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Never the Twain…Introduction to the Special Issue
Psychology of Religion: Dialogues
Between Sociocultural and Cognitive Perspectives

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Abstract

Bringing together perspectives is rarely an easy task. By assembling researchers from cognitive and cultural traditions to discuss their reciprocal research in the field of psychology of religion, we thought that we will end up with an ecumenical conclusion, everyone being convinced that the other perspective will enrich her or his approach in the future. In this introduction, our objective is to show that it was not exactly the case and, by writing a two-voices introduction, to understand why we were eventually not so sure that we were all studying the same object.

Keywords Psychology of religion · Cultural psychology · Cognitive psychology · Epistemology

« *Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,*
Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great Judgment seat;
But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,
When two strong men stand face to face, though they come from the ends of the
earth! »

Rudyard Kipling

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This volume finds its origin in multiple discussions in the corridors and the cafeteria of the Faculty of Arts and Humanities of the University of Neuchâtel. Conscious that our academic trajectories could have been different and both having had a concrete experience of the methodology used by the other, we kept wondering how to bring our perspectives closer. We probably thought that each epistemological approach had its blind spots and that it would be stupid not to enrich our understanding by joining our forces. Eventually a topic emerged that would make this endeavor possible: the psychology of religion. A conference was organized and, for our greatest pleasure, researchers working within an experimental perspective (Paul Harris, Christine Mohr) and researchers working in cultural psychology (Jacob Belzen, Pierre-Yves Brandt and Tania Zittoun) accepted to come and discuss their respective works for two days. The conference allowed for cross-perspective discussions in a dialogical format. The exchanges were of course interesting, sometimes conflicting, and we felt that the excellence of the Neuchâtel wine smoothed the tense atmosphere of the initial discussions into constructive mutual understanding. We learnt a lot about the actual diversity of psychological approaches to religion. However, we also had the feeling that our naïve attempt to bridge the gap between two strong theoretical and methodological perspectives, sociocultural psychology and cognitive psychology, was a failure, and that never the twain would meet. Moreover, our shared scientific object (religion, from a psychological perspective) seemed to run away under the crossed lights of these approaches. Instead of getting an enhanced 3D view of religion as a scientific object in psychology thanks to our double 2D binoculars, we seemed to lose the epistemic object – instead, two (at least) objects appeared. The researchers focused on different aspects of a phenomenon, religion, and their epistemological motivations often sounded different, creating *different objects*. Given these profound differences, we decided to use a special format to introduce this special volume where the different contributions of this day are collected. Each of us will describe what s/he expected from these scientific exchanges, how the different contributions modified her/his perspective and to what extend this experience changed or could change her/his scientific practice. To make the exercise more visual, we will present our thoughts in parallel columns.

I tend to be an undeniable optimist (epistemologically speaking). With an initial training in anthropology and philosophy, I have always been convinced that observations and fieldwork are an important part of the scientific ambition to better understand human nature. From this perspective, I used to look upon the cognitive division of labor between experimental psychology and cultural psychology in the following way: by insisting on the importance of the cultural context in the upbringing of individuals, cultural psychologists would highlight the *structural causes* of behaviors; on the other side, experimental psychologists could facilitate an understanding of the *triggering*

Looking scientifically at religion in psychology raises a number of problems crossing the papers in this issue. First of all, *there is no such thing as religion*. There might be religious phenomena, events, rituals, gatherings, discourses, values - and maybe even ideas and beliefs. However, this extensive constellation casts doubt on the existence of religion as a unique, scientific object. Authors in this issue deal extensively with this question, in contrasted ways. Belzen (2018) redefines "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". What qualifies as religious varies at the

causes of behavior (Clément and Kaufmann 2018; Dretske 2004). In other words, notably when it is about religious beliefs, cultural psychology would describe how the institutions and rituals scaffold the personal development, at different stages of the believers' existential trajectory. On the other hand, experimental psychology would describe the internal informational processes that are triggered in such cultural contexts, eventually leading the faithful members to experiment a given set of religious statement as being true (or *True*). To my "cognitivist" eyes, it was an excellent opportunity to take account of more "natural" settings that what can be done in a lab, testing the appropriateness of some of our hypothesis in the real world.

