that:

- there are psychological themes common to most or all religions;
- there may be particular psychological emphases and consequences in particular religious traditions;
- these psychological emphases and consequences may deserve closer psychological investigation.