

INTRODUCTION

Psychology of Religion 2013: Historical Considerations

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ABSTRACT

Finding one's bearings in the welter of claims and counter-claims in the history of the psychology of religion is a daunting task; this article attempts to survey the field through a historical analysis of critical phases in the relationship between religion and psychology. From a position of rejection to that of embraced complexity, psychology's encounter with religion reflects the difficult terrain over which the discipline itself has traversed—indicating not only self-definition issues but also its own ambiguous perspective within a 'scientific' model of reality. The modus operandi of today offers the potential of a positive outcome in the future.

Keywords

post-positivist psychology, positivism, psychologism, religious appearances,
New Naturalist identity

Psychology and religion and the psychology of religion

Serious scholarship in the history of science has revealed so extraordinarily rich and complex a relationship between science and religion in the past that general theses are difficult to sustain. The real lesson turns out to be the complexity. (Brooke 1991, 5)

In the modern academy, is there any relation so vexed as that between psychology and religion? Pace pioneering psychologist Herman Ebbinghaus' (1850–1909) characterization of psychology having “a long past but a short history,” this ought to be expected. The “long past” of Western thinking has been one wherein religious and philosophical concern with “the nature of the soul” has been central. Whether one emphasizes the Greek “care of the soul,” the particular dynamism of Judaism's focus on moral conduct within

the theological-historical horizon of God's revelation, or ignores these origins altogether and attends "merely" to the long development of a western European Christianity that builds on, intertwines and transposes these articulations into its own distinctive theological tradition (cf. Voegelin 1956–1987), what is accomplished over two and a half millennia is an elaborate conception of "the psyche"—the soul, the mind, the self. In our later centuries, the Enlightenment and the impetus it gives to naturalistic inquiry substantially complicates this already elaborate conception yet further (Tarnas 1991; Taylor 1989). Since this elaborate conception sets the stage for the "short history" of the formal, institutional study of "the psyche" since the 1800s, it is not surprising that the effort to develop psychology as the modern "science of the soul" has been beset by problems. Within this problematic tangle, the effort to implement a psychology of religion ought to prove the heart of the knot. Readers of this special issue of *Religious Studies and Theology* should not expect the articles that follow to untangle this knot—they don't!—but read with an eye to the rich, variegated and complex unresolvability at their back, they provide glimpses into issues as deep and seemingly intractable as they are intriguing and profound. Confronted with such a scenario, my intent is to provide some historical considerations that suggest ways for strategic reading of the articles in this issue vis-à-vis the theme of "the psychology of religion."

Historical considerations: The disciplinary project of psychology

That psychology as a formal project as conceived in the late nineteenth century continues to have potent significance for the discipline, and for its sub-disciplines like the psychology of religion, to the present day. For psychology, one of the *Geisteswissenschaften* caught between the humanities and the natural sciences insofar as its problematic subject matter is "human nature" (Dilthey 1988 [1883])—the awkwardness of translation of *Geisteswissenschaften* into "cultural sciences," "moral sciences" or "human sciences" is instructive—the issue of which side to choose has been crucial for its institutional self-identity. And as any scholar of religion or theology knows, whether they are in need of C. P. Snow's (1959) oversimplifying dichotomy of "two cultures" or not, approaches to religion distribute along a considerably complex continuum of positions ranging from a humanities-based approach, on the one hand, to a more naturalistic-scientific approach, on the other. And where one's approach falls carries some considerable implications, not the least being whom you will be able to talk to (or not), and who will respect you (or not). As the twentieth century has borne out, psychology in its "mainstream" manifestations has aspired to natural science status: an aspiration of constitutive significance for the psychology of religion which has, for better or worse, conceived itself as a sub-field of psychology in general. Apparently straightforwardly, this

meant proving itself to its betters in the already established disciplines. Less straightforwardly, the very effort presupposed in question-begging fashion of just what that “established discipline” consisted in, and just how unified and coherent psychology, as the singular implied, was. In the United States in mid-century these questions could be given definitive answers in terms of adherence to experimental procedure and “the hypothetico-deductive method” throughout the decades-long ascendance of positivist and then neo-positivist conceptions of science that dominated psychology’s self-understanding. This self-understanding went hand-in-hand with a Whig history-reading of psychology as a discipline, most famously promulgated by Boring’s (1950) treatment of psychology as crucially experimental in its orientation. Such an experimental locus of the discipline enabled, among other consequences, the convenience of “Wundt’s lab in Leipzig, 1879” as naming the founding father, place and date of psychology’s disciplinary origins, alongside the suggestion that the behavioral approaches dominate in Boring’s time cemented psychology’s status in the present as objective, hard science.

