

Chapter 3

Cultural Psychology of Religion

Perspectives, Challenges and Possibilities

Introducing Cultural Psychology: Initial Distinctions

After having situated a cultural psychological approach to religion and religiosity in the larger hermeneutical camp within the social and human sciences, it should by now be appropriate to introduce cultural psychology in some more detail. As one can imagine, like psychology in general, cultural psychology is a rather broad, heterogeneous enterprise to which many well-known psychologists have made significant contributions. It is important to realize from the onset that cultural psychology is not a psychology entirely different from other kinds of psychology as developed during the discipline's past; neither is it one of its separate subdisciplines or simply a field of application. Broadly stated, cultural psychology is an approach within psychology that attempts to describe, investigate and interpret the interrelatedness of culture and human psychic functioning. It is the branch of psychology that tries to take seriously the superficially trivial observation that these would not exist without each other, that culture is therefore a major factor in all meaningful human conduct, and that traces of human involvement can be detected in all expressions of culture. By "culture" this kind of psychology usually means a system of signs, rules, symbols and practices that on the one hand structure the human realm of action, structures that are on the other hand constantly being (re)constructed and transformed by human action and praxis. It may be instructive to divide cultural psychology into several variants, subsections which are obviously not entirely independent from one another and cannot all be justly dealt with in this chapter.

- (a) First of all, and vital to the development of psychology as a body of knowledge, attitudes and skills, cultural psychology investigates how culture constitutes, facilitates and regulates human subjectivity and its expression in diverse psychic functions and processes as postulated and conceptualized by different psychological schools and theories (e.g. perception, memory, mental health, the self, the unconscious, etc.). It is important to note, that the concept of culture employed here is a dynamic one, it does not just mean "context" or "situation." In the words of Ernst Boesch, a major German representative of contemporary cultural psychology (Lonner and Hayes 2007; Simao 2008):

Culture is a field of action, whose contents range from objects made and used by human beings to institutions, ideas and myths. Being an action field, culture offers possibilities of, but by the same token stipulates conditions for, action; it circumscribes goals which can be reached by certain means, but establishes limits, too, for correct, possible and also deviant action. The relationship between the different material as well as ideational contents of the cultural field of action is a systemic one; i.e. transformations in one part of the system can have an impact in any other part. As an action field, culture not only includes and controls action, but is also continuously transformed by it; therefore, culture is as much a process as a structure. (Boesch 1991, p. 29)

With such a conception of culture, cultural psychology goes beyond the common understanding of culture in psychology at large. Whereas contemporary psychology generally recognizes that not only human interactions are influenced by culture, but that also individuals' feelings, thinking, experiences and behavior are shaped by it: cultural psychology conceives of these as being inherently cultural – as being the result of human embeddedness in culture, which is therefore to be considered as a genuine element of all human functioning relevant for psychology.¹ This form of cultural psychology will be dealt with at greater length in this chapter. It is the form of cultural psychology usually developed by psychologists. (This latter remark should not be surprising, for, as we shall see in a moment, there are also other academic disciplines that use or even make contributions to psychology as a scientific enterprise.)

All conditions and determinants of psychic functioning, whether they are limitative (like psychophysical makeup or social and geographical conditions), operative (like acquired, learned activities), or normative (like rules and norms), are always cultural-historically variable (cf. Peeters 1994). Therefore, this first variant of cultural psychology consists, roughly, in two forms: a synchronic and a diachronic one. In both forms there is a realization of the historical nature of culture (in its various manifestations) and therefore of human psychic functioning. Yet, in the first form, the emphasis is on psychic functions and processes in contemporary subjects; there is an abstraction of historical variation. In the second form, however, the historical changes in human psychic functioning are being investigated and explained on the basis of modifications in cultural conditions and determinations. Cultural psychology as a whole is an interdisciplinary approach, as will be readily understood with this first of its variants: in both forms of the first variant distinguished here, cultural psychology is in need of collaboration with other disciplines from the social and human sciences. In the synchronic form, psychology relies on information, and sometimes theories, concepts and skills from disciplines like anthropology, sociology, politicology. In the second one, historiography, and sometimes even evolutionary biology (Atran 2002, 2007), are among the obvious partners in theorizing and research.

¹Cultural psychologists usually define meaningful action or conduct as the object of psychology. Obviously, there are also forms of human behavior that are not intentional or not regulated by meaning (like drawing back one's hand from a hot object; although even in the way this is done, there exists cultural variation).

