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PSYCHOLOGY AND RELIGION: WHAT ARE THEY?

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Abstract

Psychology and religion would appear to be related in principle. But religion does not feature largely in main-stream psychology. Richards (1988) argues that the relationship has historically been closer than it is now, and Buchanan (2003) largely agrees. A prior question, it is suggested, is what we do or should mean by the two terms. Different types of definition are discussed, stipulative, reportive, essentialist and operational. A special case of the last can be considered to be 'family resemblances', characteristics shared in unequal measure by members of a class. This seems most appropriate to religion, but the lists of most writers appear too short. A longer set of characteristics is suggested. But for psychology a lexical approach seems more helpful, an example being the author's distinction between discipline, subject and profession. These points suggest two entities which do have something in common, but which are in fact essentially different in significant ways affecting assumptions, content, methodology and modes of thought. Nevertheless psychology should engage with religion. Some reasons why it has not done so more completely are discussed. There are currently signs of a more comprehensive approach.

PSYCHOLOGY AND RELIGION: WHAT ARE THEY?

Some may remember that programme from the hey-day of radio, *The Brains Trust*, and the philosopher Dr C E M Joad's seemingly perennial phrase, 'It all depends on what you mean'. In psychology, this really is very often the case (for example, with intelligence, Radford 1995), and perhaps especially when two things are to be compared or contrasted. It might seem obvious that psychology and religion are two such things. Psychology is generally defined, at least in textbooks, as 'the study of human experience and behaviour', or something like that. Religion is clearly, at the very least, an important component of these. Yet it hardly features in general textbooks. I have recently reviewed two major British examples (Davey, 2004; Hewstone, Fincham and Foster, 2005). 'Religion' does not appear in the index of either. Graham Richards (1998) discusses the historical relationship of psychology and religion. He argues that this relationship has in the past been closer in various ways than is accepted now, and indeed that we cannot fully understand the development of modern western psychology without taking the interaction into account, and Trey Buchanan (2003) broadly agrees. There are, of course, many more specialized publications treating either religion from a psychological point of view, or vice versa. Nevertheless I wish to suggest that a prior question, not fully explored, is what we do or should mean by these two terms.

Defining religion and psychology

Both Richards and Buchanan, and many other authors of course, do say what they mean by the two terms. On the other hand some, such as Parsons and Jonte-Pace (2001), introducing a book on *Psychology and Religion: Mapping the Terrain*, leave both terms quite undefined. Where definitions are offered, psychology is generally treated briefly as above. Richards (1987) has made the distinction between (upper case) Psychology the discipline and (lower case) psychology the subject matter of that discipline, though this has not as yet been universally adopted. Some definitions of religion (at least in relation

to psychology) are equally brief, for example Argyle and Beit-Hallahmi (1975): ‘... *a system of beliefs in a divine or superhuman power, and practices of worship or other rituals directed at such a power*’. It is easy to think of exceptions, for example Zen Buddhism (or indeed original Buddhism as far as we know it), or scientology, though there is always the problem of circularity – exceptions are not ‘really’ examples.

I shall not attempt to collate the numerous definitions that have been offered. However, King (1995) argues that the very attempt to define religion, or identify distinctive qualities it possesses, has been primarily a Western concern, implying a concept of religion, and specifically of a creator deity, as something outside of, and fundamentally different from, our universe and ourselves. In many other cultures, no distinction is seen between life as a whole and ‘religious’ sensibility and practice. He does not deal with psychology, but an analogous point might be made, in respect of Psychology and ‘folk Psychology’.

