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**Beyond “Religion” and “Spirituality”**

***Extending a “Meaning Systems” Approach to Explore Lived Religion***

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**Summary**

A review of recent research suggests that academic and popular distinctions between “religion” and “spirituality” are unfounded. Working from a meaning systems perspec-tive, it is argued that recognizing that “religious” and “spiritual” are part of the same broad category does not go far enough. It is argued that a wider perspective that con-siders the interplay of many different cultural and social factors on both beliefs and practices is more useful. This broadening of the multi-level, interdisciplinary paradigm to examine all existential cultures, including the secular and non-religious, offers the potential to better understand the complexity and diversity of lived religion. Increased use of idiographic methodologies and a more reflective approach to the constructs used in nomothetic methodologies are advocated as a way to advance the field and better explore beliefs and practices in a more ecologically valid way.

**Keywords**

meaning systems – lived religion – spirituality – non-religion – belief – methodology – psychology of religion

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**Introduction**

Religion is often presented as being somewhat simple: as a set of beliefs and practices that are shared by a group of people. This body of beliefs and prac-tices diagnoses the problems perceived within the life of the community and offers solutions, which, if enacted correctly, can resolve those problem (Smith, 1994). Religion as actually practiced, rather than as taught by theologians, is usually far more complex. People often believe things that are inconsistent, or act in ways that are inconsistent with the beliefs that they profess (Chaves, 2010). This phenomenon, religion as it is actually practiced and experienced, has been termed “lived religion” and is the subject of an increasing amount of research within religious studies (McGuire, 2008). Many ethnographic studies document this complexity and yet much psychological research into religion has failed to adequately grasp the importance of this complexity.

Psychologists often attempt to create clear operationalisations of phenome-na which then allow for the development of measures and the creation of con-structs from large sets of data. This in turn allows for empirical tests of theory. Reducing people’s beliefs and actions to such abstractions is a necessary part of many methodologies and can be fruitful, especially for testing particular hypotheses. However, nomothetic methodologies, by their very nature, ob-scure details and differences to find general trends. Scholarly research into lived religion suggests that for many individuals the unique and idiosyncratic aspects of their beliefs and practices are of great significance (McGuire, 2008) and so neglecting them in our models greatly weakens both their validity and utility.

This paper argues that the neglect of the idiosyncratic elements of people’s religious and spiritual worlds can and should be rectified. Building upon a “meaning systems” approach (Silberman, 2005; Park, 2013), it is suggested that the boundaries between religion, spirituality, and the secular have little eco-logical validity. Individuals draw such distinctions for various reasons and yet they are emic rather than etic categorisations (Fitzgerald, 2000; Streib & Hood, 2016). Broadening our perspective to include all aspects of meaning-making has the potential to allow a fuller exploration of the complex webs of meaning that are integrated into the worldviews of individuals and groups. A psychol-ogy of religion that only explains modern, Western, “textbook” religion is inad-equate and this paper concludes by suggesting how we can move beyond these limitations. In doing so, there is the potential for the psychology of religion to integrate itself more fully into the broader discipline as well as related disci-plines such as the sociology of religion. Such a shift in perspective also reflects the evolution within the field of religious studies, where the world religions

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paradigm that implicitly underpins much psychological research has been robustly critiqued (Fitzgerald, 1990; Owen, 2011). Only a multi-level, interdis-ciplinary approach (Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003) can adequately explore all the aspects of religiosity and spirituality, and this paper concludes by arguing for the utilization of under-used methodologies to create a more inclusive un-derstanding. A meaning systems approach has considerable potential for the psychology of religion, but to reap its full benefits it must be broadened so that it actively engages with the diversity and complexity of lived religion.

**A Meaning Systems Approach to the Study of Religion**

A meaning-systems approach (Silberman, 2005; Park, 2013) to the study of reli-gion is a contemporary, theoretical approach that draws on the work of, among others, James (1902/2004), Durkheim (1912/2008), and Geertz (1973). It recog-nises that making sense of the world, forming a sufficiently reliable and accu-rate mental representation of our external environment from our perceptions and experiences of it, is a fundamental function of our brains and a key aspect of human nature (Kegan, 1982). As humans, we learn not only from our own perceptions but also from the experiences of those around us. As the world contains both agents and objects, it is necessary for the mental models we con-struct to account for both social and physical factors in our environment. This process of learning about our environment occurs not only during infancy but continues the lifespan, and unavoidably occurs in a social and cultural context (Bruner, 1990; Gergen, 1971; Jost & Kruglanski, 2002). These social and cultural influences provide important information about how we should interpret our own perceptions and experiences. They can also influence how we perceive, interpret, and remember events (Luhrmann, 1991, 2012; Newman & Lindsay, 2009). Evidence also suggests that even our emotions are, in part at least, cul-tural constructions (Barrett, 2012). Meaning systems are idiosyncratic, with individuals drawing on a broad range of experiences and cultural influences. They also go far beyond any explicit belief system.

