

Psychology and Religion

with Daniel A. Helminiak, “Theistic Psychology and Psychotherapy”; Kevin S. Reimer et al., “Varieties of Religious Cognition”; John A. Teske, “Narrative and Meaning in Science and Religion”

“THEISTIC PSYCHOLOGY AND PSYCHOTHERAPY”: A THEOLOGICAL AND SCIENTIFIC CRITIQUE

by Daniel A. Helminiak

Abstract. I take the APA publication *A Spiritual Strategy for Counseling and Psychotherapy* (Richards and Bergin 2005), along with a devoted issue of *Journal of Psychology and Theology* (Nelson and Slife 2006), as a paradigmatic example of a trend. Other instances include the uncritical use of “Eastern” philosophy in Humanistic and Transpersonal Psychology, almost normative appeal to the “Sacred” within the psychology of spirituality, talk of “God in the brain” within neurological research, the neologism *entheogen* referring to psychedelic drugs, and calls for new specializations such as *neurotheology* and *theobiology*. In response to the legitimate ethical requirements of respect and openness regarding clients’ religious worldviews, the trend is to make God an essential component in psychological theory. The argument is that God is active in the universe and especially in human affairs to such an extent that any accurate account of strictly psychological matters, not just a comprehensive, interdisciplinary purview that could include a distinct theological dimension, must include God as an explanatory factor. Less nuanced than standard theological thought about divine intervention—including a range of opinions from supernaturalism, to occasionalism, to providential and deistic naturalism—this trend would blur the epistemological differences between religion and science by appeal to claimed knowledge sources such as inspiration and revelation and thus undermine the achievements of evidence-based science and establish particularistic religious beliefs as standard explanatory accounts. The concern to include a spiritual, in contrast to a religious or theist, dimension in psychological theory is welcome; but elaborated approaches, such as my own and those of Roberto Assagioli, Viktor Frankl, and Ken Wilber, open to varied theological applications, already exist.

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Professional ethics require that psychotherapists respectfully attend to their clients' religious or spiritual commitments (American Counseling Association 1995; American Psychological Association 1992)—because religion usually determines worldviews, and these govern people's sense of identity, healing, and ultimate well-being. But *religion* and *spirituality* are difficult to define, and the terms are often used interchangeably (Spilka 1993; Spilka and McIntosh 1996). Moreover, in the United States most citizens follow the theistic religions of the West or at least believe in God. Thus, commonly, religion, spirituality, and theism are conceptually collapsed so that one implies the others (Helminiak 2006). Despite the profound example of officially nontheist Tibetan and Zen Buddhism (Suzuki 1970; Trungpa 1973), religion or spirituality apart from God is unthinkable for many. For example: "When religion is defined so broadly as to exclude the necessity for a sense of the divine the term loses its analytical power" (Hood 2005, 349); "God is central to any understanding of spirituality" (Pargament and Maloney 2002, 649); and "that God exists" is one of the "basic assumptions" of spiritually oriented psychotherapy (Sperry 2005, 311). As a result, along with religion and spirituality, God and explicit theism have entered psychology as supposedly legitimate topics of concern.

THE INSINUATION OF THEISM INTO PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY

Numerous instances of the inclusion of God in psychology evince a trend. Transpersonal and much humanistic psychology (Hart, Nelson, and Puhakka 2000; Marquis, Holden, and Warren 2001; Wilber 1996) uncritically rest on Eastern thought, which outright identifies human consciousness with divinity: Atman is Brahman (Wilber 1980, 75–76; 2006, 213–29, 232, 265–66; Zaehner [1957] 1961, 135–43). Psychedelic drugs, long used in indigenous religious rituals, now carry the name *entheogens*, sources of God within (Forte 2000); and neurological research on "religious experiences" employs terms such as the "God spot in the brain" (Crutcher 2003), "the God gene" (Hamer 2004), the "'God' part of the brain" (Alper 2006), and neurotheology (Ashbrook 1984; d'Aquili and Newberg 1999; Joseph 2002). In a devoted issue of *American Behavioral Scientist* (Rayburn and Richmond 2002), psychologists call for a new specialization, *theobiology*, which assumes that "revealed knowledge or divine

revelation” is on a par with “scientific knowledge” (p. 1793) and is to foster “learning about and understanding God [and] . . . God’s relationship to humankind” (p. 1810)—which, thus defined, replicates the classic theological agenda. To treat spirituality and the *sui generis* facet of religion (see Helminiak 1998, 50–56; 2008e, 530), the *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* (Paloutzian and Park 2005; see Helminiak 2008e; Rayburn 2006) routinely invokes “the sacred,” a vague, nonhuman, metaphysical construct (see also Elkins 1998; Hood 2005; Sperry 2005, 311) featured in a so-called Consensus Report (Larson, Swyers, and McCullough 1998). Defined in terms of the “divine” and “the holy” (Pargament 1997; Hill et al. 2000; Zinnbauer and Pargament 2005), the *sacred* is a “God substitute” (Helminiak 2005a, 73; Wulff 2003). Startlingly, the American Psychological Association (APA) itself published a book on “theistic psychotherapy” (Richards and Bergin 2005); and at the national APA convention in Washington, D.C., P. Scott Richards (2005–2006) explicitly called on secular psychologists to claim as a psychological credential their being theistic practitioners; and the first volume of the new APA journal of Division 36 (Psychology of Religion) included “Theistic Existential Psychotherapy” (Bartz 2009), one of a series of papers documented there (p. 69), part of an apparent strategy to present a theistic reconceptualization of every major psychotherapeutic theory (see Hoffman, Dodson, and Helminiak forthcoming). A devoted issue of *Journal of Psychology and Theology* (Nelson and Slife 2006) advanced a similar emphasis, and the most recent issue of *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology* (Teo 2009) featured an exchange on theism in psychology. These examples show that God not only has become a psychological topic but is even invoked as an essential explanatory element in psychological theory.

This trend is disconcerting. It imports metaphysical speculation into a supposedly empirical science, uncritically counting the popular religiosity of clients and research subjects as outright evidence for the validity of their beliefs (Reber 2006b; Richards and Bergin 2005, 137). In order to make room for spiritual matters, the call is to broaden science or, in the extreme, to abandon it as traditionally understood. Stanton Jones (1994; 2006), for example, suggests that the conclusions of science are merely metaphorical or symbolic statements on a par with the formulations of religion. Richard Gorsuch (2002), Jeffrey Reber (2006b), Carole Rayburn and Lee Richmond (2002), Richards and Allen Bergin (2005), and Brent Slife and Matthew Woolery (2006) endorse similar claims. Of course, philosophical scrutiny has questioned the very notion and nature of science (Kasser 2006), and these are at stake in this trend. Less radically, therefore, as William James suggested ([1902] 1961, 59–63), many now rightly take for granted that empiricism can and should be broadened to allow for spiritual matters by crediting as evidence the data of inner conscious experience in addition to the data of the senses. In a highly elaborated account,

Bernard Lonergan called this approach “generalized empirical method” ([1957] 1992) or “transcendental method” (1972).

