INVITED ESSAY

Religion-as-Schema, With Implications for the Relation Between Religion and Coping

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The advantages of conceptualizing religion as a cognitive schema are discussed. The nature and function of schemas are described, and studies relevant to this cognitive approach to religion are reviewed. Viewing religion as a cognitive schema not only integrates previous findings and concepts, but is also helpful in forming new hypotheses about how religious beliefs are organized, how they influence people's perception and understanding of events, and why they change. The benefits of using the religion-as-schema notion in coping research are described. Such studies of the relation between religion and coping have found that religion is associated with cognitive processing and the finding of meaning after a loss and indirectly related to greater well-being. This perspective also predicts postcrisis changes in religion. Religion-as-schema appears to be a promising way to understand the structure and function of religious beliefs.

Religion is more than a cognitive organization of beliefs. Religion is broader in that it exists outside the person in the form of texts, symbols, and traditions, and it is narrower in that it appears in the form of individuals' rites, habits, and other behaviors (Spilka, Hood, & Gorsuch, 1985; Spiro, 1987a). However, at one level religion can be viewed as cognitive in that every

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religious system includes a set of explicit and implicit propositions held to be true (Spiro, 1987b). One way to conceptualize how these beliefs function and are organized is to consider religion to be a cognitive schema. Viewing religion as such has heuristic value and serves to explain some of the psychological reality of what religion is and how it functions in people's lives. Recently, Janoff-Bulman (1989) examined the relation between people's unquestioned assumptions about the world and the stress of traumatic events, with the view that these assumptions are schematic in nature. Her work made at least two important contributions. She used the notion of the cognitive schema to understand how people's assumptions function, and she addressed the relation between these assumptions and coping with aversive events. The present article expands this framework to include not just a few individual assumptions, but also broader systems of beliefs—specifically, religion. Viewing religion as a cognitive schema has advantages for both the psychology of religion and coping research, because it connects these fields to the wealth of findings and perspectives about beliefs developed recently in social psychology (cf. Fiske & Taylor, 1991).

RELIGION-AS-SCHEMA

What Is a Schema?

Definition. A schema is a cognitive structure or mental representation containing organized, prior knowledge about a particular domain, including a specification of the relations among its attributes (Fiske & Linville, 1980; Gardner, 1985; Taylor & Crocker, 1981). Schemas are built via encounters with the environment and can be modified by experience (Bartlett, 1932; Neisser, 1976). People have schemas for many domains—not only for objects (Neisser, 1976), but also for events, roles, persons, and the self (Fiske & Linville, 1980; Markus, 1977; Taylor & Crocker, 1981). A God schema might include, for example, assumptions about the physical nature of God, God's will or purposes, God's means of influence, and the interrelations among these beliefs.

Cognitive schemas operate at various levels of generality with broad, abstract schemas usually having more specific ones embedded within them (Neisser, 1976; Taylor & Crocker, 1981). For example, a schema for God might be part of a larger, more abstract schema for religion—which might include also schemas for death, morals, and so forth. Work on schemas has not often dealt with the most abstract schemas that are least subject to reality testing (Janoff-Bulman, 1989). However, because schematic processing appears to occur in approximately the same fashion at each level of abstraction (Taylor & Crocker, 1981), knowledge about the functioning of lower-level schemas can help us understand more abstract-level schemas, such as religion.
One consistent finding about schemas is their propensity for stability. During the constant barrage of incoming stimuli, the tendency is toward fitting or adapting the data to an existing schema (assimilation) rather than modifying the schema to the stimuli (accommodation; Neisser, 1976). Although people’s schemas do constantly change, it is usually through small modifications (Bowlby, 1969; Horowitz, 1976). For example, people tend to persist in maintaining theories they have formed while in the research laboratory even when this evidence is later described as completely false (Anderson, Lepper, & Ross, 1980; Ross, Lepper, & Hubbard, 1975; see also Bowlby, 1980; Parkes, 1975). Similarly, people may continue to believe “theories” learned in a church or temple class even when later faced with various types of contradictory or inconsistent information.

