

# JACOB BELZEN'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION

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Commendation speech on the occasion of the conferment of the title of Honorary Member of the Italian Association for Psychology of Religion, Verona, 3rd September, 2004

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# JACOB BELZEN'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION\*

*Mario Aletti*

Jacob A. Belzen has been among the most influential and outstanding representatives in the psychology of religion throughout the world and is one of the leading protagonists involved in his present affirmation.

He has approached the psychology of religion with a rich and varied cultural background with a series of competences that led to his scientific research and his specific psychological approach. This is characterized, but certainly not exhausted, by the perspective of the cultural psychology of religion.

Belzen began studying for a doctorate in Social Sciences at the University of Utrecht and one in History with the Free University of Amsterdam. He then obtained a degree *cum laude* in Philosophy at Leuven with a thesis on religion, anthropology and the psychology of religion. This work was supervised by Antoine Vergote. Following this he obtained a degree *magna cum laude*, also in the Sciences of Religion at the Åbo Akademi in Turku, Finland, with a thesis on the psycho-cultural approach in theology and the sciences of religion, having as his tutor the professor Nils G. Holm. At the same time he was making a brilliant university career at the Catholic University of Nijmegen, which in 1993 resulted in him becoming a professor of the Psychology of religion at the University of Amsterdam where he is still teaching.

He is a member of the most prestigious international organizations that take an interest in the psychology of religion, sociology, the history of religion and also in the history of psychiatry. In some of which he has important scientific tasks and organizational commitments. Most important, he was the General Secretary of the *International Committee for European Psychology of Religion* from 1985 until 2003, and, from 2001, he was the President of the

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*International Association for the Psychology of Religion*, in which he was one of the most committed promoters (Belzen, 2001a, 2002a, 2002b).

Among his edited works on the psychology of religion, one can count roughly fifteen volumes published as author or as editor and 150 articles in books and reviews, in many languages. The themes discuss the history of the discipline and its protagonists (Belzen, 1994, 1995-1996, 1996a, 1998a, 1999d; Belzen & Uleyn, 1986) concerning epistemology and methodology (Belzen, 1995c, 1997d, 1997f, 2001d) with particular emphasis on the promotion of the cultural psychology of religion (Belzen, 1997b, 1997c, 1999b, 1999c, 2001b, 2003a) and the connection between mental health, psychiatry/psychoanalysis and religion (Belzen, 1990, 1992, 1995b, 1996c, 1998b, 2004) belief in the devil and in occultism, continuing with themes of lively interest on the present international debates, such as concerning mysticism (Belzen, 2003b) conversion (Belzen, 1999e) cross-culturalism (Belzen, 1995a, 1996b) the spirituality outside religion, and cults. In 1990 he founded the *International series in the psychology of religion*, the most prestigious collection in this field, published by Rodopi, of which he is still the director. In collaboration with Nils G. Holm and Ralph W. Hood Jr. he is the co-editor of the *Archive for the Psychology of religion/Archiv für Religionspsychologie* and he is a member of Editorial Board of the *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*. Jacob Belzen has been nominated for numerous international awards; among these, in 2002, the much coveted *William James Award of Division 36 (Psychology of Religion)* of the *American Psychological Association*, a triennial award given to scholars that have offered an outstanding contribution to basic research and theory in the psychology of religion.

We could continue to speak at length of an intensive curriculum and an impressive scientific production. In the present situation, I would prefer to just give some indications about his training and scientific efforts, to underline the characteristics of his work that were able to contribute to the development of the psychology of religion in which Belzen can be considered a master and from where we can find inspiration for our own way in this discipline. In fact, Belzen does not want to be considered a master and does not claim to have students or disciples. Perhaps this is a sign of a good master: one who transmits and helps others to grow, not only in acquiring knowledge, but in their own capacity to think autonomously and in finding the means to construct their own thoughts.

Naturally, as Belzen, being so concerned himself with hermeneutic psychology knows well; my résumé about his thoughts is exposed at the risk of a subjective view and an interpretation that represents the interaction between his writing and my personal feelings. I apologize and hope that this presentation will encourage in you a desire to read his essays and to know his work better.

