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The Irony of Empiricism in the Psychology of Religion

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Abstract

Current researchers are considering the relevant new knowledge that psychological studies in the past 100 years have produced concerning the psychology of religion. Experimental methods typically employed have the aim of producing value-neutral scientific results, especially in the arena of religion. However, methods are inextricably tied to assumptions, since how a person investigates something reflects their understanding or belief about that thing (Hood, 2013). Those methods present in psychology today take after the natural sciences in an effort to arrogate psychology to the status of a hard science. Naturalist methods are also based on naturalist presuppositions about the nature of the world; nothing exists outside of physical matter—an assumption that provides no room for a belief in God (Slife & Reber, 2009). This allows researchers a greatly limited perspective from which to approach the psychological study of religion. An argument is made for a methodological pluralism—one that begins with the assumptions of the hermeneutic tradition. Hermeneutics interpret meaning in lived experience and take the word of the individual to be a faithful account (Belzen & Hood, 2006). These assumptions are based on relationships, trust, and context, each of which will provide psychology with a more holistic understanding of religious phenomena.

Keywords: Philosophy, Religion, Spirituality, Hermeneutics, Empiricism

The Irony of Empiricism in the Psychology of Religion

Psychology as a science emerged from the laboratory of Wilhelm Wundt, one of the founding fathers of academic and experimental psychology (Fancher & Rutherford, 2012). Wundt expressed great interest in the psychology of religion; he disagreed, however, with his contemporaries on which methods should be used in a scientific study of religion (Belzen, 2005). To Wundt, experimental psychology was most useful to study natural phenomenon in physiological psychology; this method could not adequately account for the higher processes of human life, like religion, art, literature, or culture, which would require a more sophisticated and contextually rich methodology to ascertain understanding (Belzen, 2005; Toulmin & Leary, 1985). William James, another founding father of psychology and contemporary of Wundt, also called for a broader approach to psychology. James (1890) said, “It is better . . . to let the science be as vague as its subject . . . if by so doing we can throw any light on the main business at hand” (p. 13). In other words, if the subject matter cannot be reduced to numerical quantities and physical matter, the method of inquiry should not do so (Gadamer, 1986; Heidegger, 1962). Taking the psychology of religion as the main business at hand, and following this spirit of inquiry, psychological scientists should gladly welcome anything that increases their scientific understanding of religion, even when not of physical or numerical origin.

Contemporary psychology is often defined as the scientific study of behavior and cognition (Myers & Dewall, 2015). Human behavior and cognition are typically viewed as originating from solely natural causes, a proposition that serves as the grounds to question the importance and existence of a spiritual reality (Gantt & Williams, 2008; Slife & Reber, 2009). Religion and spirituality are seen as specific and complex manifestations of natural laws. Other pioneers of psychology (such as Freud and the psychoanalysts; Rogers and the person-centered psychologists; Watson, Skinner, and the behaviorists; evolutionary psychologists) provide “theories and methods of psychology that are grounded firmly in a philosophy of naturalism” (Gantt & Williams, 2008, p. 3). These naturalist

theories provide an account of the world that “is incapable of allowing any phenomenon (religious or otherwise) to be other than the merely natural outcome” of natural laws and causal forces (p. 3). Things occurring in nature are of physical matter; they can be seen, they can be measured. They can be explained in natural terms. According to these theories, belief in God and one’s relationship to Him are explained as manifestations of the tyrannical superego, the necessary outcome of one’s reinforcement history, a tool for self-actualization, or the necessary result of natural selection. Additionally, these explanations purport to explain human behavior and cognition in their entirety – with strict parsimony and without alternate explanations (Gantt, Lindstrom, & Williams, 2017). Whatever the explanation, it is not given that God is real, or that His reality is of consequence to any human being individually or collectively. It is easy to see why psychology’s theories and explanations of human life may not sit well with religious people.