To my astonishment, I discovered that *belief* is not a topic of interest for most cultural psychologists working on religious aspects of human behaviors. More specially, the (cognitive) idea that behavior can ultimately be explained by discovering the mental states, like beliefs, intentions and desires, that are at their source - an idea that is central to most (Westerner) analytical philosophers (Davidson 1980; Searle 1983) - does not seem relevant to them - even if, as highlighted by Belzen (2018), there are variants of cultural psychology with more or less focus on "realities seemingly somewhere 'within' the actor." Actors are engaged in a socio-cultural world where there are "using" the different symbols proposed by their culture to make sense of their existence (Zittoun 2018). This interpretative process is not about increasing his "stock" of reliable beliefs but a quest for a global meaning to existence where believers are looking for an answer "incorporating the entirety of human life, even the entirety of life in the world" (Brandt 2018). This holistic experience is less about adjusting ones' mental states to an external world, than being part of a whole which includes a community, a sense of security, a system

social, interpersonal and personal levels, according to time and place, as well as to the dynamics of human development (Zittoun 2018). From a sociocultural perspective, religion is not defined per se (or rather, by the researcher's assumptions about what counts as religious) but by "what people call religion" (Zittoun 2018). Moreover, a concrete look at how people perform religion in their life, on an everyday basis or as forming the rhythm and exceptional moments of their life (from weddings to funerals, for example), highlights religious bricolage (Hervieu-Léger 1997) as a critical concept. Therefore, modesty and tolerance maybe also for alternative approaches on the study of religion, are repeatedly called upon in the face of this tentative, variable and vanishing object. These views contrast with the cognitive perspective, in which religiosity (as a tendency to having a religious worldview) or the strength of religious beliefs can be measured (Clegg et al. 2019).

A second point of divergence seems to be *the place of beliefs* in the scientific exploration of religion. Beliefs are the building blocks of the cognitive psychology approach of religion. Indeed, religious beliefs seem to deny the expectations for rational thinking and behavior, which would be both a guarantee and a product of individual and collective success in evolution, and would therefore require special explanations. Be they considered as accidental (but universal) by-products of the evolution of the human mind (Boyer 2001), or as bringing unexpected indirect evolutionary benefits, they are at the core of the reading of religion from a cognitive psychology perspective. However, the content of these religious beliefs seems to be less relevant to this approach than the very fact of their existence. Paranormal and magical beliefs are therefore used to study belief formation in adulthood (Mohr et al. 2018), without the relationships (in

of rules and a narrative that can be crucial for ones' identity (Brandt 2018). From that perspective, it is therefore bizarre or extravagant to look for psychological tendencies that could explain why certain people are more "sensitive" to the existence of supernatural phenomenon, for instance (Mohr et al. 2018), or to test how the level of consensus about religious or scientific entities in a given community can influence individual beliefs in their respective existence (Clegg et al. 2019). To summarize, I am less convinced than I used to be that the research on triggering causes could be very relevant to cultural psychology because experimental psychologists *are not interested in the same kind of object*.

My second worry is about the structuring causes. In sociology or anthropology, it is accepted that some entities (rules, norms, rituals, institutions) somehow pre-exist in relation to the individuals. In a way, that is obvious: English language existed before we were born and will still exist after our death. Therefore, it seems possible to describe a culture and, then, to study how individual would incarnate it. In other world, it is *conceptually* possible in the experimental perspective to imagine individuals and culture as two separate entities. This idea seems to be defeated by cultural psychology because a human subject is conceptually unthinkable without culture. Culture "'orchestrates' the person from within" (Zittoun 2018). As a "milieu in which the individual, like a plant, is growing" (Brandt 2018), it seems therefore difficult to consider culture as a variable whose impact could be experimentally tested on interchangeable individuals. However, this is precisely the kind of approach that experimentalists tend to favor (Clegg et al. 2019).

Lastly, and this is probably the most problematic aspect for any potential collaboration, I was struck not by the divergences regarding the quality of the the mind of the researchers) between these beliefs and religious beliefs being fully explained in the paper. In contrast to this belief-centered approach, researchers from the (socio)cultural psychology tradition focus their attention on different units of analysis: religious phenomena include events, experiences, individual or collective practices called religious at a certain point in time and place. They imply the body as a key actor of this religious scene, and closely consider body use for religious action, or religious performance through bodily action. Religious phenomena also imply dimensions of temporality and sociomateriality: religious actions are enabled by the relation of humans to artifacts, places, and specific times, as well as to other visible and invisible participants. The religious life (and not mind) might be considered the entry point of these approaches. These lives vary in religious intensity according to the social configuration and state-of-mind of the people. Their religious moments are supported by a complex interplay of religious and non-religious elements. For example, icons and liturgical furniture can be considered religious artifacts that furnish the Church architecture. However, the candles and the chairs which also participate in the construction of the religious setting are considered only partly religious – their mundane character is obvious and they acquire their religious character only by location in a so-called religious setting (Scollon and Scollon 2004). This mixture of human and non-human elements is critical in the practical conduct of a religious life, which, as all other human endeavours, is equiped by psychological and technical instruments (Vygotsky 1930). Meaning and belonging (Zittoun 2018) or personal identity (Brandt 2018) are considered key elements in the psychological analysis of religion. Religious phenomena can be considered as emerging from social interactions with and within a

