Towards Cultural Psychology of Religion
Towards Cultural Psychology of Religion

Principles, Approaches, Applications
Acknowledgements

Although none of the chapters in this book have ever been published in their present form, parts of them draw significantly on papers that were previously published. I am grateful to the publishers for granting permission to re-use material from the following publications:

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Preface

The aims pursued in this book are quite modest. The text is not an introduction in the traditional sense to any psychological subdiscipline or field of application, nor does it present anything essentially new. Rather, it shows ‘work in progress’, as it attempts to contribute to an integration of two differently structured, but already existing fields within psychology. In order to explain this, it is probably best to say a few words about how the book came into being and about what it hopes to achieve.

As a project, the volume owes very much to others. While lecturing in places ranging from South Africa to Canada and from California through European countries to Korea, colleagues have often urged me to come up with a volume on ‘cultural psychology of religion’. For reasons that should become clear in the text, I feel uncomfortable with such a demand. To my understanding, there exists no single cultural psychology of religion. Rather, there are ever expanding numbers of divergent types of psychologies, some of which are applied to understanding religious aspects of human lives or to researching specific religious phenomena, while others are not. Within this heterogeneous field that is, correctly or not, still designated as ‘psychology’, there are also many approaches that are sometimes referred to as ‘cultural psychology’ or as ‘culturally sensitive psychologies’. It would be worthwhile applying many of these to research on religious phenomena, but at present not too many are in fact so applied.

As I resisted the idea of writing an ‘introduction’, a ‘handbook’ or a ‘companion’ to cultural psychologies of religion, Joao Edenio Reis Valle and Marcio Fabri, both from Sao Paulo, suggested I should at least bring together a number of previously published papers in which I advocate cultural psychological approaches to the study of religion and that offer a specimen of the kind of interdisciplinary work I envision. Indeed, this is what this collection attempts: it tries, through a number of essays that may each be read separately, to serve as an ‘appetizer’ to possible ways of doing cultural psychology of religion. It hopes to make the reader aware of the possibility of applying cultural psychological approaches within the psychology of religion, and it hopes to stimulate others to indulge in this type of research. The volume owes much to the anonymous reviewers of the manuscript and to the editors of journals and other media in which the various chapters were initially published, as well as to comments made at the final stage by Ray Paloutzian, Ulrike Popp-Baier,
Hessel Zondag and others. Supporters of the project from the field of cultural psychology include Carl Ratner, Jürgen Straub and Jaan Valsiner, all of whom I gratefully acknowledge.

A volume like this has limitations of several kinds. Many such limitations are due to the person of the author. Colleagues from especially the USA have often remarked how different the kind of work represented here is from what is being done in so-called mainstream psychology in the USA. The work is seen as European, and if it is true I am grateful for it and proud of it. Yet, whether I like it or not, it also has to be admitted that throughout the work it will remain visible that the author is Dutch, educated and trained primarily in the Netherlands, doing research mainly in that country. None of this, however, is a problem within the type of psychological knowledge and research represented here: as all knowledge is limited and situated, so is everything that is offered and proposed here. Cultural psychologists do not strive for universally valid knowledge: such is left to other branches of scholarship, working on such foundations of human functioning as may be analyzed using natural science approaches. Cultural psychology does not deny or trivialize such foundations. But it does remind us of the limits that inevitably go with such approaches as well: for next to being impossible without genetic, neurological, chemical and many other foundations approachable by natural sciences, psychic phenomena are instigated and regulated by cultural conditions, determinations and limitations to human conduct, such as conventions, norms, beliefs, practices and many others more. Cultural psychologists urge their colleagues in other fields not to forget about these, but to come up with types of knowledge additional to those discovered by psychologists collaborating with neurologists or geneticists. By consequence, the type of knowledge cultural psychologists provided is valid first and foremost (and sometimes even only) at the place and at the moment it was developed. Therefore, what this book has to offer is not a paradigm of how to do cultural psychological research on whatever religion wherever on the planet. It does not offer a recipe at all, but rather an appetizer: it provides an invitation to take notice of and to get involved in this kind of research, by offering examples of how cultural psychological approaches can be applied to the study of specific forms of religion. That these examples deal largely with the so-called gereformeerd (Reformed, a subclass of Calvinism) in the Netherlands has mainly to do with my situatedness as a researcher and an author: the Reformed have been and continue to constitute an important, in itself not homogeneous, religious subculture in the Netherlands, to which I myself have never belonged (nor did my family), but which I happened to come across in some of my earliest research projects and that I have some in-depth knowledge about. (And lest anyone thinks I would be particularly fond of gereformeerd, I have included in chapter 10 also an analysis of an incident they have always been embarrassed about.)

Next to gratitude for moral support provided by colleagues from many countries, this volume owes a debt also to others who helped out with many practical things, esp. to Fraser Watts, the director of the Psychology and Religion Research Group at the University of Cambridge (UK), who invited me to be a visiting Fellow during the Fall of 2008 and to shelter at Queens’ College away from the many distractions
from intellectual work that prevail at the University of Amsterdam. I am grateful for the opportunity to share ideas from this book with members of his Research Group and for the opportunity to see what a truly academic setting can look like.

