

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Psychology of religion: perspectives from cultural psychology

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After a brief introduction, this paper tries to establish what type of psychology the psychology of religion is. Having introduced cultural psychology in general, some theories applicable in research on religion are presented, and some examples of cultural psychological research of religious phenomena are discussed.

Keywords: psychology of religion; cultural psychology; meta-theory; research

Introduction

As it is impossible to condense what is presented as a book, but which in fact consists in a collection of previously published articles, in the present paper I shall not try to summarise the book, nor its argumentation. *Towards cultural psychology of religion: principles, approaches and applications* (Belzen, 2010) does not present an argumentation built up from chapters 1 to 12. Rather, it makes, in all of its chapters, a plea for a cultural psychological approach to the psychology of religion, explaining some of the meta-theoretical and methodological orientation that holds for most of the cultural psychological approaches, offering more details about some theories and presenting just a few examples from some of the research projects I have been involved in myself. The aims of the book are modest and its means are limited – and no one is better aware of its limits than I am, nor will anyone be more convinced of its modest stand. Each of the sections and each of the chapters of the book could have been different, perhaps even better. What it essentially strives to do, is to call attention to culturological approaches within psychology and to apply these in the exploration of phenomena called religious. This last sentence may sound clumsy, but if it does, it does so, on purpose. Psychologists working in the hermeneutical tradition in psychology are usually well aware of the pluriformity of psychology, of its many theories, methods and techniques, and culturologists typically explain at length that cultural realities like religion cannot be captured in all-embracing substantive definitions. (Such definitions, if attending to be universally valid, typically end up being next to empty, referring to nothing significant anymore.)

What makes cultural psychological approaches especially relevant for psychology of religion is their striving to stay close to the participants of any piece of research, close to their subjectivity, to their experiences and to their conduct, and therefore by necessity close to their world, as it is that world that instigates, facilitates and structures their subjectivity, experiences and conduct. Ever since its inception, psychology of religion has been criticised

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for losing the very object of its research: religion. Psychologists of religion, especially the researchers among them, would join mainstream psychology in dealing with ever smaller questions about ever smaller elements of psychic functioning, but also in losing sight of the human subject that is the very object of psychology, a subject inevitably functioning in a specific world and always intentionally involved in that world. (When it comes to basic elements of psychic processes like thinking, perceiving, remembering, etc. a founding father of psychology like Brentano (1838–1917)—teacher of such different psychologists as Von Ehrenfels, Husserl, Freud and Külpe—explained at length that what is specific for a psychic act (German: *Akt*) is its intentionality: it is always directed towards something, human beings do not perceive, just like that, they perceive *something*; the same with each and every psychic acts.) In contrast, cultural psychology is a radically empirical psychology: it strives to investigate human beings in the world in which they live, not to take them out (and bring them into a laboratory to subject them to experiments), cultural psychology does not strive to obtain information from subjects artificially produced during so-called “research” (like opinions as voiced in interviews or ratings of scales), but to listen to and observe human beings as they function in their respective worlds. Cultural psychology strives for ecological validity: it realises that questions like “what would you do when . . .” or “imagine yourself to be in situation x . . .” are not likely to found out too much about actual behaviour. It is hardly possible for anyone to imagine what it would be like to, for example, be confronted with the death of a beloved, to be the victim of rape, or to experience anything mystical. As human experiences are transient and often delicate, many of them will be hard to explore at all, to which a large number of religious experiences will belong too. If possible, however, a cultural psychologist will try to be present when a religious experience occurs, will observe, will ask, will perhaps draw on her own experience in that very situation. Such working with unobtrusive measures is quite different from a paper-and-pencil approach that characterises much of the present research in psychology of religion. Cultural psychologists will also try to get access to reports of experiences and processes produced during or close after the occurrence thereof, they will employ private documents like letters, diaries and other historical sources, not necessarily only of such still alive, but also of relevant persons from the past (e.g. when trying to interpret life and work of a religious prophet, a reformer, an ordinary mystic and so forth).

Nothing of this constitutes a new approach (although new methods sometimes need to be designed during the course of a specific investigation), it has at one point all been employed already by psychologists, but the truth is that participating in and observing of specific conduct is nowadays largely left to anthropologists, and that working with documents from the pasts largely left to historians. However, what makes a piece of research a psychological, an anthropological or a historical one – to limit ourselves to these examples for the moment – is hardly ever the empirical technique employed, but the perspective of the research and the frame of reference drawn on in interpreting the results of what empirical search so ever. (There are hardly any techniques that are unique to psychology. Questionnaires as so often employed in psychology, for instance, are also employed by sociologists and political scientists, but also in opinion polls and in marketing. Interviews, in a large variety, are used in any of the human and/or social sciences, but also by journalists, business managers and even by theologians. Perhaps only interpretation of free association as practiced in classical psychoanalysis and a small part of cognitive psychological experiments are techniques unique to those specific branches of psychology.) Be this as it may, cultural psychology strives to stay as close as possible to human subjectivity. When employed in research on religion, on the variety of experiences and the various forms of conduct called religious within a specific culture, this kind

of psychology enables to keep the focus with religion. After all, psychology of religion should be about religion!

Taking my examples of empirical research in the book discussed in the present special issue from just one religious subculture, in a specific country and era, I hope the reader of *Towards Cultural Psychology of Religion* will have the feeling to have learned at least something about a Dutch form of Calvinism called reformed – a form not homogeneous in itself, as should be clear after finishing the book. And I hope that the reader, having read the first half of the book, will acknowledge that it has been a kind of cultural *psychological* insight that I have been pursuing in the bits of research I did on some of reformed subcultures in the Netherlands. (By the way: I never belonged to the reformed I studied, nor did my family; I have no special affinity with the tradition.) There is no claim at all in the book that cultural psychological approaches are the best or the only possible ones, nor is there the slightest hint that the approaches I chose were the ones that needed necessarily to be employed in my pieces of empirical research. As indicated, cultural psychologists will try to remain as close as possible to human subjects in their life world, but they will never claim that this can only be done by employing unobtrusive measures. Nor does cultural psychology oppose to quantification and statistical analyses of empirical findings. To suggest such would be ridiculous: anything that helps to explore, understand and analyse human subjectivity, in all its variations and all its richness, is to be welcomed! It may be true, however, that cultural psychology constitutes a kind of balance to many other approaches utilised in other branches of psychology, especially in the quantitative tradition. Whereas much of present psychology seeks to abstract from culture and context, and seeks to indulge in finding out more about the mechanic underpinning of psychic functioning, cultural psychology makes the cultural conditions of that same human psychic functioning its object of research. In research on religion, such a kind of psychology may well contribute to analyse the particular effects any specific form of religion may have.

