

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Do we need to restart the psychology of religion? Commentary on Belzen (2010)

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What Jacob Belzen is offering us here is a manifesto for a cultural psychology of religion. This is first an academic exposition, which includes an impressive literature review, a thorough-going critique, and the offer of a new solution for what ails the psychology of religion today. My points of agreement and disagreement with Belzen will be discussed below. Naturally, more space will be devoted to the latter, where more discussion is needed.

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Is apologetics a problem?

The first question encountered by Belzen (2010) as he surveys publications which have the terms "psychology" and "religion" in their titles, is that of motivational boundaries. Many such books and articles are motivated by the defence and promotion of religious belief systems. Psychology of religion, just as Belzen says, is not interested in promoting religion, but in analysing it. Belzen has collected many examples of apologetic claims, especially certain definitions of religious. Jones' (1996) chapter *Being Human, Knowing God* is the funniest. But most of this apologetic literature is not written by academic psychologists.

Some of it is, and Belzen provides some examples. On an earlier occasion (Beit-Hallahmi, 1989), I referred to that literature as "a religious psychology." Belzen gives us some telling phrases such as "psychology and religion" or "psychology and theology dialogue" or "integrating religion and psychology," that alert us immediately to the apologetic motivation. There have been those who dream even of integrating religion and psychoanalysis (Black, 2006; Smith & Handelman, 1990).

Some well-known names in the history of religion studies have been apologists, such as, Rudolf Otto. Here is how he addressed his audience:

The reader is invited to direct his mind to a moment of deeply-felt religious experience, as little as possible qualified by other forms of consciousness. Whoever cannot do this, whoever knows no such moments in his experience, is requested to read no farther; for it is not easy to discuss questions of religious psychology with one who can recollect the emotions of his adolescence,

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the discomforts of indigestion, or, say, social feelings, but cannot recall any intrinsically religious feelings (Otto, 1917/1976, p. 8; Proudfoot, 1987).

But Otto was a theologian, developing an apologetics not only of Christianity, but of religion in general (Alles, 2001). Why should we worry about him?

The phenomenon of modern apologetics, which attempts to use secular psychological ideas in the defence of religion could be ridiculed, and could be studied as a reflection of growing secularisation, which forces religionists to seek secular support, as revelation can no longer be taken seriously.

In academic work, and everywhere else, we must be selective. As academics, we are supposed to evaluate ideas and to find useful ones, no matter what their source. So it's possible that some authors combine apologetic writing with serious psychology writing. What we judge to be purely apologetic can be simply ignored. It is proper to ignore what you consider irrelevant. William James was an ambivalent apologist with beautiful rhetoric (Joshi, 2003), who gave the psychology of religion important observations on conversion and on religion in general. I have learned much from his observations on conversion, but I have ignored his convoluted defence of religious belief. Belzen is too generous in reading and citing a large number of apologetic authors who should remain nameless.

The field of "pastoral psychology," which, according to Belzen, "serves religious aims" should not concern us when we write about the psychology of religion. Ditto for other attempts to combine psychotherapy and "spirituality," which seem to be fashionable in some quarters, but have nothing to offer us in terms of analysing religion.

The apologetics literature has no bearing on the lives and faith of normal religious believers. They only reflect the conscious conflicts of some authors who keep seeking, in vain, a measure of intellectual respectability for their religious beliefs. It is characteristic of modern scholarly apologetics that almost no references are made to concrete religious behaviours. Modern apologists seem to be defending religion in the abstract, and "God" in general, but religion is never espoused in general, and each religionist is committed to only one of 60,000 options.

The question of definition

I haven't been able to understand why Belzen refuses to define religion. Defining religion is something that is quite easy for lay people, but very hard for some scholars. We can prove that very easily by presenting individuals from any given culture with a list of nouns and verbs, asking them to rate each one on a scale of 0–100, with the question being "How close is this term to what you think of as religion?" The items would be such things as basketball, oysters, whiskey, steam-engine, nuclear reactor, antibiotics, symphony orchestra, church, prayer, fishing, potatoes, cooking, crucifix, or the Virgin Mary.

Religion as an ideology involves the individual in a unique commitment and in a unique network of relationships, real and imagined. The irreducible belief core common to all religions contains the belief in spirit entities inhabiting an invisible world, and our relationship with them (Beit-Hallahmi, 1989). My working definition of religion is the straightforward, everyday, description of religion as a system of beliefs in divine or superhuman powers, and ritual practices directed towards such powers.

In Chapter 4 Belzen seems to suggest that the definition used by psychologists is going to be different than that used by scholars in other disciplines, but here is a definition



proposed by an anthropologist, which I have used for a long time (Argyle & Beit-Hallahmi, 1975; Beit-Hallahmi, 1989; Beit-Hallahmi & Argyle, 1997):

It is the premise of every religion–and this premise is religion's defining characteristic– that souls, supernatural beings, and supernatural forces exist. Furthermore, there are certain minimal categories of behavior, which, in the context of the *supernatural premise*, [emphasis in the original] are always found in association with one another and which are the substance of religion itself (Wallace, 1966, p. 52).