Hopefully, this collection conveys some of the enthusiasm with which the studies have been pursued: contrary to the tendency to tailor empirical phenomena according to theoretical categories and to press them into the moulds provided by research methods, cultural psychology allows the researcher to remain close to the lived reality of subjects’ lives, seeking by necessity collaboration with other approaches that try to interpret these lives and their vicissitudes. Although they are just like every other scientific and reflective approach apt to reducing complexity, cultural psychologies try to resist the tendency to reductionism found so often in research on religion and to help to deconstruct scientific prejudices and all too easy answers to all too simple questions. Paradoxically, the aims pursued by this volume will be achieved if readers put it aside as insufficient and not good enough, asking for more and for better, and are consequently inspired to try to come up with such themselves. Bon appétit!

Amsterdam, Cambridge

Jacob A. Belzen

New Year’s Eve 2008
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Introduction
Very generally formulated, the aim of this book is to plea for an approach to “religion” from a cultural psychological perspective. However, even though refraining from any jargon, this formulation may easily evoke all kinds of problems in understanding. For what is meant by “religion” (the word is not without reason written between quotation marks! Such usually indicates a problem of some kind …)? What is to be understood by an approach to “religion”? And what is a cultural psychological perspective? The easiest answer to such questions would be: Just read this book! Having done so, you should know what was meant. Admittedly, this doesn’t sound too satisfactory, and it may even suggest the author is too lazy to answer appropriate questions. It seems more adequate, therefore, to explain at least some general terms and to preclude misunderstandings, even before the book really commences. Let us then circumscribe the aim of this volume once more, but a little differently, in a way that will hopefully help to situate it. As this is going to be a book in the field of cultural psychology as much as in that of psychology of religion, it aims to contribute to an integration of cultural psychology into the psychology of religion. This perhaps sounds more familiar to some people than others, who may not know what to think of when hearing the additional term “psychology of religion.” Let us start then by saying something about this discipline, its possibilities and its problems, and work our way up to its relationship with cultural psychology, in order to explain what kind of book this is going to be (and not going to be!) and what can be expected from its main corpus.

What Is Psychology of Religion?

Should one desire to do so, one could easily sing the praises of the present status of the psychology of religion: never before have there been so many psychological publications on religion, so many meetings and conferences, such an interest – within as well as outside academia – in what psychology may have to say about religiosity and spirituality. Networks are being established, journals founded, people
appointed – the field truly seems to be doing well. From someone who makes his living from the psychology of religion, one might perhaps expect praise such as this. Yet, an academic may also be expected to be earnest and serious; and, given that, I immediately want to express more concern than praise. Not that anything I said is wrong or untrue: it is just not the whole truth. At the very least I should point out the similarity of the current situation to that of a century ago: in those days too the psychology of religion was rapidly gaining an audience and both within and outside psychology there were journals founded and organizations established. But we should especially not forget what happened between these two peaks in activity: the enormous decline of the discipline. As this book is not going to be about history, I am not going to ruminate about the reasons for the earlier decline and the present growth of the field. In the background, there are some concerns I want to comment on briefly, however, and I hope to suggest some remedies. Before doing so, I should first add a little nuance to what I’ve said about the present blossoming of the discipline.

There certainly is great interest in what psychology might have to say about “religion,” religiosity and spirituality. Any book store offers dozens of books on these themes, sometimes entire sections devoted to the subject; and there are workshops and seminars offered on psychology and spirituality, and so on. It is important to realize, however, that not everything psychological about “religion” is psychology of religion. Stated even more strongly: it is most likely that the majority of those books and activities do not belong to the psychology of religion. This position grants that the expression “psychology of religion” may itself give rise to problems of understanding. Briefly, what is not meant by the expression is a psychology that belongs to, is part of, or articulates or serves the perspective of any single “religion.” Psychology of religion is therefore no “religious psychology” (as the discipline was, misleadingly, called for many decades).¹ In the psychology of religion the aim and purpose is to use psychological instruments (like theories, concepts, insights, methods and techniques) to analyze and understand “religion.” This needs to be done from a scholarly, distant perspective, remaining as personally detached as possible, as is required in all of the Religionswissenschaften, those scholarly disciplines dealing with “religion” such as the history, sociology, anthropology, archaeology and

¹The term “religious psychology” is misleading though not necessarily wrong, if understood as analogous to terms like “social psychology,” “clinical psychology” and so on. Evidently, social psychology is not social in itself: it is the psychology about the social dimension of human life and its impact on psychic functioning; clinical psychology is not clinical itself: it is about mental dysfunctions, that may be in need of clinical treatment, and so on. Likewise, religious psychology can be understood to refer to branches of psychology dealing with religion or religious life. As the term may nevertheless raise misunderstandings, however, I shall, in accordance with what has become customary today, speak of “psychology of religion” and restrict the use of “religious psychology” to refer to types of psychology that are, in one way or another, religious in themselves. Trying to introduce a neologism like “psychology on religion”, though a correct one perhaps, would not contribute much clarity.
What Is Psychology of Religion?

economics of religion, and several others.\textsuperscript{2} I immediately grant that each religious tradition contains a great deal of psychological insight – that counselors, spiritual directors and other psychologically gifted religious professionals have considerable insight into human psychic functioning (cf. Marcus 2003; see also the accounts by Aronson (2004), Dockett et al. (2003) and Levine (2000), for examples from the Buddhist traditions). This cannot, however, be considered scientific psychological knowledge – just as knowledge generated by novelists, philosophers and poets is also not called scientific knowledge.\textsuperscript{3} Further, there is considerable knowledge and insight of a psychological kind that is directly related to or founded in religious ideas. Well-known examples include C.G. Jung’s psychology and the many publications of esoteric and transpersonal perspectives: interesting as they may be, these are not usually considered part of the psychology of religion, not even by the authors themselves (cf., e.g., Faiver et al. 2001; Corbett 1996; Young-Eisendraht and Muramoto 2002; Young-Eisendrath and Miller 2000).