Hence, in the remainder of this paper I am not going to present the abstracts of the original publications and relate them to one another as if I were a deejay presenting my own records. Presenting just some sentences from each of the empirical papers, of example, would do no justice to the forms of religion dealt with, and thus be opposing my entire enterprise. Rather, I shall draw on one of its chapters and briefly explain what type of psychology I understand psychology of religion to be (§ 2), whether it be cultural psychological in its orientation or otherwise. I shall then proceed to briefly introduce cultural psychology as such (§ 3), after which I discuss some theories as applicable to research on religion and some examples of empirical research (§ 4).

Meta-theory: what type of psychology is psychology of religion?

In order to know what psychology of religion is (and what cultural psychological approaches could possible contribute to it), one should at least know what both psychology and religion are. The troubling fact is, however, that neither of the two constituent terms of the name “psychology of religion” is clear at all. Contrary to what many people think, the definition of psychology is not easy. Entire generations of scholars have been trying to come up with a clear and short answer to the question what psychology is about, but the reality is that the number of perspectives, theories and practices that all go by the name “psychology” is ever increasing. This paper will make no further futile effort to bring about a *communis opinio* with regard to the object of psychology; it will work with a somewhat empty circumscription and speak of psychology

as the science of human psychic functioning. This seems to be no solution at all, for the immediate next questions arise: what, then, is human psychic functioning, what belongs to it (and what does not), what does it rely on, what influences it and which effects does it sort, etc.? The very diverse schools and paradigms within psychology answer these questions quite differently, and theoretical psychologists, working on a meta-theoretical level, have not been able to achieve integration of them all. (And neither have they been able to clarify which schools and paradigms should count as psychological and which should not.) Emotions, cognitive abilities, attitudes and the like – they clearly seem to belong to the object of psychology, but it is not possible to integrate the present enterprise called psychology along these lines. Hardly anyone will doubt that social psychology, developmental psychology and clinical psychology belong to psychology, but how they relate precisely to one another and to other classifications remains unclear. Neither is it clear how to integrate all this with well-known theories within psychology such as psychoanalysis, behaviourism, or humanistic psychology. And who would want to deny that approaches biological psychology, evolutionary psychology and cultural psychology belong to the whole of psychology?

The meta-theoretical stand of this paper will be made clear in a moment. First, let us realise that the theoretical confusion with regard to the term “religion” is certainly not smaller: it is not clear at all what religion is or what the term means. Rather, it seems that the word refers to something different in different contexts and in different discourses, and it becomes increasingly clear that the concept has been coined by a particular class of Western theoreticians extending a particular understanding of Western ways of being in the world to contexts where that concept often does not fit well, serving sometimes interests theoreticians may not have been aware of themselves (Feil, 1997). In the empirical sciences of religion (primarily among them history, anthropology, sociology and psychology) this is reflected in a great diversity of references to the object of a particular investigation: some people meant by “religion” Christianity or one of its denominations (taking, e.g. Roman Catholicism as a model of all of Christianity or of all religions), but some have meant all-others-religions-than-Christianity (usually implying Christianity being right, the other ones being false); speaking about religion, some researchers were only investigating religious experiences (and among these often only conversion experiences). Also trendy fashions have reflected themselves in the way research was conducted: numerous publications have taken church membership as operationalisation of religiosity, as if there were no religiosity outside of churches; nowadays, the opposite trend is growing: by employing the label “spirituality” also individuals who claim to be religious but not a member of any religious group should be included into research samples. Conceptual problems and especially overgeneralisations like these have been haunting all empirical sciences of religion since their inceptions. Only a modest stand will present a way out, also for the psychology of religion: instead of claiming to have found out facts about *all* religion, about all religiosity, about all religious experiences, etc., it will be more honest and appropriate to admit that a piece of research only found out something with regard to a specific phenomenon found with a specific sample in a specific context, only with great caution to be generalised to a population that *may* be found in other contexts as well.

For if anything is clear about “religion,” it is that the word is used to refer to an almost endless variety of empirical phenomena, different from culture to culture (sometimes even from contexts to contexts within a single culture), different from period to period within the same culture, and sometimes even different among the adherents of the same religious tradition at the same time and place in the same culture. (And psychologists, with their traditionally great attention to the individual, are prone to add: even in the life span of a

single person religious experiences will differ: a religious conversion at the age of 17, for example, is likely to be psychologically differently structured than a religious conversion at the age of 71.) In conclusion and as a pragmatic resolution to the problems about the conceptualisation and definition of religion: psychology needs not itself define the concept of religion (such can logically be left to academic disciplines like philosophy and comparative religion), a psychologist can, however, turn to a specific phenomenon that, within a specific culture, is (generally) considered to be religious, and start doing research. Having done a sound piece of research, it can next be established to what extent its results apply in other contexts too.

