

Review Essay: Towards Cultural Psychology of Religion by J. E. Belzen

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Published online: 8 November 2012
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Abstract Jacob Belzen spends the first two-thirds of his 2010 book doing two things: (1) developing a cogent critique of the presuppositions that underlie mainstream psychology, especially as regards the study of religion, and (2) promoting greater use of what he calls a “cultural psychology.” The last third presents a number of religious case studies, all from the Netherlands, that demonstrate the value of cultural psychology. Although Belzen emphasizes “embodiment” in these studies, his results suggest that religion is often a “performance” for particular audiences. Finally, the applicability of Belzen’s approach to religions outside the Western tradition is discussed.

Keywords Religion · Psychology · Cultural psychology · Netherlands · Performance

Over the past decade or so Jacob Belzen has published a series of articles that collectively have had a number of interrelated goals. Mainly, I take those goals to be:

- to critique the methods and theories associated with mainstream psychology (and by this he means mainly mainstream psychology in the United States), especially as those theories and methods have been used to study religion
- to promote a different sort of psychology, one that recognizes the centrality of culture in shaping human personality, and to promote this “cultural psychology” in connection with the study of religion
- to demonstrate that cultural psychology is not really “European,” as some of his readers have suggested, but in fact is an approach to the study of psychological phenomena that has affinities with arguments made by a wide variety of thinkers in both the United States and Europe over the past century and a half
- to provide case studies involving religious phenomena that illustrate the sort of insight that can be obtained by taking culture into account in the way he suggests

Unfortunately, the problem with developing a number of interrelated arguments in article form over a long period of time is that it is difficult for readers who encounter the articles

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haphazardly to appreciate how these arguments mesh together to form a coherent whole. The great value of this book (Belzen, 2010), then, is that Dr. Belzen has (finally!) put all those arguments into one place and written a text that makes those interconnections clear.

Still, before considering the specific argument(s) that Belzen develops, and how they relate to the goals given above, I have to mention a quibble I have with the overall organization of this book.

Exemplars

Toward the end of his first chapter (pp. 17–18), after first saying that he will be explaining and then promoting cultural psychology, Belzen goes on to say that he does not aspire to produce the sort of paradigm shift discussed in Thomas Kuhn's (1962) classic work. His aim, Belzen says, is much more modest: "What can be done, however, is to offer an example: to describe briefly . . . what has been done in the type of research reported on and what kind of results have been achieved" (p. 18). Here, I wish Belzen had paid more attention to his own statement—and to Kuhn's argument. For example, in explaining how scientists learn to do science, Kuhn made the point that such learning rarely takes place as the result of an encounter with abstract theorizing. On the contrary, would-be scientists learn most of all when they encounter exemplars, i.e., examples where somebody has applied abstract theories in some concrete setting in order to produce an acceptable solution to a recognized problem. And Belzen himself, in the sentence just quoted, seems to be suggesting that he will be presenting concrete case studies. In this context, a problem with Belzen's book is that in fact concrete examples demonstrating the worth of cultural psychology come relatively late and are in short supply. It is only in the last third of the book, for example, that Belzen presents his case studies (all involving his investigations of religious traditions in The Netherlands). Relatively more emphasis on case studies, and a bit less on abstract theoretical discussion, in the first two thirds of the book would have made this a better book and done more, I think, to promote the sort of cultural psychology that Belzen wants to promote.

Nevertheless, even as it stands, this is a valuable book that has the potential to produce a gestalt shift in the academic study of religion.

The core contrast

Belzen develops his discussion of cultural psychology by contrasting it with mainstream psychology, and he sees the central assumption of mainstream psychology to be that "in essence human beings were always and everywhere the same" (p. 30). It is this belief in the psychic unity of humankind that has always led mainstream investigators to believe that their results can be generalized beyond their specific samples. Mainstream psychologists do take "culture" into account, but only as a variable that affects psychological processes that are themselves universal.