The human need for perceived meaning is present in daily life but is espe-cially acute in times of stress and difficulty (Park, 2005). The consequences of the meaning systems that we hold are substantial. The perceived conse-quences of our potential actions guides the choices we make and how we act. If, for example, we believe that violating a taboo will cause pain and suffering to either ourselves or those we care about, then we are unlikely to violate that taboo. Likewise, if we believe that something is a sign from the heavens, we will probably heed its guidance. From a psychological or sociological perspective, it

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does not really matter whether the belief is accurate or not**—**if the individual believes it, based on the model of the world that they have constructed, then they will act as if it is real. As the Thomas Theorem states, “If men define situ-ations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Thomas & Thomas, 1928,

1. 571**-**572). What concerns us is the social realities of individuals and groups (Berger & Luckmann, 1967).

There is clearly a strong survival advantage to having a sufficiently accurate model of the world, though a system that errs on the side of caution is likely to be most advantageous**—**and these hyperactive agent detection systems have even been suggested as an underlying cause of belief in supernatural beings (Boyer, 2002). All animals have cognitive systems that allow them to meet this need but those of human beings are the most complex and go beyond that of other species (Shettleworth, 2010). In our efforts to understand the world we ask not just “What will happen?” but also “Why will it happen?” Understanding causation is an inherent part of constructing a complex model of the world. A functional meaning system is also beneficial to our wellbeing. Feeling secure and that our lives have purpose, or meaning, are both important psychological needs (Baumeister, 1991; Maslow, 1943). Meaning systems, and especially reli-gious ones that posit a safe universe that is controlled by a benevolent force (or forces), can be one way of meeting these needs. A Terror Management Theory of religion is not a sufficient “explanation” of beliefs but research under that rubric strongly supports the view that the aspects of many religious or spiritual traditions can reduce anxiety, particularly the anxiety related to death or loss (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2004; Vail et al., 2010).

These efforts to construct meaning, to create a stable and predictable world in which we live, are a basic human imperative that goes beyond any explicit belief or meaning system. Though we may strive to, or even persuade ourselves that we actually do, we cannot view the world objectively and devoid of our internalised sociocultural environment. There is now widespread acknowl-edgement that the worlds we experience are not simply objective realities but that our past experiences and present beliefs continue to influence us. They shape our perceptions, our memories, and our brains themselves (Hood, 2011).

These meaning systems can be viewed at two levels, the global and the situ-ational (Park, 2011). According to Park, global meaning systems are the core schemas that people use to interpret their experiences. They include beliefs, goals, and subjective experiences of meaningfulness and purpose. The global nature of these systems means that they provide a framework for how individ-ual situations are interpreted. These interpretations of particular events and the analyses of their significance, in the light of an individual’s global meaning systems, create situational meaning.

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It is at this level of situational meaning that research investigating meaning in life and meaningfulness in life (e.g., Hicks & King, 2009; Martela & Steger, 2016) is situated. Park (2011) argues that the process of attributing meaning in life, the ways by which an individual creates purpose, significance and coher-ence out of the many things that they experience, is just one aspect of global meaning systems. They are applications of an individual’s global meaning sys-tems for specific purposes. These processes are, however, undoubtedly crucial to understanding how individuals come to find life meaningful—an impor-tant issue as finding life meaningful is strongly linked to individual well-being (Steger, 2009). Whether life is, or is not, meaningful will always be a subjective judgement and one that lies beyond the competency of psychology to answer (Hicks & King, 2009). However, the processes by which people construct sub-jective meaning in their lives, and how they maintain it in the face of situations that challenge their meaning systems (e.g., Heine, Proulx & Vohs, 2006), are important topics of ongoing research. Studying the individual elements that contribute to how individuals imbue life with meaningfulness, as advocated by Martela and Steger (2016), will help us to arrive at a fuller understanding of how we not only make aspects of life meaningful but also come to make mean-ing out of the world as a whole.

The many different ways that “meaning” is used in research can be prob-lematic, as each of them has validity and importance. The distinction between global meaning and situational meaning (Park, 2011) provides an overarching framework that helps to integrate the many different ways that people make sense of the world and can offer clarity for research. How people think the world works, what they value within it, and how they imbue it with meaningfulness are all conceptually related. When studying the diversity of lived religion(s) it is beneficial to conceptualise meaning systems in Park’s (2013) global way rather than just focusing exclusively on situational aspects of meaning-making such as meaningfulness. Further research into specific manifestations of how people create meaning in life remains needed and should help to explore the broader psychological processes involved in the creation and development of global meaning systems. However, these situational constructions of meaning-fulness within an individual’s world should be distinguished from their global model of that world itself.

**Religious and Non-Religious Meaning Systems**

Park, Edmondson, and Hale-Smith (2013) suggest that this “deeply rooted need for a functional meaning system underlies the highly prevalent embrace of

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religion across time and place” (p. 157). It is argued, with considerable merit, that religious meaning systems are able to provide answers to existential questions that purely materialistic ones cannot (Silberman, 2005; Park et al., 2013). Most religious worldviews provide a degree of certainty and safety that a random and unfeeling universe, however wondrous it may be perceived as being, simply cannot. If one marker of an effective meaning system is its abil-ity to provide sufficient causation and explanation for events, then, at least superficially, religious meaning systems do have an advantage over purely ma-terialistic ones. Atheists may question whether such models provide genuine explanations or merely alter the questions (e.g., Dawkins, 2006) but a meaning system should be considered functional if it is sufficient for the needs of the individual who has constructed it.