Such a conception did not bear up under closer scrutiny, as the discipline’s self-appointed critic Sigmund Koch made clear in his edited multi-volume treatment *Psychology: The Study of a Science* (1959–1963). In Koch’s inimitable fashion, he complained (repeatedly) of psychology’s being “stipulated into existence” (in the late 1800s), and thus pressed prematurely into the service of presenting a particular image of the discipline as a rigorous science to itself, its institutional peers, funding bodies and the general public, through its possession of a firmly-established methodology. In so doing (its image achieved by around the 1930s) psychologists bypassed the less glamorous but logically and chronologically prior work of humble engagement with its rich subject matter and tentative methodology-building through careful trial-and-error inquiry. Koch drew attention to the discipline’s diversity, plurality and incoherence, seeing this state of affairs as the reality behind a façade of unity (which reality he urged psychologists to recognize, beginning around the 1960s). His critique culminated in a proposal to endorse rather than deny this state of affairs and disband the discipline into a multiplicity of “psychological studies” housed in the appropriate topical departments wherein the studies were pursued—in biology, history, neurology, sociology and so forth (Koch 1976). (If endorsed, it would have gone into effect in the 1980s.) Unsurprisingly, the proposal was unsuccessful, although Koch’s periodizing of psychology’s history is instructive, not least for understanding some of the historical development of the psychology of religion, which loosely follows these periods of change within the discipline (see Hood and Spilka’s treatment, this issue). There are in addition some morals to be drawn from this story.

Historical considerations 2: Positivism and psychologism

One such moral is the extraordinary power exerted by the *image* of science, presumably derived from the natural sciences like physics, in the intellectual imaginary of twentieth-century psychologists. More precisely, as post-Kuhnian critical history shows, the image of science presented was (and is?) above all a *positivist* construct, and not some historically or theoretically accurate picture (cf. e.g., Markus 1987, Danziger 1990, 1997). Since its inception—let’s say for convenience, “Wundt’s lab in Leipzig, 1879”—the modern project of psychology has been deeply, complexly and problematically indebted to positivism. Whether in its adulation of science or method, its conception of history or language, or its suspicion of religion or spirituality, psychology has depended on positivist theory. In late nineteenth-century Germany, the close alliance between the two incited the complex and often contradictory debate around “psychologism” (Kusch 1995). At stake across this debate, to employ some contemporary terms anachronistically, was whether complex, emergent “higher-level” phenomena truly existed as autonomous realities in their own right that transcended their simpler, “lower-level” constituent conditions or proved reducible to them. The debate divides philosophy and psychology across numerous lines. On Gottlob Frege’s and Edmund Husserl’s influential reading, perhaps most especially threatened were the very science and reason which seed the ambition behind “psychologism” in the first place. If science with its hallmark objectivity, or reason as the foundation of “European civilization,” are reducible to mere human subjectivity—a key aspect of Husserl’s (1970 [1954]) “crisis of the European sciences?”—then psychology would not be a laudable extension of science and reason, but as “psychologistic” it would signal their dissolution. Thus was spurred a profusion of numerous and overlapping efforts to define, simultaneously, *both* the rigor of a method apposite to its object *and* the non-reducibility of that object to the methods developed to investigate it.

