1 Introduction

The psychology of religion can be defined as a branch of psychology explaining human religiosity and spirituality using psychological methods and theories. The essence of the psychology of religion is explained in the presentation of the 36th division of the American Psychological Association (APA 2018). This Division, the Society for the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality, promotes the application of psychological research methods and interpretive frameworks to diverse forms of religion and spirituality; encourages the incorporation of the results of such work into clinical and other applied settings; and fosters constructive dialogue and interchange between psychological study and practice on the one hand and between religious perspectives and institutions on the other.

The term ‘psychology of religion’ is in the process of change. It is increasingly being replaced with the term ‘psychology of religion and spirituality’. For both religiosity and spirituality, the belief and/or the experience of the divine is essential. Religiosity refers to the form of spirituality having a certain doctrine, organized practice, and organizational affiliation. Spirituality is primarily oriented towards experience and personal transformation. Conceptualization and measurement of these realities is one of the research subjects of contemporary psychology of religion.

Another development during the past decades has been a rise in intercultural and interreligious studies. Several basic concepts of the psychology of religion, such as religious development, religious orientation, religious values and religious (de)conversion, have been studied from comparative perspective. At the same time, we should recognize that there is no one single cultural psychology of religion. Very different culturally sensitive approaches can be gathered under this general term (Belzen 2010).

Working as the staff counselor-chaplain at the university provides an excellent opportunity to apply knowledge of the psychological side of religion. The focus of any kind of counseling process is on human experiences, problems, and behaviour. All the theoretical concepts and research data serve as tools to interpret these experiences and behaviour. Therefore, an eclectic approach can be applied using the theories and empirical knowledge that are best suited to a particular counseling case.
2 Religion from a Psychological Perspective

As we know, the word ‘religion’ means different things to different people. There is no consensus on this concept among psychologists of religion. By and large, there have been two types of approaches. The first relates to one particular characteristic where religion is defined based on one variable. This variable can be, for example, the experience of the holy, the practice of prayer or of certain beliefs. In this conceptual framework, one possibility is to perceive as religious everything in the human psyche and/or behaviour that is related to a deity or to a higher power.

The other approach is multidimensional: treating religion as a combination of different dimensions. This approach goes back to Glock (1962) and has been modified by various authors. The dimensions of religion are experiential, ideological, ritualistic, intellectual, and consequential. The dimension of belonging was added to this list later.

The experiential dimension of religion refers primarily to religious feelings concerning a religious experience. The number of feelings accompanying a religious experience is not limited. It could range from love to fear and from awe to despair. From psychology of religion’s early inception, the role of the experiential dimension of religion was emphasized. In many cases, the existence, intensity, and type of feeling are perceived as criteria for true religion.

The ideological dimension primarily concerns the beliefs one has. This dimension refers to the intellectual side of religion, to what it is that is believed. Psychologically speaking, how strongly a particular belief is held and what the practical implications on the behaviour are, are held as important. Beliefs express the essential teachings of a religion. Beliefs also define the purpose of humankind, the meaning for the divine perspective. Beliefs may also hold practical recommendations and implications for everyday life.

The ritualistic dimension refers to a set of repeated symbolic behaviours that bear religious meaning. The main social function of rituals is the provision of social cohesion and stability. On the individual level, rituals satisfy the need for belonging and identity. Celebration of weddings, funerals, and the birth of a first child are just a few examples of the rituals practiced. Religious rituals usually have some specific characteristics: they symbolize the presence of the divine, help people involved get closer to God, and entrust people to God’s care even after the ritual is over.

The knowledge dimension refers to the information one has about their religion. On one end of the spectrum, it is possible to practice a religion without any particular knowledge of its meaning. On the other, an individual may be extremely competent in religious teachings and practices.

The consequential or effect dimension refers to the impact of religion on human behaviour in general. Areas like moral decision-making, coping with stress, well-being and health behaviours have been studied. One of the characteristics of one’s religiosity is the number of areas of life influenced by religion.
The belonging dimension means emotional and formal membership of a religious group, movement, or organization. There are religious organizations and movements with very loose membership based on the feeling of solidarity. In others, the membership may be very formal. Belonging can follow or precede religious conversion. In all cases, the sense of ‘we’ is an important part of belonging.

The dimensions of religion may form very different combinations in one’s life. It is possible that one dimension is prevalent and others less represented. For example, a person can be religious just because of strong beliefs and have only superficial religious feelings. Another person may have several intense religious experiences without any particular knowledge or ideological reasoning.