For Belzen, the alternative to mainstream psychology is "cultural psychology," an approach that recognizes that culture and cultural context are intertwined with lived experience in ways that must be taken into account in order to understand that lived experience. I cannot improve upon his own summary of the contrast between the two psychologies:

The main contrast between the two forms of psychology . . . 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. [Mainstream] psychology, on the other hand, treats psychological processes as formed independently from culture, with culture impacting on their display, but not on their basic way of functioning. (p. 41)

At one level, Belzen is reprising one of the oldest—and forever recurring—debates in social science. Whether the specific terms being contrasted are homothetic vs. ideographic, explanation vs. understanding, quantitative vs. qualitative, empirical vs. hermeneutical, historicizing vs. generalizing, etc., it's really always (warning: gross oversimplification ahead!) a debate between scholars arguing that scientific accuracy depends on finding law-like and universal relationships among a limited set of variables and scholars arguing that understanding depends upon a holistic approach that takes both context and subjective meanings into account and that eschews generalizations. And, in fact, Belzen claims no novelty for his general argument here. Quite the contrary; he argues (see especially pp. 10–11, 118–124) that Wilhelm Wundt, now regarded mainly as the “founding father of experimental psychology,” really argued for a two-pronged approach to studying psychological processes. The first was indeed an experimental approach, but the second was a complementary approach that looked at language, morals, customs, religion, etc., and how these things influenced individuals. We have remembered the first of Wundt's contributions, Belzen argues, but forgotten the second. In addition, Belzen sees the sort of cultural psychology he is promoting as being explicit or implicit in the work of any number of individuals, including Wilhelm Dilthey, William James, Clifford Geertz, Paul Ricoeur, and Pierre Bourdieu.

What Belzen adds to this old debate, however, is 1) a relatively concise critique of the use of mainstream psychology when studying religion and 2) case studies that do indeed demonstrate the value of cultural psychology in studying religion.

Critique of mainstream psychology of religion studies

Some of Belzen's critiques of the studies done by mainstream psychologists of religion will be familiar to readers. Thus, he points out (pp. 16, 23) that under the influence of a taken-for-granted belief in the psychic unity of humankind, psychologists of religion have routinely assumed that results derived from white, middle-class students, or from subjects who are Catholic or Protestant or at least from Catholic or Protestant backgrounds, can be generalized to humankind. Other critiques, while obvious enough when said, are perhaps less familiar. Thus, Belzen is clear in arguing, at several points in his book, that most studies in the psychology of religion are pervaded by the same individualistic emphasis that pervades mainstream psychology generally, with the result that what psychologists of religion have always tended to focus on is internalized religiosity. This mainstream focus on internalized religiosity in turn leads away from studying things (like prayer, ritual, priests, saints, miracles, etc.) that the people being studied might see as central to their religious experience.

But likely Belzen's most powerful critique is one that appears in bits and pieces throughout his discussion. The gist of this critique goes something like this: Although practitioners of mainstream psychology may present their theories and methods as being scientific, and their conclusions as saying something about universal human experiences, in fact their theories, methods, and conclusions have typically been shaped in unacknowledged ways by the practitioners' own subjective attitudes toward religion. Thus, he says:

Time and again, it is apparent that it is the author's personal stand toward religion that is being legitimated by his psychological "research," or that what the researcher privately considers to be the most appealing religion, also turns out as having the most positive psychological qualifications. (p. 54)

This particular quote is followed immediately by a series of briefly mentioned examples that illustrate his point. He argues, for example, that Sigmund Freud's view that religion was a collective neurosis reflected (and legitimated) Freud's own atheism; that Gordon Allport's claim that a religious worldview provides the unifying philosophy that is the hallmark of a fully developed personality reflected Allport's personal commitment to religion; that the content of Daniel Batson's widely used Quest Scale, although supposedly measuring general religiosity, reflected Batson's own liberal Protestantism.

While I think that Belzen's core insight here is valid, I also think that to some extent Belzen's own vision is constrained by the same individualistic bias that he sees as constraining mainstream psychology. After all, the fact that Freud's atheism may have shaped Freud's personal theorizing about religion does not really explain why that theorizing became so prominent; the fact that Batson's liberal Protestantism may have shaped the development of his Quest Scale does not really explain why that scale came to be adopted so widely in mainstream psychology, etc. In other words, what needs to be added to the mix here is cultural or at least subcultural context, i.e., theories and methodologies become popular when they reinforce the cultural proclivities of particular groups of academics. That Belzen would almost certainly agree, I think, is evident from his analysis of spirituality, which takes up the bulk of Chapter 6.

