

Path in Psychology

Jacob A. Belzen *Editor*

# Psychology of Religion

Autobiographical Accounts

 Springer

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*Editors*

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# Chapter 1

## The Comeback of the Psychology of Religion: The Aims of the Present Volume

Jacob A. Belzen



### Right Away: Some Words on What this Volume Is and Is Not Going to Be About

“The psychology of religion is back. It is alive and kicking!” If that were the main message of the present volume, or even of this introduction, one would immediately need to raise some critical questions. We should at least ask why this assertion should count as special, as something worth mentioning, as anything new. Is it, for example, “news” that this branch of psychology is “back?” Many psychologists have never heard anything about the psychology of religion; a great number of them would be sincerely amazed if one were to ask their opinion about it. To the best of their knowledge, nothing like the “psychology of religion” exists; they

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wouldn't have a clue what that is, could be, or should be. And many contemporaries who are or would be interested in a scholarly approach to the study of religion would perhaps be equally puzzled upon hearing the claim this essay opens with: unlike most present-day psychologists, they may have heard about the psychology of religion, but only as something from the past, as something the founding fathers of psychology at large had been involved in, but that, for whatever reasons, already no longer existed by World War I. There have indeed been excellent scholars, well acquainted with the history of psychology, and themselves involved in the field of research on religion, who have declared the psychology of religion "dead" outright. Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, an Israeli-American psychologist who published extensive research on religion, asserted in 1974 in the leading *Journal for the History of the Behavioral Sciences* that the psychology of religion ceased to exist by 1930 (Beit-Hallahmi, 1974, p. 87). And already in 1953, Jan Hendrik van den Berg, a leading international spokesman of the phenomenological movement in psychology and the first professor of psychology to be appointed at a Dutch theological faculty (Belzen, 2007), determined the "death" of psychology of religion to have occurred in 1921 (van den Berg, 1953, p. 36). That claims such as those of Beit-Hallahmi and van den Berg can be and have been refuted (Belzen, 2008), is not an issue to enter into right now: the existence and proliferation of their opinion is what matters here.

So, yes, to many it will be "news" to hear that something like the psychology of religion would be existing or would exist again. What is obviously the next critical question presents itself right away: is this "news" true at all? It is *not* going to be the task of this introduction, or of the present volume, to answer this question in a classically academic way: presenting all available evidence and leading the reader to an inductive conclusion. Without wanting to be arrogant, the project presented here assumes that anyone who picks up this volume already knows that the psychology of religion does indeed exist, that it has returned to prominence, and that it is even growing in size. To anyone in doubt, it could be pointed out that the number of publications in psychology dealing with religion is increasing spectacularly, that even books providing metaperspectives on this literature – whether called "handbook," "introduction to," or otherwise (Argyle, 2000; Bucher, 2007; Hood, Hill, & Spilka, 2009; Hemminger, 2003; Loewenthal, 2000; Paloutzian, 1996; Paloutzian & Park, 2005) – abound by now (even the American Psychological Association has published a number of best-selling volumes in this field: Pargament et al., 2013; Richards & Bergin, 1997, 2000, 2004; Shafranske, 1996; Sperry & Shafranske, 2005); that funding is increasingly available for all kinds of psychological research on religion; that there are a growing number of conferences, papers, and journals devoted to issues from the psychology of religion; that organizations for this field exist, have been revived, or are being founded; and that quite a number of academic tenure positions for the psychology of religion have been established, especially at European universities (in countries including Belgium, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United Kingdom among others). To those for whom all of this is still "news," a quick search in any library or on the Internet will show readily enough, "The psychology of religion is alive and kicking."