(b) Secondly, numerous publications have traditionally been devoted to efforts to detect and determine the human involvement in all kinds of cultural products. Whereas in the first variant of cultural psychology, the understanding of culture is more or less anthropological, on a macro-level, in this second variant usually a much more elitist and restricted concept of culture is employed. Attention is given to products of so-called “high culture,” like novels, movies, operas and other arts, but also to entire areas like peace and war, sports, advertising, organizations, international affairs, and to important domains like socialization, sexuality and courting, labor, death and dying. Each of these subjects can and is also being studied by other scholarly disciplines to which psychology in such cases often relates as an auxiliary discipline. In fields (to be distinguished from disciplines!) like cultural studies, education or arts, the discipline of psychology is often called upon to explore the human involvement in the phenomena studied. In these cases typically some kind or another of psychology (very often: psychoanalysis) is applied. Although this may be and has been done by psychologists (again: especially psychoanalysts) themselves, it is often done by researchers and authors without formal psychological training. Or, if psychologists are hired in these contexts, they obviously are serving another goal than the development of (new) psychological theory.

In this second variant of cultural psychology, considerable attention has been given to a variety of religious phenomena, contributing substantially to the psychology of religion-literature. Not only numerous “great” psychologists, especially from the psychoanalytic tradition, have been writing explicitly on religion from the perspective of the psychological approach or theory developed by themselves (e.g., Freud, Jung, Erikson, Allport, Maslow, Fromm), but psychological approaches or theories have often been utilized by scholars other than psychologists to analyze some religious phenomenon. The latter has been done by authors with a psycho(patho)logical training (e.g. Pruyser 1983; Rizzuto 1979; Meissner 1992, 1996; Kakar 1982, 1991; Stählin 1914b), but frequently also by scholars with a (primary) background in theology, sciences of religion, or religious studies in general (e.g. Beth 1927, 1931a, b; Pfister 1910, 1926, 1944/1948; Sundén 1959/1966; Gergensohn 1921/1930; Holm 1990; Kripall 1995; Parsons 1999; Vergote 1978/1988, 1983/1997). As such work is covered at some length in other excellent reviews (as in Wulff 1997), this variant of cultural psychology will be left out of consideration in the remainder of this chapter.

(c) A third variant of cultural psychology will be mentioned here even more briefly. It is common to find an understanding among cultural psychologists that different cultural contexts, different times as well as different places, produce different psychologies, partly as a result of their being developed with or on subjects who are psychically differently constituted (cf. Gomperts 1992; Zeegers 1988), and that the history of psychology is not about natural facts, but about socially generated constructions (cf. Danziger 1990, 1997). Therefore, within cultural psychology there is, on the one hand, attention to so-called indigenous psychologies: the psychologies as developed and employed by local people (as distinguished from Euro-American

psychologists, who produced almost all of the present “academic” psychological knowledge), also in other parts of the world than on both sides of the Atlantic (e.g., Much 1995; Ratner 2008). On the other hand, there is also a fair amount of attention devoted to the history of psychology as a Western enterprise. As will be clear, in this third variant there is again collaboration with experts on local cultures (whether academically trained in the Western tradition, like anthropologists, or not) and with historians, especially intellectual historians (or with historicizing philosophers), cf. Belzen (1991a, 2007), Laucken (1998), Paranjpe (1998).

Let us now turn to a closer exploration of the first variant just distinguished, to the form of cultural psychology concentrating on the cultural basis of human psychic functioning, developed as an integral part of psychology.

Contemporary Research in Cultural Psychology

On the Difference Between Cross-cultural Psychology and Cultural Psychology

As many cultural psychologists point out, it is important to distinguish between cross-cultural psychology and cultural psychology in the proper sense.² The two disciplines work with different conceptions of culture, cross-cultural psychology operating with a rather traditional understanding of culture: it conceives of culture as a variable that may possibly have influence on behavior, and it investigates comparatively how experiences and behavior, attitudes, social relationships etc. present themselves within different cultural conditions. In its most straightforward form, individuals who match for age, sex, education and other relevant variables, but belong to different ethnic groups or live in different geographical regions, are compared with regard to the psychic phenomenon the particular investigation focuses on. This type of research has contributed greatly to the present sensitivity to the cultural variations in human ways of experiencing and of being in general (Vijver et al. 2008). Such comparative cultural studies often aim to determine culturally invariant forms of human expression, and considers these – in covariance with sociobiological perspectives – as anthropological constants, e.g. in research on emotions. From this approach, culture tends to be viewed merely as a qualification on the generality of psychological effects or as a moderator variable, but not as a constituent process that is implicated in explaining psychological phenomena (Billmann-Mahecha 2001).

On the contrary, cultural psychology in a proper sense stresses that 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, and they are artefactual rather than natural. Therefore, psychological

² Recently, authors from both traditions are trying to open up a dialogue and to look for commonalities instead of stressing differences (cf. e.g. Kitayama and Cohen 2007; Matsumoto 1994a, b, 1996; Ratner 2008; Valsiner and Rosa 2007).