Belzen starts Chapter 6 with a simple observation: Over the last few decades, psychologists of religion have increasingly come to focus on "spirituality" rather than on particular religious traditions. And the reason? For Belzen, it is because religion has increasingly come to be seen as something negative and retrograde for most academics. In this context, to study religion is to become associated with something discredited and so to be discredited in turn. As a result,

The way out for many seems to be to talk no longer about religion and religiosity, but about spirituality. Spirituality would not have the negative connotations that religion and religiosity for many people have. (p. 83)

Indeed, because spirituality can so easily be related to notions of individual well-being and personal development (as it has been in so much popular literature), the connotations of "spirituality" in the popular imagination are usually positive. The result: A search for psychological universals in connection with spirituality is received far more favorably in academic circles than a search for such psychological universals in connection with religion. Even so, for Belzen (see especially pp. 91–92), the view that spirituality is "good for you" is in the end simply the modern incarnation of the older view (a view that dominated all early research on the psychology of religion in the West) that religion was "good for you" because it was part of human nature.

In summary, then, Belzen devotes the first two thirds of his book to 1) laying out the contrasts between mainstream psychology and cultural psychology and 2) trying to undermine the reader's confidence in mainstream psychology's study of religion by showing (successfully, I think) that what purports to be "general" in mainstream studies is usually culturally specific. But, of course, this is only half the project; he also wants to promote the wider use of cultural psychology in studying religion—and this brings us to his case studies.

Embodiment and false starts

Belzen (pp. 147–148) sets the stage for his first case study in two ways. First, he calls attention to two theorists, Meredith McGuire and Richard Hutch, who some time ago (in the early 1990s) called for more attention to the body and embodiment in studying religion. Belzen then distances himself (again) from mainstream’s psychology’s search for “perennial laws of an unchanging human mind” (p. 148) and argues that the best we can hope for is understanding that is valid only for the time being and only in the cultural context being studied. With all this in mind, he begins his discussion of the *bevindelijken* tradition in the Netherlands.

The term *bevindelijken*, which does not belong to ordinary Dutch, is not easily translated, but it connotes “experience” and in a religious sense is to be understood as “experience of the spiritual process through which the soul passes in its hidden friendship with God” (p. 149). Essentially, adherents of the *bevindelijken* tradition are offshoots of a Low Country Calvinist tradition that required that a second, interiorized reformation follow upon the organizational reforms associated with Calvinism. More pragmatically, Belzen tells us (p. 151) the *bevindelijken* seem similar—both in outlook, social organization and literal appearance—to Ontario Mennonites. Although Belzen devotes a few pages to *bevindelijken* beliefs, he notes that their beliefs in themselves would not distinguish them from most other Protestant traditions in the Netherlands. So what does? For Belzen, it’s a corpus of implicit knowledge, most of which is linked to embodiment, that allows individuals to claim a *bevindelijken* identity in the eyes of other adherents. Belzen expresses all this succinctly:

The dark clothes of a *bevindelijke*, the stoney face, the grave look, the walk with a stoop, the dragging speech—these and other embodied characteristics do not just identify a person as a member of the *bevindelijke* tradition. They are also the expression of a way of life; they portray the conception of a human being who knows that the “pleasures of the world” are treacherous, is bowed down by the realization that (s)he will be doomed because of his or her sins, who knows that s(he) is totally dependent on grace, something for which a person can only humbly wait. (p. 161)

