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## RELIGIONS INFLUENCE WORLDVIEWS; WORLDVIEWS INFLUENCE BEHAVIOR: A MODEL WITH RESEARCH AGENDA

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Mark E. Koltko-Rivera

An emerging trend in public discourse is a renewal of interest in psychological explanations of the phenomenon of religion. I shall point out some problems with that trend, one of which is that it diverts attention from a more interesting issue: *religious explanations of psychology* (i.e., how religion influences individual and social psychological phenomena). I shall focus upon this more interesting issue, and how it might be addressed through the use of the construct of *Weltanschauung*, or worldview. It has been asserted that “within the psychology of religion, the cry for good theory remains at the level of cacophony” (Spilka, Hood, Hunsberger, & Gorsuch, 2003, p. 539). My ambition here is to answer that cry in a useful way. I shall conclude with some suggestions for research.

### The Revival of Psychological Explanations of Religion

In recent years, one may have noticed a resurgence of interest in a venerable question: on a fundamental level, how might we explain religion and religious phenomena? In other words, why does religion exist? Two relatively new ways of addressing this question have come into prominence. One involves neuropsychology, and looks at the neurobiological manifestations of religion, belief, and transcendent experience (e.g., Faber, 2004; Harrington & Zajonc, 2006; McNamara, 2006; Tremlin, 2006; see also Monastersky, 2006). Another takes the approach of evolutionary psychology (e.g., Atran, 2002; Boyer, 2001; Dennett, 2006b; McNamara, 2006). Much of this work is quite scholarly. However, I see at least three problems with these literatures: (1) an undeserved sense of surprise, which results in certain practical difficulties; (2) an unwarranted presumption, which results in some very serious theoretical difficulties; and, (3) the likelihood that these literatures sidestep a much more important issue involving religion.

### An Undeserved Sense of Surprise

What do I mean when I say that these literatures demonstrate an ‘undeserved sense of surprise’? Take, for instance, the neuropsychological literature to which I have referred. The most fundamental and justifiable claim of this literature is that religious activities and cognitions, such as various types of meditation, seem to be characterized by distinctive or

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identifiable brain states and activation patterns. This is important to know—but did we really expect things to be otherwise? After all, we have long had research reports of differing patterns of brain activity during Indian yogic exercises and Japanese Zen meditation, research that was reprinted in a popular collection published well over 30 years ago by Charles Tart (e.g., Anand, Chhina, & Singh, 1961/1972; Kasamatsu & Hirai, 1966/1972). The humanistic and, especially, the transpersonal psychologists have been saying this sort of thing for many years.

Please do not misunderstand me. This research is worth the highest degrees of attention, careful thought, and generous funding, in order to shed light on the precise details of neurological function. However, we need to recognize that there is a substantial degree of history here. An acknowledgement and a deep understanding of this history are prerequisite to building upon it, surpassing earlier achievements, and avoiding the pitfalls that trapped earlier explorers. Although there is not space here to explore this issue in depth, there are historic pitfalls that have inhabited the territory of brain research and religion, scientific and political pitfalls that the newer generation of researchers would do well to learn and to avoid.

### Unwarranted Presumption

There is a worse problem, to which I have referred as an unwarranted presumption in these literatures. By this, I mean that some of these researchers seem to feel that they have actually ‘explained religion’ in some fundamental sense, when all they have done is show that religious cognition has similarities to other forms of cognition. This is a fault of some in the neuropsychological camp, but even more so of those in the evolutionary psychology party. Several writers in each of these areas seem to feel that, because they can devise plausible scenarios for how religion or religious ideas *might* take the form they do (because of adaptational pressures or the function of the nervous system), therefore they have demonstrated the ‘real’ foundation of religion. This is not explaining religion—it is explaining religion *away*, and in that sense is no better than the efforts of the many others over the last century or so who have sought to explain religion away, essentially on ideological grounds (e.g., Freud, 1927/1961b, 1930/1961a). Contrary to Daniel Dennett (2006a), the charges of reductionism and scientism (see Wieseltier, 2006) have not lost their meanings, and these are charges of which much of the recent work in this field is guilty.