Function. The notion of schema is highly connected with how schemas are seen as functioning. Schema research was stimulated by findings that people bring to situations a large amount of prior knowledge that influences how they perceive and understand the situation (see Fiske & Linville, 1980, for a review, and Bartlett, 1932, as an example). One might say schemas are known by their fruits.

First, schemas influence what is perceived. Neisser (1976) wrote that people notice “only what they have schemas for, and willy-nilly ignore the rest” (p. 80). Further, because relations among the elements of the schema are imposed on the elements of the stimulus configuration, schemas influence how people understand what they perceive (Bartlett, 1932; Bruner, 1957b; Taylor & Crocker, 1981). People arrange the elements of their environment to reflect the organization of relevant schemas. For example, subjects who possess a masculine self-schema (i.e., consider themselves highly masculine and view masculinity as very important to themselves) perceive a video of everyday behavior in terms of masculinity to a greater degree than those without a masculine self-schema (Markus, Smith, & Moreland, 1985). In this way, a religious schema can provide a framework for understanding events and, therefore, can influence how the perceiver evaluates the events. Generally, if a series of events is ambiguous, someone with a religious schema is more likely than a person without such a schema to impose a religious interpretation on the events. Further, those with a particular religious schema may understand events much differently than those without that schema. An example of how a specific religious schema causes different understandings of an event is evident in a finding reported by Gorer (1965). He noted that the Spiritualists and Christian Scientists in his sample denied completely the importance of death and, therefore, did not experience grief. Gorer separated these individuals from people who experience grief but keep it inside themselves; to the Spiritualists and Christian Scientists, the situation does not call for grief. Put in more schematic terms, the datum of
someone's death is assimilated into the Spiritualist or Christian Scientist religious schema, and with this schema, death is not understood as important and worthy of grief.

Similarly, schemas allow people to go beyond the information given by providing elements for filling in missing pieces of what is perceived (Bruner, 1957a; Rumelhart & Ortony, 1977). For example, on hearing a fellow bus passenger mention that she has just donated some clothes to Deseret Industries and is going home to read her "triple combination," those having a Mormon schema will be able to infer that the speaker is Mormon. Note that if the perceiver's schema does not, in reality, match the situation, the perceiver may incorrectly fill in missing information. Two passersby might make different inferences when seeing one person dunk another into a river (e.g., baptism or homicide); both schemas allow the observers to go beyond the information given (i.e., the actions of the people in the river), but only one of them can be correct. Note that two people may each apply different schemas to an event, and neither may be accurate; the people in the river could simply have been playing a game.

Related to this, schematic conceptions of how the world works may help create the reality they anticipate even in the absence of objective environmental bases (Taylor & Crocker, 1981). For example, if a person whose religious schema includes a belief in faith healing sees a once terminally ill person healthy, she or he may assume, even without further information, that someone had prayed for that person's healing. The datum of the person's cure is easily and quickly assimilated into the faith-healing schema. The cure is then connected to beliefs about healing in ways defined by the person's schema (e.g., prayer must have been involved). This person will thus have created an example of the power of prayer; someone with another schema may have understood the stimulus (the cured person) much differently—perhaps relating it to beliefs about "doctors being quacks." As another example, one person may incorrectly infer from his or her religious schema that a second person is religious, based on cues such as hairstyle or dress. Based on this assumption, the first person may initiate a theological discussion with the second person. Even if the second person is not religious, she or he may politely continue the discussion. This will help confirm the first person's inference. In addition, the discussion itself may make the second person more religious. In this example, the first person's view of reality, based on his or her schema, created a situation that made him or her more certain of the assumption (the second person discussed theology) and may potentially have changed reality (the second person's religiousness).