A problem with attempting definitions is that it does, indeed, rather depend on what you mean, by a definition. Without attempting a philosophical analysis, there would be general agreement that there are different sorts of definition (Hospers, 1990; Miles, 1957). These include: stipulative, which one might call the Humpty Dumpty approach of stating what you intend a term to mean; reportive or lexical, the dictionary account of what is in fact referred to by a particular language group; essential, specifying one or more characteristics that constitute necessary and sufficient conditions for the use of the term; and operational, which one might regard as an attempt to say what functions or as it were ‘counts’ as the thing in question. A special case of this, it seems to me, is when there is not an exact match between different cases of what is being defined. Rather, there are what have been termed ‘family resemblances’. There is perhaps no single activity in which all ‘farmers’ engage, though all take some from a common list. All of these sorts of definitions can be applied to both religion and psychology, but all have difficulties. In the case of religion, taking a stipulative approach, A may include scientology while B excludes it. There is a continuing debate over the differences, if any, between cults and religions (see e.g. Galanter, 1989). The lexical approach dodges

any conceptual issues, while the essential tactic pre-empts them. The most helpful line in the case of religion, it seems to me, is that of family resemblances. This approach is familiar in anthropology. Sperber (2004) states: *'Today, most anthropologists would agree that "religion" is a polythetic or 'family resemblance' notion under which it may be convenient to lump together a wide variety of related phenomena'*. Several authors, such as Brown (1988) and Alston (1967), give lists of components, a selection of which would feature in anything that might reasonably be called a religion. Alston's is one of the more comprehensive lists (slightly paraphrased).

1. Belief in supernatural beings / gods
2. A distinction between sacred and profane objects
3. Ritual acts focused on sacred objects
4. A moral code believed to be sanctioned by the gods
5. Religious feelings, e.g. awe, mystery, guilt, adoration, connected in idea with the gods
6. Prayer and other communication with the gods
7. A world view including a sense of purpose and the place of the individual
8. The organization of life based on the world view
9. A social group bound together by the above.

Even so, there are generally recognized religions, of which Zen Buddhism is perhaps the best example, that correspond only loosely to the above. On the other hand, it seems to me that religions as they actually exist include several other components, and I suggest at least the following, which I think are distinct from each other and from the first nine.

10. A doctrine or creed, more or less mandatory
11. Sacrifice, real or symbolic
12. A formal, 'authorized' priesthood
13. Systems of retreat and pilgrimage
14. A body of myth, legend, and real or supposed history
15. Expression in the arts, buildings etc

16. Individual spiritual development
17. Mystical and ecstatic experience
18. Iconography, the representation and (for some) embodiment of deities
19. A programme of ceremonies and festivals
20. An organization and corporate body.

Of course, many of these can and do also exist in a non-religious context, for example ecstatic experiences, ceremonies, retreats, morality and so on. King (1995) however makes the important point that the religious versions are significant not necessarily due to differences in content or process, but because of their context of thought, discipline and value, in short their meaning. One cannot simply equate (not King's example) fasting for health reasons, as a political protest, and as a religious obligation, even if the behaviour is the same. Nevertheless, a selection from some such list as the above is what we see when we look at a 'religion'. King himself gives eight 'characteristics and structures of religious life', namely (summarized): traditionalism, myth and symbol, salvation, sacred places and objects, sacred actions (rituals), sacred writings or oral tradition, a sacred community, and the sacred experience. Again, all these have secular counterparts, even if sometimes trivial (it is common to refer to a boss's office as 'the inner sanctum').

Psychology, as an entity, is much smaller and less variegated. Religion is intimately bound up with human life in pretty well all its aspects, economic, social, political, geographical and so on (e.g. Park, 1994; Westerlund, 1996). At least 80% of the world population acknowledges a religious affiliation (www.adherents.com/Religions, April 2005). Of course in one sense psychology is even more widespread, inasmuch as it includes both psychology as subject matter and folk Psychology. But in a formal sense, Psychology is the concern of a few thousand individuals, far from randomly drawn from the human race's six billion.