Psychology of religion is neither to be identified with what is sometimes indicated as “psychology and religion” or as “the dialogue between psychology and theology.” This field, with quite a number of practitioners, is a subfield of theology or of religious studies, and at universities or colleges is usually found within those departments. (For powerful critiques of “religious studies” as an academic branch as such, see Fitzgerald (2000, 2007) and McCutcheon (2003).) Ever since modern psychology came into being, numerous theologians and other religious thinkers have had a lively interest in this discipline – focusing on a subject that has always been of prime concern to theologians too: the human soul. I am not going to dwell on how the understanding of the “soul” rapidly changed and diverged between the two academic fields, and how especially psychology hastened to get rid of the concept of the “soul.” The only point now is that many theologians, either because of their practical work as pastors or due to more systematic academic interests, closely

\textsuperscript{2}I strongly prefer the term “sciences of religion” (\textit{Religionswissenschaften}) to the term “religious studies.” The former I understand to be the conglomerate of all scientific approaches to “religion” (however understood), practiced from the perspective of the different disciplines that might be relevant to investigating any “religious” phenomenon or state of affairs (but ideally pursued from an interdisciplinary perspective); and they are usually situated at a department for the advancement of that specific discipline. “Religious studies” is usually an indication of a department or a style that derives from a (formerly) theological department or discourse, even though it sometimes claims to be rooted in a scholarly discipline like the history of religion. History of religion, however, is very often a kind of interpretative enterprise, not engaging in any empirical historical work, but mainly commenting on research done previously by others. Needless to say, such interpretive work can be brilliant, whereas most empirical work can be very boring.\textemdash For a related view, see Segal (2006). Needless to say too, that psychology of religion is, by definition, one of the “sciences of religion.”

\textsuperscript{3}This is not to say that these kinds of knowledge would be of less value than scientific knowledge! On the contrary, as should become clear, I am well aware of the very limited value of scientific knowledge, especially in the human sciences like psychology; for the moment, I want merely to distinguish the different types of knowledge.
Building Bridges

followed developments in modern psychology and tried to relate to these in their own work. Some even integrated parts of psychology into their thinking or became at least deeply influenced by what psychology, or what branches of scholarship focusing on human experiences, had to say (see, e.g. Tillich, Pannenberg or Schillebeeckxx). None of this, however, constitutes psychology of religion, understood in the very modest and general sense just mentioned. Only a very limited number of theologians turned to the psychology of religion in the proper sense; some of them even turned into psychologists of religion themselves, taking up theories, methods and techniques from a relevant psychological school and setting out to conduct empirical research or to at least produce psychological analyses of religious phenomena (see e.g. Batson et al. 1993; Girgensohn 1921/1930; Malony and Lovekin 1985; Vergote 1983/1997). In general, however, scholars from “psychology and religion” or from the “psychology and theology dialogue” remained interested primarily in broad theoretical issues – more in psychological theories in general than in practicing empirical psychological work, whether on “religion” or otherwise (Angel 2006; Crocket 2007; Browning 1987; Gundry 2006; Homans 1968, 1970, 1979, 1989, Jonte-Pace 2001, 2003; Parsons et al. 2008; Santner 2001). To someone primarily interested in theoretical issues, “psychology and religion” will be far more attractive than the inevitably very limited scope and results of any psychology of religion (which at best relates to “psychology and religion” only as a small element of a much larger whole, see Jonte-Pace and Parsons 2001). For by virtue of their training and their need to participate in discussions and in the media of their professional peers, psychologists of religion – who follow trends within psychology in general – have often narrowed down their research and reflections to small scale questions that are not so interesting to people from the “psychology and theology dialogue.” Typically, the latter acquaint themselves mostly with what is probably the most theoretical of all psychological schools, psychoanalysis. As a consequence, students in religious studies usually hear only the grand, but by now a bit hoary, theories of Freud and Jung (Palmer 1997; Vandermeersch 1974/1991), only seldom about more recent developments in psychoanalysis (Jacobs and Capps 1997; Jones 1991, 1996; Leupin 2004), and hardly ever about other branches of psychology, whether related to research on “religion” or not (Gundry 2006; Jonte-Pace and Parsons 2001; notable exceptions in this regard being Bulkeley (2005), Turner (2008), and Watts (2002)).

As I do not wish this chapter to become merely an enumeration of all kinds of psychology related to “religion” that are not psychology of religion, I shall mention only one more category: so-called pastoral psychology (for recent introductions, cf. Klessmann 2004; Watts et al. 2002). Work done in this field is often of good scholarly quality, but it is the intention behind the work that makes the difference to the psychology of religion in the proper sense: pastoral psychology serves religious purposes; it is the psychology that helps the pastor, a psychology developed and practiced to facilitate the aims of (usually Christian) churches. There is hardly anything wrong with this, of course, and within pastoral psychology people are very often well acquainted with and employ the psychology of religion; the point is that the latter is, in principal, neutral towards its object: it does not want to foster nor to
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combat “religion,” only to analyze and understand it (Belzen 1995–1996). Similarly, psychology of religion is not to be identified with any integration of psychology and theology, or of psychology and Christianity. (For information on that “movement”, see Stevenson et al. 2007.) Here too, the psychological study of religion is not an end in itself, but a kind of handmaiden to a religiously inspired goal.

