INTEGRATING DIFFERING THEORIES

The case of religious development

Summary

Developmental psychology of religion is like a smorgasbord: For some authors conation is a major driving force, for others emotion, for yet others cognition, socialization, psychodynamics, and/or coping with critical or stressing life events, not forgetting attribution theory as a significant predictor. After recalling the necessary background knowledge, a specification for an integrated theory of religious development is presented, and a speculative scheme is advanced in which the weight of the partial theories depends on the native endowment of individuals, their levels of development and personal investment, and situational conditions.

1. Introduction to the basic problem

To situate the problem by way of a comparison: In physics a single mathematical formalism (quantum theory) deals highly successfully with such diverse phenomena as the interactions between massless light quanta (photons) and 'fundamental' particles having a mass, nuclear events, atomic emission and absorption spectra, and particular molecular behaviour. Although the spatial dimensions, the mass range and the time scales involved each span many factors of ten, computations and measurements so far agree to an impressive degree. In contrast, to (more or less properly) understand the religious behaviour of human beings and its development across the life span, a battery of theories needs to be employed at present. Whereas physics research is basically an 'easier' task than research in psychology or sociology (Patry/Reich 1991), I argue here that better theoretical help to the researcher of religion could be provided than is yet available.

To get a sense of the overall situation in psychology of religion (that is not just the developmental aspects) we turn first to Bernard Spilka, Ralph W. Hood, Jr., and Richard L. Gorsuch (1985, pp. 3-17). These authors review many possibilities to comprehend religion: one can adopt an individual's outside/inside or a social perspective, study ritual, doctrine, religious emotions, religious knowledge, ethics, the religious community, conversion or even apostasy, (each time where
applicable this occurs along the dimensions of content, frequency, intensity, centrality [and development, K. H. R.]). One can concentrate on the reasons why people are religious (e.g., instinct, need for meaning and control, wish to avoid anxiety, desire to grow, or simply habit). And one can consider all this for childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age; and for persons of diverse styles (such as scientific, dogmatic, and ad hoc, Berzonsky 1992) and various overriding dispositions (intellectual, emotional, justice orientation, etc.). Additionally, Paul W. Pruyser ([1987]; Malony/Spilka 1991, pp. 191-192) suggests studying faith groups, denominations, sects, cults, various types of individuals (liberal, orthodox, fundamentalist, evangelical, Hindu, Shiite, Sunni, capitalist, Marxist, Anabaptist, militant, pietistic, established, in-free-church tradition, free-thinker, God- and-country ideologist, etc.). Although many pieces of the puzzle exist, it is not surprising that no comprehensive systematic program has been carried out to date, given the extension and diversity of the field, and the small number of labourers. In particular, we lack longitudinal data of religious development, making it difficult to assess competing theoretical claims.

Given these challenges, psychologists have tried to meet them through different approaches. Pruyser (loc. cit., p. 191) lists the following: (a) social-psychological (several), (b) behavioural (c) cognitive (several), (d) classical psychodynamic, (e) ego-psychological, (f) British objective-relations, (g) clinical psychological, (h) pastoral psychological. (i) para-psychological, (j) organizational behaviour, (k) life-course developmental view, (l) stress and crisis, and perhaps even (m) a military view. Hence, just as in the case of mainstream psychology, psychology of religion is so diversified and subspecialized that clearly one can no longer speak of the psychology of religion. In such a situation one can understand that Spilka, Hood, and Gorsuch (1985, p. 17) predict: 'The likelihood is that no one theory will ever suffice for this complex realm'. David M. Wulff (1993) suspects that a truly comprehensive theory of religious stability and change 'is most likely be soft to an extreme and hence not useful in practical affairs'. Nevertheless, after recalling the necessary background information, I present a specification for an integrated theory at least of religious development, and advance a speculative scheme designed to cover a variety of religious life paths.

2. Two major difficulties for attaining theory integration

Two major difficulties for attaining theory integration concern (a) the position with respect to the reality of the transcendent, and (b) the research motives and aims.

(a) Wulff (1991, pp. 630-636) placed various views in psychology of religion into