

Chapter 9

Religion as Embodiment

Cultural-Psychological Concepts and Methods in the Study of Conversion Among “Bevindelijken”¹

Psychology of Religion and Cultural Analysis

Some years ago, Meredith B. McGuire, then president of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion (SSSR), tried to call the attention of sociology and psychology of religion to the human body (McGuire 1990). In an eloquent presidential address, she claimed that the social sciences of religion “could be transformed” if the notion that humans are embodied would be taken seriously. In particular, she pointed out the body’s importance (a) in self-experience and self’s experience of others; (b) in the production and reflection of social meanings; (c) as the subject and object of power relations. McGuire’s essay testifies to the growing awareness in contemporary general sociology and psychology of the impact of culture on human functioning, including religiosity. Deplorably, McGuire has not found much of a reception in the psychology of religion. At about the same time, in an invited essay in the opening volume of the newly established *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* (IJPR), Richard Hutch (1991) similarly called attention to the issue of embodiment. He showed that the body has been neglected both as an object of study and as “a researcher’s best tool” (p. 196). Attention to embodiment, Hutch (1991) claims, could foster a comprehensive theoretical reconstruction of the psychology of religion that works beyond ethnocentric limitations. But if one goes through the following volumes both of the *JSSR* and the *IJPR*, one finds no echoes of McGuire’s or Hutch’s plea. For the development of theory and research in the discipline, this is to be deplored. Theory, however, is not an end in itself. In any scholarship, also in the scientific study of religion, new theories, concepts and methods will only count as progress when they demonstrate an improved access to and understanding of the phenomena to be analyzed, when they enable research of

¹*Bevindelijken* refers to a group of “experience-oriented” religious people in the Netherlands that is being described in the text. I know of no English word that captures the meaning and current connotations of this term and therefore prefer to use the original word, as is customary in studies in anthropology and history of religions.

phenomena that were considered unapproachable, or when they make visible hitherto unknown (aspects of) phenomena. Therefore, theorizing about “embodiment” will have to prove its value in its empirical application: what can it add to the exploration and understanding of religion(s)?

Like all cultural phenomena, religions are multifarious and multiplex, not to be explained by one single scientific discipline, but neither to be approached by one single theory or method within a branch of scholarship. Simple as this sounds, it is still not a common realization. In particular psychology – and to the extent that it, rightly, orients itself on this discipline, this criticism pertains to psychology of religion as well, see the previous chapters – suffers from a lack of attention to the specificity of its objects. The main reason for this is the adherence to the so-called dogma of the “psychic unity of mankind.” In psychology (of religion), there is little realization that many results from research are valid only “for the time being” (Gomperts 1992), and that psychologists are usually writing contemporary “history” (Gergen 1973), not discovering perennial laws of an unchanging human mind. As a result, many psychologically intriguing phenomena in past and present, are either not being approached by psychology at all, or they are tailored down to what current methods and concepts can deal with. From a methodological perspective (which in academic psychological training is often typically reduced to statistics only), this is a fundamental fault. As should be evident, this is a criticism of a general feature of the discipline, not of individual researchers who – because of lack of time and resources – are all too often forced to conduct research with whatever means their training provided them with. Neither am I claiming to proclaim anything “new”; on the contrary, the plea is for an application of the “old” Aristotelian insight: that methods should be designed according to the nature of the object to be investigated and – I would add – according to the questions one wants to answer. When this chapter calls upon other concepts and methods than those employed by current psychology of religion, there is no intention to present these as superior or as a substitute to all that has been done in this field so far. Rather, the intent is to broaden the scope of psychology of religion, to enlarge the range of phenomena with which it can deal, and to contribute to a more appropriate understanding of some religious phenomena. (Certainly not of all! Every object of research should be allowed to call for its own approach.)