There is, however, an apparent problem with the position that religious meaning systems are superior to non-religious ones. If religious meaning sys-tems are so good, and if the needs that they meet are so fundamental, then why don’t we all have religious meaning systems? Either the need for meaning systems is not as innate and universal as the theory claims or the proposed superior functionality of religious meaning systems is undermined and a meaning systems approach to the study of religion has decreased utility. This problem is acknowledged by Park et al. (2013) and they briefly offer several pos-sible solutions. Might the need for an existential meaning system, one which answers the “ultimate” questions about why things happen and also provides guidance about what should happen, not be as deep or universal as they have argued? Are religious worldviews actually not as good at meeting these needs as they first appear to be? Both of these possibilities have some merit. While all human beings need to construct a functional model of the world to allow them to survive, it is not clear that existential answers are required within such a global meaning system, at least for all individuals and in all cultures. It is pos-sible to go through life without giving serious philosophical thought to such questions and a nihilistic perspective that perceives life as a series of random, meaningless events leading towards inevitable death and oblivion can also be adopted either explicitly or implicitly (Lee, 2015). Many individuals find the answers provided by traditional religion to be either inadequate or irrelevant to their lives (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1997; Sheard, 2014; Streib & Keller, 2004). The changing nature of religiosity, beliefs, and behaviours that have tra-ditionally been associated with religions, in the contemporary world is incred-ibly complex. Although the truth claims of any particular religious worldview are weaker in a diverse, multi-cultural society than they would be in a homo­ genous culture where there are no alternative explanatory systems, research has shown that the traditional Secularization hypothesis, which argues for the continuing decline of religiosity, is flawed (Gorski, 2003).

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Park et al. (2013) also suggest an alternative possibility to explain the appar-ent discrepancy between the theory they advocate and the growing number of people who identify as having no religion. Perhaps “even secular worldviews are religious in character, in that they are also unverifiable and can provide many of the same meaning provision functions . . . in which case our defini-tion of religion itself is at fault” (Park et al., 2013, p. 165). This, I will argue, is close to the truth and suggestive of a solution that has wide -reaching conse-quences. There are fundamental similarities, at least in terms of psychological and sociological function, between “religious” and “secular” worldviews and the understanding of “religion” used in much of the meaning systems research is problematic. Rather than describing secular worldviews as being “religious in character,” I shall instead argue that religious and secular worldviews should not be seen as inherently distinct. Instead, all worldviews should be under-stood as being different manifestations of the same, incredibly broad, psycho-logical processes. Recognising the common roots of the broad spectrum of religious and secular beliefs helps explain the complexity of lived religion and has important implications for the academic study of religion.

**Defining “Religion” and “Spirituality”**

Religion is a widely used concept in both popular and academic discourse and yet it is notoriously difficult to define satisfactorily. There have been many at-tempts to do so (see Hood, Hill, & Spilka, 2009, or Oman, 2013 for reviews) and yet it remains true that “any definition of religion is likely to be satisfactory only to its author” (Yinger, 1967, p. 18). Even this assessment may be optimistic, as many authors acknowledge the weaknesses and limitations of their own definitions. There are several reasons for these enduring difficulties. Religion is not a singular thing, but is instead an often misleading reification of similar yet not identical ideas in the minds of different individuals (Guthrie, 1996). As Ann Taves (2009, 2013) has argued, the range of objects, ideas, and prac-tices which are considered religious or sacred is so broad that we cannot really speak about “sacred” or religious objects (or concepts) but should instead talk about objects and ideas that are considered sacred within particular cultural contexts. Almost any object has been considered sacred somewhere at some point. This raises severe problems for substantive definitions of religion**—** such definitions are only appropriate within narrow cultural contexts. A more functionalist approach that looks at what religion is and does is thus preferable if we wish to work across religions or understand the psychological or socio-logical factors involved in religious belief or practice (Oman, 2013). Such an ap-proach often leads to different interpretations and explanations of events and

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behaviours than those of the believers and practitioners themselves. This step away from emic interpretations is necessary if we wish to explore and analyse religiosity across cultures and faith traditions rather than privileging a Judeo-Christian view of religion and the world (Fitzgerald, 2000). Research in reli-gious studies, anthropology, and the sociology of religion has also increasingly focused on the diversity of what is frequently called lived religion (McGuire, 2008). This approach to studying religions attempts to move beyond the the-oretical constructs of what theologians say those who adhere to a particular religion should be and do and instead studies religions as they are actually practiced**—**invariably discovering far more complex and nuanced patterns of belief and behaviour than might be expected from the study of sacred texts and traditions alone.