The critique of the psychology of religion set forth in this article is not intended to discredit the sincere and honest attempts of many scholars to “provide additional knowledge about religion(s), from a psychological perspective” (Belzen, 2005, p. 829). Rather, the objective is to bring to light hidden assumptions embedded in the scientific method that are not often recognized or understood and propose a viable alternative methodology (Gantt & Williams, 2008; Slife & Reber, 2009). Indeed, “The certainty achieved by the scientific method is no guarantee of truth” (Moran, 2004, p. 280; Gadamer, 1986). An alternative approach to understand the phenomenon of religious and spiritual experience is *hermeneutics*. In contrast to assuming natural objects and the necessary causes of their behavior, a hermeneutical approach assumes that our existence in and interaction with the world is wrapped up in direct, personal experience (Heidegger, 1962). A fundamental assumption of hermeneutics is that we understand the world and our relation to it through concerned and engaged living. James (1907) spoke to this point when he said, “The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events. Its verity is in fact an event, a process: the

process namely of its verifying itself, its *verifi-cation*. Its validity is the process of its *valid-ation*" (p. 201; italics in the original). In other words, people come to know truths about the world and their place in it by living in it, not just through empirical data and statistical analyses. In opposition to the view that treats religious experiences as objects to be observed and measured, hermeneutics centers on meaningful relationships and experience as lived (Slife & Christensen, 2013). In this orientation, religion and religious experience are seen holistically. Religious experiences are not objects that can be picked up, or manipulated and observed from different angles like a rock. Meanings of religious experience are akin to the ideas and emotions conveyed in conversation that transcend the actual words spoken: the words cannot be taken individually in isolation, but must be understood in context as they, together, form a web of meaning (Slife & Christensen, 2013; Slife & Whoolery, 2006). Likewise, religion and spiritual experiences are more than mere isolated variables to be manipulated or controlled for to predict an experimental outcome. When treated as a variable, religion is seen as a subjective bias through which people see the world, one that potentially distorts what is "objectively true." From a hermeneutic perspective, religious belief does not distort a supposed objective, bias free reality. Rather, religious belief is part of what constitutes the "real" world and how to understand it; it is world-view. People are able to make meaning through the web of meaningful connections (related assumptions) in their lives, such as their beliefs, personal history, fears, goals, and aspirations. It is through these assumptions and connections that people know how to make sense of and navigate their relationships, careers, etc. This is not true of religious people alone; scientists also become able to navigate and make sense of their world through the assumptions they make about it. In fact, for some (if not many) scientists, science has become their religion (Williams & Robinson, 2015).

If science and religion are both based on assumptions about the world—ideas that cannot be proven but must be believed—then it is not inherently clear one worldview is better than the other. Yet, psychological scientists claim they hold special knowledge

about human nature that is privileged because it is objective, not influenced by ideologies or personal ambition (Geher, 2006). This idea paints the picture that psychological scientists stand on a vantage point from which they view reality and are obligated to promulgate knowledge of that reality (Slife & Wendt, 2006). When seen this way—by lay people and scientists alike—it is implicitly communicated and understood that everyone else must therefore turn to psychologists to understand themselves and the world (Slife & Wendt, 2006). This position relegates religious worldviews to second-class knowledge at best, and irrelevant or delusional at worst (Gantt & Melling, 2006). While much theorizing in the psychology of religion currently reduces spiritual phenomena to purely material explanations that undermine religious experience, hermeneutic phenomenology provides a way for psychologists of religion to study spiritual phenomenon in a way that preserves the non-naturalistic, non-reductive, and holistic nature of such phenomena. Simply put, hermeneutic phenomenology provides a framework through which religion can be understood as a valid and meaningful worldview.