Yes, some forms of religious cognition and behavior seem to ‘show up’ on brain scans. Yes, one can come up with post hoc adaptational explanations of religious phenomena. However, we need to recognize that these findings do not really tell us very much about religion at all. Come, now: *all* human behavior and *all* human cognition seem to be mediated by the central nervous system, often in distinctive manners for different types of behavior and cognition, and *all* human behavior and cognition are subject to adaptational pressures. We should not expect religion to be any different, regardless of how religion actually came to be.

Let me put it to you this way. We discover nothing special about the Bible, the Book of Mormon, or the Bhagavad-Gita, by learning that they are all printed on paper. Similarly, we discover nothing fundamental about religion itself by learning that some forms of religious behavior and cognition have neurological underpinnings—imagine that!—or adaptational significance. Similarly distinctive underpinnings seem to exist for just about every form of human cognition and behavior.

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Perhaps most importantly, there are certainly no metaphysical conclusions to be drawn from this scholarship. It is troubling to see that some authors on both sides of the rationalistic divide think otherwise (see Monastersky, 2006).

### **The Better Question: “How Does Religion Explain Psychology?”**

Perhaps the greatest problem with the aforementioned literatures involves another issue altogether. At a high level of abstraction, many of these authors make the claim that, in some way or another, psychology explains religion. This is an interesting concept, albeit an unprovable and perhaps even unscientific one. However, I consider this a distraction from an issue that I think is far more useful to contemplate: the degree to which religion explains psychology. Let me explain what I mean by that.

It has been a distinct pleasure to see the emergence in recent years of another kind of literature about religion. This is a literature demonstrating, on the basis of rigorous research, that religion really does make a difference in the lives of religious adherents, sometimes for good, sometimes for ill. For example, my predecessor as the recipient of this award last year, Vassilis Saroglou (2006), demonstrated through a series of empirical studies that there is a limited but real way in which religiosity is associated with prosocial behavior. At the same time, even a cursory familiarity with history, whether one is reading an account of the medieval Crusades, or the front page of *The New York Times*, will reveal that religion can be associated with intense brutality and cruelty, the ultimate in antisocial behavior.

In this new century, different peoples and cultures are coming into contact with increasing frequency, and in the unlikeliest of places. In addition, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction has made the stakes of the outcomes of our multicultural contacts higher than ever before in human history. In this context, my position is that by far the more urgent practical question is, how does religion explain psychology? For example, how does religion influence the founder of a hospice for lepers, on the one hand, and the leader of a cell of suicide bombers, on the other? How does religion justify self-sacrifice in one context, and infanticide in another? How does religion help some people avoid drug and alcohol abuse? How is it that religion helps some people to cope with their stressors (see, e.g., Pargament, 2001)? How does religion *increase* some people's stressors? To state the question in its most general form, how does religion influence individual personality function, cognition, and behavior, as well as all aspects of interpersonal and social process? In other words, how does religion explain psychology? This is where I think the action is, at least in the early part of this fine and tortured and promising and threatening new century, and it is the question on which I shall focus for the rest of my presentation.

This is not such a new question. Twenty years ago this year, at this very conference, the then-president of this Division, Richard D. Kahoe (1987), raised this matter, in his call for “a radical psychotheology.” It was Dr. Kahoe's position that differences in religious beliefs made for differences in cognition and behavior, and he exhorted his fellows in the Division to find out more about these differences, and why and how they occur. How does religion explain psychology? This is an excellent question today, perhaps even more pressing than when Dr. Kahoe expressed it.