Further critical questions could be brought up, however. Any of the quick searches alluded to in the previous paragraph will also readily show that this field called psychology of religion is even more heterogeneous than psychology at large: in principle, contributions to the psychology of religion could be made from any psychological discipline (e.g., developmental psychology, social psychology, physiological psychology), perspective (cognitive psychology, psychoanalysis, evolutionary psychology, etc.), or theory (e.g., attribution theory, terror management theory, theories about authoritarianism, admission, and many other issues). Moreover, the psychology of religion counts quite a number of practitioners without formal credentials in psychology (there are colleagues with degrees in psychiatry, psychoanalysis, theology, and other subjects). As with psychology at large, the question easily arises: what has this field to offer? What is its value? What does it really have to tell us? And if the psychology of religion is indeed “back,” from where did it return? Why did it disappear (if it did)? What is the difference between its present and its past: does it have anything more, better, new, or whatever, to tell compared with the situation of about a century ago? These fundamental questions deserve precise answers that are well thought through, and based on extensive knowledge of both past and present results and claims. To help prepare answers to such fundamental questions is the main goal of the present volume; in itself it does not have the goal to provide such, of necessity evaluative, answers.

Obviously, any such answer will depend on the criteria one employs, and these criteria will again depend on a number of very different factors. Equally obviously, therefore, the answer will depend on one’s estimation of psychology in general, on one’s attitude towards religion, and on one’s opinion about scientific research into religion; such estimations, attitudes, and opinions will depend on one’s professional training, on one’s position in the academic field, and on the kind of institution where one is employed; it will possibly depend on one’s age or at least the period of one’s training; the answer is likely to depend on the country where one is functioning. Less obviously, the answer will be influenced by all kinds of unreflected a prioris, on factors and motivations one is unconscious of, on coincidences and particularities in one’s personal life of whose importance one is unaware. Also, the answer will be determined by the level of sophistication allowed, on the context of the question being asked, on the person who is asking the question, and on the level of privacy granted to the answer. To be brief, there will be a variety of answers to the question about the value and achievements of the psychology of religion, just as there will be a great number of different answers to the question of what psychology is at all. And to make things even more complicated: there will be no criterion by which to tell whether an answer is entirely right or wrong. What is possible, however, is to judge the plausibility of answers given as well as the validity of the argumentation on behalf of such answers and their representativeness.

As has been indicated, this volume only offers steps towards answers to some of the questions. Ultimately, its orientation is towards the most fundamental issues, but a more proximate goal is to provide first-hand information about the development of the psychology of religion in its recent past. In order to know what the psychology of religion is, it is at least necessary to know where it came from and how it developed.

Along with inquiring about theories, their application and proliferation, about methods and techniques employed in research and practice, about institutions and organizations, some obvious questions are also: who have been its key players, what did they do and fail to do, and for what reasons. In such an historicizing procedure, it is only fair to grant a voice to these key players themselves: what do they themselves have to say about the current growth of the psychology of religion, and about their role in it? Where do they themselves see their contribution: what did they expect, what did they aim at, what did they achieve, and what do they regret? To anyone interested in the psychology of religion in general, listening to what some of its prime figures have to say will be interesting and useful. To those interested in the recent history of that field and the disciplines it relates to (such as psychology in general, but also the sciences of religion), the information in this volume will be indispensable. Finally, in some ways, this volume will function as a source to future historians and to those drawing up a picture of the state of the art in the psychology of religion.

### **The Triad: Historical–Systematical–Empirical**

The greater part of the best scholarly work consists of three components, which in reality cannot be separated from one another. All good systematic work, all theory, must relate to what is commonly called empirical reality, and it must be aware of where it positions itself in terms of the history of a certain field of scholarship. Equally, all empirical work aims at systematic contributions to a certain discipline or scholarly field, and it always rests on theoretical assumptions. Historical research in its turn is always empirical, whether it proceeds quantitatively or otherwise, and it always sets out from some systematic point of view. It follows that the present volume too can be situated in different ways, and these ways are not necessarily the ones intended by the authors and the editor. Be this as it may, we can at least quickly identify the kind of work this volume does not aim to contribute to although anyone wanting to employ it differently than was intended can probably do so.

