

A Cultural Psychological Reading of *Religionspsychologie*

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Summary

Jacob Belzen's *Religionspsychologie* (Belzen, 2015) is a fascinating, deeply scholarly written book retracing a century of psychology of religion in Europe and its relation to the rest of the world. It both shows the anchorage of psychology of religion in the debates taking place around the development of psychology, and in the evolution of Europe since the beginning of the 20th century. In this brief commentary, I highlight the qualities of this work, and especially its ability to retrace the complex human network of relationships that accompanied the development of a scientific society and its publications. I then suggest two possible ways to complement this analysis. First, as a developmental, sociocultural psychologist, I reflect on the fact that this field of enquiry, that aimed to be inter-confessional, came to be led essentially by scholars of Christian origin or addressing Christianity. Second, observing the variety of approaches constituting psychology of religion today, as highlighted by Belzen, I emphasize the diverse epistemologies grounding these works. I finally argue in favor of a pragmatic stance, which might both guide the field into issues of societal relevance, and allow psychology of religion to contribute to the development of psychology as a whole.

Introduction

Jacob Belzen's *Religionspsychologie* (Belzen, 2015) is a fascinating, deeply scholarly written book retracing a century of psychology of religion in Europe and its relation to the rest of the world. Yet paradoxically, it is also a very amusing book – first, because it is led like a conversation with a pleasant interlocutor, eager to share his enthusiasm, and second, because doing the history of a research field – not to say a discipline – Belzen also retraces the history of a century, of psychology, and mostly, the stories of many intermeshed lives – masters and disciples, husbands and wives, admirers and enviers, mystical and empiricists. To this century-broad fresco of human passion and intelligence, there is not much to add. I will simply make a comment on the first

sections of the book, and address a more prospective point related to the third section.

A Not-So Ecumenical Science of Religion

One of my recent surprises as I attended a few meetings of psychologists dealing with religious issues, which I found reflected in the first two sections of the book, is how much the psychology of religion has long been mainly a Christian project in Europe. It is also what appears to be the case in the almost hundred years of the International Association for the Psychology of Religion, the *Internationale Gesellschaft*, and the publication that would become the *Archive for the Psychology of Religion*. Although there has been explicit an intention to promote inter-confessional debates and to overcome religious differences when the society was created at the beginning of the 20th century in Germany, it actually seems that for most of the society's existence, these inter-confessional issues mainly concerned various forms of Catholicism, reformed churches, and Protestantism (Belzen, 2015, Chapter 4). Of course, some "religious-free" or trans-religious questions were raised by the members of the society – about belief or mysticism, for instance – and some others were also raised about civilization distant in time and space, in a perspective closer to Wundt's *Völkerpsychologie*. Yet most involved authors in Europe were also attracted to psychology of religion in link to their own religious origin or orientation, claimed, or problematic – which were all Christian. This seems to have changed only with the entry on the stage of the International Association of the provoking Ms. Marianne Beth, a scholar who was both the first woman involved, as well as the first participant of Jewish origin – although her interest was not oriented toward Judaism. The fact of her religious origin, mentioned by Belzen in the context of the uprising of the National-Sozialismus (Belzen, 2015, p. 102), is however not further developed – a discretion which can be understood – yet one may wonder about this. Interestingly, Beth also engaged dialogue with the Kant-Gesellschaft, which grouped many Jewish intellectuals (Martin Buber, Hannah Arendt, Georg Simmel, etc.). This society was mainly a philosophical one, yet interested in questions related to the psychology of religion (Belzen, 2015, p. 93). Why were these authors not more closely associated to the project of the *society* is however not addressed further. Aware that I miss much information here, and also, wanting to avoid any essentialization on the basis of this observation, I would like to raise a few questions from a theoretical perspective.

From an anthropological or a cultural psychological perspective, any religion is a cultural system, with its rules, norms, taboos, wardens, and epistemic principles, itself located in a given sociocultural environment where it is related to other systems (Dahinden & Zittoun, 2013; Geertz, 1972; Zittoun, 2013a, 2013b). From a developmental perspective, it then follows that a given person, with his or her specific trajectory in the world, exposed to these others, with their discourses, ways of doing, ways of speaking, internalizes and appropriates certain ways of seeing the world, and how through these many things that constitute her, he or she makes a unique sense of herself, others and the world. From such a perspective, if a person developed within a given religious system, that system and people with whom she interacts may facilitate some ways of thinking or acting, guide towards some, or limit others. Hence, various cultural elements – religious or others – progressively can be used as resources for her development, or at times, can become a rather limiting and constraining semiotic guidance (Lawrence, Benedikt, & Valsiner, 1992; Zittoun, 2006a).