Nonetheless, the Divinity itself falls outside of empirical methodology. Theologians of all traditions insist that God is inscrutable mystery (Armstrong 1993; Carmody and Carmody 1996). Thomas Aquinas stated repeatedly in Part I of his *Summa Theologica* (1955) that we may know *that* God is, but we do not know *what* God is. If the theologians are correct, we are mistaken to invoke God as an explanatory factor in a scientific theory. Any such invocation reduces God to some particular opinion, for God in Godself and people’s beliefs, images, or opinions about God cannot be one and the same. Whereas such beliefs, images, and opinions constitute a legitimate and significant concern of psychology (Rizzuto 1979; Pargament 1997), God as such must be the concern of theology. This stance echoes Theodore Flournoy’s “principle of the exclusion of the transcendent”: “Psychologists of religion should neither reject nor affirm the independent existence of the religious object, a philosophical matter that lies outside their domain of competence. It is within their province, on the other hand, to acknowledge the feeling of transcendence and to observe its nuances and variations with the greatest possible fidelity” (Wulff 1997, 41).

Theology and psychology are methodologically disparate disciplines. At its core, theology deals in reasonably accounting for the existence of things and, in a common version, sees God as Creator. In contrast, science deals with understanding realities whose existence is a given (Helminiak 1998). Hence, Marquis de Laplace’s notorious response to Napoleon Bonaparte’s question about the absence of God in his explanation of planetary motion was legitimate: “I have no need of that hypothesis.” The concerns of theology and of the sciences are irreducibly different. The claim that theism enjoys a reliable, valid religious or spiritual source of knowledge on a par with that of science—such as divine revelation, inspiration, and intuition (Gorsuch 2002; Nelson 2006; Rayburn and Richmond 2002; Reber 2006b; Richards and Bergin 2005; Slife and Richards 2001; Slife and Whoolery 2006)—threatens to subvert the whole enterprise of evidence-based research and scholarship. My intent is not to demean theist belief or to limit scientific theorizing but to plead for methodological integrity and, thus, to maintain the meaning of *scientific*. Indeed, theistic psychologists are concerned to preserve, not undermine, the objective validity of truth, morality, and theism; yet, exploiting technical uncertainties in current philosophy of science (Kasser 2006), they invite relativistic epistemological confusion. If they would exalt personal belief, popular piety, and collective superstition to their stereotypical (Nelson 2006; Principe 2002; 2006), premodern status of unquestioned truth, what could *truth* or *objectivity* mean? How many kinds of truth or actual parallel, complementary, supplementary, discordant, or even contradictory “truths” can there be? The very underpinnings of Western civilization and the hopes for global community

(Helminiak 2008d) are at risk if the hard-won appeal (Lonergan [1980] 1990, ch. 1) to relevant evidence in honest and good-willed collaboration is no longer recognized as the criterion of reliable knowledge and acceptable action.

Human beings cannot know apart from their own knowing apparatus (Lonergan [1957] 1992). No one can dispute this assertion without presuming its validity in the process. In every case—even regarding the claim of an experience of, or revelation from, God (Lonergan 1972)—fragile human judgment is de facto the ultimate basis of knowledge claims. Unconstrained by shared evidentiary criteria, a human judgment with weighty consequences is a freewheeling specter. Thus, the good-willed attempt at openness to spiritual concerns in psychotherapy, coupled with the methodological complexity of the endeavor, has spawned a trend that threatens to undermine the psychology of religion, psychotherapy, and all science.

THE PROGRAM OF “THEISTIC PSYCHOTHERAPY”

I address that trend here by focusing on Richards and Bergin’s *A Spiritual Strategy for Counseling and Psychotherapy* (2005) and a devoted issue of *Journal of Psychology and Theology* (Nelson and Slife 2006) and by citing other key publications from within the same stream of thought within the psychology of religion (such as Gorsuch 2002; Rayburn and Richmond 2002; Slife and Richards 2001; Watts 2001). Building on the religious beliefs that (a) God exists, (b) humans are created by God, (c) humans are in immediate communication with God, and (d) God regularly and miraculously intervenes in worldly affairs, especially when prevailed upon by believers (Richards and Bergin 2005, 112), and consistently confounding religion, spirituality, and theism, these theorists explicitly call for a *psychological* treatment of spirituality centered on theism. Indeed, they presume that God is so essential to and so palpably active in human affairs that, to be accurate and complete, any account of human nature and human psychology must include a divine variable and specify a process of communication with God. Thus, on the theoretical level, Richards and Bergin propose what they call a new personality theory built on a purportedly generic theism; and on the applied level, they—and, as insistently, Slife and Brent Melling (2006, 280)—propose that theism guide even secular therapists in addressing spiritual issues with clients across religions and denominations.

Richards and Bergin’s book deserves acclaim on many fronts. It is a massive work, a veritable encyclopedia of recent psychological research on religion and spirituality. It offers extensive and useful guidelines about spiritual issues for both secular and pastoral therapists. Its self-description as unapologetically value-laden and its commonsense insistence on the normative status of values such as health, well-being, honesty, and goodwill

are supremely welcome (compare, for example, Martin and Sugarman 2000, 404). Moreover, this book is praiseworthy in its attempt to address spirituality by noting the particular needs of a presumed majority of clients who believe in God. These emphases highlight questions that need to be addressed, and this book contributes by prompting important discussion in psychological and social-science circles.

Unfortunately, the theistic psychologists approach these issues with uncritical insistence on widespread belief in an intervening God. Thus, the book skews the framework of the discussion and obscures potential contributions. Highlighting these aberrations and indicating alternative approaches to spirituality in psychology and secular psychotherapy, first, I present a discussion of problematic presuppositions surrounding theistic psychotherapy; second, I focus on the core of the theory: divine intervention, that is, miracles, acts of God that periodically suspend, redirect, or alter the course of natural processes; and third, I reprise the problem of a claimed generic theism. Subtle theological considerations are unavoidable when psychology addresses spirituality. My hope is to highlight them for natural- and social-science professionals and, specifically, to show that theology and psychology are not antagonistic but can enjoy a coherent and mutually respectful interrelationship. Indeed, addressing complementary aspects of the human quest for understanding, moving together toward comprehensive science, these distinct disciplines need each other.

PROBLEMATIC ASPECTS OF THE THEISTIC-PSYCHOTHERAPY PROGRAM

The Conflation of Religion, Spirituality, and Theism. Several serious confusions confound the program of theistic psychology. First, it explicitly defines the psychology of religion and spirituality as inextricably related to theism (Richards and Bergin 2005, 7, 11, 12, 22, et passim; Slife and Richards 2001). In contrast, in the field at large, discussion abounds about the difference between religion and spirituality, and even psychologists of religion are reluctant to explicitly involve God in psychology. To be fair, however, the prevailing practice in psychology-of-religion circles also confounds these three phenomena—but surreptitiously (Helminiak 2005a; 2006; 2008a), by avoiding explicit talk of God and invoking a God-substitute, “the sacred,” which Richards and Bergin also uncritically allow.

