

Meaning and “Meaning It” in the Psychology of Religion: The Absorption of an Academic Discipline into Culture

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Published online: 1 February 2014
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Abstract The author argues that the discipline of psychology of religion has been and is largely being absorbed into popular culture, where it no longer has any institutional backing and where it becomes much more difficult (if not impossible) for any authority to guide the conversation. While this presents a threat to the training of clergy in the pastoral arts, as well as the job prospects for recent Ph.D. graduates, it also presents an opportunity for insights to be deployed to a wider audience and for the most radical and simple teachings of the discipline to be revisited and debated in a more capacious setting. This article assesses the transformation of the discipline and the reasons why the discipline is important for houses of worship and the larger society, regardless of whether or not it is fully sponsored or accepted in academic institutions or theological seminaries. The author of the article uses some of the key insights from Erikson’s (1958) *Young Man Luther*, specifically chapter 6, “The Meaning of ‘Meaning It,’” to support the thesis.

Keywords Psychology · Religion · Seminary · University

Outline

This article was first written out of sheer curiosity as to the status of the discipline of psychology of religion. That ultimately remains the concern of this article, to argue and show the reader that psychology of religion still is a discipline practiced in some academic institutions and theological seminaries but that the discipline has been absorbed into culture. The article opens with an examination of Jacob Belzen’s important (2012) publication on the state of the discipline, which is made up of autobiographies from famous international psychologists of religion. Belzen’s (2012) text confirms that the field has struggled immensely over the last 50 years due to the loss of professorships and the decline in publications and interest in the field. Still, Belzen is optimistic that the field is of growing interest, but he does not really point to anything specific to support that optimism.

I agree with Belzen’s argument, but I believe the answer to his optimism may be found in the vast interest in the larger culture in religion and behavioral processes. Here I am referring to

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television shows, film, popular literature, self-help literature, and developing technology, all of which employ insights into religion and psychology in order to sell their products and market their intellectual/spiritual property. There are innumerable examples I could have chosen as evidence to support my argument; I passed on the most obvious examples, such as the late Steve Jobs's lifelong interest in Buddhism and psychology and how these interests are displayed in Apple technologies, for the sake of brevity and because I assumed readers would already be familiar with them. In order for my argument to be substantiated, I felt I had to find lesser known and less than obvious case examples to justify my argument that psychology of religion is being absorbed by culture. I chose David Cronenberg, filmmaker, and Rodney Rothman, comedian, as my case examples as both are not very well known and yet their work has garnered significant attention from a critical audience.

I also wanted to make sure the examples I used were noted, critiqued, and fairly widely recognized in popular culture, as I felt this was the best way to show readers that, whether or not they agree with my thesis, culture itself has rendered its judgment on these creative projects and a dénouement of sorts is complete. This made it somewhat difficult for me to include a section on someone less well known like Franz Metcalf, whom most people in the broader culture have probably never heard of but whose career trajectory in the field of psychology of religion well supports the thesis in this paper. Metcalf holds a Ph.D. in religion and the human sciences from the University of Chicago and specializes in Buddhism, having graduated in 1997. He has written five popular books on Buddhism, psychology, and culture, which mostly include aphorisms and highly accessible chapters designed for anyone with a high school education. Metcalf is an adjunct professor at California State-Los Angeles but is perhaps more well known as an author of popular books on Buddhist spirituality, such as his 2002 book, *What Would Buddha Do? 101 Answers to Life's Daily Dilemmas*. Therefore, the case examples I did choose were selected from a large set of possible evidence and were chosen with the aforementioned constraints in mind.

Employment prospects for scholars specializing in this field is something I do not seek to speculate on, though I do assess the de-institutionalization of this discipline through a look at some scholars' alternative career paths as well as a theoretical discussion on Kohut's famous essay "On Courage" (1985) in order to consider why it might be important to study and write on topics in the psychology of religion even though it is difficult to find work in the field. I conclude the paper by showing the unfortunate consequences of, as well as the opportunities created by, the de-institutionalization of the academic discipline of psychology of religion. To do this, I employ some of the most famous historic voices of this discipline, such as William James and James Dittes.

Psychology of religion has been defined and described in a number of different ways (cf. Wulff 1991). I define the discipline in this paper as the use of explicit psychological terms or descriptors in studying, observing, or interpreting religion or spirituality, broadly construed. Thus, for myself at least, I do not think one needs to have professional training in psychology or religious studies in order to engage this discipline, as many outside of the discipline without formal training deal with these categories of understanding on an everyday basis, such as in a court of law or other professional settings.

As this article shows, psychology of religion plays a critical role—arguably it is the sine qua non—of pastoral theology or pastoral psychology. Pastoral theology is mentioned in this article because a number of psychologists of religion have worked in positions where their role was that of pastoral theologian, or a theologian who specializes in the practical or pastoral dimension of ministry. Difference thus proliferates within the discipline of psychology of religion, and as the author of this article, from here on out I am assuming my readers have some familiarity with these differences, such as the quantitative methods that generally

proliferate in psychology and the qualitative methods that generally proliferate in religious studies. Variations on these generalizations exist, but as I point out in a later section, psychology has managed to house psychologists of religion in academic institutions at a much more successful rate than religious studies scholars precisely because our society offers immediate financial rewards and esteem to quantitative methodologies; this is not the case with qualitative methods.