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). For example, conversion is a phenomenon found within certain religions, having a different meaning within different subgroups of such religions, being the result of certain patterns of religious practice, in their turn related to certain religious doctrines and rituals. In cultural psychology usually the meaning of some form of action (or thought or experience) is central, not the action as such (which could be, and in fact often is, studied by other social and human sciences too). Culture, also cultural practices, is conceived of as symbolic: it is considered to do more than merely represent preexisting realities and regulate behavior. Rather, culture is seen as creating (social) reality, whose existence rests partly on such cultural definitions. With this, cultural psychology recognizes the open and indeterminate relationship between cultural meanings, practices and material forces. It is recognized that not only social institutions (e.g. marriage, school), roles (e.g. bride, student) and artifacts (e.g. wedding ring, lecture notes), but also psychological concepts (e.g. the self, emotion, mind) and epistemological categories (e.g. time) depend, in part, on cultural distinctions embodied in language categories, discourse, and everyday social practices.

The main contrast between the two forms of psychology investigating the role of culture in psychological phenomena is therefore conceptual, not methodological. Cultural psychology views culture and psychology as mutually constitutive and treats basic psychological processes as culturally dependent, if not also, in certain cases, as culturally variable. Cross-cultural psychology, on the other hand, treats psychological processes as formed independently from culture, with cultural impacting on their display, but not on their basic way of functioning (Miller 2001, p. 38). In order to not remain too abstract, let us consider some pieces of research in contemporary cultural psychology.

Examples of Current Fields of Research

According to contemporary cultural psychologists, working with a more nuanced and process-oriented understanding of culture, realizing and determining its impact on psychic functioning will broaden psychological theory. And indeed, with regard to a number of basic issues in psychology like cognition, emotion, the self, well-being, self-esteem, motivation, cultural psychological research has contributed to the elaboration of new theoretical frameworks (Kitayama and Cohen 2007). A core insight from the cognitive revolution has been that individuals in making sense of experience go beyond information given, rather than merely passively “processing” it (Bruner 1990). An act of interpretation mediates between stimulus and response. Such interpretation necessarily draws on culturally available systems of meaning. Culturally different settings require different activities, leading to different (cognitive) abilities. Thus, to refer to just one example, it was found

that arithmetical problem-solving goes on differently, leading to different results, in different situations. Lave et al. (1984) found, for example, that whereas 98% of problems were correctly solved by subjects when engaged in grocery shopping, only 59% of an equal kind of questions were answered correctly by the same subjects when tested in a classroom. These researchers argue further that problem-solving is not a disembodied mental activity, but belongs to, and is specific to, the kind of situation the subject is involved in. In general, cognition is viewed as constituted, in part, by the concrete practical activities in which it is situated and the cultural tools on which it depends (Miller 1999, p. 87). Likewise, emotions are not just the same ones, differing only in degree across cultures, but are different in different cultures, i.e. some emotions exist in some cultures and not in other ones. Emotions are characterized by beliefs, judgments, and desires – the content of which is not natural but is determined by the systems of cultural belief, value and mores of particular communities. They are not natural responses elicited by natural features which a situation may possess, but socio-culturally determined patterns of experience and expression which are acquired, and subsequently feature in, specific social situations (Armon-Jones 1986).

Also in the conceptions of the self – understood as an individual's understanding and experience of the own psychic functioning – and in related modes of psychic functioning, qualitative differences exist between individuals from cultural communities characterized by contrasting self-related cultural meanings and practices (Kitayama et al. 2007). Thus, the researchers Shweder and Bourne (1984) showed that, in descriptions of persons, Oriyan Indians – as compared to Euro-Americans – place greater emphasis on actions than on abstract traits, while more frequently making reference to the context. (Instead of describing a friend as, e.g., "friendly," Oriyan Indians would say that she or he "brings cakes to my family on festival days.") Recent extensions of this type of research indicate that theory of mind understanding does not spontaneously develop toward an endpoint of trait psychology, but that it proceeds in directions that reflect the contrasting epistemological assumptions of local cultural communities (Lillard 1998; Miller 2002). Another example: the fundamental attribution error (i.e. a bias to overemphasize dispositional relative to situational explanations of behavior) was formerly assumed to be universal, but research now suggests that Asians may be less vulnerable to it than North Americans (Lee et al. 1996; Morris et al. 1995).

With regard to self-esteem and well-being, cultural research implies that strategies of self-enhancement and defensive self-promotion to maintain positive feelings about the self are culturally variable, with Japanese populations emphasizing a culturally supported self-critical stance and Chinese populations emphasizing maintaining harmony within groups. The tendencies for reported self-esteem and life satisfaction to be higher among North-American than among Asian cultural populations (Diener and Diener 1995) probably does not indicate more successful patterns of adaptation to be linked with individualism. Moreover, the research in this area suggests that psychological measures of self-esteem are biased by conceptions of norms, practices and self-conceptions as individualistic, and may therefore not be able to capture central goals for the self in cultures that emphasize fulfillment of interpersonal responsibilities and interdependence (Miller 2001, p. 33).