In contrast, Robert Emmons (1999) and Ralph Piedmont (2005), to some extent, and clearly Roberto Assagioli ([1965] 1976), Viktor Frankl (1962; [1969] 1988), and the School of Logotherapy (Institute of Logotherapy 1979) refrain from implicating metaphysical entities in their treatments of human spirituality (see Helminiak 1987; 2008d). I have argued at length (Helminiak 1987; 1996a, b; 1998; 2001b; 2005a; 2006) that, while fully open to theist extrapolation, a genuine psychology of spiritual-

ity can and must have its ground in the human mind—namely, in the mind’s experientially available, open-ended, self-transcending capacity for knowing and choosing, which Lonergan ([1957] 1992; 1972; [1980] 1990) called *intentional consciousness* or *human spirit*. In 1916, James Leuba had proposed such an approach to the *spiritual*: “The word does not imply anything supernatural. It designates the higher reaches of the mental life, the mental activity referring to the good, the beautiful and the true” (cited in Wulff 2003, 21). Likewise, Assagioli’s concern in psychosynthesis was “the awakening and manifestation of latent potentialities of the human being—for instance, ethical, esthetic, and religious experiences and activities” ([1965] 1976, 37). As a “scientific conception,” “psychosynthesis does not aim nor attempt to give a metaphysical nor a theological explanation of the great Mystery—it leads to the door, but stops there” (pp. 6–7). In the same vein, Frankl wrote about the *noetic* or *noological*, “that dimension in which the uniquely human phenomena are located. It could be defined as the spiritual dimension as well. However,” he insisted, “what we understand by the noological dimension is the anthropological rather than the theological dimension” ([1969] 1988, 22). Apart from such delimitation, psychological attempts to explain empirically documented human spiritual experiences by appeal to a transcendent and inscrutable Divinity is surely a doomed scientific enterprise.

The Conflation of Professional Disciplines. The theistic psychologists also consistently and expressly erase the lines between academic and professional specializations (see also Hood 2002, 1860), a matter that raises serious ethical issues for counselors who function like clergy (Stifoss-Hanssen 1999; Tjeltveit 1986). According to Richards and Bergin’s idiosyncratic usage, psychology, philosophy, and theology are seemingly the same discipline. Slife and Richards (2001) are lucid regarding this claim (Helminiak 2001a). Seconded by Sian-Yang Tan (2006, 261), Reber states that religion—not religious studies or theology—is a “discipline of study” (2006b, 195), a “discipline in academia” with its own “theory, method, or means by which to understand and treat human life” (p. 202); and, supposedly, despite proprietary definitions of truth and truth’s criteria (Reber 2006a), religion stands on a par with a potential dialogue partner, psychology. Thus, in Richards and Bergin there occur the strange notion of “the *theology* of scientific *naturalism*” (2005, 74, n. 1), the peculiar title “*Philosophical Foundations of Theistic Psychotherapy*” (p. 97), and the assertion that “*God* exists” (p. 112) as the very first principle about a psychological “*View of Human Nature*” (emphases added). Len Sperry (2005, 311) asserts the same first principle.

According to the theistic psychologists, any worldview, whether it includes God or not, is a theology because “it makes certain ontological claims about the nature of God and reality” (Richards and Bergin 2005, 74, n. 1).

Supposedly, “all psychological traditions are grounded in a particular *theology and philosophy*” (p. 74; emphasis added). Don Browning made a similar claim: Uncritically presuming that to propose a worldview is a specifically religious function, he called the underlying meaning-and-value systems of psychological theories “religious” (1987) or, now, “quasi-religious” (Cooper and Browning 2006). More precise analysis would suggest that those psychological systems are spiritual but not religious (Helminiak 1998, 161–212). Still, at least Browning (1987; Cooper and Browning 2006) does not presume to call secular worldviews and metaphysical principles “theologies.” Richards and Bergin do. Indeed, Slife and Richards (2001) insist that all psychologists, even atheists, are theologians.

The Supposed Immunity of Religious Premises to Criticism. Against a backdrop of current epistemological uncertainty, Slife and Richards (2001) invoke what appears to be Kurt Gödel’s incompleteness theorem in an attempt to shield their theological opinion (Helminiak 2001a). Gödel showed that the first principle of any closed mathematico-logical system could not be proved within that system; the first principle has always to be presupposed on the basis of extrinsic considerations. Slife and Richards (2001) misapply this theorem to the case of open, developing, and reality-based systems of personal belief and collective interpretation (Lonergan [1957] 1992, 18–20, 595–600). In so doing they “mistake the rules of logic for the laws of thought” (p. 596). In the latter, leaps of intelligence and evidence-based judgments rule, not the consistencies of logic, which engage only after insight has made its proposal. This misapplication allows the audacious insistence that the first premise of anyone’s religious argument is immune to criticism. Supposedly, “certain theological issues are closed because they are the foundation of other beliefs” (Slife and Richards 2001, 195). “Theological beliefs are different from other beliefs” (p. 195) because they set the parameters of a person’s whole worldview. So, inconceivably—picture the planes flying into the Twin Towers in the name of Allah or the violent expulsion of early Mormons from Missouri in the name of Christ—they assert, “Theological beliefs cannot be judged as ‘rational’ or ‘reasonable’” (p. 195). In contrast, Western theological opinion has held for millennia that although metaphysical beliefs are not provable, they should at least be reasonable and plausible—that is, consistent with current knowledge, respectful of fundamental values such as health and life, and logically coherent.

Theology as an Absolute and Universal Requirement. The unflinching boldness of the theistic psychologists—or perhaps their forthrightness in contrast to the pervasive but veiled theist appeal to the “sacred” in American psychology of spirituality—is to make theism an incontestable presupposition. Not only is theism supposedly immune to criticism, but also, everyone has a theology. Whether or not one believes in God or even wants to

discuss God, one is a theologian in the loose sense; one holds at least an implicit position on God. Despite Buddhist, Confucian, and Shinto religion, for the theist psychologists God is an unavoidable topic.

Logically this argument is flawed, but its content, belief in God—along with the confounding of theology, philosophy, and the notion of a worldview—obscures the logical mistake. That one person holds a position on a particular topic does not mean that everyone must hold an opinion on that topic. People do withhold judgment, often for legitimate reasons, and people sometimes have no interest whatsoever in others' burning concerns. However, the advocates of theistic psychology respond that belief in God is unique among opinions: It is a widespread and respected position (Reber 2006c). Then what of draconism, the cult of snakes? Cultures around the world and throughout the ages grant supernatural significance to snakes or serpents (see Guirand [1959] 1996), and supposedly religious belief is immune to criticism. Are we all then draconologists—and demonologists, unicornologists, and mynychlorologists (from the Greek for "green moon," suggesting the supposition that the moon is made of green cheese), as well? These latter examples are obviously absurd, but they instantiate the same logical form as the therefore equally absurd argument about theism.

Evidently, unwilling to grant the validity of a nontheist worldview—and perhaps rightly so as regards coherent, *comprehensive* explanation (Longergan [1957] 1992), although the issue in this discussion is not the accuracy of belief in God, a theological question, but the acceptability of constructing a psychological theory around belief in God—the theistic psychologists feel constrained to attribute their personal conception to everyone. By such a hegemonic strategy, the conflation of disciplines allows these theorists to see, not just spiritual concerns and value-laden worldviews, but God everywhere, wanted or not, intended or not. They insist that, as a fact of the universe and of the human condition, theism must be an aspect of any adequate human psychology. But not, of course, draconism.

The Supposed War between Science and Religion. Another confusion that pervades Richards and Bergin's book is a caricature of the opposition between science and religion, which even Tan characterized as "throwing out the baby (good science) with the bathwater (scientism or the worship of reductionistic, positivist science)" (2006, 262–63). Without close attention to historical evidence, Richards and Bergin propose a devastating critique of science by portraying science as inherently naturalistic, atheistic, materialistic, relativistic, deterministic, and reductionistic (2005, 32–39). They repeatedly make reference to "the naturalistic-atheistic worldview" (p. 19, for example).

