Chapter 11
Religion and Religiosity as Cultural Phenomena: From Ontological Reductionism to Acknowledgment of Plurality

Jacob A. Belzen

Psychology's ties to religion have always been numerous—and perhaps always will be. Ever since human beings started to reflect upon themselves, they have been wondering about the relationships between those apparently non-material aspects of their functioning—such as dreaming, feeling, and thinking—and the rest of the world, including other non-material aspects of that world called by designations like gods, spirits, fate, virtue, purpose, and what have you. The earliest forms of religions seem to have been related to funeral ceremonies, humans apparently assuming that non-material, non-visible aspects of themselves and others continue to exist after the body dies, therefore oftentimes providing the deceased with what they would need in the 'beyond,' the 'afterlife.' In what counts as one of the oldest types of religion, shamans will send their 'soul' on a voyage to a world beyond the common world in order to find medicine or whatever solution to the situations of illness or other despair that made people turn to a shaman. In all long-existing, established religions, there are highly elaborated and highly different notions of both human and divine realms and especially of the relationships between those two, leading to prescriptions of both how to deal with the divine realm and how to deal with the consequences with regard to that realm; across religions, there are countless commandment about how humans, 'down here' (as opposed to 'up there'), 'under the moon' (as opposed to beyond the moon, among the stars), on 'earth' (as opposed to 'in heaven'), should live their lives.

J.A. Belzen (✉)
University of Amsterdam, Oude Turfmarkt 147, 1012 Amsterdam,
GC, The Netherlands
e-mail: belzen@hum.uva.nl

Even if one, after the rise of so-called scientific psychology in the nineteenth-century Europe, would be inclined to call many of these ideas and explanations of such practices 'implicit psychology' and 'folk psychology,' perhaps limiting psychology's scope and domain to only such realms of human life that can be investigated by scientific methods, many of the questions asked to psychologists can nevertheless not be answered by science only and they continue to draw on all kinds of religious doctrines, or at least on worldviews derived from religious perspectives. As has been explained at length by numerous authors since Foucault (1961/1965), in many respects the present-day psychologists have stepped into (or perhaps have been forced into—this chapter is not going to evaluate these developments!) roles that in previous periods of Western civilization were taken care of by the clergy: psychotherapy, for instance, sometimes resembles in many respects older religious practices of hearing confession and of spiritual direction. Whereas in such previous times, ethical rules were provided on the basis of ecclesial doctrines and with ditto authority, nowadays people with questions about feelings of guilt, loneliness, or despair, about difficulties with their children, with their (sexual) partners, with their parents or employers, often turn to professional (or sometimes to popularized) psychological knowledge furnished with scientific authority. Very often, however, the answers and advices given are not derived from any objective scientific knowledge alone, but consist in a delicate mixture of such knowledge and of hopefully sophisticated common sense, in which a good deal of religious notions or religiously influenced worldviews dress themselves.

And not even science itself is without religious notions: Science always starts from presuppositions that are themselves not scientific, that cannot and need not be scientifically proven, and more often than not, such presuppositions are articulations of religious notions. To stay with the science of psychology: whether an entity in many religions and religious philosophies called the 'soul' exists or not, and whether that soul can maintain a relationship to any 'god,' is not an issue science itself could resolve. One 'believes' (or one does not) in such matters. But such belief does make a difference: If one assumes that many states of affairs in human life (like socioeconomic status, health, marital happiness and many more) are the result of conduct of the same soul in a previous life, or the result of divine punishment, one will provide different therapy and counseling to people asking for them. The assumption of a unique, subsistent, essential, and immortal soul (like in much dualistic Western thought) will result in a different view on life, in different attitudes, and in different ways of coping with tribulation. Moreover, what counts as science and what doesn't, is affected by non-scientific positions too. For those who are of the opinion that only the natural sciences should be regarded as science, many aspects of reality will not—not yet or perhaps never, the answer will depend on the stand taken—become accessible, yet they are aspects that (non-scientific? the

answer will depend on the stand taken) psychologies such as psychoanalysis in all its branches often concentrate on. Totally different notions of the human being in its relationships to different realms of reality are the foundation of many so-called transpersonal psychologies—whether one accepts these as types of psychology at all will depend on the stand taken, not on any psychology itself.

The aim of this chapter is neither to enumerate the many types of relationships between 'psychology' (in what way ever defined) on the one hand and 'religion' (in what way ever understood) and religiosity (understood as the personal experiential-behavioral correlate of being involved in [a] religion) on the other hand,[1] nor to leave the reader bewildered because of the many actual and possible fights between all kinds of stands taken in the broad domain marked out by these poles. The fourfold aim is rather (1) to deal with only one type of relationship between psychology and religion, (2) to do so in a reconciliatory manner, (3) to argue that a specific type of progress has been achieved in this domain, and (4) to demonstrate the indispensable contribution of cultural psychology in this regard. The short introduction above was necessary not only to evoke at least some awareness of the history of the domain we are talking about, but also to realize that both 'psychology' and 'religion' are nouns that refer to extremely diversified fields: what counts as religion to one, may count as perversion or as anything-but-religion to others (the religious phenomenon called 'temple prostitution' may be abhorred by advocates of religious 'celibacy,' the phenomenon called 'religious terrorism' by some, will be called 'martyrdom' by others, to give just some examples of controversial practices); what counts as psychology to some, may have nothing to do with psychology according to others (the opposition between much of academic psychology and transpersonal psychology has been hinted at already, also think of how little 'methods' like transference analysis or experiment sometimes have in common—both practiced by 'licensed psychologists,' however).