With regard to motivation, recent cultural work challenges some common assumptions that link agency with individualism; it shows that agency is experienced qualitatively in different ways in contrasting cultural communities. In cultural groups where the self tends to be conceptualized as inherently social rather than as inherently autonomous, individuals are more prone to experience their true selves as expressed in the realization of social expectations rather than in acting autonomously. Also, Miller and Bersoff (1994) showed that whereas Americans interpret helping as more endogenously motivated and satisfying when individuals are acting autonomously rather than in response to social expectations, Indians regard helping in both cases as just as endogenously motivated and satisfying. Likewise, Iyengar and Lepper (1999) found that Euro-American children show less intrinsic motivation when choices on anagram and game tasks were made for them by their mothers or by their peer groups, but that Asian-American children display highest levels when acting to fulfill the expectations of these trusted others. Extending this type of cultural research to issues of socialization, it has been shown that not only the meaning but also the adaptive consequences of particular modes of socialization are culturally dependent. Whereas in Euro-American cultural communities authoritarian modes of parenting tend to be associated with more maladaptive outcomes than are less controlling authoritative modes of parenting, Korean adolescents associate greater perceived parental warmth with greater perceived parental control, concordant with the Korean view of parents as having a responsibility to exercise authority over their children, failure to exercise it being experienced as parental neglect (Berndt et al. 1993; Miller 2001).

Cultural Psychology of Religion

The Interdisciplinary Character of Cultural Psychology of Religion

In psychology at large, the sensitivity for the cultural character of the phenomena being researched has largely been lost. All too often, researchers take their results to be cross-culturally valid: there is usually no realization that results obtained (frequently only on Western middle class white students) may only be valid for the sample chosen, and even that only for the time being. Therefore, in spite of (or perhaps because of) dealing with small-scale questions, concepts and manipulated variables, and in spite of it ever increasing refinement of scales and sophisticated statistical techniques, psychology is often criticized for not observing sufficiently, not going deeply enough into the phenomena it wants to explore, especially not when constructing its “measuring instruments” (cf. also Belzen 1997b).

Among the interdisciplinary authors from the founding days of psychology and other social sciences there were also scholars who are now frequently remembered as the founding fathers of sociology such as Max Weber (1904/1984) and Émile Durkheim (1912). Yet, although one finds interesting (cultural) psychological

approaches with them, especially in their work on religion, they are hardly ever read by psychologists anymore. Awareness of the cultural character of the religious phenomena under scrutiny was since the beginning of the twentieth century also found with a number of theologians, who had developed into historians of religion or into comparative scholars of religion (Andrae 1926, 1932; VanderLeeuw 1926, 1928, 1932; Sierksma 1950, 1956/1980; Söderblom 1908, 1916, 1939). Very frequently, such scholars turned to psychology for interpretation of their findings (cf. Sharpe 1986). But as psychology in general narrowed down its perspectives, it lost its attractiveness to comparative scholars of religion and to others who would otherwise have been interested in psychology. If at all, they oriented themselves to psychoanalytical psychology. The work of this group of scholars – not developing new psychological theory themselves, but using psychological viewpoints within another discipline or enterprise – largely belongs to the second form of cultural psychology distinguished in the first paragraph of this chapter, and will be left out of consideration here.

In current cultural psychology, there is a return to the interdisciplinary approach from the former days (Jahoda 1993, 2007). As one of the social sciences, psychology is in need of close collaboration with, e.g., historians, sociologists and anthropologists. Accepting that culture is a major constituting and regulating force in people's self-definition, conduct and experience also require a different kind of research than is usual in mainstream psychology of religion. The particular religious "form of life" (Wittgenstein) the human being is embedded in, can then no longer be neglected in favor of searching for some presumably inherent and invariable psychic structures. On the contrary, it is necessary to study people *engaging* in their particular "form of life," not to take them out of it by submitting them to experiments, tests or questionnaires in the "laboratory." Accordingly, researchers have to turn to participant observation, analysis of personal documents, interviews, group discussions and other ecologically valid techniques. Further, it becomes necessary to study not the isolated individual, but also the beliefs, values and rules that are prevalent in a particular cultural situation, together with the patterns of social relatedness and interaction that characterize that situation. In any case, it appears erroneous to try to study the "individual mind" as such. Psychology cannot fulfill this task without the aid of other cultural sciences.

Theories in Contemporary Cultural Psychology and Their Application to Religion

In contemporary cultural psychology a variety of concepts and theories is employed, drawing from different strains of thoughts (Triandis 2007). As there is no space here to cover the range even approximately, let us take a brief look at just some of them, and see what a concept like *habitus* means, what the theory of the dialogical self and other narrative approaches stand for, and what theories of "action" (or "activity") have put forward.

