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Explaining Religion to Death: Reductionism, Evolution, and the Psychology of Religion

EDWIN E. GANTT AND RICHARD N. WILLIAMS

Recent thinking suggests that the time is right for a reconsideration of the interface between psychology and religion. We argue that most accounts of religion in contemporary psychology (especially as typified by evolutionary theory) have been toxic to the phenomena of religious experience. This toxicity results from the adoption of a naturalistic explanatory framework that renders religious phenomena as merely results of mechanical forces and material conditions. This approach fails to take religious phenomena seriously and, thereby, dismisses their meaningfulness before any serious investigation has begun. We argue that only by taking religious experience seriously--that is by treating religious phenomena on their own terms as fundamentally meaningful expressions of human experience--can a fruitful scientific psychology of religion be possible. We propose the phenomenology of Emmanuel Levinas as a viable perspective from within which to develop such a psychology of religion.

Even the most cursory review of the history of the psychology of religion reveals that there has never been a shortage of perspectives in psychology from which to render an account of religious phenomena and of religion itself (see, e.g., Forsyth, 2003). However, the great majority of such accounts—for example, accounts found in psychoanalysis, behaviorism, neuroscience, and evolutionary psychology—have been fundamentally toxic to religion itself. This toxicity is, we believe, the inescapable result of various theories and methods of psychology that are grounded firmly in a philosophy of naturalism, a philosophy that is incapable of allowing any phenomenon (religious or otherwise) to be other than the merely natural outcome of non-agentic forces and material conditions (Slife & Whoolery, 2006). We say this not from the perspective of religious persons who want to defend religion qua religion (although we

freely admit that we are such persons and that we do want to defend it), but rather as psychological scientists. As such, it is our firm belief that any science, although its essential business is critical analysis, should not announce the “nonexistence” of its subject matter until after careful analysis and experimentation have shown, to the satisfaction of sophisticated and open-minded scholars, that there really is nothing to the phenomena being studied.

In the field of psychology of religion, however, we fear that far too many scholars have simply begun their investigations of religious experience and behavior

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with an unexamined intellectual commitment to a philosophy of naturalism that is incompatible with, and too conceptually narrow to afford an understanding of religion, and have then explained religion, literally, to death. This, of course, is not a problem unique to the psychology of religion, reflecting as it does the more general reductive strategy that has characterized the discipline of psychology since its inception (see Slife & Williams, 1995). Given this general commitment to reductionism, it comes as no surprise that behaviorists have sought to explain religion as reinforcement history gone wrong, psychoanalysis as a superego on guard, neuroscience as the result of brain activity, humanism as a means of satisfying personal needs, cognitivism as primal thinking in the face of anxiety, and evolutionary psychology as a strange sort of counterintuitive survival tactic (for a more detailed treatment, see Browning & Cooper, 2004; Forsyth, 2003; Wulff, 1997). Despite their theoretical and practical differences, all of these approaches nonetheless share a common commitment to explaining religion and religious phenomena *as experienced* out of existence.

Psychology's explanatory tactic of reducing religious phenomena to categories of nonreligious phenomena has two origins. The first is a general disciplinary failure to carefully explore in self-critical ways the presumptive philosophical grounds of the psychological theories typically deployed to explain religion. The second is the related failure to intellectually tackle religious phenomena from a conceptual grounding that is both fundamental enough and rich enough to offer an adequate or "thick" account of religious phenomena in the first place (Geertz, 2000). Thus reductions of religious phenomena, by means of which such phenomena are dismissed as epiphenomenal if not illusory, are, in the final analysis, questions begging: that is to say, religious phenomena are judged by the dominant theories to be unreal primarily because they do not fit the metaphysical categories native to the theories themselves. We believe as a discipline that aspires to scientific status, psychology can and must do better than this. For, as Rolston (1999) reminds us about the nature and aims of scientific inquiry generally, "We often forget how everyday experience can demand certain things of the sciences. Science must save the phenomena . . . [and if a scientific theory cannot] . . . so much the worse for that theory" (p. xv).