A benefit of conceptualizing religion as a schema is that research on the effects of schema on the processing of information can be applied to religion. Several of these functions are described later. Because schemas allow people to fill in gaps in input or knowledge, they allow individuals to employ heuristics or shortcuts that simplify and shorten the process of problem solving (Taylor & Crocker, 1981). When a problem has cues that activate a
schema, people can use that schema to assist in solving the problem. Taylor, Crocker, and D’Agostino (1978) found that problems with schema-relevant cues were solved faster than problems with schema-irrelevant cues. Perhaps individuals with religious schemas can employ heuristics to solve problems or deal with issues that are relevant to the religious domain (e.g., finding meaning in misfortune, explaining seemingly “unnatural” occurrences).

Relatedly, Taylor and Crocker (1981) reported that a large number of studies show faster cognitive processing for schema-relevant versus schema-irrelevant material. For example, Markus (1977) found that students who had schemas about themselves for being either dependent or independent responded faster to schema-relevant information than students who did not possess schemas in these domains. Related to religion, individuals with religious schemas have significantly shorter response latencies than those without such schemas when asked to indicate if a religious adjective describes them (Spencer & McIntosh, 1990). Taylor and Crocker (1981) pointed out, however, that some studies find longer processing time for schema-relevant stimuli. One possible reason for this may be the centrality of the stimuli. “Information that is highly redundant and/or central to the schema might be processed faster than schema-irrelevant material, whereas information that has novel implications for the schema and/or is peripheral to the schema might be processed more slowly” (Taylor & Crocker, 1981, p. 102). In the realm of religion, this suggests, for example, that an individual whose religious schema includes an explanation for why good things happen to bad people will be able to process cognitively information about the success of a “bad” person more quickly than a person for whom the instance would be novel or not included in the schema.

Further, the complexity of a schema has implications for the processing of information. Tesser (cited in Taylor & Crocker, 1981) suggested that schemas provide criteria for evaluation and, therefore, that people with highly developed schemas make more confident and extreme evaluations more quickly than people without schemas. Similarly, people are faster and more confident in predicting the future if they have a schema for the stimulus domain (Markus, 1977). Those who possess a complex religious schema should be able to evaluate the religious significance of stimuli more quickly (e.g., what impact, if any, does this archeological finding have on religious beliefs or assumptions?) and would be more confident when predicting future religious outcomes (e.g., what will happen to church-state relations if the Supreme Court makes this ruling?) than those without a complex religious schema.

In short, schemas enable people to identify stimuli quickly, fill in information missing from the stimulus array, and select a strategy for obtaining further information or solving a problem (Taylor & Crocker, 1981). Schemas frame the way in which information is perceptually organized, stored, retrieved, and processed. Schemas sort the myriad stimuli, make them meaningful, and facilitate their processing.
How Does the Schema Construct Relate to Previous Work?

The idea that knowledge or beliefs about the physical or metaphysical universe influence how one perceives and understands events or novel information is not new to psychology in general or the psychology of religion in particular. Previous scholars have discussed schemas and schema-like constructs. For example, Bowlby (1969, 1980) presented the idea that individuals have inner working-models of the world. Hall (1986) discussed cosmologies, defined as belief systems based on viewing the universe as an orderly system involving complex interacting processes of energy or life-force. Ball-Rokeach, Rokeach, and Grube (1984) suggested that a person’s value-related attitudes toward objects and situations and organization of values and beliefs about the self form a comprehensive belief system that provides an individual with a cognitive framework, map, or theory. Glock and Piazza (1981) saw people as structuring reality in causal terms—what or who has power to influence events. What Parkes (1975) termed the assumptive world is defined as a strongly held set of assumptions about the world and the self.

Schema-like functions for systems of beliefs have also been discussed. Just as schemas are built through experience, previous work points to the construction of systems of beliefs through experience (e.g., Bowlby, 1969; Parkes, 1975). Ball-Rokeach et al. (1984) saw belief systems as being relatively enduring, yet able to undergo change as well. Harvey, Hunt, and Schroder (1961) proposed that belief systems provide a network of relations that give people an orientation and ties to the world; one’s network of concepts supplies one with linkages to the surrounding world through which reality is read (see also Luckman, 1967). The framework described by Ball-Rokeach et al. (1984) enables the person to engage in cognitive activity related to “selective remembering and forgetting, information processing, decision-making, conflict resolution, ego defense, denial, withdrawal, judging, intending, trying, praising and condemning, exhorting, and persuading—and doing” (p. 27). Bowlby (1969) stated that people have maps of the environment that influence reactions to changes in the environment. Parkes (1975) indicated that a view of reality is “maintained and used as a means of recognizing, planning, and acting” (p. 132).