Similarly, William James, a psychologist, describes a separation of the visible and the invisible worlds, which parallels the separation between sacred and profane:

Religion has meant many things in human history: but when from now onward I use the word I mean to use it in the supernaturalist sense, as declaring that the so called order of nature, which constitutes this world's experience, is only one portion of the total universe, and that there stretches beyond this visible world an unseen world of which we now know nothing positive, but in its relation to which the true significance of our present mundane life consists. A man's religious faith...means for me essentially his faith in the existence of an unseen order of some kind in which the riddles of the natural order may be found explained (James, 1897/1956, p. 51).

I use the presence of the supernatural premise, or the supernatural assumption, as the touchstone for defining certain human behaviours as religious. All religions, as ideologies, promote the idea of the invisible world, inhabited by various creatures, gods, angels, ghosts, and devils, who control much of what happens to us. Through various rituals, humans believe that they interact with the pantheon of greater and lesser spirits.

This definition is broad enough to cover what to most human beings is connoted by religion, through their concrete historical experience. It has the advantages of being concrete, historical, and close to the direct experience of the proverbial person on the street, the common believer. The universality of our definition is based on the universality of beliefs in the world of the spirits. Despite the cultural variations and the claims for uniqueness, there is a universal common denominator to religion. The description of supernaturalism is valid not just for Westerners, but also for Shintoists, Hindus, Moslems, Sikhs, and members of thousands of other religious groups.

And if we believe in the existence of the unseen world, then religion as a social institution is for us the mediator between the invisible supernatural world and the visible, human and natural world; but that institution, with the behaviours tied to it, does not exist without the belief in the supernatural. Religious belief systems create communities where rituals are enacted collectively. The collective aspect is often felt as the most powerful (cf. Beit-Hallahmi & Argyle, 1997).

Those who offer us "functional" definitions of religion often have an apologetic agenda. These definitions emphasise "meaning," "values," or "ultimate concerns," effectively hiding the obvious reality of religious beliefs and practices. Thus, Allport (1937, p. 214), states that "Religion is the search for a value underlying all things, and as such is the most comprehensive of all the possible philosophies of life." I find this definition puzzling and unhelpful. Fromm's definition of religion I find similarly puzzling: "any system of thought and action shared by a group which gives the individual a frame of orientation and an object of devotion." (1950, p. 21). What could be pointed out again is that just as in the case of other apologists, in the case of those offering "functional" definitions of religion the distance between the definition and the reality of billions of believers is striking.

The behavioural definition of religion is not only close to that which real people experience and recognise immediately. Such substantive definitions are in line with the



traditions of scholarship in the study of religion. In the research conducted by historians, anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists deals with behaviours which are directly tied to the belief in the spirit world. They don't ask people about "philosophies of life" or "ultimate concerns," but about the energy they invest in negotiating with the spirits.

Measuring religiosity

While religion is an institution and a belief system, what we measure in the actual behaviour of individuals is religiosity, which is the adherence to a particular belief system, any of the 60,000 religions currently in existence. Belzen describes religiosity "as the personal-subjective correlate of a particular form of religion" (2010, p. 208). Religiosity is a continuous, rather than a discrete, variable. The expression of religious beliefs is the main measure of religiosity, which is then related to other beliefs, and to psychological and behavioural indicators. Religiosity is not randomly distributed in any population, as beliefs and attitudes are correlated with the primordial social roles of age, sex, and social status (Beit-Hallahmi & Argyle, 1997). As I have suggested (Beit-Hallahmi, 1989), we can differentiate between a psychology of religion, which focuses on the psychological explanation of religious phenomena and beliefs, and a social psychology of religion, studying the behavioural correlates of religiosity. Belzen is correct in stating that most research (and not only in psychology but in sociology and political science as well) is about religiosity.

The question of universality, culture, and history

In his listing of human universals, found in all known cultures, Brown (1991) included religion, divination, and myths. Religious ideas have a long history, and predate other aspects of culture. We have clear evidence of religious beliefs during the middle Palaeolithic period, between 100,000 and 40,000 years ago. The material evidence is of intentional burial and animal worship, and archaeologists suggest that only ideas about the world of the spirits and communicating with it can explain the findings. No other explanation can account for the massive investment of resources in activities and artefacts which have no direct bearing on survival, at a time when human communities are small and always in danger of extinction (Kaufman, 1999).

While artefacts and customs have changed since the Stone Age, the basic premise about the world of the spirits has not. The investment in grave goods proves that these early humans thought that death is not the end, and the difference between one bowl of food left with a dead child 50,000 years ago and the tombs of Egyptian pharaohs 5,000 years old is just quantitative. The belief animating both is identical: We have to invest in creating the right future for the dead.

