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"Towards cultural psychology of religion: principles, approaches, and applications": an appreciative response to Belzen's invitation

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Jacob Belzen's call for a cultural psychology of religion is much appreciated and this comment expresses considerable sympathy for most of his arguments. However, in order to facilitate a broad appreciation of Belzen's book, the focus is upon five areas in which critiques seem most appropriate. These five critiques are offered to engage Belzen in a dialogue concerning what is a significant book that raises important issues for the psychology of religion which has been admittedly blind to the cultural possibilities.

Keywords: cultural psychology; spirituality; mysticism; qualitative; electicism

Since I am writing this by invitation to contribute a response to Belzen's (2010) book before I have the final print copy, I am hindered a bit by the fact that I have pages numbered for the first six chapters, but none from chapter 7 on. Thus I will not refer to specific pages when making references to the yet-to-be-printed text and will respond to Belzen's invitation in a more colloquial and conversational style, fitting since this paper was completed and sent to Belzen prior to the discussion at the meeting of the International Congress for the Psychology of Religion in Vienna in August 23–27, 2009. In addition, I admit a positive bias towards much of Belzen's work. For instance, I was editor of *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* when his paper on conversion among "bevindelijken" was published (Belzen, 1999) and participated with him in the conference (and subsequent book) in which we expressed somewhat different views of James' *Varieties* (Belzen, 2006; Hood & Williamson, 2006). Finally we shared co-authorship on a handbook chapter on methods in the psychology of religion (Hood & Belzen, 2005) that quickly revealed a difference between what Belzen in this text refers to as a European perspective, one he is proud to accept and has shared with this American in print (Belzen & Hood, 2006). Since much of Belzen's book is a reprinting or a minor re-working of previously published material, some of it noted above, I obviously am more than sympathetic with his views. However, to be helpful, I will focus upon areas in which we have disagreements, even substantial disagreements. The five areas in which I shall respond are (1) his definition (or lack thereof) of key terms, such as "psychology," (2) his reaction to the religion/spirituality debate, (3) his commitment to a non-measurement

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based psychology, (4) his restriction of psychology with respect to ontological claims and finally, (5) his eclectic use of what often are incommensurable theories.

1. What is "Psychology"?

Belzen is clear that he has not written a book on cultural psychology. His book is more like Beit-Hallahami's (1989) "prolegomena" or even more, Paloutzian's (1996) "invitation," the term Belzen explicitly uses in his title. However, Paloutzian invites us to a party already ongoing while Belzen invites us to one not yet in progress. Perhaps that is why his preface is dated New Year's Eve, 2008. He envisions a "heterogeneous" field with no clear boundaries nor with a central focus. Furthermore, his cultural psychology seeks no universally valid knowledge. There can be no psychology of religion any more than there can be a psychology of language because religion and language are declared to be cultural phenomena. Thus, as Wittgenstein denies a private language, Belzen rejects a private religion wiping aside with a wave of his arms James' famous definition of religion in the *Varieties*. All of this is surely fair, but restricted. The individual variations in the appropriation of both religion and language are immense and proper objects of psychology investigation. The question is what psychology we employ. Belzen is not helpful for he refuses to give psychology any defensible definitional boundaries. He admittedly rejects the means by which psychology (especially American psychology) has tried to model itself after the natural sciences, seeking only mathematical formula of matter in motion, a metaphor that at least one historian of psychology argues almost seduced an entire field (Robinson, 1995). Belzen's cultural psychology and his analysis of the German reaction to the *Varieties* in Chapter 7 raises issues that in Robinson's terse words Wundt knew to be "not explicable in the language of natural science" (Robinson, 1995, p. 280).