More specific to the psychology of religion, the schema construct can also be tied to Allport’s conception of intrinsic religiosity (Allport, 1966; Allport & Ross, 1967). He indicated that for individuals with an intrinsic orientation, religion serves as the framework within which they live their lives; he conceived intrinsic religiousness as relating to all of life and as being integrative and meaning endowing (Donahue, 1985). These attributes can be seen as functions of having and using a developed religious schema. Some part of being “intrinsically religious” may be possessing such a schema.
How Does the Schema Construct Help the Psychology of Religion?

If previous scholars have worked with concepts similar to the schema construct, what reason is there to adopt the idea of religion-as-schema? There are several.

It is a virtue of the schema construct that it does not conflict with previous work. Whatever bit of reality the other notions or frameworks have tapped into may be shared by viewing religion as a schema. One advantage of adopting the schema notion is that it combines previous work into a unified framework. For example, Allport’s (1966; Allport & Ross, 1967) religious framework can be combined with Bowlby’s (1969) notion that working models are built via experience and the notion of Harvey et al. (1961) that belief systems affect how people structure their understanding of the world. Thinking of religion as a schema allows us to integrate much previous work into a consistent framework.

More important, adopting the schema concept links the research by cognitive and social psychologists on thinking and information processing to work done on systems of beliefs in general and religion in particular. It is more probable that the way people’s minds function is consistent across content areas than that the way the mind works relative to religion is different from, say, how it works relative to astronomy. (Conversely, psychologists of religion should be aware that much of their previous work can be informative to cognitive and social psychologists who are interested in how more abstract, higher-level cognitive schemas might function and what influence they might have.)

Some researchers have already made use of the concept. Processing of religious information has received some attention. Lipson (1983) considered children’s religious background to provide them with religious schemas. She gave Catholic and Jewish children neutral and religion-specific readings. She reported that each group recalled more text-based propositions, generated more implicit recall, made fewer recall errors, and spent less time reading the schema-relevant passage than the schema-irrelevant passage. Their prior religious knowledge strongly affected their perception, memory, or both. Using a cognitive-psychology approach in examining memory for religious messages, Pargament and DeRosa (1985) evaluated the effects of students’ beliefs about whether God or people control people’s lives on memory for three sermon-like messages, each advocating a particular combination of God and personal control. They found that belief in personal control was significantly and negatively correlated with memory for the High God—Low Personal control message and that belief in control by God was marginally and positively correlated with memory for the same message. They also found that the tendency to distort recall of the content of the message in the direction of High God—Low Personal control was significantly related to more belief in God control and less in personal control.
Further, the tendency to distort recall of the message in the direction of Low God–High Personal control was significantly related to greater beliefs in personal control. These results are consistent with the view that students’ religious schemas affected their memory or perception of the speeches. This influence on memory or perception of information is likely to occur in other domains as well (e.g., news reports, gossip).

Lechner (1990) applied work on cognitive schemas to his study of people’s God concepts. He found that a well-delineated concept of God was associated with integration of religious beliefs into daily life. Being religious can thus be seen as involving, in part, more elaborate schemas in the religious domain and more overlap between that domain and others.

In his description of Christian evangelism in public settings, Ingram (1989) provided an example of how viewing religion as a schema integrates both psychological and sociological perspectives on religion. Using Goffman’s (1974) notion of frames (a type of schema), Ingram indicated that proselytizers use an evangelical schema to interpret the events of a witnessing encounter, and try to shift the potential convert’s interpretation of the situation—and life—to an evangelical frame. Thus, religious schemas can both be introduced from the outside (by society, peers, missionaries, etc.) and, once possessed by an individual, can influence both perceptions of events and actual behavior.

