Radical reductionism in the psychological study of religion: Prospects for an alternative critical methodology

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The scholarly enterprise known as the psychology of religion can be understood as the psychological study of religious practice, belief, and experience. With one foot in the stream of psychological theory and research and the other in the flow of religious experience and understanding, it seeks to illuminate the latter through use of the former. In other words, religion becomes the object of psychological analysis, that is, in some sense subordinated to psychology (Wulff, 1997). This relative inequality raises significant methodological issues for anyone attempting to study religion in this way. In particular, one is confronted with the prospect of becoming reductionistic, that is, of explaining what is in fact a complex phenomenon in terms too simple and uni-dimensional, distorting (or at least diminishing) the object of study in the process.

Is the Psychology of Religion Reductionistic?

Charges of reductionism in the psychology of religion tend to come from those who have a vested interest in asserting the uniqueness of religion. There are theologians and religious scholars who study religion from other, more traditional religious studies disciplines, for example, biblical studies, comparative religion, or religious history. They often suspect that an explanatory framework for religion developed outside of these traditional religious studies disciplines — for example, a psychological theory — and used to account for religious phenomena, will inevitably be reductionistic, that is to say, deem their perspectives unnecessary and replaceable (Neville, 1996; Wulff, 1997). Then there are religious believers or practitioners who, by virtue of adhering to a particular religious tradition or practicing a particular religious faith, can be considered "insiders," that is, they view religion from the vantage point of committed participants in the phenomenon. To them, all scholars of religion, including psychologists of religion, are considered "outsiders" who, even if they possess a personal faith of their own, adopt a measure of scientific objectivity when studying religion so that they might understand the phenomenon from the vantage point of one who is not necessarily a participant. It is not uncommon for religious participants as insiders to feel threatened by the interpretations of their tradition and faith experience put forth by scholars of religion as outsiders.

1 This article is based on a Paper presented at the XIVth Conference of the International Association for the Psychology of Religion, September 29, 2001 in Soesterberg, the Netherlands.
Are these accusations of reductionism justified? Yes and no. Yes, for three reasons. First, some psychologists assume that religious or spiritual experiences, beliefs, and behaviors are simply labels given to particular expressions of fundamentally generic human processes. They reject outright the notion that the religious or spiritual dimension of life might be *sui generis*, that is, unique and distinguishable from other (e.g., psychological) dimensions, by virtue of being "of its own kind; constituting a class alone" (Gove, 1981, p. 2286). Consequently, they describe or explain tradition or faith without reference to religious or spiritual terms in a way that (at least implicitly) discredits the religious and spiritual significance of that tradition or faith (Paloutzian, 1996; Wulff, 1997). They engage in what might be called a radical reductionism, a form of oversimplification that results from "the attempt to squeeze ... data, with all their variegated content, into the limited perspectives of one science" (Gove, 1981, p. 1905) while making ultimate claims about the veracity of the final product. This inevitably leads to dangerous distortion of the subject matter under study.

Second, many psychologists of religion have adopted a basic methodological principle known as "the principle of the exclusion of the transcendent." This modernist principle named by Swiss psychologist Theodore Flournoy states that 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" (Wulff, 1997, p. 41). Viewed by scientific researchers as an appropriate methodological tool to help them avoid making judgments about spiritual reality and mixing those judgments into their scientific work, it is perceived by many religious believers as an outright denial of the existence of any transcendent reality, for example, a God. The latter might question whether it is possible to bracket the transcendent and have anything left that could be meaningfully understood as religious. They fail to see the value in what is essentially a functionally atheistic approach, and often feel as though this approach ignores the core of their religious tradition or faith and, in doing so, belittles it.

Third, charges of reductionism may be supported by the fact that, in the American context at least, psychologists have co-opted a number of traditional religious functions previously served by religionists and philosophers alone, for example, constructing theories of human nature, counseling the troubled, and helping people find meaning for their life. There is good reason to suspect that many psychologists, in advocating these functions of their discipline, do so with a negative bias toward religion. In addition, some have been overtly hostile and antagonistic toward religion, seeking either to explain it away through radical reductionistic analyses or, by virtue of a conspicuous neglect, to designate it as unimportant (Küng, 1986; Wulff, 1997).

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2 See McCutcheon (1997) for an overview of the discussion and debate around notions of *sui generis* religion.

3 J. Jones (1996) uses the term "absolute reductionism." His chapter on "The Dilemmas of Reductionism" provides a clear and helpful historical discussion of parallel problems in the natural sciences and in psychoanalysis with respect to reductionism.