Similarly, as sociologist of religion Douglas Porpora (2006) has recently pointed out:

In any proper experience, the object of experience contributes something to the content of experience. The object, in other words, is part of what explains the content. Yet if objects of experience—whether in religion or science—are methodologically bracketed out of consideration, they are disallowed a priori from doing any explanatory work. The unavoidable implication is that there are no genuine experiences of anything so that the very category of experience dissolves. (pp. 58-59)

In agreement, we would argue that only by taking religion and religious experience seriously—that is, by treating the phenomena of religious life on their own terms as fundamentally meaningful expressions of human social and moral experience—will a fruitful scientific psychology of religion emerge. To adequately understand the behavior of people, in this case religious behavior, we believe that psychologists must understand their experiences. "Minimally," as Porpora (2006) notes, "that means not to rule out *tout court* what people say they are experiencing" (p.59). Thus we propose here that the field needs to find a metaphysical ground upon which both psychology and religion can be taken seriously and investigated without dismissive reductions when the categories do not fit well. We propose that the phenomenological work of Emmanuel Levinas provides just such a metaphysical grounding and thereby offers the real possibility—one that will need to be thoughtfully investigated—of a real psychology of religion.

THE INTERFACE OF PSYCHOLOGY AND RELIGION

In examining the question of how and where psychology and religion meet, Parsons and Jonte-Pace (2001, p.1) refer to the *and/or debate* as one of the defining features of the field of psychology of religion from its earliest years. The term aptly reflects the central question of whether the two disciplines can ever be integrated in such a way that the psychological does not simply replace the religious, or whether the two fields (at best) just come together briefly in the context of pursuing answers to more particular and limited

questions. These same authors (Parsons & Jonte-Pace, 2001, p. 2) ultimately adopt the term “religion and psychological studies” to characterize the field in its current form with its current *modus operandi*. They also observe that in the early stages of the psychology of religion religion was regarded principally in terms of “a series of cultural phenomena” so that the field was focused on the “analysis of the psychological meanings, origins, and patterns in religious ideation and practice” (Parsons & Jonte-Pace, 2001, p. 2). Thus religious behavior became the subject of study and psychology became the method.

In a very significant article in *American Psychologist*, Stanton L. Jones (1994) argues that the dialogue between psychology and religion has in fact been a monologue conducted in “one of three classic modalities,” each of which is unidirectional and leaves “psychology being unaffected in any substantive way by the interaction” (p. 184). Thus whether establishing a psychology of religion to study religious experience scientifically, co-opting psychological concepts and mental health resources for pastoral counseling or religious education, or employing the findings of psychological research to critique or modify religious concepts and practices, “religion is treated as an object, either of study, for education and provision of services, or for reform” (Jones, 1994, p. 185). In none of these forms of interaction, however, is religion considered to be a peer discipline or an equitable partner with psychology. Clearly, as Browning and Cooper (2004) point out, the underlying assumption is “that while religion has very little to offer psychology, religion can serve as an interesting object of psychological study” (p. 246).

Shedding some historical light on this state of affairs, Wulff (2001) has shown that the psychology of religion emerged during a period marked by the secularization of religion and by the application of psychological methods to the understanding of many human phenomena not previously studied or explained in scientific (i.e., naturalistic) terms. Wulff (1997) also makes it clear that “the psychological science that evolved in twentieth-century America was strongly influenced by positivistic philosophy, according to which most if not all religious statements are philosophically meaningless,” and thus it is “comprehensible why many students, teachers, and practitioners of psychology view religious faith as an outdated and perhaps regrettable phenomenon” (p. 17).