Naturalistic Psychology of Religion

Psychological scientists base their methods and research on a philosophy of science known as *logical positivism*. Positivist philosophy of science holds that opinions, presuppositions, statements, ideas, and the like have no place in science because they are subjective, and therefore have no real meaning without empirical evidence (Bickhard, 2001). In the positivist mind, knowledge must be verified through tangible measurements of publicly observable things (Kutney, 2006). Thus, positivist thought endeavors to produce an objective, value-free science that is entirely void of subjective presuppositions (Bickhard, 2001). Due to its self-reported claim of a science free of assumptions, it has become difficult for the average scientist (or consumer of scientific knowledge) to identify the presupposed notions underlying positivist science (Bickard, 2001). Despite the seductive idea of ascertaining a value-free, objective, and universal knowledge

of the world, the very notion is itself advancing a philosophical perspective, which is not verifiable through empirical and objective data. Science from this perspective is based on at least two problematic assumptions: material reductionism and objectivism (Clegg, 2016; Gantt & Williams, 2008).

Evolutionary psychology, for example, avails itself of logical positivist methods and has risen to prominence in psychology, especially serving as the grounds for explaining many psychological phenomena. Theories of religion taken from evolutionary psychology will illustrate positivist assumptions and the problem of their implications for religious people. To emphasize the prevalence of evolutionary theory, Gallup poll results from 2014 reported that 50% of Americans believe that humans evolved from less advanced forms of life. Moreover, a recent database search for “evolution and psychology” (limited to the field of psychology) revealed that in 1990 only 493 scholarly articles were published in the Scopus database compared to 4,071 in 2016 (see Figure 1; Figure 2; Figure 3). Theories set forth in evolutionary psychology purvey reductive naturalistic assumptions (Gantt & Williams, 2008). As people continue to look to psychologists for understanding of human nature, these provocative assumptions will unknowingly pervade the thought of those who accept such theories (Wiker, 2002; Wilkens & Sanford, 2009). In what follows, current examples will cast light onto the implicit assumptions in theories of religious behavior and cognition, namely, materialism and objectivism.

Problem of Material Reductionism and Agency

Material reductionism (or, simply, materialism) underlies all of evolutionary theory and logical positivism (Clegg, 2016; Costa & Shimp, 2011; Wiker, 2002). Material reductionism is the assumption that all that is real—including the fundamental make-up of humans and all human experience—is physical matter, the movement of which is governed by universal, natural laws; anything else is unobservable and consequently unknowable (Gantt, Wages, & Thayne, 2014). All behavioral and cognitive phenomena, religious or otherwise, are explainable by these natural

laws (Gantt & Williams, 2008). Natural law is considered universal and incontrovertible, like gravity (Gantt, Wages, & Thayne, 2014). Gravity pulls all objects on earth toward the center of the earth. We accept this by our experience and by reasoning through physics. Gravity has no personal motive or purpose; it just does what it does without concern for human beings. Now, we infer that the purpose of gravity is to keep us on the earth, but gravity does not wake up every morning deciding to help us out. It simply is what it is, does what it does, impersonally, frigidly (E. Gantt, personal communication, September 20, 2017). All natural laws are of the same character: cold, impersonal, meaningless. If human behavior and cognition can be explained by such natural laws, then humans must not have agency, the ability to make meaningful decisions. Natural law is causal, necessarily determining behavioral and cognitive outcomes (Gantt & Williams, 2008). Thus, material reductionism undermines two crucial aspects of religious worldviews and religious experiences: spiritual reality and agency.

To illustrate, evolutionary psychologists hold that cognitive mechanisms extant in humans were evolutionarily adaptive in the eons past. One well-considered self-preservation mechanism is the *agency detector* (Barrett, 2000). When a stimulus is perceived (such as hearing a rustling in the bushes), it triggers a cognitive response in the organism that assumes the presence of an agent (a living being) that could potentially threaten the individual. Research shows that this mechanism is so hyperactive that moving dots or geometric shapes on a computer screen cause people to assume another person is altering the patterns or shapes, and this is seen in infants and adults alike (Bloom & Veres, 1999; Gergely & Csibra, 2003; Heider & Simmel, 1944). Atran and Norenzayan (2004) argue that agency detection is increased in uncertain circumstances (p. 720). Under these conditions (e.g., the death of a loved one, unemployment, or any number of stressors), humans are more likely to assume that such circumstances are intentional or result from the will of a supernatural agent (Bering, 2006). These concepts are counterintuitive and nonsensical to the evolutionary psychologist, precisely because nothing, including God, exists