In ironic contrast, the account of "The New *Zeitgeist*" (ch. 3) presents a picture of the opening of science to the spiritual, in physics from the early twentieth century and in psychology from the time of Alfred Adler and

Carl Jung and especially via the humanistic-existentialist tradition of the 1960s (compare Bartz 2009, 72). This account of scientific openness ends with the assertion that “all divisions of inquiry . . . have become open to spiritual perspectives” (p. 137)—although the authors presumptuously construe this development as ipso facto support for theism.

Where, then, is that supposed pervasive war of science against the spiritual? Historian of science Lawrence Principe states outright, “No serious historians of science or of the science-religion issue today maintain the warfare thesis” (2006, 5). It has a precise and easily pinpointed origin: the historically shoddy and ideologically driven books of John William Draper in 1874 and especially Andrew Dickson White, first president and apologist of the first non-religiously affiliated university, Cornell, in 1896 (pp. 5–7 and Lecture 2). Apart from the antiscience campaign of biblical fundamentalism (Schudel 2006), Richards and Bergin’s scientific enemy of religion is a fiction. However, in self-fulfilling prophecy, the religious position they advocate constitutes the very kind of threat that science or any critical thought would oppose (“Summarizing the Judgment” 2005).

The Motivation behind Theistic Psychology. One other confusion in the book relates to the motives for its production and the movement it champions (Bartz 2009). Ostensibly, the book is to fill a void in the field (Richards and Bergin 2005, 13) by providing a model of psychotherapy (p. 12) that would serve religious people, the majority of whom believe in God (p. 7). The book advances the personal religious belief “that God’s spiritual influence can assist clients and therapists” (p. 10).

Richards and Bergin present their work as a response to the recent requirements of professional ethics for secular counselors and psychologists. However, although the codes require only respectful and knowledgeable openness to a client’s religion (American Counseling Association 1995; American Mental Health Counselors Association 2000; American Psychological Association 1992), this book presents both an elaborated theory of psychology and an approach to psychotherapy whose controlling conceptualization is a particular religious belief. This is no mere strategy for counseling.

Because it moves within the confines of specific religious faith, a psychology structured around belief in God is pastoral psychology (see VandenBos 2007), not spiritual guidelines for secular psychotherapists. The book’s claim to present only a generic version of theism—“a multidimensional, ecumenical psychology, not a specific theology” (Richards and Bergin 2005, 116, 18–19)—is disingenuous or utterly uninformed. Delineation of a generic theism is an impossibility (Armstrong 1993; Carmody and Carmody 1996; Helminiak 2008b). Overview treatments of “God” begin by making this point: The meaning of the term “is as varied as human culture itself” (Reese 1980, 193), and “It is very difficult—perhaps

impossible—to give a definition of God that will cover all usages of the word and of equivalent words in other languages” (Owen 1967, 344). Even Jones (2006, 256), supportive of this religionist project, denies the possibility of a generic theism because—point made!—he would stand by his particularist Evangelical Christian faith. As Richards and Bergin themselves suggest, religion and theism go hand in hand; thus, a specific belief in God entrains distinctive outlooks and morals. These characterize the world’s diverse religions and cultures among which variety, not fundamental homogeneity, is the rule. Besides, as demonstrated below, this book’s theism is of quite a peculiar kind.

Provocatively, Richards and Bergin write that with their proposal of “theistic psychotherapy” they want “to influence mainstream psychotherapy practice” (2005, 11, 18). They propose to launch “a global psychotherapy orientation or tradition, such as the psychoanalytic, humanistic, and cognitive traditions” (p. 10), namely, a theistic tradition of psychology (see also Bartz 2009, 69). But to what effect? To meet what need? The observer of recent events in the United States cannot but wonder: the erection of monuments to the Ten Commandments on public property, the insistence on theological content in the Pledge of Allegiance, the religious censorship of science textbooks and the removal of other books from libraries, the training of religiously committed lawyers to instigate and win cases that favor conservative religion, the granting of federal monies to faith-based initiatives, the religiously based campaign against the civil rights of sexual minorities, the passing of religiously motivated legislation to specify procedures in ethically sensitive medical cases, the preferential federal funding of demonstrably ineffective abstinence-only sex-education programs, the appeal to religious credentials among presidential candidates, and other forms of conservative religious hegemony. Given the tenor of the times, is this “spiritual strategy,” deliberately or unwittingly, one more Trojan horse that will insinuate personal religious opinions now into the very field of psychology, as David Wulff (2003) laments?

I know theorists Richards, Slife, and Reber personally, and I trust their good will, but the urgency of their program and the looseness of their conceptualization—I speak now as a credentialed and well-published theologian—suggest that something more than professional interest is driving their agenda. Despite all good intentions, if successful, their proposal will have serious negative consequences for psychological theory, research, and practice.

THE CONTROLLING ASSERTION OF THEISTIC PSYCHOLOGY: DIVINE INTERVENTION

Beyond the above problematic aspects of theistic psychology, analysis of its guiding principle suggests that serious theoretical shortcomings vitiate Richards and Bergin’s religious project. This principle is insistence on routine

extraordinary divine interventions, and it controls a set of “philosophical assumptions” (2005, 97) that constitute so-called *scientific theism*.

“*Scientific Theism.*” Much of the argument of the theistic psychologists lacks positive elaboration, as even Jones (2006) and Tan (2006) object. Richards and Bergin (2005), Slife and Richards (2001), Slife and Whoolery (2006), and Reber (2006b) generally explicate their position simply as a suggestive contrast to the positions they criticize and oppose. Thus, the meaning of scientific theism is best understood as a hypothetical alternative to its opposite, “*scientific naturalism* in its atheistic form” (Richards and Bergin, 2005, 97). Richards and Bergin’s driving concern is to oppose (a) atheism, (b) agnosticism, and (c) nontheism in science, although this nuanced continuum of positions plays no role in their either/or presentation; in their worldview, one is either a theist or an atheist, and all science, naturalistic by definition, is atheistic by definition.

They insist that they “think it unnecessary to exclude God from scientific theories or from the scientific discovery process” (p. 10). The argument is as follows: If God exists and if God created and is actively involved in the universe, one cannot accurately treat of its operations, especially in the case of humans, without including reference to God. Insistence on divine interventions is the crucial point. Defending their position against fellow theists who do not insist on extraordinary divine interventions, Slife and Melling (2006) propose an ad hoc distinction between weak and strong theism. They insist that only their “strong theism,” allowing for routine extraordinary divine interventions, grants “that God exists in the practical or functional sense of making a difference in the world or mattering in our lives” (p. 282). Their goal is somehow to illustrate “how God’s activity in the world *could* matter to the philosophy of science” (p. 284). Others (Assagioli [1965] 1976; Browning 1987; Crutcher 2003; Doran 1981; Frankl 1962; [1969] 1988; Helminiak 1987; 1996a; 1998; Lonergan [1957] 1992; Wilber 1996; 2006; Wulff 2003) leave room for theist belief within a comprehensive scientific framework by differentiating diverse disciplines and clarifying their interrelationship. Evangelical Christian psychologists have pursued such an approach, named *integration*, for decades although, methodologically self-debilitated, they have never succeeded in specifying it (see Helminiak 1998, 30–50; Jones 2006; Nelson 2006). Sperry and Erik Mansager (2007; Sperry and Shafranske 2005) have launched the same failed program in a new form (Helminiak 2008c). In contrast, Richards and Bergin (2005) and Slife and Richards (2001) would collapse the disciplines—philosophy, psychology, and theology—into one.