The notion that psychological phenomena depend on practical activities has a long tradition, ranging from Marx and Engels, to Dewey and contemporary thinkers like Bourdieu. Religious people very often cannot explain on a cognitive level why they perform as they do, for example, in rituals. (Even the question as posed by a researcher, say, would be odd, as we will see in a case of empirical research reported in Chapter 9.) Most often they have no knowledge of the “official” rationales for certain conduct. Accordingly Roman Catholics cannot account for their behavior during Mass, nor can Buddhists for the reasons for experiencing grief as they do (Obeyesekere 1985). Yet people perform perfectly in accordance with the expectations of their religious (sub)culture, often with a competence and to an extent that a foreigner will never learn to manage. Religion regulates conduct, although this conduct cannot be conceived of as the conscious following of rules. People’s conduct – in the broadest sense, also including their perception, thinking, emotion, needs, etc. – is regulated according to a scheme or structure that is not consciously known. This scheme is not even of a primarily cognitive nature at all, but is something belonging to the body. People act not because they know consciously what to do: it is as if their body knows for them. Affect, for example, is not the result of properly knowing how to feel – it is ruled by an immediate corporeal structure. Bourdieu (1980/1990) calls this structure *habitus* – it is this structure that generates and structures people’s actions. Although these structures are personally embodied, they are not individual: they characterize the (sub)culture and are derived from the patterns in the participant’s conduct. They belong to both the individual and a (sub)culture; in fact, they are precisely the nexus between an individual and a cultural institution. Unlike western secularized societies, religion in most cultures is not just a specific practice performed on specific occasions. In such cultures, religion is transmitted through practice, “without raising to the level of discourse. The child mimics other people’s actions rather than ‘models.’ Body praxis speaks directly to motor function, in the form of a pattern of postures that is both individual and systematic, being bound up with a whole system of objects, and charged with a host of special meanings and values” (Bourdieu 1980/1990, pp. 73–74). The same applies to those western subcultures where religion is still predominantly a shaping and integrating force. For example: it is because he carries, in his body, the *habitus* of a Hindu from India, that a believer thinks, reacts, feels and behaves as an Indian Hindu, in fact *is* an Indian Hindu, and not because he would know the specifics of the doctrine, the ethical rules or the rituals. The believer usually is *not* aware of these specifics. Not being individual, the *habitus* is itself structured by social practices: its dispositions are durably inculcated by the possibilities and impossibilities, freedoms and necessities, opportunities and prohibitions inscribed in the objective conditions. It is in social practices that the *habitus* can be observed at work: being (re)produced and producing conduct itself.

To what extent ever the *habitus* may be non-cognitive or operating in a way non-conscious to the actor, the conduct that results does mean something, both to the actor and to other cultural participants. This meaning is rooted in both personal life history and culturally available meanings. Analysis of activity must take into account the “forms of life” that are the context of meaning. This culturally available meaning can only be traced and analyzed at the level of text: words, proverbs,

stories, myths, articulated symbols. However true it may be that without the analysis of activity, cultural psychology is only telling half of the story (Ratner 1996), it remains true that cultural knowledge, symbols, concepts and words, laid down in and maintained by linguistic conventions, stimulate and organize psychological phenomena. Here narrative psychology can be seen as an obvious ally in any analysis of religiosity. It points out that in the course of their life, people hear and assimilate stories, which enable them to develop “schemes” which give direction to their experience and conduct – schemes with whose help they can then make sense out of a potential stimulation overload (Howard 1991). To each developing story, and in every situation with which they are confronted, people bring an acquired catalogue of “plots” which is used to make sense out of the story or situation (Mancuso and Sarbin 1983). Here lies a possibility of applying narrative psychology to religious phenomena. For, whatever religion may be besides this, it is in any case also a reservoir of verbal elements, stories, interpretations, prescriptions and commandments, which in their power to determine experience and conduct and in their legitimization possess narrative character. Clifford Geertz’s definition of religion, which is most widely disseminated in cultural psychology, points to the central importance of “stories,” of linguistically transmitted and given reality: “a religion is a system of symbols which act to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing those conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic” (1973, p. 90). In order to effect a connection with narrative psychology, one need only take the word “symbols” in this definition and give it more precise content with the aid of “stories and practices.” (In this connection one must realize that both practices and “conceptions” again employ stories to explain and legitimate themselves.) In other words: people who, among the various culturally available life forms, have also been introduced to, or have appropriated, a religious life form, have at their disposal a system of interpretation and conduct which (narratively) prefigures reality for them. Thus in every situation, expectations, interpretations and actions can be brought to bear which have been derived from a religious horizon of understanding and which, under certain circumstances, confirm and reinforce this understanding. Indeed, precisely those persons and groups are considered deeply devout who succeed, with the greatest frequency, spontaneously and perseveringly, to activate this religious horizon of understanding and who are in a position – despite the paradoxes they are confronted with – to overcome their own problems of religious interpretation and to act in harmony with the system of interpretation and conduct they have appropriated as well as with the “stories” that have been handed down to them.