---

[1]The distinction between religion and religiosity introduced only in passing here is quite important. Religion refers to an entity on the level of culture, any religion having properties such as doctrines, ethics, organization (of clergy and otherwise), architecture, and symbols. The term religiosity refers to the correlate of these on the level of the human being: whereas a religion has a doctrine, a human being has religious thoughts and experiences; therefore, a theological treatise about prayer belongs to a religion, a person praying displays religiosity. An ecclesiastical or otherwise religious doctrine belongs to the respective religion, a person believing, doubting, rejecting that given doctrine is committing an act of religiosity. A temple may signify the presence of a certain type of religion, a person visiting that temple can display religiosity. (Note, I write 'can' display: as one can also visit a temple for non-religious reasons, for instance, as a tourist. The individual meaning of any act is never available without having consulted the subject involved, which is the reason why meaning is usually investigated by experience-near empirical methods.) Moreover, to anticipate some of the reasoning of this chapter, as will come as no surprise to fellow cultural psychologists: the primate is with the cultural entity of 'religion'; 'religiosity' can only exist as the result of instigation and regulation by 'religion'; there is no way to derive a complex cultural phenomenon like religion from individual psychic processes or functions. (The latter type of reasoning usually leads to an ontological reductionistic fallacy.)

From 'the' Psychology of Religion to Psychologies of Religions

The one type of relationship between 'psychology' and 'religion'[2] to be dealt with in the remainder of this chapter is the psychology of religion, which is usually understood as the common designation for such employment of (some kind of) psychology to investigate and analyze (some kind of) religiosity. In order to proceed well, some possible misunderstandings related to the term 'psychology of religion' need to be clarified. First, short and practical as the name seems to be, one should bear in mind that psychology of religion is not religious psychology: It is not the articulation of any psychology that would be inherent to any religion. (Evidently, as hinted at in the introduction, such would be possible, has been done and is fascinating in itself.) Rather, what is meant here is the employment of (whatever kind of) psychology that, for other than religious reasons, has 'proved' itself to be valid psychology in an effort to investigate (whatever kind of) religion. Also, bear in mind that this employment of psychology may serve totally different intentions: sometimes, psychology has been used to discredit religion (during the days of the Soviet Union, some institutions for research on religion had the duty to contribute to the liquidation of religion, see Kääriäinen 1989), sometimes to defend religion in general or to defend some types of religion [usually, of course, including the author's own type of religion, think of the well-known works by James (1902/2002) or Allport (1950)], or to outright serve the purposes of some religion (like the so-called 'pastoral psychology' which is the employment of established psychology in the services of Christian churches, see, e.g., Watts et al. 2002). All of this may be related to, but is not to be identified with the psychology of religion in 'a proper sense' (Wulff 1997): the (in principal: neutral[3]) looking at religion through the lens of psychology. Neither is the psychology of religion to be identified with (usually highly theoretical) discourse on the (possible) relationships between psychology and religion as hinted at shortly in the introduction already; rather, psychology of religion stands for what religion looks like through the lens of psychology as employed in some kind of research.

In a double respect, it is noteworthy to signal that there is no one and single psychology of religion. First of all and as hinted at already, there are many different types of psychology and many different empirical phenomena designated as religious. Ever since psychology's rise as a 'modern science,' there has been a strong

---

[2]From now on I will mostly just employ the terms psychology and religion, leaving behind the somewhat clumsy use of quotation marks; the reader should remember, however, that 'such scholarly approaches that have been called psychology,' respectively, 'such cultural entities including the human experiences and conduct they instigate, facilitate, and regulate, as have been called religious' is what is being meant.

[3]It goes without saying that a neutral stand is not easy to achieve when it comes to something like religion. It takes considerable (and long) training to be able to analyze one's own and other people's types of religion without prejudice and apriori valuations, or to at least leave such aside during professional research.