The distinction between *geisteswissenschaften* and *naturwissenschaften* has been more endorsed in European than American culture, and clearly Belzen wants to maintain something of this distinction as he mourns its passing. However, he fails to advance the argument by never making clear what psychology is – other than a heterogeneous field that studies other heterogeneous fields such as religion (always left undefined) and spirituality (defined and hence I will return to this below). Even the key plea for a cultural psychology is a field undefined. Belzen relies upon Ernst Boesch to affirm that culture is as much a process as a structure but in so doing apparently rejects the many efforts of psychologists to develop a psychology of culture as indicated by Freud's continued fascination with the oedipal drama as it is played out in history, individually and culturally alike. So my first criticism is basic, I do not know what Belzen thinks psychology is. I am a bit more comfortable with what it is not, that is a concern with a natural science view of the body as an organism, a proper study of biologists but for which James (1892) in the *Briefer course* reminded us (consistent with Belzen's cultural view of embodiment) that natural science assumptions need only provisionally apply. In a word, what Belzen and I share is a reject that psychology became materialistic. We are on good grounds here for Freud's effort in his *Project for a Scientific Psychology* intended to provide a model of psychology as a natural science in order to "to represent psychical processes as quantitatively determinate states of specifiable material particles" (Freud, 1895/1950, p. 295). This admittedly premature, unfinished, and unpublished (in Freud's lifetime) work was written in a few weeks and played no part in Freud's mature if every changing theory of psychoanalysis. Thus, while Freud may have desired that psychology be a natural

science that which is a permanent contribution to psychology is not his neurophysiologic speculations, but his distinctive psychoanalytic psychology. Here is where I think Belzen is right not to place too much emphasis on the emerging cognitive and evolutionary psychologies that are inherently reductionist. In one of his latest writings on psychology and religion (in reaction to the emergence of Bolshevism and his critique of Marxism) Freud stated, "Strictly speaking there are only *two* sciences, psychology pure and applied and natural science" (Freud, 1933, p. 179, emphasis mine). Belzen has a similar sense in opposing a natural science reduction of psychology, but he forecloses further discussion by not committing himself to at least a provisional definition of the psychology or psychologies he envisions and to which we are invited to contribute.

2. Is "Spirituality" a dead end?

Belzen is not keen on the turn to spirituality as a topic for psychological research. However, by providing the clearest definition of any term in his book, Belzen seems to advance the counter to his own argument. While admittedly not fond of definitions, he defines spirituality as a commitment to transcendence, with the caveat that transcendence is meant is the sense intended by Karl Jaspers (unspecified in this book). However, I want to take this definition as acceptable (returning to Jaspers briefly below) and note that as an object of psychological investigation psychologists can study both a religiously interpreted commitment to transcendence (those who self-identify as equally religious and spiritual) and a secularly interpreted commitment to transcendence that can be expressed in natural scientific language (such as the ecological movement, etc.). We might then speak of a vertical and a horizontal transcendence. These latter tend to self-identify as spiritual but not religious. This distinction is crucial for it is a movement not simply of psychologists disguised as apologists as Belzen suggests, but also as a global movement in opposition to cultural forms of religion by making religious imperatives optional. Religion becomes a free choice, individualised, and not unresponsive to Jaspers own sense of a subjective and experiential transformation of Kantian philosophy, While one can debate the extent this is a movement towards secularisation, the crucial issue here is one of the American model of separation of church and state and the freedom of religious choice. The US Supreme Court has essentially consistently ruled that while one has absolute freedom of religious belief (since the court recognises no heresy) the government can constrain religious practice if it has an overriding or compelling interest. Thus, the state can neither establish a religion nor need it accept any and all religious practices. I have documented the constraint on serpent handlers even in the most religiously intense areas of the United States, such as the Deep South (Hood & Williamson, 2008, pp. 208–225). The point here is that Belzen underplays the role of psychology relative to culture by placing both religion and spirituality too much in the cultural realm. The dynamic, of individuals struggling against an interpretation of experience no longer viable but imposed and endorsed by institutions ("religions") is an historical process that contemporary psychology is enmeshed in. Whether endorsing religion over spirituality (or the reverse), it may be that it is a permanent characteristic of human nature that Belzen's cultural psychology denies. I agree with Grosuch and Miller (1999) that James' *Varieties* would likely be called the *Varieties of Spiritual Experience* if written today yet I emphasise that the subtitle would remain, "*a study in human nature*." Belzen's cultural psychology rejects any claim to a universal human nature, but his definition of transcendence is compatible with such a claim. Even in Jaspers sense, there can be a universal sense that always there is something more. Perhaps Belzen's cultural

psychology does imply a psychology of religion as religion as a cultural phenomenon has roots in a spirituality that is inherently part of human nature. A resting place, as James said, for this perhaps uniquely human emotional mood.