Nevertheless difficulties of definition arise. The brief versions of introductory textbooks often fall short of all they are meant to, or ought to, include. They are attempts at

‘essentialist’ definitions, which I have argued are inappropriate (Radford, 1992). Others fall back on listing some of the many activities of psychologists (an operational definition). In some countries Psychology is actually defined by law, at least in its professional aspects. But it would not do to say, operationally, that Psychology is what Psychologists do. That would exclude many other specialists who clearly deal with psychological matters. It might be possible to make a list of components analogous to those for religion. But it seems most unlikely that it would include any of the items listed above, except number 20. Still less would there be anything corresponding to sacred meaning such as King specifies. Further, there are manifestly many widely different religions, distinguished by doctrine, practice and assumptions (e.g. Esposito, Fasching and Lewis, 2002). Possibly few would wish to say that there are distinct ‘Psychologies’ in the same way. I have argued, on the other hand, taking a lexical approach, that words such as ‘psychology’, ‘history’ or ‘physics’ each stands for several entities that are essentially different (Radford and Rose, 1989; Radford, 2004). Specifically, what I term discipline, subject and profession. At the risk of repetition, by a *discipline* I mean a set of problems that seem to hang together, and their related methods and body of knowledge. A discipline is not defined by a set of material. Rather it has a focus, but no boundaries. There is nothing that can be ruled out as irrelevant *a priori*. Nor can any methods of investigation. By a *subject* I mean a selection of material for purposes of dissemination or presentation, for example for teaching or writing. By a *profession* I mean a body of people, formally or informally organized and qualified, who apply or explore the discipline. Both a subject and a profession have territorial aspects. Just what practitioners are empowered to do, and what material goes into texts or syllabuses, are legitimate concerns. But any such limitations on a discipline would be absurd, a retreat to censorship of enquiry.

This analysis can only to a small extent be applied to religion. Religion can be treated as a subject, whether as doctrine or more objectively as comparative religion. Many people are qualified and organized to practice it, and for them religion may be said to be their profession. But the majority of followers of a religion are not like this. One could hardly say that a religion, or Religion in general, is either a subject or a profession,

though it has aspects of both. With a discipline, it is still more debatable. It would surely be generally agreed, as suggested at the start, that the problems on which Psychology focuses are those of human thought and behaviour, or some such phrase. (This is a lexical definition, it is what the label indicates.) It is much harder to find a generally applicable phrase in the case of religion. Hyde (1990) discusses various attempts to do so. The discipline of History is the study of the events of the past (strictly, recorded events), that is, history. It would be odd to say that Religion is the study of religion (and neither is Theology). Nor are there agreed methods, and still less an agreed body of knowledge. Some religions, at least, attempt to restrict enquiry, sometimes with violence. Censorship and heresy are the antithesis of a discipline, as I conceive it. Thus one can hardly characterize Religion as a discipline.

Comparing psychology and religion

We seem to have two somewhat disparate conglomerations or collections, to which I might refer as (R) and (P) respectively, the () representing, if you will, two loose corrals. Certainly some of the specimens in one resemble some of those in the other. Whether they are the same species, however, is not always clear. For example, can psychotherapy from a religious standpoint really be equivalent to a non-religious approach? (see Bhugra, 1996). The most ambivalent case is perhaps that of psychoanalysis. Although Freud was trained as, and always insisted that he remained, a scientist, his system has often been compared to a religion, mainly on the following grounds. There is an obvious analogy between the analytic session and the confessional (with fees as penance). There is admission to the profession by a form of acceptance of doctrine, the training analysis. There is validation by individual experience. Freud remarked that his theories were tested on the couch. This can be taken to mean that the therapist observes the results there (although seldom very systematically or objectively); but also that what really matters is what the patient feels to have happened, that is to say individual experience. This is the bedrock of most if not all religions. 'Insight' would appear to be of the same order of phenomena as 'enlightenment' or 'revelation'. And there is the suspicion that psychoanalysis is a system in which it is necessary to 'believe' in a more religious than scientific manner, and that in fact new psychoanalyst is (in some respects) but old priest

writ large. There are also cases, such as scientology, which seem to fall partly into both camps, but which the majority of members of both disown.