EVOLUTIONARY THEORY AND THE CONTEMPORARY INTERFACE OF PSYCHOLOGY AND RELIGION

Perhaps nowhere do we see more clearly the dismissal of the lived reality of the religious in the context of an apparent conflict between experiential and explanatory categories than in the emerging field of evolutionary psychology. This theoretical approach has become so popular that we will here devote substantial attention to current evolutionary explanations of religion and religious behavior. This treatment will illustrate the long-standing tension between psychology and religion and put in bold relief the contrast between contemporary naturalistic, reductionistic approaches to the psychology of religion and an approach we find much more promising—one informed by the phenomenology of Emmanuel Levinas.

The past two decades have witnessed an explosion of scholarly interest in and publications about evolutionary psychology (see, e.g., Buss, 1999; Cartwright, 2000; Palmer & Palmer, 2001; Pinker, 2002; Stanovich, 2005). Chapters on evolutionary psychological theory have become a prominent feature of many recent texts (see, e.g., Gaulin & McBurney, 2001; Westin, 2002). Many of its advocates have argued that evolutionary theory is not just a model for explaining certain specific features of human behavior, but rather represents “a new paradigm for psychological science” (Buss, 1995, p. 1)—one that “provides the conceptual tools for emerging from the fragmented state of current psychological science and linking psychology with the rest of the life sciences in a move toward larger scientific integration” (Buss, 1999, p. 411). Such claims have led some critics to suggest that evolutionary theory is, in essence, a “theory of everything” and that “sociobiology and evolutionary psychology are but the latest efforts to develop a unifying theory that will explain the meaning of ‘life itself’” (Nelkin, 2000, p. 19).

Given such lofty aspirations, it is not surprising that among the areas of human experience that evolutionary psychologists have been most interested in exploring are religion and religious experience, especially in terms of their origins (see, e.g., Atran, 2002; Boyer, 2001; Dennett, 2006; Wilson, 2002). Religious experience and expression are, for the evolutionary psychologist, not fundamentally unlike any other chance adaptive

behavior in which human beings might engage for purposes of survival and reproductive opportunity. Indeed, as reflected in the title of his most recent book, Rue (2005) argues that *Religion Is Not About God*, but rather “is about manipulating our brains so that we might think, feel, and act in ways that are good for us, both individually and collectively” (p. 1). The basic assumption behind such theorizing, noted by Pearcey (2004) is:

Religion is merely an idea that appears in the human mind when the nervous system has evolved to a certain level of complexity. That is, a brain complex enough to imagine hidden predators, like saber-toothed tigers hiding in the bushes, may also malfunction by imagining unseen agents that are not real, like gods and spirits. (p. 55)

For example, according to some evolutionary psychologists, religious belief in supernatural agents (i.e., gods, angels, spirits, etc.) initially arose because “some inference systems in the mind are specialized in the detection of apparent animacy and agency in objects around us” (Boyer, 2001, p. 144). Barrett (2000), for example, has argued that the human mind has been programmed by natural selection to infer the presence of intentional agents from among the events of the surrounding environment. Presumably, in our early evolutionary history it was vitally important for the day-to-day survival of our ancestors that they be able to quickly detect both danger and promise in the sounds and movements of the objects around them because such sounds and movements might well signal the presence of either predator or prey. However, according to Boyer (2001), this innate “agency detection system” is naturally “biased toward overdetection” and thus tends to “jump to conclusions” (p. 145), causing us to infer the presence of intentional agents in certain events in the world when, in fact, no such intentional agents are present. Possessing an agent detection system that is biased toward overdetection presumably conveys an evolutionary advantage:

The expense of false positives (seeing agents where there are none) is minimal, if we can abandon these misguided intuitions quickly. In contrast, the cost of not detecting agents when they are actually around (either predator or prey) could be very high. (Boyer, 2001, p. 145).

Religion, then, is the result of not abandoning our “misguided intuitions quickly,” but rather allowing them to fester into full-grown superstitions and irrational ritual practices, whereby we attribute supernatural origins or theological meaning to what are in reality merely happenstance occurrences in the natural world. In short, according to such an evolutionary psychological perspective, religion is by its very nature an irrational obsession with false positives.