As indicated in the previous paragraph, this volume is not offering a specimen of historical scholarship, although it certainly provides data that may be employed by any future historian of the field of the psychology of religion, of psychology in general, of the sciences of religion (*Religionswissenschaften*) or even of something called “religious studies” in the United States. Equally, the volume does not present a specimen of psychological research on any form of religion, which would be the core and kernel of the psychology of religion itself. Obviously, however, the following chapters could, under some conditions, be used in that way. To some approaches within psychology at large, autobiographical types of research are the preferred ground to obtain answers to their questions. A great number of empirical techniques are being utilized to gather and to analyze empirical data of all kinds, but most types of interviews and many kinds of questionnaires all draw on data that are autobiographical and generally historical in nature. Entire fields such as narrative psychology usually proceed by employing (auto)biographical texts, whether produced on

behalf of and at the request of researchers, or for other purposes (see, e.g., Bauer, McAdams, & Sakaeda, 2005; Bittner, 2006; Markowitsch & Welzer, 2010; McAdams, 1985, 1993; McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2006; Singer & Bluck, 2001). In one way or another, any of the following chapters could be employed in that way too; it all depends on the kind of question with which a future researcher will turn to any of the texts in this collection. With respect to the triad historical–systematical–empirical, however, the emphasis of the present volume is on the first components: not offering systematic historiography in itself, it does aim to offer data on the history of the psychology of religion. And although the provision of empirical data has been one of the goals of our enterprise, this has not been and could not have been without systematic points of view. One may well quarrel about the adequacy of these points of view. It would be totally inadequate, however, to pretend to have been proceeding without such theoretical a priori. As these have been influential in the way this collection has come about, I should at least mention some of them, even if in an historicizing way, for a moment.

Here I should just point out that the collection has more in common with historical projects in other human sciences than with the employment of autobiographical procedures in empirical psychological research. In general, it is probably true that among disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and other social sciences, psychology has become the least historically oriented and inclined. This is somewhat surprising, especially in the psychology of religion field, as the employment of (auto)biographical data has been very prominent at the outset of this psychological subdiscipline: early pioneers including Freud, James, and Starbuck drew heavily on (auto)biographical material and even proponents of the first “experiments” in the psychology of religion, such as Stählin, strongly favored autobiographically based approaches (Belzen, 2012). Today, awareness of the history of their field has largely been marginalized among psychologists (and consequently among psychologists of religion), and volumes with titles such as *A History of Psychology in Autobiography* (see, e.g., Lindzey, 1989; Lindzey & Runyan, 2007; Lück, 2004; Mos, 2009; Pongratz, Traxel, & Wehner, 1972; Pongratz & Wehner, 1979; Wehner, 1992) have become rare exceptions in the field of psychology at large. Yet they have served as examples of the kind of work offered in this volume, as have some projects in neighboring fields; see Lachmann and Rupp (1989a, 1989b, 2000).

It is amazing in a way that even among psychologists of religion, who because of their professional relationships to theologians, philosophers, and scholars of religion tended to be a rather theoretically inclined group, autobiographical reflections have become exceptions too: there isn't much of substance between Starbuck (1937) and Faber (1993). This is probably the consequence of their trying to keep up with the so-called mainstream in contemporary psychology. There are not many psychologists who publish “glimpses into their own black box,” even of a “self-deconstructive” nature, as the anthropologist George W. Stocking (2010) recently did; of course, there are exceptions; see Hermans (2012) for an example of an autobiography by a well-known present-day psychologist.

Primarily historically oriented as this project is, like all scholarship it ultimately aims at such fundamental issues as have been hinted at in the beginning of this

introduction, and in the way it has been executed it has not been without systematics, even if these mirror the assumptions and preferences of the editor, and are largely determined by his path into the psychology of religion. Intellectual integrity requires they should be brought, at least to some extent, into the open.

