

## Chapter 15

# Looking Back

What kind of conclusions can we draw from the dialogue between psychology and religion? As we have seen, the field is rich and complex so that any simple answer to this question will be inadequate. However, it is worthwhile to reflect on general trends as they have much to teach us.

### 15.1 Lessons from Dialogue

A first conclusion that must be drawn is that many views of religion held by psychologists in the 20th century were very wrong. Freud and many others viewed religious participation as psychologically unhealthy and viewed organized religious communities with disdain. These positions were advanced by well-meaning psychologists who viewed them as scientific facts. However, the evidence is that (1) religious participation is generally associated with positive physical and mental health, and (2) this positive effect is more related to participation in communal activities than individual devotional activity or spiritual seeking (see Chapters 10 and 11).

Science is a human enterprise and accordingly makes mistakes. Nevertheless, the fact that psychologists missed the mark by such a wide margin for many decades is an embarrassment for science in general and psychology in particular. We have much to learn from this failure. It teaches us about the limits of science, the value of nonscientific ways of knowing and the dangers of scientism that can lead us to wrong and hasty conclusions. Such conclusions are obviously bad for religion, if people wrongly perceive that there is something inherently problematic in religious participation. However, it is also the case that this kind of mistake is bad for science, as it undermines its credibility as well as places psychologists on the wrong side of the evidence.

Despite these problems, another conclusion that quickly presents itself is that psychological science has much it can offer to religious traditions. While religion is more than psychology, it is also true that every member of a religious tradition is an embodied, psychological being who is subject to the biological, relational, and social forces that are studied by psychologists. Failure to recognize this fact and take advantage of the knowledge and critical perspective provided by psychology would

be unfortunate. For instance, it is largely because of psychology—not religious thought—that we now understand the crucial role of childhood in the development of spirituality and religion in the individual (see Chapters 5, 7 and 8). Problems with prejudice and authoritarianism among religious individuals that have been revealed in psychological studies provide a healthy challenge to religious organizations to make sure they are moving toward the goals that they want to reach (see Section 12.5).

A final conclusion that is evident in recent dialogue is that religious traditions are a rich store of wisdom that could generate hypotheses to be investigated by psychologists, as well as offer critique and correctives (Ross & Konrath, 2002). Some of the most important contemporary movements in psychology, such as the expansion of therapy techniques and the development of positive psychology, are heavily dependent upon religious insight and practice (see Chapter 11). There is every reason to believe that more good material awaits.

The bottom line of all of this is that both psychology and religion have a vested interest in dialogue. No real scientist wants to pursue a mode of investigation that will conceal the truth or lead to falsehood. In like manner, no genuine, authentic follower of a religious tradition wants to ignore things that are problematic. If neither science nor religion is thought of as possessing a perfect understanding of all aspects of human experience, the ideal relationship between them becomes one of dialogue. In this model, science may study the human person in general and our spiritual life in particular, and this study will help expand and correct religious beliefs and practices. On the other hand, religion may react to this study and show ways in which it is deficient. It may also offer a more general critique of scientific approaches to human experience and suggest new ways of understanding the human person. We learn the most by fully participating in such a dialogue.

The terms of this dialogue have changed markedly over the past hundred years. During much of the 20th century, the conversation was largely one-sided, with psychologists talking and religious people listening. Even Freud received a good reception among some religious writers. However, in the past few years, psychologists have become much more interested in what religion has to offer, and religious professionals have become more circumspect about how they make use of psychological theory and research. This makes a more level playing field for dialogue.

## 15.2 Approaches to Dialogue

Under what conditions is a psychology and religion dialogue most likely to be successful? The best work over the past century has been based on six fundamental principles. It has been:

- *Knowledgeable* about relevant material in both psychology and religion.
- *Appreciative of complexity* that is involved in the issues under discussion. A corollary to this is that no single system or reductionist framework is likely to contain or explain all facets of the relationship between psychology and religion.

- *Transparent to self and others* about the philosophical and religious presuppositions behind the positions taken in the dialogue.
- *Fair* in evaluation of the evidence on a given issue.
- *Open to learning*, correction, and new perspectives. It involves a willingness to take seriously what the other side has to say, to recognize that one does not have all the answers, and to admit mistakes.
- *Useful* to the individuals or community who are the object of study.

Is any one approach to the psychology and religion dialogue more likely to be productive according to these criteria? While this is an important issue for discussion and debate, an examination of the field suggests that many approaches can lend themselves to either dialogue or monologue depending on the specific stance of the investigator. A good example of this can be found in applications of the evolutionary paradigm to the psychology of religion. Reductionist approaches such as that of Pascal Boyer are conversation stoppers of doubtful validity or utility, while the more open approach of someone like Harvey Whitehouse has much potential for promoting dialogue (see Section 6.2.3).

## 15.3 Barriers to Dialogue

We have the knowledge needed to undertake constructive dialogue between psychology and religion. What might prevent that from happening? At this time there seem to be two main types of barriers: ideological positions and cultural values.