In this vein, Boyer (2001) argues that the light of evolutionary theory has now shown us “how the intractable mystery that was religion is now just another set of difficult but manageable problems” (p. 2). The manageable problems to which Boyer refers are the problems of how something that seems fundamentally irrational and counter-productive (i.e., religion) could, despite considerable evolutionary costs, not only survive through the centuries but even flourish. Given the “substantial costs of religion’s material, emotional, and cognitive commitments to factually impossible, counterintuitive worlds,” explaining religion is a “serious problem for any evolutionary account of human thought and society” (Atran, 2006, pp. 302-303).

Despite its ultimate origins in biological necessity and evolutionary happenstance, and despite various claims regarding the possible existence of a “God gene” or a neurological basis for religious belief (see, e.g., Hamer, 2004), evolutionary psychologists are quick to point out that now “religions are transmitted culturally, through language and symbolism, not through genes” (Dennett, 2006, p. 24). What matters to the evolutionary psychologist of religion, therefore, is not so much knowing whether there might be a “god center” in the brain, but rather “Why did those of our ancestors who had a genetic tendency to grow a god center survive better than rivals who did not?” (Dawkins, 2004, p. 14).

MEMES NOT GENES

Currently, the most popular answer to that question for advocates of an evolutionary psychology of religion is to be found in the study of memetics, an approach to the question of the evolutionary origins of cultural and social phenomena “that invokes not just biochemical facts but the whole world of cultural anthropology” (Dennett, 2006, p. 140). Memetics, as a conceptual approach, posits the existence and studies the replication, spread

and evolution of “memes”—a sort of mental or cultural analogue to genes. A meme is a cognitive or behavioral pattern that is thought to be transmitted from one individual to another. However, since individuals who have transmitted the meme continue to carry it themselves, the transmission is in reality more along the lines of a replication. As Pearcey (2004) notes, “Just as genes are the carriers of physical traits, so memes are hypothetical units of culture that are said to be carriers of ideas” (p. 61).

Oxford zoologist Richard Dawkins, who coined the term in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*, suggested:

Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation. (p. 192)

Religion is memetic: Whatever the particular biological and environmental origins of religion happen to be, it has managed to attain a significant level of penetrance and perdurance in the cultural environment that has allowed its continued survival as a stable social practice (Blackmore, 1999). And as Dawkins (1976) has argued:

The survival value of the god meme in the meme pool results from its great psychological appeal. It suggests that injustices in this world may be rectified in the next. The “everlasting arms” hold out a cushion against our own inadequacies which, like a doctor’s placebo, is none the less effective for being imaginary. These are some of the reasons why the idea of God is copied so readily by successive generations of individual brains. God exists, if only in the form of a meme with high survival value, or infective power, in the environment provided by human culture. (p. 193)

On this model then, religion originates in some set of naturally selected genetic tendencies to behave in particular ways—which, in turn, provide for a cultural context within which certain sets of genes can further propagate themselves and are propagated by the transmission of memes in a process analogous to genetic

transmission (Blackmore, 1999). The utility of religion, then, is that it serves “as a structure supporting and mechanism promoting moral codes” that, in turn, help to stabilize society so as to better ensure individual and group survival (Broom, 2003). Religious talk of meaningful experience, truth, or the transcendent and ineffable is really just so much talk, spurred on by nothing more than simple genetic necessity packaged as memes.