The young religions we know very well, born during the past five millennia, are proud to proclaim their antiquity and the unchanging nature, and they do indeed reflect what hasn't changed in 100,000 years. Written creeds are a recent invention, and the theology of the past millennium is already a response to growing secularisation.

In all cultures, religion and religiosity are socially learned. In 99% of the cases, young humans are successfully taught to accept the tenets of whatever faith their parents hold. The plausibility, legitimacy, and coherence of belief systems are created by culture and socialisation, as individuals respond to, and assimilate, cultural givens. Socialisation is the process which makes an individual child a member of a unique group and makes possible



the absorption of the group culture. Individual religious identity is, in the vast majority of cases, totally predictable in terms of culture and intergenerational continuity. Adult beliefs and publicly displayed proven commitments are tied to the accidents of birth, geography, and history. Because the informal teaching of religion is directed at young children, religious narratives must be accessible to children, and they are.

Individuals follow cultural scripts for religion, as for other behaviours. But we can still point to some generalisations or even universals. The local is universal and the universal is local. Despite the cross-cultural and historical evidence for the diversity of religious beliefs, there are also some universal features in terms of the common belief system: The invisible spiritual forces which religious individuals believe in are envisaged anthropomorphically, with many human qualities, and are usually thought of as male (Carroll, 1979). Despite the local diversity, what is striking about religion and religiosity is their unity across time and space. Actually, one behaviour that is universally found among followers of all 60,000 religions is to proclaim quite forcefully that their own tradition, ancient or young in age, is unique, first because it is true and then because of all its temporal and eternal benefits.

Religion is universally claimed as the source of, and the authority for, moral codes, impulse control, and social power arrangements. Women are everywhere more committed to religion, and the family is sacralised everywhere. We find everywhere the same dreams about human immortality, salvation, cosmic victory, justice, and Judgment Day. We find the idea of mana, with humans seeking physical closeness, or physical contact, with sacred objects, leading to touching them, or to pilgrimage to the locales of relics and tombs. I can report observing Hindu women, who do not have too many saints' tombs, visiting the tombs of leaders of a Sikh group (the Radhasoami Satsang) in Agra, India.

Similar stories about reincarnation and the transmigration of souls from humans to animals are found in strikingly different circumstances. According to beliefs among the Wari, an Amazon basin tribe, the spirits of dead go to an underground world, and return in the form of fish or peccaries, pig-like animals that are a major source of meat for the tribe. Later on, the ancestor-peccaries seek out hunters from their own families and offer themselves to be shot, ensuring that their meat will go to feed the people they love (Conklin, 2001). Similar ideas have been propagated elsewhere. Among Hassidic Jews, there has been the belief in the souls of just men transmigrating into kosher beasts, which Jews may eat. These beasts had to be slaughtered with the sharpest knives, otherwise causing the just men unnecessary suffering.

People all over the world tell similar stories about miracles. One kind of miracle that seems to reflect the psychic unity of mankind is the virgin birth, among other stories of miraculous birth of heroes (Kluckhohn, 1959; Rank, 1914). Stories about the semi-human children of the gods abound. Here is a story from the book of Genesis (6; 1–4, 6):

And it came to pass, when men began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born unto them, that the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives of all which they chose. There were giants in the earth in those days; and also after that, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bare children to them, the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown.

This sounds like a summary of many Greek stories about sexual intercourse of gods and women and its products, but we find it in the Old Testament. The connections and the similarities among traditions are easy to see. Herakles (or Hercules to the Romans) was the greatest hero in ancient Greek culture. His story teaches us how humans can reach immortality and divine status. This involves first being a descendant of the gods, then performing miracles, and then dying a particularly horrifying death (Nagy, 1997).

Sounds familiar? Most followers of the Jesus myth will emphasise its historical and cultural uniqueness, and above all, its truth. But we find many other variations on the same theme all over.

Psychology, like all academic fields, seeks broad generalisations about mental processes. Belzen would like to change that, but I doubt if many psychologists are going to follow him. I have done my share of local, cultural psychology research (Beit-Hallahmi, 1992; Bunzl & Beit-Hallahmi, 2002), but it has always been conceived as demonstrating universal processes and dynamics. I find myself still a believer in the "dogma of the 'psychic unity' of mankind," together with most of my colleagues.