The concept of spirituality as something either distinct from or comple-mentary to religion has grown in prominence over recent years within both ac-ademia and public discourse. This distinction has been traced to the rise of the New Age movement in the 20th century by Beit-Hallahmi (2014), with spiritual practices having existed within religions for thousands of years. Distinctions between spirituality and religiosity have been made in various ways (see Hood et al., 2009) and yet the theoretical grounds for doing so are questionable. For example, Gorsuch (1993) distinguishes personalised spirituality from institu-tionalised religion, suggesting that spirituality is in essence a psychological phenomenon and that religions are sociological phenomena. These distinc-tions are problematic because they are based on relatively limited conceptions of each term. They may, or may not, reflect emic distinctions that are common in the modern West, but, when placed into a broader global and historical con-text, the innate biases of such a perspective are exposed. In many cultures, par-ticularly indigenous ones, there are no centralised, institutional religions and the boundaries between the personal and the communal are understood very differently (Fitzgerald, 2000). A full review of global and historical understand-ings of religion and/or spirituality is beyond the limits of this article but it is important to note that the distinctions frequently drawn in Europe and North America are not universal.

**Religion/Spirituality as a Single Etic Category**

Recent research conducted in a variety of Western contexts suggests that even in the modern West the distinctions drawn between religion and spiritual-ity are problematic, if not unjustified. The theoretical merits of such distinc-tions have been widely critiqued within religious studies, but in psychological

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research, distinct constructs continue to be utilised. A number of recent em-pirical projects have attempted to unravel the concepts of religion and spiri-tuality, in both Europe and North America, using a range of methodologies. Although their findings are not all identical, a broad conclusion was shared between them: that although the terms may carry different nuances for partic-ular people these distinctions are emic and have little analytical validity. Each concept is so broad, and the two frequently overlap so significantly, that they should be considered a single category.

Gall, Malette, and Guirguis-Younger (2011) used Grounded Theory to explore the definitions of spirituality and religiousness of 234 participants with a wide range of nationalities. They found that religiousness was conceived as an exter-nal tool that allowed individuals to access their spirituality and have a relation-ship with the divine. Spirituality was primarily viewed as an integral part of one’s identity and the experience of transcendence of the self, either through religious or secular means. They observed that although there were similari-ties across the different national groups in the sample, there were also notable differences and concluded that whether spirituality and religiousness overlap or diverge is determined by cultural factors such as religious heritage, national-ity, and generation. They concluded that the connection between religiousness and spirituality is dynamic and shifting, although it may be more accurate to say that the conceptions of these terms are dynamic and shifting. Neither re-ligiosity nor spirituality are fixed, distinct categories, but each is complex and changing**—**meaning many different things in different contexts.

La Cour, Ausker, and Hvidt (2012) conducted a factor analysis of the respons-es of 514 adult Danes about their understanding of the word “spirituality” in which they identified six main understandings of the term. They concluded that a common understanding of the term does not exist**—**it is simply so broad as to be almost meaningless. These six factors only explained 32% of the variance, however, which is indicative of just how broad conceptions of spir-ituality were in the sample. The three most popular items that respondents indicated are part of spirituality involved connection and something greater than oneself. For some individuals, spirituality was a striving in opposition to religion**—**the 4th factor in their model and one that explained 3.3% of the vari-ance in the model. The 3rd factor in the model was almost the opposite, iden-tifying spirituality as an integrated part of religion, and this factor explained 5.8% of the variance. The strongest factor in the model, accounting for 9.3% of the variance, characterised spirituality as a positive dimension of life and well-being. Participants conceptualised spirituality very broadly and diversely but notably more individuals perceived an integration of religion and spirituality than a distinction between them.

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Berghuijs, Bakker, and Pieper (2013) studied the conceptions of spiritual-ity among a large, representative sample of the Dutch population (*n* = 2,313). Responses were coded without a preconceived system and were then subject-ed to a Principal Component Analysis, which identified eleven components to conceptualisations of spirituality. These components formed a wide spectrum that overlapped with constructs from psychology, religion, and philosophy. This led them to conclude that only a “family-resemblance format” definition of spirituality is possible. The study also found that there were not large differ-ences between those affiliated with religious groups and those who are not, and that unaffiliated individuals were not more likely to have egocentric attitudes towards spirituality. This supports viewing spirituality as a broad spectrum of beliefs and experiences, many of which occur within religious traditions, that resemble each other but do not all share any unique or universal features.

Keller et al. (2013) conducted a cross-cultural Semantic Differential Analysis with 1,785 total participants, drawn from Germany and the United States. The study found that not only was there considerable overlap between the con-cepts of religion and spirituality but also that the understanding of each term was strongly influenced by cultural factors. Their finding, that “religion only”, when not overlapping spirituality, left almost nothing as a concept, provides further support for the suggestion that religion and spirituality should not be distinguished.

A very different approach was taken by Nancy Ammerman (2013), who con-ducted a large qualitative study in Boston and Atlanta, with 95 participants selected to be reflective of the overall US population in terms of their religious beliefs and affiliations. Her inductive, discursive analysis concluded that the distinctions drawn between religion and spirituality were primarily about “moral boundary work.” The distinctions were linguistic and political, differ-entiating between groups rather than describing conceptually different phe-nomena. This insight is of particular importance. It is a basic tenet of social psychology that groups often differentiate themselves from each other and can be encouraged to do so with even only the most superficial and artificial rea-sons for doing so (e.g., Tajfel, 1974; Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971). Once groups have formed in this way, the in/out distinction assumes increasing sig-nificance to the individuals within the groups. These mechanisms of group dynamics may explain the emic distinctions drawn between groups and how very similar beliefs or practices can come to be perceived as being significantly different and form the basis of profound schisms.