In fact, apart from proclaiming personal faith, there is no methodological reason to insist on divine intervention. If such interventions are routine, regular, and systematic, their effects fall under the regularities of nature that by definition science addresses apart from explicit theist belief. If such

interventions are specific, irregular, and unsystematic, they are unique occurrences, miracles. As such, although perhaps amenable to statistical method (Gorsuch 2008; Lonergan [1957] 1992, 76–91, 109–25), they would fall outside of classical scientific explanation, even outside of “theistic science” somehow intentionally “attuned” to continuous divine activity.

Nonetheless, believing in a palpable role for God in human living, Richards and Bergin champion a God who is “involved” in the world (2005, 13, 112). Slife and Whoolery insist on “the activity of God,” “divine influences in the world (including scientific),” and “God’s influences” (2006, 224). Richards and Bergin repeatedly emphasize divine interventions and human communications with God. These supposedly have discernible effects in this world. For example, numerous studies suggest that religion is a positive influence in people’s lives, for which researchers suggest a list of possible explanations. Assuming that religion means theism, Richards and Bergin would explain this “powerful, beneficial sociocultural factor” as follows: “We conclude [that is, opine] that none of these influences would be enduring or powerful if the influence of God were not present.” Echoing Jeff S. Levin, they assert that “there is a superempirical healing energy activated by religion . . . a divine blessing on the human bioenergetic system” (2005, 136).

What do these words mean? Even Jones calls for clarification about divine interventions and communications (2006, 253). For centuries theologians have discussed these questions and formulated coherent answers (Principe 2006). In contrast, Richards and Bergin address these matters at the level of popular piety and explicitly advocate the need to credit religious assertions and make room for their claims in psychological theory (see also Reber 2006b; Slife and Richards 2001; Slife and Whoolery 2006).

Standard Theological Accounts of God’s Involvement with Creation. Insistence on divine interventions is the crux of the matter. This topic is theological, yet the theistic psychologists have inserted it into psychology. Therefore, it is imperative that we examine this matter thoroughly. If for no other reason, psychotherapists—and scientists in general—would do well to understand this theological matter because, as the theistic psychologists point out, it is an unavoidable aspect of many people’s religious belief.

There is a well-known range of opinions about divine intervention, which Principe has usefully summarized (2006, Lecture 4)—but, unfortunately, not in print (Principe 2008). *Supernaturalism* stands at one extreme. It recognizes no natural or consistent causes but believes that God directly effects everything that happens. Virtually no one holds this opinion. On the other extreme is *deistic naturalism*, the belief that God created the world and set up all the processes within it, then left it to function on its own. For deism God is an absentee landlord having no ongoing role in the unfolding of the universe. Deism arose as a philosophical by-product of the

mechanistic determinism that followed upon Isaac Newton's stunning synthesis (Goldman 2006, Lecture 8; Principe 2006). However, the avowed indeterminism of probabilistic quantum mechanics and of deconstructionist and postmodern analyses guts deism of its philosophical heart and socio-cultural appeal. Discredited eighteenth-century deism is an extreme opinion that sophisticated theists shun. Nevertheless, Richards and Bergin (2005), Reber (2006b), Slife and Richards (2001), and Slife and Whoolery (2006) characterize science with this view and with equally discredited reductionistic logical positivism (Goldman 2006).

The mid-range opinions are more interesting and more relevant. Toward the center from supernaturalism is *occasionalism*, which holds that God created the world and could do with it as God wills, but God has made a sort of covenant to maintain regularities in nature. These constitute what medieval theology called the *cursus communis naturae*, the common course of nature. Although in practice the *cursus communis* functions like natural laws, actually there are no laws, and God must specifically intervene at every point. This position is called occasionalism because various earthly occurrences provide the occasion for God to intervene and effect a result. For example, although fire heats water, it is not the nature of fire to do so. It is merely that God has agreed to make water get hot when placed over a fire.

Occasionalism has a double advantage. Scientifically, it allows for regularities in nature so that some sciencelike predictability is possible, and religiously, it allows ample room for special divine interventions, which would appear as miracles or at least as blessings from God. However, occasionalism has the distinct disadvantage of placing direct responsibility on God for whatever happens. If that fire burns someone, God is responsible. One could not say that the forces of nature were just functioning as they do and people should be more careful. Everything that happens is the direct will of God. This position supports a highly magical worldview. Additionally, it does not favor any search for understanding; it does not foster science. To every question for explanation, the answer is simply and exhaustively "God." Occasionalism is not a useful position either theologically or scientifically.

Toward the center from deistic naturalism on the opposite extreme is *providential naturalism*, which holds that God created the universe and built natural processes into it. These can be discovered, and their elaboration is the basis of scientific laws and the natural-law theory of ethics. One explains the world and knows God's will by understanding the processes that the Creator built into the universe. This position is the most viable. It allows for both scientific explanation and for belief in an involved Creator-God.

Providential naturalism is not deistic; it does not exclude God from constant involvement (compare Slife and Melling 2006, 281). According

to Aquinas (1955, I q. 9 a. 2, q. 105 a. 5; see also Helminiak 1987, ch. 5), creation imputes three roles to the Creator. First, *creation* means that God set beings in existence. This one role defines deism; but for providential naturalism God does not withdraw from creation as if it were a once-and-for-all established clockwork universe, even as the current scientific theories of cosmogenesis and evolution suggest. Second, *conservation* means that God sustains beings in existence: Contingent reality—unable to account for its own coming into existence and, perforce, for its perduring in existence—would cease to exist without God’s constant activity. Third, *concurrence* means that God acts to allow beings to act in accord with their respective natures. Without God’s creative concurrence, nothing new could come into being; no act of a creature could have a real effect.

Granted this complete account, absolutely standard in the Western theological tradition, appeal to creation already provides a God who is ongoingly related to and active in the world. If so, the theistic psychologists are unnecessarily concerned about securing an active role for God. There is no need to posit extraordinary interventions.

Another standard theological approach to providential naturalism elaborates divine concurrence by distinguishing between primary and secondary causes in nature. As creator, sustainer, and enabler, God is the primary cause of all things; ultimately, by definition, nothing exists or happens apart from God. But God chooses to act through secondary causes, namely, the natural order that God created. Natural processes are secondary causes. Thus, as the primary cause, God acts through secondary causes; God works through nature. Or, as one pious slogan has it, “God helps those who help themselves.”

This naturalism is providential because believers trust that God cares for the created universe, is in inextricable relationship with it, and is working some good purpose through it. God cares for creation not by constantly intervening to adjust the original creation and its particularities, as supernaturalism, occasionalism, and the theist psychologists would have it, but by having established and by sustaining an overall order in which all particularities, because they function within this given order, work eventually toward the good (Helminiak 2005b, 165; 2008d, 98–103; Lonergan 1971).

Providential naturalism also allows that God could work outside of the natural order. Such activity would constitute a miracle, strictly speaking—an extraordinary event that by definition natural causes cannot explain and that, as a singular and unique occurrence, does not pertain to science—for example, resurrection from the dead. Alternatively, God could effect an extraordinary event by working within the natural order but in an unusual way—for example, by having a driving wind forge a pathway through the Red Sea. But medieval theologians and natural philosophers recognized that one would be hard pressed to say whether some extraordinary

event was truly a miracle, especially if it occurred through natural causes. Aquinas held that in the end one recognizes miracles only through faith.