One domain in which a cognitive-schematic understanding of religion has been constructive is in examining the relation between religion and coping. In the next section, I use this topic as an extended example of how viewing religion as a cognitive schema can be helpful.

**RELIGION AND COPING**

Thinking of religion as a cognitive schema is useful in investigating how religion can influence the coping process and outcome and also in exploring how traumatic events can affect religion. To explore these questions, we must first consider from a cognitive standpoint what happens when an individual experiences a stressful event. When a life change occurs (e.g., relocating to a new place, the death of a loved one), people must make the event, which has occurred in external reality, real inside the self (Horowitz, 1976; Parkes, 1975). This involves integrating the data of the occurrence with prior assumptions (Janoff-Bulman, 1989). Hastie (1981) noted that any specific event can be evaluated as congruent, incongruent, or irrelevant with regard to a particular schema. How a particular event relates to one’s religious schema is likely to have an impact on coping and adjustment. A major cognitive coping task of people experiencing potentially stressful life changes is assimilating their experiences to their extant cognitive schemas, changing their basic schemas about themselves and their world (accommodation), or both (Horowitz, 1976; Janoff-Bulman, 1989).
Many major life events (e.g., births, transitions to adulthood, marriages, deaths) have historically been linked to religion and are often given religious significance (Spilka et al., 1985). This may cause religious schemas to be cued when such events occur. In addition, people dealing with major life events often indicate that they use religion as part of coping (e.g., Balk, 1983; Friedman, Chodoff, Mason, & Hamburg, 1963; Koenig, George, & Siegler, 1988). Religious schemas are therefore likely to be cued or activated during times when people are coping. Thus, attributes of individuals' religious schemas may have an impact on how people deal with such events. Of course, not everyone has a religious schema, and many people's religious schemas may be peripheral and undeveloped. Some probably have other schemas that can fulfill the same functions that a religious schema can. All these are individual-difference variables that can be examined in the religion-as-schema perspective.

How might a religious schema influence how a person copes with an event? Two particular functions of schemas seem applicable when considering the influence of religion in coping: (a) increased speed of processing domain-relevant information and (b) assimilation of stimuli to a form congruent with an extant schema. The first function may expedite cognitive processing of the event, and the second may facilitate the finding of meaning in the event.

Cognitive Processing

Recall that possessing a schema in a domain of interest enables the person to process schema-relevant information more quickly and efficiently (e.g., Markus, 1977; Taylor, Crocker, & D'Agostino, 1978) and that the perceiver may be able to employ shortcuts or heuristics that simplify and shorten the process (see Taylor & Crocker, 1981). If religious people do possess a cognitive structure that includes ways of thinking about traumatic events, such a schema should facilitate faster cognitive processing of such events.

Faster processing may also be related to better adjustment to aversive events. Recall that people must integrate data from traumatic events with extant beliefs. Being able to cognitively process a negative event quickly and efficiently could facilitate the integration of the event. Having a well-developed religious schema may be analogous to having a closer match between the event and one's schema. Instead of having to fumble around inventing or modifying a less developed schema after the event occurs, one can just plug the event into the extant schema and begin processing. Thus, processing is likely to occur more quickly and more smoothly. Support for this view is given by Parkes (1975), who claimed a successful transition from an old situation to a new one is more likely if the person has a relatively realistic model of the new situation. Processing "on the fly" is likely to be more sloppy and hazardous than processing according to established plans.
To the extent that religious beliefs promote the latter type of processing, religion should relate to better adjustment.

McIntosh, Silver, and Wortman (1993) evaluated the role of religion in parental coping with the loss of a child to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS). SIDS death was studied because it provides a good arena in which to examine ideas about the impact of traumatic occurrences. The death of one's child is certainly one of the most traumatic events that can occur (Palmer & Noble, 1986), and the nature of SIDS does not allow the bereaved time to cognitively prepare for the crisis. McIntosh et al. (1993) found that the more important religion was to respondents, the more cognitive processing (e.g., intentional and unintentional thinking about the baby and his or her death) was evident immediately after the loss. To the degree that those for whom religion is more important also possess a more developed religious schema, this finding is consistent with the notions that having a religious schema can facilitate thinking about the death of a loved one. More cognitive processing immediately after the loss is linked to greater well-being and potentially less distress 18 months later. Thus, religion is associated with an important part of the coping process, and this was predicted by viewing religion as a cognitive schema.