tendency, even among present-day psychologists, to combat other approaches within psychology than those one has been trained in. Obviously, all kinds of interests play a role here (e.g., financial-economic ones, when different fractions need to rival about available funding), but sometimes an incapacity to deal with variety, especially about issues important to self-esteem, manifests itself here. (In general, many people find it hard to accept that the way things are in their life could have been quite different: with different parents, they might have been raised quite differently, their spouse might have married someone else; that other people on other continents have different opinions is, literally, a tale from a faraway country, but that the own children vote or believe deviantly is often enough a reason for tragedies in families, etc.) Numerous discussions, quarrels and fights, secessions, and rivalries in psychology remind of the similar happenings in churches and other religious organizations. Yet, as philosophers of other sciences (like Bunge 1979; Pattee 1973) have distinguished different layers in the theories within a certain science, philosophers of psychology have been helpful in proposing a stratification for the many theories in psychology. Van Rappard and Sanders (1990), for instance, spoke about three main levels of structurization in theory, that each approach reality from a certain perspective: mechanicistic, organicistic, and hermeneutical (see also Dennett 1981), which exhibit successive levels of mounting complexity as a result of the increasing historico-cultural determinacy of the object and therefore of the results of research. While in mechanicistic and organicistic theories, the tendency is as much as possible to disregard the historico-cultural determinacy of human reality, in hermeneutic psychologies this is deemed both impossible and undesirable. So, on the first level, human beings are studied as if the researcher were dealing with mechanisms. (And indeed, some aspects of human psychic functioning operate on a low level of structurization, like behavioristic theories about learning, or 'computational' cognitive psychology.) Theories like Piaget's or Gibson's figure on the organicistic level: They conceive of the human psychic functioning as an organism. The hermeneutical level in theory is typically seen as the highest level of structurization, as it presupposes the other two (the reverse not being the case: on a lower level of structurization, one does not need to take the higher levels into account, one can make an abstraction of those).[4] Approaches in psychology like the cultural—historical activity theory, social constructionism, and in general all those that go under the label 'cultural psychology' are examples of this level of theory in psychology.

From this perspective, the different kinds of psychological theory do not necessarily contradict one another; on the contrary, they illuminate different aspects of

---

[4]Mind, however, that to this idea—like to almost any relevant idea in psychology—objections have been raised: The so-called anthropological school (in medicine, also including psychiatry) and the phenomenological movement (which had strong offshoots in psychology) have pointed out that in the case of the human being even the lower levels of structurization are affected by the higher levels, there would be no simple 'stimulus–response–situation' in the world of the human being; trying to abstract from the higher levels would be a distortion, resulting in invalid 'knowledge.'

psychic functioning and taken all together contribute to a more holistic view of the human being, also in psychological respects. By logical consequence, this is also true for the religious realm: at all times, in whatever religion human beings are involved in, psychologists can direct their attention to different aspects of psychic functioning, from a physiological—psychological level to a cultural psychological level. If one takes a look at the literature presenting itself as belonging to the psychology of religion, one sees this tendency reflected: From any psychological perspective, one could investigate those psychic aspects of religiosity any particular psychological perspective focuses on, the many 'handbooks' available by now offering handsome overviews.[5] And one probably should conclude that for an embracing view of psychical factors at work in any given instance of religiosity, one will need to draw on a variety of psychological perspectives.

Progress in Psychological Thinking About Religion?

The second reason why there is not one and single psychology of religion may count as a type of progress in psychological thinking about religion. Obviously, the notion of progress is problematic, and in scientific and scholarly milieus easily reeks after positivism. The type of progress referred to here is quite the opposite, however: whereas positivisticly inclined scientists tend to think that to all kinds of questions and problems there may be only one answer, other than natural scientists point out that to many questions and problems there may be several answers, not a single one among them necessarily being the best one. To a clinical psychologist, there usually is not only one option available to help clients deal with their problems (e.g., 'I can't stop thinking about my deceased mother, it interferes with all of my life, my work, my marriage'); to a historian, there hardly ever is a single reason for something happening in the past ('why did Leonardo paint the Mona Lisa?', 'what caused Napoleon to try to conquer Russia?', 'why was Hitler elected?'). As with so many domains in human life, the recognition of a multitude of relevant factors is in many branches of scholarship an advantage over the effort to rule out as

---

[5]To mention just some examples: Wulff (1997) organized his classic book along the mainstreams in theories within psychology like biology-oriented psychology, behaviorism, psychoanalysis, humanistic psychology, and others; Paloutzian and Park (2013) drew on 'basic psychology disciplines,' like developmental, social, personality, and cognitive psychology, and tried to line up with current wings like neuropsychology, cross-cultural psychology, evolutionary psychology; Miller (2012) added attention to movements like positive psychology, feminism, esotericism, and parapsychology, while Pargament (2013), himself a clinical psychologist, gave ample attention to applied versions of psychology of religion like in psychotherapy and counseling, and in clinical and otherwise health-related situations. In modern journals like *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* or the APA-published *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, editors and authors do their best to line up with current developments within psychology at large. The conclusion remains the same: from any psychological perspective one can make contributions to 'the' psychology of religion.

many variables as possible. In order to help to change a certain situation ('we don't want Jim to commit criminal acts'), or to understand an event or a certain state of affairs ('why did Jim become a criminal at all?') not all factors recognized may be equally important, but for exhaustive analysis and embracing and lasting solution, it is usually best to take as many factors into account as possible.