On the basis of their own work and these broader developments in the field, Streib and Hood (2016) have argued that, as etic categories, there is no lon-ger any reason to distinguish between religion and spirituality. Although, as

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emic labels, the distinctions may continue to be necessary in certain types of research, they should be understood as part of a single, broad analytical cat-egory. This supports the cautions of Zinnbauer, Pargament, and Scott (1999) and Kapuscinski and Masters (2010), who warned against the dangers of polar-izing religion and spirituality. Whether this category of phenomena should be identified as religion, spirituality, or religion/spirituality remains a contentious topic but more important than agreement about the most appropriate term is the acknowledgement that they are not separate categories.

**Integrating “Religion” and “Secularity”**

Within the broad conceptions of religion/spirituality in the research discussed above there were many ostensibly secular elements that were considered by some individuals to be spiritual. These included music, dance, art, experiences of nature, and experiences of communal belonging. The boundaries between the sacred and the secular are nebulous even within the lives of those who identify as religious (Ammerman, 2014). Everyday life, she suggests, is largely secular and mundane and yet religious meaning can be woven through it, cre-ated through interactions that may occur in almost any context. Like other aspects of identity, the circumstances an individual finds themselves in will determine whether or not it comes to the fore. Almost identical events can be interpreted as either sacred, secular, or both depending on the psychological acts of the individual. Just as attributions of cause and intent are determined by a range of contextual factors in everyday events (Jones et al., 1974; Shaver, 1975), there are many influences determining whether religious or spiritual at-tributions are made to an event or experience. These include characteristics of the individual, the experience itself and the contexts of each (Rizzuto, 198l, 1991; Spilka, Shaver, & Kirkpatrick, 1985). This complexity is often overlooked in research that forces individuals to describe their beliefs or experiences in rigid, rational categories.

This view of religiosity and secularity not as a dichotomous choice but rath-er as part of a broad, complex spectrum is further supported by the work of Keysar (2014) who used data from the American Religious Identification Survey and General Social Survey to demonstrate how the American population is slowly sliding towards secularity by individuals gradually rejecting particular aspects of religion while retaining others. The non-religious are not a homog-enous group but instead are similarly diverse and complex in their beliefs and practices as any other large group of people (Lee, 2015). Subtraction views of secularization, which suggest that the mere removal of religious influences

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from the social world will leave a secular one, are flawed (Taylor, 2007). There is now an increasing body of research suggesting that those who identify as athe-ists do not simply “believe in nothing” but instead actually believe in different things which appear to serve some of the functions that religious beliefs do for others (Day, 2011; Farias, 2013; Lee, 2015; Schnell, 2003). They can provide pur-pose, emotional regulation, and transcendence of the self. Many non-religious individuals also “believe in” entities or practices that others identify as spiritual or religious, such as ghosts or reincarnation (Day, 2011).

This idea that secular beliefs, objects, and values can function in ways that are similar to religious ones lies behind the concept of “Implicit Religion” (Bailey, 1999). As Bailey himself noted, there have also been more than fifty similar constructs that overlap with the idea of Implicit Religiosity. Schnell (2012) notes that only rarely have psychological perspectives been considered in the study of implicit religiosity and that psychology has also largely neglect-ed implicit religiosity as a concept. This is regrettable and an increased focus on what is often described as implicit religiosity is necessary if the arguments being made in this paper are accepted. Meaning-making has been recognised by several authors as being a key facet of implicit religiosity (e.g., Schnell, 2003; Williams, Francis, & Robins, 2011) but, as previously discussed, a global mean-ing systems perspective is broader than just meaning-making. Research into implicit religion usually focuses on situational rather than global meaning.

Streib and Hood (2013) suggested a conceptual map of implicit and explicit forms of religiosity, arrayed on two dimensions (the level of institutionalisa-tion and the direction of transcendence). Such a step is correct to recognise the underlying similarities between different forms of religiosity but does not go far enough to handle the complexity of lived religion. The diversity of beliefs and behaviours, even within religious traditions, when lived religions rather than textbook religions are studied, does not lend itself well to such clear-cut distinctions between implicit and explicit religiosity. Many individuals will contain elements of multiple implicit and explicit belief systems (Lee, 2015). A conceptual focus on the global meaning systems of individuals can help to move research beyond artificial binaries like implicit and explicit religiosity.

As Timothy Fitzgerald (2000) has argued, the distinctions drawn between the religious and the secular are often political in nature. Identifying some-thing as religious or otherwise is both an act of power and also a bestowal of power upon a group or institution. However, in the case of religion the division has benefits for those on both sides of the divide. For the religious, it allows the creation of a safe domain where beliefs and other aspects of groups’ core identities are protected. It also frequently bestows legal benefits such as tax ad-vantages or exemptions from particular laws. However, as Fitzgerald observes,

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the creation of a religious sphere also unavoidably creates another sphere that is not religious. This secular sphere can then be perceived as rational and or-dered. This “more rational” sphere provides a degree of comfort to those who either reject or compartmentalise religious identities. The distinction between the religious and the secular is both a political and a theological act, and one that reflects the cultural heritage of the West and is not found in many other cultures.