These dimensions provide a theoretical framework for interreligious studies as well. This means that different religious traditions, movements, and practices between different cultures or within one culture can be studied based on these categories. For example, religious dedication or religious fundamentalism can have similar psychological characteristics despite their ideological and ritualistic dimensions being very different.

3 Psychological Theories and Studies of Religion

Psychological studies of religion can be split into two areas: methodological and theoretical. For the psychology of religion, these two categories are essential because the psychology of religion uses the methods of psychology and psychological theories to design the research and interpret the data gathered. The following is a brief overview of the methods and theories used.

The psychological methods used in the psychology of religion as a social science can be broadly divided into two large groups: qualitative and quantitative research methods (Weathington, Cunningham, and Pittenger 2010). These methods concern methods of data collection and data interpretation. These methods can also complement each other, through mixed methods. For example, interviews (a qualitative method) can be analyzed using quantitative content analysis. For both methods, the two criteria of scientific research, reliability, and validity, must be guaranteed.

The most widely used qualitative method in the psychology of religion are interviews, observations, biographical analyses, case studies and analyses of personal documents. The popularity of qualitative methods is grounded in the fact that a person’s religion – as well as the social occurrences of religion (rituals and movements), can be studied in their individuality to a sufficient level of detail and depth. The prime concern with qualitative methods is that the power of generalization is relatively low and that reliable qualitative methods are relatively expensive to use.

One of the most popular quantitative research methods in the psychology of religion is the use of surveys. As a result of the wide use of this method, a remarkable number of correlational relationships between different aspects of religion and reli-
giosity have been gathered. The drawback is that we cannot always give meaningful interpretation to the data that arises.

One way to overcome the lack of theories in the field of the psychology of religion is to use other psychological theories explaining intra-psychological phenomena or human behaviour. For the psychology of religion, it means that planning the research and interpreting the data gathered is carried out based on a general theoretical understanding of the human psyche and behaviour. The following is a description of five different psychological traditions – psychodynamic, cognitive, neuropsychological, evolutionary, and positive psychology – and of their impact on the psychology of religion (Nelson 2010; Wulff 1997).

In the psychodynamic or psychoanalytical approach, one’s personality and behaviour are seen as essentially determined by unconscious drives. Unconscious material is heavily influenced by the events of early childhood. Emotional and psychological problems are often rooted in conflicts between the conscious and unconscious mind.

The impact of psychoanalysis on the psychology of religion can be condensed into three fields. First, the terminology of psychoanalysis can be used in describing religious phenomena. For example, religion can be described as a protective system, or hiding a sin as a result of a defense mechanism. Second, particular theoretical approaches for describing religiosity have been developed. For example, according to Attachment Theory, the image of God can be treated as an attachment figure. Third, psychoanalysis has a remarkable impact on pastoral counseling, where the analytical conversation has been used as therapeutic tool.

The cognitive approach to the psychology of religion studies the relationship of religion to higher mental processes, such as attention, language use, memory, perception, problem solving, and thinking. It involves investigation of the role and impact of religion on internal mental states and processes. One of the main issues here is the question of specifically religious mental processes. The general point of view is that psychologically there are general human phenomena, like thinking or feeling, and religious thinking is a subcategory of these phenomena. What makes one’s psychological process sacred is its relation to religion in general or to a person’s category of the sacred, or otherworldly. From this perspective, religion has a meaning-giving and attributive character.

Under the cognitive approach, religious beliefs, religious doubts and struggles, religious feelings, religious motivation in decision-making, religious moral reasoning and religious motivation have been studied.

The neuropsychology of religion primarily deals with neurophysiological correlates of religious experiences and religious behaviour. These explanations are based on a general neuropsychological understanding of the localization of psychological processes in the human brain and the relation of brain activity to different types of human behaviour.

The three fields of neuropsychological studies of religion, which are developing rapidly, are as follows. First, the localization of religious experiences in the human
brain. The main conclusion of the research is that it depends on the type and character of a religious experience. The type of experience can be mystical, ecstatic, intuitive, purely emotional, or rational. Second, the impact of psychedelic drugs on religious experience. Third, the relation of distractions of neurological functioning and mental illnesses to religious experiences and religious behaviour. The main conclusion is that religious experiences and behaviours have their representations in the human brain, drugs can facilitate religious experiences and religion can have diverse effects on mental functioning, from a balancing effect to a situation where religious practices can also be a source of mental dysfunction.

The *evolutionary psychology of religion* is a relatively new branch of the psychology of religion. Evolutionary psychology is a theoretical approach to psychology attempting to explain the adaptation of useful mental and psychological traits as functional products of natural selection. Alongside memory, patterns of social behaviour, models of thinking and decision-making, religion too can be interpreted from the evolutionary perspective.