It is not just for the sake of theory, therefore, but because of being involved in empirical research on a religious minority and the resulting need for an appropriate conceptual framework that I turned to the “various theoretical approaches” McGuire and Hutch draw on. Some of these are also being presented under the admittedly still diffuse label of “cultural psychology.” Here, one finds not only a recognition of the pluriformity of human conduct, a pluriformity which calls for equally pluriform psychologies to account for it, but also an increasing realization of culture’s necessity and inescapability in evoking, facilitating and structuring human subjectivity and functioning. Accordingly, methodologies and concepts are being developed in different corners of cultural psychology to investigate and conceptualize the relationships between culture and personality. Having said this, I should immediately stress

that what is at stake is something other than an elaboration of the common sense notion that “everything is cultural” in the sense that everything has a cultural context. The point is far more radical, and has been aphoristically expressed by Clifford Geertz: “There is no such thing as human nature independent of culture” (1973, p. 49). The viewpoint, therefore, is also very different from that of the older “culture and personality” school, as developed, for example, by Franz Boas and Margaret Mead. In the latter school, Western psychology (at the time, it was usually simplified psychoanalysis) was placed at the heart of the enterprise and researchers tried to find corroborations or at least equivalents of personality traits such as were supposed to exist in the West. (In a way, this is still part of the program of the so-called “cross-cultural” psychology.) Subsequent schools have developed under the names of “psychological anthropology” and “ethnopsychology” that come closer to what is nowadays increasingly called “cultural psychology” (Voestermans 1992).

What all of these traditions have done is show the deficiencies of mainstream Western psychology. Criticizing existing psychology (which has been done ever since the discipline established its independence), however, does not necessarily mean having an alternative. It is only in recent years that several approaches are being developed that seem promising for the rise of a different psychology (and social science). First of all, these contemporary approaches realize that we are not just dealing with “them” but also with “us”: they no longer deal with “foreign” cultures only. Research in the (briefly mentioned) traditions has shown that the ways in which human beings perceive, categorize or reason are not processes deducible from any human machinery or “hardware,” but reflect and depend upon cultural self-definitions. This also pertains, therefore, to the Western researchers themselves. So cultural psychology, unlike the other traditions mentioned, often tries to understand how any (also Western) human conduct is being constituted by “culture.” Secondly, this implies a stronger emphasis on the interwovenness of human bodies with cultural regulating systems. To quote an aphorism by Geertz again: “Culture, rather than being added on, so to speak, to a finished or virtually finished animal, was ingredient, and centrally ingredient, in the production of that animal itself” (1973, p. 47). We will turn to this issue of the importance of the body in a moment. Thirdly, our taking cultural psychological claims seriously may, indeed, as McGuire (1990) expected, lead to a transformation of the psychology of religion. But first, let us turn to our empirical object.

The *Bevindelijke* Tradition

Research on a Dutch religious minority led to the search for an appropriate cognitive and empirical *instrumentarium* which this chapter reflects. One of the Calvinistic traditions in the Netherlands is known by the term *bevindelijken* (Dekker and Peters 1989; Hijweege 2004). This term, which does not belong to ordinary Dutch, is hard to translate and functions as a *terminus technicus*. At its root *bevinding*, an old word

for “experience,” is to be understood as: experience of the spiritual process through which the soul passes in its “hidden friendship” (cf. Ps. 25:14, RSV) with God. Ignoring here an assortment of theological distinctions, one might designate the *bevindelijke* tradition as focusing on subjective spiritual experience; and even though these believers themselves, for theological reasons, abhor the word “mysticism,” theologians and scientists of religion have often depicted the tradition as a mystical one (Belzen 2003; Beumer 1993; Brien 2003; Quispel 1976). Although this characterization is not sufficient, let us first look at what is meant by their focusing on experience.