Whereas the conceptualisation of religion is not a problem specific to psychology, the question what kind of psychology to employ in the exploration of a specific religious phenomenon certainly is a problem specific to psychology! This question is indeed a core problem and can logically only be solved by psychologists. The stand of this paper is that *no* kind of psychology can or should be excluded. As hinted at already, psychology is increasingly pluralistic, opening numerous vistas on human psychic functioning. As religion is so diverse in terms of time, culture and individual, hermeneutical psychologies seem an obvious ally in studying religiosity. This is, of course, the approach any cultural psychologist will prefer. It should be reminded, however, that from *every* psychological perspective research into religious phenomena can be pursued and has been pursued. (Although it should also be admitted that some psychological approaches or theories, e.g. social psychology and psychoanalysis, have been much more employed than others. For excellent overviews of theory and empirical research, see e.g.: Hood, Hill, & Spilka, 2009; Wulff, 1997.) As no human being ever exists without a biological fundament, it is obvious that a biological psychological perspective can legitimately be applied to human psychic functioning, and consequently also to human psychic functioning as it relates to religiosity. It is also obvious, however, that a biological perspective will be of limited value in the exploration of any specifics a certain type of religiosity may have: the biological perspective primarily investigates what is the same for all human psychic functioning across situations, whereas a cultural psychological perspective focuses on what is specific in a certain situation. That the biological psychological fundamentals of praying to Mary by Roman Catholics will be the same as those of praying to Shiva by some Hindus seems trivial, as it should also be obvious that differences in, for example, attitudes and emotions between Catholics and Hindus are best understood by integrating their different cultures, including religion, into the explanation of such behaviour called religious. One of the central questions for a cultural psychological approach to religious phenomena is therefore: in what way do cultural entities like religious traditions constitute, facilitate and regulate psychic functioning?

But first, however, let us bring this argumentation to a conclusion. In short: religion, religiosity and what have you, are no psychological concepts. For sure, religion, however defined and at what level ever investigated, cannot exist without human psychic functioning, but that is true for all cultural phenomena. All religious phenomena are cultural phenomena: they are instigated, transmitted and maintained by human beings, they are no natural phenomena like stones or biological entities. No cultural phenomenon, religious or not, whether it be an activity (like prayer), an artefact (like a temple) or a concept (like *samsara*) is part of psychological theory as such (it does not belong to the formal object of any psychology, concepts such as emotions, consciousness, ego strength, etc. do), but each of them can be psychologically investigated: which psychodynamic function does prayer fulfil with a certain individual?; what does it mean for this group to go and worship at this particular temple?; which emotions are reflected in the concept of *samsara*?

All phenomena called religious can be investigated by psychology (they all belong to the material object of psychology), although it will always be a limited insight that psychology can offer into the phenomena; sociology, anthropology, economics have their own, equally legitimate perspectives. “Religion” being part of psychology’s material object, psychology of religion is first and foremost a wide field of application of psychological expertise, both in research and in practical situations like counselling. Religion is one the many possible fields that psychology can turn to, just like it can turn to and is in fact applied to art, sports, war, teaching, organisation and management, and what have you that psychologists are doing research on. Only in a remote sense religion constitutes an object for theoretical psychology: if any psychology would pretend to be comprehensive – as schools like, for example, psychoanalysis and humanistic psychology pretend to be – but is not able to deal with central domains of human life like social relationships, labour, sexuality and child raising, religion, art, aggression, etc., then such a psychology would probably be deemed defective. But before such a verdict needs to be pronounced on any kind of psychology, it should be granted a sufficiently long time of research and development; in any case, almost all present psychological approaches are applicable and have been applied to religion. Psychology of religion is not in need of new theoretical options! It is rather in need of thoughtful application of the different options available already.

Whereas some parts of psychology have often been drawn on in exploration of religious phenomena, others have hardly been employed. Now that social psychology and personality psychology have been applied at length, as the clinical psychological studies of religiosity are countless and as evolutionary psychology in general is enjoying increasing attention and is slowly making its way into psychological research on religion too (for an excellent example, see Kirkpatrick, 2005), the time has come to also integrate cultural psychological approaches into the psychology of religion. And that and that alone is the claim the book *Towards cultural psychology of religion* (Belzen, 2010) wants to make and to substantiate.

Cultural psychology: initial distinctions

Three variants

Like psychology in general, cultural psychology is a rather broad, heterogeneous enterprise to which many well-known psychologists have made significant contributions (Jahoda, 1993, 2007). Moreover, it is a field that is growing rapidly (cf. the recent publications of handbooks like Kitayama & Cohen, 2007; Valsiner & Rosa, 2007; Valsiner, in preparation). It is important to realise from the onset that cultural psychology is not a psychology entirely different from other kinds of psychology as developed during the discipline’s past, nor is it one of its separate subdisciplines or simply a field of application. Broadly stated, and at this point without much specification, cultural psychology is an approach within psychology that is trying to describe, to investigate and to interpret the interrelatedness of culture and human psychic functioning. It is the part of psychology that tries to take serious the perhaps seemingly trivial observation that both culture and human psychic would not and cannot exist without one another, and that therefore culture is a major factor in all meaningful human conduct and on the other hand traces of human involvement can be traced in all expressions of culture. Culture is here understood as a system of signs, rules, symbols and practices that on the one hand structures the human realm of action, and on the other hand is being (re)constructed and transformed by human action and praxis. It may be instructive to divide cultural

psychology at large in different variants (that are obviously not entirely independent from one another, and that cannot all be dealt with in depth in this paper).

First of all, and vital to the development of psychology as a body of knowledge, attitudes and skills, cultural psychology investigates how culture constitutes, facilitates and regulates human subjectivity and its expression in diverse psychic functions and processes as postulated and conceptualised by different psychological schools and theories (e.g. perception, memory, mental health, the self, the unconscious, etc.). It is important to note, that the concept of culture employed here is a dynamic one, it does not just mean context or situation (Boesch, 1991, p. 29; see also Lonner & Hayes, 2007; Simao, 2008).

With such conception of culture, cultural psychology goes beyond the common understanding of culture in psychology at large. Whereas contemporary psychology generally recognises that not only human interactions are influenced by culture, but that also individuals' feeling, thinking, experiences and behaviour are shaped by it, cultural psychology conceives of these as being inherently cultural: as being the result of human embeddedness in culture, which is therefore to be considered as a genuine element of all human functioning relevant for psychology.¹ This form of cultural psychology will be dealt with at greater length in this paper. It is the form of cultural psychology usually developed by psychologists. (This latter remark should not surprise, for, as we shall see in a moment, there are also other academic disciplines that use or even make contributions to psychology as a scientific enterprise.)