> The fact is that mystical feeling of enlargement, union, and emancipation has no specific intellectual content of its own. It is capable of forming matrimonial alliances with material furnished by the most diverse philosophies and theologies provided only that they can find a place in their framework for its particular emotional mood'' (James, 1902/1985, p. 337).

Here there is ample room for Belzen's cultural religion but also a limit to its explanatory power. James' sub marginal thesis argues that the self becomes aware of what he James' simply identified as ''MORE of the same quality'' (1902/1985, p. 401, emphasis in original).'' He also notes that, ''It is when we treat of the experience of 'union' with it that their [mystics] differences appear most clearly'' (p. 401). Thus, James can accept an aspect of the constructionist position which was articulated at the time of James' *Varieties* by Rufus Jones, ''The most refined mysticism, the most exalted spiritual experience is *partly* a product of the social and intellectual environment in which the personal life of the mystic has formed and matured'' (1909, p. xxxiv, italics in original). Jones' emphasis is crucial, for it allows what James allows, that portions of experience escape cultural influences. Stace (1960, pp. 153–154) notes that self-transcendence (James ''MORE'') is part of the experience and *not* of the interpretation of experience.

It also is directly relevant to Belzen's critique of the common core thesis confronted below in our discussion of measurement-based psychologies.

3. Belzen's avoidance of measurement-based psychology

Belzen has an impressive list of publications, but lacks a single measurement- based study. It appears that his plea for a multiplicity of views excludes measurement as if there was an inherent disjunction between numbers and words. Measurement need not be linked to the reductionist assumptions of psychology viewed exclusively as a natural science. Belzen apparently fails to see this even when his own questions are addressed in ways best resolved with measurement. I will cite two examples, one is my critique of him and the other is his critique of my own work, to which I shall give a measurement- based reply.

Belzen is correct that with many groups, measurement is out of the question, including his own work on conversion among the ''bevindelijken'' referred to above when participants are unlikely to respond to questionnaires. My own work with the serpent handlers of Appalachia (Hood & Williamson, 2008) is similar in scope and did not use questionnaires with handlers. However, in another study of the homeless, we found both interviews and questionnaires to be helpful in illuminating discrepancies between followers of a self-proclaimed prophet and his efforts to usher in the ''Kingdom of God'' by service to the poor (Poloma & Hood, 2008). Similarly, I co-authored the methodological critique of much measurement-based psychology in which we jointly called for another paradigm for the psychology of religion, one rooted in hermeneutical or European as opposed to American models of psychology. However, this is not to refuse measurement when it can in fact clarify a question that is both properly empirical in the measurement sense and capable of meaningful resolution via empirical (measurement) methods. Nor is it to deny that measurement and hermeneutics can jointly be utilised in a single research endeavour to increase an understanding that is limited by only one method (or set of questions asked).

The first example missed by Belzen is in the last chapter of his book when he explores what he sees as the neglect by psychologists of the phenomenon of Dutch pillarisation.

He notes that in searching for the motives behind pillarisation one of the founders of sociology in the Netherlands, J.P. Kruijt proposed five motivates: emancipation, protection, social control, conflict regulation, and a response to modernisation. Belzen's discussion of these is devoid of an obvious methodological tool that would answer the questions as to the relative weight of different motives involved in pillarisation. Belzen likely sees this as a "sociological" as opposed to a "psychological" question, but I see it as a "social psychological" question in which distinctions between disciplines are fluid and firm lines impossible to draw unless one simply affirms rigidity as a virtue. Reliable scales to assess each of the proposed motives for pillarisation could be created, questionnaires administered to adequately literate participants, and statistical procedures (regression, SEM, etc.) used to determine the relative weight of the motives. To deny measurement when it is one important way to answer a question is to fail to use the range of methods available to psychology, which even as a human as opposed to a natural science, can employ measurement.

