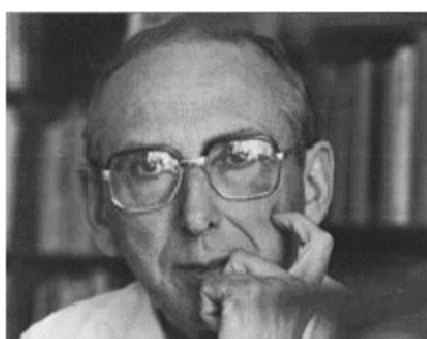


Chapter 15

How and Why I Became Interested in the Psychology of Religion

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I was born too early in the twentieth century to be able to acquire a university degree in psychology, for this kind of faculty did not yet exist when I was a university student, either in Louvain or in other European cities. Lack of a formal qualification had not, however, hindered Freud, Piaget, and a number of other eminent psychologists, and it did not prevent me from accepting a nomination in psychology. I was, in fact, not completely unprepared, for at Louvain University, where I carried out my doctoral studies, there was considerable interest in the nascent psychological sciences, particularly in the Faculty of Philosophy. As early as 1920, they were giving full attention to the epistemological questions of perception and of free will, in discussion with positivism and post-Kantian epistemology. Gradually, and especially in the second half of the twentieth century, an increasing number of lectures were devoted to the “depth psychology” of Freud, Jung, Adler, and the newly developed American psychology of “human becoming”. As is well known, psychology of religion is important in all these psychologies, in spite of a declaration by a Russian psychologist at the international congress in Mexico in 1963 that dead religion no longer constituted an object of interest to psychologists.

As a student of philosophy I was interested in existential psychological questions. This interest led me to study the then-new philosophy of Heidegger, as well as some Scheler, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty. The texts of Heidegger, which meditate

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on and clarify essential existential experiences, were, are, and will continue to be of great significance for psychologists of the human being. I was reminded of this when in 1957, at Heidegger's invitation, I dined alone with the man himself in Cerisy-la-Sale. We talked extensively about psychoanalysis. Heidegger's philosophy of existential experiences and ideas obliges psychologists of religion to pose radical questions about religious "experiences" and about fundamental human desire and its deep ambivalences. Heidegger refers to Kierkegaard who, although not technically a psychologist, is undoubtedly a master in the psychological analysis of man and the enlightening influence upon him of biblical religion.

When historical events led me to do a doctorate in philosophy on Thomas Aquinas, I chose to focus on a question in his works which is at the same time philosophical, theological, and psychological: desire, especially religious desire as constitutive of the mind and the psyche, and its uncertain reaching towards the divine reality, possibly one's personal God. Later on, as a psychologist of religion, I reaped the benefits of these philosophical studies.

The particularity of biblical religion is most important for the psychology of religion. Its fundamental idea is that of the self-revelation of the deity as the distinctive most personal deity, as the personal God. As a psychologist, I naturally put to one side the conviction that this religious conception is born of self-revelation through words and actions by this God, but had to take account of the fact that this very specific religious conviction is of major importance for the psychology of persons belonging to this religion or opposed to what it has always regarded as its own essence. Through contemporary multiple intercultural contacts, this religion also influences other religions. The divine being speaking very personally to certain elected individuals, the prophets, is surely neither a celestial stone nor a higher star! The divine self-revealing being of biblical religion is obviously a divine self, beyond and fundamentally different from the vague divine being of which such great philosophers as Plato and Aristotle could conceive. This fact is also essential for the development of the western concept of the human being as a personal ego. I have become increasingly convinced that the western philosophical and psychological conception of the human being as personal ego is an essential cultural consequence of biblical-Christian God revelation. In my doctoral thesis of theology, which was based an exegetical study, my aim was to show that it is not redemption of sin but self-revelation of the divine being as a personal God that is the major idea, most explicitly in the fourth Gospel. This is, of course, of major importance for an empirically oriented psychology of religion.

The psychological religious interest was present in my mind the day after my defense of my doctoral thesis of philosophy, when I went to Professor Nuttin, who was essentially interested in the psychology of human development, to ask if he would lend me his bicycle for an evening ride in the woods near Leuven. I also asked for some suggestions for books to read during my free summer. As I already knew all the works he mentioned, he asked me if I would be interested in giving some lectures in this field, for he wished to include psychology of religion on the program of psychological studies he was organizing at that time.

Having been offered special postdoctoral grants for study in Paris and in Freiburg in Germany, I opted for Paris, giving up my grant for Freiburg, and stayed there for

a considerable time. There was no scientific study of the psychology of religion in Paris, not even at the Institut Catholique. This will come as no surprise to scholars acquainted with the history of the psychology of religion in the years 1950–1970. Piaget was a brilliant professor of psychology at the Sorbonne, but he devoted his lectures to what has been his major work: *Gestalt* psychology in different kinds of perception. I found the most interesting studies of psychology of the personality in the newly founded Société Française de Psychanalyse, by, among others, D. Lagache, J. Lacan, and Françoise Dolto. There was also a real psychological interest in religion, largely in line with authentically Freudian studies. The majority of the leading members were atheists but they had a good knowledge of Christian religion and, although not subscribing to it themselves, appreciated its cultural and psychological significance. They had no objections to a priest with higher university degrees and an objective scientific disposition doing the training and analyses required for membership of their psychoanalytical society.

In the years 1954–1958 Paris was a most interesting place, both directly and indirectly, for a future psychologist of religion. The lectures by Merleau-Ponty on phenomenology and by Lévi-Strauss on ethnography were stimulating for psychologists. Psychology of religion itself, however, was only present outside the university, essentially in the convent of the Carmelites, who published the famous and (from a psychology point of view) highly important *Études Carmelitaines*, issues of which on mysticism and on possession (Satan, 1948) were of major significance for a branch of psychology then in its infancy. The trend of thought in this group was essentially Jungian, but they had sympathy and real psychological interest in the work of psychoanalysts such as Lacan and Dolto, Freudian psychoanalysts who disagreed with the unconvincing rationalistic view of religion.

During this time I became thoroughly acquainted with the major works of Jung and was able to engage in discussion with Jungian psychotherapists. I gradually perceived that the opposition between Freud and Jung is of major importance for the psychology of religion. I still remember the virulent opposition to Freud on the part of some Jungian therapists or theologians, but my studies in theology made me quickly aware that their Jungian interpretation of biblical religion was a new form of the Gnostic views that pervaded Christian thinking in southern Europe in the second and following centuries. The studies for my theological doctorate in exegesis had enabled me to detect these new Gnostic features in Jungian psychology and to understand the fascination it held for those with psychological and religious interests.

Discussions with Jungian psychologists strengthened my psychological and theological interests in mystical writings, especially those of John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila. I still believe, however, that a Freudian psychoanalytical background helps the reading and understanding of the extraordinary psychological analyses which these mystics carry out and elucidate. It certainly helped me to write my work *Guilt and Desire* (1988). As I write in my book, Freud did not really understand the major importance of the mystical vector in the various great religions. His psychological interpretation of mysticism is simply that of a rationalist mind completely deprived of any kind of personal religious experiential approach to the mystical experience. This conviction has also been of major importance for my systematic psychological studies of the different types of “religious experience.”