One of the main ideas of the evolutionary approach is that only the behaviours of functional experiences will be maintained through the process of natural selection. The fact that religion has existed in all human cultures prompts the question about its evolutionary functionality. To answer this broad question, evolutionary psychology categories are used to explain the role and functionality of religion. Terms like adaptation, inference system, functional behaviour and universal patterns are used. In short, the evolutionary psychology of religion is focused on how evolution has shaped the religious mind and religious behaviour.

The *positive psychology of religion* is related to a humanistic understanding of human behaviour. It is a scientific approach to studying human thoughts, feelings, and behaviour with a focus on strengths. Positive psychology is a perspective, an approach to studying positive experiences (happiness, inspiration), positive states of mind and traits (gratitude, compassion) and applying positive principles in professional behaviour (spiritual leadership, supportive coaching models).

In positive psychology, the virtues leading to well-being are listed. These are wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. The last item encompasses spirituality with all its dimensions, including religiosity. Apart from the essence of religiosity, which is to enhance one’s well-being and happiness, its different aspects, such as its relation to health behaviours, coping, finding meaning, prosocial behaviour, well-being, and happiness, are studied in the context of positive psychology.

In concrete research, one of the major psychological approaches can be used as a framework for research design and data analysis. Another option is to use a synthetic approach, in which different schools are employed to explain the phenomena investigated. For example, to gain a better understanding of someone’s religious experience, both psychoanalytical and neuropsychological categories can be used.
4 Research Subjects in the Psychology of Religion

The psychology of religion is about bringing explanation to three interrelated areas. First, how is religion related to the intrapsychic processes? Second, what is the impact of a person’s religiosity on their behaviour? Third, how are people of different ages developing in religious terms (religious development)? These three broad fields – intrapsychic processes, behaviour and development – can be considered the main focus of the psychology of religion.

4.1 Religion and Intrapsychic Processes

Religion and intrapsychic processes have been studied under the cognitive psychology of religion. Among others, religious experiences, specifically religious phenomena have attracted attention throughout the history of the psychology of religion. Since the times of William James (1842–1910), the experiential dimension of religion has been considered by several scholars to be the root and centre of a person’s religion. This means that on the personal level one’s religious experiences play an important role in their religion.

In his classic work “Varieties of religious experience”, William James ([1902] 1958, 42) defined religious experience as “feelings, acts and experiences of individual men, in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine”. He did not find religious experiences to be ‘supernatural’, but rather a natural fact of human life. In James’ interpretation, religious traditions developed around individuals who had deep religious experiences. Consequently, personal religious experiences lie at the heart of religion.

Rudolf Otto ([1917] 1950) argued that there is one common factor to all religious experience irrespective of cultural background. He identifies this factor as the ‘numinous’. The numinous cannot be strictly defined as it is that by which all religious experiences are defined. The numinous can only be evoked or awakened in the mind. The numinous is a realm or dimension of reality that is mysterious, awe-inspiring, and fascinating. According to Otto, the best expression for the numinous is the Latin phrase *mysterium tremendum* – a magnificent mystery. The mystery is the ‘Wholly Other’, which is beyond apprehension and comprehension.

Informative for understanding the structure of a religious experience are the studies of Karl Girgensohn (1921) which are based on the use of the method of experimental introspection. He asked the subjects to read different religious texts and recorded their reports of internal experiences. As a result, he described the structure of a religious experience as consisting of primary and secondary components.

The primary components of a religious experience are intuitive thinking and the ego function. Intuitive thinking is vague and unformulated, uncontrollable, and unrepeatable, and is associated with feelings of pleasure and displeasure. The ego func-
tion means that a person’s ego has to take a stand when confronted with a religious reality. The secondary components are images and the will. Images were the ‘mental pictures’ the respondents reported to have seen during the reading of the text. The will is a result of the ego function and refers to a new attitude in terms of greater commitment to and identity with the religious reality.

Essentially, religious experience means a person experiencing something called the divine. The divine is understood differently by different persons and in different religious traditions. During a mystical experience, one feels as though they have been touched by some higher or greater truth or power. This may occur inside or outside a religious setting or religious tradition.

According to Pahnke (1971), the main characteristics of a mystical experience are as follows: (1) unity – a sense of cosmic oneness, (2) transcendence of time and space, (3) a deeply felt positive mood, (4) a sense of sacredness, (5) noetic quality – a feeling of insight or illumination, (6) paradoxicality – a person may realize that he/she is experiencing, for example, “an identity of opposites,” yet it seems to make sense at the time, (7) alleged ineffability (8) transience – the experience passes, (9) persisting positive changes in attitudes and behaviour.