The history of progress in insight into multifaceted problems reminds of a famous saying attributed to Bernard of Chartres (+1124), about whom the philosopher (and later bishop) John of Salisbury (c. 1120–1180) wrote that he 'used to compare us to [puny] dwarfs perched on the shoulders of giants. He pointed out that we see more and farther than our predecessors, not because we have keener vision or greater height, but because we are lifted up and borne aloft on their gigantic stature' (1159/1955, p. 167). Indeed, the saying has become a metaphor for progress in the human sciences, to which large parts of psychology also belong. For many Westerners today, it is hardly conceivable that previous ages did not recognize how different children are from (so-called) adults, that they did not realize that behavior is usually overdetermined, that deviancy may be related to psychic disorder, etc. The 'discovery' of 'the psyche' (and the rise of a branch of science concentrating thereon) may count as a kind of progress in the history of humanity. Contrary to the lament over the lack of unity in psychology, the emergence of different types of psychology constitutes a continuation of this type of progress as well: the 'psyche,' the very object of psychology, has shown itself to be so complex that multiple and sometimes highly different types of psychology are necessary to even begin to explore and understand it and to begin to take the psychological dimension into account with regard to all human functioning. Many pioneers of present-day psychology spoke about their newly established science as if it were one and single (as many psychologists even today continue to do so). Within only a few decades, however, it had to be acknowledged that 'progress in psychology' does not consist in any unilinear movement as often assumed to be the case in the natural sciences—in this latter sense, one can only conclude that there is no progress in psychology and that large parts of psychology have perhaps 'gone astray' striving for it (Toomela and Valsiner 2010). The progress referred to here, however, is typical for philosophy and the human sciences to which psychology, in many respects, next to the natural sciences, will always also belong. Progress consists in the acknowledgment of diversity in the psychological realm and of the many factors that need to be distinguished here.

The history of 'the' psychology of religion is a telling example of the developments evoked and of the type of progress hinted at. During the course of the last 150 years, there has not only been an increasing understanding that the noun 'religion' is unsuitable to refer to the worldwide multitude of phenomena that

Westerners have called by that name. Indeed, recently, voices can be heard that propose to discontinue altogether the use the word 'religion' in scholarly discussions: The very word would be coined by Westerners, modeled after a particular understanding of certain types of Christianity and in its application to utterly different subcultures it would be an example of intellectual colonialism (Feil 1986, 1997; Haußig 1999). The diversity supposedly covered by the noun 'religion' as its designation would have only in common that it is being referred to as religion (by Westerners), the real issue for scholarly research being to find out, why some practices at some time have come to be regarded as 'religion' at all (see, e.g., Hölscher 1999; McCutcheon 2007; Taves 2009). Be this as it may (and as such an issue that is not specific to psychology of religion), a similar trend can be depicted for 'the' psychology of religion as well: Ever since the 'turn to the subject' in the modern European philosophy, there has been a tendency to try to understand (all of) religion by means of one single psychology, often enough leading to a kind of ontological reductionism (when it was suggested that 'religion' *tout court*, so to say, would be the result of the psychic function or mechanism that any particular author postulated or claimed to have discovered). Whereas religion in early Modernity was still understood to be the human being's service of (the Christian) god (therefore, an obligation of the human being toward god), modern philosophies like deism, rationalism, and naturalism offered new interpretations of the world that turned the existence of religion as such into something that needs to be accounted for. Whereas the early Enlightenment had explained religion by appealing to human rationality ('god' would be necessary to explain the existence of the world), Kant founded religion in the will (theology would not add anything to the explanation of the natural world, god would be no 'object of theoretical reason', as Kant (1787/ 1956) phrased it; but god would be a necessary postulate for 'practical reason', in order to guarantee morality). After him, the effort to explain religion that became most dominant in psychology would be formulated by Schleiermacher (1799/1958): He founded religion in emotion; according to Schleiermacher, religion would be 'a province of its own within the soul,' it would be 'sense and taste for the Infinite.' A long row of psychologists, up to the present, followed, trying to anchor religion in a (single) property of the human psyche—forgetting, like with so many other domains of human life, that the explanation of the human conduct and experience under scrutiny owes much more to culture and history than to any aspect of the human psyche (an insight gone lost to much of contemporary psychology, influenced by American individualism, but common in much of older continental European psychology, and one that current cultural psychology capitalizes on, Valsiner 2012, 2014). Numerous explanations for the existence of religion have been proposed by psychologists, naturally in terms of the theory they happened to

develop or to be acquainted with, often leaving no room—as is typical for reductionism[6]—for alternative 'explanations.' Thus, James (1902/2002) spoke about religion in terms of emotion (disregarding all cultural and historical factors at work in any religion), Freud (1913/1964, 1927/1961) saw oedipal complications and projection at work in religion, Skinner (1953) called attention to (social) learning, Jung (1938/1969) 'detected' archetypes, and contemporary psychologists offer interpretations in terms of cognitive and evolutionary psychology. But throughout the development of the psychology of religion modesty has increased: Only a small minority of those involved today will still claim that there is only one single psychological explanation for religion; most will grant that all of psychology at best provide some insights into some of the psychological aspects of religion and religiosity.

