Psychology of religion

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Judged by these two volumes, the psychology of religion is as diverse as psychology in general. Aspects in contexts for instance gives historical examples of both the survey approach of religious phenomena and qualitative case studies and debates. A specimen of the former is the work of the Swiss-American pioneer James Henry Leuba, portrayed by David M. Wulff. An example of the latter is the debate on psychoanalysis and pastoral care between Oskar Pfister and Werner Gruehn, meticulously analysed by Eckart Nase. The variety of approaches is reflected in Van Belzen’s editorial introduction, when he writes: ‘there is no such thing as “the” psychology of religion’. Van Belzen is quite clear about his own position: psychology itself is a thoroughly historical enterprise. Not only are human conduct and consciousness pervaded with contemporary culture, psychological theorizing and research is also profoundly influenced by both Zeitgeist and previous psychological work.

If we follow Van Belzen’s own criteria, this volume is somewhat disappointing, since most of the authors refrain from approaching their subject-matters in a wider historical or theoretical context. When Vande Kemp surveys Gordon Allport’s pre1950 writings on religion, she presents the reader with an elaborate and precise inventory but does not transcend her empirical material. The same comment applies to Noragers lengthy account of the correspondence between Gronbaek and Gruehn. These ‘empiricist’ contributions are a great contrast to Vandermeersch’s thorough analysis of the history of the French psychology of religion, culminating in the work of Paul Ricoeur. Vandermeersch reconstructs the gradual convergence of French psychoanalysis and Catholic theology, placing the latter firmly in the context of European history. Vandermeersch clearly shows the ambivalent attitude towards psychoanalysis among French Catholic intellectuals, with sex, guilt and morality as main issues. In the second part of this chapter, the controversial figure of Lacan is introduced, whose work and ‘psychoanalytic politics’ have led to both an important shift within French Catholic theology and a theoretical reorientation within (French) psychoanalysis.

A variety of Dutch approaches to the psychology of religion is documented in Van gisteren tot heden (‘From yesterday until the present’). This volume contains eight inaugural addresses of leading Dutch psychologists of religion, covering the 20th century almost completely. The early 20th century contributions mainly consist of reviews of contemporary European and American studies in the psychology of religion, a procedure which was apparently seen as a good venue to legitimize and mark it as an independent field of study for the Dutch audience. From the 1930s onwards, non-theological approaches of religion appear, with a heavy emphasis on psychoanalytic and phenomenological viewpoints. The 1950s witness the advent of pastoral psychology, exemplified in the work of J.H. van den Berg, who dismisses the idea of psychology as a neutral science: the essence of psychology is psychotherapy, and the essence of psychotherapy is spiritual care. In the same period, the Catholic pastor and psychologist Han Fortmann paves the way for a new approach: commenting on the earlier work of both Dutch and foreign scholars, he draws ‘culture’ into the psychology of religion. In the 1960s, Fortmann develops a full-blown cultural psychology of religion in his 1200-page study on religious perception and projection. His untimely death in 1970 prevented a further exploration of this fruitful venue, although his work inspired a variety of social scientists and theologians in the Netherlands.

Van Belzen’s initiative to select and publish these contributions should be applauded. Especially the Dutch volume provides a wealth of interesting material, both historically and theoretically. The compilation of historiographical studies in Aspects in contexts, apart from the chapters by Van Belzen and Vandermeersch, has a more anecdotal character and by this falls short of the criterium formulated by the editor himself: history of psychology is a serious subdiscipline, not just a hobby.

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