beyond the physical matter that constitutes the world (Atran & Norenzayan, 2004). Events in life, good and bad, occur because of natural law, not because an omnipotent, omniscient God willed it so. However, a reductionist worldview necessitates an explanation of this phenomenon in terms of physical matter. Specifically, some sensory stimulus—be it the sound of rustling leaves or the redistribution of neurotransmitters in the “god spot” of the brain—fall on, or make contact with, an individual (such as their ears or brain) (Atran & Norenzayan, 2004; Barrett, 2000). In a manner so predictable that it is deemed universal law, this collision of physical particles causes a person to feel as though some other person is responsible for the event.

Excluded from this theory is the possibility of a reality wherein an omnipotent God actually is actively involved in the world and in individual lives (Gantt & Williams, 2008; Gantt, Wages, & Thayne, 2014). Contrary to naturalistic accounts of reality, the world’s religious traditions all orient their lives toward a spiritual reality that transcends the physical world (Richards & Bergin, 2005). Further, explaining in terms of adaptive evolutionary mechanisms turns religion into some sort of survival tactic, the end being to preserve oneself long enough to reproduce and pass along their genetic code (Fancher, 2012; Wiker, 2002). Indeed, in this explanation, the brain and the *agency detector* mechanism are sufficient to have a religious or spiritual experience; the experience itself is contained within the person, a stagnant and inherent property of an object, like the density of granite. Religious experience, in this light, does not relate to or depend on the existence of anything outside the person, be it God or any other spiritual force.

Problem of Objectivism for a Spiritual Reality

That people and their constitutive properties are self-contained entities is an idea that follows from objectivism. Objectivism is the assumption that objects exist outside of the subjective, individual mind (Clegg, 2016). Generally, the existence of an object is independent of anything or anyone else. A rock simply

is; it depends not on anything to exist except the past (causal) material conditions and (causal) natural forces that formed it. Knowledge of an object can be obtained by carefully controlling the surrounding conditions in order to isolate the object and identify any causal forces acting on it, which give rise to its existence (Slife & Christensen, 2013). Knowledge of objects, such as religious sentiments, is uncertain until enough evidence has been gathered in support of or against its existence (Slife & Whoolery, 2006). Indeed, these are the very objects upon which the aforementioned natural laws exert their impersonal force (Clegg, 2016; Slife & Christensen, 2013). In the study mentioned previously, faith seemed to be the object of study; the question of why people tend to attribute the reason for an event to another person (Barrett, 2000). Although faith is not directly observable, it is assumed that this unseen principle acts in a predictable, law-like manner, giving rise to observable behaviors; in turn, these behaviors can be observed and measured in a manner appropriate to gather evidence for supporting or rejecting a theory (Morling, 2015). Following through with this assumption leads to viewing religious experiences as detached, impersonal objects to be manipulated, observed, measured, and, ultimately, explained away.

Approaching religious phenomena in this way robs the individual's experiences of the context and rich historical background of religious belief. This approach distorts an understanding of the meaning of the phenomenon itself. For example, a rock is a rock regardless of the context, but its meaning could possibly be a fire starter or a weapon, depending on the situation and the person who interacts with it (Slife & Christensen, 2013). Without context and meaning, religious experience becomes no more significant than a sneeze, being the result of some underlying natural processes and causal laws. As such, spirituality would be biological or naturally selective mechanisms to ensure reproduction, rather than a path to healing, significant relationships, enlightenment, or salvation. Now, whether an individual believes solely in a material reality or in a spiritual one is a matter of choice. However, believing in one does not obviate

the other. Psychological scientists can do more to realize that their reasoning is based on faith in science (Gantt & Melling, 2009). If the assumptions they accept cannot be empirically verified—and they cannot—then their explanations are no more real than religion is from their perspective.