The sort of biological and mechanical reductionism being advocated here by so many evolutionary psychologists has, however, been subjected to considerable criticism by thinkers both in and out of the discipline (see, e.g., Gantt & Reber, 1999; Johnson, 1995; Menuge, 2004; O’Hear, 1997; Poulshock, 2001; Rose & Rose, 2000; Williams, 1996). Because this critical literature is so vast and so varied, we will not attempt to recount it all here. Rather, we will simply note that the main thrust of these critiques has been that the biological reductionism and necessary determinism inherent in evolutionary explanations do not so much explain religion as explain it away. That is to say, because evolutionary theories in psychology tend to reduce all human social behaviors to nothing more than the necessitated byproducts of impersonal natural forces acting on the brute physical matter of the brain and body, they ultimately destroy the possibility that such behaviors (religious or otherwise) can be social or meaningful in any genuinely substantive way (see, e.g., Gantt, 2002; Slife & Williams, 1995). For although individuals may well experience their religious lives as personally vital, morally significant, and intensely real, once the evolutionary psychological story is in place, religious experience can only be seen as the merely subjective impression one happens to be left with in the wake of essentially impersonal, a-meaningful, and non-social biomechanical processes operating in the service of entirely contingent genetic ends. The meaning of religious experience of any kind, then, is just an illusion—useful in some evolutionary way perhaps but nonetheless an illusion. Thus once the inescapable Darwinian conclusions have been drawn, religion can be seen to be really just the necessitated “by-product of several cognitive and emotional mechanisms that evolved under natural selection for mundane adaptive tasks” (Atran, 2006, p. 302). This is not to say religion is “an evolutionary adaptation per se, but a recurring cultural by-product of the complex evolutionary

landscape that sets cognitive, emotional, and material conditions for ordinary human interactions" (Atran, 2006, p. 304). Despite the ardent and deeply held beliefs of its practitioners and defenders, in the final evolutionary psychological analysis, religion is really nothing more than a complex set of irrational myths and bizarre rituals that processes of natural selection have curiously produced in us so that we can cope with the fundamentally arbitrary and meaningless nature of existence as we get on with the vital business of reproduction.

PSYCHOLOGY AND RELIGION

The foregoing discussion of evolutionary psychological approaches to religion brings clearly into focus the context in which Wulff (2003) offers a description of the field of psychology of religion as being in crisis and calls for a return to an older tradition which sought to get at the meaning of religious experience (see also Belzen, 2001; Richardson, 2006). Wulff (2003) and others perceive a need to avoid the co-opting of the field of "psychology of religion" by those interested principally in religious apologetics and at the same time avoid those whose only interest is in mapping religious behaviors as just another class of behaviors generally. Based on the analysis presented above, we maintain that the field has gone too far in the latter direction. Similar concerns seem to be at the heart of the recent turn in the field toward interest in spirituality.

Richard Gorsuch (2003) takes up the topic of spirituality in a recent volume to which he gave the interrogatory title *Integrating Psychology and Spirituality?* Gorsuch (2003) defines psychology as "the scientific study of human behavior in its immediate context" (p. xx). Obviously, in employing this definition it is still entirely possible to have a psychology of religion that mainly employs traditional scientific methods to understand religiously relevant behaviors. Under such a regime, for example, religiosity is simply a personality variable—one source of influence among many. Belzen (2001), however, is critical of such a "problematic, or at least short-sighted . . . application of psychological reasoning to religion" (pp. 45-46). He argues that such an approach narrows the definition of religion to a "sentiment" or "personality trait" or some "inherent property" and ignores the cultural, social, and historical aspects of religion. An approach

which relies only on the traditional analytic approaches of mainstream psychology of religion, Belzen (2001) argues, would be incapable of dealing with a phenomenon like spirituality in its richness.

In addition to offering a definition of *psychology*, Gorsuch (2001) defines *spirituality* in the following manner:

Spirituality consists of our relationship to the broader reality of which we are a part, our role in this reality, and how we align ourselves, including our behavior to be consistent with that reality . . . [It] is the quest for understanding ourselves in relationship to our view of ultimate reality, and to live in accordance with that understanding. (p. xx)

He further points out that spirituality in this sense does not require belief in or the existence of any deity.