At one level, Belzen here is harking back to one of the oldest traditions in the social scientific study of religion, a tradition which argues that formal religious beliefs are less important in studying religion than behavior. It is a tradition that literally revolutionized the study of religion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, even though different practitioners applied this insight in different ways. Thus, Emile Durkheim argued that the psychic effervescence experienced when clan members gathered together and engaged in collective rituals gave rise to a belief in transcendent forces; Jane Harrison argued that male initiation rituals in ancient Greece gave rise to several Greek myths; and of course Sir James Frazer argued that one particular ritual, the ritual slaying of a king in order to renew nature, gave rise to any number of myths about dying and reborn gods. And yet as old as this emphasis on behavior over belief in studying religion is, Belzen builds on this old tradition in creative ways. To understand how, however, let me be presumptuous and say that we need to tear down the tiniest bit of the theoretical scaffolding that Belzen himself has erected and rebuild that theoretical scaffolding differently. Less cryptically, I want to suggest that to fully appreciate the value of the cultural psychology that Belzen is promoting, his own emphasis on *embodiment* needs to be scaled back and replaced by an emphasis on *performance*. To understand why a greater emphasis on performance would aid Belzen’s project (demonstrating the value of cultural psychology), let me proceed by analogy and consider how an emphasis on performance produced exactly the same sort of revolution in the study of gender that Belzen wants to introduce in the study of religion.

Revisiting the revolution in gender studies

Up until the early 1980s, feminist scholarship on “gender” was pervaded by an individualist bias that saw gender as a role that was acquired through a process of sex role socialization. Basically, the prevailing consensus was that biological males were socialized in a way that led to the acquisition of certain traits; biological females were socialized in ways that led to the acquisition of other, different traits. In this view, gender traits might vary somewhat from culture to culture, but once acquired by individuals within a culture, these traits were invariant across the different contexts in which the individuals acted. Starting in the late 1980s, however, any number of investigators, building on the work of theorists like Candace West and Don Zimmerman (1987), increasingly argued that gender was a performative act, that is, something that females and males *do* in particular contexts to establish themselves, respectively, as “masculine” or “feminine” in the eyes of the particular audience they face in that context. By the turn of this century, this new approach to gender had completely displaced the sex role socialization approach among feminist scholars, which explains, for example, why West and Zimmerman’s 1987 article is now the most-cited article ever published in *Gender and Society*, itself a top-ranked journal in both women’s studies and sociology (Jurik and Siemsen, 2009). For a sampling of some early work in the “doing gender” tradition, see the collection assembled by Fenstermaker and West (2002a); for an overview of more recent work, see the literature reviews in Denker (2009) and Johnson (2009).

A central element in this new way of conceptualizing gender was/is the view that what constitutes “doing gender,” even for the same individual, will vary depending upon the context and the audience. For example, in a study of elementary school students, Barrie Thorne (1999) found that in the schoolyard, students performed gender in ways that suggested “masculine” and “feminine” were not only *different* but also *opposed* in ways that created separate spaces for girls and boys. When these same students moved into the classroom, however, gender still connoted difference but no longer connoted opposition, and so both boys and girls behaved quite differently than in the schoolyard.

Of course, as is inevitable with any long-standing scholarly argument that comes to define what is mainstream, revisionist critiques of the original “doing gender” approach have arisen. Messerschmidt (2009), for example, chides investigators in the “doing gender” tradition for not paying more attention to the congruence or lack of congruence between “gender” and “body,” e.g., to situations where a biological female explicitly sets out to perform masculinity. Another current debate, for example, is whether more emphasis should be put on performances that aim to “undo,” rather than “do,” gender (Connell, 2010). Nevertheless, the core insight—that gender is best seen as a performance, and that the particular script that will guide gender performance will vary depending upon context—remains intact.

So what is the relevance of all this to Belzen’s argument? Nothing terribly complicated; I simply want to suggest that Belzen’s case studies come into sharper focus, and so become more useful in understanding the sort of cultural psychology that he wants to promote, if we read those case studies against the “doing gender” literature. Phrased differently, much of what Belzen argues when he presents his case studies can be read as suggesting that religion is best studied as a performative act designed to establish that a person is “religious” in the eyes of some particular audience. Of course, because behaviors only acquire meaning as the result of cultural associations that exist in the mind of both the performer and the performer’s audience, an understanding of those cultural associations is integral to the task of understanding such performances. Within this perspective, the things on which Belzen focuses in the *bevindelijken* example cited above—i.e., dark clothes, a stoney face, a grave look, walking with a stoop, dragging speech—are easily seen to be a performance, but presumably