In other ways there appear to be significant differences. Richards (1998) says that ‘Both Psychology and religion tackle the “big questions” and claim professional expertise in the “cure of souls”’. But many Psychologists do not think that souls, in any religious sense, even exist. A big question, I suppose, might be why people commit acts of evil.

Different kinds of answers are found in (R) and (P) respectively. Limiting ourselves to Christianity, the most salient form of religion for western Psychology, evil is indissolubly linked to original sin. This doctrine does not merely mean that all humans have the potential for evil, but that they actually are sinful by nature, regardless of what they do. Keith Ward (1998), Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford, holds that the doctrine ‘is a profound analysis of the human condition, and it is quite compatible with the evolutionist account of human biological origins’. I don’t know of any evidence from Psychology, or indeed any other human science, to support this. On the contrary, it is beyond reasonable doubt that humans are born with a range of potentials for good and bad, which vary between individuals and develop variously in interaction with environmental factors. Much of this is well established in ample detail. Now, it is not just that contrary opinions emanate from (R) and (P). It is a different kind of answer, based on different kinds of grounds. The psychological answer is based, as far as possible, on objective evidence carefully gathered and open to refutation. That remains broadly the standpoint of Psychology as a discipline, despite various critical views (e.g. Fox and Prilleltensky, 1997). The religious answer is given, and remains true whether evidence supports it or not. Ward’s argument is based on the Genesis account, which he says is now taken as symbolic rather than literal. But he still thinks the doctrine is a true description. And some, of course, do take Genesis quite literally.

This raises complex questions, which can only be illustrated here (see Wulff, 1997). Some theologians and some scientists argue that science and religion are compatible. One line is that religion, like science, is based on evidence, and open to change in the light of it. Another is that, contrariwise, science itself involves belief just as religion

does. For example, John Bowker (2002) says that science progressively changes and develops, as Newton's ideas were modified by Einstein. In the same way, he says, traditionally God was always referred to as male, but now this is not so. The simple problem would seem to be, that there are no better or worse grounds for referring to God as male or female or neuter or unknown now than there have ever been, in other words none at all. (To say nothing of the numerous Goddesses the human race has conceived of.) Newton's and Einstein's views can be tested by observation. This does not mean, in itself, that it is meaningless to talk about God, and in order to do so one has to use some pronoun. It does mean, it seems to me, that the two ways of thinking are incompatible. Again, Alister McGrath (1988, quoting Griffith-Thomas, 1930) argues that religious conviction is based on evidence in the same way as scientific theory: faith '*commences with the conviction of the mind based on adequate evidence*'. McGrath, a trained scientist, is also an ordained Anglican priest. As such, he must believe, as his Church's Synod recently confirmed, in the divine conception of Christ, and his resurrection. The historical evidence for these resides in the New Testament accounts; there is no independent corroboration. Both events are commonplaces of myth, and the accounts were derived from oral tradition many years later. The point, however, is not that this would not appear to many historians to be 'adequate evidence'. It is that it must be believed regardless of the evidence. This is made explicit in authoritative pronouncements such as that of the *Catholic Encyclopaedia*, which states: '*there is a two-fold order of knowledge ... in one we know by natural reason, the object of the other is mysteries hidden in God, but which we have to believe and which can only be known to us by Divine revelation*' (www.newadvent.org/cathen/, April 2005).

Conversely, some creationists hold that evolution is 'only a theory', for which there is no evidence, and that belief in it is therefore an act of faith. One believes in Darwin, or one believes in the Bible. (Since the latter is the word of God, the decision is simple. And that also disposes of the scores of other creation myths which might seem to have an equal claim.) More seriously, Mendel Sachs (1976), for example, argues that scientists have 'faith' at least in '*a total order underlying all the manifestations of the material world*', which cannot be proved. It appears to me that such a 'faith', if scientists do

indeed hold it, is more in the nature of an assumption, or a hope, rather than a certainty based on revelation. Psychologists and other scientists assume that their subject matter does not behave completely at random. The assumption is supported by the observation that if it did, there could be no practical applications of scientific knowledge, which there manifestly are. I don't claim that these ways of thinking are necessarily true of all religions or religious persons, merely that their acceptance differentiates religious and scientific thought.