Out of this debate and these efforts, with equally as many psychologists endorsing a “psychologistic reduction” as those decrying it, and others—perhaps most famously figures like Freud and Jung—ambiguously appearing to be doing both simultaneously, emerges the eventual congealing in the United States of a consensus around a positivistic self-definition in terms of an established empirical methodology (the object of Koch’s criticism as merely an appearance of unity, and merely the image of shared, established method). Also emerging from these efforts are sophisticated studies of religion that display an acute awareness to present religion as irreducible—for example, Otto (1923 [1917]), Underhill (1955 [1911]), and van der Leeuw (1939 [1933]). (The latter studies and their concerted response to “psychologism” provide examples of the setting, and arguably much of the impetus and guiding rationale, for Mircea Eliade’s

work [e.g., 1954, 1959], perhaps the most influential scholarship on religion of the twentieth century.) In other words, positivism first incites controversy and debate within a newly-forming psychology in the form of the reductive threat of “psychologism,” from which a broad continuum of approaches, pro and contra, emerge—many of them finding in “religion” the most radically irreducible “Other” to positivism. Within psychology itself, some decades later, positivism provides a resolution to the debate which is decisive for the discipline’s self-understanding throughout the twentieth century, and decisive for the temporary “disappearance” of the psychology of religion in the USA for some decades. This sketch of some of the historical dynamics around positivism in the establishing of psychology as a discipline bears some remembering, especially in the current context wherein the possibility of a “post-positivist” psychology, and the implications this would have for the psychology of religion, loom large.

Critique and differentiation: A post-positivist psychology?

A second moral to be drawn from Koch’s story, which is ultimately inseparable from and complexly related to the moral of the “image-bearing” power of science, is the ineffectuality of critique relative to the *institutionalization* of a discipline. If the practices and thinking, *and* the researchers employed to conduct these, depend for their livelihood upon institutions that, once established, reproduce themselves by an entirely different rationale than that of their criticism, the latter can be easily ignored. This is not to say that critique doesn’t matter, but that its consequences prove very complex. For example, I think the thorough-going critique of positivism has led to the demise (for the most part) of positivism’s blithe disregard and blanket generalizations of its opposition, of any easy assumption by proponents of its dominance, and of a too-casual assumption of the widespread acceptance of its point of view. Further, it has generated insight and inspired new movements and orientations within psychology—social constructionist, discourse-analytic, critical, hermeneutic, to name a few—and found common cause with “extrapsychological” orientations like feminism or post-colonialism. But it has not, I would venture, led to the demise of positivism as an effective power embodied in the premises or practices or, in Ludwig Fleck’s (1979/1935) apt term, the “thought-style” of many psychologists. Put differently, and the point seems crucial to appreciate a sub-field like psychology of religion, there has not been a “sea-change” in the discipline, but increasing differentiation—arguably fragmentation—and pluralization.

To illustrate with a salient example: one of the leading scholars in the study of mysticism, Bernard McGinn, provides as the Appendix to the first volume of his multi-volume study of western Christian mysticism (McGinn 1991) an excellent and concise summary of theological, philosophical, comparative

and psychological approaches to religion qua “mysticism” (1991, 265–343). He concludes the summary:

The stand-off between empiricism and transempirical epistemology is as strong now as it was at the beginning of the century. Even those, like myself, who are convinced that a purely empirical reading of mystical texts from a reductive psychological perspective has only an ambiguous contribution to make to the present study of mysticism, cannot but be troubled by the lack of conversation between psychological investigators and those involved in studying the history and theory of mystical traditions. Both sides seem equally at fault in this unrealized conversation. (McGinn 1991, 343)

How to account for such resolute and longstanding non-dialogue? Has there been considerable change in the last two decades to overcome this “stand-off” and realize some conversation? While some would support this reading, and do so with good evidence and plausible rationale (see Smythe, this issue), I incline toward a more cautious reading: given psychology’s history, its present configuration should not be optimistically understood as a pendulum swing away from positivism. It is one thing to silence a strident propaganda or mute a blunt rhetoric, another thing to stop or transform the actual practices these support. If the former happens but not the latter, then what can occur is an increase in rhetorical sophistication (or rationalization) without any substantive change in process or product. A less subtle, more aggressive option is a reversion to type with a retrenchment of the criticized position accompanied by a more belligerent foregrounding of its epistemology. That is, to be a proponent of positivism today enables both the invoking of old stratagems of “courageous hard-headed objectivity” against the “soft romanticism of wishful thinking” alongside the added pleasure of rebellion from the margins due to positivism’s “dethroned” status. One wonders to what extent the splitting in 1987–1988 of the American Psychological Society from the American Psychological Association, the development of “positive psychology” as a putatively new approach, or the emergence of the “new naturalism” or “new atheism” (about which more will be said below), are examples of positivist re-assertion. If this is the case, the differentiation occurring in psychology over the last decades is *not* one of genuinely overcoming differences and leveling the playing field, but one of papering over differences and in fact *multiplying* the number of fault-lines and widening gaps in existing fissures. If psychology-in-general as a discipline is undergoing convulsions of exactly this sort, it is hard to say to what extent it is actually post-positivistic. On the one hand, numerous critiques and the emergence of ever-more sophisticated alternative voices make themselves heard, whilst an equally potent critique of positivism echoes across the academy, whether evident in postmodernism (e.g., Lyotard 1984), the emergence of “science studies” (cf. Biagioli 1999), or the eruption of the “science wars” (e.g., Ashman