In addition, theologians have been reluctant to claim miraculous interventions. To do so rashly would be blasphemous; it would risk attributing directly to God what was of natural origin. For this religious reason the medievals valued science, that is, “natural philosophy”: To speak accurately about God’s possible supernatural intervention they needed to understand exactly the functioning and the limits of natural causation. In their minds there was no conflict but rather interdependence between natural philosophy and theology. Above all, there was no need to make room for God because God was always present and active whether events were miraculous, extraordinary, or, most likely, routine and natural.

Providential naturalism is a position that meets current interdisciplinary needs (Helminiak 1998). For psychological theorists, therapists, or clients who want a theological position in addition to psychology in order to allow for both science and belief in an involved God—and for natural scientists as well—providential naturalism could suffice. It welcomes both psychology and theology, delineates them as distinct academic disciplines with different methodologies, and coherently posits their interrelationship. It allows for science to explain the nature, functioning, and interaction of created realities and for theology to account for the ongoing existence of these realities. It allows even psychologists who believe in God to bracket their personal piety, without offense to it, as they freely pursue psychological research, understanding, or psychotherapeutic practice, knowing in faith all the while that they are exploring the handiwork of, and working in conjunction with, God—even as in the natural sciences Johannes Kepler and Newton believed they had explained God’s creation in explaining the movement of the planets. No insistence on extraordinary divine interventions is required.

A Novel Position on Divine Intervention. Within this range of theological opinions, it is difficult to know where Richards and Bergin and their fellow theistic psychologists stand. Concluding his presidential address, Richards (2005–2006) mentioned human nature and personality, dysfunction and healing, assessments of clients, relationships and interventions with clients, and the facilitation of therapy. The deliberate suggestion was that God intervenes or that the invocation of God somehow makes a palpable difference in all these professional matters. This list of arenas of supposed divine intervention is long. Therefore, providential naturalism, which minimizes miraculous interventions, does not describe Richards’s position. On the other hand, Richards and Bergin also express support for current psychological research and theory, clarifying that they only want to expand, not eliminate, current social science (2005, 102). Therefore, neither does occasionalism, which recognizes no natural causa-

tion, describe their position. It must lie somewhere between the mid-range positions, providential naturalism and occasionalism.

Gorsuch's position, however, could be read as occasionalism. He understands that the "laws of science" or "natural laws" "show God's habitual, consistent way of acting" and "identify how God continually and steadfastly operates time after time" (Gorsuch 2002, 1834). As for God's extraordinary intervention, Gorsuch cites answered prayers and miracles strictly taken, but, echoing the medievals' argument that scientific investigation could not demonstrate such claims, he offers no insight into what scientific contribution the theistic psychologists infer by insisting on divine interventions (pp. 1834–35).

Richards and Bergin (2005) give one clue when they approvingly cite a statement by John Templeton and Robert Herrmann (p. 100). It finds room for ongoing divine creation at the interface of classical and statistical scientific laws (a situation familiar from chaos theory: Prigogine and Stengers 1984; see also Lonergan [1957] 1992 on emergent probability). Thus, at stake is what theologians call the god of the gaps (Habgood 1983), a god who is assigned an ever-retreating locus of extraordinary intervention at the most recently recognized glitch in scientific theory. Of course, the operative understanding of scientific theory in this case is a simplified popular rendition because scientists themselves ultimately see no unbridgeable gap in their theory of natural process. As noted, neither do providential naturalists have a problem in reconciling belief in God with scientific theory.

Richards and Bergin are hard pressed to insist on miraculous interventions and still affirm scientific method and its undeniable achievements. The book's argument at this most critical juncture is incoherent. For example, that quote from Templeton and Herrmann ends with a pantheistic conclusion: "Perhaps . . . the only reality is God" (2005, 100). Nevertheless, on the same page, Richards and Bergin explicitly insist that their position is not pantheistic. They also insist that they are not indulging in the occult or the musings of contemporary spiritualistic movements. As even the sympathetic Jones (2006) asks, What do they intend?

Purported Evidence for Extraordinary Divine Interventions. Richards and Bergin provide one other rare clue about their understanding of divine intervention: They refer to "the reality and value of intuitive and inspirational ways of knowing" (2005, 101). They have in mind "insights ["given"] to scientists through divine inspiration during or after diligent effort by the scientists" (p. 101). Similarly, wondering how we ever transcend our own biases, Slife and Whoolery posit "a rupture of our biased world that originates from *beyond* that world . . . *other*-worldly ruptures" (2006, 226). Frank Richardson also endorses this enthusiastic theist notion of "'*other*-worldly ruptures' that bring transcendence or a relation to the Divine into the very center of the picture" (2006, 242 n. 12). Slife and Whoolery justify

their claim by appeal to popular opinion: “Brilliant ideas and insightful hypotheses have frequently been viewed unabashedly as ‘inspired’ and even ‘a gift from God’” (2006, 225).

Most people view insight (Lonergan [1957] 1992) as a normal and natural, if remarkable, capacity of the human mind. Likewise, in their naive or sometimes sophisticated—providential naturalistic—piety, most religious folk thank God for their minds’ moments of insight. Scientific theism, however, sees insight as an extraordinary divine intervention. Indeed, Richards and Bergin conclude that “scientists may improve their work by more consistently exercising faith in God” (2005, 101). Legitimizing claimed communication with God via a tenuous scientific appeal, they explain, “The exchange of thoughts and feelings between God and humans can be viewed as a form of telepathy or influence at a distance” (p. 114).

As a serious proposal, Reber (2006c) identifies the mental and the divine: “There is no evidence that [the human] spirit is human rather than godly” (2006b, 199). In that case it would be no surprise that human insight stand as an example of extraordinary intervention: Divine would be what it is. Indeed, Reber insists that intellectual breakthroughs are “transcendent, inspired, and miraculous” (2007). Similarly, emphasizing again the self-transcending capacity of the human mind, Reber proposes another example “most obviously relevant and accessible to psychology,” namely, the sometimes remarkable experience of genuine interpersonal dialogue (2007). He impressively weaves together the thought of Martin Buber, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Emmanuel Levinas to illustrate a spiritual dimension to this human experience (Reber 2002). Distinguishing the spiritual from the divine, I would concur. But on the basis of this analysis, Reber advances that “there is clearly space allowed for divine participation in the dialogue” and proposes that dialogical experience is one of “a variety of ‘extraordinary, supernatural divine interventions’” (2007). No doubt, popular piety speaks in such terms, and lovers commonly describe their togetherness as divine. But do popular hyperbole and poetry merit uncritical credence? Does *mythos* translate seamlessly into *logos*?

Given that the insightful working of the human mind is amenable to considerable explication (Lonergan [1957] 1992; [1980] 1990), one might apply Occam’s razor and ask, Why involve God extraordinarily when the appeal to natural mental functioning already suffices? The retort would likely be that this principle of parsimony functions as a covert mechanism of reductionism, avoiding the need to consider God’s activity, supporting “an anti-religious worldview and belief system” (Reber 2006b, 199), and distorting religion, “not really studying religion as many religious people experience it” (p. 200). Very usefully, in terms of the confounding of “descriptive” and “explanatory reductionism,” Wayne Proudfoot (1985, Ch. VI) illuminates this “protective strategy” of insisting on popular accounts:

“Inquiry is blocked to insure that the subject’s own explanation of his experience is not contested” (p. 197). Thus, granted scientific theism, the retort is invulnerable—because its first premise, declared immune to criticism, is the “fact” of an intervening God. Sheer assertion rules the day, and it becomes clear how dangerous scientific theism is. It dismisses as atheistic naturalism standard principles of scientific methodology, like Occam’s razor, that present a challenge to its supernatural insistence.

