Throughout history, scholars and researchers have tried to identify the one key reason that people are attracted to religion.

Some have said people seek religion to cope with a fear of death, others call it the basis for morality, and various other theories abound.

But in a new book, a psychologist who has studied human motivation for more than 20 years suggests that all these theories are too narrow. Religion, he says, attracts followers because it satisfies all of the 16 basic desires that humans share.

"It's not just about fear of death. Religion couldn't achieve mass acceptance if it only fulfilled one or two basic desires," said Steven Reiss, a professor emeritus of psychology at The Ohio State University and author of The 16 Strivings for God (Mercer University Press, 2016).

"People are attracted to religion because it provides believers the opportunity to satisfy all their basic desires over and over again. You can't boil religion down to one essence."

Reiss's theory of what attracts people to religion is based on his research in the 1990s on motivation. He and his colleagues surveyed thousands of people and asked them to rate the degree to which they embraced hundreds of different possible goals.

In the end, the researchers identified 16 basic desires that we all share: acceptance, curiosity, eating, family, honor, idealism, independence, order, physical activity, power, romance, saving, social contact, status, tranquility and vengeance.

Reiss then developed a questionnaire, called the Reiss Motivation Profile, that measures how much people value each of these 16 goals. More than 100,000 people have now completed the questionnaire. The research is described in Reiss's book Who Am I? The 16 Basic Desires that Motivate our Action and Define Our Personalities.
based on how well people believe it does compared to secular society," Reiss said.

One of the basic desires - independence - may separate religious and non-religious people. In a study published in 2000, Reiss found that religious people (the study included mostly Christians) expressed a strong desire for interdependence with others. Those who were not religious, however, showed a stronger need to be self-reliant and independent.

Reiss said one advantage of his theory is that, unlike many other theories of religion, it can be scientifically tested.

"In 16 Strivings for God, I discuss a mystical personality type - the kind of person who would likely find value and meaning in mystical experiences and would be attracted to religion for that reason," he said.

"We can test that and find out if there really is a mystical personality type."

While the theory can tell us a lot about the types of people who are attracted to religion and different religious experiences, it cannot say anything about the truth of religious beliefs, Reiss said.

"I'm not trying to answer theological questions about the existence or nature of God," Reiss said. "What I'm trying to answer is the nature of why people embrace religion and God."

Provided by The Ohio State University

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