Activity theory was seminally lined out by Vygotsky (Veresov 1999) and elaborated in the cultural- historical Russian tradition initiated by him (Leontiev 1978, 1981; Luria 1971, 1976; Vygotsky 1978, 1998). Vygotsky enumerated three cultural factors that influence psychic functioning:

1. Activities such as producing goods, raising children, educating the populace, devising and implementing laws, treating disease, playing, and producing art

2. Artifacts including tools, books, paper, pottery, weapons, eating utensils, clocks, clothing, buildings, furniture, toys, and technology
3. Concepts about things and people, e.g. the succession of forms that the content of person has taken in the life of human beings in different societies with their system of law, religion, customs, social structures, and mentality (Mauss 1938/1985, p. 3, in Ratner 2002, p. 10)

Vygotsky emphasized the dependence of psychic functioning on these three cultural factors, and the dominance of activities over the other two. (Ratner 2002 correctly pointed out that the real situation is more complex and dynamic: it contains reciprocal influence among the factors, and it is animated by intentionality, teleology, or agency.) Vygotsky stated: “The structures of higher mental functions represent a cast of collective social relations between people. These structures are nothing other than a transfer into the personality of an inward relation of a social order that constitutes the basis of the social structure of the human personality” (1998, pp. 169–170). Another member of the “cultural-historical” school in psychology initiated by Vygotsky wrote similarly that “changes take place in the course of historical development in the general character of men’s consciousness that are engendered by changes in their mode of life” (Leontiev 1981, p. 22).

According to activity theorists, activity, artifacts and cultural concepts need to be explored by psychologists to understand psychic functioning of individuals in a particular culture. This is not a task to be left to scholars other than psychologists, as one has to look outside the individual to comprehend the content, mode of operation, and dynamics of psychological phenomena, constituted as they are by cultural factors and processes. Gerth and Mills (1953) pointed out that activities are internally divided into roles, and that each role entails distinctive rights, responsibilities, norms, opportunities, limitations, rewards and qualifications. (The activity of religion, e.g., includes the roles of believer and usually of some kind of priest, both more often than not divided into a host of religious categories as penitent, possessed, enlightened, etc., or such as pastor, baptizer, minister, exorcist, etc.) The distinctive characteristics of a role shape the occupant’s psychic functioning, for it is by her or his experience in enacting various roles, that the person incorporates certain objectives and values which steer and direct her or his conduct, as well as the elements of her or his psychic structure. Fulfilling a role requires psychic training: it involves learning what to do, as well as the meaning of what to do. “His [sic] memory, his sense of time and space, his perception, his motives, his conception of his self, his psychological functions are shaped and steered by the specific configuration of roles which he incorporates from his society” (Gerth and Mills 1953, p. 11; cf. also Ratner (2002), for an actualized outline of activity theory, integrating numerous contemporary research findings and extensive discussions of its relation to other cultural psychological approaches).

The concept of the (social) role is an excellent device for a cultural psychological approach to religion, as it designates a historically specific set of norms, rights, responsibilities and qualifications that pertain not only to persons and/or situations actually present, but also to those from the realm of religious stories, symbols and

discourse in general. Roles are specific, distinctive ways of acting and interacting, and the concept can be used to designate the functioning (action, but also corresponding attitudes, emotions and expectations) on the part of the actual believer as well as to the (anticipated) conduct of the beings from an immaterial realm as stipulated by the divers religions, as the Swedish psychologist of religion Hjalmar Sundén (1959/1966) pointed out. His role theory of religious experience has proved a powerful heuristic device to analyze both contemporary and historical cases, and can be considered as a contribution to a cultural psychology of religion (Belzen 1996b).

Examples

Before closing, let us take a brief look at some examples of research on religion, performed along cultural psychological lines. We shall consider work from different countries and in different religious traditions.