The Plural Program in the Psychologies of Religions

In an effort to grant the right of existence to the variety among the psychologies of religions, one could distinguish a threefold program in this branch of scholarship (Belzen 2015):

1. The inclusion of 'religion,' in what sense ever understood, in psychological reasoning and acting. Although this program is comprehensive—one could think of many types of research and application of psychological expertise—it could be called a 'weak program,' as the emphasis is not with the analysis of phenomena, events, and situations called religion, but rather with either theoretical psychology (e.g., focusing on the relationship between psychology and religion—an important issue that as such does not belong to the psychology of

---

[6]Note that reductionism as such is a kind of error in logic found in all kinds of domains. Methodological reduction of complexity in order to focus on some selected factor is as such a valid element in many procedures, both outside and inside science. (As soon as one leaves the research situation, this type of reduction should be left behind.) However, acknowledging *only* the factor one wishes to concentrate on, not just during a certain investigation but in general, denying the presence of other factors in the more complex whole counts as ontological reductionism. (A salesman, a chemist, and an art historian will each focus on different aspects of, e.g., Rembrandt's work, but without necessarily denying the relevance of other aspects. Neglecting the artistic value altogether, considering the market value of a painting only would be a form of reductionism; to focus only on the chemical materials used in painting in dealing with a piece of art would be just as much a form of reductionism.) With regard to the scientific study of religion, Freud's saying that 'God would be nothing but an elevated father' counted as an infamous example of psychological reductionism. One should bear in mind, however, that treatises of religion that seemed to be defensive (like Jung's) often are just as reductionistic in explaining (almost) everything by means of only his own 'analytical psychology,' and that many theological treatises (especially of Christianity) are reductionistic too when allowing only for the religious viewpoint itself (e.g., when allowing only supposed divine or otherwise supernatural agents as 'explanation' for anything religious, whether an individual conversion, the emergence of Christianity, the origin of the Bible, or what have you).

religion), or with the development or application of some psychological theory or technique (e.g., bringing religious variables or populations into the scope of a piece of empirical psychological research). In the latter case, the focus is on the development of psychological instruments (concepts or techniques) that might, but need not be, applied to religion. Paradoxically, and pointedly, expressed: This would be a type of psychology of religion that is not primarily concerned about religion, but about psychology. Research on religion functions here as a possible *application and illustration* of a particular psychological theory or technique.

2. The second program in the psychology of religion, however, has its focus with the *exploration* of religious phenomena, events, and situations. To belong to this 'strong program' can be counted all those efforts to explore, and possibly explain empirical constellations considered religious, in light of a certain psychology. The biggest difference—even if it sometimes is more an accent than a principal difference—with the previous program is that the starting point is with religion (in what way ever understood), not with a psychological approach or method. By consequence, in such a piece of research even diverse psychological theories or techniques may be employed, or psychological viewpoints may be combined with ones drawing on other scientific approaches (like anthropology, history, or sociology). In such works, one often encounters a interplay of extensive empirical description and multiple theory.

3. As a third program, one could then consider all such efforts to determine or even explain 'religion,' *tout court*, including its origin, development, and reason of existence, by means of any psychology. This program is the oldest one in the psychology of religion and also the most theoretical one. (It has had many precursors that nowadays are counted to the history of the philosophy of religion, from the efforts to explain religion as the result of fear of death in Antiquity to the notion of religion as a socially produced illusion by Karl Marx.) Ever since its introduction into thinking about religion, this program has attracted considerable attention, not only from scholars of all kinds, but up until today also from the general public (see bestselling books like Dawkins (2006), Dennett (2006) or Hitchens (2007), who often employ some type of popularizing or sometimes even vulgarizing psychology). The goal here is to arrive at an *explanation* why religion exists at all, which is beyond psychology's sole competence, however, turning this program into an 'all-too-strong' one.

Obviously, what counts as an advantage in one program, or to one observer, may resemble a disadvantage in another program or to another observer. Research as figuring in the weak program, striving to remain close to mainstream psychology and to get its results published in such journals, may be best recognizable as present-day psychology and may facilitate the return of religion into the scope of the discipline of psychology at large. But it often has not too much to say about the religious phenomenon that functions as an illustration to the psychological theory or technique employed, and for that reason is often a disappointment to people interested in what psychology might have to say about religion (Nørager 1996).

This type of psychology of religion is therefore most attractive to and usually practiced by psychologists only, and much of the recent growth of the psychology of religion is owed to this program. Psychological reasoning as found with the third program is most attractive to people with strong theoretical interest, but it easily runs the risk of becoming a kind of vulgarized psychology as when 'too much is explained by too little,' sometimes even leading again to a type of ontological reductionism, when all of religion is derived from psychological mechanisms only. This type of psychology of religion is often enough no longer recognizable to research psychologists, as hardly any empirical investigation is reported here and the discussion is highly conceptual and goes into the direction of general theoretical debates about the relationship between psychology and religion in general. (In the main, such discussions are not found among psychologists, but among theologians and academics at institutes for religious studies (Jonte-Pace and Parsons 2001), more often than not only engaging psychoanalysis, yet sometimes leading to excellent publications in their own right, see, e.g., Dixon (1999), Parsons (1999, 2013)). The second program is one to which both experts of religion (like historians of religion, or comparative religionists, but also empirically oriented Christian theologians) and researchers drawing on a variety of approaches contribute. Not new psychology, but new psychological insight into something religious is what counts here, but it may, according to representatives of the first program, result in eclecticism and lack of scientific rigor, and it runs the risk, according to representatives of the third program, of presenting *Bilderbuchphänomenologie* (an academic swear word, which means something like: a book full of nice pictures, but failing to offer coherent analysis or overarching theory). Yet, the second program is radically empirical in its own way, for instead of molding an empirical phenomenon into the categories of some existing psychology, it will concentrate on that empirical phenomenon and look whether existing psychologies have something to offer to its exploration (and perhaps explanation) at all. If need be, representatives of the second program will even prefer to device new ways of conducting empirical research rather than 'subjecting' (mind the word!) religious people to standardized techniques as already developed in many branches of psychology.