a performance that only connotes what Belzen suggests (the pleasures of the world are treacherous, sin leads to damnation, salvation depends on grace, etc.) because of a common familiarity (on the part of not simply performer and audience, but also the researcher and his/her readers) with a particular cultural tradition. Suggesting that we focus on performance in studying religion in the same way that we (now) focus on performance in studying gender is not novel. Orit Avishai (2008) made exactly this suggestion in her study of Orthodox Jewish women in Israel—hardly surprising, I might add, given that Avishai identifies Barrie Thorne (one of the most well-known scholars in the “doing gender” tradition) as someone who provided support for the study.

Performances, whether of gender or religion, are never purely idiosyncratic. On the contrary, performers (in both cases) invariably have available to them a repertoire of cultural scripts and choose the particular script they feel is best suited to the audience at hand. In this regard, another of Belen’s core insights is that narrative structures are a particularly important part of this cultural repertoire. In this regard, I note, Belen’s argument has affinities with the suggestion made some time ago by Andrew Greeley, namely, that stories (again, in the sense of narrative structures) have always been particularly important in shaping the ways in which Catholics draw closer to God (see especially Greeley, 1995). Still, what’s most valuable about Belzen’s formulation is not simply that he makes this general point (about narrative structures shaping religious behaviors) but that he provides concrete examples showing how attention to this issue can lead to understanding. Consider, for example, Belzen’s extended discussion (pp. 185–214) of Doetje Reinsberg-Ypes (1840–1900), an Amsterdam woman who published her spiritual autobiography in 1898.

At one level, the story that Reinsberg-Ypes tells about herself follows the formula for a conversion narrative typical of a number of Protestant traditions: an initial period in which she felt separated from God; much detail about the moment of conversion; and a description of the “new life” dedicated to God following the conversion experience. But her story also reflects some emphases that were distinctive of the particular Protestant subtradition to which she initially belonged. This was a pietistic subtradition that made a particularly strong distinction between formal church membership (which might include weekly attendance at church services) and a correct “interior condition and conviction” (p. 190) that brought the individual into union with God. Belzen’s point is that performing religion using a conversation narrative shaped by this pietistic emphasis leads to statements that might seem “wrong” (in the sense of factually false) to outsiders but that make perfect sense to the person involved and that person’s audience. Thus, at several points in Reinsberg-Ypes’s account of her life before conversion, she says (see Belzen’s discussion, p. 190) that she had nothing to do with religion; that she was not aware of any religious life, etc. In fact, it seems likely that she *did* attend some church services, *did* have some religious instruction, etc. Her statements about having nothing to do with religion, in other words, were not meant literally but were a way of establishing in the mind of her target audience that in the period before her conversion she had lacked that interiorized turning toward God that is so important in the pietistic tradition and so much a part of pietistic conversion narratives.

On the other hand, while performances can be effective they can also be *ineffective*, i.e., performances can fall short of convincing target audiences that a person is religious. In this vein, another instructive section of Belzen’s discussion of Reinsberg-Ypes’s autobiography is his analysis of why she generally *failed* to win approval for her religiosity (or for her writings), first from the people she met in the psychiatric asylum at Ermelo (in the Netherlands), where she resided for a time, and then again from the people she met in the Religious Society for the Fullness of Christ (an unestablished group similar to the Salvation Army), a group to which she later gravitated.

The patients and staff at the asylum at Ermelo, for example, like Reinsberg-Ypes herself, were predominantly from a pietistic-Calvinist tradition. While Reinsberg-Ypes's behavior was in many ways consistent with that tradition, the claim—which she made to people at Ermelo—that her letters were “not only written with ink but are the true and living words of God” (p. 210) would have been jarring, since the “word of God” label is rigidly reserved for the Bible in the Calvinist tradition. After her stay at Ermelo, Reinsberg-Ypes moved away from her Calvinist pietism to a more evangelical orientation and in the process gravitated to the Religious Society. Here, as Belzen points out (p. 211), while several of her behaviors (aggressive witnessing, rejection of doctrinal authority, fighting with established churches) fit well with the evangelical script favored by members of that group, she was seen to *lack* the self-assurance that the evangelical conversion narrative presumes in a post-conversion adherent—and so here too (as at Ermelo) she failed to convince her audience of her religiosity.