Introduction and thesis

In Belzen's (2012) opening chapter, he argues that the discipline of psychology of religion is alive and well. However, he adds the qualifier that "many psychologists have never heard anything about the psychology of religion" (p. 1) and chronicles a number of arguments made in the past by reputable scholars that the psychology of religion is "dead" (p. 2). The failure of psychology of religion to become an organized and widely reputable field that could capture university funding and support is consistently verified by others in the field, past and present, including Donald Capps (1977), who wrote: "Unfortunately, there is much confusion about what psychology of religion is and there is considerable debate as to whether it is even a viable enterprise" (p. 193). Nevertheless, Belzen (2012) argues forcefully that his book "assumes that anyone who picks up this volume already knows that the psychology of religion does indeed exist, that it has returned to prominence, and that it is even growing in size" (p. 2).

Like Capps, Belzen (2012) concedes that the psychology of religion has been "largely disorganized" (p. 7) and "heterogeneous" (p. 7), but he cautiously muses that the field is still growing. Additionally, his 2012 book profiles a number of autobiographical accounts of international psychologists of religion who began their careers in another field but, by the time they neared the middle or latter part of their careers, were identified primarily as psychologists of religion. It is entirely on the basis of these autobiographical accounts that Belzen (2012) convincingly argues that psychology of religion has a rich history as an academic discipline and is well respected internationally. He additionally argues that the significant international figures whose autobiographical testimonies are profiled in his book show that the discipline is now well established and is possibly growing.

These autobiographical accounts may be considered in conjunction with public testimony from Lee H. Butler, Professor of Theology and Psychology at Chicago Theological Seminary and the University of Chicago Divinity School, who easily could have been one of the figures Belzen profiled in his 2012 book. Butler wrote a public, open letter to the Society for Pastoral Theology, which includes some of the noteworthy figures Belzen included in his 2012 book. In this open letter, which was prompted by the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, Butler bravely lambasts theological curriculums for creating a knowledge or theological hierarchy of disciplines that locates the practical disciplines (like pastoral care or pastoral theology) at the very bottom. For Butler, this decision has destructive consequences for the church and society:

I am concerned that as the culture is poised to legislate gun control, theologically educated leaders are failing to attend to wailing men and women who are suffering the traumatic loss of all our children. Too many theological curriculums are reforming their programs by dropping pastoral care in the name of responding to social concerns without acknowledging that society is inclined to ignore what it cannot legislate. Furthermore, because theological education tends to emphasize a theological hierarchy

that locates practical fields at the bottom of a list of important voices, many theologically educated leaders are emphasizing a gun control agenda instead of seeking to address the human condition within our culture of terror. As a result, too many theologically educated leaders are well prepared to respond to the tipping point issue and are ill-prepared or unwilling to care for Rachel and Ray, who will not be “consoled because their children are no more.” Instead of maintaining or increasing pastoral care curricular offerings, the preparation for care ministries [is] being replaced by market appeal. Theologues are being taught to refer, making pastoral care an outsourced social service. If this trend continues, religious leaders will theologically reflect on and celebrate reductionist ideologies without the capacity or responsibility to care for souls because they will send Ray and Rachel to a time-out room where their wailing cannot be heard. If we suppress the wailing, what hope do we have for transforming a culture gripped by terror? (L. H. Butler, open letter correspondence to the Society for Pastoral Theology, December 28, 2012)

As Heije Faber (2012) and Donald Capps (2012, 1977) among others attest to, the psychology of religion very often has found its institutional location in seminaries and theological curriculums established for the purpose of training clergy. This is actually one of the central points of Capps’s (1977) article, as he argues that theological education as it has historically been understood and defined is entirely impossible without psychology of religion: “Through its emphasis on motivational transformation, psychology of religion provides the pastoral theologian with one objective criterion for evaluating theological formulations” (p. 199). Pastoral theology and pastoral care are, thus, intellectually and practically impoverished without psychology of religion.

So, at this point in this article I have presented a few different sets of evidence on which to consider whether the psychology of religion has grown or not. Butler’s testimony went uncontested in the public forums of the Society for Pastoral Theology, where it is and has been generally well held that the disciplines of pastoral care and pastoral theology are constantly struggling to justify their existence in institutions. This means that one major location for psychology of religion within institutions is perpetually threatened. How might one therefore justify the resurgence of the psychology of religion? This is the question that this article seeks to answer.

I argue that while psychology of religion has found some footing in the discipline of psychology as a legitimate and worthwhile exercise (one which has gained some institutional backing), the field of psychology of religion has and is dying in seminaries and departments of religious studies, just as Butler states. Although Butler is talking explicitly about pastoral care, I have argued that this division of the theological curriculum has enabled psychology of religion to exist within it. Butler’s concerns in his open letter are justified and legitimate as they bespeak lived realities in our schools, houses of worship, hospitals, jails, and larger communities. It is entirely reasonable to conclude that the loss of psychology of religion in the field of religion (in undergraduate, graduate, and seminary curriculums) has been socially, politically, and theologically devastating.