A second example comes from Belzen's admittedly partly whimsical critiques of my work on mysticism. In his chapter of the specificity of religion and in a previously published paper Belzen characterises my claim for empirical support for the unity thesis in mysticism as little more than sleight of hand (Belzen, 2009b, p. 217). I shall take the liberty of respond playfully to his "criticism of the M-scale in a playful image" (Belzen, 2009b, p. 217). He continues the image in one I often use in class, but with a far different outcome. He assumes that Stace's common core criteria have been placed in a magician's hat (I love being a magician!) and then are pulled from the hat via the M-scale and claimed to empirically support for Stace's common core theory. Of course, one cannot expect a magician to pull from a hat what he or she has not first put in there. Hence the "telling" criticism is,

> He [Hood] designed an instrument to answer the question, tested it out, and lo and behold, a common core shows up – *but* the instrument was based on a conceptualization of mysticism, by Stace (1960), that *presupposes* a common core. So: Hood got a common core out of the empiricist's hat (the M-scale), so to speak, but only after he put it (Stace's theory of a common core) in there before (Belzen, 2009b, pp. 217–218, emphasis in original).

However, rather than a telling critique, Belzen's claim is precisely where theory-driven measurement empiricism advances a specific claim. Consider this sequence: (1) Stace did not presuppose a common core – he claimed to identify it empirically from a catholicity of cross-cultural derived phenomenological descriptions of mystical experiences; (2) Hood created a scale that reliably measures Stace's common core (what are in "the Hat"); (3) in a variety of cultures from the United States to Scandinavia to Iran individuals are presented with "the hat" containing Stace's common core (of course, a magicians must work their magic!); the 32 items measuring the common core are "pulled out of the hat" *not* by Hood but by individuals in the various cultures; (4) the pattern or clustering of these items are consistent across cultures – revealing introvertive mysticism, extrovertive mysticism, and interpretation. (5) This is empirical support for the common core thesis. It does not mean mysticism is identical across cultures since individuals interpret their experiences. Such interpretation involves language and culture and gives meaning to the experience. As noted by Jones above, experiences are partly cultural. Still, the basic structure may be identical and one of those cultural universal Belzen does not seek but perhaps could find if he would look.

4. Belzen's claim that psychology must be silent on ontological claims

There is no area in which Belzen and I disagree more than in his assertion that psychology can make no assertion regarding the ontological validity of claims. He makes his case for

this explicitly in chapter 3 but it runs throughout his text as a dominant sub-text. It is implicit in his discussion of the name change issues in Division 36 and his worry that the Division is moving (actually returning) to a religious apologetics stance. It also runs throughout his discussions of psychology of religion in the Netherlands where we are told the chair of cultural psychology at Nijmegen was partly to defend Catholic students from natural reductionist views of their faith. [This is why the name change of Division 36 is a "return." *Psychologists Interested in Religious Issues* (PIRI) emerged out of the Catholic psychological group seeking divisional status in the APA. *Psychology of religion*, the current name, emerged out of a struggle where during my presidency the executive committee voted to propose the name be *Psychology and religion*, a decision never sent to membership for vote as it was immediately changed again to *Psychology of Religion* a submission sent to the membership that was accepted. The proposal to change the name to *Psychology of religion and spirituality*, as Belzen notes, passed by a simple majority, but the Newsletter editor of the division, W. Paul Williamson noted that the by-laws required a two-thirds majority vote and hence the announcement of the name change was withdrawn. A prominent Catholic psychologist wrote the newsletter argument against the name change. The division still gives the Bier award named after Father Bier. The new journal is *Psychology of religion and spirituality*. If the division has an apologetic stance it is Evangelical. The apologetic stance is most evident in numerous clinical publications sponsored by the APA and many written or edited by division members where religion is included under the rubric of cultural diversity and thus can be integrated into therapies and counselling (See Hood, 1998)]. However, ironically the concern of Belzen that with religious apologetics is tempered by Belzen's explicit commitment to a neo-Kantian view that supports social constructionist and denies those psychologists (or anyone else for that matter) can have knowledge *about* religion and hence is a curious implicit apologetics for religion. Belzen's implicit methodological commitments are not simply neutral, but impotent to say anything about the ontological validity of what it investigates. Religion is saved from psychological critique.