In considering the question of how religion influences individual and social psychology, it is worthwhile to consider how a similar challenge has been approached by another branch of our discipline: cross-cultural and multicultural psychology. For many years, psychologists have encountered research reports of cultural and ethnic differences in this or that psychological characteristic. Such findings, however, raise more questions than they answer. “Culture” and “ethnicity” are inherently multidimensional constructs,

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comprising everything from the details of a shared history and language to preferred foodstuffs and styles of attire, and much else beyond. It tells us little to say that a study found ‘cultural’ or ‘ethnic differences.’ What *aspects* of culture or ethnicity were implicated in these differences? What was the nature of the association? If causal, then how did which aspects of culture or ethnicity cause these differences? (See Betancourt & López, 1993, and Sue, 1999.)

One may make much the same case regarding religion. “Religion” also is an inherently multidimensional construct. For example, Glock’s (1962) model posits five dimensions to religion:

- the *ideological* dimension, which refers to religious beliefs;
- the *ritualistic* dimension: religious practices;
- the *experiential* dimension: mystical experience and religious emotion;
- the *intellectual* dimension: religious knowledge; and,
- the *consequential* dimension: the ethical and attitudinal consequences of religion.

In any given research situation where differences related to religion are found, which dimensions of religion make the difference? Perhaps most importantly, how do these dimensions make a difference?

Contemporary researchers in psychology of religion grapple with these issues. As Dr. Saroglou pointed out, “an important area for future research is the study of the *underlying psychological mechanisms* that may explain *why* religious people tend to be prosocial” (Saroglou, 2006, p. 6, emphasis added). In grappling with issues like this, some very interesting answers have begun to emerge, answers to which I have my own small contribution to make. This contribution focuses on a particular psychological construct, one that has been addressed by a surprising array of scholars over the last century (see review in Koltko-Rivera, 2004). The construct to which I am alluding is *Weltanschauung*, or, in plain English, *worldview* (Koltko-Rivera, 2000, 2004, 2006b).

### The Worldview Construct

[Note: much of this section quotes and summarizes portions of Koltko-Rivera, 2004, which is otherwise uncited.]

The writer Anaïs Nin might have been summarizing worldview theory when she wrote, “we don’t see things as they are, we see them as we are.” More prosaically, human cognition and behavior are powerfully influenced by sets of beliefs and assumptions about life and reality, or, as we may put it, by worldviews.

A worldview is a way of describing the universe and life within it, both in terms of what is and what ought to be. A given worldview is a set of beliefs that includes limiting statements and assumptions regarding what exists and what does not, what objects or experiences are good or bad. An individual’s worldview defines for that person what that person can know or do in the world, and how it can be known or done. A worldview defines not only what goals are possible to pursue in life, but what goals *should* be pursued. Worldviews include assumptions that are unproven, even unprovable, but these assumptions are superordinate, in the sense that they provide the epistemic and ontological foundations for other beliefs within a belief system.

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Let us consider some examples of worldview beliefs. Are human beings basically good, or evil, or both, or neither? (Consider the effects of such beliefs on trust or altruism.) Can basic character and personality change radically, or are these essentially fixed at some point in the life span? (A therapy client's beliefs here might affect therapy outcome.) Do people choose their behavior freely, or is behavior fundamentally determined? (Compare B.F. Skinner's and Carl Rogers's programs in this light.) What are valid sources of knowledge? (No doubt many supporters of evolutionary theory and intelligent design differ here.) Is it most important to support the traditions of the past, enjoy the present moment, or plan for the future? What is the ultimate source of moral guidelines? How should one relate to one's reference group, or to authority figures, when differences of priorities or direction arise? How tolerant should one be of people who believe fundamentally different things from what is believed by one's group of reference (whatever that may be)? To what extent does one's reference group possess the truth? To what extent do *other* groups possess the truth? Is this world essentially a purely material object, or is it immersed in a spiritual domain, as well? Is it true that, as a television series tag-line once put it, "there is no master plan"—or, is there one after all? What is the purpose of sexual behavior? What is the meaning of life?