The Indispensable Contribution of Cultural Psychologies

Because of its preference for hermeneutical approaches, including so-called qualitative research methods, cultural psychology appears to be a natural, though not the only possible, ally to the second program. If one accepts that different psychologies may contribute to insight into human psychic functioning, this also implies that such approaches within psychology that go by the name cultural psychology are indispensable: It would be, and in fact is, a fault in ontological reasoning to assume that only physiological psychology, or only neuropsychology, would be 'really' scientific psychology. Although a common opinion among the general population of Western societies, it would be just as illogical to consider clinical psychology as

the prototype of psychology *tout court*. Cultural psychologies focus on the way human beings are becoming human beings because of their inculturation: It is because the neonates is born into (a specific) human culture, that she or he will develop a human nature. (Without culture, there would be no human nature, cf. Geertz (1973, p. 49). A human being is unthinkable without culture, only a being like the mythical Kaspar Hauser would emerge.) Decades ago psychologists like Vygotsky (1978) have already pointed out that the higher psychic functions have a double origin: first a cultural and, after appropriation, an individual one. All concrete phenomena belonging to the reality of the psychic are determined by cultural encadration. All knowing, experiencing, action, wanting, and fantasizing can only be grasped in light of the individual's historico-cultural situatedness and mediation. Emotions, to deal only with this example briefly, are not irrational eruptions of purely natural and unavoidable reactions. In contrast to what is currently thought, they turn out rather to be characterized by convictions, evaluations, and wishes, whose content is not given by nature but determined by systems of convictions, values, and mores of particular cultural communities. Emotions are socioculturally determined patterns of experience and expression which are acquired and then expressed in specific social situations (Armon-Jones 1986). The various behavioral, physiological, and cognitive reactions which belong to the syndrome which is a specific emotion are not necessarily emotional in and of themselves. Ultimately, emotions are based on the same physiological processes which underlie all other behavior. What makes a syndrome specifically emotional, however, is the way in which the different responses are organized and interpreted within a certain context. To put it succinctly, emotions conform to pre-existing cultural paradigms: They are socially construed syndromes, temporary social roles, which encompass an assessment of the situation by the person in question and are interpreted as passions instead of actions (Averill 1985). Further, in the course of the so-called civilization process (Elias 1939/1978–1982) which can be described for Western society, certain emotions were not only regulated but even created (see also Foucault 1975/ 1977). Human subjectivity in its totality is always subject to specific historical–cultural conditions: There is no meaningful conduct that is not culturally constituted. It has to be understood in light of cultural contexts; and this not to find out how the postulated constant articulates itself again and again in different contexts (such only results in knowledge about 'cultural variation') but to trace how a specific cultural context made the specific action, knowledge, and experience possible. Accordingly, psychology, like history, anthropology, and linguistics, is— next to being partly a natural science, focusing on levels of psychical functioning that can be approached by mechanicistic and organicistic metaphors—also a hermeneutical science: It focuses its attention on meanings and searches out the rules according to which meaning originates in a cultural situation.

As pointed out already, religiosity, like so many aspects characteristic of human beings, is a culturally constituted phenomenon too, shaping the psyche and being shaped itself by that psyche; religiosity is the result and correlate of subjective involvement in some kind of religion (in what way ever understood), displaying enormous differences. (In some religions, like Christianity or Islam, prayer is

regarded as central; other religions do not even have the concept or practice of prayer. Some religions oppose all violence, even toward animals, other religions induce violence, in the form of sacred slaughtering of animals but sometimes also against followers of a different religious path, think, for instance, of the Inquisition in Late Medieval Europe, persecuting, among others, the early Protestants, think also of the many instances of religiously legitimated violence at present. The range seems to be without end.) Approaches within psychology that try to conceptualize the very nexus between a given type of religion, as a subcultural entity, and personal religious functioning will necessarily draw on such cultural psychological approaches: If one, e.g., would like to understand an individual conversion (whether an intensification of faith or a switch to another religious tradition), neurophysiological psychology will hardly be illuminating. For whether a person prays to Allah or to the Virgin Mary does not make a difference on the level of brain activity. For the subject involved, however, the difference may be of ultimate importance! Biographical approaches, narrative psychology or dialogical self-theory might be helpful to analyze and understand how and why such a conversion came about (Belzen 2004; Popp-Baier 1998). Or if one would like to explore the personal meaning of belonging to a clearly recognizable religious minority like the *Amish* in Pennsylvania (USA), the *Chassidic Jews* in Antwerp or Jerusalem, or the *Bevindelijken* in the Netherlands, theories about embodiment formulated by Bourdieu, Goffmann, or Radley may be more apt than cognitive approaches (Belzen 2010; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Goffman 1951, 1961; Radley 1996; Zittoun 2012).

