

REVIEW ARTICLE

CONTEMPORARY METHODOLOGICAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS IN THE PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION

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Abstract: **Objective:** To review contemporary theoretical approaches and methodological strategies in the psychology of religion and identify emerging research directions. **Data Sources:** Recent peer-reviewed literature, theoretical works, and empirical studies on religion, spirituality, cognition, neuroscience, and mental health were reviewed. **Study Selection:** Studies were selected based on their relevance to conceptual advancements, methodological developments, and interdisciplinary contributions to the psychology of religion. **Summary of Contents:** The review discusses major conceptual models, including cognitive, attachment, existential, and neuroscientific perspectives, alongside quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods approaches. It also highlights cross-cultural research, digital religion, religious coping, and future priorities for progressing the field. **Conclusion:** The psychology of religion is steadily adopting interdisciplinary and culturally inclusive approaches. Subsequent studies should emphasize methodological pluralism, longitudinal designs, and integration of neuroscience and digital contexts to better understand religious and spiritual experiences.

Keywords: *Psychology of Religion; Spirituality; Neuroscience; Religious Coping; Cross-Cultural Psychology; Mixed Methods.*

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INTRODUCTION

The psychology of religion is a dynamic and interdisciplinary field that brings empirical study methodology of cognitive, social and personality psychology to bear on the depths of human religiousness (Emmons and Paloutzian, 2002). Since its early pre-paradigmatic days, the field has become a multi-level framework with a systematic approach to the problem of reductionism in the study of spiritual phenomena in a sense of both neurocognitive level and sociocultural level (Arystanbaeva and Kasimova, 2025).

It was based on some of the early philosophical research of such people as William James and Stanley Hall and has developed from the first philosophical studies to current attempts to unite a variety of quantitative and qualitative approaches to research. In the present scholarly debate, the importance of the ability to go beyond them, to work with the epistemological and ontological assumptions that these

approaches carry, so as to be able to respond to the growing complexity of the field. Recent research in the field is more inclined towards multi-level paradigm that encompasses both the traditional empiricist-analytical approach and the hermeneutical approach. This integration calls for an urgent reconsideration of methodological pluralism ranging from the cognitive neurosciences to cultural psychology and how they can better account for the complexity of the interaction between internal belief systems and external sociopolitical environments (Anjum and Aziz, 2024; Pak, 2020).

Investigators are more likely to clarify the historical debate between positivistic epistemologies and the subjective fullness of spiritual experience if they critically examine methodological, ontological and ethical assumptions which underlie the current modes of inquiry. The breadth of the field that can be encompassed in the term thus

requires a more synthetic approach between empirical hypothesis testing and a more nuanced interpretive approach, in order to overcome the reductionist naturalism. Scholars are now more inclined to see higher mental processes, including religious values, as always in relation to its historical and cultural context, meaning that hermeneutic traditions are now increasingly being brought into play to account for aspects of human experience lost in a purist positivist paradigm.

FIELD OVERVIEW

This is a truly interdisciplinary endeavor today which requires a multi-level approach that brings in elements of evolutionary psychology, neuroscience and cultural anthropology to chart the whole spectrum of religious phenomena (Elk and Alemán, 2016). Furthermore, research questions have turned to the adoption of sophisticated qualitative approaches to grasp the nuanced and subjective meaning of spiritual practices, which goes beyond quantitative measurements. Such methodological pluralism is critical to transcend the problematic typologies of 'religious' and 'spiritual' and instead explore the ways in which these typologies can meaningfully and usefully be used by individuals (Murphy *et al.*, 2022).

This shift to a "multi-level interdisciplinary paradigm" will open the way for the field to view religious world-views as equal partners in the scientific process instead of as targets for reductionist investigation.

This goes beyond simple methodological eclecticism: it is an 'Explanatory Pluralism' (Paloutzian, 2009) that requires the systematic synthesis of data from different levels of analysis to arrive at a unified multi-scaled description of the religious cognition. Overall, the discipline places itself in an advantageous position with respect to its utility to psychology as a whole by acknowledging the resemblance of religious meaning systems to any other meaningful systems (Paloutzian, 2017).