Although one might, and many certainly would argue that the conception of spirituality without a deity is ultimately unsatisfactory, if not impossible, it seems clear that spirituality is an important and widespread human phenomenon, and that it is of increasing interest to psychology, to other social sciences, and to contemporary culture. Furthermore, Gorsuch (2001) has taken us to the heart of the matter, to what we believe to be the central question for any psychology of religion, and to the heart of its current crisis as described here. It is simply this: Psychology and religion will always be at odds and any interface between them—as in a "psychology of religion"—will be deeply problematic unless the psychology and the religion (a) can be understood—even potentially—from the same intellectual grounds and (b) are both established on grounds that take us past methods and models to metaphysics, and that (c) those metaphysical grounds are sophisticated enough to allow both for rigorous intellectual analysis of the psychology of religious phenomena and for the existence of genuinely meaningful spiritual (or religious) behavior. In line with Porpora (2006), the case we are making here is not that psychologists of religion *must necessarily* admit or even *presuppose* supernatural realities. It may be an entirely empirical matter that there are no supernatural realities out there to be experienced and that all are mistaken who think they do experience such things. The argument of this paper is instead that such

assessment should be an empirical conclusion rather than an a priori disciplinary assumption, which as such forever remains equally beyond either support or contestation. (p. 59; italics in the original)

In short, we are claiming that religious experience should be considered in its own right as what it claims to be in the very experiencing of it, not reduced to something other than what it claims to be because of the incompatible metaphysics forced upon it by the naturalistic assumptions of an alien psychology.

It is precisely in the consideration of these issues that we believe the work of Emmanuel Levinas can make its greatest contribution. His work has the potential to produce both a sophisticated psychology and a non-reductive understanding of religion and to set them on the same metaphysical grounds. Because his work is uncommon in this respect, we consider it possible that his position not only provides a new and creative psychology of religious behaviors along the hermeneutic lines Wulff (2003) and others (e.g., Browning & Cooper, 2004; Richardson, 2006) have called for, but because it grounds psychology and religion in the same metaphysics, it may possibly offer a psychology of religion itself.

PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION AND THE WORK OF EMMANUEL LEVINAS

The work of the French phenomenological philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas¹, has recently stirred considerable interest in academic circles. Levinas's work is firmly rooted in the phenomenological tradition of such thinkers as Husserl, Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger (Spiegelberg, 1994).

Over the course of a career spanning most of the 20th century, Levinas produced a careful explication of the experience of what it means to be a human being. In this essay we will deal briefly with two of the aspects of his work that most directly address the issues we have introduced regarding the interface between psychology and religion and the possibility of a psychology of religion. Central to any understanding of Levinas is the concept of *otherness* (Levinas, 1969). The Other stands as a contrast to and antidote for the individual ego that is assumed by much of contemporary psychological theory to be at the core of our identity as persons. The absolutely other is that which is absolutely other than I—

in general terms, other than the ego—that which escapes or exceeds my ability to capture, conceptualize and explain by my own mind. This “otherness” is sometimes referred to as “alterity”—that which “overflows” the self and the self’s conceptualizations (Levinas, 1969, 1985). For Levinas the absolutely Other is God (Levinas, 1985; see also Bloechl, 2000). There is a religious feel to much of Levinas’s writings, in part because he produced some overtly religious works, and in part because he freely mixed religious language and metaphor into his phenomenology.

The field of psychology of religion has struggled at times with defining its subject matter because doing so would necessitate a definition of “religion” itself. In a discipline such as psychology—a discipline which does not readily embrace theistic positions—this has created more than a few problems. However, if theism is not seen as necessary for religion, one is not only left to wonder just what religion is, but one also becomes quite hard pressed to distinguish religion from any other cognitive or emotive activity (Belzen, 2001). In such an intellectual climate—where religion has no status different from any other source of behavior, and religious experience and religious behaviors are not inherently different from any other types of behaviors or concepts—a psychology of religion cannot help but lose its identity and become indistinguishable from psychology in general. It has been a matter of some discussion in the field of psychology of religion just how religion ought to be defined in order to include all perspectives and yet retain its identity as a distinct factor in attitudes, personality, and behavior.

