

Psychologists Are Learning What Religion Has Known for Years

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EVEN THOUGH I was raised Catholic, for most of my adult life, I didn't pay religion much heed. Like many scientists, I assumed it was built on opinion, conjecture, or even hope, and therefore irrelevant to my work. That work is running a psychology lab focused on finding ways to improve the human condition, using the tools of science to develop techniques that can help people meet the challenges life throws at them. But in the 20 years since I began this work, I've realized that much of what psychologists and neuroscientists are finding about how to change people's beliefs, feelings, and behaviors—how to support them when they grieve, how to help them be more ethical, how to let them find connection and happiness—echoes ideas and techniques that religions have been using for thousands of years.

Science and religion have often been at odds. But if we remove the theology—views about the nature of God, the creation of the universe, and the like—from the day-to-day practice of religious faith, the animosity in the debate evaporates. What we're left with is a series of rituals, customs, and sentiments that are themselves the results of experiments of sorts. Over thousands of years, these experiments, carried out in the messy thick of life as opposed to sterile labs, have led to the design of what we might call spiritual technologies—tools and processes meant to sooth, move, convince, or otherwise tweak the mind. And studying these technologies has revealed that certain parts of religious practices, even when removed from a spiritual context, are able to influence people's minds in the measurable ways psychologists often seek.