This scope is further enhanced by increasing cross-fertilization with allied human sciences which is required for more extensive research programs that may be able to traverse the very intricate paths of feedback between theory and methods.

A genealogical view of the discipline in the section following shows how the discipline has been developed over time, shedding light on fruitful research avenues both within and beyond the current paradigm: comparative studies of digital-native religions, a neuro-cognitive investigation of the transformative nature of the experience of the divine, and a research agenda on religious coping in underserved populations.

In particular, incorporating the Triple Network Model gives robust neuroscientific architecture to map the interaction between the saliency, executive control networks and default networks to support very profound spiritual transformations.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

This field has a history of this kind of evolution of early philosophical and theological speculations to a more clearly defined, empirical rigoristic clinical integration, which has been described as a "third wave" (Pargament, 2023). This has led to a rethinking of the earlier reductionist studies which saw religion as a form of pathology, and a greater focus on longitudinal empirical research which describes the complex relationship between religious participation and health. But, yet, as discussed before, the field has been historically limited by the hegemony of a positivist-empiricist paradigm, often at the expense of qualitative and first person perspectives of spiritual experiences (Coyle, 2008).

This methodological disconnect has remained in part because this discipline has long established its identity as a hard science, and often dismissed subjective spiritual experiences and in favour of an analysis of the operation of these constructs as meaningful and useful frameworks for individuals. In an effort to bridge this divide, contemporary scholars more and more reject the notion that the legitimacy of scientific knowledge depends on removing the past or denying lived experience.

Rather, the current research has focussed on the ways that the "insider" and "outsider" can enhance one another, promoting a dialogue between practitioner phenomenology and psychological theory. This methodological shift has the effect of imploring researchers to leave the singular and exclusionary ways

of working within frameworks of natural science and to adopt a pluralistic approach which critically engages with different religious and spiritual traditions (Porter *et al.*, 2022). The focus on theological wisdom is a step away from the field's traditional focus on neglecting theological perspectives that were necessary to give the field the ability to respond to the complexity of mind, body and soul.

COGNITIVE SCIENCE OF RELIGION

This subfield looks at the cognitive processes that give rise to the supernatural ideas, but moves attention to the recurrent and systematic cognitive architectures that allow the development of a religious belief (Barrett, 2007; McCauley, 2018).

In addition, attachment systems are being applied to understanding the role of early relationships with caregivers as internal working models impacting upon perceptions of God's presence and spiritual security. Further, existential and humanistic orientations relationship with the deity play a role of an approachable and supporting figure while anxious and avoidance-related orientation tend to be related with perceived distance or conditional benevolence of the deity.

Moreover, studies focusing on the minimally counterintuitive concept imply the cognitive properties of belief systems are conducive for retaining information and the cultural dissemination of information (Plante *et al.*, 2023). The existential psychological literature builds on these cognitive foundations, and explores how such religious frameworks can serve as "existential buffers" against mortality salience, and as sources of "life-coherence" in the inevitable life change (Viftrup, 2017; Watts, 2012).

In addition to these cognitive architectures, researchers are now investigating how these existential buffers can interact with the particular kind of ontologies of different worldviews to alter responses to suffering and trauma (Nelson and Slife, 2024).

ATTACHMENT APPLICATIONS

Presently, the relationship between the two is examined; namely, how the two primary attachment styles relate to how parental characteristics project onto the conception of

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God. In particular, researchers are looking at how secure attachment leads to experiencing God as a close, helpful presence. By contrast, anxious/avoidant styles are related to perceived distance from or conditional benevolence of God. In addition, the longitudinal studies are designed to see if these internal working models are stable or change over the years, and if there are noteworthy spiritual experiences that can lead to "earned security" in one's relationship with the divine.

In the future, investigations might involve a person-centred perspective in order to study these representations of God as multi-faceted and dynamist rather than just as cognitive constructs and attachment to feelings. These longitudinal studies indicate that religious behaviour might be a way of self-regulating, with the divine again providing a 'secure base' that helps to alleviate existential suffering and ensure psychological resilience.