Routine, varied instances of self-transcending breakthrough are the sole examples that scientific theism has to offer to illustrate supposedly extraordinary divine intervention. That people have insights is the evidence proposed to justify the mingling of theism and science. The credulity of this position must be blatant. From a theological perspective, it is offensive to both God and humankind. Surely, divine intelligence transcends even the most profound of human insights. To locate God in human insight is to reduce God to mere human spirit (Helminiak 1998; Lonergan [1957] 1992). Contrariwise, to sequester human insight in the realm of God is to reduce humans to a status below perhaps that of brute animals, who are credited with a form of insight (Goodall 1986; Helminiak 1996a, 152–58); it is to excuse all human ignorance and resultant wrongdoing; it is to remove from the human constitution any inherent capacity for knowing God. Indeed, it is to imply that, like unquestionable divine revelation, every insight is an extraordinary divine gift. But why, then, do we often find that our “breakthrough” bright ideas are mistaken? After granting an insight, does God also have to grant us a determination regarding the accuracy of our idea? (See Lonergan [1980] 1990 on the centrality of judgment in human knowing.) Philosophically and theologically naive, scientific theism undermines itself. Both belief in God, which it champions, and human cognitive and moral responsibility, which it advocates, are the weaker within this religiously urgent but theologically callow position.

In the final analysis, unfortunately, it does not matter what the theistic psychologists hold. Nor does its intellectual grounding matter. Scientific theism is a sheer assertion of religious faith—for this reason it is misplaced in psychological theory—so no reasoned discussion can touch it. What is clear, however, is that, whatever it is, this position is not a generic theism. Regarding the theology of divine interventions, Principe states outright, “Theologians across time and denominations disagree widely on this point” (2006, 13). There simply is no generic theology of divine interventions. Moreover, on the basis of the collaborative efforts of Jews, Christians, and Muslims, “Medieval theologians and natural philosophers, however, favored naturalistic explanations whenever possible” (p. 13). “Given [its] bent toward naturalism, orthodox Christian theology holds that God *almost invariably* works through ‘secondary causes’” (p. 14). Not only is theistic psychology’s interventionism not generic; it also is not mainstream.

The Epistemology of Scientific Theism. Richards and Bergin's other statements about scientific theism are equally disconcerting. For example, the explicitly named epistemology of scientific theism is "methodological pluralism." It embraces "multiple 'ways of knowing.'" Among them, in addition to "authority . . . , sensory experience (empirical observation), reason, intuition and divine inspiration," are both "quantitative and qualitative inquiry" (2005, 101). These latter, Richards and Bergin believe, are not always epistemologically compatible. But wanting to lose neither the old nor the new and envisaging no reconciliation, they retain both (p. 102). They explicitly reject the relativism that is inherent in the radical version of postmodern qualitative methodology (Rosenau 1992). Nonetheless, echoing the point made above about the supposed invulnerability of first principles, they hold that "all modes of inquiry and theory-building are grounded in faith and 'biases,'" that all science and research is "culture-bound, rooted in unprovable assumptions," and that "the criteria for judging results are personal" (p. 102). In other words, at this point they disavow any claim to shared correct understandings and accurate statements; they do not believe in objective truth. At this point, aren't they now relativists?

Reber's attempt (2006a) to answer Terry Cooper and Browning (2006) confirms this interpretation. Seemingly equating deeply held belief *ipso facto* with truth, Reber mounts an argument for different kinds or facets or meanings of *truth*. He asks, "Have religious people been forced to answer to psychology and science's standards of truth . . . ?" Then he elaborates, "If Christian truth is based upon faith rather than certainty and intimacy instead of objectivity, it is something very different than the foundational truth of a scientific psychology" (2006a, 273). But this seductive, romantic argument forgets that science explicitly denies any claim to certainty; and this argument overlooks the commonality that intimacy and objectivity share insofar as both pertain to the human subject and, perforce, implicate the knowing human mind. How different, then, could religious truth and scientific truth really be, and their criteria and epistemological foundations (Lonergan 1972)? Avowedly Reber is no relativist; he and his colleagues certainly do not want to be. But neither is their position coherent.

Astute at criticizing other positions but slow at articulating their own, in turn Richards and Bergin reject as inadequate classical realism, idealism, solipsism, critical realism, and postmodernism. Instead they propose what they call *theistic realism*. By this they mean that

it is possible for scientists to gain valid understanding and knowledge about the world and about spiritual realities, although this knowledge will always be incomplete and somewhat limited and distorted by their methods, culture, and context. Nevertheless, by using multiple ways of knowing and by seeking inspiration in their scientific endeavors, scientists can advance our ability to know truth and understand the world, spiritual realities, and God. (2005, 102)

But how, exactly? This jejune statement provides no prescription for the advance of understanding. What is the method or epistemological position of this theistic realism? Only a complex of admittedly incoherent “ways of knowing” and reliance on divine “inspiration.” Scientific theism has no integral epistemological position. Its sole novelty is a hope, a prayer, an invitation to believe. The position is a statement of religious faith, not a scientific theory.

Corroborating this severe conclusion is Richards and Bergin’s own bottom line. Aware of the complexities (and the contradictions?) in their methodological pluralism, they can respond only with the words of Jesus’ call to his first disciples in John 1:39: “We therefore invite readers to ‘come and see’ whether our perspective seems promising and fruitful” (2005, 102). With the same voice, Slife and Melling end their response to critics: Their theorizing aims for “an interpretative knowledge of God’s influences, at least for those who have ‘ears to hear’ (Mark 4:23)” (2006, 284). Perhaps, as “An Evangelical Forum,” *The Journal of Psychology and Theology* allows proselytizing—but also APA? In these cases, the seeker is invited to a religious revival grounded in nonfalsifiable claims, not to a psychological or scientific disquisition grounded in evidence.

Let my objection be clear. I am far from critical of personal piety. I myself am a devout theist. And I am far from denying the power of a spiritual focus for psychotherapeutic healing. For years, as a priest and a certified pastoral counselor, I employed interventions drawn from the religious tradition that I shared with my clients. I have no objection to such practice for explicitly pastoral agents, though I grant them no *carte blanche* because curious religious beliefs can cause needless human suffering (Helminiak 2008b). I value astute spiritual interventions even within secular psychotherapy, and I elaborated a responsible, fully psychological approach to such an enterprise (Helminiak 2001b). However, I object to construing personal piety as psychological theory, to turning therapy into a sectarian religious practice, and to proposing popular piety as reasoned theology and even validated science. And I shudder as the tenor of our challenging times demands equal welcome to all opinions, sweeping aside as prejudice the critical thinking that alone could sort them out. All opinions are not of equal value, and many have already been weighed. The project of theistic psychology reprises seventeenth- and eighteenth-century discussions, which long ago led both the humanities and the sciences far beyond their early-modern positions. The third millennium and its testily burgeoning global community can only suffer from regression to premodern mentalities. Post-modernity needs to appeal to current, nuanced intellectual resources, which might actually effect safe, sane, promising, and holy individual and social integration (Helminiak 2008d).