Finding Meaning

Taylor (1983) proposed that the search for meaning (i.e., finding a purpose for or an understanding of the event) is one of three important themes in the coping process (see also Rothbaum, Weisz, & Snyder, 1982; Silver & Wortman, 1980). A number of studies reported that meaning is often sought during crises (e.g., Bulman & Wortman, 1977; Dollinger, 1986; Glick, Weiss, & Parkes, 1974; Sanders, 1980) and that finding meaning in misfortune is associated with effective adjustment (Silver, Boon, & Stones, 1983; Thompson, 1991; but see Dollinger, 1986, for evidence of an attribution-distress link).

Religion may well be able to provide this meaning (Allport, 1950; Clark, 1958; Spilka et al., 1985; Wuthnow, Christiano, & Kuzlowski, 1980). Sherrill and Larson (1987) maintain that among burn patients, the meaning supplied by religious commitment is an important and under-studied part of coping. How does the religion-as-schema view relate to this process? Recall that schemas influence how people understand what they perceive. A schema may shape the individual's reality to be in line with the schema, even without objective foundation (Taylor & Crocker, 1981). For example, Bartlett (1932) found that subjects frequently added their own causal ties, ignored unusual information, and revised the plot of a non-Western-style Indian folk tale until the story resembled a Western schema for folk tales. In a similar fashion, a person whose religious schema already includes an understanding of traumatic events may better be able to fit such an event to an extant schema,
perhaps imposing understanding and meaning (see Wuthnow et al., 1980). McIntosh et al. (1993) found in their study of religion's role in parental coping after losing a child to SIDS that greater importance of religion was associated with parents' finding more meaning. Having found meaning, a person may be more likely to experience better adjustment to the event. Indeed, McIntosh et al. (1993) reported that the finding of meaning is associated with less distress and more feelings of well-being immediately after the loss and less distress 18 months later. Viewing religion as a schema allows us to understand how religion can impose meaning on traumatic events and why religious beliefs might be helpful when dealing with a crisis.

The previous discussion has demonstrated the utility of viewing religion as a schema to the investigation of religion's influence on coping and adjustment. However, schemas not only affect how people respond to incoming events and information (and thus how they cope with traumatic events), but they also themselves are influenced by events and information. Thus, viewing religion as a schema also assists in making predictions about how religious beliefs will change in response to traumatic events.

**Religious Change From Trauma**

Trauma has been proposed as a cause of religious conversion (e.g., Ullman, 1982), as well as a generator of religious doubts (e.g., Friedman et al., 1963). Traumatic events can challenge people's generally unquestioned and unchallenged fundamental beliefs (Janoff-Bulman, 1989; Janoff-Bulman & Frieze, 1983; Parkes, 1975); sometimes radical changes occur in people's belief systems (Bowly, 1969). Janoff-Bulman and Frieze (1983, p. 7; Janoff-Bulman, 1989) seemed to assume that everyone's basic beliefs will be "shattered" by victimization. However, as reported by Janoff-Bulman (1989), multiple victimizations do not appear to continue to generate change in a person's assumptive world or belief system. Thus, once victimized, further victimizations do not necessarily destroy one's beliefs and do not require the same reorganization as an initial victimization. This leaves the door open to there being individuals who do not experience a radical adjustment of beliefs as a result of the initial victimization. Janoff-Bulman and Frieze (1983) wrote that the number of assumptions affected depends on the individual. Perhaps there are those who have a developed schema prior to any victimization that allows them to bypass any dramatic reorganization.