EXISTENTIAL PERSPECTIVES

In this field of research, the question is investigated whether religious meaning-making is an important psychological mechanism as a way to distract from knowledge of death and limited life (Fortuin, 2021). Researchers can study how, using Terror Management Theory, religious symbols serve as cultural buffers that can help to alleviate death anxiety and increase self-esteem when death threats are present (Vail *et al.*, 2009).

Furthermore, the study seeks to uncover the underlying motivations and contexts behind the use of particular spiritual practices, as they can evoke the experience of synchronicity and subjective meaning, and thus promote a person's ability to cope with life's uncertainties (Russo-Netzer and Icekson, 2026). In addition to these, humanistic models also explore the potential of intentional activity for religious well-being in terms of opportunities for eudaimonic well-being, that is, opportunities for a coherent sequence of events in which to process life-changing transitions (Ramsay *et al.*, 2018).

Incorporating these existential variables with frameworks of attachment, researchers have come to increasingly see systems of meaning-making as the link between secure representations of the divine and stable psychology (Çınaroğlu, 2023; Granqvist *et al.*,

2009). This sense of a 'responsive divine presence' is an existential sense of ontological security which, combined with cognitive-affective information, can be helpful to scholars in better explaining how a responsive divine presence becomes an ontological security that is fundamental and can last even in the midst of the most acute crisis events (Bradshaw *et al.*, 2010; Cherniak *et al.*, 2020).

EMERGING RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Future research should focus on longitudinal studies of the effects of religious activities on well-being outcomes across different developmental periods to gain a better understanding of specific modulations by religion (Chen and Vander Weele, 2018). In addition, empirical studies should investigate how internal working models of the Divine will help people to control their emotions during crisis situations.

Furthermore, research is needed on the interaction between identity formation and meaning making, and how meaning is made after transformative spiritual experiences when the self-concept reconsolidates. This kind of research would be enhanced if there were interdisciplinary interaction between psychological researchers and religious scholars in order to provide a more phenomenologically accurate representation of constructs of the "spiritual self."

Furthermore, scientists should investigate the "darker side" of these constructs, that is, whether, and to what extent, inner struggles and religious conflict with God can unintentionally have a harmful impact on psychological functioning, ultimately leading to lack of psychological resilience (Pargament and Lomax, 2013).

SPIRITUALITY AND MENTAL HEALTH

Future studies need to move beyond distress indicators to the investigation of outcomes with a more theoretical link to spiritual experiences, including sense of coherence, post-traumatic growth, and benefit finding (Garssen *et al.*, 2020). An additional important point to consider by clinical researchers is the possibility of incorporating spiritual-struggle assessments into a standard psychological assessment, especially for highly religious communities (González-Rivera and Álvarez-Alatorre, 2025).

In addition, there is a need for empirical studies to examine the lasting effects of the interventions that incorporate spirituality in reducing the symptoms, most specifically in clinical populations with spiritual distress in order to enhance evidence-based approaches to integrating spirituality in psychiatric care (Pargament and Abu-Raya, 2007).

Furthermore, exploring the means by which certain virtues like benevolence and integration of religion moderate the course of these struggles can shed light on the reasons for some to experience such significant growth while others experience continued decline (Desai and Pargament, 2013).

RELIGIOUS COPING MECHANISMS

Research should more systematically discriminate between positive religious coping – using faith as source of support and/or meaning – and negative religious coping – perceiving spiritual punishment or abandonment. This integration is important because recent evidence suggests that the multidimensional nature of religious coping (the positive and negative dimensions) may be overlooked in the assessment of religious coping and the ways it relates to symptom development (Cheng and Ying, 2023).

IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Future studies should focus on the ongoing maturation of religious identity at adolescence and on a developmental link between parents' religious beliefs and adolescents' religious commitment by studying the mediation of religious identity integration. Due attention, especially on the role of peer socialization and engagement with religious community, should be given to this developmental process.