The conceptual distinctions between what John E. Smith (1994) called “quasi-religions”, such as Humanism and Nationalisms, and “religions proper” are primarily a reflection of these political and theological influences. As Smith himself noted, quasi-religious worldviews still offer implicit soteriologies and it can be argued that providing a diagnosis of the perceived problem(s) of the human condition and a solution to them is the hallmark of religion.

The increasing numbers of individuals who reject traditional concepts of religion or spirituality means that continuing research into “non-religion” is undoubtedly required. However, definitions of non-religion are “semantically parasitic categories” that rely on definitions of religion (Lee, 2015). If religion/ spirituality is broadened into a single category that also includes many seem-ingly ‘secular’ elements, then the validity and utility of the category is question-able. The arbitrary, historically contingent nature of the categories “religion” and “non-religion” are probably, as Lee (2015) argues, still necessary to facilitate many types of research into the “existential cultures” that individuals believe in. For psychological work, especially from a meaning systems perspective, the distinctions are probably more damaging than beneficial**—**at least at an ana-lytical level.

Conceptualising different meaning systems, which are emically distin-guished, as being part of a broader process that is a human universal offers the potential to both explore and understand those distinctions more fully. Perhaps more importantly, it offers the potential to better explain the multi-faceted and often contradictory beliefs and behaviours that study of lived reli-gion has unveiled. Appreciating that, at a psychological level, the diverse range of cultural influences and personal experiences are all integrated by the brain into an implicit model of reality offers a partial explanation for religious incon-gruence (Chaves, 2010) and theological incorrectness (Slone, 2004). Individuals often hold seemingly conflicting ideas simultaneously, or behave in ways that are not consistent with the beliefs they hold (Chaves, 2010). Similarly, people often hold beliefs or perform actions that contradict the formal doctrine of the religious identities that they hold (Slone, 2004). We all absorb contradictory ideas and explanations in our daily lives, which our brain must then categorise and integrate with previous knowledge and experience as best it can. However,

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these constructions of order and meaning often do not respect the rationalisa-tions that we use when attempting to describe our beliefs or justify our actions (Kahneman, 2003, 2012). The complexity of lived religion (and other existen-tial perspectives) and the repeatedly observed intermingling of religious, spiri-tual and secular ideas in the minds and lives of individuals suggests that the emic distinctions are often post hoc rationalisations, which integrate them in a meaningful way into an individual or group’s metanarrative.

Religions are complex social constructions that are woven through almost all aspects of an adherent’s life. The emic distinctions that groups and individu-als draw are, in many ways, part of the phenomena and studying how and why those distinctions are drawn is an important avenue for continuing research. However, while doing so, it is important to keep in mind that, regardless of the emic distinctions being made, the same needs and broad motivations are involved and our common psychological hardware is being used and manipu-lated to meet those needs (cf. Barrett, 2013; McCauley & Cohen, 2010). Religious and other spiritual practices (and beliefs) may provide individuals with the tools to fulfil their need to find meaning, purpose and transcendence but that does not necessarily make those systems the most fundamental aspects of the phenomena. Understanding how those tools work requires us to look beyond arbitrary distinctions. Such an approach has the potential to allow the study of religion to make a greater contribution to the wider psychological disciplines.

**Parallels with Other Approaches**

The conceptual approach advocated here echoes elements of the work of several previous theorists (e.g., Day, 2011; Erikson, 1980; Fowler, 1981; Jung, 1931/1969) and these similarities provide further support for the approach. Although reviewing the evidence for each of the following is beyond the scope of this article, taken together they suggest that there is justification for viewing religion and spirituality in a much wider context than society often does. There are also important differences between each of the following approaches that cannot be explored fully within the scope of this article.

Carl Jung drew on the German philosophical tradition of von Humboldt, Kant, and Hegel and used the term Weltanschauung, or worldview, to describe an individual’s “conception of the world . . . but also the way in which one views the world” (Jung, 1931/1969, p. 358). For Jung, both the religious and the philo-sophical could provide the basis for Weltanschauung, and Weltanschauung emerges out of a synthesis of social experiences and unconscious processes of the psyche. The exact nature of those unconscious processes remains

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contentious, but the clinical observations that Jung based his work on support conceptualising meaning making as a complex, dynamic integration of diverse social and psychic experiences.

Erik Erikson used the term “Ideology” to describe the “something-between-a-theory-and-a-religion . . . [that is] a necessity for the growing ego . . . [which forms] some new synthesis of past and future: a synthesis which must include but transcend the past” (Erikson, 1980, p. 153). This synthesis of diverse cultural influences within an individual’s developing mind is, he argued, a critical and unavoidable process, at least within healthy psychological development, and it is this process of synthesis that a broadened meaning systems approach offers the potential to explore.