and Baringer 2001). On the other hand—the institutional hiring, evaluating, promoting and tenure-granting hand—is the doing of psychological research for the most part “business as usual,” which is to say, positivism as usual?

The point to be drawn is that contemporary circumstances of the last few decades bear some resemblance to the founding decades of psychology—widespread debate; a great diversity of approaches; uncertainty as to disciplinary identity; a crucially defining, and complicating factor, of a positivist orientation—and to this extent history may be repeating itself. While it is no longer in vogue to discuss “psychologism,” the substance of the issues posed by psychological investigation today might well be, in effect, very similar, and raises the intriguing issue, beyond the scope of the historical considerations presented here, as to whether “religion” as an object of study continues to occupy the peculiar privilege of being “radically, irreducibly Other” to reductive aspirations?

What this issue is not

The historical considerations laid out above are intended to provide some possibilities for the reader in terms of the complex contextual dynamics of psychology’s disciplinary history against which the different articles presented in this issue can be read. In addition, the reader should also be forewarned of a few things that this issue of RST is *not*. This issue is *not* an attempted evaluation—historical, summative, formative, prescriptive or otherwise—of the psychology of religion, nor does it present some high-altitude synopsis of the shape of the sub-field as a whole. Numerous anthologies, articles and books essaying such efforts have already been written, many of them excellent. Jonte-Pace and Parsons (2001) is one of the best in this regard, presenting assessments by the leading scholars in the psychology of religion—cf. especially the opening articles by Wulff (2001), Spilka (2001) and Belzen (2001)—alongside a balanced array of perspectives (critical, feminist, international and so on) on the psychology and religion relation. For an article-length summary of the subfield concluding on a critical-prescriptive note, see Wulff (2003). A non-exhaustive list of other books and articles in a similar vein offering insightful synopses and assessments on the psychology of religion and/or the psychology-religion relation are Belzen (1997), Belzen and Wikström (1997), Buchanan (2003), Fontana (2003), Livingstone (1997), and Roelofsma, Coveleyn, and van Saane (2003). In all these cases, their treatments of the subject are broader in scope or more intensive or more tendentious than what is offered here.

Further, this issue is *not* a sweeping survey of the multiple currents of the subfield through some rubric that groups the thousands of myriad studies composing it into particular “families” or “positions” or “approaches.” For that task the interested reader is recommended either the textbook by Hood,

Hill and Spilka (2009)—perhaps the preferred textbook in North America in the last decades, likely due to its “empirical focus” being in keeping with psychology’s disciplinary self-understanding in those terms—or that by Wulff (1997), which presents a more broadly-weighted account of the psychology of religion as a balance between the just-mentioned “empirical” approaches with psychodynamic and humanistic approaches. Noting the former clocks in at 636 pages and the latter at 640, the point should be clear that this journal issue is rather more selective and modest in scope (Smith notes that Spilka et.al.’s 2003 edition has “over three thousand titles dating from the late nineteenth century” [2009, 175 n. 29]).