All conditions and determinants of psychic functioning, whether they are limitative (like psychophysical makeup or social and geographical conditions), operative (like acquired, learned activities), or normative (like rules and norms), are always cultural-historically variable (cf. Peeters, 1994). Therefore, this first variant of cultural psychology consists, roughly, in two forms: a synchronic and a diachronic one. In both forms there is a realisation of the historical nature of culture (in its various manifestations) and therefore of human psychic functioning. Yet, in the first form, the emphasis is on psychic functions and processes in contemporary subjects; there is an abstraction of historical variation. In the second form, however, the historical changes in human psychic functioning are being investigated and explained on the basis of modifications in cultural conditions and determinations. Cultural psychology as a whole is an interdisciplinary approach, as will be readily understood with this first of its variants: in both forms of the first variant distinguished here, cultural psychology is in need of collaboration with other disciplines from the social and human sciences. In the synchronic form, psychology relies on information, and sometimes theories, concepts and skills from disciplines like anthropology, sociology and politicology. In the second one, historiography, and sometimes even evolutionary biology (Atran, 2002, 2007), are among the obvious partners in theorising and research.

Second, numerous publications have traditionally been devoted to efforts to detect and determine the human involvement in all kinds of cultural products. Whereas in the first variant of cultural psychology, the understanding of culture is more or less anthropological, on a macro-level, in this second variant usually a much more elitist and restricted concept of culture is employed. Attention is given to products of so-called "high culture," like novels, movies, operas and other arts, but also to entire areas like peace and war, sports, advertising, organisations, international affairs, and to important domains like socialisation, sexuality, and courting, labour, death and dying. Each of these subjects can and is also being studied by other scholarly discipline to which psychology in such case often relates as an auxiliary discipline. In fields (to be distinguished from disciplines!) like cultural studies, education or arts, the discipline of psychology is often called upon to explore the human involvement in the phenomena studied. In these cases typically some

kind or another of psychology (particularly psychoanalysis) is applied. Although this may and has been done by psychologists (especially psychoanalysts) themselves, frequently in these cases, it is done by researchers and authors without a psychological training. Or, if psychologists are hired in these contexts, they obviously are serving a goal other than the development of (new) psychological theory.

In this second variant of cultural psychology, considerable attention has been given to a variety of religious phenomena, contributing substantially to the psychology of religion-literature. Not only numerous “great” psychologists, especially from the psychoanalytic tradition, have been writing explicitly on religion from the perspective of the psychological approach or theory developed by themselves (e.g. Freud, Jung, Erikson, Allport, Maslow, and Fromm), but also others, besides psychologists have often utilised psychological approaches or theories to analyse some religious phenomenon. The latter has been done by authors with a psycho(patho)logical training, but frequently also by scholars with a (primary) background in theology, sciences of religion, or religious studies in general. As such work is covered at some length in other excellent reviews (as in Wulff, 1997); this variant of cultural psychology will be left out of consideration in the remainder of this paper.

A third variant of cultural psychology will be mentioned here briefly. It is common to find an understanding among cultural psychologists that different cultural contexts, different times, as well as different places, produce different psychologies, partly as a result of their being developed with or on subjects who are psychically differently constituted (cf. Gomperts, 1992; Zeegers, 1988), and that the history of psychology is not about natural facts, but about socially generated constructions (cf. Danziger, 1990, 1997, 2008). Therefore, within cultural psychology there is, on the one hand, attention to so-called indigenous psychologies: the psychologies as developed and employed by local people (as distinguished from Euro-American psychologists, who produced almost all of the present academic psychological knowledge), as in parts of the world other than on both sides of the Atlantic (e.g. Much, 1995; Ratner, 2008). On the other hand, there also is a fair amount of attention given to the history of psychology as a Western enterprise. As will be clear, in this third variant there is again a collaboration with experts on local cultures (whether academically trained in the Western tradition, like anthropologists, or not) respectively with historians, especially intellectual historians (or with historicising philosophers), cf. Belzen (1991, 2007), Laucken (1998), and Paranjpe (1998).

The remainder of the present article will deal with the first variant just distinguished, the form of cultural psychology concentrating on the cultural basis of human psychic functioning, developed as an integral part of psychology.

The difference between cross-cultural psychology and cultural psychology

As many cultural psychologists point out, it is important to distinguish between cross-cultural psychology and cultural psychology in a proper sense.² The two disciplines work with different conceptions of culture. Cross-cultural psychology operates with a rather traditional understanding of culture: it conceives of culture as a variable that may possibly influence behaviour, and it investigates comparatively how experiences and behaviour, attitudes, social relationships, etc. present themselves within different cultural conditions. In its most straightforward form, individuals who match for age, sex, education and other relevant variables, but belong to different ethnic groups or live in different geographical regions, are being compared with regard to the psychic phenomenon the particular investigation focuses on. This type of research has contributed greatly

to the present sensitivity for the cultural variations in human ways of experiencing and of being in general (Van de Vijver, van Hemert, & Poortinga, 2008). Such comparative cultural studies often aim to determine culturally invariant forms of human expression, and consider these – in covariance with sociobiological perspectives – as anthropological constants, for example, in research on emotions. In this approach, culture tends to be viewed merely as a qualification on the generality of psychological effects or as a moderator variable, but not as a constituent process that is implicated in explaining psychological phenomena (Billmann-Mahecha, 2001).

