The Teachers' File

PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION: WHAT ONE NEEDS TO KNOW

by K. Helmut Reich

Abstract. This essay is an introduction to systematic nonsectarian psychology of religion—its nature and scope, and its history. Among major issues, the study of motivation for being religious and stages of religious development are discussed, as well as counseling and psychotherapy. I summarize current trends.

Keywords: counseling; history of psychology of religion; motivation; psychology of religion; psychotherapy; religion; religious development; transcendence.

The field of religious psychology can be subdivided in various ways. For example, one can separate systematic, nonsectarian psychology *of* religion from all combinations of psychology *and* religion, especially from the efforts toward a dialogue (e.g., Benner 1988; Clouse 1997; Malony 1991; Myers and Jeeves 1987) or even integration (Kauffmann and Hill 1996). Like physicists or biologists (cf. Hefner 1996), psychologists conceive combinations of science and religion in a number of ways, including the interpretation of psychology from a perspective of various religions (Christian, Jewish, Hindu, etc.; cf. Koteskey 1991). Because Fraser Watts has already dealt with psychology and religion in the Teachers' File (Watts 1997), in this essay I concentrate on a *psychological analysis* of religion (e.g., Batson, Schoenrade, and Ventis 1993; Hood et al. 1996; Wulff 1997). The nature and scope and the history of this program will be

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mapped out, some issues articulated, and current trends indicated. Because of the previous emphasis on emotions (Watts 1997) this article focuses more on cognition.

Nature and Scope of the Field

Given the complexity of the psychology of religion and the diversity of approaches to it, this article cannot provide a detailed consensual view of the nature and the scope of the field. In more general, more abstract terms, one might say that psychologists attempt to analyze and conceptualize religion in meaningful psychological terms (Paloutzian 1996). Two trends can be observed, a descriptive trend (approaching religion from within) and an explanatory trend (approaching religion from without) (Wulff 1997). As is well known, *religion* is a rather broad term, which has not yet been defined in a fully satisfying manner. Religion has at least explicatory and expressive aspects; it involves meditating, feeling, reflecting, and acting. Correspondingly, there is no lack of themes for particular studies, concerning, for instance, religious *knowledge* and *beliefs*, religious *feelings* and *experiences* (including conversion and mystical experiences); religious *practices* (prayers, rites, pilgrimages), and positive or negative *effects* of being religious (on health and well-being, on marriage and parenthood, on coping with stress, on morality, on social and political attitudes, on one's attitude toward death). Also studied are the roots and sources of religion and religiousness (biological, subconscious, conditioning, based on human needs) and religious development (dealing with age-related stages, the characteristics of pertinent changes, and developmental mechanisms). Other investigations have to do with religious *orientations* and *attitudes:* religion as a part of one's ultimate quest and identity or as a useful means to certain ends, religion as purely private or as communal.

Numerous relevant schools of psychology exist (which may hardly recognize each other). They are enumerated here roughly according to their openness to a transcendent being, from the least to the most open (Wulff 1997, 635). Included are orthodox psychoanalysis, theoretical behaviorism, sociobiological theory, cognitive psychology, object-relations theories, Erik Erikson's ego psychology, developmental psychology, humanistic psychology, Carl Gustav Jung's analytical psychology, correlational psychology, and phenomenology. Sometimes transpersonal psychology is added to the list (e.g., Williams 1993/1994), although that school is not very widely accepted in academe. Psychologies of religion also serve as both objectives of basic research and resources in counseling and psychotherapy; these objectives lead at least to different emphases.

A Brief History

In 1524 psychology acquired an independent status as one of the three branches of pneumatology, the two others being natural theology, and angelography and demonology. There followed a long struggle to keep psychology tied to theology rather than being freed from that tutelage. As one result of that struggle, *psychologism* was defined (and warned against) as a position assuming that truth could be established only by reducing it to the subjective elements of self-observation. Both pro- and antireligion psychologists committed psychologistic errors, often the error of unwarranted movement from psychology to ontology (Vande Kemp 1986).