Additionally, researchers need to explore the ways the internalization of these beliefs can (or cannot) coalesce to create a sense of self, especially for children growing up with multiple cultural, religious and secular identities. To explore these developmental pathways, person-centred methodologies to understand the different profiles of adolescent spiritual involvement are needed (Longo *et al.*, 2017).

CROSS-CULTURAL INVESTIGATIONS

Comparative studies should be conducted to compare the psychological effects of the challenges faced by members of different

faith groups and the ways in which different theological frameworks and practice of rituals affect them in terms of psychological resilience and character development (Mulavu *et al.*, 2026). Such researches are necessary to focus on non-Western centered paradigms, and need to stress situated experiences of practitioners in non-hegemonic cultural contexts (Dein *et al.*, 2012).

Furthermore, the study of the religious identity of migrants and what happens to it when they are forced to leave familiar communal structures may show whether the migrant becomes more individualistic in his or her religious viewpoints, or produces adaptive, hybrid religions.

COMPARATIVE RELIGIOUS STUDIES

Empirical investigations should address the different ritualistic practices (e.g., meditation, liturgy, communal prayer) to assess universalities in psychological responses to different rituals and whether they invoke universal neuro-affective regulation. The link between these cross-tradition findings and secularization research can help researchers determine whether a functional replacement of institutional involvement in modern societies in regard to these underlying cognitive needs exists.

(Norenzayan *et al.*, 2014) Such studies would need to specifically focus on the role of secular mindfulness and non-theistic wellness paradigm in connection with the psychological scaffolding which traditional religious institutions had provided (Haidar *et al.*, 2023). In addition, scholars ought to examine the change from communal to individual spirituality and how this change requires a reconfiguration of purpose, especially since this shift from communal to individual spirituality may affect the moral development of emerging adults.

GLOBALIZATION EFFECTS

Research needs to explore how the globalised migratory movements affect traditional religious socialization, whereby the migrants have to renegotiate their identities in more and more secular and pluralistic host societies (Frederiks, 2015). It is important to see if these migrations with identity change serve as a way of catalysing psychological development or create spiritual distress through the disruption of established community-based support systems (Bhugra

and Becker, 2005) in these longitudinal studies.

INDIGENOUS BELIEF SYSTEMS

Future studies should focus more on the psychological research that upholds the uniqueness of indigenous spiritual traditions, and leaves behind colonial representations of them as tools for maintaining ancestral identity (González *et al.*, 2021). Academicians should give more attention to longitudinal studies to examine the barriers that arise in aggregating empirical findings due to the lack of congruence between conceptualization and operational definition (Voas, 2015).

Further, while adaptation of current Western psychological concepts to incorporate non-Western spiritual practices is important, an 'ontological turn' calls for a research focus and framework that is led by indigenous communities to better capture these nuanced spiritual paradigms (Blume and Diop, 2025; Ting *et al.*, 2025). This entails a relational approach that accords with indigenous knowledge systems, that is, a methodology that does not impose a clinical gaze on spirituality with a western 'standard' or norm (Blume and Diop, 2025; Ting *et al.*, 2025).

The utilisations of these relational worldviews as foundations for inquiry enable scholars to successfully decolonise the implicit bias embedded in the conventional psychological tools while furthering the interpretation of multiple approaches to articulating meaning and well-being in communities [Blume and Diop, 2025; Ting *et al.*, 2025]. Therefore, future empirical designs should focus on comparing approaches to spiritual development that highlight the different socio-cultural factors that influence spiritual development as opposed to using uniform measures of religiosity (Carr *et al.*, 2014; Kor *et al.*, 2019).

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES

Future research should focus on the creation of standardized instruments that tap the multidimensional nature of religious belief with the diverse populations in a valid cross-cultural manner (Benson, 2004; Stoppa and Lefkowitz, 2010). These elegant tools need to overcome the current incongruity in conceptualization and operationalization that make it difficult to pool results of empirical research (DeHaan *et al.*, 2011).

In conjunction with these quantitative developments, researchers should include qualitative interview designs that would capture more complex, subtle lived experiences of spirituality that are not addressed by self-report scales (Walsh *et al.*, 2018).