These are a few of over three dozen dimensions of worldview that I described in a recent article on the psychology of worldviews (Koltko-Rivera, 2004). One might imagine that such foundational beliefs have potential implications for a wide variety of personal and interpersonal behaviors, for matters of civic and economic importance, and even for international war and peace. The worldview construct is worth investigating in many subfields of psychology, including the psychology of religion.

In an attempt to provide a coherent picture of the worldview construct, in that article (Koltko-Rivera, 2004) I proposed a collated model of worldview dimensions, calling upon a large body of literature. Many dimensions in this model—perhaps all of them—are relevant to the psychology of religion. Over three dozen dimensions are far too many to discuss in detail here. However, the worldview dimensions that I identified in that article form seven groups, which are worth summarizing:

- The *Human Nature* group includes beliefs about the essentials of human nature: Is it good or evil, changeable or fixed in stone, and so forth.
- The *Interpersonal* group involves beliefs about the proper or natural characteristics of interpersonal relationships and human groups. For example, is a linear or a lateral authority structure better; should we be individualist or collectivist; should we cooperate, compete, or disengage; are very different Others tolerable or not, and so on.
- The *Cognition* group includes beliefs regarding thought and mind. For example, is intuition a reliable source of information? Is science?
- The *Will* group involves beliefs about the telic, purposeful function in human life, including such topics as free will, determinism, and the rational and irrational roots of behavior. For example, to what extent is our behavior biologically determined? To what extent does behavior have roots in irrational or unconscious sources?
- The *Truth* group includes beliefs about the stance that people take toward what they happen to hold as "the Truth." For example, to what extent is the Truth relative, or universal? To what extent does the individual feel that his or her reference group possesses an accurate account of the important truths about the universe?

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Does the individual's reference group hold the Truth exclusively, or do very different Others possess the Truth as well?

- The *Behavior* group involves beliefs regarding the focus of behavior, or behavioral guidelines. For example, should we focus on preserving the past, on experiencing the present, or on achievement in the future? Are moral guidelines relative or absolute?
- The *World and Life* group includes beliefs regarding various 'big picture' issues, such as the purpose of life, the existence and nature of divinity, and the random versus the planful nature of the universe.

In addition to describing dimensions, in my recent article, I proposed an integrated theory of worldview function in individual psychology, positioning worldview in the streams leading from stimulus to perception, and from impulse to behavior. In proposing this theory, I related worldview to such other constructs as motivation, agency, personality, cognition, and acculturation. The value of mentioning this for our discussion is to underscore the idea that worldview shapes perception and forms behavior, in interaction with other psychological constructs. This is a proper Popperian theory, testable in every part.

### The Relation of Religion to Worldview to Behavior

I have gone into such detail describing the worldview construct because I think that it is an important part of an answer to the question, how does religion influence psychology? I think, in fact, that worldview is a key part of an answer to that question. What do religions do? Prominent among potential answers to this question is the idea that religions convey worldviews. *Every religion conveys a worldview.*

This is easiest to see in terms of a religion's ideological and intellectual dimensions. Whether we consider the transmission of oral story cycles in shamanism, or a lengthy, carefully worded statement of church dogma, religions convey a sense of what is real, what is good, and what people should do. Religions convey worldviews.

However, conveying a worldview is by no means a function only of the ideological and intellectual dimensions of a religion. Ritual practices are often very powerful means by which beliefs and ideas are conveyed. Beyond that, the very way that a ritual is normatively interpreted itself conveys some important idea. For example, the various versions of the Christian ritual of the Lord's Supper convey ideas about reality—and different ideas, to be sure, depending on how a given religious body performs and interprets that ritual. As with ritual, so too the experiential and consequential dimensions of a religion convey worldview.

The answer to the question, then, of how religion influences psychology, can be expressed as follows: *Religions shape worldviews, thereby shaping their adherents' sense of reality and proper behavior; in turn, worldviews shape cognition and behavior.* I depict this formulation in Figure 1. Each of Glock's five dimensions of religion and religiosity potentially affects beliefs within each of the seven groups of worldview dimensions. That is, religion exerts an influence in forming the individual's sense of reality and proper behavior, that is, the individual's worldview. In turn, the individual's worldview exerts an influence on the individual's cognition and behavior.