### 15.3.1 Ideological Barriers

1. *Scientism*. Science is a wonderful tool, but it is not the only way we learn about the world. Given its limitations and the nature of human action, it seems likely that it is not always the best way to learn about people. Contemporary science is strongly influenced by naturalism and the search for universal, invariant laws. However, action takes place in specific contexts that are non-repeatable in their complexity, so while science can provide useful information, it can never give a complete guide to action. Other ways of knowing and deciding also need to be part of the picture. This is in keeping with the vision of the founders of modern science, who never argued that science is the best way to answer all questions.
2. *Positivism*. The dead hand of positivism continues to impair psychology in general and its dialogue with religious traditions in particular. While it has been many years since it was taken seriously as a viable philosophy of science, many psychologists—including some psychologists of religion—still subscribe to its beliefs and practices. Of particular importance for the psychology and religion dialogue is the positivist view of history, which sees the world as leaving behind religious superstition in favor of scientific progress. This view of history is not

a scientific fact—it is an ideological or philosophical position. Obviously, true believers in this particular ideology will ultimately be uninterested in what religion has to say. The increasing social and environmental problems linked to our modern, individualistic and technological culture reveals another picture of history that challenges the positivist model of progress. Ultimately, in a positivist strategy of reductionism and conflict, everyone is a loser.

3. *Hedonism*. Although specific religious traditions differ in both beliefs and practices, most have sought ways for individuals to transcend what is typical and achieve what is possible. Some psychologists would ask, why bother? Isn't life more about adjustment, fitting in, and being happy? Taylor (2007) argues that lying behind this is the idea that the pursuit of transcendence interferes with pleasure and so should be avoided. An ordinary life is best and the cost of growth is too much. An ideological position of this type leads to little interest in many aspects of religion, with the possible exception of things perceived to enhance well-being. From a religious perspective this is unfortunate, as (1) there is more to life than pleasure, (2) the pursuit of pleasure through methods such as materialism is ultimately self-defeating, and (3) a comprehensive sense of well-being requires the pursuit of transcendence and spiritual connectedness. Research to date in the social sciences is generally supportive of the religious position on this issue.

### 15.3.2 Cultural Barriers

Several aspects of belief and values that are enshrined in contemporary Western culture also can be seen as potential barriers to integration. One of the most important of these is extreme individualism.

The individual stands at the center of Western society, and an attempt to provide individual freedoms certainly has many benefits. However, individualism as it is practiced in Western countries often assumes that groups and relationships impede the individual in their search for happiness and growth. This attitude toward the group has led psychologists to ignore or look negatively upon religious organizations and communities. The anti-religious ideas endemic in positivism reinforce this tendency and constitute a barrier to a complete and fair examination of the role of religious communities in the life of the individual. This has proved to be a big mistake in several ways. First, a large body of research now shows that participation in organized religion is associated with significant physical and mental health benefits. Second, there is increasing evidence that it is difficult to understand the religious behavior of individuals without an appreciation for the religious culture and community within which they live. Third, it ignores the self-understanding and experience of religious traditions, which generally see communal life and relationships as vital to spiritual growth.

Individualism has also influenced the separation of religion from spirituality. Contemporary academic definitions of these terms tend to define religion in terms of community and spirituality with reference to the individual. Some authors appear to prefer an individualistic spirituality and to privilege it over more communal ways

of seeking. However, studying spirituality from only an individualistic perspective runs the risk of ignoring the considerable effect of religious communities and the cultural context within which spirituality is lived for most people.

As we have seen, many scholars and individuals are observing a number of negative social and cultural trends. The newspapers carry stories of environmental degradation and global warming. The past century has seen unprecedented levels of warfare and cultural or physical genocide, which continue in the world today. Yet many people seem resigned to a conclusion that “progress” is inevitable, and these losses are things we must accept. One message of this book is that we need not accept this fate. Religious traditions offer great resources for the solution of many modern problems, and psychology can offer assistance in this endeavor.

It is clear from the theory and research reviewed here that the human person is both an *individual person* and a *relational being*. Thus, we need to avoid the extremes of an individualism that ignores the necessity of social relationships and a collectivism that ignores the uniqueness of the individual. This position has considerable support in the scientific literature, as well as important positions taken by religious and philosophical writers. Psychology in particular has often been guilty of stressing individuality at the expense of the vital relational connection a person needs to exist and flourish in their daily life.

## 15.4 Prospects and Directions for Dialogue

Assuming that barriers to dialogue can be overcome, what are the potential areas for dialogue in the future? Some encouraging current trends point to possibilities.

First, it seems likely that the psychology and religion dialogue will benefit significantly from postmodern and practice insights. Many scholars on the psychology side of the conversation, as well as those on the religion side, have begun to make use of postmodern concepts and methods, while avoiding the extreme relativism that has plagued postmodern thought in some areas of social psychology and philosophy. The willingness to consider qualitative approaches to investigation, sensitivity to differences among various religious traditions, and an understanding of the importance of context in religious behavior or experience are all valuable outcomes of a conversation influenced by postmodernism. It seems likely that these trends will continue.

Second, there are many exciting possibilities for expanding the depth and breadth of topics related to religion or spirituality that are part of the dialogue. While religious traditions are being exploited as a potential source of therapeutic techniques, other aspects of their thinking have been relatively neglected and may provide valuable insights. For instance, religious theories of psychopathology offer fascinating perspectives on important problems like depression, anxiety, or addictions. A broader consideration of religious traditions and practices is also at hand, with Islamic and Orthodox traditions taking their rightful place as partners in dialogue.

Finally, the psychology and religion dialogue is poised to explore the importance of community and the relational context for spirituality. Many contemporary authors

on both sides of the dialogue have become deeply conscious of this important aspect of human experience. It may be that this conversation will also have an impact on the broader field of psychology, sensitizing it to these issues.

Predicting the future is hazardous. Fifty years ago, the British psychoanalytic writer Harry Guntrip argued that our culture needed a move away from a focus on human power and “a rebirth of the major interest in the needs of the heart and the end of existence toward which all our, at present, fevered and anxious activity tends” (Guntrip, 1957, p. 197). A strong dialogue between psychology and religion can help us move toward that goal while retaining the benefits that science has to offer us.