Besides discussions and conflicts about, among other themes, the doctrine and organization of the Church or its relation to the political world and the alien “world” in general, etc., Western Christianity has an unbroken tradition which is particularly focused on what one could call “interiorization.” Ignoring many differentiations here, one can say that the concern of many mystics and spiritual authors has primarily been the cultivation of a heartfelt personal life of faith. Although many of them have also been very active in (church) politics and, conversely, many a reorganization was based on spiritual ideals, their primary aim was to interiorize the truth confessed, to appropriate, to experience and to live that truth in their lives. Rather than dogmatic expositions, one finds in this tradition treatises on spiritual virtues, prayer, growth in faith, the shape of a life that is well-pleasing to God, etc. (cf., e.g. Aalders 1980). To mention just one example and simultaneously the book which, beside the Bible, has been the most widely read in the West, let me refer to *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis. When the Reformation of the sixteenth century also found acceptance in the Low Countries (equaling roughly now The Netherlands and Belgium) and the majority of the Protestant inhabitants organized their church along Calvinistic lines, representatives of a spiritual movement in the seventeenth century insisted on a *further reformation*: needed beyond church reform was a reformation of the heart. *Pietas*, practical piety, must be cultivated. To be rejected was a lukewarm middle class life within a mainline church, even though it had been organizationally reformed. Formalism and fossilization had to be combated. This demand is similar to that which is presented in pietistic circles. The reception of German, French, and above all English pietistic (Puritan) authors led, in the seventeenth century, among a series of other factors, to a variant of pietism peculiar to The Netherlands (Heppe 1879/1979), with representative figures like Voetius, Teelinck, Lodenstein, who along with internationally better known men like Bunyan, Whitefield and (later) Spurgeon, are still being read in certain Reformed circles today (Hof 1987).

In The Netherlands one naturally finds a broad spectrum of spiritual currents and also among the “Reformed” (Calvinists adhering to different churches that all use the adjective “reformed” in their name) there are a number of very distinct types of piety. And of course, there are other protestant groups like Pentecostals and Evangelicals strongly focusing on subjective experience, equally characterized by a somewhat literal understanding of the Bible. These should be well distinguished from the *bevindelijken*, however. For up until now the believers who and the groups

which strongly identify with the main representatives of the *Further Reformation* are a clearly recognizable minority. These people, who today number approximately 250,000 (the Dutch population being about 14 million citizens), are to be found in different (Calvinistic) churches; the *bevindelijke* tradition is not identical with specific churches, although some churches (e.g. the “Old Reformed Church,” cf. Tennekes 1969) may have a higher percentage of *bevindelijke* congregations (parishes) and individuals than other churches, e.g. the Dutch Reformed Church. They have their own schools, socio-economic organizations, press, media, travel agencies, a political party (with two seats in Parliament equaling about 1.3% of the votes), etc. Also as individuals they can often be easily recognized as members of this community: they usually dress in black, or at least in very dark clothes; women may not wear slacks, avoid the use of makeup, wear their hair in a bun; working on Sundays is taboo (as is riding a bicycle or going out visiting, etc.). They relate antithetically to contemporary culture: television is rejected as well as medical insurance, birth control practices, sports and many other things. In their public recognizability they remind one in many respects of certain orthodox Jewish communities or of groups like the Mennonites in Ontario. (Although they may not like this comparison, it is not meant to be pejorative or to stigmatize them at all. I am only trying to convey an impression of the nature of the – in many respects respectable – subculture with which we are dealing.) The theologian VanderMeiden, a former adherent of the tradition, published a “portrait” of these communities, a portrait that is intended for a broad public and is generally recognized (also by the *bevindelijken* themselves). He points out that the demand for the interiorization of religion – which in his opinion is justified – as it was put forward by the Further Reformation, pietism, and many other spiritual movements, has – like any other demand that as such is proper – often led and still leads to one-sidednesses. According to VanderMeiden, the *bevindelijke* spirituality is “still exactly as pious and genuinely experiential [as in its original phase, JAB], still faces the world much as outsiders, is still exactly as focused on heaven and as powerfully fascinated with the stirrings of the soul more than by the earth, which has been designated as the place of the saving action of God” (VanderMeiden 1981, p. 101; my translation). Let us take a somewhat closer look at some of the elements of the spirituality of this circle, although we have only a very few (inadequate) words at our disposal for this purpose. (VanderMeiden devoted an entire book to the project.)