In the context of the foregoing discussion, Levinas’s work makes a singular contribution. With the exception perhaps, of those who wish to concoct a “religion” and allow it to spring fully formed, not from the head of Zeus, but from their own heads, and ground it in their own subjectivity and preferences, none should argue against the idea that the very essence of any religion is a recognition of otherness and even, perhaps, an absolute otherness. This recognition and quest to understand absolute otherness may or may not involve theism: i.e., explicit reference to a god. This same recognition—of the importance of otherness—is also entirely compatible with contemporary notions of spirituality (see, e.g., Gorsuch, 2003). Thus it appears that Levinas’s work provides a foundation for a psychology of religion. If

otherness is at the heart of our experience of being human and also at the heart of religion and spirituality, any psychology that seeks to understand human beings in terms of how they act and find meaning in a world infused with otherness is indeed a psychology of religion, since religion is likewise infused with otherness. Thus a psychology grounded in Levinas's work will necessarily focus considerable attention on the fundamental fact and the resultant praxis of being confronted both in the particular and in general with otherness. It might be said that this is the fundamental fact and praxis of religion as well. Thus Levinas's work puts religion and psychology on the same grounds: i.e., both involve carefully examining our lives as we live in the face of otherness. And we must recognize these as legitimate intellectual grounds.

Two additional points should be kept in mind in regard to this common ground for religion and psychology. First, the great potential for Levinas's work to produce a rich and intriguing psychology of religion and to succeed where others have failed derives from the fact that religion—as the confrontation with absolute alterity—is not just an idea or cultural tradition among many similar ideas and traditions. Thus a thoughtful scholar of religion who is grounded in a Levinasian perspective will not be drawn off by the inevitable and banal questions of our age, such as “Whose religion?” and “Why do you claim your religious perspective is right?” Rather, in following Levinas, such a scholar would recognize that the alterity which underlies religion is the very wellspring of human identity and self-consciousness (Narbonne, 2007). Thus religion is not to be studied as a mere idea or social institution which an individual ego encounters somewhere along the road of life and must evaluate for him or herself. On the contrary, the alterity that is the essence of religion is also the seed bed of the human psyche, and it is the core reality in terms of which we become who we are (Cohen, 2002). Thus any psychology of religion that takes Levinas seriously will be at once a fundamental psychology—not at the periphery, but at the heart of the entire psychological enterprise.

Second, Levinas's position is a strong one in the context of today's skepticism because religion is not a matter of ideas; it does not exist first or even essentially as ideas. Levinas takes us immediately away from ideas toward the world of lived experience—from questions

such as “What do I think about God or about my religion?” to the essential question: “How do I respond to the Other?” For Levinas, the absolutely Other (God) is always reflected in what he refers to as the face, meaning that any encounter with an other person reveals to me in some sense otherness. In addition, it is this very encounter with an other (person—infused with otherness) that calls me into being as the being that I am—since before any such encounter there would be no particular reason for awareness of a self. Thus “religion” (as an encounter with absolute alterity) brings us into being as the kind of beings we are, and, since otherness always comes to our attention in engagement with concrete other persons, “religion,” as the encounter with alterity, also takes us immediately to moral response and calls us to social action. We are called into being by the presence of the particular face of a particular other. We are drawn therein into the ethical world. This is important to note because it is the concern for the ethical that draws many to the psychology of religion in the first place. Indeed, many have argued that ethical concern is the essence of any religion (see, e.g., Eliade, 1959; James, 1905; Taylor, 2007).