During the last hundred years (traced, for example, by Paloutzian [1996]), psychology of religion initially experienced a remarkable blossoming, particularly in the United States, thanks to such figures as G. Stanley Hall, William James, James Henry Leuba, and Edwin Starbuck. A marked decline followed in the period from about 1930 to 1950. Reasons were, on the side of psychology; (1) the prominence of behaviorism (for which conditioned behavior was the only acceptable scientific theme); (2) the arrival of psychiatry and psychotherapy in their various forms (which entered into competition for clients with counseling by the clergy); and (3) in academe, a movement from philosophy departments to independent psychology departments which needed to establish their identity. Not infrequently that identity took the form of a radical positivism and a disavowal of religious matters. On the side of theology, the dialectical school of Karl Barth was not interested in social sciences and did not encourage the psychology of religion in divinity schools and seminaries. The popularity of Freud's *The Future of an Illusion* (published in 1927) did little to identify psychologists as allies in a common quest.

Since the 1960s and 1970s, with the waning of both positivism and dialectical theology, the mellowing of the more radically antireligious forms of psychoanalysis, and the improving relations between therapists and clergy, psychology of religions has experienced a comeback. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, a journal with worldwide circulation, is "devoted to psychological studies of religious processes and phenomena in all religious traditions. It provides a means for sustained discussion of psychologically relevant issues that can be examined empirically and concerns religions in the most general sense. . . . The journal aims to disseminate psychological theory and research that relates to religion across national and cultural traditions." Studies pertaining to psychology as defined above are also published in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion,* the *Review of Religious Research*, and the *Journal of Empirical Theology*, among others.

What Is Special about the Psychology of Religion?

An assessment of the nature and scientific status of psychology of religion depends notably on two parameters: (1) the philosophy of science adopted (cf. Clayton 1997) and (2) the particular brand of psychology applied (cf. Reich 1997, from which this essay draws material). For instance, radical positivism will obviously not recognize as scientific a psychology attempting to understand mystical experience via introspection. However, if a fallibilist epistemology is adopted, a psychological research program can in principle be deemed scientific even if the supernatural is assumed in the hypotheses to be investigated.

The issue of the supernatural, the transcendent, is a particularly tricky one for the psychology of religion. As indicated above, it is dealt with differently by different schools. It would be cautious to start with a disclaimer that neither God nor the worldview of the churches is the object of study, nor faith versus reason, nor religion versus science, but people (Hood et al. 1996). Many (descriptive, correlational, and factor-analytic) studies can be made without intimately involving the transcendent. Setting such a limit makes for scientific credibility, but does it unduly limit the scope of investigation? For deeper explanations, and for research in other areas, such as religious and mystical experience, a too-strict self-limiting attitude on the part of the researcher cannot do full justice to the nature of the experience of God in believing subjects. According to Fraser Watts and Mark Williams (1988, 153), such research requires a sense of relatedness to God that is neither one of identification with God nor one of alienation, and is not independent of observation, but does not follow straightforwardly from observation either.

Presumably, a believer and a nonbeliever could agree at least partially on an interpretation of empirical results. However, if a transcendent reality perceived by the subject(s) comes under discussion, the following problem might arise: some persons (having had religious experiences themselves and having developed religiously as a result) may find it difficult to have their viewpoint accepted because other persons (lacking such experience) may be unable or unwilling to enter the debate. Huston Smith (Griffin and Smith 1989, 63–64) discusses such an "inflammatory statement," pointing out that it suggests the assumption of a basic inequality of human beings. He nevertheless favors a continuing interaction on the grounds that even if neither party changes its mind, interaction "occasions the opportunity to point out what, by our respective lights, the other is missing." Given that different presuppositions and differing experiences may lead to differing research, or at least differing interpretations of research results, a solution could be to have mixed research teams whose members are open to constructive dialogues.

Three Major Issues

Psychological categories such as perception, cognition, emotion, motivation, abnormality, and social life can all be studied as pertaining to religion and personal religiousness, and so can such categories as personality characteristics, development, and therapy. If religion and religiousness are studied as the *independent* variables, their influence on such variables as social and political attitudes or wellness is usually investigated. Conversely, if religion is the *dependent* variable, studies tend to relate it to such independent variables as genetic endowment, an infant's type of attachment to the primary caregiver, family climate, and socialization. Because of space limitations, we will concentrate here on motivation, development, and therapy.