(a) The Belgian psychologist of religion Vergote has applied Freudian-Lacanian and Winnicottian psychoanalytic thoughts and cultural psychological reasoning in general in extended research on religion. His work is characterized by an – among psychologists! – remarkably unusual interdisciplinary approach: he draws on cultural anthropology, history and sociology, psychoanalysis and philosophy. When confronted with the task to define his object of study, he does not commit the fallacy of trying to develop a psychological definition of religion, but he turns to cultural sciences, especially to anthropology. Accordingly, the task for psychology of religion is to develop or to make use of an approach that will yield insight into the psychic processes that are involved in and determined by this culturally given religion. Next, there is no pretension of studying “religion” in general (whatever that may be), but an in-depth analysis of some concrete phenomenon, belonging to a particular religious form of life (be it stigmata, worship of ancestors, or whatever). Usually, Vergote’s publications deal only with aspects of the Christian faith in its Roman Catholic version – even more concretely: from the Belgian context. In one of his main publications, he attempts a study of “belief,” which he considers to be one of the most important elements in and specific for the Christian faith. Before starting his psychological research, he offers a brief account of what “to believe” means in Christianity (1983/1997, pp. 187–191). Proceeding in this way, he has removed himself far from any effort to write a psychology of religion in general: as he is not writing on religion in general, he is, in that volume, not even writing on the Christian religion in general, but only on one of its aspects: faith. As in his better-known *Guilt and Desire* (1978/1988), he defends the position that “by nature” the human being is neither religious nor irreligious; the human being can only become a religious or irreligious person, because of culturally available religious meanings: “what is studied by psychology is the effect of psychic archeology on the process by which the individual appropriates the symbolic system of religion” (1983/1997, p. 26).

It is psychology's task to bring to light (latent) meanings and motivations in experienced religion, and to investigate how these relate organically to each other and form the structure of personal religiosity. Therefore, it just as revealing to study the process by which a person develops into an unbeliever, as to study the oscillations between belief and unbelief.

(b) Research on a mystically oriented Christian spirituality in the Netherlands may count as another example of a cultural psychological approach to religion. As Belzen (2003) has tried to point out, the notion of conversion as adhered to by *bevindelijken*, orthodox-mystical believers belonging to the Calvinistic tradition, may well be interpreted with the aid of categories of social constructionism, especially in its "rhetorical-responsive" version. As in many non-western countries, but also with several more or less traditional religious groups in the West – where religion is a major shaping force in various, sometimes even almost all, domains of private and public life, and where people more often than not fail to distinguish between the two – *bevindelijke* believers have "embodied" (Bourdieu) knowledge "of the third kind" (Shotter) about their religion. *Bevindelijke* identity does not just consist in membership in some church, in affirming specific theological doctrines, in joining an "inner circle" or even in being able to account for one's religious experiences in a certain stylized way, but predominantly in an all-pervading "style," belonging to a specific "life form" (Wittgenstein), displaying itself in and through the body. Whereas Vergote has also worked with standardized instruments like Osgood-scales, Belzen utilized very diverse empirical strategies, including dozens of observations made during attendance at church services, observations and conversations on the occasion of visits to feast days (mission conferences, book fairs, training courses, political assemblies); numerous encounters with people, in the street, after church, at their homes, sometimes just "small talk," sometimes in the form of semi-structured interviews (in some cases even with a tape-recorder on the table); analysis of ego-documents, novels, spiritual authors and scholarly publications on *bevindelijken*; reading their newspapers, visiting them on Internet. In short: anything that might help a person to "get in touch" (Shotter 1992). In Chapter 9 we shall take a closer look at this research.

(c) Similarly, Much and Mahapatra (1995) have combined anthropological methods and psychological reasoning in their study of a *Kalasi* (a possession oracle in the Hindu tradition) of Oressa, a state on the eastern coast of India. They show the interplay of meanings in the constitution of the life form of the woman they present in their case study, and consider her role as a possession oracle from the point of view of personal meanings and values, of social statuses or positions, and of local cultural symbolic contexts. In their analysis, they focus upon the cultural discourse that accommodates the role and status of a possession oracle, and upon the semiotic skills of the oracle herself as she transforms herself from her ordinary persona to a "moving divinity" (*Thakura chalanti*). During the times of transformation and possession (and at those times only!), *Kalasis* are expected to speak and behave in ways different from normally acceptable social behavior.

The resulting behavior is, however, a patterned and meaningful symbolic deviation from the norm, and not a random inhibition. There clearly are norms for behavior while possessed. *Kalasis* are held to have special powers when possessed by the Goddess. Their actions and speech are understood as her actions and speech, and their special powers under possession are viewed as attributes of the Goddess. According to Much and Mahapatra (1995, p. 76) the discourse of the oracle (*hokum*) is a socially shared illusion wherein participants have the experience of *darshan*: a vision of visions (or objects) who are special conduits of divinity, during which they can receive personal attention and advice directly from the Goddess. (As such, the *hokum* is not particularly different from other kinds of socially shared illusions in Western or Indian cultures, like psychotherapy, academic symposia or business meetings.) The authors point out that it is not the “supernatural” aspect of the *hokum* which makes it an illusion, but rather its socially constituted facticity, without which it would not be experienced as meaningful in the way that it is. Reflecting on their research, Much and Mahapatra come up with an interesting suggestion for psychological theory: from a cultural psychological point of view, personality patterns – dispositions, patterns of knowing and feeling, awareness and response – are aptly considered skills. A neonate enters the social world with a certain range of potentials, some universal or widely shared, others particular to a subset of individuals. Which of these potentials are cultivated or not, and in which way, depends to a large extent on cultural contexts of learning, knowing and performing. The marginalized or even pathologized potentials of one culture may be recognized talents, and so developed into socially and personally adaptive skills, in cultural contexts where these skills are accepted, where they can be cultivated in well-organized institutionalized forms, and where they are integrated with local social structures and cultural goals. Cases in point would be the various contemplative, mystical and ecstatic skills valued, taught and cultivated in South Asia but ignored and generally pathologized by mainstream contemporary western society.