***Bevindelijke* Spirituality: Am I Converted ...?**

These believers have often been described as the “heavy ones.” The reference is to their seriousness or to the gravity with which they take all the things of (the) life (of faith), the fear of sin and of hell above all. Their theology and spirituality is centered on *election* and *conversion*. “Many are called but few are chosen” (Matt. 22:14). Conversion is viewed as a process, not so much as a once-and-for-all,

or repeated, act. It is the work of God in his chosen ones. The elect person must be converted (by God) and repent (avoid the world and sin). Conversion as an act of God, though in principle it is a once-and-for-all event, must be confirmed afresh over and over in life. The converted is “placed on a road:”² he gains knowledge of his sin, learns to see that he has fled from God, indeed even hated Him, has betrayed His love, and transgressed the commandments. He learns to see that he is incapable of keeping God’s commandments, incapable of changing himself, let alone of improving himself. He learns to see himself as a sinner who not only cannot change himself but also does not *want* to change at all: he is recalcitrant, flees from God, even when he outwardly puts on a pious front He learns to accept that only God can convert him back to God, that an intervention of grace must come into his life, from the outside, to change him. Just as the Heidelberg Catechism teaches: elect sinners, once they have begun to receive this knowledge of *sin*, move forward to *redemption*, which is the unilateral work of the Holy Spirit within them, in order to arrive at the end at the station of *gratitude*; that is, *if* the “grave” believers of the “further” or “second” reformation type, ever get that far.... For those who think that grace is at work in them, who think they see a small cloud of salvation, must be on their guard: are they not fooling themselves? Are they not being deceived by the devil? Are they not rocking themselves in the cradle of a false security? Are they not steering themselves, “while harboring an imaginary heaven in their heart,” straight to hell? Did not the apostle say: “Examine yourselves to see whether you are holding to your faith” (2 Cor. 13:5)? These and numerous other Bible verses are cited and pondered as favorites. One learns to examine oneself, to make distinctions between countless kinds of Christians (nominal Christians, Christians-in-word, camp followers, Sunday Christians, talk-Christians, baptized citizens of the world, etc.), to distinguish the many stations of the spiritual life (also in their own life), to distinguish the many forms in which a person can know Christ (as surety, as high priest, as advocate, and many more).

Really and truly, these people are “grave”; they are “troubled” (which they distinguish as a spiritual stage before conversion) over their salvation; they transpose everything in life into the key of the absolute. VanderMeiden writes:

Laughter is not forbidden, but for a person who has discovered his wretched condition, laughter finally dies except when eternity beckons and smiles at him. The face, the clothing, the gait (especially on Sundays) – all this is burdened by the leaden weight of a human fate,

² Although one can hardly do so in a translation, in the next sentences I will try to convey a little of the style of the *bevindelijken*, using their rather rhetorical terminology. I will deliberately avoid gender neutral language, which they would abhor as opposing the “divinely ordained creation order of male headship.” In many respects, the *bevindelijken* are strictly conservative; even their language, called the “language of Canaan,” is old-fashioned, rooted in a – to their understanding: irreplaceable – Bible translation from the seventeenth century and in authors from the Further Reformation. Many of the distinguishing characteristics of the group fall outside the scope of this article; in the text I focus on their spirituality, which, for lack of space, I can only describe in part. Some more information in English on the group and its spirituality can be found in Belzen (2003).

the burden of being or not-being elect and of the necessity of conversion. This fundamental question: “am I elect and hence can I be converted?” injects immense seriousness into a person’s life. It is a weightier question than all other questions in life: weightier than all the social and political problems combined. The “grave ones” get up with it in the morning and go to bed with it at night. In “grave” circles one frequently hears the familiar greeting: “How are you?” interpreted as follows: “How are you doing spiritually; have you made progress on the road of salvation; do you already know whether you are elect, called, born-again, converted, justified or sanctified? And can you detect these progressive steps in yourself?” (1981, p. 40)