James Fowler (1981) drew on the work of Erikson (1980) and Tillich (1957) in the construction of his Faith Development model. Fowler (1981) extended the term “faith” to encompass “our way of finding coherence in and giving mean-ing to the multiple forces and relations that make up our lives. Faith is a per-son’s way of seeing him- or herself in relation to others against a background of shared meaning and purpose” (p. 4). This broad conception of faith as a human universal that creates relationships and meaning is very similar to the broad-ened approach being advocated here. Although “faith” is now such a loaded and contested term that different terminology may be necessary, a fuller inte-gration with the insights of Fowler will enrich the meaning systems approach.

More recently, the empirical work of Abby Day (2011) has explored how “be-lief” in contemporary Britain is “propositional, affective, embodied, and per-formed”, a concept that can be either anthropocentric or theocentric, and yet which is co-produced socially and culturally with a central function of creating and affirming meaning and belonging. Her work supports the importance of meaning and belonging within belief systems, and the rejection of approaches that place an overemphasis on rational, coherent articulations of beliefs. Both anthropocentric and theocentric individuals are forming relationships that give meaning to their lives, and it is these processes that a meaning systems approach studies. At the psychological level, it seems likely that the processes have sufficient similarities to warrant investigation alongside each other.

**Implications and Suggestions for Future Research**

Expanding the perspective from which global meaning systems are studied to include both religious and secular elements, and recognising that there are not clear, analytical distinctions between the two categories, has a number of consequences for the psychological study of lived religion. Global meaning

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systems are not the only facet of religions and spiritualities and yet they do have particular importance both within them and when studying them. Actions and beliefs often cannot be untangled fully, and what we think, feel, and do are interlinked.

Adopting such a position is not to advocate a new, singular construct that can be measured and correlated with other constructs. Rather, recognising both the diversity of religious and secular influences within an individual’s life and that the categorisation of particular influences as either religious or secu-lar is problematic should affect how a wide range of methodological approach-es to the study of religion are implemented. In particular, it should influence how specific research findings are integrated with each other both within the field of psychology and at an interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary level.

The need for the psychology of religion to utilise a multi-level, interdisci-plinary paradigm (Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003) has been argued persuasively and has already proven fruitful (Paloutzian & Park, 2013; Park, 2013). Integrating the insights of critical religious studies and secularism studies (e.g., Fitzgerald, 2000; Lee, 2015), as advocated here, into the psychological study of religion is a natural extension of this approach. Recognising the diversity of lived religios-ity (McGuire, 2008; Schnell, 2003), both explicit and implicit, is necessary if we seek to explore the ways that our minds and societies influence and are influ-enced by experiences that are deemed religious (Taves, 2009). Human lives are complicated and multi-faceted. In order to understanding them fully, we need to draw on the full range of academic approaches and to move further towards a transdisciplinary perspective on phenomena that cut across every aspect of human life and experience.

The relative neglect of qualitative methodologies in the psychology of re-ligion (Aten & Hernandez, 2005; Davis et al., 2016; Hood & Belzen, 2013) has contributed to the continued conceptualisation of religion as something dis-tinct and measurable within the field even though related fields, such as re-ligious studies and the sociology of religion, have moved beyond such naïve approaches. There are numerous qualitative research methods that have been developed by psychologists studying other phenomena and which can and should be used to investigate aspects of religiosity and spirituality. Each ap-proach is suited to answering slightly different questions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Maxwell, 1996) and the following list is by no means exhaustive.

The complex webs of meaning making, and the diverse and often contra-dictory ways that individuals perceive and make sense of the world, mean that idiographic research methods are especially useful for their study. Phenomenological approaches explore the richness and complexity of indi-vidual lives (Willig, 2008). They attempt to both understand what experiences

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are subjectively like for individuals and also to understand how those expe-riences are made sense of. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) is particularly suited to studying religious or spiritual experiences, especially when these are located in the broader concept of how an individual makes sense of the world. IPA is a flexible approach that is designed to not only investigate subjective experiences but also how individ-uals make sense of those experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Shinebourne, 2011). As an approach that is also both interpretative and analytical, IPA studies can move beyond the purely descriptive and be easily integrated with other methodologies and either new or pre-existing frameworks. When seeking to explore the dynamic and subjective relationships between different aspects of religiosity (and other aspects of individuals’ lives) IPA can provide an effective way to deepen our understanding and draw out complexities that more nomo-thetic approaches may either miss or obscure.

Other qualitative approaches also have potential for exploring how as-pects of religiosity are located and experienced within a broader life context. Grounded Theory is a more intensive research approach that includes a range of related methodologies (Birks & Mills, 2015; Nolas, 2011). It is particularly adept at exploring complex phenomena and generating new theories and models from a diverse range of data. The iterative and inclusive nature of data collection in Grounded Theory makes it suitable for exploring both what is oc-curring and why it is occurring, questions that should be central when seeking to understand lived religiosity. Discursive social psychology (Holt, 2011; Potter

* Edwards, 2001) can and should also be used to explore how language both produces versions of external reality and can stimulate or influence psycho-logical experiences of those realities. Thematic Analysis is a widely used and flexible qualitative analytical tool that can be used with a range of epistemo-logical positions to study the experiences, behaviours, and beliefs of particular groups (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It is a primarily descriptive approach that can also be used either to test existing conceptual frameworks. Thematic analy-sis can efficiently provide qualitative triangulation and refinement to existing models and measures.