The relationship of psychology and religion

'Know then thyself, presume not God to scan: / The proper study of mankind is man', said Pope, but he took for granted the reality of a deity. For those who do not, everything in (R) must be considered as human behaviour, and thus the proper study of Psychology, as well as of other human sciences. (Of course if God does exist, he she or it must be an important factor in human behaviour, and thus equally worthy of Psychological attention.) (R) is close to the focus of psychology, and should be studied by Psychologists. On the other hand, there would appear to be a disjunction between mainstream scientific Psychology and personal belief in religion. Of course there are Psychologists who are religious believers, although many fewer than in the general population (Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle, 1997). As Graham Richards points out, they adopt one of several attitudes. Some merely ignore or deny any discrepancy. Hood et al. (1996) begin their textbook *The Psychology of Religion* by stating: *'...Psychologists have no calling to challenge religious institutions and their doctrines ... it is not our place to question revelation or scripture'*. But it is difficult to see how this can be avoided when behaviour is directly affected. Most psychiatrists, indeed most people, would make a clear distinction between hearing voices when there are, or are not, other people actually speaking to one. Parents who spare not the rod because the Book of Leviticus so commands might well find themselves charged with child abuse, and a Psychologist might be called as an expert witness.

Others take the two as separate 'domains', perhaps dealing with different problems and/or giving different sorts of answers. The concept of a domain implies a territory or

area, distinct from others. I think this is inappropriate for a discipline, and some might well feel it is not appropriate either for a religion, or Religion in general. Argyle (2000), for example, argues that beliefs about religion are unlike beliefs about the physical world. They '*are not verifiable in the same way, they are couched in symbols and myths ... they are really attitudes which are expressed by images, using certain metaphors and accompanied by certain emotions*'. But for many religions this view would be clearly heretical, since they insist on the literal truth of their beliefs. Of course such beliefs and attitudes can be, and are, studied by Psychologists. And again, the question of how far attitudes correspond to reality cannot be entirely avoided. Another version of the 'two domains' line is 'science asks how, religion asks why'. But as a Psychologist, it is precisely why people behave as they do that I wish to discover. I suggest the difference here is rather, what sort of answer satisfies the enquirer (see Richards, 2005). I find an account in terms of heredity and environment satisfactory in principle; believers do not.

Yet another variation is that 'there is more than one sort of knowledge'. This is more sophisticated. It could be taken in various ways. One would refer to implicit knowledge such as skills, another to subjective experiences, feelings, attitudes etc. This really depends, once again, on what you mean by 'knowledge'. But in any case, such matters are subject to psychological enquiry and explanation whether they are religious or not. Stronger claims for uniquely religious knowledge might apply to ecstatic or mystical experiences, the attainment of which is often seen as the culmination of religious life (Marcoulesco, 1995). Numerous accounts of 'mystical union' or the like stress its qualities of absolute conviction and of clear (even if inexpressible), and direct or immediate, knowledge. The problem is that this knowledge seems to be by its very nature private. As William James put it, '*The incommunicableness of the transport is the keynote of all mysticism. Mystical truth exists for the individual who had the transport, but for no one else*' (James, 1902). Of course all subjective experience is in the last resort private, but if it is taken as a distinct form of knowledge this would appear to be inaccessible. Nor is it an infallible source of knowledge. One need not doubt that the mystic has had a profound experience, but it is difficult to see how Psychology, taken as an attempt at objective, verifiable science, can accommodate such claimed direct, personal

knowledge of reality, as opposed to reports of such experiences. It is hard to reconcile 'direct' experience with the psychological fact that experience is mediated by the senses and nervous system. 'Mystical' or similar experiences are widely reported in all cultures. They are variously attributed according to the norms of each culture. There is besides considerable doubt as to whether the various experiences are equivalent. Yandell (1993) distinguishes 'at least' five distinct types. And their status as evidence is highly questionable (Hepburn, 1967).