A critical reply to all of this might be that, regarded in this way, there seems not to be very much psychology of religion at all! That is essentially correct. If we take by way of example the largest organization for psychology in the world, the American Psychological Association, and its psychology of religion division, which is mid-sized among APA divisions, we should realize that the large majority of its 2,500-plus membership is not very interested in the psychology of religion in its proper sense. Most of the members are psychologists with a private interest in “religion,” of whom quite a number are interested in integrating “religion” into their professional work as, especially, clinical professionals (Cashwell and Young 2005; Frame 2003; Fukuyama and Sevig 1999; Miller 2002; Richards and Bergin 1997; Sperry 2001; West 2000).

Also recall that prior to 1992, Division 36 was for years called “psychologists interested in religious issues”, and that there are strong forces at work that would either like to return to that name or change it into “psychology of religion and spirituality,” cf. the discussions in the Division’s Newsletter from the beginning of this century. The psychology of religion is therefore a field of very moderate size with a limited number of practitioners worldwide. This field is doing relatively well and there are indeed praises to be sung, albeit that one should know what one is singing praises about and also what kind of praises can be sung at all.

I admit that the picture painted here is too simple, perhaps too optimistic: most psychologists of religion do have some private reasons for being involved in this work, reasons that may be partly religious too; yet, as in all sciences of religion, psychology of religion should observe an epistemological episteme in the Husserlian sense: it should refrain from passing judgment on axiological pronunciations and on claims to ontological truth of the religions it studies. This position is difficult to master and requires considerable training to even begin to understand it. However, the attempt to do justice to religions other than one’s own and to be critical toward one’s own religion as well, are essential elements for any scientific study of religion. In Chapter 6 I will deal with this issue in some detail.

To complicate things, but more importantly, to make this account more truthful to the actual situation: although psychology of religion is usually practiced by psychologists, this is not necessarily so. Classic studies have been published by psychiatrists like Meissner (1992) and Rizzuto (1979), both working from a psychoanalytic perspective. Also people coming from and employed at a theological or religious studies department sometimes contribute genuine psychological studies of a religious phenomenon. (Though usually restricting themselves to working with psychoanalytic theories, they often choose very interesting topics, like the person of Jesus of Nazareth (Capps 2000; Watts 2007), the Bible (Ellens and Rollins 2004; Rollins 1999), religious violence (Ellens 2004; Jones 2008) and many others more). And on the other hand, psychologists also sometimes add to the “psychology and religion” literature, as, e.g. Johnson and Jones 2000; Olson 2002; Roberts and Talbot 1997. The distinctions made in this chapter do not aim to present categories with strict boundaries, they have heuristic value only.

One finds excellent reviews of theories in the field, especially of the older ones, in Wulff (1997) and an up-to-date overview of contemporary empirical research in Hood et al. (2009).
I would like to mention only a few indicators of the vitality of the field, which include the many empirical investigations reviewed by, e.g., Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle. In 1997 they published an updated version of their 1975 *Social Psychology of Religion*; and when the two volumes are compared it is impressive to see how much more recent empirical work is included. (The same conclusion can be reached when comparing the subsequent editions of the best available review of empirical research in general – that by Hood et. al. 2009.) Another example: about 20 years ago not a single introduction to the field existed, but now we have several (e.g., Argyle 2000; Hemminger 2003; Loewenthal 2000). To a great extent this certainly is the result of the ever-increasing number of psychological investigations and publications in general, and also of the fact that “religion” is a much less taboo theme within psychology than it was just a few years ago (even the American Psychological Association recently published a number of best-selling books on the subject, cf. volumes like Richards and Bergin 1997, 2000; Shafranske 1996a; Sperry and Shafranske 2005). If, however, we ask whether there has been much progress in the psychology of religion (next to quantitative growth), the answer needs to be more modest: it very much remains to be determined whether we have actually learned more about “religion” over the last 20 years, or whether we deal more adequately with “religion” in psychological research and other branches of professional psychological work. I would especially like to draw attention to one very problematic point.

**Psychological Research: on Religion?**

Many are the problems with the object of our discipline. As we have seen above, the object of the psychology of religion can be determined as “religion” – it sounds very easy, almost tautological. It is by no means clear what “religion” is, however. To roughly summarize the entire literature on the definition of “religion” (cf., e.g., Platvoet and Molendijk 1999; Greil and Bromley 2003), let me point out that “religion” is much too broad a term; it fails altogether to subsume the worldwide multitude of phenomena called “religion” into a single, comprehensive, universally valid definition or concept (cf. Feil 1986, 1997; Fitzgerald 2007; Haußig 1999; Kippenberg 2001). For the psychology of religion this is a problem, but not a special or a specific one: the definition and conceptualization of “religion” is a problem to all sciences of religion and can probably be better solved by philosophers and phenomenologists of religion than by psychologists of religion (who may however contribute to reflection on the problem to some extent, see Chapter 7). For psychologists, especially after having taken notice of cultural psychological reflections, the solution may pragmatically consist in doing research on phenomena that can with some authority – be it even only common sense, in a certain society – be referred to as “religious,” *provided* – and this is essential – the psychologist understands that her results cannot, or at least cannot easily, be generalized to other phenomena also called “religious.” (I shall return to this instantly. But I shall first try to explain why I come up with what proposal.) For psychologists, as for other scientists studying religion, it would be far
more adequate to state they have been doing research on this or that phenomenon from this or that tradition on this or that location, than to claim to have been doing research on “religion.” As there is no need for empirical researchers on religion to try to settle what should or should not be understood by the designation “religion,” they may turn to the investigation of phenomena generally accepted as being religious. (And following William James, I would even recommend selecting intensive as opposed to liminal cases of what is considered religion or religiosity.) As this sounds terribly clumsy, it may perhaps be best to continue, even in this book, to use the word “religion,” understood in the problematic but modest sense just pointed out.