Hence, given the fact that most researchers active in the domain of psychology of religion had some personal relations to their religion, as suggests Belzen, then it might be likely that these systems guided their questioning. In that sense, it might be interesting to examine how a given religious system, with its constitutional conditions, supports or prevents certain questions raised by people about the nature of their religious experience or their belonging. Hence, can these questions be formulated within the language of the system itself? Or does it need to draw on other semiotic resources, such as a scientific vocabulary, psychological or philosophical, to address them? Does the fact of using a language or a mode of questioning intrinsic, or external to the religious system, has any other consequences, and for whom? For instance, is it socially more recognized to adopt an academic – philosophical or psychological – rather than a religious language, does it allow to turn such questioning into a more respected one? Reversely, is trying to answer questions about faith or religious experience within the system itself – e.g., through biblical or Midrashic interpretation – an opportunity or a limiting condition, due to the constraining modalities of that system (Baucau & Zittoun, 2013; Zittoun, 2013a)? Or otherwise, is it simply dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, supported by other social networks and belonging, that allowed some researchers to become members of certain groups rather than others?

In his historical analysis, Jacob Belzen is very careful to give space to all orientations and sensibilities present within the field developed as psychology of religion around the International Association and the *Archive*. As an outsider, however, I can only observe this absence of consideration of the primarily Christian rooting of the society, as well as a primary interest for Christian

religion in the *Archive*, and I only wonder how much examining this blind sport could enrich or complete the analysis.

And a More Selective Future for Psychology of Religion

Raising this first point, I actually position myself within the very ecumenical panorama of the heterogeneity of psychology of religions, or of relationships between psychology and religion, reviewed by Belzen in the third part of his book (Belzen, 2015, Chapter 11). Although there is a wide variety in the objects, used theories, methods, and grounding in current practices of psychology of religion, can we not identify lines of strength, potential for future developments? And if so, how to do so?

As Belzen says, there *is* a psychology of religion, undoubtedly – but why bother, and why still bother now? In my view, the future of psychology of religion lies not only in the subjective interests of researchers to these matters or to the service of a growing community, but to its social relevance. And to address that issue in a grounded way, we need to turn back to what appears as one absent of the reviews of the pluralisms of psychology of religion today, which is, the plurality of their *epistemological groundings*. In effect, one of the reasons of the apparent eclecticism of the approaches identified by Belzen is that these are grounded into very different types of epistemologies. Choosing to evaluate the outcome or church attendance through a questionnaire to address coping mechanism, or studying religious sense-making through a case study (Lawrence et al., 1992) do not only convoke two data gathering techniques (e.g., questionnaires vs. interviews), and two theoretical frames (e.g., medical-positivistic vs. dialogical), they also rely on deeply contrasting conceptions of the nature of social-scientific knowledge, the modalities of its constitution and its outcomes – that is, different epistemologies – from the most naïve realism to postmodern constructivist.

Here, I would like to argue in favor of a pragmatic epistemology to the psychology of religion – a pragmatist stance also adopted by William James (Brandt & Fournier, 2007; James, 1902, 1904b; Zittoun, 2013b), and rejected by some of the early promoters of the International Association (Belzen, 2015, Chapter 3). A pragmatic epistemology encourages studying issues or concepts in such a way that their use makes a difference; either they allow to change one's outlook upon the world, or they allow to act upon it. This can be understood at two levels: that of producing concepts that matter in this double sense, or also, to focus on issues that actually are important for people in themselves (Cornish & Gillespie, 2009; James, 1904a, 1904b). In addition, it encourages a

strong and reflexive dialogue between theorization and facts, also called abduction – where neither science should be the flat application of models or theories, nor the pure account of facts, but emerge out of a permanent and mutual enrichment of these two aspects (Zittoun, 2015).

From such a perspective, a few implications can be drawn. First, a useful starting point for a study of psychology of religion is that of issues that do matter for people we – as researchers – study, or with whom we collaborate. Of course, this can be very local. Why do the children of a religious school feel in danger when they venture in the surrounding streets in time of peace (Zittoun, 1996)? Why do University students draw on biblical stories when they move away from home (Zittoun, 2006b)? But it can also take much wider proportions: Why does a whole minority community who used to self-define herself through her national origin or her regional roots, starts to present herself as a religious minority, as the former-Yugoslavs from Switzerland, who then were presented as Kosovars, then Albanese from Kosovo, before becoming “Muslims”, in a country which itself starts to fear its religious minorities (Dahinden, Duemmler, & Moret, 2011; Dahinden & Zittoun, 2013; Holtz, Dahinden, & Wagner, 2013)?