On the contrary, cultural psychology in a proper sense stresses that cultural patterns of acting, thinking, and experiencing are created, adopted and promulgated by a number of individuals jointly. Such patterns are supra-individual (social) rather than individual, and they are artefactual rather than natural. Therefore, psychological phenomena are cultural insofar as they are social artefacts, that is, their content, mode of operation and dynamic relationships are socially created and shared by a number of individuals and integrated with other social artefacts (Ratner, 2002, p. 9). Conversion for example, is a phenomenon found within certain religions, which has different meanings for different subgroups of such religions, as a result of certain patterns of religious practice related to certain religious doctrines and rituals. In cultural psychology usually the meaning of some form of action (or thought or experience) is central, not the action as such (which could be, and in fact often is, studied by other social and human sciences too). Culture, also cultural practices, is being conceived of as symbolic: it is considered to do more than merely represent preexisting realities and regulate behaviour. Rather, culture is being seen as creating (social) reality, whose existence rests partly on such cultural definitions. With this, cultural psychology recognises the open and indeterminate relationship between cultural meanings, practices and material forces. It is recognised that not only social institutions (e.g. marriage and school), roles (e.g. bride and student) and artefacts (e.g. wedding ring and lecture notes), but also psychological concepts (e.g. the self, emotion and mind) and epistemological categories (e.g. time) depend in part, on cultural distinctions embodied in language categories, discourse and everyday social practices.

The main contrast between both forms of psychology investigating the role of culture in psychological phenomena is therefore conceptual, not methodological. Cultural psychology views culture and psychology as mutually constitutive and treats basic psychological processes as culturally dependent, if not also, in certain cases, as culturally variable. Cross-cultural psychology, on the other hand, treats psychological processes as formed independently of culture, with culture impacting their display, but not their basic way of functioning (Miller, 2001, p. 38).

In order to not remain too abstract, let us consider some recent pieces of research. For reasons of the limited space available, however, no review will be given of contemporary cultural psychological research on core issues like cognition, emotion, the self, well-being, self-esteem and motivation in general (such reviews can be found in the literature mentioned). Let us we rather cut short and turn directly to cultural psychological approaches of religious phenomena.

Cultural psychology of religion

Theories in contemporary cultural psychology and their application to religion

In contemporary cultural psychology a variety of concepts and theories is employed, drawing from different strains of thoughts (Triandis, 2007). As there is no space here to

cover the entire range, let us take a brief look at some of them, and see what a concept like *habitus* means, what the theory of the dialogical self and other narrative approaches stand for, and what theories of action (or activity) have put forward. Finally, also an example from psychoanalytic reasoning will be provided.

Habitus (Bourdieu)

The notion that psychological phenomena depend on practical activities has a long tradition, ranging from Marx and Engels, to Dewey and contemporary thinkers like Bourdieu. Religious people very often cannot explain at a cognitive level why they perform as they do, for example, in rituals. Most often they have no knowledge of the official rationale for certain conduct. Accordingly Roman Catholics cannot account for their behaviour during Mass, nor can Buddhists for the reasons for experiencing grief as they do (Obeyesekere, 1985). Yet people perform perfectly in accordance with the expectations of their religious (sub) culture, often with a competence and to an extent that a foreigner will never learn to manage. Religion regulates conduct, although this conduct cannot be conceived of as the conscious following of rules. People's conduct – in the broadest sense, also including their perception, thinking, emotion, needs, etc. – is regulated according to a scheme or structure, that is not consciously known. This scheme is not even of a primarily cognitive nature at all, but is something belonging to the body. People act not because they know consciously what to do; it is as if their body knows for them. Affect, for example, is not the result of properly knowing how to feel – it is ruled by an immediate corporeal structure. Bourdieu (1990) calls this structure *habitus* – it is this structure that generates and structures people's actions. Although these structures are personally embodied, they are not individual: they characterise the (sub) culture and are derived from the patterns in the participant's conduct. They belong to both the individual and a (sub) culture; in fact, they are precisely the nexus between an individual and a cultural institution. Unlike Western secularised societies, religion in most cultures is not just a specific practice performed on specific occasions. In such cultures, religion is transmitted through practice, “without rising to the level of discourse. The child mimics other people's actions rather than ‘models’. Body praxis speaks directly to motor function, in the form of a pattern of postures that is both individual and systematic, being bound up with a whole system of objects, and charged with a host of special meanings and values” (Bourdieu, 1990, pp. 73–74). The same applies to those Western subcultures where religion still is predominantly a shaping and integrating force. For example: it is because he carries, in his body, the *habitus* of a Hindu from India, that a believer thinks, reacts, feels and behaves as an Indian Hindu, in fact is an Indian Hindu, and not because he would know the specifics of the doctrine, the ethical rules or the rituals. The believer usually is not aware of these specifics. Not being individual, the *habitus* is itself structured by social practices: its dispositions are durably inculcated by the possibilities and impossibilities, freedoms and necessities and opportunities and prohibitions inscribed in the objective conditions. It is in social practices that the *habitus* can be observed at work: being (re)produced and producing conduct itself.

Narrative psychology

To what extent ever the *habitus* may be non-cognitive or operating in a way non-conscious to the actor, the conduct that results does mean something, both to the actor and to other cultural participants. This meaning is rooted in both personal life history and culturally

available meanings. Analysis of activity must take into account the forms of life that are the context of meaning. This culturally available meaning can only be traced and analysed at the level of text: words, proverbs, stories, myths, articulated symbols. However true it may be that without the analysis of activity, cultural psychology is only telling half of the story (Ratner, 1996), it remains true that cultural knowledge, symbols, concepts and words, formulated and maintained by linguistic conventions, stimulate and organise psychological phenomena. Here narrative psychology can be seen as an obvious ally in any analysis of religiosity. It points out that in the course of their life, people hear and assimilate stories which enable them to develop *schemes* which give direction to their experience and conduct – schemes with whose help they can then make sense out of a potential stimulation overload. To each developing story, and in every situation with which they are confronted, people bring an acquired catalogue of *plots* which is used to make sense out of the story or situation (Mancuso & Sarbin, 1983). Here lies a possibility of applying narrative psychology to religious phenomena. For whatever religion may be besides this, it is in any case also a reservoir of verbal elements, stories, interpretations, prescriptions and commandments, which have the power to determine experience and conduct and in their legitimisation possess narrative character. Geertz's (1973) definition of religion, which is most widely disseminated in cultural psychology, points to the central importance of *stories*, of linguistically transmitted and given reality:

a religion is a system of symbols which act to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing those conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic (1973, p. 90).