According to Paloutzian (2017, 250), religious experiences differ along several dimensions, such as ordinary versus unusual, frequent versus infrequent, pre-belief versus post-belief, mystical versus earthly, discrete versus continuous, and explainable versus unexplainable. All this shows the variety of possible religious experiences.

4.2 Religiosity and Behaviour

The relationship between one’s religiosity and behaviour covers different fields, such as religion and helping behaviour, religion and moral decision-making, religion and health behaviour, the impact of religion on purposeful action, religion and coping. There are some forms of behaviour that can be called religious behaviour. The essence of such types of behaviour is addressing the divine relationship or carrying religious meaning. A good example thereof is prayer.

The relation between religion and helping behaviour raises the question of whether religious people are more helpful than non-religious people. The empirical results of the studies in this field are controversial. In their classic “Good Samaritan” experiment, Darley and Batson (1973) found that in a situation where someone needs help, one’s being in a hurry has more bearing on helping behaviour than religious orientation and actual thoughts (religious or non-religious).

A sweeping generalization about religion and pro-social attitude would be that most of the religious traditions cultivate pro-social attitudes; most religious people say that they are rather helpful. Despite vivid examples like Mother Theresa, today’s empirical research has not attested to the greater helpfulness of religious compared to non-religious people.
Religion and moral decision-making have been studied in relation to different forms of behaviour. For example, religious people are more critical of teasing than non-religious people. Their moral decisions are based on their religious value system. Religious people tend to be more conservative compared to general tendencies in a society.

According to Nelson (2010, 313), studies on connections between religion, spirituality and health show a moderate correlation between religious involvement and better health status. A positive effect is found at both the individual and the group level. The prevalent opinion is that religion has an indirect impact on health. It means that not religion as such but a religiously motivated lifestyle, e.g., taking care of the body as a temple of God, results in a healthy way of life.

Religion can drive purposeful human action in different ways. One of the main processes in this area is sanctification as a psychological process through which aspects of life take on a spiritual quality and significance. Respondents can describe the process with expressions like ‘God played a role in the development of this striving’, ‘I experience God through this striving’, and ‘this striving reflects what I think God wants for me’. Apart from religious pursuits, religion can also satisfy general human needs, such as the need for status and acceptance, curiosity, social contact, and idealism. The studies in this field can be generalized into the statement that the function of religion cannot be reduced to a naturalistic set of human motivations. The sacred component of religion requires that religious motivation be appreciated and investigated on its own terms.

A coping strategy is the thoughts and actions we use to deal with a threatening or stressful situation, e.g., action taking, planning, or seeking emotional support. Religion can serve as a coping strategy. In stressful situations, people tend to be more religious than in times of tranquility. There are various means of using religion for coping with the stress of the life. According to Pargament et al. (2015), the methods of religious coping can be divided into five groups. These are as follows: the religious methods of coping to find meaning, to gain mastery and control, to gain comfort and closeness to God, to gain intimacy with others and God, and to achieve life transformation.

One of the purely religious forms of behaviour is prayer, generally understood as a dialogue between a human and God. Under the psychology of religion, the dimensions, types, and psychological effects of prayer have been studied. In addition, the category of God’s image as a subjective understanding of God is connected with studies on prayer. It appears that prayer has at least three dimensions: awareness, including concern for others and self-awareness; upward reaching, search for meaning, of experiences of inner peace, and outward reaching, including petitionary prayer.

The psychological effects of prayer depend on different variables like the characteristics of the image of God or religious orientation. It is possible to distinguish the effects of prayer on the individual and the group level. On the individual level, prayer increases awareness of one’s self, needs and motives. Further, prayer supports one’s faith and hope. Prayer also helps to verbalize internal feelings and find mean-
ing for actions and life in general. On the group level, the practice of joint prayer increases the group’s cohesiveness and its centeredness on religious values.

The correlation between religiosity and behaviour may manifest itself on different levels. For example, religion can provide a motivation, meaning or goal for acting. In some cases, e.g., religious ritual or prayer, we can talk about purely religious behaviour.

4.3 Religious Development

Religious development has been studied from three different perspectives. First, religious development is understood as a lifelong phenomenon. Under this perspective, religious development has been studied in childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age. In addition, theories of lifelong religious development covering the entire span of human life have been developed. The second perspective concerns some concrete aspects of one’s religious development, such as conversion, apostasy or the turning points in the process of religious development.