Nevertheless, there is hope that the survival and possible expansion of psychology of religion in psychology departments will one day spur a renaissance revival of sorts in adjunct fields like religion (here I use the term “adjunct” intentionally to connote the relatively paltry economic weight religious studies now has in the knowledge economy of universities). Yet, this alone does not entirely support Belzen’s (2012) cautious optimism, at least from my perspective. Belzen closes his chapter by suggesting that there are newfound interests arising

globally in the psychology of religion and urges all young people who have somehow become interested in psychology of religion to listen to their elders, now wise with age:

Without exception, our authors have been pioneers to whom the present practitioners of the discipline owe a great deal. Listening to what these giants—at their advanced age probably wiser than most of their younger colleagues—have to say will be instructive to all present practitioners and to anyone else who wants to learn about the comeback of the psychology of religion. (p. 16)

Where have these younger colleagues come from and who are they? What is their institutional location? The majority of Belzen's (2012) autobiographical accounts are from European scholars, so perhaps this is the geographical region where psychology of religion is growing. Still, many of the autobiographical accounts come from scholars like Ana-Maria Rizzuto (2012), an "Accidental Psychologist of Religion" (pp. 185–200), or H. Newton Malony (2012), a "Psychologist of Religion Incognito" (pp. 155–166). These titles suggest that the psychology of religion has not changed much at all, in terms of the amount of institutional sponsorship it gets now versus 50 years ago. So, again, why is Belzen cautiously optimistic about the future and the current growth of psychology of religion?

Perhaps some young scholars are, like myself, among the privileged few to have completed Ph.D.s at the handful of schools around the world where one can still earn a Ph.D. in the discipline of psychology of religion. But what about the others—where do they come from and who are they? I argue that psychology of religion has grown slightly in psychology departments but predominately in culture. Culture, I argue, is where psychology of religion has found its deinstitutionalized home, and it is there—in works of art, scientific creation, and late-night comedy, among other areas—that insights from the field of psychology of religion are regularly deployed, much more often in fact than in the halls of academia or in the sacred spaces of houses of worship.

Some will counter with the argument that these cultural manifestations do not qualify as legitimate psychological studies of religion, and to this I might grudgingly agree if I were concerned with demarcating the boundaries of what is pure versus impure psychology of religion. However, I am not so interested in observing the obvious differences between these two as I am in noticing the similarities. I do believe that practitioners in the psychology of religion (in academic institutions) and participants in culture (which we all are) can agree that legitimately psychological insights on religion are deployed in culture regularly and that it is extremely ironic that as psychology of religion is struggling in academic institutions, it is in fact noticeably growing in culture.

Belzen's (2012) urging of those interested in psychology of religion to pay attention to the elders in the field will likely be taken tongue in cheek, if that, for while it is a cliché to respect one's elders, members of today's culture know what the ancients of the discipline—including Freud—preached: namely, that wisdom does not necessarily come from experience and that at the heart of the most profound innovation is a desire to learn from one's elders and yet also go one's own way by (possibly) disobeying their direct orders. Part of why psychology of religion has been absorbed by culture is precisely because it resists the very authoritative structures provided by the academy, the seminary, and houses of worship. It is a discipline marked by ideological subversion and rejuvenation. Contemporary culture provides the kind of de-authoritative, freewheeling license that a discipline like psychology of religion thrives in. The following sections will assess this phenomenon and explain both the creative and destructive consequences that follow from it.

Psychology of religion in the discipline of psychology

One way through the evidence presented thus far is to point to the growth that psychology of religion has experienced in psychology curriculums. This might appear as a strange suggestion to some, especially since Belzen (2012) accurately states: “Indispensable as psychology is to the sciences of religion, to psychology as an academic discipline religion is far less central” (p. 15). Nevertheless, this is perhaps exactly why psychology of religion has found an institutional location of sorts in psychology departments—precisely because it is less than central to the discipline. This allows psychology to remain a discipline that speaks to a wide array of phenomena (including, but not exclusively, religious phenomena).

A survey of relatively recent scholarly publications on psychology of religion over the last few years reveals that the majority by far of those writing on psychology of religion are professors of psychology or clinical psychologists. Some of the major names from the field of psychology writing on the psychology of religion include Raymond F. Paloutzian, Bernard Spilka, and Crystal L. Park. These scholars’ publications often incorporate statistical analysis, which leads to seemingly less tendentious or polarizing findings. Publishers and others are naturally attracted to these kinds of numerical findings because our culture prizes quantitative conclusions over any other kind. The discipline of psychology has thus been granted the authority to speak on religion and associated topics, specifically, without being associated with the field of religion, generally. This is part of why psychology departments rank higher than religion departments in the budget planning of knowledge economies at universities, since psychology has ostensibly demonstrated its authority over all things religious.