Certainly his work is noticeably oriented by his training and his early interest in the historical -cultural perspective. Belzen's approach to the psychology of religion comes from the environment of the cultural psychology that was initiated by Han Fortmann at the Catholic University of Nijmegen at the end of the 1950's, under the influence of Fritz Rutten, Fortmann's master and artifice of the Department of psychology of that university. Fortmann was aiming at a combination of cultural psychology and a psychology of religion methodologically deconfessionalized, and in this way, he encouraged Belzen to study trans-individual dimensions in the construction of religious meaning. The historical perspective promotes constant attention on the cultural declination of every philosophical, anthropological, and psychological model. In this way, man had to fulfil himself, as an individual and as part of a community, always in a culturally modulated way in a temporal and geographic space (Belzen, 1997a). From this point of view being religious can be very different in one historical cultural context and in another. This is valid in any case, not only for the psychology of religion but for psychology in general. In a certain way - according to Belzen - every psychology should be a cultural psychology (Belzen, 1997a; Belzen, 1997f, 1999d). Moreover, the history of psychology teaches us that the theories and models evolve and are rooted in paradigms, pre-conceptions, when not culturally predetermined in ideology. This brings us to the conviction not only of the non-universality of the conclusions of psychological studies but also of the necessity of hermeneutic inquiries into the findings of researchers (Belzen, 1999d, 2001b).

I believe that this attention to the individual's diachronic and synchronic links with culture, finds its natural solution in cultural psychology as intended by Fortmann and continued by Belzen. This is why I believe that it is a charming joke that Belzen claims to have chosen psychology almost by accident, because his vocation for History was not lucrative enough nor easily sold on the cultural market; in fact his former interest found its place adequately in cultural psychology. But this vocation made his beginnings difficult with the department of psychology in Nijmegen, where the influence of cognitive

psychology and particularly behaviourism – there, as in most of the academic environment, in the past and not only then! - privileged experimental laboratory research and the study of diverse mental activities as objective, isolated “things”, separate from the complex personality of the subject and his roots in the historical cultural context.

Because of this, when Nijmegen wanted to include Belzen in a research group, he chose the psychology of religion, the closest to cultural psychology and emphasising the global expression of the personality. He chose a group working on the connection between psychotherapy and religion. The first approach to psychology of religion was therefore, for Belzen, in the clinical perspective that demonstrates the interaction of the religion with the structuration, the re-structuration, and even the de-structuration of the personality drawing attention to the individual and his becoming.

There was a time when psychology of religion was emerging from the context of religious sciences and was often left in obscurity by the sociological (or at times sociographic) perspective of demoscopic surveys, or any educational matters, not to mention the ideological value, sometimes apologetic and sometimes reductionistic.

Fortunately other horizons were open to Belzen from reading the classics (Freud, Jung, Fromm, James etc.) and the works of the two most important protagonists from the beginning of the psychology of contemporary religion in Europe, who could both be considered his other masters, Hjalmar Sundén, leader of what could be described as the “Scandinavian school”, and who introduced into the psychology of religion a combination of perception psychology and role psychology (Sundén, 1959/1966, 1975; see also Belzen, 1996a; Holm & Belzen, 1995), and Antoine Vergote, founder of the “Leuven school” with his views on anthropology, on psychoanalysis as the science of man, the analysis of religious language and the psychic structure of belief and unbelief (Vergote, 1966, 1969, 1978, 1983, 1988, 1993, 1997; Vergote & Van Der Lans, 1986).

His personal synthesis of the models and the teachings of the two schools encouraged Belzen to recognize in cultural psychology the possibility of studying the relation between religion as a cultural phenomenon and the psychic functioning of the individual; in other words to recognize as the object of psychology of religion religiosity i.d. a living experience (intended) with the religion that the individual encounters in his own cultural environment (Belzen, 2001d).

Naturally I do not wish to speak at length about cultural psychology of religion, its characteristics, its challenges and its problems, given that that will be the theme of prof. Belzen's contribution which can be found in this volume.

I want only to put forward some specific characteristics that could be thus summarized; the psychology of religion of Belzen is 1. Primarily psychology 2. A cultural psychology 3. An hermeneutic–constructionistic psychology.

1. Belzen's psychology of religion is a real psychology that knowingly distinguishes between sociology, theology, philosophy, the history of religion and anthropology. But we cannot ignore that these constitute the environment, and nourish and condition the orientation of the "life form" (Wittgenstein) through which the religiosity of the individual manifests (Belzen, 1995-1996) but it studies them from the point of view of individual experience. Psychologist, with a vast background of historical cultural studies, Belzen is well aware of the importance of culture in history. But it is not the history of religion as such in which his interest remained focalised but rather on the psychic functioning of the subject confronted with religion. (In the same way, for example, in which the psychologist is well aware of the importance of neurobiology in each human act including religious behaviour, but does not view religion from a neurobiological point of view). Moreover his interest is in acquiring knowledge; he does not aim to judge the value of religious truths nor does he intend to praise or minimize, but to give a phenomenological understanding of individual religiosity.