One of the ways of knowing to which scientific theism appeals is revelation. Its postmodern status is highly problematic. Almost every religion in

the world claims revelation, but the “revealed” truths differ (Helminiak 2008b; 2008e), and every educated person in today’s world is aware of this fact. Should the Jews or the Arabs have the land they both claim as divinely given? Are the Vedas to be accepted as revelation, or do the religions of the book have the right to disqualify others’ beliefs? After Islam, is Mormonism the final fulfillment of the Judeo-Christian tradition, or does the even more recent Bahá’í religion hold that honor? Whose revelation is true? More important, how does one decide? The theistic psychologists offer no epistemology with which to address these questions. Their position is regressive and ultimately divisive. Yet today these questions are pressing.

THE PARTICULARITY OF “GENERIC” THEISM

The inconsistencies of scientific theism go further. For example, Richards and Bergin presume that humans have “an eternal spirit or soul” (2005, 103). What of Christianity’s belief in resurrection of the body and union with God through the beatific vision, Hinduism’s central affirmation of reincarnation, and Islam’s belief in heaven as a sensuous paradise? Life after death is not a homogeneous notion across religions.

More important, what does *eternal* mean in this case? For the astute medievals *aeternitas* was a technical term that meant “without either beginning or end,” and only God, uncreated, is eternal. In contrast, a created being that lives outside of time enjoys *aevum*, endlessness (Aquinas 1955, I, q. 10, a. 5), akin to our *immortality* (Helminiak 1998, 269–70). To which does that *eternal* refer? Richards and Bergin’s qualification of the “eternal spirit” as “created by God” (2005, 103) complicates the question. They also call humans “offspring of God” (p. 112), recalling a topic that featured in the Council of Nicaea’s debates over the created-versus-uncreated status of Christ as Son of God. They add that humans “carry within them the germ or seed of divinity” (p. 112), implying the logically impossible transformation of humans into God, the created into the uncreated. How are these assertions to be taken?

These matters are hardly trivial. Many Jews do not believe in life after death. Christians and Muslims do believe in unending life, but only after death. In addition to life after death, besides Hindus and Buddhists also Mormons believe in preexistence (Hexham 1990). Is the ambiguity of “eternal,” “offspring of God,” and “seed of divinity” a deliberate attempt to make room for Mormon belief (see also Richards and Bergin 2005, 115, 117)? If so, do these allusions imply that humans are really God or gods, uncreated, without beginning or end? In fact, Mormon belief ambiguously treats humans and God interchangeably: “As man is, God once was; as God is, man may become” (Hexham 1990, 776). This facet of Mormon theism—that humans are “gods in embryo”—is more akin to Hinduism, for which “Atman is Brahman,” than to any of the Western theisms. Reber’s

refusal to distinguish between the mental and the divine (2006b, 199) supports this interpretation. Additionally, if every human is or is to become a distinct god (Hexham 1990), is Mormon theism actually polytheistic? Or is the term *god* now functioning merely as a symbol of human hope and fulfillment (see Helminiak 1998, 107–10)? From a number of perspectives, Richards and Bergin's is no generic theology, and from every perspective this discussion involves speculation about esoteric, otherworldly, nonfalsifiable matters. Proper to theology, they are not pertinent to empirical social science.

Without treatment of other important issues—such as scientific theism's vague and incoherent basis for its moral universalism (Richards and Bergin 2005, 47, 104–5), its historically naive suggestion that theism is the basis of ethics (pp. 47, 75, 76, 104–5, 115–26; Reber 2006b; Slife and Whoolery 2006; see Helminiak 1998, 180–91), or its esoteric belief in the existence of personified evil (Richards and Bergin 2005, 120)—it must already be clear that theistic psychology presents not a generic theism but a strangely particularistic one. This well-intentioned but theologically unsophisticated plan for treating spiritual issues in secular psychotherapy by emphasizing theism creates more problems than it solves. Long-standing theological opinion already has presented a coherent approach to relating God and humans, theology and science. The mainline solution—providential naturalism—does not require extraordinary divine interventions to have God be active in creation, but this solution pertains to theology, not psychology or natural science. The claimed war between science and religion is a historical fiction. The insertion of God into the psychology of spirituality inevitably dooms this project (Helminiak 2005a; 2006; 2008a, e), which APA has published. And one still wonders: To what purpose?

CONCLUSION

Relating his historical lecture on “God and Nature—Miracles and Demons” to the twenty-first century, Principe concludes with the following remarks, which seem apropos of the spiritual strategy of Richards and Bergin and their collaborators:

Some non-mainstream American fundamentalist sects greatly enhance the frequency and importance of “miracles” (a kind of crude occasionalism) and, consequently, diminish natural causation and the scope of scientific frameworks. Further, they attribute far greater power to Satan and demonic forces than is orthodox and, thus, border on (or even fall into) Manichean dualism. Consequently, their spiritual world is disordered, reflected in an irregular natural world (full of interventions) and a lack of faith in the regularities that constitute science. (Principe 2006, 16)

In contrast, Assagioli ([1965] 1976) and Frankl (1962; [1969] 1988) developed psychologies of spirituality that do not implicate God. Unwittingly still committed to Hindu metaphysics—namely, the picture-thinking

and emanationism of the Great Chain of Being—incompatible with logically coherent Western theism (Helminiak 1998, 213–292; 2001a), Ken Wilber (1996; 1980, 75–76; 2006, 213–29, 232, 265–66) offers an interdisciplinary approach to science and religion. In another highly elaborated theory, I also propose an interdisciplinary approach whose whole sweep includes theism (Helminiak 1987; 1996a, b; 1998; 2001b; 2005a, b; 2006; 2008a, e). With an adequate epistemology and sufficient conceptual nuance, a fully humanistic—that is, nontheist—account of a generic spirituality seems possible. Application of Lonergan’s phenomenology-like analysis of intentional consciousness or human spirit, for example ([1957] 1992; 1972; [1980] 1990), supports an account that (a) rests on an empirical basis; (b) builds on an aspect of the mind, so (c) it is genuinely psychological; (d) bespeaks an open-ended dynamism that could explain mystical experiences and enlightenment; (e) includes empirically determined criteria of both epistemology and ethics and, thus, (f) not only is fully open to the God of Western religions, who is said to act in and through untrammelled natural causes or, on occasion, through miraculous intervention, and (g) not only provides an account of possible human union, but not identity, with divinity; but also, (h) even apart from these theological extrapolations, specifies the meaning of positive change and entails a theory of normative human development (Helminiak 1987; 1996a; 1998; 2008b, d).

Elaborated psychological approaches to spirituality apart from, but open to, theism exist. Thus, if evidence-based argument and logical coherence carry any weight, it would seem that the current trend of invoking theism to treat spiritual issues is not only gravely mistaken but also wholly unnecessary. This trend’s collapsing of methodologically distinct disciplines such as biology, neuroscience, psychology, and theology is ominously regressive. In particular, psychology and psychotherapeutic practice are to be respectfully open to people’s religion. They—and all the sciences and professions—need also to be attentive to long-standing theological opinion and contemporary critical thinking so that, amid a millennial culture shift, humanity can keep mushrooming openness to religion in balance.

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