Numerous authors in Belzen’s (2012) book come from the field of psychology and attest to experiencing major roadblocks in doing psychology of religion within the discipline of psychology, such as David Wulff (2012, p. 259). Nevertheless, in this case and in the case of others like Bernard Spilka (2012, pp. 226–231), whatever initial roadblocks there were (either internal or external, as both are represented in these autobiographical accounts), they were eventually overcome and studies were performed that gained institutional support. So, one possible way to sift through the evidence is to argue that while psychology of religion has eventually nearly died off in the field of religious studies, it has gained interest and support in the field of psychology—to the point that major book publications in the field of psychology of religion now nearly always are authored by psychologists in psychology departments.

Many psychologists with interests in religion were also initially blocked from pursuing psychobiography, only later to be granted permission and eventually commendation. Disputes continue as to which discipline—religious studies or psychology—holds the ultimate control over performing psychobiographical studies (e.g., Capps 1978). Nevertheless, if the dispute may be resolved on the basis of number of major psychobiographical publications by authors in each field, psychology is the clear winner.

In Schultz’s (2005) *Handbook of Psychobiography*, he states: “Fortunately for me, at [University of California] Davis in the mid-1980s lots of things that weren’t psychology were nonetheless finding their way into the psychology curriculum” (pp. 13–14). Schultz discusses his arduous struggle to get his psychobiographical dissertation topic approved, but he also acknowledges a transformation in the discipline of psychology that was occurring at this time, one that included an infusion of the research interests of someone like William James—altered states, parapsychology, psychobiography, etc.

Still, Schultz (2005) states: “As a subdiscipline, personality psychology, of which psychobiography forms a small part, is struggling” (p. 17). This makes perfect sense to me, in light of the evidence presented, as it suggests that the field of psychology has and will continue to remain hostile to things that are religious or quasi-religious in nature, if only because it cannot

allow these topics to become central domains of inquiry. If it were to accept these domains of religious or quasi-religious inquiry as central to the discipline, it would subvert its own assumed power to speak with authority on them, which it cannot do.

In spite of Schultz's contention that psychobiography is having a rough go of it in psychology departments, Schultz (2005) acknowledges: "If we look back 15 years and compare then to now, there can be no question: One finds far more activity in the psychobiography vein and more mainstream acceptance" (p. 17). Kasser (2013), Schultz (2011), and McAdams (2011) offer further evidence that psychological biography has assumed mainstream acceptance by psychologists. While psychobiographies are occasionally published by scholars in religious studies, such as Capps (2000) or Kramp (2014), scholars in religious studies have not been capable of anywhere near the kind of output of their counterparts in psychology. This further demonstrates that psychology of religion is either growing at a slight rate or staying about the same in terms of institutional support within psychology departments.

It is necessary now to further account for the growth of interest in psychology of religion that Belzen (2012) asserts with cautious optimism, for it clearly can only take on a limited form of growth in psychology departments and other areas of the academy, such as religious studies, where it has severely struggled. I am in no way trying to make a straw man out of the ambivalent Belzen (2012) who, as I have mentioned before, makes numerous attempts both to assert that the growth of psychology of religion is real and also not to "naively sing its praises" (p. 14) regarding the growth of the field. Instead, I am attempting to show my complete agreement with Belzen's argument and his cautions, while at the same time suggesting an alternative location for the growth of psychological studies of religion—in culture—which is a prospect that Belzen (2012) does not consider. My argument is therefore intended to resolve the ideological ambivalence Belzen (2012) articulates.

On the meaning of "meaning it": psychology of religion absorbed into culture

Towards the end of Donald Capps's (2012) autobiographical essay on his career as a psychologist of religion, Capps wrote:

I had various reasons for deciding to write on [John Henry] Newman for my STM thesis and later for my doctoral dissertation, but a central one was the fact that I embraced the following lines of his poem as if they were my own: "Keep thou my feet; I do not ask to see/The distant scene—one step is enough for me." The lesson, if there is one, would seem to be that the very fact we have chosen the path of least resistance suggests that we can be rather oblivious as well to where the path is taking us. Psychology of religion is a good, well-worn path for one to follow. It is not, however, for those who have a strong or desperate need to know its final destination. Unlike Christian, the hero of John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1957), who knew that his destination was the Celestial City and worried a great deal that he might not get there, the psychologist of religion (this one, at least) is under no illusions that there is, in fact, a clearly identifiable [career] destination, and therefore, there is no reason to worry that one might not get there. (p. 51)

Capps's words here synchronize well with Erikson's (1958) famous chapter on Luther's efforts to cut through medieval pieties in order to actually have the kind of vital faith and way of living Luther craved. Meaning it, as Erikson (1958) so aptly states, "is not a matter of creedal protestation; verbal explicitness is not a sign of faith. Meaning it, means to be at one with an ideology in the process of rejuvenation [where one does not know what the final

ending will look like]; it implies a successful sublimation of one's libidinal strivings; and it manifests itself in a liberated craftsmanship" (p. 210).

Capps's (2012) autobiographical chapter indicates obvious awareness of the lack of official jobs in positions designated for psychologists of religion. His closing paragraph cited at the beginning of this section implies that the interests that many have in the discipline are simply dispersed into culture, where people take on a variety of professions for survival—some of which appear to possibly have nothing to do with psychology nor with religion, but where the individual with some training in the discipline (whether formal or informal) is able to study and create in their own way.