Which type of psychology a certain psychologist will draw on is depending on numerous factors. Not only the choice of the object of study (usually one type or another of religiosity, religion as the macro-cultural phenomenon is hardly ever made an object of study by psychologists) is oftentimes related to her personal circumstances (she will turn to the religion she knows by acquaintance or that she has got to know somewhere along her biography), she will probably try to employ the type of psychology she has been trained in herself. Ideally, and as pointed out in almost any methodological treatise, the object of research comes first, the methods and technique to be employed only second. In fact, it hardly ever works that way: especially in a field of application like the psychology of religion (where the aim is not so much to develop new psychology, but to analyze something considered religious in light of psychology), when running into an object of interest, or when being confronted with a certain question or problems, psychologists usually do not set out to develop a new theory or a new technique for empirical research, but will employ existing ones. Although in many respects sound, this procedure carries a huge risk when researchers mold the factual problem too strongly into the categories of a theory they happen to have at hand already. To what extent ever illuminating it may be to discuss a problem or a certain situation in terms of a given theory, here a possible discrepancy between, simply said, empirical reality and analytical tool needed to be guarded against too: In the case of applied psychology, the analytical tool (a psychological theory or research method) should be employed to understand better any psychic aspect of the phenomenon under scrutiny, not the

other way round. Obviously, psychology of religion should be practiced in order to find out more about religion, it should not be a case of psychology for psychology's sake. Psychology of religion has been criticized, especially by representatives of religious points of view, of offering no real or no new insight into religion and/or religiosity, but of being just repetitious, of just finding again what other psychological research has been finding elsewhere already, only this time within a religious context (cf., e.g., Koepp 1920; cf. also Dittes 1969). This objection seems to be all too critical (for it oftentimes is illuminating in its own right to show psychological factors at work in constellations about which no psychological analysis had yet been put forward: think about the many other domains of application of psychology, like arts, sports, conflict management, war, education, marriage, jurisprudence, and advertisement), but it is also understandable as there often seems to be an opposition: is the research aiming to be on psychology's side (risking to find out nothing about the object it should deal with) or on the object's side (perhaps losing touch with the science of psychology)? To such research that really strives to focus on the religious object on which it is supposed to bring psychological light to shine, cultural psychological approaches provide an obvious royal road. Without any claim to be the only possible approach in the psychology of religion, cultural psychology is a type of psychology that allows to concentrate on the empirical religious object itself, striving for analysis and understanding while precluding efforts to explain all of religion from the existence of some postulated psychological function or mechanism only.

References

Allport, G. W. (1950). *The individual and his religion: A psychological interpretation*. New York: Macmillan.

Armon-Jones, C. (1986). The thesis of constructionism. In R. Harré (Ed.), *The social construction of emotions* (pp. 32–56). Oxford: Blackwell.

Averill, J. R. (1985). The social construction of emotion: With special reference to love. In K. J. Gergen & K. E. Davis (Eds.), *The social construction of the person* (pp. 89–109). New York: Springer.

Belzen, J. A. (2004). *Religie, melancholie en zelf: Een historische en psychologische studie [Religion, melancholy and self: A historical and psychological study]*. Kok: Kampen.

Belzen, J. A. (2010). *Towards cultural psychology of religion: Principles, approaches, applications*. Dordrecht, Heidelberg, London, New York: Springer.

Belzen, J. A. (2015). *Religionspsychologie. Eine historische Analyse im Licht ihrer Internationalen Gesellschaft*. Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer.

Bourdieu, P., & Wacquant, L. J. D. (1992). *An introduction to reflexive sociology*. Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press.

Bunge, M. (1979). *A world of systems*. Dordrecht: Reidel.

Dawkins, R. (2006). *The God delusion*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Dennett, D. (1981). Intentional systems. In J. Haugeland (Ed.), *Mind design* (pp. 221–242). Montgomery: Bradford Books.

Dennett, D. C. (2006). *Breaking the spell: Religion as a natural phenomenon*. New York: Penguin.

Dittes, J. E. (1969). Psychology of religion. In G. Lindzen & E. Aronson (Eds.), *The handbook of social psychology* (Vol. V, pp. 602–659). Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Dixon, S. L. (1999). *Augustine: The scattered and gathered self*. St. Louis, Mo: Chalice Press.

Elias, N. (1939/1978–1982). *The civilizing process* (Vol. 2). Oxford: Blackwell.

Feil, E. (1986). *Religio. Band I: Die Geschichte eines neuzeitlichen Grundbegriffs vom Frühchristentum bis zur Reformation.* Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

Feil, E. (1997). *Religio. Band II: Die Geschichte eines neuzeitlichen Grundbegriffs vom Frühchristentum bis zur Reformation (ca. 1540–1620).* Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

Freud, S. (1913/1964). Totem and taboo. In *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud*. (Vol. 13, pp. 1–161). London: Hogarth.