Although an increased use of qualitative methods is required to redress the current imbalance in the psychology of religion and better explore the complexity of lived religion this does not mean that quantitative methods should be abandoned. Quantitative and experimental methods are appropri-ate for answering a wide range of research questions, including exploring the relationships between constructs and evaluating the effects of interventions. Fractionating broad and imprecise categories like religion into smaller com-ponents, such as rituals or specific beliefs, can allow for precise and testable

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hypotheses to be developed (Taves, 2013; Whitehouse & Lanman, 2014). These constituent components may include constructs like “meaning in life” (Hicks & King, 2009) or “social values” (Rokeach, 1973; Tsirogianni & Gaskell, 2011) that extend beyond the overtly religious. If the arguments presented in this paper are accepted, then a focus on broader constructs such as these, rather than narrowly religious ones, should be preferred. A fractionating approach can also address the principle objection to the approach advocated here, namely that by broadening the category of religion and/or spirituality they can be-come meaningless and lose analytical value. The argument presented here is that these categories are already of minimal analytical value and so they should be replaced by both a broader framework, that of global meaning sys-tems which involve both religious and secular aspects, and a range of narrower and more constructs that can be studied within that framework. Many studies have found robust findings and correlations between broad constructs such as religion or spirituality and other variables but the perspective taken here questions the universal validity of these constructs and effects. Particular forms of religiosity or spirituality will correlate with, and contribute to, various outcomes but without a more nuanced approach that fractionates them into more specific beliefs and behaviours, the mechanisms involved will remain obscured (cf. Masters & Hooker, 2013; Park & Slattery, 2013)

When using either qualitative or quantitative methodologies, it is important that scholars are critical and reflective about both the emic categorisations and linguistic choices made by the participants in their research. Critical reflection about the researchers’ own assumptions and beliefs, and their impact, should also be part of all good research (e.g., Mortari, 2015; Willig, 2008). It will often be appropriate, or even necessary, to use emic categorisations within research projects but when working analytically these categorisations should be inter-rogated rigorously (cf. Oman, 2013; Woodhead, 2011). It is especially important to be aware of the intermingling of different emic categories and how, even within the same individual, they may not be used consistently. Good research designs should not force participants to make exclusive choices when multiple options may apply (cf. Gellner & Hausner, 2013).

Recognising that lived religion consists of fusions of many different be-liefs, behaviours, experiences, and influences underlines the need for a truly multi-levelled and interdisciplinary paradigm (Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003). The study of religions, beliefs, and meaning systems needs to be conducted at every level, from the neurobiological through to the cultural and the cross-cultural. Work at each level should inform and be informed by work at other levels. Insights from very different methodologies must be triangulated with each other to gradually increase our overall understanding of human life

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and nature. Qualitative and quantitative approaches from disciplines includ-ing psychology, sociology, anthropology, neuroscience, and religious studies should all be utilised according to their particular strengths. The often frac-tured relationship between the study of religion within those disciplines and their broader academic communities is detrimental to those on both sides of the divide.

The strength of a meaning systems perspective, as advocated by Crystal Park (2011, 2013) and expanded on here, is that it provides a framework for such integration. It recognises that religions and spiritualities can help to meet fun-damental human needs and also that they emerge from universal cognitive processes. Looking beyond the artificial and emic categorisations that are an unavoidable part of human life and instead conceptualising religious, non-re-ligious, and secular existential cultures as idiosyncratic attempts to construct functional models of our world has the potential to provide a far richer under-standing of the complexity of lived religion, lived irreligion, and everything in between.

**Conclusion**

The lack of dichotomy between religion and the secular is an unavoidable and logical consequence of combining Taves’ (2009) insight that anything can be considered sacred with many of the most common definitions of religion/spir-ituality. If religion/spirituality is “the search for significance in ways related to the sacred” (Pargament, 1992) and “the sacred” or “ultimate concerns” can be anything that an individual or group values most highly, then religiosity/spiri-tuality is the search for significance and meaning. As such, it is a universal as-pect of human experience and existence**—**something that can find fulfilment in many different forms. The many different ways that our cultures offer us to meet these needs are synthesized in each individual life to form a complex, dynamic, and unique nexus. The explicit recognition that those of different religious traditions, and those who reject them, are all engaging in the same psychological and sociological processes is critical if we seek to understand, and perhaps even resolve, the divisions that are the source of so many prob-lems in the world that we have to share.

A meaning systems approach that looks beyond the explicitly religious and spiritual offers the possibility of a cohesive answer to some of the problems raised by the diversity of lived religion. A more inclusive and expansive ap-proach, which is both more reflective about the influences of our own beliefs and more critical about the language used to describe those of others, will

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require different methodologies to complement those that are already widely used. It is only by working across the traditional boundaries and using all the resources at our disposal that we can move beyond the limitations of our implicit cultural biases. Doing so is necessary if we wish to understand the psychology of the human species, and not merely that of the modern West.

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