This formulation goes a long way toward explaining the immense influence that religion exerts on individual psychology and social process. In a broad way, it also is consistent with the direction in which some researchers and theorists have been heading for

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some time. For example, there are strong resonances between this formulation and the work of Daniel McIntosh (1995/1997), Peter Hill (1994/1997), and Elizabeth Weiss Ozorak (1997). There is also broad agreement between this formulation and the various articles found in a recent special issue of the *Journal of Social Issues* (Silberman, 2005), regarding religion as a meaning system. At the same time, I think that this formulation has some particular value as a theoretical statement relating religion to behavior specifically through the worldview construct.

**Research Questions Using Worldview to Address Psychology of Religion**

[Note: Some of this section quotes and summarizes portions of Koltko-Rivera, 2000, which is otherwise uncited.]

This formulation also gives us a handle on religious phenomena, an angle of approach with which we can construct research projects into the relationship of religion, cognition, and behavior. Here are a few questions where a consideration of worldview might be worthwhile in relation to some traditional concerns of the psychology of religion:

- The psychology of religion has long considered the question of the effects of religious conversion on the personality structure and belief system of the individual (see research summarized in Spilka et al., 2003, and in Wulff, 1997). What effect does conversion have on underlying worldviews? How are these changes, if any, related to changes in cognition and behavior?