Thus they examine themselves – and others. For “spiritual conversation” is highly valued. Over and over, in *bevindelijke* circles, conversation will touch upon the spiritual life, allusions are made to it, biblical or other religious phrases are used. All of life is permeated by religious elements in such a way that much of what an outsider would regard as religious is not experienced that way at all by the people in question. For them, activities become religious in the strict sense only when they are performed with a religious intention, for example when, after repeatedly talking about God and his work during the day, these people come together explicitly for this purpose in the evening. For aside from the (often triple) Sunday services there are numerous occasions in these circles where people meet for less formal “house-gatherings” (“conventicles”), where they talk about “God’s Word” (the Bible) and especially about the *praxis pietatis*: where they tell stories about what “the Lord has wrought in the lives of individuals” (Schram 1983). Partly these stories are borrowed from books published in their own circles (conversion stories; spiritual autobiographies); partly they are also presented by the participants about and by themselves. At least, *if* there are those who are bold enough to testify that they are converted or at least that they can observe or have observed the workings of the Spirit in their life! This takes courage both before God and before oneself as well as before the others. For, in the first place, these people do not want to commit the sin of appropriating for themselves what has not been granted to them by God. And, in the second place, they will have to expose themselves to the criticism or at least the looks and questions of others who are present and who must first be persuaded before they will acknowledge that a given person is in fact converted. With the help of what they know – from sermons, personal accounts, stories, and from books of their great authorities, the “old writers” of the Further Reformation – about the heights and depths of the spiritual life and with the help of what is known about the life and conduct of the person in question, the narrator is made to understand how people rate her or him spiritually. Hence there is reason to be on one’s guard ...

As may be clear, in many respects the *bevindelijken* do not have a theology that would be different from “mainline” (if there is such a thing) Protestantism (compare with, e.g. McKim 1992). It is their spirituality, their “operationalization” (Belzen 1996a) and experience of Protestant (i.e. Calvinist) principles in daily life that makes them different. Their spirituality is centered on conversion, which is a highly ambiguous, even controversial, topic. Controversial – not in the sense that

there would be theological debate about it, but in the sense of the recognition among individual believers. On the one hand, people are being confronted time and again with the call to repent: in church services, in literature, and also in private discussions the necessity of conversion is spoken of continuously. On the other hand, great emphasis is laid on the human *impossibility* to convert her- or himself: it is God's (highly exceptional) work in the elect ones. To claim without warrant that one is converted would be one of the greatest possible sins. Therefore, and paradoxically, an individual account of conversion is very exceptional; it is distrusted and only accepted (if ever) after extensive "testing" (often by informal authorities, i.e. not by theologians or church leaders, but by, say, the leaders of conventicle meetings). Although there have always been a few people who were accepted by many (never by everyone) as converted, and who were held in high esteem, in recent years their number has dwindled. (*Bevindelijke* theological interpretation: the Spirit is not working among us anymore, we are approaching the last days.) But even these acknowledged converts would never claim to be or boast of being converted; they would tell about their spiritual struggles, of hoping and of despairing, of the ups and downs in their spiritual life. Especially people going to conventicle meetings (a similarly decreasing number), but also regular churchgoers are even recognizable without special dress (which is often a traditional type of costume). Their way of walking, looking, their vocabulary, their intonation – it is all peculiarly characteristic of a "true *bevindelijke*."

Pressing down upon the life of these people is the deadweight of the idea of being guilty and of having to submit, with complete justification, to the punishments God sends down on them. They reject vaccination and health insurance, for example, since sickness is interpreted as being sent by God whose will one ought not to resist, nor should one seek to escape the consequences of God's wrath by taking out insurance. In all things, both in their personal life and in events on a larger scale, these people discern the hand of (especially a punitive), God. The following quotations from a variety of sources illustrate this point.

One of our informants told us about his religious socialization:

I was three years old when I broke my thighbone; in the same year I got diphtheria and became seriously ill. My mother, who is a "changed" person,³ always saw this as a warning. Until I left home and certainly till I was twenty, she kept telling me that I should change my way of behavior for I must be a wicked person for the Lord to send me so many calls of conscience at such an early age. Time and again she warned me, for I would go to hell, if I did not change my behavior.

