

COMMENTARY

Debate Concerning the Psychology of Religion

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My thanks to Professor H. Newton Malony for kindly inviting me to respond to my commentators (see Beit-Hallahmi, 1993; McDargh, 1993). Although not pretending to close the debate, I hope with my response that follows, that I may further clarify it.

It is clear from his comments that McDargh (1993) appreciated my reflections on the epistemological conditions for making the psychology of religion theoretically consistent. In the absence of these conditions, the psychology of religion risks becoming a bag for all kinds of more or less interesting observations of religious or quasireligious facts, and the most scientific characteristic of the enterprise then simply becomes the use of statistical methods.

A major element in the epistemology of the psychology of religion consists in differentiating it from other sciences of religion: sociology, philosophy, and theology. Although McDargh emphatically approved of my intention to do this, he also feared that I would establish fences and thereby cut off avenues to a psychology that could be "more interesting or even more relevant to the full complexity of human experience" (1993, p. 89). I understand his position, because persons trained in theology or in the cultural anthropology of religion often feel disappointed by issues in the psychology of religion and especially by correlational studies that use rough religious and flat psychological concepts. But, in order to produce relevant psychological observations and concepts, it is necessary to trace and determine bound-

aries. Such boundaries safeguard the identity of a discipline, they force the rigorous observance of religious facts, and they guarantee the construction of theories that conceptualize the structures and processes underlying the identified facts. More precisely, it is the identification of a scientific field through establishing boundaries that makes us more aware of the manner in which it interfaces with other disciplines for more fully grasping and explaining the facts. It is because I am conscious of the complexities of social and individual experiences, expressions, and behaviors related to religion that I stress the necessity of respecting the limits and the proper competence of psychology. I think that, in my previous books, I have provided effective ways of differentiating the psychology of religion from other approaches and at the same time situating the data, and the psychological interpretations, in an integrated view of human beings. I refer in particular to two books already published in English, one in the field of empirical psychology made by means of a newly constructed semantic scale (Vergote & Tamayo, 1980) and one in the clinical psychology of religion (Vergote, 1988). It is precisely for the combination of epistemological rigor and interface considerations that the latter publication was so well received and appreciated by Wallace (1991) in the *International Review of Psycho-Analysis*. I fear that in interpreting boundaries as fences as McDargh suggested, one risks ending up sitting on the fence.

For the most part, McDargh focused his remarks on the belief–faith relation. This is a major question where psychological conceptions, neglect of other sciences, and theological or ideological convictions converge in conditioning approaches. In denying the oppositions between belief and faith, I refer to many linguistic analyses, for example, those of Price (1969) and Needham (1972). In my empirical research on the God-representation (1980), I think I showed how religious faith as life orientation, emotional involvement, and evaluational construction is mediated and structured by belief-contents. This is actually consistent with the essential purview of psychology as the study of representations and processes. Unconscious and preconscious representations determine our expectations, trusts, and fears, and events in the experienced realities change the underlying schemes of faith–belief and the personal meaning given to culturally transmitted religious representations and symbolic expressions. However, to understand religious belief and faith as well as disbelief and convinced atheism, the psychologist should work with anthropologists and sociologists and with theologians who know the particular religious culture.

Why do psychologists of religion oppose or simply dissociate belief and faith? Some do so because they are aware that simple questionnaires based on assent to belief-contents have too often been taken as valid measures for discriminating religious types and attitudes. Others, influenced by James (1902/1985), foster a nostalgia for reaching the postulated pure and purely personal religious potentiality in human beings. Others simply identify belief with the “dogmatic” disposition described by Rokeach (1960). Still other

ideological preconceptions could be detected. I would even propose for consideration in this regard, the project of rigorously examining the conceptions and underlying motivations of religious and nonreligious people concerning the tension, exclusion, or integration between belief-contents and faith. In support of his position, McDargh cited a text by Luther (p. 90). However, I would stress the first proposition of the quoted text: "Trust and faith of the heart *alone* make both God and idol" [italics added]. In the first instance, such a proposition reminds me of Freud's theory—namely that the idealized phallus was the first god of the religious person. I also emphasize, as did Freud, that it required a long and dramatic process of "spiritualization" for humans to conceive of the biblical God-Father.