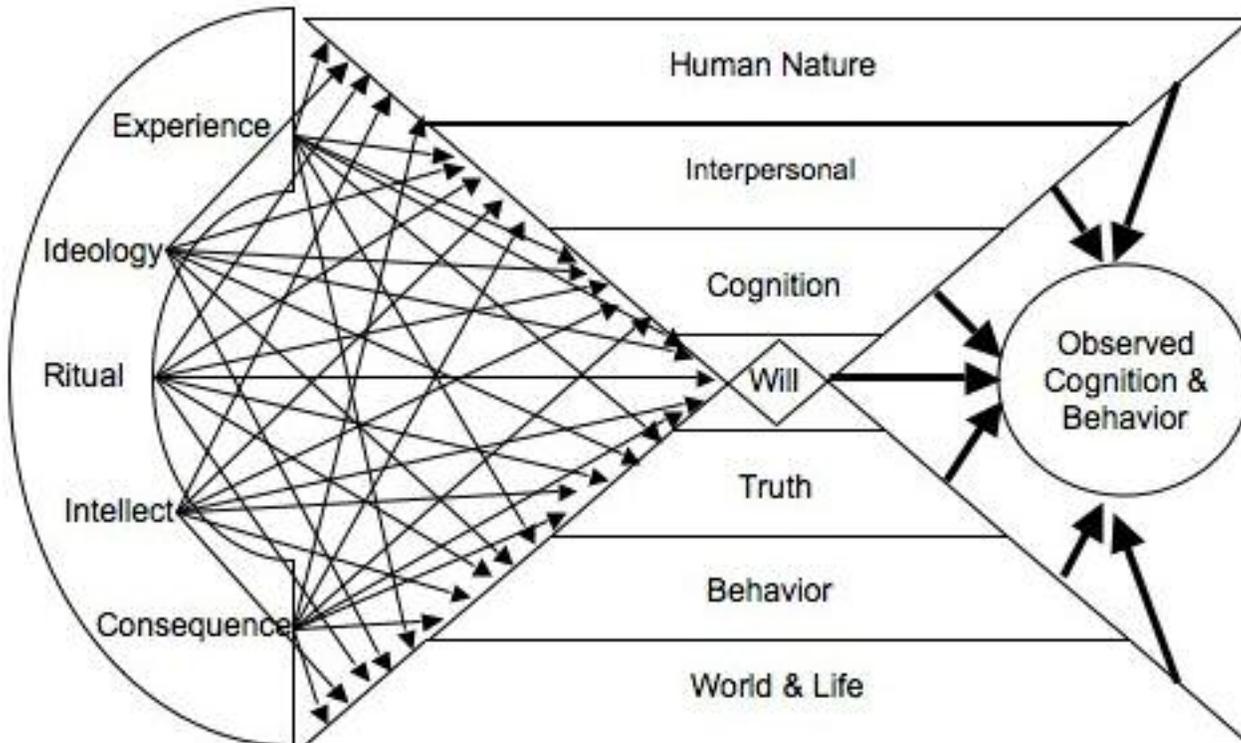


Figure 1. Causal relationships between 5 dimensions of religion, 7 groups of worldview dimensions, and cognition and behavior.

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- What are the effects of religious, spiritual, mystical, peak, and/or transpersonal experiences, as well as short-term and long-term contemplative disciplines, upon an individual's worldview and subsequent behavior? This question also has relevance for outcome and training research in counseling and psychotherapy, given that contemplative techniques have been advocated for use in intervention (e.g., Boorstein, 1996; Cortright, 1997; Keutzer, 1984), training (Rubin, 1985), and supervision (Dubin, 1991; Okundaye, Gray, & Gray, 1999; Rabin & Walker, 1987).
- A related question involves the worldview possessed by the individual, *before* the occurrence of mystical or “peak” experiences. Maslow (1970) noted that an individual's belief system could block the occurrence, recognition, or integration of peak experiences. In light of this, an appropriate research question might be, what worldview beliefs are antecedent to the occurrence or report of mystical/“peak”/transpersonal experiences?
- What differences in worldview are associated with differences in faith development (Fowler, 1981) for people of similar ages? How do these differences play themselves out in cognition and behavior?
- What intergroup and intragroup worldview differences exist among faith communities? How do these relate to differences in Glock's dimensions of religion, on the one hand, and behavioral differences, on the other?
- How do worldviews of lapsed members or deconverts of a faith community compare with those of core (i.e., active and observant) members (adapted from M. Eisenstein Ebsworth, personal communication, April 11, 2000)? How do these relate to behavioral differences?
- In one of my own research samples, over 12% of participants indicated that they affiliated with more than one type of religious group (Koltko-Rivera, 2000, p. 152). How do the worldviews of “multireligious” people compare with the worldviews of “unireligious” people in the same faith communities?
- Recently, I have made the case that, late in his life, Maslow reformulated his hierarchy of needs to include a level beyond self-actualization, namely self-transcendence (Koltko-Rivera, 2006a). How does religion affect one's position on the hierarchy of needs? How does one's position on this hierarchy—essentially a statement of worldview regarding the purpose of life—affect subsequent cognition and behavior? (This includes both overtly religious and more general cognition and behavior.)

### Conclusion

A crucial focus of the psychology of religion involves the ways in which religion influences individual and social psychology. I have suggested that one paradigm to use in studying this influence is the notion that religions convey worldviews, and worldviews shape cognition and behavior. I have also pointed out some directions in which research efforts might usefully focus. I discuss instrumentation for worldview assessment extensively in Koltko-Rivera (2000), where I also describe the Worldview Assessment Instrument. The tools exist to investigate the connection between religion, worldviews, cognition, and behavior. I look forward to the next era of research into the ways in which religion affects behavior through worldview.

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**DR. KOLTKO-RIVERA DEDICATES THIS ARTICLE TO  
DOUGLAS HEATH, PH.D., WHO INTRODUCED MARK TO THE  
PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION AT HAVERFORD COLLEGE.**

## ANNOUNCEMENT

### International Conference on Spirituality

This meeting, in cooperation with the International Association for the Psychology of Religion, will be held in Prague, Czech Republic on September 21–23, 2007. Pre-registration and submission of abstracts begin January 1. Keynote speakers will include Jacob Belzen, Bob Emmons, Ken Pargament, and Ralph Hood. For more information, log on to <http://cmeps.ecn.cz/spirituality/>.