Culture, religion and ‘the dialogical self’:
Roots and character of a secular cultural psychology
of religion

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I. Introduction: Cultural psychology of religion

At present, the interest in the psychology of religion is clearly increasing, not only among students and the general public, but also among practitioners and researchers (cf., for example, publications by the American Psychological Association; e.g., Richards & Bergin 1997, 2000; Shafranske 1996; for a review of the larger field, cf. Belzen 1998, 2000). To a lesser extent this also applies to cultural psychology: There is certainly more interest in the field than there was, say, ten years ago. Some authors and journals associated with this renewed attention to cultural psychology also devote attention to religion; although usually not allied with the psychology of religion, they give examples from religious domains, and certainly no longer treat religion as taboo (cf., e.g., Gergen 1993, 1999; Gone et al. 1999; Much & Mahapatra 1995; Popp-Baier 1998; Sampson 1996). And perhaps even more important, a cultural psychological approach to the study of religion offers the opportunity to overcome some of the aprioris and moral biases that have dominated – and hindered – the psychology of religion for too long (especially the notion that religion is part of man’s nature, and that it is therefore better, or more healthy or whatever, to be religious than non-religious; cf. Belzen 1999). When we understand religion as an element of culture, we need concepts and units of analysis that will enable us to investigate the nexus between a certain culture (or cultural context) and the person, such as activity, action, habitus, and also narrative or ‘story’. The theorizing about the ‘dialogical self’ as initiated by Hermans and Kempen may count as a case. Their work – which has been well received by the international cultural psychology ‘movement’ (Hermans 1999a,b; Valsinger 2001) – is promising for a cultural psychological analysis of religion. It is particularly interesting to take a closer look at this body of theory, as it simultaneously provides an opportunity for an analysis of the second type mentioned above: The development of the concept of the dialogical self is inextricably bound up with the history of psychology at the Catholic University of Nijmegen (the Netherlands). The dialogical self may be regarded as a belated result of a much older Dutch initiative to integrate cultural psychology and the psychology of religion, which led to the establishment of a department for the psychology of culture and religion at Nijmegen in 1956 (although its roots reach back to the founding years of psychology in general in the Netherlands). As well as this, it belatedly catches up with a stand that has been fundamental to all psychologies of religion for a long time: Psychological research on religion must be performed from a secular perspective (cf. Belzen 2001). To corroborate these claims, it is necessary to draw substantially on
The dialogical self

One of the attractive aspects of the concept of the dialogical self as developed by Hermans and Kempen (1993) is that it is both firmly rooted in classical European traditions in psychology, and compatible with contemporary discussions within international, nowadays USA-dominated, psychology. The concept of the dialogical self is the result of an ongoing reception of and conversation with authors as diverse as Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty as representatives of phenomenological thought, James and Mead as representatives of American pragmatism, and Sarbin and the Gergens as representatives of such contemporary movements as social constructionism and narrative psychology. The compatibility with developments presently taking place in philosophy, literary theory and in various segments of interpretative psychologies is evident, as is made clear in *The Dialogical Self* and numerous other publications by Hermans and Kempen (Hermans & Kempen 1993, 1998; Hermans, Rijks & Kempen 1993), as well as in publications by other authors (McAdams 1999; Fogel 1993). In their effort to conceive of the human person as a multiplex and changing, context-dependent, embodied self, Hermans and Kempen clearly contribute to a cultural psychology, as it is presently developing at various places and with different branches, but also as it has a long tradition at Nijmegen, where both authors have been studying and working for some forty years. The diversity of influences and sources manifest in their work has always been a feature – both a strength and a burden – of the Nijmegen department of cultural psychology. But first, let us consider the concept itself very briefly.

Hermans and Kempen propose an idea of the self as a multiplicity of relatively autonomous I positions in an imaginal landscape. Drawing on Sarbin’s (1986) proposal for a narrative psychology, assuming that in the self-narrative a single author tells a story about herself as actor, Hermans and Kempen conceive of the self as polyphonic: One and the same individual lives, or can live, in a multiplicity of worlds, with each world having its own author telling a story relatively independent of the authors of the other worlds. At times the various authors may even enter into a dialogue with one another. Moreover, the self, conceptualized in analogy with a polyphonic novel, has the capacity to integrate also the notions of imaginative narratives and dialogues. In their idea of the self, Hermans and Kempen no longer stipulate – in contrast to James and Mead – an overarching I, which would organize the several constituents of the me. Instead, the spatial character of the self leads to the

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1 A personal note: Harry Kempen died suddenly on March 26, 2000. He was my – and every Dutch cultural psychologist’s – teacher; more important, he was my colleague for many years. At the department for cultural psychology, our offices were next to one another, and we became good friends: For years, we had several conversations each day, during which we shared all sorts of issues, including matters of personal relevance. The present paper draws substantially on these conversations (our ‘thousand hours’, as I used to call them).