“Simply put, how we seek to know assumes what we believe to be real” (p. 79). Thus, by understanding which methods a researcher employs, the careful thinker can learn what that researcher believes to be real. When researchers seek knowledge through methods tailored to discover material objects, they reveal their belief that a spiritual reality is either unimportant or nonexistent. Ironically, while evolutionary psychologists are making their claims, which denounce religion, it is generally accepted in the scientific community that the positivist assumptions, upon which the methods used to reach those conclusions are based, are outdated and “confounding and nonsensical” (Clegg, 2016, p. 199). Thereby, evolutionary psychologists hold to a religious-type belief that religion is outdated and nonsensical (Midgley, 2002).

Hermeneutics: A Meaningful, Interpretive Approach to Religion

In contrast to the naturalism underlying the scientific method, hermeneutics focuses on understanding and articulating human meaning and relationship in the context of historically and culturally situated lived-experience (Slife & Christensen, 2013). Combined with experimental methods of research, hermeneutic interpretation of religion can provide a more complete, robust, and rigorous psychology of religion (Belzen, 2005; Gantt & Melling, 2009). The scope of this article does not allow sufficient space to extol all the virtues of a hermeneutic approach in the psychology of religion. However, a brief coverage of what the hermeneutic assumptions are, and some proposed methodological applications should provide the reader with a sufficient understanding of the hermeneutic approach. Specific mention will be made of historicity, interpretative relationships, meaning and lived experience, and the individuality of general experiences.

Hermeneutics is an interpretive approach focusing on meaningful relationships between people and their direct experience with the world (Slife & Christensen, 2013). Understanding an experience begins with some pre-understanding of that experience—a prejudice in the literal meaning of the word, as in pre-judgement. Prejudices are based on a web of beliefs, traditions, and prior experience. As mentioned earlier, “Every seeking gets guided beforehand by what is sought” (Heidegger, 1962). In fact, it is not possible to form an intelligent question (like a research question) without first having some understanding of the topic, without an idea of what one hopes to find, questions arise from and are formed by one’s preconceptions (Gadamer, 1977). Experimental psychology asserts that the prior understanding takes the form of a scientific theory, which will or won’t be supported by data (Morling, 2015; Myers & Dewall, 2015). But where do the theories come from? They come from a person, or people, whose understanding is constituted by a web of previous experiences and judgements about the topic (Moran, 2004). A question cannot be asked with zero knowledge of something (Heidegger, 1962). Likewise, a theory cannot originate without prejudices or pre-understanding. Scientific theories are formed from an intricate web of pre-experience (Belzen & Hood, 2006; Gadamer, 1986). Experimental methods aim to reduce subjectivity by confirming or rejecting theories based on objective data and intersubjective analysis and opinion. The intersubjective review process is based on the claim that greater numbers of reviewers will help check for bias and personal opinions; personal experience is dubbed uncertain and non-confirmable (Myers & Dewall, 2015; Morling, 2015). In hermeneutics one assumes “subjective” ideas are confirmed in personal experience with objective reality (Belzen, 2005; Moran, 2004). Understanding is not something that occurs only in one’s head, as it were: a person obtains understanding as he or she engages with the objective world in meaningful living (Guignon, 2002). One’s prejudices inevitably give rise to one’s investigation, interpretation, and understanding of a phenomenon. Prejudices do not, however, inevitably distort the truth revealed in experience

(Gadamer, 1977). Rather than divorcing oneself of prejudices, as in experimental psychology, hermeneutic researchers acknowledge and clarify their prejudices at the outset and throughout the research process (Laverty, 2003). Gadamer (1986) stated, "It is the tyranny of hidden prejudices which makes us deaf to what speaks to us in tradition" (p. 270). Ironically, the bias of overconfidence deemed a heresy in experimental psychology has come to be a leading assumption of the scientific method, constituting a willing deafness to intersubjective bias.