Freud, S. (1927/1961). The future of an illusion. In *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud*. (Vol. 21, pp. 1-56). London: Hogarth.

Foucault, M. (1961/1965). *Madness and civilization: A history of insanity in the age of reason* (R. Howard, abridged, Trans.). London: Tavistock.

Foucault, M. (1975/1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. London: Lane.

Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*. New York: Basic Books.

Goffman, E. (1951). Symbols of class status. *British Journal of Sociology, 2,* 294–304.

Goffman, E. (1961). *Asylums: Essays on the social situation of mental patients and other inmates*. Chicago: Aldine.

Haußig, H.-M. (1999). *Der Religionsbegriff in den Religionen: Studien zum Selbst-und Religionsverständnis in Hinduismus, Buddhismus, Judentum, Islam*. Berlin, Bodenheim: Philo.

Hitchens, Chr. (2007). *God is not great: How religion poisons everything*. New York: Twelve Books.

Hölscher, L. (1999). Religion im Wandel: Von Begriffen des religiösen Wandels zum Wandel religiöser Begriffe. In W. Gräb (Ed.), *Religion als Thema der Theologie* (pp. 45–62). Gütersloh: Kaiser.

James, W. (1902/2002). *The varieties of religious experience: A study in human nature*. London, New York: Routledge.

Jonte-Pace, D., & Parsons, W. B. (Eds.). (2001). *Religion and psychology: Mapping the terrain. Contemporary dialogues, future prospects*. London, New York: Routledge.

Jung, C. G. (1938/1969). Psychology and religion. In *The collected works of C.G. Jung* (Vol. 11, pp. 3–105). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Kääriäinen, K. (1989). *Discussion on scientific atheism as a soviet science, 1960–1985*. Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia.

Kant, I. (1787/1956). *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*. Wiesbaden: Casel.

Koepp, W. (1920). *Einführung in das Studium der Religionspsychologie*. Tübingen: Mohr.

McCutcheon, R. T. (2007). Words, words, words. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion, 75,* 952–987.

Miller, L. (Ed.). (2012). *The Oxford handbook of psychology and spirituality*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Nørager, T. (1996). Metapsychology and discourse: A note on some neglected issues in the psychology of religion. *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion, 6,* 139–149.

Paloutzian, R. F., & Park, C. L. (Eds.). (2013). *Handbook of the psychology of religion and spirituality* (2nd ed.). New York, London: Guilford.

Pargament, K. I. (Editor-in-chief) (2013). *APA handbook of psychology, religion, and spirituality* (Vol. 2). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Parsons, W. B. (1999). *The enigma of the oceanic feeling: Revisioning the psychoanalytic theory of mysticism*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Parsons, W. B. (2013). *Freud and Augustine in dialogue. Psychoanalysis, mysticism and the culture of modern spirituality*. Charlottesville, London: University of Virginia Press.

Pattee, H. H. (Ed.). (1973). *Hierarchy theory*. New York: Braziller.

Popp-Baier, U. (1998). *Das Heilige im Profanen: Religiöse Orientierungen im Alltag. Eine qualitative Studie zu religiösen Orientierungen von Frauen aus der charismatisch-evangelischen Bewegung*. Amsterdam, Atlanta: Rodopi.

Radley, A. (1996). Displays and fragments: Embodiment and the configuration of social worlds. *Theory and Psychology, 6*, 559–576.

Rappard, J. F. H., & Sanders, C. (1990). Theorie in de psychologie. [Theory in psychology]. In P. J. van Strien & J. F. H. van Rappard (Eds.), *Grondvragen van de psychologie: Een handboek theorie en grondslagen [Foundational issues in psychology: A manual for theory and foundations]* (pp. 33–44). Van Gorcum: Assen.

Salisbury, J. (1159/1955). *The Metalogicon, a twelfth-century defense of the verbal and logical arts of the trivium* (Daniel McGarry, Trans.). Berkeley: University of California Press.

Schleiermacher, F. D. E. (1799/1958). *Über die Religion: Reden an die Gebieldeten unter ihren Verächtern*. Berlin: Reimer.

Skinner, B. F. (1953). *Science and human behavior*. New York: Macmillan.

Taves, A. (2009). *Religious experience reconsidered: A building-block approach to the study of religion and other special things*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Toomela, A., & Valsiner, J. (Eds.). (2010). *Methodological thinking in psychology: 60 years gone astray?*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age.

Valsiner, J. (2012). *A guided science: History of psychology in the mirror of its making*. New Brunswick, London: Transaction.

Valsiner, J. (2014). *An invitation to cultural psychology*. London: Sage.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. (M. Cole, Ed. & Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Watts, F., Nye, R., & Savage, S. (2002). *Psychology for Christian ministry*. London, New York: Routledge.

Wulff, D. M. (1997). *Psychology of religion. Classic and contemporary* (2nd ed.). New York: Wiley.

Zittoun, T. (2012). Une approach socioculturelle du développement religieux. L'exemple du Judaïsme. In P.-Y. Brandt & J. M. Day (Eds.), *Psychologie du développement religieux. Questions classiques et perspectives contemporaines* (pp. 221–248). Geneve: Labor et Fides.