The definition and conceptualization of religion being primarily an issue for philosophers of religion (and probably for practitioners of “religious studies,” cf. McCutcheon 1999, 2003), there is another question to which I wish to draw attention: does the psychology of religion have much to say at all about that diffuse object, religion? This question is both central and vital to the psychology of religion. For if this question is answered in the negative, we should immediately ask, What has the psychology of religion been doing for more than a century now? What does the recent growth of this field really constitute other than and more than just an increase of activities under the label “psychology of religion”? In all likelihood we will probably have to admit that most of the work in the psychology of religion is not about religion, not about the phenomena usually regarded as religious (not about rituals, prayer or martyrdom, not about miracles, visions and appearances, not about worship, priests and saints – to mention just a few phenomena that are commonly considered to be religious, although this is probably not always correct). At best, most of the psychology of religion is about religiosity, about the individual-personal counterpart of some type of religion (Belzen 2005a). To a large extent this is understandable: psychology is the science of the “psyche”: it is about psychic functioning, and as this is most easily investigated via individual subjects, Western psychology at large certainly has had an inclination toward the individual and the personal.7 I can only touch upon it briefly here, but an oft-observed tragedy is that psychology nowadays hardly deals with individuals and persons anymore, but just with presumed isolated psychic processes or even with some variables only (Fox and Prilleltensky 1997). Across academic psychology the experiment is considered the ideal research method: it is able to detect and distinguish variables that can then be manipulated under experimental conditions and thereby generating solid knowledge. One of the problems with this approach, however, is its limited external validity: even if it were possible to dissect psychic processes into units that can be measured and manipulated, results from studies in laboratory settings would hardly apply to the much more complex, far less predictable and almost uncontrollable real-life situations outside the laboratory.

7 Although it may seem niggling to some, I like to continue to distinguish between a theory and what the theory is about. Psychology consists of theories, and what is part of such theories is correctly called “psychological”, belonging to the science (logos) of the psyche; what psychological theories are about, however, should correctly be referred to as “psychic”. So, with “psychic” I do not mean clairvoyant or telepathic but the aspects of empirical reality dealt with in psychologies.
Moreover, as concerns religion, one wonders whether it is at all subject to experimentation. The psychology of religion naturally orient itself to psychology in general, however, and consequently quite a number of psychologists of religion have attempted to distinguish just such variables; although it should be noted that the majority of empirical studies are not experimental, but correlational (Hood and Belzen 2005).

Following such trends in psychology in general, research in the psychology of religion has focused on individual religiosity (Hill and Hood 1999), often assessed only by a rating scale and correlated with one other issue (e.g., general satisfaction and subjective well-being, stress, adjustment, affective disorders, trauma and intervention, addiction, care-giving for disabled elders, abuse, blood pressure, burnout, etc.). Yet one must ask whether psychology in general did not make a major theoretical and methodological mistake in focusing almost exclusively on the individual. Psychology has done so in an ill-understood effort to mirror the natural sciences: it naturalizes its object of study. Its *modus operandi* is marked by de-subjectivization and de-contextualization as it tries to produce universally valid results. It is precisely this last assumption which needs to be challenged, however, as has been the case in the history of psychology time and time again. Even the founding father of experimental psychology, Wilhelm Wundt, contested the view that in order to understand higher psychic processes it is sufficient to restrict oneself to investigating individuals. As other researchers have made clear, numerous psychic processes (e.g., thinking, learning, memory, etc.) are dependent upon and conditioned by language and other aspects of our acculturation (Cole 1996). The relationship between culture and psychic functioning cannot be studied experimentally, but needs to be investigated by methods developed in other human and social sciences, such as history, sociology, anthropology, and others. Wundt already concluded that psychology must consist of two branches: an experimental, physiological individual psychology and what he called *Völkerpsychologie*, what we would today perhaps call a social scientific psychology or even better a cultural psychology. In Wundt’s opinion psychology should not only take individual psychic processes as its objects, but also topics such as language, justice, ethics, customs, society and religion. All of these are clearly elements of culture: none of them is produced by a single individual but they are products of the coordinated action of a plurality of individuals. Language, for example, is not dependent upon the individual – it is the other way round: in order to be able to speak, an individual must adapt to a pre-existing language. It is the same with other domains of culture: in order to survive and become fully human, every infant must be acculturated, must become a participant in culture. This is equally applicable to religion, according to Wundt, and he therefore declared the psychological study of religion to be possible only by means of cultural psychology.