In order to effect a connection with narrative psychology, one need only take the word symbols in this definition and give it more precise content with the aid of stories and practices – in this connection one must realise that both practices and conceptions employ stories to explain and legitimate themselves – in other words, people who among the various culturally available life forms, have also been introduced to, or have appropriated, a religious life form, have at their disposal a system of interpretation and conduct which (narratively) prefigures reality for them. Thus in every situation expectations, interpretations and actions can be brought to bear which have been derived from a religious horizon of understanding and which, under certain circumstances, confirm and reinforce this understanding. Indeed, precisely those persons and groups are considered deeply devout who succeed, with the greatest frequency, spontaneously and perseveringly, to activate this religious horizon of understanding and who are in a position – despite the paradoxes they are confronted with – to overcome their own problems of religious interpretation and to act in harmony with the system of interpretation and conduct they have appropriated as well as with the stories that have been handed down to them.

A recent psychological approach developed in accordance with developments in contemporary cultural psychology is the concept of the *dialogical self* as developed by Hermans and Kempen (1993, cf. also Hermans, 2001). These authors propose an idea of the self as a multiplicity of relatively autonomous “I” positions in an imaginal landscape. Drawing on Sarbin's (1986) proposal for a narrative psychology, assuming that in the self-narrative a single author tells a story about herself as actor, Hermans and Kempen conceive of the self as polyphonic: One and the same individual lives, or can live, in a multiplicity of worlds, with each world having its own author telling a story relatively independent of the authors of the other worlds. At times the various authors may even enter into a dialogue with one another. Moreover, the self, conceptualised in analogy with

a polyphonic novel, has the capacity to integrate also the notions of imaginative narratives and dialogues. In their idea of the self, Hermans and Kempen no longer stipulate – in contrast to James and Mead – an overarching I, which would organise the several constituents of the “me.” Instead, the spatial character of the self leads to the supposition of a decentralised multiplicity of I positions that function as relatively independent authors, telling their stories about their respective me’s as actors (1993). In their initial publication on the dialogical self, the authors point out three ways in which their conception differs from much of the received view in the West. In contrast to a conception of the self as individualistic, the I moves in an imaginal space from one position to another, from which different or even contrasting views of the world are possible. Second, the dialogical self is social, which does not mean that a self-contained individual enters into social interactions with other outside people, but that other people occupy positions in the multi-voiced self. The other person is a position that I can occupy and that creates an alternative perspective on the world (including the self). Finally, the conception of the dialogical self opposes the ideal of the self as a centralised equilibrium structure. Hermans and Kempen do not stipulate the self as the centre of control: The different I positions in the self represent different anchor points which – depending on the nature of the interaction – may organise the other I positions at a given point in time (1993).

The concept of the dialogical self proves especially fruitful for a cultural psychological approach to religion (Belzen, 2003). Informed by a cultural psychological heritage, it opposes the idea of a unified, separate and centralised self. It presents the self as being evoked and structured by a diversified cultural setting, and views the self as an ensemble of relationships with “actual” as well as “imagined” others from different realms: From history, from one’s personal past, but also from a mythical past or some spiritual realm. A person may maintain relationships with persons actually met, but also with persons known from stories, television, pictures, statues in a temple, or other religious meeting places. Therefore, Hermans and Kempen (1993) represent the self as an embodied multiplicity of I positions in stories made possible and available by cultural contexts. To the extent that a person is religious or is familiar with religious discourse and practices, she or he will be acquainted with stories about gods, spirits and saints; in other words, such a person will be familiar with religious signifiers with whom she or he may or may not interact. Precisely to detect whether, why, and to what extent one or several relationships with religious signifiers constitute an essential part of one’s narrative construction of the world; what their place is in the more general organisation of the self; and why, when, and how such I positions will develop and where they will be moved to, are empirical questions that will be examined by a psychology of religion drawing on the theory of the dialogical self.

Activity theory

Activity theory was seminaly lined out by the Russian psychologist Vygotsky (Veresov, 1999). He enumerated three cultural factors that influence psychic functioning, (a) activities such as producing goods, raising children, educating the populace, devising and implementing laws, treating disease, playing and producing art, (b) artefacts including tools, books, paper, pottery, weapons, eating utensils, clocks, clothing, buildings, furniture, toys and technology (c) concepts about things and people (e.g. the succession of forms that the content of person has taken in the life of human beings in different societies with their system of law, religion, customs, social structures and mentality (Mauss, 1938/1985, p. 3, in Ratner, 2002, p. 10). Vygotsky emphasised the dependence of psychic functioning on these three cultural factors and the dominance of activities over the

other two. (Ratner [2002] correctly pointed out that the real situation is more complex and dynamic: it contains reciprocal influence among the factors, and it is animated by intentionality, teleology or agency.) Vygotsky stated:

The structures of higher mental functions represent a cast of collective social relations between people. These structures are nothing other than a transfer into the personality of an inward relation of a social order that constitutes the basis of the social structure of the human personality (1998, p. 169–170).

Another member of the cultural-historical school in psychology initiated by Vygotsky wrote similarly that “changes take place in the course of historical development in the general character of men’s consciousness that are engendered by changes in their mode of life” (Leontjew, 1981, p. 22).

According to activity theorists, activity, artefacts and cultural concepts need to be explored by psychologists to understand psychic functioning of individuals in a particular culture. This is not a task to be left to those other than psychologists, as one has to look outside the individual to comprehend the content, mode of operation and dynamics of psychological phenomena, constituted as they are by cultural factors and processes. Gerth and Mills (1953) pointed out that activities are internally divided into roles, and that each role entails distinctive rights, responsibilities, norms, opportunities, limitations, rewards and qualifications. (The activity of religion, e.g. includes the roles of the believer and usually of some kind of priest, both more often than not divided into a host of religious categories as penitent, possessed, enlightened, etc., or such as pastor, baptiser, minister, exorcist, etc.) The distinctive characteristics of a role shape the occupant’s psychic functioning, for it is by her or his experience in enacting various roles, that the person incorporates certain objectives and values which steer and direct her or his conduct, as well as the elements of her or his psychic structure. Fulfilling a role requires psychic training: it involves learning what to do, as well as the meaning of what to do.