## The History of this Volume

Some brief words on my own history in the field of the psychology of religion will probably be helpful in understanding the rationale for organizing this volume and the selection I arrived at for its composition. When I entered university in the 1970s I had a vague interest in philosophy (a subject I did not really know about) and an equally vague intention of becoming an historian. A friend who had been attending lectures on psychoanalysis enthusiastically recommended that I enroll in a psychology program, which I did, again with a vague idea of becoming a clinician. A world opened itself up to me, but not so much the world of human beings and their subjectivity, about which I heard a great deal more during my studies in philosophy and history. Attracted to the kind of academic freedom as it still seemed to exist at a Dutch university in the 1970s, I opted for an academic career, all the while becoming convinced that such would be easier in the ever-expanding field of psychology than in the other subjects I was pursuing. (And indeed, my first salaried job at a university was for teaching the experiment and other research methods to psychology students).

Needing to specialize within psychology, I had chosen cultural psychology, primarily because of its theoretical and interdisciplinary character. At my university a section of the department for cultural psychology was involved in research on religion, and this was where I first got involved in formally funded research projects. (Before, I had never even heard about the psychology of religion.) Again, worlds opened themselves up to me, this time the worlds of religions, of theology, of the scientific study of religion, of very diverse (and not necessarily religious) spiritualities. It was all fascinating enough for me to acquire a full training in the sciences of religion too. When I was invited to a chair professorship in the psychology of religion at the University of Amsterdam, I tried to pursue this subject along cultural psychological and hermeneutical lines in general (Belzen, 1997, 2001, 2004, 2010; Belzen & Geels, 2003), all the while remaining interested in the history and theory of that very field (Belzen, 1991, 2000, 2007, 2009; Belzen & Kugelmann, 2009). When I had first encountered the psychology of religion in the early 1980s, there was, except for some masterpieces such as Vergote (1978/1988), next to nothing in general in or on that field available except some articles and reviews of older literature. Especially in Europe the field was so limited in size and number of practitioners that it seemed possible to get acquainted with almost everyone personally. In order to deepen my overview of the subdiscipline, I developed the idea of interviewing the key players to discover and understand how they had made their way into this discipline, how they defined and outlined the field, and why and how they themselves were involved.

Along with but apart from the kind of work I was hired to do, I started to correspond and to have conversations with people including Antoine Vergote in Belgium, Heije Faber in The Netherlands, Paul Pruyser in the United States, and Hjalmar Sundén in Sweden, people who may really be considered to have been refounding the psychology of religion since the late 1950s.

Simultaneously and surprisingly, the field started to grow and to get organized. A first major event, in my memory, was the publication of *The Psychology of Religion: An Empirical Approach* by Spilka, Hood, and Gorsuch (1985), conceived along the lines and written in the style of a contemporary, increasingly quantitatively oriented psychology. All of a sudden, the few psychologists of religion in Europe at that time had the exciting feeling that we were, indeed, a part of that psychology as a whole! Only a few years later, Wulff (1991) published his impressive overview of theories in and lasting contributions made to the field during psychology's past, showing that religion had been a major issue to many, if not all, of the founding fathers of psychology at large. Soon after, from disciplines neighboring on the psychology of religion, authors such as Browning (1988) and Vandermeersch (1974/1991) started to point out the extent to which theories in psychology were linked to religious and philosophical notions, to be followed only a little later by numerous practically oriented works that convincingly argued that attention to religious issues would be a requirement in psychotherapy and other domains of mental health care (e.g., Bhugra, 1996; Brown, 1994; Grzymala-Moszczyńska & Beit-Hallahmi, 1996; Kimble, McFadden, Ellor, & Seeber, 1995; Loewenthal, 1995; Pargament, 1997; Schumaker, 1992).