In my opinion Wundt’s insights remain largely valid. As I shall argue in Chapter 7, it is tragic that they have been so quickly forgotten unlike his experimental and individual psychology. There are many reasons for this – that I cannot recount here in detail, as this is not going to be a study in history. But a very important one is certainly the rise of behaviorism in the USA, which focused expressly on individuals, largely disregarding how they interacted with culture. Moreover, in the early days promises were far more common than convincing results. Wundt developed
his ideas at the same time that philosophers such as Dilthey and Rickert differentiated between the natural sciences and the humanities or cultural sciences. Those working in the latter sciences had come to realize that human functioning can be and in effect is very different at other times and in other places. They did not yet have the proper instruments (theories, concepts or research methods) to explore and conceptualize these insights, however. Wundt also lacked such essential tools and employed notions like “folkspirit and folksoul,” “prehistoric and history,” “individual and society,” none of which are psychological concepts. Even then, and increasingly ever since, psychologists have oriented themselves overwhelmingly toward the more prestigious natural sciences and have thereby largely lost sight of the social scientific component of their discipline. Since then, many theories compatible with Wundt’s plea for a cultural psychology have been developed (although they have not usually been applied within the psychology of religion); but very often either those theories were neglected (as happened to William James’ *Principles*, Belzen 2005b, 2006), or they were formulated by persons who have come to be regarded as non-psychologists within the historiography of the history of psychology (for example George Herbert Mead or Norbert Elias).

This having been said, I am not simply and naively going to propose a “return to Wundt,” or to anyone, in this book. History proceeds whimsically, dialectically at best; there is no way to return to a past position nor is there much use in attempting to do so (for the past isn’t around anymore, things have changed). What we can and should do, however, is to take notice of what our predecessors said and did in order to take advantage in the present situation. Moreover, I think Wundt was exaggerating: although I agree with him that religion is clearly a phenomenon on the level of culture (not of the individual), I disagree with his position that investigation of individual religiosity is useless. I do see religiosity as one of the subjects for the psychology of religion, but two important points need to be taken into consideration: first, religiosity should be studied as the result of the subject’s being embedded in religion at a cultural level; and second, psychology should not forget to try to say something about religion as a cultural phenomenon too. Much of this also pertains to spirituality, which quite a number of psychologists of religion have recently come to regard as the main object of the psychology of religion. (In Chapter 6 I shall deal in more detail with this issue and with the possibilities and problems that relate to it.) What I shall propose in the following chapters of this book is to try to pursue the psychology of “religion” including “religiosity” and “spirituality” from the perspective of cultural psychology. As it must be tedious to readers to see such words constantly between quotation marks, and even more to be confronted with a circumscription time and again of what is and what is not meant by such a word, I shall just write: religiosity and spirituality, as with the word religion, mainly for reasons of elegance and simplicity. This does not imply that there is any single and clear understanding of what these terms stand for; nor does it mean I would assume a “common core” to exist to all that is called religion or religious or spirituality or spiritual (Hill 2000; Hill and Pargament 2003; Hood 2003a; Zinnbauer and Pargament 2005). As indicated, these are not issues to be settled by psychologists. For a psychologist, the remedy exists in doing research on persons, phenomena, events and in general on states of affairs that others than psychologists
have designated as religion or as religious. As I shall defend later at greater length in this book from a cultural psychological perspective, my plea will be to do research on such phenomena that are plainly recognizable as religious in a given culture, not to draw conclusions true and valid for all religions (for there exists no religion-in-general, there is no religion-as-such, separable from other cultural entities and manifestations). The desire for such conclusions is inappropriate when it comes to research into any of the phenomena that are high on the cultural psychological agenda: research for what might be true of all human functioning, regardless of cultural context, is not an aim for cultural psychology. (But it may well be for other branches of psychology, like evolutionary psychology, neuropsychology or physiological psychology. Acknowledging the importance of these approaches, in themselves just as partial as any cultural psychological approach, a cultural psychologist will probably still be tempted to look for cultural impact, even at the levels on which these psychologies are operating, and not without reason. It is even questionable whether any specifically human functioning exists without relation to culture.) Not pretending to achieve results that are valid always and everywhere, cultural psychological research into specific forms of religion does give rise to heuristic hypotheses about the possible intertwining of religion and psychic functioning at other places and at different times and about ways to investigate this.