McDargh suspected me of having in mind in this context the work of Fowler (1981), and rightly so. However, I also have in mind some psychologists as well, for example, Wulff (1991). I fear psychologists such as Wulff only come up with very formal abstract concepts that are not responsive to the complexity of the cognitive and emotional contents and structures of different religious individuals. Their abstract reduction to "faith" may condemn psychological research to sterility. Besides, I agree with McDargh's (1993, p. 90) critical remarks concerning Fowler. May I also mention that I co-conducted an empirical research, testing Fowler's developmental psychology of "faith" (cf. De Wilde & Vanhuysse, 1985). To accommodate the findings in this study, it was necessary to thoroughly rework Fowler's map of criteria for distinguishing between stages. It is also striking that the components of faith are various and do not change in a uniform coherent pattern as suggested by Fowler, for example, the logic working in representations, the worldview, and the social perspectives; the locus of authority; the extension and limits of social consciousness; the moral judgment; and the role and meaning of symbols.

I am glad that McDargh (1993) approved of my critical comments on the psychic causalities (p. 91). However, I think the irony rather to be in his mingling of psychological and divine causalities, rather than in my stressing of interacting psychological causalities, and also of interactions between cultural determinants and psychological activations. As is the case for the living organism (cf. Atlan, 1979/1986), the circular endo-causality (or internal causality) of the psychological self-organization does not exclude new interactions with the milieu. These latter interactions often produce the effect of an increased complexity and of different levels in the self-organization. But, in contradistinction to McDargh, as a psychologist, I would never introduce God, his historical revelation, grace, and so forth as causal factors explaining the emergence of new forms of belief-faith, because psychology is an empirical science and God is not an empirical object. What as a psychologist I observe, and what I should take account of, is the historical fact of the enormous influence people like Jesus or Mohomet had, who spoke as mediators of what is believed to be divine revelation. They changed the representation of the divine and consequently the qualitative components of

faith. Similarly, it is a mistake to refer to Winnicott's (1971) "mother/baby" psychology simply because the mother-baby interaction can be observed. In so far as the therapeutic analysis of the child or the adult only bears on the changing representations and emotions with respect to the mother, then, except for some objective historical facts, the psychologist will not infer statements about the real actions and dispositions of the mother from what is heard and observed in the client. A theologian, by contrast, can fully accept the (partial) psychological explanation of, for example, visions and apparitions, and for some cases maintain that God has been acting hiddenly within psychological, social, and cultural factors.

Beit-Hallahmi's (1993) considerations call for a brief reply. From the start, he tried to imprison the reader in the idiosyncratic conceptual fortress he had previously constructed. Obviously, he is a believer—in his own system—in a manner that religious believers rarely are. It must be unconscious irony that he qualifies as "apologetic" by stressing of the epistemological principle of the methodological scientific neutrality of the psychology of religion. Might it also have been hidden Catholic apologetics that moved people like Flournoy, Freud, and E. Jones when they earlier stated this same principle? All of these authors critically reflected on the characteristics that differentiated psychology from near-philosophical mixtures of psychology, metaphysics, and sociology. These critical considerations explain why the claims of explaining religion are disappointing and appear to be preposterous compared to more rigorous observations of the facts. With the famous anthropologist Evans-Pritchard (1965), "I have to conclude that I do not feel that on the whole the different theories we have reviewed, either singly or taken together, give us much more than common-sense guesses, which for the most part miss the mark" (p. 120). Would there not be something comic in pretending to explain through psychology the religious convictions and emotions of Socrates, Buddha, Jesus, Augustine, Kant, and so forth? To be sure, you do not need a PhD to be a religious believer, or for that matter, to be an atheist. However, you can have a PhD and be a believer (even a Catholic) or an atheist. But whatever disposition prevails, it is evident that the polemical considerations such as Beit-Hallahmi advances have nothing to do with epistemological discussions concerning the realm and expertise of the psychology of religion.

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