On balance, then, focusing on performance in studying religion, like focusing on performance in studying gender, leads to a focus on all the elements that contribute to that performance—and these include not simply the overt and embodied behaviors of the actor involved but also the entire repertoire of stories and narratives, beliefs, etc., that both actor and audience (and again, researcher) draw upon in making sense of that performance. There remains, however, one ambiguity in Belzen's theoretical structure that we must now confront.

What's in a name?

In his well-known and widely discussed book, Daniel Dubuisson (2003) made the claim that “religion” is, and has always been, a Western construct. By this he means not simply that the term itself is a Western invention, but that the notion of “religion” carries along with it a set of methodological and theoretical prescriptions that have been shaped by the West's own cultural experience. In his words,

We would not be exaggerating to say that the history of religions is a Western academic discipline or epistemology, in that its methods, concepts, ways of posing questions and formulating problems have meaning only when referred to the West's own history. (p. 91)

The result, Dubuisson argues, is that when Western investigators study “religion” in non-Western societies they end up—in choosing to study some things and ignore others—validating the construct itself but providing little real insight into the society being studied. In his final (and very brief) chapter (pp. 195–212), Dubuisson himself tried to overcome the limitations he associates with the academic study of religion by promoting the use of a different and more inclusive term (“cosmographic formations”) that would replace “religion” in investigating non-Western cultures. Still, as I read his discussion here, Dubuisson is in the end really just arguing for particularistic interpretations that are valid only for the culture and context being studied—which of course is much the same thing that Belzen is promoting.

While Belzen makes no mention of Dubuisson's work specifically, he (Belzen) does very early on in his book (pp. 8–9) take note of several scholars who, like Dubuisson, have suggested that most definitions of religion do not have a universal applicability. But if so, how does Belzen himself—who very much retains an attachment to the words “religion” and “religious” throughout his text—propose to identify “religion” as an object of study? His answer:

For psychologists, especially after having taken notice of cultural psychological reflections, the solution may pragmatically consist in doing research on phenomena that can with some authority—be it even common sense, in a certain society—be referred to as “religious,” provided—and this is essential—the psychologist understands that her results cannot, at least cannot easily, be generalized to other phenomena also called “religious.” (p. 8)

And in the same vein, a few sentences later:

As there is no need for empirical researchers on religion to try to settle what should or should not be understood by the designation “religion,” they may turn to the investigation of phenomena generally accepted as being religious. (p. 9)

But when would “common sense” (first quote) lead an investigator to conclude that something is religious? And when would it seem obvious (to an investigator) that something is “generally accepted as being religious” (second quote)? The practical answer, I suggest, especially in light of Dubuisson’s work, is simply this: when that investigator is a Western investigator and the something being studied has at least a loose affinity to the notion of “religion” as that term has traditionally been understood by Western scholars. What this suggests (to me) is that, at least at the moment, Belzen’s approach will be most useful in studying the groups (like the *bevindelijken*) that have historically been *seen* as religious in Western cultures. I’m less clear on how useful Belzen’s approach would be in non-Western contexts. At the very least, this is an issue that I hope Belzen takes up in subsequent publications.

Conclusion

Adopting a focus on performance, that is, on how people “do religion” not only requires us to take cultural meanings into account but also directs our attention to a wide array of items that may be critically important to the people involved but that have been ignored in mainstream studies of religion. Such a perspective has the capacity to effect the same gestalt shift in studying religion that it effected in studying gender. Still, while the revolutionary potential of West and Zimmerman’s 1987 article on “doing gender” now seems obvious, the fact is that the first draft of that article was written a decade earlier and was consistently rejected by academic journals as being too out of sync with then-prevailing approaches to gender (Fenstermaker and West 2002b). I truly hope that scholars come to grips with Belzen’s arguments just a bit sooner.

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