While such assumed neutrality might at first glance seem appealing, it fails to confront the difficult task of judging the realty of phenomena studied, including entire cultural claims. While Belzen has some sympathy for psychoanalysis he obviously has moved far beyond classical Freudian theory (Belzen, 2009a). However, moving beyond Freud here may throw out the baby with the bathwater. Freud's view of religion in *The future of an illusion* (1927) was more compatible with Belzen's view of current view of psychology. Here Freud focussed upon the motivation to hold religious beliefs, not the truth claims of the content of such beliefs. As with modern object relations theory, there are phenomena between a solipsistic subjectivity and an objectively shared reality. They are intersubjective and in Jabob's sense of the term, cultural. Here they can be protected from ontological scrutiny and held "as if" they were true. Such views had been anticipated by Vaihinger, 1924/1968) and were explicitly rejected by Freud . . .

Freud's used his own historical narrative to provide an explicit rejection of Vaihinger (and by inference of any claim to protect religion as a cultural psychology immune from scientific falsification).

> I am reminded of one of my children who was distinguished at an early age by a peculiarly marked matter-of-factness. When the children were being told a fairy story and were listening to it with rapt attention, he would come up and ask: "Is that a true story?" When he was told it was not, he would turn away with a look of disdain. We may expect that people will soon behave in the same way toward the fairy tales of religion in spite of the advocacy of "As if" (Freud, 1927, p. 29).

Elsewhere I have been criticised in print by Belzen (Belzen & Uleyn, 1992) as having an apologetic stance with respect to religion for accepting Freud's demand that religious claims be treated as factual claims capable of falsification. In Freud's most maligned and last public work on religion, *Moses and Monotheism* he stated:

> I have never doubted that religious phenomena are only to be understood on the pattern of individual neurotic systems familiar to us—as the return of lone since forgotten, important events in the primeval history of the human family—and that they have to thank precisely this origin for their compulsive character, and that, accordingly they are effective in human beings by the force of the *historical truth* of their content (Freud, 1939, p. 58, emphasis mine).

Of course, Freud's historical truth is precisely a delusional distortion of a material truth, and not simply an illusion (Freud, 1930). Freud was no apologist for religion and explicitly denied any pious solutions to the claim to life's meaning, "We too believe the pious solution [monotheism] contains the truth—the *historical* truth not the *material* truth" (Freud, 1939, p. 129, emphasis in original).

I return to Freud because he presents us with a model from which Belzen has moved too far. His discussions in Chapter 10 on religion and psychopathology are among his best work, the chapter rise to real literary merit. However, it becomes apologetic in its own way, not allowing Belzen to assess any material truth claims, to use Freud's words. In this sense, Belzen seems to align with the political correctness of the APA. Psychologists who would protect religions claims from falsification reject Freud's claim that delusionary beliefs can be culturally shared and still be false. Cultural religion can be mass-delusion. This applies even to hallucinatory experiences, as the recent history of modifications in the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) shows. Hallucinations can interact with delusions in Freud's widely discredited (but perhaps only apparently so (Badcock, 1980, 1990) phylogenetic theory of religion, yet each remains indicative of pathology *even when culturally supported*. However, the last several revisions of DSM have included cautions about identifying hallucinations as pathological if there is normative support for these practices. This was made especially clear in DSM-III-R:

When an experience is entirely normative for a particular culture—for example, the of hallucinating the voice of a deceased in the first few weeks of bereavement in various North American Indian groups, or trance and possession states occurring in culturally approved ritual contexts in much of the non-Western world—it should not be regarded as pathological. American Psychiatric Association (1987, p. xxvi).

An example is the political correctness embedded in recent efforts to avoid the psychological exploration those who adhere to delusionary beliefs (e.g. Belzen's religion as a cultural phenomenon) and to focus instead upon idiosyncratic individual neuroses that are merely a caricature of (Freud, 1907, 1930, pp. 84–84).