The study of the *motivation* for a person's religiousness is particularly difficult, notably because people may not be (fully) aware of their own motivation. Potentially, there is a wide choice: (1) the needs for *(a)* appeal, *(b)* self-submission, *(c)* self-assertion, *(d)* religious values, *(e)* meaning, *(f)* control, *(g)* self-esteem; (2) social norms; (3) developed familiarity; (4) increase of explanatory potential (Gorsuch 1994; Spilka, Shaver, and Kirkpatrick 1985). So far there has been progress but not yet a breakthrough. Much sophisticated and painstaking work is needed to disentangle the various possibilities, which furthermore may function singly or in combination.

Study of *religious development* may encounter other difficulties (see, for example; Reich 1993a). Obviously one can study the religious views, activities, and experiences of persons of various ages and note the differences found. Continuing the same study over many years with the same respondents will in principle provide data that are significant. But how does one know whether they constitute a developmental sequence (as opposed to such influences as chance variations, socialization, or cohort effects)? And if they do, what are the developmental logic and the driving mechanisms?

In a cognition-based developmental psychology some guidance as to the characteristics of the most developed stage is particularly important because the most developed stage is thought to be the key to the explanation of the entire sequence: All other stages are supposedly necessary milestones on the way to the final stage. The chances of finding many individuals who are at the highest stage are usually slim. And their religiousness differs. Who is to be the paradigmatic example of religious development: Anselm of Canterbury, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Meister Eckhard, Hildegard von Bingen, Martin Luther King Jr., Saint Francis of Assisi, Teresa of Avila, or Mother Theresa? Unless we have some notion of what the final stage is like, we grope in the dark when looking for the lower stages.

Clues may be provided from analogies with other sorts of evolution—the development of the universe, of life, of human culture—or from general features of psychological types of development (cognitive, moral, of friendship, of the self; see, for example, Oser and Reich 1996). In any case, experts in religious studies and theologians should be able to judge whether the later stages of religious development described by psychologists are really higher, that is, more profoundly religious, stages. Both Fowler (1981, 1987) and Oser and Gmünder ([1984] 1991), as well as Benson (1992), introduced theologians' views when describing their highest stage of mature faith. This is not unproblematic, though, because different religions and theologies may have differing ideals—to name just a few: to strike a balance between one's personal relationship to God and heeding the call to social service and justice; to make oneself comfortable at the lines of tension in life or even to increase tolerance for painful events; to become less egocentric; to gain a deeper personal autonomy; *unio mystica*. The prospects for a consensual universal view of the ultimate aim of religious development are not too promising, given the diversity of religions the world over. Conceivably, we may need a more pluralistic theory than the extant ones (e.g., Hay, Nye, and Murphy 1996; Reich 1993b).

Among the activities that may show the largest differences in assumptive frameworks between psychologists who are religious believers and those who are nonbelievers are *counseling and psychotherapy* (cf. Bergin 1991; O'Donahue 1989). Because many studies tend to show the relevance and often the positive effects of religion for personal and societal well-being (e.g., James W. Jones 1993 and the numerous authors quoted there; Jung 1933, 264; Paloutzian and Kirkpatrick 1995; but see also Meadow 1984), and many religions motivate their adherents to care for others, believers could be tempted to overstress religious aspects in their counseling. In contrast, nonbelievers may neglect them.

A potential major problem arises from the fact that both religion and therapeutic psychology provide concepts and technologies for ordering inner life, but these do not necessarily harmonize (Stanton L. Jones 1994, 191–97). It is then a matter of testing the respective presuppositions experimentally to find out whether they can contribute to the progress of human knowing and well-being.

CURRENT TRENDS

For some time now, psychologists of religion have attempted to establish themselves as researchers in their own right, freed from a dependence on theology and philosophy, but also from nurturance by antireligious psychoanalysis and behaviorism. Currently the trend is to interact more

closely with mainstream psychology, and this is expected to lead to mutual benefits.

Scientific progress is thought to come from a theoretically informed empirical approach using a large variety of methods (e.g., Wulff 1992). At this stage of the development of psychology of religion, theories are numerous (and often in competition). Principles and approaches are increasingly enriched by neighboring fields such as neurophysiology (Albright 1996; Ashbrook 1996), sociobiology, and religious studies, as well as theology (Hunter 1989) and philosophy.

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