QUANTITATIVE SURVEY DESIGNS

To promote psychometric rigor, investigators ought to study cross-cultural equivalence of the religious measures in question, and the structure of constructs like orthopraxy or communal belonging should remain the same across linguistically and denominationally diverse groups. In addition, researchers should step beyond simple, unidimensional self-report measures in order to more fully account for the complex nature of experiences of spirituality by including measures of spiritual emptiness, among others.

Furthermore, using mixed methods designs can help connect the big picture of population-level assessments with the individual's experiential reality (King and Hemming, 2012), especially given that religious identity is not a binary, but exists as a continuum (Cragun *et al.*, 2025).

To overcome the "view from nowhere" bias, it is important to take religious and spiritual factors into account in the context in which they function (Park *et al.*, 2016). Currently, there are few studies on adapting psychometric instruments for use in non-Western settings like China, and this should be the focus of future research to better understand the psychometric properties of instruments in non-Western settings (Wang *et al.*, 2024).

This involves adapting the scale items that capture a moral- and religiously sanctioned worldview to fit with a worldview current in other parts of the world, like the Middle East, where there may be different local moral and religious norms that do not correspond to the secularized norms typically used in the scale.

QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW METHODS

The researchers need to use a phenomenological approach to direct them to the idiographic structures of religious experience and enable the research participants to express the internal essence of their experience in terms of their own language (Lindahl *et al.*, 2017).

Such narrative-based approaches are critical to access more implicit manifestations of religiousness and more experiential features that are not accessible via structured self-report scales (Sharp *et al.*, 2019). Semi-structured interviews and life-history narratives can be used to plot the unfolding of personal faith and spiritual coping and the path of meaning-making in the context of individual trauma. These qualitative methods play a crucial role in supplementing traditional quantitative approaches and drawing out the multi-dimensional and intricate aspects of spirituality, which are difficult to categorize in simple quantitative analyses (Surbakti *et al.*, 2024).

MIXED METHODS DESIGNS

Mixed-methods designs which combine qualitative and quantitative data enable more detailed interpretation of the psychological phenomenon studied, especially when subjective data (narratives) are used to inform the interpretation of large-scale quantitative data. Triangulation strategies are especially important here because one can cross-check amongst the quantitative latent class groupings, and with the lived, first person empirical stories from the participants in order to get a more rounded empirical picture.

This deliberate integration of these epistemologies can alleviate the problems that nominalists can face in their attempts to represent spirituality as culturally transcendent and therefore to miss the idiosyncratic aspects of it. Moreover, this integration enables a convergence approach, which recognizes universal characteristics of religiosity and also the cultural specificities which influence the expression of religion (Demmrich, 2024).

Finally this should be enriched by introducing 'Explanatory Pluralism' to make sure that data integration can go beyond parallel presentation to a proper synthesis where conflicting findings can be reconciled.

This move towards explanatory pluralism needs to go together with an ontological turn which critically examines how our basic notions of self and the divine are being framed with "Western" presuppositions (Pak, 2020).

FUTURE RESEARCH PRIORITIES

Researchers should explore the way in which online communities can act as new crucibles for today's religious experience, examining the ways that online communities do or do not enable the expression of religious identity as a community.

Additionally, investigators should use techniques of neuroimaging to help determine the neural correlates of spiritual transcendence, namely how the activity of the default mode network and prefrontal cortex relates to the peak religious experience. Last but not least, there is a desperate need to expand empirical research to less studied populations such as Muslims and atheists in order to fix the biases in the field and improve inclusive understanding of belief in psychology (Ho and Ho, 2007).

NEUROSCIENTIFIC PERSPECTIVES

In addition, future studies could include the neuroscience approach to fully understand the physiological aspect of these experiences. Brain-imaging research may be able to create a crucial empirical link between subjective spiritual experiences (e.g., experiences of transcendence or awe) and neural activity and pathways (Rim *et al.*, 2019). Functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) or electroencephalography can be used to study if these neural markers are different physiologic signatures of different religions.