Closing Words

As I shall try to argue also in Chapter 7, cultural psychology seems well prepared to correct one of the oldest and most widespread flaws in the psychology of religion, i.e. forgetting to focus, at least at some point, on religion as a phenomenon of culture. Cultural psychology may serve as a remedy here, as it enables us to do justice to the cultural impact of the phenomena under consideration: a cultural psychological approach takes into account the specific form of life (Wittgenstein) in which subjects are involved. I must grant that in so doing the results obtained are not valid for every person and/or group in every religion, but it is exactly this sort of aspiration that should be abolished from psychology (not just in psychology of religion)! As there is no such thing as religion-in-general, but only specific forms of life going by the same label “religious,” and as psychology should not strive for

insight into presumably basic elements of psychic functioning valid for all subjects, regardless of time and place, the psychology of religion should try to detect how a specific religious form of life constitutes, involves and regulates the psychic functioning of its adherents. The psychology of religion will have a future and will have the possibility to formulate meaningful results and interpretations by selecting specific phenomenon from religious forms of life, taking account of their particular psychic impact and using concepts and methods from cultural psychological theory.

Next to this, cultural psychology promises to be a valuable addition and corrective to other psychological approaches that already focus on religion as a cultural phenomenon but that tend to jump to conclusions no scientific analysis of religion could ever reach. An interesting example is the increasing attention to both the neurological and cognitive basis of religious functioning (cf., e.g., Andresen 2001; Cohen 2007). One finds results from this type of research used in both reductionistic and in apologetic reasoning (cf., e.g., Newberg et al. 2001). Authors from these approaches stress either the brain or the mind in their explanations of religion. However – and I am not doing justice to the literature on this topic (for an introductory review, cf. Reich 2004) – people seem to forget that even these are never more than the necessary preconditions for the specifics of human functioning and are not sufficient conditions themselves. If we can discover that some parts of the brain are more vital to religious functioning than others (Ramachandran and Blakeslee 1998), we still could not conclude that these parts are responsible for religious functioning. The impact of acculturation always remains and that is one of the main issues for a cultural psychological approach, particularly as regards its application to religion. Likewise, if evidence appears that religion has developed for evolutionary purposes (Guthrie 1993; Boyer 2001; Kirkpatrick 2005), it still remains for psychologists to find out by which means any given specific religion shapes the religious life of contemporary subjects. Also, when cognitive scientists show that also *in religione* the mind functions as it is predetermined to do (Andresen 2001; Slone 2004), is that not a bit trivial? How could we, after more than a century of reflection and research in the psychology of religion, expect otherwise? Of course, the mind will allow for the development of only certain religious ideas and practices, and facilitate these, hinder others; and of course scientific knowledge about the working of the mind must be taken into account in a comprehensive theory of religion (to which the whole of the psychology of religion will only be able to contribute modestly).

What will always remain an impossibility is the ability to judge the ultimate existential and ontological value of any kind of religion on the basis of scientific work. In addition to the fact that scientific knowledge is provisional by definition, in principle science can never be turned into an attack on or into an apologetic device on behalf of any religion. That brain and mind are involved in religious functioning is trivial, that they alone determine the form, content and modality of individual religious functioning or of religion as a cultural phenomenon is an unsound conclusion. But neurobiological approaches and cognitive psychology can help assess, and can join together with cultural psychology to detect and depict via an analysis of the interlacement of religion and psychic functioning what is specific to religious forms of life. We should take care not to repeat a kind of nature–nurture debate:

obviously, in all psychic functioning brain and mind are involved; they enable, shape and limit what human beings can and cannot do, but they do not determine all and everything. If we want to know more about a cultural phenomenon like religion, cultural psychology is a legitimate way, perhaps even the royal road, to try to find out more about its relationship to psychic functioning.

Different psychological approaches may be employed to try to analyze religious persons and phenomena. Although some may be more apt than others, each must remain modest: each will always offer only a partial perspective on the phenomenon under scrutiny. Yet in this way and in their own right the different psychological approaches to religion will do what their very name requires of them: use the instruments of psychology to find out more about religion, one of the most complex elements of human cultures.

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