In researching a topic, one's understanding and prejudice are continually refined as additional light shines through the investigation of the experience. This process, which gives rise to new understanding, is the process of interpreting meaning. Slife and Whoolery (2006) asserted:

A crucial aspect of many religious topics is their meaning, and meaning does not fall on one's retina. The story line or meaning of a book... is not the printed word we observe; it is the *nonobserved* experience of the relations *among* the printed words (not to mention the interpreter) (p. 223).

Meaning is thus inherently and inextricable contextual in nature. Thus, complete understanding does not come through an abstraction of universal theory from an experience (Gantt, Lindstrom, & Williams, 2017; Slife & Reber, 2005). Rather, understanding comes by remaining as close to the context within which an individual experiences (Gantt, Lindstrom, & Williams, 2017; Slife & Christensen, 2013). In this sense, what is sought is the meaning intrinsic to all experience—what is fundamentally necessary for an experience of a certain kind to be such (Moran, 2004). Following an experience, understanding continues to be developed as one's pre-understanding meets the objective reality of the experience (Belzen & Hood, 2006; Gadamer, 1986). For instance, a Christian, having lost a job, would experience and understand that loss as the will of an omniscient, omnipresent God, even if other people might offer alternate explanations. Whereas an evolutionary psychologist views this as a coping mechanism,

the Christian views this situation as a venue to increase trust and belief in divine will (Richards & Bergin, 2005). Rather than being a survival tactic to propagate genes in the gene pool, the end goal of the Christian is to be humble and receive salvation from God (Gantt, Wages, & Thayne, 2014). Evolutionary psychologists might acknowledge that Christians view the world as such, but ultimately the Christian perspective is unnecessary and fruitless because even it is brought under the vastly expansive umbrella of natural selection theory (Geher, 2006). Seen in this way, religious beliefs are “simply misguided” because, according to evolutionary psychologists, they fail to take into account the more fundamental—and more factual—evolutionary history of our species (Geher, 2006, p. 116). A hermeneutic researcher would approach the study of the phenomenon with his or her own assumptions and opinions on the matter made clear and keep an open mind to understand from the perspective of the experiencer (Hein & Austin, 2001; Laverty, 2003). Drawing on the description of the experiencer as expressed in language, the researcher brings to light the fundamental essences of the experience by carefully and methodically studying the description (Belzen & Hood, 2006). Using the description as a text, the researcher engages in an interpretive dialogue, through which his or her understanding of the phenomenon is corrected, by the evidence of the experience given, in order to become true and faithful to the experience as lived by the experiencer.

Scientists attempt something similar, but the scientific method is incapable of providing such a complete and meaningful understanding. On the grounds of objectivism, they assume the need of operational definitions to concretely measure unseen hypothetical constructs. On the grounds of reductionism they assume operational definitions are the ultimately real manifestations of the unobservable construct (Bickhard, 2001; Clegg, 2016; Morling, 2015). Measurement of these operationalized constructs can take place using EEGs, behavioral observations, and surveys, for example. Research thus carried out produces a “certainty” of quantifiable data rather than the “subjective” and “dubious” expression of experience through language. In

the scientific method, even qualitative data must be coded and standardized somehow (Morling, 2015). Unfortunately, these data and analyses only provide a partial account, missing the fundamental essence of religious experiences that provide depth, color, and meaning. Results generated by the scientific method do constitute integral components of a complete understanding of religious phenomena (Gantt & Melling, 2009). Deprived of the hermeneutic interpretive understanding, the phenomenon becomes cold and lifeless like a cadaver, devoid of personality and animation (Gantt & Williams, 2008).

