

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Appreciation of the study “Towards cultural psychology of religion: principles, approaches and applications” by J.A. Belzen (2010)

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This paper provides a discussion of the volume *Towards cultural psychology of religion* by Jacob Belzen. Next to appreciation, some critical issues are raised, both on the level of theoretical assumptions and of empirical research.

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The title of this book, *Towards cultural psychology of religion: principles, approaches and applications*, clearly enounces the conception of its author: as religion is a definite cultural phenomenon, Belzen (2010) intends to promote a psychology of religion that pays full attention to the typical cultural dimension of every religion. In developing this idea, Belzen is of course aware that the psychological look on religion is itself a definite cultural and historical fact, to which he also pays full attention. This is how I understand the title of his book. It identifies the ensemble of studies in the field of psychology of religion it contains; and these studies intend to enlighten both religion and psychology as historical phenomena. Belzen clearly recognises that consequently the book must be read with the consciousness of the relative nature of the different studies.

His stressing of the historical cultural nature of religious phenomena does not lead Belzen to a relativism that simply dissipates the specificity of “religion.” In this context, I highly appreciate chapter 4 in which he presents his well-informed and pertinent critical studies of the two founding fathers of psychology of religion, Wilhelm Wundt and William James. Belzen obviously did study them thoroughly and, for a part, they did form his personal insights and convictions during his mental discussions with them. To recall these historically original times of the psychology of religion is most interesting for readers who themselves critically reflect on the essential topics and on the adequate methods of studying them. Therefore, I myself would have placed this chapter at the beginning of this book.

Actually, in his chapter 1, rightly entitled “Building bridges,” Belzen presents an important critical and very clear essay on the past difficulties implied in the idea of a psychology of religion. There, he also clearly describes the still present hesitations with respect to a philosophically and theologically neutral science of religion, as psychology of

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religion should be. Belzen adequately explains that historically his science had to free itself as well from the theological point of view as from the opposed atheistic philosophical conception of religion. The long first chapter actually is an interesting critical analysis of the past and eventually still present confusions in this most complex domain. I personally agree with the theoretical position of the author.

I am not sure, however, that in effective psychological research Belzen would be as simply at ease in this respect as he is in his theoretical epistemological assertions. My doubts are nourished by the radical sociological–psychological conception he proposes in a major part of his chapter 1: on “The relationship between cultural psychology and psychology of religion.” To be sure, by their very nature, experience, behaviour, attitudes... are cultural facts, “the effect of culture.” Personally I would say: they themselves are essentially the components of culture. Every culture indeed consists of a major part of social relationships, of attitudes, of ritual behaviours... And by its very essence, as brought forward by man as a cultural being, culture is a historical reality. I consequently would not, as does Belzen, simply say that “any state of affairs needs a genetic explanation” (2010, p. 13). This last expression involves the idea, first, that one could explain the phenomenon by going back to its historical and for a part psychological origin and, second, that this origin itself is the possible object of a scientific explanation. I fear Belzen gets here unwillingly imprisoned in a philosophically positivistic conception of psychology as well as of religion. Now, to be sure, this is not his philosophical conception and obviously it is not the one he applies in the studies he effectively pursues. He manifestly adopts and pursues the principle he clearly expresses in his chapter 1, p. 14: “... by now, cultural psychologists have developed and are drawing on a great number of theories and concepts that they do conceptualize precisely as the nexus between ‘culture’, however, understood, and ‘human psychic functioning’, however, conceptualized.” Here, I would only make the important observation: the cultural conceptualisation is never simply and fortunately undesigned. I, however, completely agree with the author’s affirmation that “cultural psychological viewpoints should be included in and should be driving any psychology” (p. 15); consequently also psychology of religion.

I personally am convinced that precisely the historical nature of culture explains the historical fact, which Belzen seems to observe with amazement: that psychology of religion “has dealt with monotheistic traditions, as illustrated by a recent handbook...” (p. 16). To be sure, Belzen knows there are many studies made with good psychological insights on other and on “primitive” religions. He rightly stresses the fact that Christian and Jewish religious persons have made psychological studies on their own religious people. I would in this respect tell what a Muslim psychiatrist told me at a congress in Egypt where I was invited to give a talk: “we spontaneously accept the thesis that all our religious ideas and expressions have been directly revealed by Allah, so that consequently psychological and surely critical psychological analyses of them have no meaning for us.” I did not make an inquiry on this point, I only quote what he said to me in the presence of other psychiatrists who shared his religious belief and who did not contradict him. Experiences of this kind teach us that both the religious ideas themselves and the whole evolution of mind and science in a religiously appropriate world have made the psychology of religion a possible and a meaningful enterprise in the modern West. This historical relativism of psychology, as a scientific enterprise does not, however, entail a theoretical relativism of the scientific theories to which the secure observation of psychological data may lead us. When in some African areas, indigenous people measure distances according to the time people need to go over them, the distances consequently are “longer” for elderly people; we will translate their time accounts in our more abstract and general measures of distance and time.