respective research (they are obvious), but on a profound divergence regarding the hidden narratives underpinning our respective epistemological *interests*. As Jacob Belzen reminds us in his article, psychology is both a *Naturwissenschaft* and a *Geisteswissenschaft*, belonging to both the natural sciences and to the humanities. Symbolically, experimentalists feel that they are part of a grand story that enabled naturalistic sciences to scrutinize more and more aspects of our environment and existence. These advancements have been made possible by an increasing carving of the world into more simple parts, giving ways to an experimental methodology. A similar strategy is suggested to study the human psyche: divide the complexity to have a chance to rule it. This approach is therefore very sensitive to the different bridges that could lead us to understand, for instance, how the nature of our neuronal networks enables conscious feelings and thoughts and, inversely, how the belief in the efficacy of a ritual can trigger tranquilizer hormones. It is only if you accept such potential continuity that a naturalist inquiry is feasible. This grand narrative, punctuated by the succession of adaptations during our natural history, is of course rather demystifying, partial and sometimes naïve. It is for sure a narrative of a very different kind than religious narratives, global worldviews that "propose meaning-systems that integrate all aspects of the life of a human being" (Brandt 2018). Yet it is only if you accept (believe!) that your small attempts to understand a very little aspect of the reality will eventually fit in multigenerational effort to understand reality that the effort was worth the try. On the back of most naturalistic minds, the assumption is that there is probably not a *Sense* behind all of this; the thrill is to explain *how* things are the ways they are, not why. I could be wrong, but I now have the feeling that the importance given by cultural psychology to the way people make

material and temporal setting extended by cultural transmission through space and history.

A third point of divergence seems to be the positioning of the participants under study towards their own religious beliefs/ religious practice. From a (socio)cultural perspective, culture (including religion) is at the same time structuring the field of human experience, thinking, and activity, and re-constructed (transformed) by human activity. Religious concepts, ideas, or practices are considered as cultural resources, which are both internalized and transformed by human beings. There is no inert relation to beliefs as a set of pre-given conceptions to be adopted or rejected. To the contrary, the relation to religious contents and forms is an active, dynamic one, changing according to the life challenges (Brandt, 2018) of the person. Religion may serve as a symbolic resource in human development, supporting "the dynamics by which young adults and adults, experiencing a diversity of experiences and meeting the richness of their cultural world, engage in unique revisions of their personal culture, and conferring sense to their experience" (Zittoun 2018). The mode of engagement with religion is therefore always a mode of transformation, adaptation, bricolage. It allows for different levels of presence, commitment, agreement, conviction, as well as for different levels of truth (what is hold as truth).

To conclude, these two traditions in psychology offer very different perspectives on religion: on the one hand, religion, as a reduction of religious beliefs, offers a playground to explore belief in the system of human thinking and development. On the other hand, religion can be seen as a cultural and life construction. In my view, I would argue that the scientific study of religion deals with the delicate construction of the conditions which

sense of their situation is driven by a different assumption: ultimately, there *is* a sense - whose religious narratives are pointing to, and our human existences are dedicated to retrieve it. Within this framework, it is obvious that the chiseled cuttings of empiricists are not particularly seducing…

Given these fundamental differences, I have to admit that I have lost part of my epistemological optimism. However, I am still convinced that the detailed observations of rituals, for instance, the "deep" description of personal trajectories within a given faith, or the insistence of the social dimension of any religious lifecourse are vital and complementary to any experimental approach. The description of the traditional Pessah celebration, or the different religious "bricolages" made by believers (Zittoun 2018), give a lot of food for thought to any experimentalist. Reciprocally, I am still thinking that the naturalistic study of the cognitive, affective, and social capabilities of individuals is not without interest for cultural psychologists. For instance, a better understanding of the concrete psychological processes involved in *internalization*, a central concept for cultural psychology, could be relevant. Similarly, a more proximal account of the processes enabling individuals to "put some distance" between themselves and their cultural milieu seems essential for the symbolic "bricolage" that is central to any religious trajectory. In a nutshell, the contact points between experimental and cultural psychology are probably rarer that I initially thought. However, it doesn't mean that their exploration is worthless.

enable the religious events to happen – i.e., with the construction of the conditions which allow human beings to relate themselves to invisible entities, for the better and for the worse. The analysis of this complex process requires different methods. The existential experience is absent from the lab setting (so far), which makes cognitive psychology lab studies interesting when they are cleverly designed, but mostly irrelevant, for (socio)cultural psychologists. The longlasting field and deep qualitative studies of (socio)cultural psychologists may impress their cognitive colleagues, and give them some food for thought, but they seem to miss the point, as they cannot provide any causal explanation to the phenomena described. To conclude, I wonder whether it could be that our methodological choices constrain the objects that we investigate, and not the reverse… However, then I would suggest another way to compare our approaches. Couldn't we try to research together religious phenomena on a jointly selected, socially relevant concrete case, in order to better understand the soundness and productivity of our respective approaches? This may be the topic for another collective and dialogical scientific endeavor.

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