Conclusion

Empirical methods alone have yet to provide an adequate understanding of religion from a psychological perspective (Gantt & Williams, 2008). Experimental psychology lauds the merits of its own methods, relishing in the fallibility of human reason to perceive and understand experiences as experienced. Supposed pure, objective knowledge is discovered and promulgated through a reliable method of objective inquiry and empirical validation. In the psychology of religion, this lauding has lent itself to much ado about relatively nothing. Experimental methods used to study religion from a psychological perspective have provided next to no additional insight for the past century (Belzen, 2005; Koenig, 2008). Although psychological science is purported to be free of biases, the results of scientific inquiry have produced inferences that pass as bias-free, yet are laden with presuppositions (Gadamer, 1986; Heidegger, 1962; Slife & Reber, 2009; Slife & Whoolery, 2006). This has resulted in scientific theories that outwardly appear to be value-free, but on the inside deduce that God is not real (or is merely a fantasy) and that religious experiences are simply blips in cognitive processes, which are resultant from evolution (Atran & Norenzayan, 2004; Bering, 2006). Methods through which the data are collected to support these claims are theoretically untouchable because of their claim to be free of all assumptions (Bickhard, 2001; Clegg, 2016; Toulmin & Leary, 1985). However, while the rest of the sciences move beyond these positivist assumptions, psychologists

demonstrate a religious zeal for a philosophy of science and methods that are outdated and less recognized by the natural sciences.

Far from devaluing quantitative methods, hermeneutics allows for the broader methodology called for by Wundt, James, and others. Efforts have been made recently to integrate quantitative and qualitative methods. It would not be prudent to disregard all of the work that has heretofore been done (Kutney, 2006). Instead, hermeneutics serves to enhance and enrich the vast knowledge that has been obtained to this point and, when needed, reevaluate and reformulate theories and principles of psychology based on the new insights obtained through interpretive methods (Slife & Christensen, 2013). This plurality of methods would be able to provide meaningful answers to what religion is and how religious phenomena occur and influence the psyche.

Assumptions being inescapable, psychology must begin on an even playing field with religion. A hermeneutic (interpretive) approach would provide such a playing field. Far from trying to rid scientific inquiry of biases, hermeneutic researchers make all relevant biases clear from the beginning and clarify them throughout the research (Hein & Austin, 2001; Lavery, 2003). Further, people are taken at their word, and their accounts of personal experiences are taken as the data of the research. The historical context of an individual partly accounts for the meaning that one interprets in their life experience. The end goal of all hermeneutics is to discover meaning that people experience in their lives (Slife & Christensen, 2013). An interpretive approach to systematically studying religious phenomena would provide a deep, rich understanding of what constitutes particular religious phenomena and what is unique about different religious people and cultures while giving full credibility to their beliefs. Although parts of the whole understanding may be generalizable across religions, the result would highlight the uniqueness and rich culture of individual religions and individuals within religions (Belzen & Hood, 2006). Understanding in this regard should be of particular interest to psychologists and consumers of psychological research in

a world where individuals and their personal beliefs are of utmost importance.

Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to address the implications of these ideas outside the psychology of religion, it is possible that similar methodological issues are affecting psychology in general. These findings suggest that the same reconsiderations may be called for in other subfields of psychology such as personality, marriage and family, and psychological disorders. Psychological scientists should sincerely consider the philosophical basis and implications of the work being done in their respective fields. Their critical assessment could lead to the discovery of still more meaningful theories throughout psychology.