Our psychological statements concerning actual religious ideas and behaviours of different populations tend to adopt a similar objective disposition. However, as the person is practically always personally involved in statements about psychology, and even more so about religion, the scientific objective mind in these matters is extremely difficult to maintain. Self-satisfaction declaration in this matter does surely not guarantee an objective mind!

I, consequently, have no problem with the text of chapter 7 (The question of the specificity of religion) and 8 (A cultural psychological promise to the study of religiosity . . .) on the historical situatedness of all psychological theory. Personally I am not at all afraid that the consciousness of the historical character of psychological theories would plunge us in disastrous relativism. On the contrary, the really historical insight requires and sustains a mind, which is not a simple relativistic slave of history. I do not know whether Belzen fears this. Perhaps he dreads that his pieces of interdisciplinary empirical research on some religious subcultures in The Netherlands in the third chapter of the section “Applications” may discredit his scientific mind. The four parts of this chapter are, however, essentially objective descriptive studies of very peculiar religious conceptions and behaviours in some rather self-isolating groups, or are harshly apart living Calvinist populations. Belzen seems to me to describe them very accurately, quoting a lot of expressions and depicting typical behaviours. He does not seem to have the intention to go beyond a rigorous description and a brief historical sketch. I think he is right in this sober psychological–historical evocation, abstaining from psychological explanation.

My agreement with him in these peculiar questions contrasts with my unhappy feelings concerning some too defiant expressions in the last part of chapter 1 concerning psychology of religion. Belzen attributes to psychology in general and even more to psychology of religion in particular idealising expectations. He opposes to them – to easily, I fear – critical ideas about the real situation of this science. My personal long experience of psychology of religion, of meetings and readings in this field, of directing many students accomplishing a master or a doctorate makes me more cautious than Belzen in judging the trials, errors and accomplishments in this field.

I also think his awareness of the theoretical and practical difficulties proper to this field of research should allow Belzen to form a more positive appreciation of research with psychometric tests. Of course, unhappily a lot of empirical research is done by students making a thesis at the end of their studies. My personal experiences of research in this field did teach me that a really personal research requires a lot of questioning readings and of preliminary testing of possible working hypotheses. And the researchers have to free themselves as much as possible of spontaneous cultural, religious and scientific preconceptions. Financial and academic situations often stimulate a more rapid and largely repetitive research. Scientific congresses should stimulate the real research mind. But I doubt whether the indignant negative judgements Belzen seems to cherish will encourage the researchers. I would quote him a nice sentence of a poem of Paul Valéry: “Patience, patience, patience dans l’azur; Chaque atome de silence est la chance d’un fruit mûr.”

After my very interested and questioning reading of the first chapters, I did read with warm sympathy chapter 8 on the “Background and context of the ‘Dialogical self’.” For the historian of psychology of religion, this chapter is really interesting. It nicely exposes why the Catholic theological context could give the psychologists a scholarly freedom of research in the field of religion. Catholic theology indeed does not consider the human psyche as essentially religiously sick by reason of the inherited grave sin that falseness the human mind and will. Reading this chapter, I remembered having heard Karl Barth telling

that for him psychology of religion is nonsense. In the conception of Belzen and in mine, psychology of religion is largely influenced by the cultural-religious context; but this is an anthropological factor, not a result from a divine historical determination, not a “divine punishment.”

Belzen rightly did take up in this book the short chapter 10 on “Psychopathology and religion.” A case study adequately illustrates the possible connections between mental illness and religion. The reader who is not acquainted with the very special protestant spirituality of the church of the *bevindelijken* sees in this chapter how a very special Protestant spirituality could conduct to the manslaughter of a person “possessed by the devil.” A good study of psychopathology, as this case study is, may conduct us to analyse more deeply the preconscious and really unconscious drives and representations the evolving personal and social religiosity must work through. I think Belzen will agree here with this commentary on his case study.

My exposé makes clear that the different chapters of this cultural psychology of religion are really a major contribution to this field. I am convinced that this book will encourage and inspire systematic empirical research in this field. I think Belzen would appreciate this . . . even silently.

Reference

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