This, I argue, is what it means to 'mean it,' as Erikson says—now more than perhaps ever before, the discipline of psychology of religion is changing, and meaning it means to be at one with the discipline as it undergoes rejuvenation. This rejuvenation is occurring, as I have shown, in some psychology departments and perhaps in other isolated cases in academia, but the world today knows about psychology of religion almost entirely from culture, and examples of this are now what I will turn to.

These examples further justify my thesis that while the ostensible growth of psychology of religion is attributable in some select cases to the grudging acceptance of psychological studies of religion in psychology departments, by far and away the greatest growth in the discipline has been in culture. While this growth has been occurring, religious studies departments have become increasingly adjunctive to university missions built around job placement and vocational preparedness and, as the letter from Butler quoted above attests, this has had profoundly destructive consequences for the church and society.

Cronenberg

Popular film and television are perhaps one of the best places to see the growth of psychology of religion in culture, where the discipline is absorbed by individuals outside of academia as well as those within it. One director in particular I view as having strong interests in the psychology of religion and inserting them in his films is David Cronenberg. Cronenberg first caught my attention with his film *Spider* (2002), which explores one man's chronic experience of mental illness. I forgot about Cronenberg for a few years until I read Elijah Siegler's (2012) article on Cronenberg. Siegler (2012) wrote:

I suggest that we in religious studies need to look at films that wrestle with the same questions of meaning that religion does (questions of sex and death, power and desire, family and society, transformation and transcendence, etc.) *but that do so in a uniquely nonreligious, or secular way*. Further, we need to look not just at narrative elements of secularism on film, but at thematic and visual elements as well. (p. 1099, emphasis added)

Siegler argues throughout this very important article that religious studies has really missed out on studying film because of its narrow view of film. Historically, according to Siegler (2012), religious studies scholars have focused on the "replay [of] the struggle between good and evil" (p. 1110) in films, and in doing so have missed out on the larger religious processes that are addressed in film. Cronenberg's interest in examining deeply religious themes in a non-religious way is part and parcel of the job description of the psychologist of religion.

Psychology of religion is grounded in the exploration of religion in both the ostensibly religious and non-religious alike; it problematizes the definition of religion in this sense. Consider, for example, David Wulff's (1991) excellent textbook in psychology of religion.

In this book Wulff examines phenomena such as dancing, physical and mental handicaps, and politics and governmental systems, along with many other topics that might not normally fall under the proper umbrella of religion. Other examples abound as well, the psychological studies of Capps and Capps (1970) of ostensibly religious and ostensibly non-religious leaders. Process, thematic elements, and meta-analysis matter just as much, if not more, to the psychologist of religion as actual content of observable material. For these reasons, Cronenberg's work is representative of that of a psychologist of religion. If he does not bear the title of "psychologist of religion" (which is certainly understandable), his insights are certainly representative of those within the field of psychology of religion.

Interestingly enough, Siegler (2012) identifies Freud as Cronenberg's main theoretical influence in his work, rather than another filmmaker or film theorist (p. 1106). Cronenberg's films problematize the origins of evil, as "many of his films do not have traditional villains" (p. 1102). Cronenberg's central artistic message is to problematize the notion of reality, as he recognizes the desperate desire of human beings to constantly escape the reality they are in through moments of transcendence. His films force his viewers to reflect on ways in which to make their own experience of reality more pleasant, more fulfilling and meaningful, in spite of how obviously challenging that task is. It is truly because of figures like Cronenberg that Belzen (2012) may talk of the "comeback of psychology of religion" (p. 16).

Rothman

Comedians have long used religion as useful material for their stand-up routines, but with the Internet, globalization, and the rise of visual culture, now, more than ever before, comics' routines may swiftly be transmitted all over the world. Since religious conflict and difference are increasingly widespread topics of tragedy, comedians like John Stewart or Stephen Colbert have become famous for their insightful reflections on God, religious difference, and the humor we may find even in the most tragic of circumstances surrounding religion. Many have come to consider their viewing of a half hour of Stewart's or Colbert's jokes on religion as a critical part of their daily routine; many hang on these comedians' words like others would a sermon by their favorite preacher.

Aside from these two comedians' obvious command of psychological and behavioral studies of religious behavior as well as the religious uses of humor, additional examples of the use of religion in comedy abound. One is the work Rodney Rothman, who wrote a memoir about early retirement after he was laid off as a writer for *The David Letterman Show* (1993). Rothman's (2005) *Early Bird: A Memoir of Premature Retirement* reflects on what Erikson (1958) called "the most neglected problem in psychoanalysis" (p. 17), which is work. I would personally argue that this remains one of the most neglected problems in all of contemporary psychoanalysis and psychological studies of religion, largely in part due to the lack of funding and interest in this kind of study.