Historical considerations 3: Science-religion relations and the real lesson of complexity

Given these qualifications as to what this issue is not, and the above historical considerations of psychology for “strategically reading” the articles in this issue, what is this issue, stated positively? Put simply, it is trying to gesture towards “the real lesson of complexity” in science-religion relations that historian of science George Hedley Brooke emphasized, cited in the opening epigraph. Yes, there has been a “psychology of religion” as a sub-field of psychology whose historical dynamics have followed those of psychology-in-general (see Hood and Spilka’s article, this issue). Yes, crucial to that history has been the capacity of its investigators to demonstrate a suitably “empirical methodology” which historically has been positivistically understood (hence, among others, the contemporary need to argue for the inclusion of qualitative approaches; see Lentine, Ladd, Broughton, Brioli, and Stout, this issue). And yes, therefore ambiguously situated relative to psychology-in-general or “psychology-as-an-empirical-discipline” are approaches with longstanding interest in religion such as psychoanalysis and the depth-psychologies. On the one hand, these continue unapologetically in their own right as developed traditions that eschew argument, positioning, or self-justification relative to other approaches (see the contribution by Fenn, this issue, following a Freud-Rank-Bollas-inspired trajectory). Or, on the other hand, they can continue as more dialogically conscientious continuations of such traditions (as with Smythe’s article in this issue, presenting a Jungian-based approach engaged with hermeneutics). Examples could be multiplied, but the point at issue is the science-religion relationship is the background to these “psychology of religion” vis-à-vis “psychology-in-general” dynamics, and that this background is not mere backdrop but pervasively, subtly, and actively impacts and transforms these dynamics. The relationship between science and religion has unfolded in the latter centuries of “the modern Western world,” and engendered some well-known characterizations.

The most well-known such characterization is likely that of conflict. Certainly the perception of conflict between science and religion has been a popular and enduring one; the Copernican revolution, the trial of Galileo, and the debates sparked by evolution all come to mind as obvious evidence for this view. As the titles attest, John Draper's 1874 *History of the Conflict between Religion and Science* and Andrew White's 1896 *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (White, 1965 [1896]) exemplify the conflict thesis. Their original dates of publication provide an important clue as to when the thesis really comes into vogue, and a telling clue as the later decades of the 1800s have been crucial for psychology in regard to the historical considerations outlined above. It is particularly telling because (a) the prominence and apparent plausibility of the conflict thesis has never really gone away, (b) psychology has always offered a potential role as antagonist to religion, especially in its offering of "psychologistic" explanations, and (c) because positivism has been the key player informing the conflict thesis. In the last decade, some very popular nonfiction plays on precisely this possibility for conflict—and plays up; after all, controversy sells—demonstrating clearly that "the conflict thesis" (and a none-too-subtle reassertion of positivism by aggressive proponents?) is alive and well. *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*, published in 2004 by Sam Harris, was the first in a series of highly popular bestsellers. Richard Dawkins published *The God Delusion* (2006); *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* was published by Daniel C. Dennett (2006), followed by *God: The Failed Hypothesis—How Science Shows That God Does Not Exist* by Victor J. Stenger (2007) and *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* by Christopher Hitchens (2007).

Psychology offers the appearance of being an ally to at least some of this effort in that the putative locus for explanatory causes of religious experience, beliefs or ideas are "internal" in a psychological sense of biological, neurological, genetic, evolutionary-physiological or some such—in the late 1800s, what they would have called "psychologism." (Note that when Dawkins and Harris are not writing their speculative nonfiction bestsellers they also occasionally work, on the side, as geneticist and neuroscientist, respectively). To be sure, in many instances psychologists (usually of an evolutionary-cognitive persuasion) have done more than offer an appearance and have overtly and intentionally made common cause with conflict thesis proponents; for example, Boyer (1991), Pinker (2002) or Tooby and Cosmides (1992). However, despite this ample evidence for psychology-as-antagonist in "the conflict between science and religion," it proves a very one-sided and unrepresentative version of things as soon as one casts one's net wider and more representatively broader (cf. Cantor [2011] for an excellent recent overview

of the conflict thesis). The exceptional work of Barbara Herrnstein Smith (1997, 2005, 2009) around intellectual controversy and argument—whether modern/postmodern, realist/constructivist, science/religion—sheds light on the dynamics and rhetoric of such debates. In her more recent work (2009) on science and religion, with considerable focus on what she calls “the New Naturalism” invoking many of the figures cited above, such as Dennett and Boyer, Smith describes the versions of science and religion endorsed for the sake of their polemical narrative (and crucial for “the conflict thesis”) as “tendentiously narrow,” “conceptually and historically strained,” “caricatures,” and “melodramatic and tendentious accounts of intellectual history” (135–136, 139, and 176 n. 31). Smith argues:

The operation of a strong Two Cultures ideology, with its familiar intellectual provincialisms, inter-disciplinary hostilities, and mutual caricatures of “scientists” and “humanists” has, over the past fifty years, come to dominate the Anglo-American academy. ... What is significant here is the perpetuation of that ideology by many practitioners and promoters of the New Naturalism. The caricatures here include a constellation of routinely disparaged and often conflated antagonists or supposed antagonists... (139)

The conflations, misrepresentations, and polemic nature of the caricatures and ideology here are clearly reminiscent of the “psychologism” debate; and in these respects, a particular historical pattern would appear to be repeating itself. That said, there are some equally clear, and significant, differences. Advances in the history of science focused on the science and religion relation informing the careful analysis exemplified in Smith’s work makes considerably more difficult the plausibility of sweeping generalizations on which “old school” positivism and “New Naturalism” rely. As Brooke and Cantor (1998, 20) state, such generalizations “are vulnerable because they are selective in their use of evidence. They gloss over the diversity and the complexity of positions taken.” The work of Brooke (1991; Brooke and Cantor 1998) makes clear that the well-known typology of analytic options for science-religion relations Barbour (2000) lays out—conflict, dialogue, independence and integration—are empirically instantiated throughout historical situations in a diversity and variety of ways that demand case-by-case investigation and refuse generalization or simplification (cf. Dixon, Cantor, and Pumfrey 2011). The “real lesson of complexity” means the relation between science and religion is not necessarily any of Barbour’s four options, but contingently and situatedly the relations obtaining between the two can be any, some or all of the options in differing proportions. Proponents of particular viewpoints strategize and argue relative to a multiplicity of interests which must be disentangled; in the process of doing so the historian discovers no necessity of any particular type of relation, nor autonomous domains readily labeled “science” and “religion,”

but context-specific actions intelligible relative to certain interpretations of ideals and norms, political pressures and interests, desires and contingencies. The historical perspective suggests that *both* science and religion need equally multi-faceted articulations and nuanced, differentiated and highly self-conscious characterizations (and by implication, therefore the notion of “secular,” too; cf. Taylor [2007]). While this seemingly affords a potential role for psychology of religion to play in assisting a reconceptualization of science-religion relations that would preclude reifying science or religion into singular hypostatized entities, such a role assumes some *distinctiveness* for the psychology term. If the historical burden of the “psychologism” debate, and the contemporary one of a “post-positivist” psychology, is precisely about just what that distinctiveness of psychology consists in, then the “psychology of religion” finds itself ambiguously situated indeed.

A final glimpse at the contemporary scene in trying to ascertain the “science-religion relation” reinforces the complexity lesson, as diversity seems the order of the day. One example: a polar opposite to the conflict thesis of the New Atheists/Naturalists, Stephen Jay Gould (1999) proposes a “nonoverlapping magisteria” thesis, arguing that science and religion have no conflict because they have no overlap. Science deals exclusively with the empirical, while religion is concerned exclusively with questions of ultimate meaning and moral value. A second: while Smith (2009), as mentioned above, offers a critique of the rhetoric and representations of the New Naturalists, she also does the same for what she calls the “New Natural Theology,” which are (primarily Christian) attempts to reconcile science and religion, usually by a strategy of subordinating scientific claims to theological ones (e.g., Griffiths 2002; Haught 2003). However, the point of Smith’s exploration is that much of their reasoning and assumptions is effectively analogous to their naturalistic opposition, although it is utilized to arrive at an opposite conclusion. The diversity of theological options is far beyond the scope of this introduction to even sketch, but the theology criticized by Smith in her text certainly does not exhaust all the theological positions available, and certainly the more sophisticated articulations are acutely aware of genuinely alternative rationales (e.g., Milbank, Pickstock and Ward 1999; Smith and Olthuis 2005; Williams 2005). A third and fourth example: an edited volume titled *Sacred Science?* explores the possible religious significance and functions science serves (Øyen, Lund-Olsen and Vaage 2012), while the text *Rethinking Religion* (Soffin 2011) presents itself as an atheist argument for the existence of God (admittedly, in ultimately naturalistic, rationalist terms). Further examples could be multiplied, underlining that complexity is the lesson.