Furthermore, the investigation of these neural pathways in relation to underserved and non-Western populations is needed to transcend the Eurocentric models of the neurosciences of religion in use today (Pargament, 2023). It is important to broaden the scope of this research, especially to historically underrepresented and under-resourced communities like indigenous groups, migrants who have been pushed out, and rural areas, to diversify the data sets consulted in this research, and to overcome geographical biases that are already at work (Watts, 2024).

Beyond simple localization, the combination of the Triple Network Model can help researchers investigate the interaction between the salience network, central executive and default mode networks to dynamically explain how they modulate spiritual states. In addition, predictive coding

models offer a powerful way of conceptualizing how religious observances serve as high-level priors and reduce prediction errors in an uncertain environment, leading to better models of mystical experiences (Houran and Schofield, 2023; Mosurinjoh *et al.*, 2023).

UNDERSERVED POPULATIONS

Last, attention is needed to correct the over-representation in the past of Western type samples. Future research needs to be conducted to include giving a voice to those who have so far not been included, such as those from non-Western or economically marginalised communities to capture the true diversity of faith globally. This adoption of this inclusive perspective is not only a moral one, it is also a methodological one: it is necessary to consider religious dimensions within their particular cultures and socio-ecological contexts.

The analyses should be person-centred and inductive with different sets of groups going outside the standard typologies to find out what distinct and setting-specific latent classes of religiosity are there? (Pearce *et al.*, 2013). To break free of old nomothetic traditions, the needs to be done by means of different methodological approaches (hierarchical cluster analysis, bifactor models).

However, current research has not included them in the neurophysiology models, and although there are many existing studies examining neural activity in individuals belonging to a particular faith, these studies have not been particularly large or varied in their demographics, which limits the possibility of fruitful variation in the mechanisms among different faith traditions (Walter and Koenig, 2023), (Forman and Wald-Fuhrmann, 2024).

Furthermore, doing more research on spiritual development that focuses on longitudinal studies of spiritual development in populations with poor mental health and in disadvantaged and/or economically impacted populations will be important for future research of the relationship between mental health and various forms of spirituality (Miller *et al.*, 2018). An

intersectional approach to address intersection-specific identities and lived experiences in the context of community engaged research and designing will be used to ensure these groups are not simply studied, but are integral participants in the research and design, increasing the generalizability and ecological validity of neuro-psychological findings (Weng *et al.*, 2020).

DIGITAL AGE RELIGION

The researchers should explore the role of social media as a “digital cathedral” and examine the influence of algorithms on curating content that influences the spiritual identity of young people and the dissemination of religious ideologies. Further, exploring the psychology of such parasocial relationships with religious personalities can shed light on the mimicry and differences between virtual communities and the traditional charismatic authority structure.

Moreover, future research needs to consider the affective dimension of such interactions, next of content analysis, in order to gain insight into how platforms' affordances and design architectures impact the user's religious experience, depending on the platform. This calls for an interdisciplinary perspective, using sociological concepts on charismatic authority to the particularities of digital engagement, and shedding light on the processes in between the sacred and the profane (Carvour *et al.*, 2025).

Furthermore, given the increasing availability of open-access databases, scholars should make use of this to carry out cross-cultural analyses, which would provide an overview of these digital trends across different socio-political contexts (Davis *et al.*, 2022; Scott *et al.*, 2019). Increasing this investigation will further uncover the ways in which these online communities enable important support networks for people experiencing spiritual crises in their increasingly secular, polarized world (Exline *et al.*, 2024).

CONCLUSION

Incorporating these neuroscientific, cultural and digital insights is crucial to develop a more nuanced picture of the psychology of religion that considers not only the biological nature of human cognition but also the

flexible and hypermediated character of contemporary spiritual life as well (Marei, 2024; Zmigrod *et al.*, 2018). A more inclusive, technologically-savvy research agenda will bring the field closer to understanding how digital modalities can transform the lives of people and their spiritual and mental health throughout the lifespan (Park *et al.*, 2024). In the future, it is crucial for the field to bridge these cognition gaps and apply them in the quickly changing digital world, where new practices are fundamentally altering the human experience (Alkhouri, 2024; Ergen, 2023).

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