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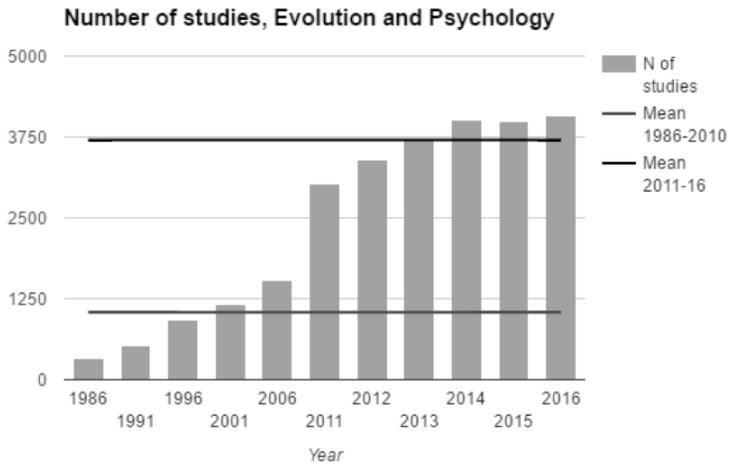


Figure 1. Results of a database search for “evolution and psychology” limited to journal articles published between 1986 and 2016 within the field of psychology. The mean number of studies published from 1986-2010 and from 2011-2016 are represented by the lower and upper horizontal lines respectively.

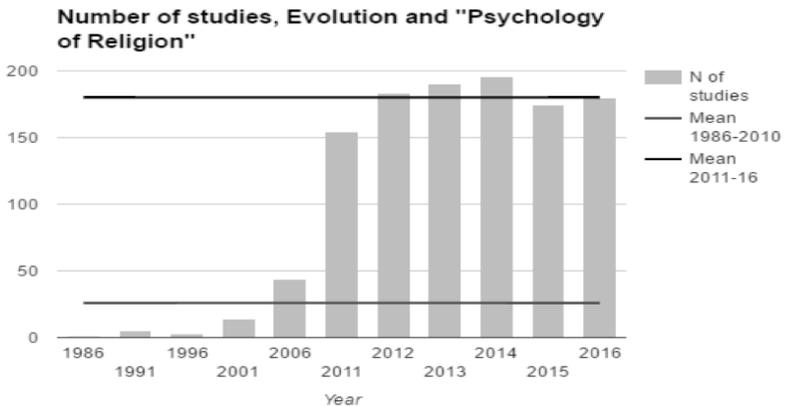


Figure 2. Results of a database search for “evolution and ‘psychology of religion’” limited to journal articles published between 1986 and 2016 within the field of psychology. The mean number of studies published from 1986-2010 and from 2011-2016 are represented by the lower and upper horizontal lines respectively.

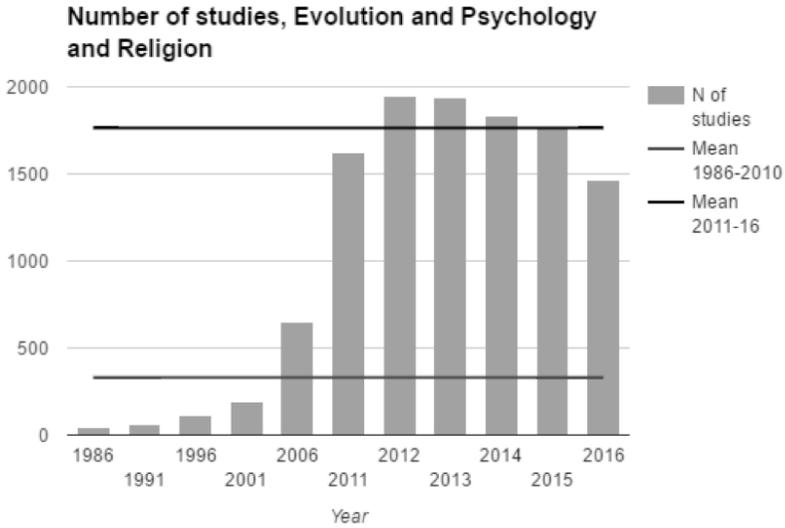


Figure 3. Results of a database search for “evolution and psychology and religion” limited to journal articles published between 1986 and 2016 within the field of psychology. The mean number of studies published from 1986-2010 and from 2011-2016 are represented by the lower and upper horizontal lines respectively.