Religious development in childhood has been investigated from different angles. For example, it has been found that religious socialization of children depends on the caring attitude and religious harmony between parents. Children experience God in everyday situations, not necessarily in religious settings. For children, prayer and the image of God develop from the fantasy stage toward a more individualistic and reflective stage.

Religion in adolescence is mainly influenced by the development of abstract thinking. The image of God is more conceptualized; the spiritual dimension of life requires a satisfactory explanation. Typical to adolescence are religious doubts. As to religious socialization, the role of the family decreases and the influence of peers, friends, and school increases.

Most of the studies on religiosity have been conducted on adults. Special attention has been paid to the religiosity of the elderly. Ties with the religious community change and various values are reassessed in a more reflective manner. An invariable subject is the attitude toward approaching death. Studies of the relationship between death anxiety and religiosity have controversial results. The general understanding is that death anxiety is alleviated not so much by religious beliefs as by confidence in one’s worldview in general.

There are two more well-known theories of lifelong religious development. These are James Fowler’s theory of faith development and Fritz Oser’s and Paul Gmünder’s theory of the stages of religious judgment. In his theory, Fowler (1981) defines faith as a universal quality of human meaning-making. Faith describes the underlying meaning-making process used by all people regardless of their beliefs or cultural tradition. The faith development theory conceptualizes this psychological process of meaning-making in seven stages. The highest stage is called universalizing faith, at which people are detached from any ideology, living their values like Mother
Theresa or Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Fowler suggests that these stages are the same regardless of whether individuals are aligned with a religion or are non-religious.

Oser and Gmünder (1991) understand religious judgment as the way in which an individual reconstructs his or her experience from the point of view of a personal relationship with the Ultimate (God). Religious development is concerned with the age-related, meaning-making qualities of this reconstruction. Religious judgements can occur in any context but have special importance during times of crisis. The authors describe six stages of religious judgement starting with the stage of absolute heteronomy, where God is active and the human being reactive, and ending with the stage of intersubjective religiosity, where God can be seen in all commitments, and loyalty to the Ultimate is shown in relation with others.

One of the specific phenomena of religious development studied is that of conversion. The main motive for conversion can be intellectual, where a person intellectually comes to the assurance of the existence of God; mystical, where conversion is a result of a supernatural experience; and social, where a person converts because of social pressure or demand. Based on the speed of conversion, distinction can be made between sudden conversion and gradual conversion. One question relating to conversion is whether conversion changes personality. The answer is that there are changes on the general level of functioning, like ultimate concerns and the goals of life. There may also be changes in mid-level functioning, such as concrete goals and instrumental values. The main characteristics of personality, such as openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism or will, remain the same.

Current psychological studies are investigating the phenomena of spiritual transformation and apostasy, or deconversion. Spiritual transformation denotes changes in one’s meaning system in relation to the sacred. Deconversion (Streib et al. 2009) can be described through different trajectories, such as secularizing exit, oppositional exit, religious switching, integrating exit, privatizing exit or heretical exit. There are also cultural differences between North America and Europe. In North America, religious deconversion is interpreted as a personal spiritual change, and in Europe more as a change of religious tradition.

5 Contribution of the Psychology of Religion to Practical Theology

Historically, practical theology has been a church-related subdiscipline of theology. Today, practical theology is becoming increasingly independent, focusing more on religious practices inside and outside the church. Therefore, practical theology is incorporating disciplines like the psychology of religion, the sociology of religion, psychotherapy, and communication theory.
Based on Richard Osmer’s (2008) approach, it is possible to develop a framework for practical theological interpretation by focusing on four key questions:

- What is going on? (descriptive-empirical task)
- Why is this going on? (interpretative task)
- What ought to be going on? (normative task)
- How might we respond? (pragmatic task)

The object of these questions is similar to the psychology of religion and practical theology – a living human document.

The psychology of religion can contribute to these tasks in different ways. It provides a solid empirical basis of human experiences and practices. These data are interpreted in psychological terms, but practical theology can give a larger, religious meaning to the knowledge gathered. Although the psychology of religion is not normative per se, the categories of functional and dysfunctional religiosity can be applied in pastoral care and counseling. The psychology of religion can provide conceptual and evidence-based arguments for solving practical problems in people’s lives and in church practice.

Finally, one of the greatest deficits in the psychology of religion is the theory. Despite tremendous amounts of correlative data, psychometric results, experimental and observational data, it still lacks a systematic approach to putting these parts together. The situation in the psychology of religion has been called a “cry for theory” (Paloutzian and Park, 2005). Hopefully, one day the friendship between research-based psychology of religion and philosophically orientated practical theology will lead to such a theory.

Bibliography