Psychoanalysis and the psychology of religion

The work of Sigmund Freud is not part of the psychology of religion. Freud was a neurologist who developed a comprehensive theory of personality, but he did that outside the academic world. It should be noted that psychoanalysis has survived as a cultural movement, mostly in the form of psychotherapy, outside the academic world. Academic psychology, being a field without a paradigm and in search of theoretical ideas, has been open to psychoanalytic ideas, which were widely used, accepted, and tested for several decades. The golden age of psychoanalytic ideas in academic psychology of religion, psychoanalytic ideas have had some influence and led to numerous publications testing psychoanalytic hypotheses (Beit-Hallahmi, 1996; Beit-Hallahmi & Argyle, 1997; Beit-Hallahmi, in press b).

Freud's writings on religion contain hypotheses about the psychology of religion, which could be analysed and tested by psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists. This theoretical apparatus includes only ahistorical, general, hypotheses.

Classical psychoanalysis, as a general theory of human behaviour, has created a body of literature which offered us interpretations of religious behaviours. What was unique about classical psychoanalytic efforts was the focus on the actual content of beliefs and rituals, and the actual behaviour of concrete believers and communities. Some of the interpretations were brilliant, while many were mediocre or worse, but all dealt with the reality of lived traditions, and looked at activities engaged in by billions (Beit-Hallahmi, 1996).

Spirituality?

The most puzzling of Belzen's ideas for me was the suggestion that we should add the term "spirituality" to our theoretical apparatus. He states in Chapter 6

Someone who is a member of a religious organization, who believes certain things, but does not engage in any activity because of her or his commitment to Transcendence [whether a religious activity or not], will hardly be called spiritual (2010, p. 87).

He is clearly correct in observing that sometimes beliefs are not followed by acts, and there is behaviour, which may be quite dramatic, inspired by belief. But this is already covered by the term religiosity, which is what we always measure in individuals. We find low religiosity and high religiosity, or low and high ego-involvement in religion, and these are correlated with other variables (Beit-Hallahmi, 1989). Belzen refuses to define "spirituality," and then offers as definition "any operationalization of commitment to transcendence." Later on he states: "It especially leaves open the question of what

Transcendence is" (2010, p. 87). My suggestion is that the concepts of religion and religiosity, as presented above, are sufficient for our needs.

There is another problem with the term "spirituality." Since the 1960s, it has become extremely fashionable, and serves an apologetic purpose. I can easily recall the 1960s discourse in the United States, where much criticism was directed at something referred to as "organised religion," the implication being that there is some pristine essence behind, below, or above "organised religion." Over the past few decades, "spirituality" has been embraced by apologists everywhere in the face of growing secularisation. Its definition has been vague and broad, so that most individuals end up being "spiritual." While religion is the "establishment," "spirituality" is individualistic, liberated, tied to the "New Age" (which is in reality Old Age). Here Belzen, after denouncing the apologists and documenting their negative impact, ends up joining forces with them.

Given the definition of religion I work with, the basic question is whether individuals believe in the existence of the world of the spirits. Most "spiritual" people I know do indeed believe in spirits, and that is why they are religious and so the term religion is sufficient for our needs. We can go on to measure religiosity and the dimensions of religious involvement. In Chapter 6, Belzen states that spirituality is a non-concept. So what did we gain?

Future directions

Belzen's erudition is matchless, and his meticulous reading has left him disappointed and pessimistic about the field. My reading of the literature, more limited than his, leads me to being impressed by some of the brilliant minds that have worked in the field and have made some lasting contributions. My main suggestion is to ignore the apologists and stay close to academic psychology.

Belzen criticises the psychological experiment as a research method, and thus chooses to ignore important work done over the past half-century. Here is one impressive example: Hood, Morris, and Watson (1991) tested a hypothesis proposed by Carroll (1986) about the origin of the Catholic cult of the Virgin Mary are tested empirically. The study looked at the connection between early maternal bonding and preferences for religious images. Seventy-one non-Catholic males, selected for religious commitment, evaluated crucifixes and representations of the Virgin Mary. As predicted, an operational interactive measure of early maternal care and protection, indicative of repression, and the Parental Bonding Instrument, best predicted selecting both a suffering Christ and an erotic/nurturing Virgin Mary.

Interesting experiments have been carried out by C. Daniel Batson, who has been one of the most creative individuals in the academic psychology of religion (Batson et al., 1989; Darley & Batson, 1973). Recent experiments have used sophisticated techniques to show what effect religion does and does not have on prosocial behaviour, though the matter is far from settled (Beit-Hallahmi, in press a; Norenzayan & Shariff, 2008; Randolph-Seng & Nielsen, 2007, 2008; Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007).

Recent theoretical and experimental work by Barrett (1999), Bering (2006), and Kelemen (2004) is one major reason why we should all feel excited about the research being done by academics psychologists of religion. Most of this work is being published in academic research journals which do not focus on religion, and that is very significant, because it reduces the marginality of the field, something which Belzen laments. Contributions relevant to the psychological study will come from several fields

in the human sciences, such as, anthropology, sociology, and history, but psychology, whether cultural or "universalist," remains unique in terms of research methods and theoretical notions.

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