Serving as I was on an increasingly international scale, I discovered how extensive yet largely disorganized and, especially, how heterogeneous the psychology of religion really is. Because of its professional relationships to large and established fields outside psychology (such as theology and religious studies, social sciences, history of religions, and others) and because of the involvement of people from disciplines including psychiatry, pedagogy, psychoanalysis, and others, it is probably indeed more heterogeneous than its mother discipline (psychology). Numerous as are and have been the efforts to do research on "religion" (a better phrasing would be: on "a variety of phenomena called religious within a certain culture") from a psychological perspective (better: "from the perspectives of one of the many theories called psychology"; I shall refrain here and now from using these more adequate but very clumsy circumscriptions; for an explanation, see Belzen, 2010), I don't think that there is anyone at present with an overview of "the" psychology of religion: there are an ever-increasing number of people who in some way try to apply one psychological viewpoint or another to any kind of religious functioning whatsoever.<sup>1</sup> Neither do I think it would be possible to write any history of "the" psychology of religion: the contributions to this field are too various and too dependent on their diverse contexts (such as the disciplines within which these contributions were developed, the countries in which they lived or received their training, the biographies

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<sup>1</sup>Which, in my humble understanding, would be a good circumscription of what psychology of religion "is." As is made clear, however, it would not accord with my intuitions to define, once and for all, what psychology of religion "is." It is wiser to let a thousand flowers bloom.

of the authors, and more besides). After Wulff's excellent overview of some of the best-known theories, I would as an historian plead for in-depth empirical investigation and analysis of selected contributions from a variety of perspectives (Belzen, 1991, 2000, 2007; Huxel, 2000; Klünker, 1985).

If ever I had the intention of turning my getting acquainted with some key players in the psychology of religion into a publishable project, it was transformed by a number of factors, among which the most important have included (1) the death of some of the key players with whom I had come into contact (such as Paul Pruyser or André Godin), (2) my increasing interest in autobiographical data and perspectives in psychological research (Belzen, 2004; Belzen & Geels, 2008). Therefore, at some point, I decided it would be better (and more manageable) to have some of these key players tell their own stories about their involvement in "the" psychology of religion than racing against time and trying to get standardized interviews with a number of them. And (3) another not unimportant consideration was that it is far more enjoyable for any reader to have access to personal, first-hand stories than to read any analysis of such stories or interview transcriptions.

I decided therefore to continue to contact, visit, and correspond with my senior colleagues, but now also to talk them into, coach, and facilitate them in writing up versions of their stories as psychologists of religion. I discussed a number of questions with all of them,<sup>2</sup> leaving them free, of course, to handle them as they desired. As becomes apparent from the following chapters, some addressed some of them

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<sup>2</sup> These were questions such as: Would you please provide some information on your personal background? (Obviously, an account of your educational and professional training will be most illuminating for the understanding of your work, your position, and your views as a scholar.) What turned you into a psychologist of religion? How, where, and when did you first encounter the discipline (even if only the word)? What did psychology of religion look like when you first encountered it or when you first got involved? How did the field develop during your period of time in it? Did you have any teachers or mentors or models in this field? Who were they, and what has been their influence on your work? Did collaboration with anyone influence your work? How would you define psychology, religion, and psychology of religion? How do you see its relationships to other sciences of religion, to the psychological sciences (including, of course, psychoanalysis and psychiatry), to psychotherapy and counseling, to theology and ministry, and to any other field you may wish to include. (If you enter into a subject like this at all.) What place did this subdiscipline hold in the whole of your life/career/work? (Perhaps it was less central than your inclusion in this volume suggests? If so, no problem at all!) Is there a relationship between your work in the psychology of religion and your other professional work? Is there such a relationship between your psychology of religion and your views of life, of the world, of the human being? (*Lebensanschauung*, *Weltanschauung*, *Menschanschauung*) Is there a relationship between your religious views and your work in the psychology of religion? Has there been a relationship between important life events and your work in or views of the psychology of religion? Have there been any conflicts that influenced your work? (Or did you run into conflicts because of your work or interest in the psychology of religion?) What have been your biggest problems in or with the field? What has been your major contribution to the psychology of religion? What has been your greatest disappointment in or with the field? How would you evaluate the psychology of religion: the idea in general, its achievements, and its development? (I tend to differentiate here between psychology as a science, a discipline, and a profession, but you should do as you like.) What are your expectations and hopes for the field? Any pieces of advice you would like to give present practitioners or to people who might want to become one?