Fortunately for us all, Rothman took up the topic and not only provides brilliant reflections on the relationship of work to American life, but also on the relationship of meaningful work to healthy aging, the profoundly religious themes of the human life cycle, the challenges of dealing with regret and loss as we age, and the relative worth of making money. In spite of all the laughter one experiences in reading the book, Rothman paints a vivid portrait of a society in deep decay. He writes near the opening of his (2005) book about his reasons for trying out an early retirement, "I get to see if working hard is worth it" (p. 5) and "I have no interests. Nobody I know has any interests" (p. 12). He tragically concludes: "My generation might be

bad agers *in training*” (p. 35, emphasis added). Rothman is writing comedy here out of extraordinarily tragic material, for his perception is that American youth and middle-aged persons are being trained or programmed to live extremely painful and unnecessarily tragic lives. This is what was behind his bold experiment in retiring early—he was willing to risk it all because he realized he had nothing to lose, except perhaps the money and misery of his current life (these were also lost when he was laid off). He also appears to know he had to crack jokes about his experiences or else succumb to tears; jokes appear to be the more functional and creative choice.

The central critique of Rothman’s book is that American values are inconsistent with the insights of healthy aging, a topic Rothman has obviously read up on just as would any psychologist of religion worthy of that title (Rothman cites various books on gerontology and the life cycle at various points in his book). I would also not be surprised if he hadn’t also read Erikson’s (1958) text, as Rothman (2005) wrote: “I was ‘at work.’ I wasn’t working” (p. 42). This is a near replica of Erikson’s (1958) interpretation of Luther’s insight as he searched for a vital meaning to the religious work he was doing. As Erikson (1958) interprets: “The point is, not how efficiently the work is done, but how good it is for the worker in terms of his lifetime within his ideological world” (p. 220). Rothman’s impulse to cut back was, thus, extraordinarily wise if also extremely countercultural. Rothman (2005), aware of this insight, focuses his comedic sketches of American retirement in South Florida on its clannishness and its vacuity—a foil for his own rebel choices and rebel lifestyle where he chose to favor substance over style, while elderly Floridians favored style over substance:

Once you’ve visited five or six retirement communities in one day, it becomes very difficult to tell them apart from one another. Over and over again, you find yourself driving down a street called Everglade Lane, past nearly identical two bedroom houses with attached garages and eight-foot-by-eight-foot sodded front yards. . . . The community names start to blur too: Verona Lakes, Venetian Isles, Harbor Isles, Harborview. . . . I’m concerned that when I pick the community I want to retire into, I’ll have forgotten the name of it by the time I retire. I’ll wander aimless and homeless around South Florida until I’m attacked and eaten by a displaced alligator. (p. 143)

Rothman offers a scathing critique of American conformity throughout his comedic text, reminiscent of Alexis De Tocqueville or Henry David Thoreau. For example Rothman (2005) notes: “Money doesn’t just buy you a huge house with poured concrete Roman pillars by the swimming pool. It buys you distinction from the conformist masses. At Mitzer, houses don’t have ‘entrances,’ they have ‘great rooms.’ There’s no clubhouse, but there is a ‘Grande Clubhouse’” (p. 145). Rothman accurately points out that money, rather than being used for survival or vital involvement, is primarily used by retired Americans for patching together what fragile self-esteem is left after living a working life they never felt provided them with meaningful work. Like Cronenberg, Rothman’s insights are non-religious observations on deeply religious themes, behaviors, and actions. This is yet one more major example of psychology of religion being absorbed by culture and spreading rapidly.

The closest Rothman (2005) comes to actually discussing the topic of religion literally is in reflecting on the possible offense deities might take because of our actions. The jury seems to be out in one sense, when he wonders if he should feel bad for masturbating in bed as a Jew while there is a large painting of Jesus on his roommate’s wall looking down over him judgmentally (p. 33), and yet he scolds others for worrying about a God taking vengeance on them for any particular action (p. 138). Rothman’s genius is in his making light of what we experience as the most grave of all matters in our private consciences.

Alternative paths in psychology of religion

There are many individuals who have received formal training in psychology of religion at seminaries and universities who are only able to spend part of their lives in the academy in an adjunctive role (due to institutional budget limitations), while supplementing their living in culture (due to their individual budgetary demands). There are also rare cases of individuals who receive formal training in psychology of religion and are able to continue these interests in departments other than religious studies or psychology. Consider Nathan S. Carlin, who is Associate Professor at the University of Texas Medical Center in Houston. Carlin's interests in psychology of religion radiate through his work in various aspects of medicine and psychological and bodily health, as well as in his work in the Presbyterian Church (USA), where he is an ordained minister.

But even Carlin's writings and interests support the thesis this article aims to prove, namely, that the main growth of psychology of religion is occurring outside of the academy in culture. Carlin's writings frequently deal with topics of popular culture and art. See, for example, his 2011 article with Thomas Cole on *The Wrestler* (2008) or his 2012 article on *Family Guy* (1999). Carlin's unique position in the medical humanities certainly demonstrates the limitations on the growth of psychology of religion in conventional avenues of the academy; moreover, his interests in culture as the subject of his research suggest that this is where the real growth in psychology of religion is taking place.