The boundaries between 'domains' may shift as psychological knowledge impinges on matters of faith, rather as the Catholic Church eventually acknowledged that it was not crucial to hold that the earth is the centre of the universe (and has just recently pronounced that the Bible is not necessarily to be taken literally). The process of adaptation is made easier for many by the current 'pick and mix' approach to personal beliefs that has developed (Wulff, 1997). Furthermore, the concept of two domains may not apply to all religions. In Christianity it goes back to the distinction between civil and canon law. Indeed in essence it goes back to the very beginning: *'Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's'* (Matthew 22:21). But Islam (for example) admits no such distinction: *'... we cannot have a philosophy or an educational policy which is based on a concept not identical with the Islamic'* (al-Attas, 1979). There are two sources of knowledge, science and revelation, and in case of conflict the latter is always supreme. As mentioned above, in other cultures religion is not seen as a domain separate from the rest of life at all. What I wish to draw out is that what I have labelled (R) and (P) are entities of basically different types, and the relationship between them cannot be symmetrical.

The Psychological study of religion

Psychologists should certainly study religion. It cannot but be a massively important part of their subject matter. Religion is currently changing (as it always has done) but it is unlikely to disappear in the short term, as thinkers of the Enlightenment may have concluded. David Fontana (2003) suggests four reasons for a relative lack of activity. First, religion and spirituality appear to some to be contrary to the teachings of science

and to a materialist / reductionist philosophy. I have suggested that some features of religion are incompatible with science, but this is not a valid reason for not examining religion as a phenomenon. I would also repeat the point made earlier, that many of the components of religion that I proposed, such as systems of morality, and indeed spirituality, exist in their own right, and are not intrinsically religious (see Holloway, 1999). Second, some religions have opposed scientific advances. There is currently a resurgence of this with the very active propagation of so-called ‘scientific creationism’ and similar notions. The rise of ‘fundamentalism’ is well documented (e.g. Almond, Appleby and Swan, 2003). All the more reason for Psychologists to be involved. Third, the Psychologist of religion needs a knowledge of not only Psychology but of many other disciplines concerned with history, philosophy, anthropology, creative arts, etc. But this in my view is true of all ideal Psychologists. Fourth, there are major methodological problems, for example (as above) in the study of inner experience, which is often seen as the core of religion. Difficult as it is, Psychologists should neither deny nor ignore such experience. But as I have suggested, there is a difference between accepting the reality of experience, and accepting what the experience is said, by the experiencer or others, to be of. Most if not all people have a convincing experience of seeing the moon as larger on the horizon than at the zenith, even though we are sure both the object and the image remain identical. Another problem with religious mystical or ecstatic experience is that it is typically both rare and usually fleeting, though often with long-lasting effects. However, ‘difficult’ is not the same as ‘impossible’.

There are, I believe (in a non-religious sense), signs of the outline of a more comprehensive account of religion in terms of the human sciences. It will be based, as all such accounts must be, on integrating physiological, individual and social factors, as I am not alone in suggesting (e.g. Runciman, 2005), indeed the concept goes back at least to Thomas Hobbes. The term ‘bio-psycho-social’ has appeared. This is not the place to explore current work on ‘neurotheology’, genetics, evolutionary psychology, parental influences and many other areas which will contribute. The question of compatibility remains. I have suggested some contraindications, but other views are many. The late Pope John Paul II pronounced that ‘*Science can purify religion from error and*

superstition; religion can purify science from idolatry and false absolutism' (1988, quoted by Mooney, 1996). But Psychologists, I hope, would reject both.

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