The Relationship Between Cultural Psychology and Psychology of Religion

Naturally, at this point the argumentation could switch to an exposition of what cultural psychology is, or of what is usually meant by it. Such, however, will be attempted in almost all of the following chapters. Therefore, at this point, a few words should suffice, especially to make clear the relationship to other psychological approaches to the study of religion. First of all, just as with religion, I shall usually speak of cultural psychology in the singular, although this is not entirely correct: there exists no single cultural psychology, there only exist cultural psychological theories, and an even larger number of culturally inclusive psychological approaches and concepts. It is just for convenience sake that we speak of cultural psychology as if it were a homogeneous enterprise. But the cultural psychological perspectives referred to or drawn on in this book should not be identified with cross-cultural psychology: these are separate approaches working with different conceptions of culture. Cross-cultural psychology operates with a rather traditional understanding of culture, conceiving it as a variable that possibly influences behavior, and comparatively investigating how experience and behavior, attitudes, social relationships etc. present themselves within different cultural conditions. Cultural psychology, on the contrary, stresses that all of these are essentially cultural: they are the effect of culture, as opposed to only being influenced by culture. All cultural patterns of acting, thinking and experiencing are created, adopted and promulgated by a number of individuals jointly. Such patterns are supra-individual (social) rather than individual;
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and they are artifactual rather than natural. Therefore, psychological phenomena are cultural insofar as they are social artifacts, i.e., insofar as their content, mode of operation and dynamic relationships are (a) socially created and shared by a number of individuals, and (b) integrated with other social artifacts (Ratner 2002, p. 9). Being an interdisciplinary approach, cultural psychology has a number of natural allies: as human conduct and functioning changes over time and as any state of affairs needs a genetic explanation, cultural psychology lines up with historical scholarship to interpret the present. When studying contemporary subjects, it also and in addition relates to disciplines like sociology, ethnemethodology and anthropology. Especially when dealing with non-Western subjects or when making comparisons between subjects from various countries, the confusion with “cross-cultural psychology” (Berry 1992; Bouvy 1994; Grad et al. 1996; Moghaddam et al. 1993) occurs. But, again, the latter approach usually takes existing Western psychological constructs, and tests for their presence in other cultures, while cultural psychology is inclined to ground theoretical categories in terms of the specific cultures from which they are derived (Much 1995).

Let us now turn to the relationship between cultural psychologies and the psychologies of religion as they are usually pursued today. Let us take a look again on a kind of “meta”-level, not to give an account of the goals and results of either cultural psychology or psychology of religion, but rather to compare them one to another. Some brief comments should help to bring the two fields more clearly into focus. As just noted, from a historical perspective, the fields of cultural psychology and of psychology of religion have a number of things in common. They were both prominent in the days that psychology developed into an independent branch of scholarship; they both suffered from the narrowing down of perspectives in psychology; and they both enjoy a recent come-back (cf. the almost simultaneous publication of handbooks for cultural psychology by Kitayama and Cohen 2007, and Valsiner and Rosa 2007, and of handbooks for psychology of religion and spirituality by Bucher 2007, and Paloutzian and Park 2005). The similar history led, however, to a major change in their relationship: whereas initially they were related (as with Wundt), nowadays there is not much of an overlap between the two fields anymore, and a new rapprochement needs to be brought about, to the benefit especially of the psychology of religion. (The handbooks on cultural psychology each devote one chapter to religion; the handbooks on psychology of religion and spirituality contain nothing about cultural psychology.) All meaningful human conduct is cultural, but some domains of human psychic functioning are more cultural than others. It will be self-evident that phenomena typically investigated on a psychophysiological level are less prone to cultural influence than perceptual phenomena, and that these again are less cultural in nature than what personality psychologists are doing research on. Phenomena like nationalism, honor, gratitude and many more that precisely make the world a human world are almost entirely cultural, however. This does not imply – a point that for didactical reasons should be iterated time and again – that on this level of human functioning psychophysiology doesn’t play a role: to all human functioning all levels that can be distinguished in psychological analyses are relevant! In psychic phenomena like cognitive development, meaning giving, mourning,
memory, sense of self, however conceptualized, processes central to genetics, physiology, neurology and many other sciences play a more evident role. The issue is that for an embracing understanding of certain phenomena under scrutiny, sometimes an approach from one corner of psychology may be more relevant than from another corner of psychology. To explore the different forms of identity formation found in various cultures or the psychic aspects of diverging practices in different religions, one is probably better off with an approach that takes historical and socio-cultural factors into account than with an approach rooted in biopsychology only. (Not that the latter is impossible: recently a number of studies have been published that fruitfully integrate cognitive psychological perspectives into anthropological and even into archeological research, see Cohen 2007; Whitehouse and Laidlaw 2004; Whitehouse and Martin 2004. The only comment a cultural psychologist would make here, is that cognitive functioning as such is not universally identical:; we find the impact of culture also on a cognitive level, cf. Kotre 1995; Miller 1999; Wang and Ross 2007.)

If we have understood this correctly, we can avoid two all too common misunderstandings. First, cultural psychologists do not always or do not exclusively do research on phenomena that are mostly cultural in nature. Cultural psychologists do not only engage in research into cultural phenomena like citizenship, traffic, marriage, circumcision, etc. Cultural psychologists could investigate all other subjects about which psychologists in general are doing research, only they are especially keen on how culture instigates and regulates them. Second, in so doing, cultural psychologists do not primarily try to understand complex functioning in terms of theories designed to explain less complex functioning (which is to a large extent just reductionism). Without denying that factors appropriate to a lesser complex level of psychic functioning are significant, cultural psychologists turn to culturally sensitive approaches to discuss the phenomena under scrutiny. They do this even to such an extent that quite a number of psychologists, oriented other than towards culture, reproach the cultural psychologists of having left psychology altogether and of becoming engaged in history or sociology or anthropology or another “culturological” approach. As I shall try to show, this is a reproach that may have been understandable some decades ago, but which is no longer valid: by now, cultural psychologists have developed and are drawing on a great number of theories and concepts that try to conceptualize precisely the nexus between “culture,” however understood, and “human psychic functioning,” however conceptualized. But, indeed, in research their modus operandi is characterized by an interdisciplinary approach: they will try to conduct their investigations by examining real life situations; they will work together with anthropologists, sociologists, historians, folklorists, linguists, and with representatives of whatever discipline may help to answer their questions (Boesch and Straub 2006; Straub and Werbik 1999).