The contemporary employment zeitgeist and the growth of psychology of religion beyond the avenues of the academy is not something any individual can control; classically trained psychologists of religion must remain flexible and creative in attempting to find that work which is good within "his lifetime and his ideological world," as Erikson (1958, p. 220) wrote. While keeping in mind Capps's (2012) previously mentioned recommendations on the uncertain future of the classically trained psychologist of religion and heeding John Henry Newman's advice to focus on the present, I think it is also very important to consider Kohut's famous (1985) essay "On Courage," where he outlines the markers of true courage as the courage that is required for day-to-day living.

First, Kohut echoes many of the concerns Rothman (2005) humorously critiques, namely that of conformism. Kohut (1985) writes: "We may justifiably deplore some behavior as the manifestation of a psychological shortcoming and of moral infirmity—like the actions and attitudes of those who quickly and opportunistically adjust their convictions under the influence of external pressures" (p. 11). Here Kohut describes the quintessential conformist character of American fiction depicted in Lewis's (1922) *Babbitt*. Kohut (1985) agrees with Lewis that such personalities are legion:

The psychological outcome [of such conformity], which is unfortunately more or less characteristic of the psychological makeup of *the majority of adults*, is not an individual striving toward a creative solution of his conflicts concerning the redefinition of his basic ambitions and values but a person who, despite his smoothly adaptive surface behavior, experiences a sense of inner shallowness and who gives to others an impression of artificiality. (p. 11, emphasis added)

In numerous examples throughout this chapter, Kohut identifies individuals living and dying because of their highly idiosyncratic lives and work choices, often in conflict with the prevailing norms in the society around them, like Franz Jaegerstaetter (p. 25), a German farmer who was killed by the Nazis. Kohut ultimately argues for the maintenance of the nuclear self and the sustenance of deeply personal, if also tragic, goals. Evidence that the nuclear self is

being properly maintained includes the presence of humor and empathy even in the midst of tragic suffering. Kohut (1985) concludes:

Self-fulfillment is not necessarily moral, and true creativity—which, I believe always requires the full participation of the nuclear self—is not necessarily a matter of conscientious work. The tragic hero may be moral in the usual sense of the word; our values and ideals may coincide with his. But he may also be a great sinner, a man who steps beyond the bounds of the morality of his times and his society. The question is not whether the hero is a sinner or saint; the question is whether, in that segment of his life curve that is portrayed in the tragic drama or novel, the innermost pattern of the hero's self is struggling for expression and ultimately reaches its goal. (p. 41)

Because of the widespread conformity in culture and because of the unique training and perspective of the psychologist of religion, we psychologists of religion who are engaged in the material of culture (which I have noted includes most of us because we are all participants in culture) are critically important figures (however unnoticed or unsung) who are “at one with an ideology in the process of rejuvenation” (Erikson 1958, p. 210), and in that process of “meaning it,” as Erikson calls it, we may experience extraordinary obstacles. Nevertheless, that vital engagement with our chosen discipline is critical not only to the development and maintenance of our nuclear selves but also to the social transformation that Kohut (1985) suggests is only possible because of the inner psychological commitment of the “tragic hero” (p. 41), as demonstrated in cases such as that of Franz Jaegerstaetter.

The consequences of culture's absorption of psychology of religion

Overall, therefore, the transformation of the discipline of psychology of religion and its “comeback” (Belzen 2012, p. 16) are pretty well limited to the realm of culture. This is, on the one hand, extremely exciting for the discipline, and there is a promise of immense growth in this realm of culture. On the other hand, the comeback of the psychology of religion is also marked by the de-institutionalization of the discipline, its overall official death in the majority of academic departments (especially religious studies and seminaries). This will, as Butler was quoted previously as saying, be extremely destructive for theological institutions, houses of worship, and the larger culture as they may lose the official ambassadors of spiritual healing. Or, as Butler suggested, the pastoral arts will be outsourced to elsewhere (where, exactly, Butler is not specific—perhaps to clinical psychologists who wrestle with the non-psychological topics that Schultz mentioned) as clergy attempt to remain relevant and powerful figures in the culture.

In this scenario, persons in pain will only have Rodney Rothman's works to read or Cronenberg's films to watch. While these works of humor and art will certainly help persons in pain reflect on their lives and experiences, they are in and of themselves incapable of addressing the idiosyncratic, specific psycho-spiritual needs of individuals. Certainly the relative tolerance of the field of psychology of religion in psychology departments will help to train psychology professionals on the religious dimensions of the human person, but as I pointed out in a previous section this is not the central aim of studies in the field of psychology and this is, of course, why psychology of religion will probably never gain much ground or extreme popularity within this discipline. Psychologists of earlier decades, such as Paul Pruyser (1976), have pleaded for the presence of clergy trained in the psychology of religion for their unique diagnostic and theological-clinical interventions. These are the kind of interventions that scholars like Butler or Pruyser argue could only come from someone trained in the pastoral arts.

Conclusion

James Dittes's (1967) work offers evidence supporting Capps's (1977) claims as well as Butler's claims of the importance of psychology of religion for pastoral theology and pastoral care. Dittes opens his (1967) work with the statement: "This book may be classified as an application of *psychology of religion* to problems of *pastoral theology*" (p. x, emphasis in original). Dittes, who according to Capps (2012) "spent much of his career challenging the very penchant of academicians to engage in classifications" (p. 48), here very significantly, if subtly, states his own belief in psychology of religion as the sine qua non of pastoral theology and pastoral care.