During the great flood which struck The Netherlands in the winter of 1994–1995, the *Reformatisch Dagblad*, a newspaper of the *bevindelijke* school, editorialized as follows:

The floods which threaten the houses and properties of many of our compatriots and fellow parishioners call upon us, now that the Lord's Day is approaching, to bring the

³That is a person in whose life God has "wrought a change."

prevailing distress into the worship services with all due sobriety. The need to humble ourselves and to return to Almighty God is spelled out for us in Jeremiah 5:20ff. May this message break down our delusions of autonomy and awaken us out of our blindness and deafness, so that we may see the hand and hear the voice of the Lord. (*Reformatorsch Dagblad*, February 3, 1995)

The hog cholera which swept the hog industry in the southern part of the Netherlands in 1997–1998 also struck farmers who as Christian believers belong to the *bevindelijke* tradition. One of them is an elder with the “Old Reformed Church” in The Netherlands. In a newspaper article he is quoted as saying: “With this epidemic the Lord is demonstrating the powerlessness of humans. God rules: that is a reality which should humble us.” He also has reasons of principle for not inoculating his pigs:

Man cannot banish any illness. That, after all, is perfectly clear, isn't it? Despite all the measures which have been taken, the epidemic is steadily assuming more severe forms. The Lord is still stretching out his hand and showing man his powerlessness. (Berge 1997, p. 17)

Obstacles to Empirical Research

Trying to conduct any psychological investigation into these people's spirituality is not an easy undertaking. Besides difficulties one may have to deal with in general when intimately exploring people's religiosity or when investigating any (new) religious movement that relates antithetically to “the modern world” (including especially the psychology of religion: researching without taking into account God's action!), the paradoxical nature of *bevindelijke* conversion plays tricks on the researcher. Dealing with religious topics is strictly reserved for religious discourse itself (whether in church or conventicle, by a minister or an elder, or in private spiritual conversations). Someone who does not express himself in this way and in this context will not have access to these people's religiosity. Passing out questionnaires, therefore, would be useless: they would not be returned. Sending out interviewers seems to be of little use either, as *bevindelijken* will not consent to being interviewed, or will avoid talking about what exactly is their experience of, or with, conversion. Moreover, it would take hard training for the interviewer to learn to talk and behave in the proper way, a task almost certain to fail. Trying to carry out observations is likely to turn out to be a very embarrassing experience, both for the observer and the observed. Church services may be visited publicly, although it may happen that one – especially when it is clear one is not coming for reasons of personal piety – is firmly invited to leave the church or even the church area! And even if one stays to attend a worship service, one will only witness what any published or tape-recorded sermon could yield as a result: the singing of psalms (in a translation and a melody from the seventeenth century; no musical instruments), some announcements on church activities, some long prayers (about 15 min each) and a very long sermon (about 60 min), in an archaic language,

telling the listeners they are doomed eternally unless they are converted. Even fellow researchers in this project who have been studying this group for a long time (in some cases, amounting to several years) felt extremely uneasy in such a situation, for it is apparent that even in relatively moderate circles the visitors/researchers are not welcome. Such observations do not yield much insight into private spirituality, into experience of, or with, conversion.

Obviously, these obstacles to empirical research are not altogether unique to dealing with the *bevindelijken*. However, since psychologists are usually interested in experience, in private affairs and subjective states and reports, people all too often conclude that psychological research into *bevindelijke* conversion is an impossibility. Besides theological and other scholarly research from an “inside” perspective (Brienen 1978, 1986, 1989; Florijn 1991; Graafland 1991; Harinck 1980; Jong et al. 1992; Ketterij 1972), there have been some studies from a social scientific “outside” perspective by historians and sociologists (Beumer 1993; Dekker and Peters 1989; Janse 1985; Vellenga 1994; Lieburg 1991; Zwemer 1992), but – to my knowledge – hardly ever by psychologists.⁴ Nevertheless, experiences incurred in a long-standing project (Belzen 1989b, 1990, 1991b, c) on “*bevindelijke* spirituality” do not entirely accord with this view. Together with several (changing) others, I have tried to get as close to *bevindelijke* conversion as seemed possible without, however, ever becoming “one of them,” without any inside experience of their religiosity of my own. Therefore, the empirical results that I draw on in this chapter, and that have also been used in the above introduction to the group and its spirituality, have not been collected in any standardized, straightforward way. Besides this, they are very diverse, including dozens of observations made during attendance at church services, observations and conversations on the occasion of visits to feast days (mission conferences, book fairs, training courses, political assemblies); numerous encounters with people, in the street, after church, at their homes, sometimes just “small talk,” sometimes in the form of semi-structured interviews (in some cases even with a tape-recorder on the table); analysis of ego-documents, novels, spiritual authors and scholarly publications on *bevindelijken*; reading their newspapers, visiting them on the Internet (which some of them do indeed use!). In short: anything that might help a person to “get in touch” (Shotter 1992). (Compare the methods Festinger employed in his classic study *When prophesy fails* (1956). Note, however, that no “participant observation” in the strict sense was used in this research with the *bevindelijken*: I did not really “participate”; cf. also Hood’s (1998) approach in order to get access to and win the confidence of the “serpent-handlers” for a contemporary example of the creative ways one must sometimes adopt in order to obtain any results at all.)