What should be clear from this brief exposition is that there are some major differences between cultural psychology and psychology of religion. One may rightly say of both that they are characterized by multiplicity: as with cultural psychology, one can do psychology of religion in many different ways. But whereas a valid psychology could ignore religion, no valid psychology can afford to be culturally insensitive.
Any psychology that aspires to be more embracing than just an idea or a concept, must take into account the cultural nature of human psychic functioning. But while every psychology can be employed in research on religion, it need not necessarily do so. If research and theory in the psychology of religion have brought to light anything, it is this: religion is not a property of human psychic functioning; it is the opposite: in all religions the entire range of psychic functioning manifests itself. Therefore, research into the psychophysiological underpinnings of a type of behavior such as prayer is well possible, just as it is possible to do research into the psychophysiological underpinnings of swimming, reading, planning a holiday. But in order to understand why this child prays to Allah and another to the Virgin Mary, or even to understand why such prayer can have become so important for an adult that she or he would rather die than discontinue practicing it, psychophysiological knowledge is not of prime relevance. To explore the particularities of any religious behavior – it should be emphasized again: there is nothing that is true of all behavior called religious; not even prayer is considered the same in all religions or as centrally important as in the example just given – and the attitudes, meanings, emotions and practices that go with it, one is better advised to turn to cultural approaches. But this is only the case, of course, if one is interested in doing research on any type of religious conduct; such research is not a requirement that must be fulfilled by any psychology to be sound. To the different types of psychology, religion is first and foremost a field of application. Religion can be approached from any psychology (though some psychological perspectives are more appropriate than others). Such research into religion is not an urgent issue for psychology, however; it is urgent for persons interested, for whatever reasons, in religions; and it is pressing for society, as religions are of great importance to numerous participants of almost all societies. To the extent that psychology of religion has any importance, it derives its importance entirely from the relevance religion has to societies as well as to individuals.

Formulated somewhat more in slogans: cultural psychology is not only about culture, about cultural artifacts, etc.; cultural psychological viewpoints should be included in and should be driving any psychology. Psychology of religion is a heterogeneous field, consisting of all the efforts that have been undertaken to understand religious phenomena from the perspectives of, in principle, all psychologies that could have been applied to religion. Cultural psychology, understood as culturally sensitive forms of psychology, is a must; psychologies can only neglect the cultural nature of human psychic functioning to their detriment. Religion, however, can be neglected for a long time before any psychology will have to be criticized as invalid.

A number of further comparisons can now be made between cultural psychology and psychology of religion; and these will need less explanation. Cultural psychology is a very broad, in principle infinite field; psychology of religion is a rather limited field (for it is “only” about religions, however broadly one may define these). Both fields are rapidly expanding, but whereas contributions are made from literally all continents to cultural psychology, psychology of religion is a field practiced almost exclusively in the United States of America. (It seems the American Psychological Association is the only national organization for psychology having a division for psychology of religion.) Although the number of research areas in
cultural psychology is infinite (viz. all psychic phenomena, screened for their cultural nature, plus all cultural phenomena, screened for their psychic aspect), the number of areas of psychology of religion is in principle only a subset of that larger cultural number (viz. all religious phenomena). And whereas the number of possible objects for research in the psychology of religion is countless, in fact, this subdiscipline has dealt almost exclusively with (Protestant and Roman Catholic) subjects from the Western part of Christianity (with the notably exception of the research on “cults” or “new religious movements”). At best, one could say, psychology of religion has dealt with monotheistic traditions, as illustrated by a recent handbook (Hood et al. 1996; Spilka et al. 2003), which uses the Cross, the Crescent and Star of David as illustrations on its cover. (But in fact, that cover even misrepresents the actual situation, as there are hardly any psychological studies on Islamic forms of religion.)

The heterogeneity within cultural psychology is much larger than in psychology of religion: cultural psychologists draw on an ever increasing number of new psychological approaches; the majority of psychologists of religion draw on theories that count as mainstream in social and personality psychology, in psychoanalysis and developmental psychology. In contrast to the enormous number of topics that could have been researched, psychologists of religion mainly restricted themselves to topics like religious experiences (under which almost everything could be counted, but which usually means phenomena referred to as conversion or mysticism), and a few other topics like socialization and development of religiosity during the life span, and issues related to mental health, as can readily be seen from any introduction. (Next to these, numerous publications have touched upon the so-called intrinsic versus extrinsic religious orientation.) Being a field of application, research on religion has never led to innovations within psychology (numerous psychological theories have been applied to religion, but no theory has ever been developed because of research on religion). Cultural psychology on the contrary is in danger of losing itself in an ever expanding number of so-called “new ideas” (many of which still need to be assessed as to how “new” they are indeed, if valid at all).

Once More: The Modest Aims of This Book

The situation being as described, the conclusion from the previous section can only be that there seems to be not much of a relationship between cultural psychology and psychology of religion. That conclusion is essentially correct. Although some cultural psychologists now and then refer to some religious phenomenon, as it were in passing (Boesch 2000; Gergen 1993, 1999; Gone et al. 1999; Much and Mahapatra 1995; Sampson 1996), or if they want to give an example, there is hardly any theory in the field of cultural psychology that has elaborated at length on any religious phenomenon or that has given a specific type of religious functioning its proper place. Moreover the number of studies on religion conducted from an explicitly cultural psychological point of view is very limited. Certainly, from psychoanalytic perspectives there have always been studies on religion (Belzen 2009a;