Dittes (1967) notes that the "most important matters of life involve the tension between competing personal motives or attitudes or inclinations" (p. x) and that therefore, "when we see one strong tendency (such as an avoidance or blunting of the church's mission) we may suppose a competing tendency (such as a keen sensitivity to the church's mission) also to be present, even though not visible" (p. x). Dittes's (1967) book is therefore highly relevant to this article, as I note the blunting of the psychology of religion on an institutional level accompanied by a competing tendency in the larger culture where psychological insights on religion and religious behaviors are warmly welcomed and encouraged. In the case of the former, academic institutions have judged psychology of religion to be bankrupt, while in culture psychological and behavioral insights on religion are seen as wealth producing and entrepreneurial. Dittes (1967) further clarifies his argument, in his own italics: "*Whatever the internal obstacle to the purposes of the church and its ministry, this obstacle presents precisely the occasion for a realization of those purposes*" (p. 16). Culture, I have argued, has and does offer this precise occasion.

Dittes's argument helps to frame Butler's remarks in a slightly different light, as it suggests that the ultimate purposes and goals of the ministry will be exercised so long as there is some kind of vital resistance going on in the larger culture. This is obviously a very speculative argument, one that cannot be substantiated on the basis of statistics but at the same time one that makes some sense in light of the evidence presented in this article on, say, the ways in which John Stewart or Steven Colbert might "minister" through their use of humor or the way in which Cronenberg might reframe the challenges of chronic mental illness in society.

Capps (2012), who uses Dittes's *The Church in the Way* (1967) and his interpretation of the import of resistance as the reference point for his autobiographical (2012) chapter "The Path of Least Resistance," notes that there was a great deal of irony in the fact that as he studied with Dittes and reflected on his own resistance to various vocational avenues, he discovered he "felt altogether different. I simply enjoyed them [Dittes's classes and books] and as I sat in the classrooms and seminar rooms, I did not constantly ask myself, [Why am I here or why am I doing this?]" (p. 50). In studying resistance and its meaningfulness, Capps (2012) found his own path of least resistance in the psychology of religion—a path that, as he says, does not offer "a clearly identifiable destination" (p. 51). In the context of this article, I would add that psychology of religion does not necessarily offer a clearly identifiable starting point either, as one could encounter insights and studies from the psychology of religion in the training process for a number of different professions.

Resistance or struggle on the part of psychologists of religion to keep their interests alive could, therefore, be a path of least resistance. While it may lead to the kind of personal sacrifice that Kohut (1985) discusses and certainly requires courage and verve, it may also provide the individual with a life path and calling that is far less stressful and painful than it would otherwise be if he or she simply dodged the original resistance or the original struggle. William James (1902/2004) grasped this paradox in his famous text *The Varieties of Religious*

Experience when he promoted in classic Jamesian fashion the virtues of living strenuously and at the same time chides American readers for fearing things like poverty: “Poverty indeed *is* the strenuous life” (p. 319, emphasis in original) and “I recommend this matter to your serious pondering, for it is certain that the prevalent fear of poverty among the educated classes is the worst moral disease from which our civilization suffers” (p. 320). For James, the obstacles that come with living strenuously, such as poverty, are the pre-requisites for a life of real pleasure. In other words, the path of least resistance is filled with obstacles, but so long as those obstacles are meaningful then one is indeed living well.

James (1902/2004) commends wealth for “it gives time for ideal ends and exercise to ideal energies. . . . But wealth does this in only a portion of the actual cases” (p. 320). James, therefore, commends us to embrace the path of least resistance through living strenuously as we each interpret it. In the case of the psychology of religion, we have reason to continue hoping, with Belzen (2012), that more will emerge from this discipline from unexpected sources. We also have reason to hope that with the demise of psychology of religion and pastoral care in seminary curriculums, some unforeseen force will counteract this, as Dittes’s (1967) thesis assumes. This article has sought to make visible some of these ostensibly invisible forces in the larger culture.

In conclusion, Belzen (2012) is correct, I think, to argue for the continued growth of psychology of religion, although this growth is taking place largely outside the confines of the academy and seminary. In other words, not much has changed in the last 50 years or so in institutions that sponsor the psychology of religion, other than the minor growth in psychology that was noted. Butler is correct to be extremely concerned about the loss of pastoral care, and this implies some further loss of a potential institutional location for psychology of religion. Nevertheless, as with any loss, this must also be viewed as opportunity. In never flinching or shying away from the challenge Erikson (1958) presents us with to “mean it” and to “be at one with an ideology in the process of rejuvenation” (p. 210), we psychologists of religion should remind ourselves that our efforts to mean it may result in an assortment of challenges that come with living strenuously, including severe poverty or even death. Yet, this may well be the path of least resistance. Either way, as Belzen (2012) states, we psychologists of religion will press on in “splendid isolation” (p. 16). Nevertheless, it behooves us to press on with full awareness of the larger interests our discipline has in culture, as this will certainly make for further possibilities of transformation of the discipline, academic institutions, and the larger culture.

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