Considering differences in religiosity as differences in elaboration of a religious cognitive schema may allow us to predict who will experience religious change after a crisis. For example, because those who have an elaborated belief system that incorporates understandings of a particular event (e.g., death) should have less of a need to modify or reject their schema when confronted by such events, individuals who are most religious at the time of the trauma may experience less religious change. This gains some
support by Cook and Wimberley's (1983) findings that there is little evidence that adjustment to the death of one's child produces stronger adherence to religion for those having a religious commitment already—those who already have a framework do not appear to change.

Using a panel of parents who had lost a child to SIDS, McIntosh, Silver, and Wortman (1989) tested hypotheses about religious change derived from viewing religion as a cognitive schema. Because a more developed or elaborated religious schema might be able to assimilate the event better and thus obviate the need for change, McIntosh et al. (1989) predicted that the most religious respondents—those assumed to have the most complex schemas—would experience the least actual change in religion between 3 weeks after the loss and 3 months after the loss. That importance of religion at 3 weeks postloss and absolute change in religion were correlated negatively supported this contention. Further, a comparison of absolute change supported the hypothesis; pairwise comparisons of differences between group means revealed that absolute change for those who indicated religion was "not very important" through "very important" did not differ from each other, but each was greater than the absolute change found in those who indicated religion was "extremely important." That this difference in absolute change is not due to a ceiling effect is inferred from open-ended responses on the effect of the loss and the small number relative to the other groups of those originally in the "extremely important" group who showed a decrement in importance of religion. These findings suggest that those who possess an elaborate or complex religious schema prior to a traumatic event change this schema less—perhaps because the power of the schema reshapes the event rather than vice versa.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Viewing religion as a cognitive schema is consistent with previous psychological investigations of beliefs and religion. Further, it has proven useful in understanding how people comprehend and remember religious messages, the relation between religiousness and people's concept of God, the process of public evangelism, and how religion and coping with trauma are related.

These studies exemplify what can be done when viewing religion as a cognitive schema. One area that needs further work is the direct examination of religious schemas. How many people have them? What areas of perception or processing do they influence? What are different ways in which they are formed and organized? Understanding how religious schemas function in general can provide insight into a number of questions.

Psychologists of religion long ago put aside the notion that religion was unidimensional, with people simply varying on how religious they were (Spilka et al., 1985). Thus, if the religion-as-schema view is to be helpful at all, it must be more than simply a way to describe "religious" versus "nonre-
ligious” people or people with religious knowledge versus those without it; it must prove useful in dealing with individual differences among religious people. One potential distinction made apparent by viewing religion as a schema is differences in the organization of people’s beliefs. Some cognitive organizations of religious beliefs might be highly structured and hierarchical, whereas others might be simple, abstract, and vague. What effect does this individual difference have on the functions of religion in people’s lives? Another important difference among people may be in whether their religious schema is salient or central—or whether it is connected to the self (cf. Markus, 1977; Spiro, 1987a). Two people may have very complex religious schemas. If one of these people is “religious”—that is, if religion is an important part of the self for this person, then his or her religious schema is likely to be activated often—perhaps chronically—and thus will have more influence on his or her life than the other person’s schema (cf. Markus, 1977).

Another domain in which viewing religion as a schema would be helpful is that of religious experience. For example, certain religious schemas may cause individuals to interpret ambiguous stimuli as religious or mystical in nature. Relatedly, knowing what stimuli or environmental cues activate religious schemas could be used to understand the structure and function of individuals’ religious beliefs.

Finally, as suggested by both work on evangelism (Ingram, 1989) and work on the effect of trauma on religion (McIntosh et al., 1989), considering religion as a schema can be helpful in studying religious change and conversion.

Viewing religion as a cognitive schema is conceptually rich and empirically useful. Whenever an investigator is interested in not only the content of religious beliefs but also their organization, relation to other beliefs, role in problem solving, and effects on perceiving, evaluating, and remembering stimuli, he or she should consider conceptualizing religion as a schema and applying what psychology knows about the structure and functions of a schema. Psychologists of religion have long known that religion can powerfully affect the way people perceive and understand the world. They have also long known that the world can influence people’s religious beliefs. Religion is more than a cognitive schema, but thinking of it as such provides a useful way to analyze these relations and to understand religious beliefs themselves.

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