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In DSM-IV, a hallucination is defined only as "a sensory perception that has the compelling sense of reality of a true perception but that occurs without external stimulation of the relevant sensory organ" (American Psychiatric Association, 1994, p. 767); it is not automatically deemed to be an indication of mental illness. The most recent edition of this manual (DSMIV-TR) simply cautions that "a clinician who is unfamiliar with the nuances of an individual's cultural frame of reference may incorrectly judge as psychopathology those normal variations in behaviour, belief, or experience that are particular to the individual's culture" (American Psychiatric Association, 2000, p. xxxiv).

This move towards a non-critical cultural psychology allows that at best psychiatric theory must adhere to cultural conventions in the identification of not simply delusions, but even hallucinations. Belzen's ontological neutrality is assured but with a diminished psychology as the outcome. Critically psychological analysis of the particular content of religion even as culturally endorsed is readily available. Carroll's on the cultural expressions of Catholicism are exemplary here (Carroll, 1986, 1991) and have even led to empirical work at both the cultural psychological and laboratorylevels (See Hood, Hill, & Spilka, 2009, pp. 315–319). If belief content of religion is protected from criticism the concept of mass-delusion is denied.

Freud's suggestion that religion saves individuals from creating their own idiosyncratic caricatures of religion easily identified as delusional (Freud, 1907) is paralleled by William James' insight that the relationship between individual experience and collective shared experience is empirically important:

> A genuine first-hand experience is . . . is bound to be heterodoxy to its witness, the prophet appearing as a mere lonely madman. If his doctrine prove contagious enough to spread to any others, it becomes a definite and labeled heresy. But if it then still prove contagious enough to triumph over persecution, it become itself an orthodoxy; and when religion has become an orthodoxy, its day of inwardness is over; the spring is dry; the faithful live at second hand and stone the prophets in their turn (James, 1902/1985, p. 270).

To juxtapose Freud and James here is a useful reminder that both these psychologists are admittedly admired by Belzen and are worth re-consideration in light of a cultural psychology of religion that Belzen's denies is possible. The psychodynamics by which one creates their own caricature of religion as opposed to accepting a cultural form of religion are important and blurred by Belzen's own apologetics of ontological neutrality.

5. Belzen's eclecticism

Belzen's text is a masterful weaving of a variety of psychological theories many of which are incompatible with one another. Given the curious state of psychology, a field undefined and with no unified centre, Belzen's invitation is for yet another, a cultural psychology whose birth might be eminent and propitious if we but read his text as midwives. Yet the sheer number of theories and their selective use allow for little in the realm of critical analysis. How are we to relate Lacan and Kohut? Why should we accept the dialogical self of Hermans and Kempen other than to prefer a polyphonic symphony of multiple I's narrated from a not so grand cultural text. Opposed to such a self is that of James, or Mead, both summarily rejected by Belzen in his discussion of the dialogical self but each with a rich and massive supporting counter literature. Rorty (1999, p. 14) noted that American scholars turned away from reading James when philosophy took the linguistic turn. This is also the turn that characterises the cultural psychology championed by Belzen. Similarly, Barnard notes that,

> There has been such a stress on the linguistic nature of experience in recent philosophical thought that lay claims to immediacy or to a knowledge that is not structured linguistically are instantly suspect (Barnard, 1997, p. 120).

Why accept a neo-Kantian social constructionism in the face of radical critiques of its limits? Even within psychoanalysis, Parsons (1999) has shown the limits of a purely mediated view of reality, one that cannot escape mediation and acknowledge the transformative power of psychoanalysis. The argument here is trivial – to use such a range of theories, often incommensurable with one another, is to support a central claim of the

text – the field of psychology is heterogeneous, more so if we add cultural psychology. If we seek no unified theory, we will find none. And if we claim, that as with the blind men and the elephant, each has its own point of view, who then will remind us that it is the elephant that makes such points of view possible. Against my good friend Belzen and with the American transcendentalist David Thoreau, I end my appreciative response to Belzen's call with not an invitation, but a question: If it is not true that, ''Be it life or death, we crave only reality'' (Thoreau, 1854/1939, p. 103), what then is the truth we crave?

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