2. Psychology studies man in culture and because of this the psychology of religion is cultural psychology of religion, but in the same way each psychology is (or should be) a cultural psychology, taking into consideration the trans-individual dimensions of human behaviour. This is significant for Belzen and encourages an approach that we might call "ecologic" towards authentic man, keeping a distance from the "laboratory psychology" that sectionalizes human behaviour and isolates him from his natural context. In the objective, not always implicated, of reaching that which would be called the "hardware" of human behaviour and not taking into consideration its concrete contents (software) it hides the temptation of the omnipotence of psychological knowledge, when it tries to define the essence of what the psyche is. Meanwhile it seems to me that psychology must study the psyche as a means of relating to oneself, to others and to the world. In my view, and I believe that of Belzen (but I do not want to presume that my views are his), psychology, each psychology is an applied psychology that refers to concrete man, situated and

observed in a real life event. In consequence and specifically the psychology of religion does not study a *homo religious* in the abstract, neither does it mention its origins, nature, and the ontological value of religion, but studies the functional relation that man creates with a concrete religion which is present in any given culture. The real or valid question for the psychologist is “What is this man doing with this religion ?”

3. Belzen recognizes that in the psychology of religion (as in every other branch of psychology) there are a vast range of methodologies, each one appropriate to a specific level of complexity. They are, in some way mistakenly, grouped into two different methodological traditions. One which is empiricist-analytical and the other which is hermeneutic-phenomenological, often but not always, identified as quantitative and qualitative methods. Belzen does not hide his preference for a better understanding of individual religiosity with the hermeneutic method, which leads primarily to understand phenomena not to predict or control them. Recognizing limits in the field of the psychology of religion, of the experimental research in the strict “laboratory” sense, which isolates single behaviour from the context in which it is structured and manifested., Belzen encourages us to research and use appropriate methods for the specific object of study (Belzen, 1997e; Belzen, 1997f). He himself emphasised the importance of a method based on social constructionism, inside a perspective of cultural psychology that is similar to that of Jerome S. Bruner (1986; 1990; 1991; 1995). The “search for meaning” of Self, the world, and our relationship with the world has a constructive-narrative perspective of reality, through continual negotiation between individual and culture of the meanings presented by the symbolic-cultural universe.

The attention given to hermeneutic methodology by Belzen is noticeable from the beginning of his scientific production, in the study of the personality of scholars who made the psychology of religion a specific discipline (Belzen, 1994, 1996a; Belzen & Uleyn, 1986) or in the study of the religious movements that emerge in history (Belzen, 1999b, 2001c; Belzen & van Driel, 1990).

As far as empiric research is concerned, Belzen showed complete awareness of psychological and religious constructions (faith, prayer, sense of guilt, forgiveness etc.) are connected to the religious environment in a context of exchange and negotiation which can be included and evaluated psychologically. Ethno-psychiatry has taught us much concerning this, but Belzen shows efficiently how this principal is necessary also for the study of religious forms of our contemporaries and neighbours, particularly in the case

of religious minorities. Take for example, the study conducted on conversion with the “bevindelijken”, a minority group of Calvinist extremists in Holland, which demonstrates how even the concept and the experience of conversion are extremely different in this group compared with traditional religious denominations (Belzen, 1999b, 2003b). Also in this case, we are not dealing with a philological-lexical endeavour. The research is purely psychological, guided by the conviction that one cannot understand individual religiosity if we do not confront the religious form of reference in an hermeneutic perspective, leaving behind the temptation of reductionism or apologetics (Belzen, 1999a).

To conclude.

Culture is not only given, but it is also a mental construction, a civil construction and an ethical task. Whoever studies culture makes culture, constructs the scientific community and builds human society. This Jacob Belzen does. His efforts and extensive study in a wide horizon of research, his care and dedication to his students and also his organizational qualities, his contribution to this field, are all joined in a task of construction, not only in the science of the psychology of religion, but in a society more and more aware of its cultural roots, of its history, its preconceived ideas and prejudices, its perspectives and its limits. In this way, the work of Jacob Belzen in the psychology of religion becomes also an ethic and civil task.

For these reasons the Italian Society for the Psychology of Religion is proud and honoured to welcome among its honorary members, Professor Jacob A. Belzen, and I, both as President of this association and as a friend, warmly welcome him and look forward to his pleasant and valuable collaboration.

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