Because Levinas maintains that our very coming to be as persons—and thus what is most essential and basic in us—is occasioned by a fundamentally ethical situation—the encounter with another person whose very face reflects to us otherness and even God, putting us in a state of ethical obligation to respond to them—his account of us is “metaphysical” (i.e., it says something about what is essential in us). Thus his work is often described as an “ethical metaphysics,” or a “metaphysics of the ethical” (see, e.g., Wyschogrod, 2000). Levinas's “metaphysics of the ethical” arises from the fact that otherness is the fundamental ground from which any analyses of our understanding of our own humanity must begin. The fact that our contact with otherness is always and at once an ethical call viz a viz concrete others makes it an ethical metaphysics. Here again, in the sphere of ethics, Levinas's position is stronger than those which have usually informed contemporary ethical discourse. Following Levinas's thrust, the ethical does not derive from the rational powers of the individual ego, nor from that ego's brain chemistry or its history of contingent reinforcers—which puts that ego in a position of trying to figure out how obligated it is and then what would be the ethical but

not too costly course of action. For Levinas, the ethical call or impulse is not principle driven at all. The ethical has its roots in the primitive encounter with the other in the context of the simultaneous emergence of a keen and piercing recognition of the Other—otherness itself (Levinas, 1968, 1998). The “other person” or “other mind” has always been a “problem” for philosophy and certainly for psychology because the encounter of the ego with the other is the encounter of two self-contained subjectivities (see, e.g., Robinson, 1998). In such an encounter ethical obligation becomes equally problematic because each mind must assess its rational obligation, derive principles for responding, etc., and the very principles that guide such deliberations are never sure, self-evident, or obviously universal. Any ethical claim or obligation must first pass a cognitive test based on rational analysis, then it must be inculcated into solitary minds as a rational imperative; finally we must overcome the “weakness of the will.” All must be done in a context of uncertainty about the rightness of either the obligation or the process of responding.

However, if Levinas is right, neither the other person nor ethical obligation constitute “problems” in the philosophical or rational sense; nor is the ethical itself based first in abstract rational principles. Rather, the encounter with concrete other persons in one’s own lived experience is the occasion for coming to be as a person. The ethical obligation is not engendered by rationality, but arises non-deliberatively in that very coming to be. Principles are generated as guides to action (rather than serving as motivations for action) as we make our way through a world of infinite asymmetrical ethical obligation (Williams & Gantt, 1998). From a Levinasian perspective, psychology of religion does not need to join the battle around issues of moral theory, nor does it need to justify the ethical as a topic of study. The ethical is already at the very core of both psychology and religion.

CONCLUSION

Thus in conclusion, we believe that the work of Emmanuel Levinas has the potential to contribute significantly to a careful re-examination of the investigatory priorities of the psychology of religion. For example, when informed by his work psychologists of religion might well be drawn to the investigate their understanding of the meaning of otherness and the strategies and effects of living in and responding to a world saturated with ethical obligation in the face of otherness. We would hope such research priorities might replace the current preoccupation with finding the evolutionary purposes served by religion and the biochemical origin of sophisticated beliefs and even of spirituality. We hold such a change in research priorities to be profoundly desirable to prevent religion from being explained to death.

Levinas’s work also has the potential of turning psychology of religion into a fundamental psychology—fundamental in the sense that to understand the essence of “religious” behavior is to understand the essence of human behavior itself. This is because the metaphysical foundation of human behavior (behavior in the face of otherness) is the same as the metaphysical foundation of religion (behavior in the face of otherness). Such behaving in the face of otherness is a far cry from behaving at the whim of memes, genes, and whatever survival strategies might be in vogue in this era. A psychology of “religion” as understood from the perspective of Levinas’s work may very well be *the* psychology of human beings. By requiring psychology of religion to attend more directly to our actual lived experience of alterity encountered in the face of the other, Levinasian phenomenology offers a common metaphysical ground upon which a genuinely scientific psychology of religion and a truly religious psychology of religion can—perhaps for the first time—meet.

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ENDNOTE

- 1The reader is referred to the introductory chapter in Gantt and Williams (2002) for a brief biographical sketch of Levinas. The analysis of Levinas's work presented here is taken chiefly from his best known works (e.g., Levinas, 1969, 1985, 1987, and 1998).