His [sic] memory, his sense of time and space, his perception, his motives, his conception of his self, and his psychological functions are shaped and steered by the specific configuration of roles which he incorporates from his society (Gerth & Mills, 1953, p. 11; cf. also Ratner, 2002, for an actualized outline of activity theory, integrating numerous contemporary research findings and extensive discussions of its relation to other cultural psychological approaches).

The concept of the (social) role is an excellent device for a cultural psychological approach to religion, as it designates a historically specific set of norms, rights, responsibilities and qualifications that pertain not only to actually present persons and/or situations, but also to those from the realm of religious stories, symbols and discourses in general. Roles are specific, distinctive ways of acting and interacting, and the concept can be used to designate the functioning (action, but also corresponding attitudes, emotions and expectations) on the part of the actual believer as well as to the (anticipated) conduct of the beings from an immaterial realm as stipulated by the diverse religions, as the Swedish psychologist of religion Sundén (1959, 1966) pointed out. His role theory of religious experience has proved a powerful heuristic device to analyse both contemporary and historical cases, and can be considered as a contribution to a cultural psychology of religion (Belzen, 1996).

Psychoanalytic approaches

In some psychoanalytic circles – notably in France and in those that orient themselves towards developments there – there is an awareness of the impact of culture that seems

contrary to much vulgarised psychoanalytic reasoning found so often. There is recognition that supra-individual entities like societies and/or entire cultures are not just repeating the phases and mechanisms that psychoanalytic theorising claims to have discovered when studying patients. Instead, structurally informed analysts emphasise the importance of what Lacan called the *symbolic order* or the *discours de l'Autre*. This symbolic order pre-exists the individual and will persist when the individual has left it. Yet the individual is already represented in this order before birth, even if only by the name that will be given. Lacan clearly gave primacy to cultural order when he invented his dictum: “man talks, yet because the symbol has made him man” (1966, p. 242). Psychic development is the result of culture; there is no natural—in the sense of innately preconceived—growth, according to Lacan. The structure of the psyche as such, not just its culturally variable contents, is dependent on culture, on forces from “outside.” The constitution of the subject, the *psychic birth* (after natural birth) is dependent on (awareness of the separateness of) the other (usually the mother); in order to achieve a first – imaginary – image of itself, the child (in the so-called “mirror-phase”) needs someone else to pass down this image. Most important for cultural psychology: self-consciousness, in Lacan’s view, only emerges thanks to language: it is because of identification with the discourse of the other that the human being becomes a participant in culture, able to say I and – later – to speak in its own name. Subjectivity is constituted and marked by cultural givens. Because of the entrance into the cultural symbolic order – preeminently language – needs are transformed into desires, which are therefore not naturally given, but a product of culture. In this sense, it is impossible to conceive of a human instinct that would not be marked by cultural references that define it. Even sexual instincts are never merely natural forces: the strata of meanings deposited in them invariably condition the strategies of satisfaction as well as the pitfalls of suffering and discontents. That human beings desire, and the way in which they want to satisfy that desire, is the consequence of cultural signifiers that direct human desire. Thus, similarly as Freud defined the drive as psychic *labour* because of the intrinsic unity with the corporeal, also culture imposes labour, it shapes the psychic realm.

Examples of empirical cultural psychological research on religion

Before closing, let us take a brief look at some examples of research on religion, performed along cultural psychological lines. We shall consider work from different countries and on different religious traditions.

The Belgian psychologist of religion Vergote has applied psychoanalytic thoughts and cultural psychological reasoning in general in extended research on religion (1988). His work is characterised by a remarkably unusual interdisciplinary approach: he is drawing on cultural anthropology, history and sociology, psychoanalysis and philosophy. When confronted with the task of defining his object of study, he does not commit the fallacy of trying to develop a psychological definition of religion; but he turns to cultural sciences, for example, to Clifford Geertz’ well-known anthropological definition of religion. Accordingly, the task for psychology of religion is to develop or to make use of an approach that will yield insight into the psychic processes that are involved in and determined by this culturally given religion. Next, there is no pretension of studying religion in general, whatever that may be, but an in depth analysis of some concrete phenomenon, belonging to a particular religious form of life, be it stigmata, worship of ancestors, or whatever. Usually, Vergote’s publications deal only with aspects of the Christian faith in its Roman–Catholic version: even more concrete from the Belgian

context. In one of his main publications, he attempts a study of belief which he considers to be one of the most important elements in and specific for the Christian faith. Before starting his psychological research he offers a brief account of what “to believe” means in Christianity (1996, p. 187–191). Proceeding in this way, he has removed himself far from any effort to write a psychology of religion in general, as he is not writing on religion in general; he is, in that volume, not even writing on the Christian religion in general, but only on one of its aspects, faith. As in his better-known *Guilt and Desire* (1988), he defends the position that by nature the human being is neither religious nor irreligious, the human being can only become a religious or irreligious person, because of cultural available religious meanings. “What is studied by psychology is the effect of psychic archaeology on the process by which the individual appropriates the symbolic system of religion” (1996, p. 26). It is psychology’s task to bring to light latent meanings and motivations in experienced religion, and to investigate how these relate organically to each other and form the structure of personal religiosity. Therefore, it just as revealing to study the process by which a person develops into an unbeliever, as to study the oscillations between belief and unbelief.