In that respect, it might be useful to resituate these dynamics in their wider social and political contexts. Hence, although the march of history is very much present in the background of Belzen's analysis, the analysis of its role in the appearance and disappearance of certain questions could be interesting. The beginning of psychology of religion met the young 20th century, with all the richness diversity in a mainly Judeo-Christian Europe, at a point of relative peace (the large religious wars are over, the troubles in the middle east are far, and the upcoming war is still to manifest itself). Yet two world wars obviously affected psychology of religion – not only because it slowed down publications, and sent to the front or deported some of their authors; indeed, many ferocious proponents simply seem to have lost interest in these questions as more urgent social and political issues were calling them. In the second decade of the 21st century, the cultural and religious landscape is slightly different. Although Europe is still a relatively peaceful patchwork of languages and modes of living, the presence of Islam has radically increased in formerly dominantly Christian areas, in a world context where aggressive fundamentalist groups render the religion's name daily salient in the media. It is in that context that we should question how and why people mobilize their faith, claim a belonging, or why others ostracize specific religious groups. What is it that religions or religious claims or ideas or identities make people do, and what for? Why is “religion” that puts people so much on the move? These questions are pragmatists in a first sense: These are about how specific semiotic systems shape people's gaze on the world and guide their action. This could also

become pragmatist in a second sense – how could a psychology of religion allow us to understand, if not prevent dramas, such as the terrorist attacks in most of European capitals or on holiday resorts these past years? How can we produce knowledge that can guide policy makers and practitioners, so as to facilitate peaceful coexistence and mutual understanding in schools and in the workplace?

From a more theoretical stance, we can now also reflect on the development – or absence of development, as suggested by many authors quoted by Belzen – of psychology of religion from a pragmatist perspective. One core question is indeed: To what type or body of knowledge wants psychology of religion to contribute *primarily*? Here Belzen also recalls that there are many ways to consider the links between religion and psychology. As a psychologist within the social sciences, I will reply from my disciplinary perspective. For me, our enquiry should, whatever objects or shapes it takes, contribute to our understanding of people's lives in a changing world. A good observation is thus one that challenges existing theories, and allows developing more powerful or precise understandings of the world. On the one side, psychology of religion, is, to the same extent that a psychology of cooking or playing tennis, a psychology applied to a specific domain of human activity and which allows to understand humans better. Of course, religion as such is not as anodyne as playing tennis – only the former pushed people to cross oceans or deserts, allowed the most delightful human experiences, and justified the slaughters of billions of others. Hence, on the other side, the specific contribution of psychology of religion to psychology and the social sciences as a whole is that it precisely groups a very wide range of human experiences – some very specific, some much less – but unique in their combination (de Rosny, 1981; Hüwelmeier, 2011; James, 1906; Obeyesekere, 2012). In that sense, it actually challenges any theory of psychology – is it strong enough, integrative enough, rich enough to account for these specifically religious phenomena? Some authors have worked in that direction, measuring and advancing their models in the light of religious issues (Erikson, 1993; Freud, 1913; Valsiner, 1998). Although their projects were not formally part of a psychology of religion as an institutional field, they actually participated to its internal debates. Reversely, many simple applications of preexisting conceptual tools from psychology into issues of religion bring very little to theoretical discussions – showing how this or that declared faith is related to self-esteem, gender identification or coping mechanism – and definitely fail to account for the specificity of the psychological phenomena related to religion.

As Belzen beautifully shows, the origins of psychology of religion were deeply rooted to the birth of psychology and its first institutionalization, in Germany around Wundt's laboratory, and in the USA around Hall's work. Some

of the structuring problems and debates of the field reflect these wider scientific evolutions, themselves very specifically located in a time and space, allowing exchanges, fostering collaborations and exclusions. Perhaps what psychology of religion has lost by establishing itself as self-standing discipline is its anchorage in wider and foundational debates in psychology, as it once was the case.

To Conclude

My two lines of interrogation are only mosquito mumbles in front of the remarkable historical reconstruction of one century of European academic psychology of religion. As a sociocultural psychologist, thanks to Jacob Belzen's case study of the development of psychology of religion, I both learned about the development of psychology as a field, and also, about the dynamics of creating scientific societies, about collaborations and rivalries – about the daily activities of social sciences. In both senses, this history of psychology of religion is an invitation to examine the blind spots of psychology as a whole. Also, in turn, I hope that these few lines may also suggest some questions to the blind spots of psychology of religion.

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