Or perhaps a third, admittedly speculative, moral could be drawn from Koch’s story in regards to the intriguing commonalty between Koch’s appraisal

of psychology, studies of religion, and the “complexity thesis” characterizing the history of science-religion relations: each would seem to be essentially a multiplicity of perspectives rather than a unity. In the case of psychology this is despite the powerful impact of positivism on the discipline’s self-understanding and despite an avowed commitment to a particular conception of method. To risk the danger of drawing a positive conclusion from negative evidence: perhaps “the psyche,” like “religion,” is a non-objectifiable object? Could the pluralistic diversity of psychology, arguably its incoherence, like that of the numerous types of study of religion, be interpreted as the faithful reflection of a many-sided, stubbornly irreducible subject matter?

Conclusion: Whither psychology of religion today?

The very effort to evaluate or assess the subfield or to present some coherence or shape to the psychology of religion—here the recurring metaphor of “mapping” or “cartography” (Jonte-Pace and Parsons 2001 and Livingstone 1997, respectively) is telling—forecloses one real possibility: that the subfield has exclusively nominal status with no empirical support to give substance to the name. In other words, that the subfield “psychology of religion” has no shape or coherence at all; its ostensible boundaries have dissolved, and the only generalization that holds is that no generalization holds. Thus when Hood and Spilka (this issue) say “Slowly but surely, the psychology of religion has been entering the mainstream of professional psychology. ... The day has passed when the psychology of religion can be distinguished from psychology-in-general,” it can be read as the sub-field achieving recognition, a coming-of-age story of gaining acceptance. Similarly when Smythe (this issue) claims “Much of the contemporary literature on psychology and its relationship to theology and religion exhibits a broadly inclusive pluralism that supports a variety of distinct perspectives,” this is clearly a positive characterization of an improvement in relations between established positions. If, however, the contemporary trend of an ambiguously “post-positivist psychology” towards a “liberalization of approaches” and a “democratization of methods” entails a loosening of standards and a dissipation of disciplinary boundary-marking, then in that very celebration these valorizations also lose much of their affirming power. In this case, psychology of religion’s indistinguishability from psychology is not so much an achievement, but merely recognition of the muddledness that characterizes both; do we have an inclusive pluralism, or merely an indifferent cacophony? “Diversity” or chaos? A “rich abundance” or a compulsive productivity? To be sure, “the center does not hold”—according to Sigmund Koch, psychology has never had one—but if the obvious fallback to a plurality of centers does not hold either, then scholars looking for some sense to the contemporary scene presumably designated

by the locution “psychology of religion” find themselves in terrain not only uncharted, but unchart-able. I don’t know, but my best guess is that this is indeed the current situation, and that the psychology of religion at present has no particular shape or definition. It is unclear what studies that self-identify with the subfield would mean or might gain by such description. Interpreted pessimistically, it invites a repetition of history and a reassertion of some positivist version of science to give psychology some distinctiveness of identity—with ample candidates, for example a “New Naturalist,” for leadership. Interpreted positively, this is a moment of radical freedom and possibility and an opportunity for bold theorizing, for forging unprecedented cross-disciplinary connections, and for the creative development of innovative synergies. Interpreted negatively, the pervasive sense of indiscriminacy accompanying the proliferation of work bespeaks a technological-economic rationale that equates efficiency with quantity, goodness with productivity, and discerns quality not at all. Such a possibility demands critical attention, raises the bar on the integrity with which scholars in the psychology of religion do their work of “saving religious appearances,” and likely entails political and historical considerations too rarely addressed. Perhaps in our contemporary world academic freedom and its technological underwriting must go hand-in-hand, and the opportunities that present themselves for the psychological study of religion are always also crises. In the midst of these interpretive possibilities, what is undoubted is that psychologists of religion live in interesting and complex times.

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