Research on a mystically oriented type of Christian spirituality in the Netherlands may count as another example of a cultural psychological approach to religion. As Belzen (1999) has tried to point out, the notion of conversion as adhered to by *bevindelijken*, orthodox-mystical believers belonging to the Calvinistic tradition, may well be interpreted with the aid of categories of social constructionism, especially in its rhetorical-responsive version. As in many non-Western countries, but also with several more or less traditional religious groups in the West – where religion is a major shaping force in various, sometimes even almost all, domains of private and public life, and where people more often than not fail to distinguish between the two – *bevindelijke* believers have *embodied* (Bourdieu) knowledge of *the third kind* (Shotter) about their religion. *Bevindelijke* identity does not just consist in membership in some church, in affirming specific theological doctrines, in joining an inner circle or even in being able to account for one’s religious experiences in a certain stylised way, but predominantly in an all-pervading style, belonging to a specific life form (Wittgenstein), displaying itself in and through the body. Whereas Vergote has also worked with standardised instruments like Osgood–scales, Belzen utilised very diverse empirical strategies, including dozens of observations made during attendance at church services, observations and conversations on the occasion of visits to feast days (mission conferences, book fairs, training courses and political assemblies); numerous encounters with people, in the street, after church, at their homes, sometimes just “small talk,” sometimes in the form of semi-structured interviews (in some cases even with a tape-recorder on the table); analysis of ego-documents, novels, spiritual authors, and scholarly publications on *bevindelijken*; reading their newspapers, visiting them on Internet. In short, anything that might help a person to “get in touch” (Shotter, 1992).

Similarly, Much and Mahapatra (1995) have combined anthropological methods and psychological reasoning in their study of a *Kalasi*, a possession oracle in the Hindu tradition, of Orissa, a state on the eastern coast of India. They show the interplay of meanings in the constitution of the life form of the woman they present in their case study, and consider her role as a possession oracle from the point of view of personal meanings and values, of social statuses or positions, and of local cultural symbolic contexts. In their analysis, they focus upon the cultural discourse that accommodates the role and status of a possession oracle, and upon the semiotic skills of the oracle herself as she transforms herself from her ordinary persona to a “moving divinity” (*Thakura chalanti*). During the

times of transformation and possession, and at those times only, *Kalasis* are expected to speak and behave in ways different from normally acceptable social behaviour. The resulting behaviour is, however, a patterned and meaningful symbolic deviation from the norm, and not a random inhibition. There clearly are norms for behaviour while possessed. *Kalasis* are held to have special powers when possessed by the Goddess. Their actions and speech are understood as her actions and speech, and their special powers under possession are viewed as attributes of the Goddess. According to Much and Mahapatra (1995, p. 76) the discourse of the oracle (*hokum*) is a socially shared illusion wherein participants have the experience of *darshan*, a vision of visions or objects who are special conduits of divinity, during which they can receive personal attention and advice directly from the Goddess. As such, the *hokum* is not particularly different from other kinds of socially shared illusions in Western or Indian cultures, like psychotherapy, academic symposia or business meetings.) The authors point out that it is not the “supernatural” aspect of the *hokum* which makes it an illusion, but rather its socially constituted facticity, without which it would not be experienced as meaningful in the way that it is. Reflecting on their research, Much and Mahapatra come up with an interesting suggestion for psychological theory, from a cultural psychological point of view; personality patterns – dispositions, patterns of knowing and feeling, awareness and response – are aptly considered skills. A neonate enters the social world with a certain range of potentials; some universal or widely shared, others particular to a subset of individuals. Which of these potentials are cultivated or not, and in which way, depends to a large extent on cultural contexts of learning, knowing and performing. The marginalised or even pathologised potentials of one culture may be recognised talents and so developed into socially and personally adaptive skills, in cultural contexts where these skills are accepted, where they can be cultivated in well-organised institutionalised forms, and where they are integrated with local social structures and cultural goals. Cases in point would be the various contemplative, mystical, and ecstatic skills valued, taught, and cultivated in South Asia but ignored and generally pathologised by mainstream contemporary Western society.

Concluding remarks

Although in psychology of religion, increasingly the value and necessity of alternative, modern approaches is being recognised (Kirkpatrick, 2005; Paloutzian & Park, 2005), not too much of cultural psychology in a general sense has been received thus far. If psychologists turn to research on religion, it is still usually from a more conventional theoretical point of view and with the application of traditional research methods (Cutting & Walsh, 2008). Published in respected psychological journals, such research is often more focused on psychology-related topics, like life satisfaction and subjective well-being, stress, adjustment, affective disorders, trauma and intervention, and addiction rather than on the religion or the religiosity of the investigated subjects (Belzen, 2005). Alternatively, for a psychology of religion that strives for insight into the psychic particularities of any religion, the vista of cultural psychology might become vital. Moreover, it is this approach that promises to do justice to the phenomena under consideration: a cultural psychological approach will take into account the specific form of religion some sub sample of subjects is involved in (Belzen, 2010). Granted, in doing so the results obtained will not be valid for every person and/or group in every religion, but this is exactly an aim that should be abolished in psychology, not just in psychology of religion! As there exists no

religion-in-general, but only specific forms of life that go under the label of being religious and as psychology should not strive for insight into presumably basic elements of psychic functioning valid for all subjects, regardless of time and place; psychology of religion should try to detect how a specific religious form of life constitutes, involves, and regulates the psychic functioning of the persons involved. If we proceed in this direction there will be a future for the psychology of religion and the possibility of meaningful results and interpretations in selecting some specific phenomenon from a religious form of life, taking account of its particular psychic impact, and using concepts and methods from currently evolving cultural psychological theorising.

Notes

1. Cultural psychologists usually define meaningful action or conduct as the object of psychology. Obviously, there are also forms of human behaviour that are not intentional or not regulated by meaning (like drawing back one's hand from a hot object; although even in the way this is done, there exists cultural variation).
2. Recently, authors from both traditions are trying to open a dialogue and to look for commonalities instead of stressing differences (cf. e.g. Kitayama & Cohen, 2007; Matsumoto, 1994a, 1994b, 1996; Ratner, 2008; Valsiner & Rosa, 2007).

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