⁴Even an application I made for a grant for student research was initially (1992) criticized by reviewers of the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research: I should have realized that this group is too closed to be investigated, especially about conversion.... Meanwhile, the student successfully defended her doctoral dissertation: Hijweege (2004).

Variants of Cultural Psychology

To what extent can psychology be of any help in understanding this *bevindelijke* spirituality? Generally, and in accordance with a metaphysical tradition that is powerful in the West, psychology pursues what is presumed to be the case for, or to be the basis elements of, all human psychic functioning. Typically, no attention is paid to “culture,” whether contemporary or historical; particularities are to be excluded. Cognitivist approaches – created in tandem with computer technology (Sampson, p. 601) – for example, usually center on a mind that is a kind of abstract calculating device dwelling inside the head of an individual and conducting its operations on symbolic representations of the outside world. The embeddedness of human beings in history, society and culture is excluded by such an approach in order to focus on the mind’s intrinsic processes and structure. Although voices criticizing this approach have become more frequent and louder in recent years, this picture still holds true for the major part of psychology, also in its analysis of religion. Rambo (1992), author of a synthetically designed psychological model of conversion, writes, “Psychologists [of religion, JAB] typically do not address the context of religious conversion because their emphasis is on the individual. Until recently they tended to focus on issues that ignored or downplayed cultural and social variables” (p. 164). Although Rambo is clearly aware of the importance of context, in his monograph (1993) he can hardly quote from any empirical study that realizes the impact of culture in conversion. It is not likely that such psychological studies – worthwhile as they may be in themselves – will be of great help when it comes to an adequate psychological conceptualization of the specific characteristics of *bevindelijke* spirituality. Moreover, most psychological studies on conversion have studied conversion *to* a new faith or *to* a new religious group (not necessarily a “new [usually meaning: non-Western] religious movement,” but new to the individual concerned). Clearly, conversion *to* a new group is not what is at stake in the case of the *bevindelijke* conversion. One cannot even say it is a (new) commitment to a formerly held faith, as a “true *bevindelijke*” believer is already very committed, yet the more committed (s)he is, the less likely it is that (s)he will claim or consider her or himself to be converted. Besides, and importantly: conversions to the *bevindelijken* as a group are not known at all; although people do change their membership in churches, they – already *bevindelijk* – remain within the same tradition.

A current approach in psychology that does strive to give appropriate attention to the fact that humans are cultural beings is Social Constructionism (cf., e.g., Cushman 1990; Gergen 1985; Harré 1986; Sarbin and Kitsuse 1994). In its different variants, it is one of the most powerful factions of a cultural psychology (Voestermans 1992; Sampson 1996). Social constructionism strives to replace interest in psychological processes within individuals – common fare in experimental social psychology – with concerns for interdependencies, jointly determined outcomes, “joint action.” The attempt to identify emotions, for example, is regarded as obfuscating. Social constructionists point out that emotional discourse gains its meaning not from its (assumed), relationship to an inner world (of dispositions, drives, instincts, traits),

but from the way it figures in patterns of cultural relationships.⁵ “Communities generate conventional modes of relating; patterns of action within these relationships are often given labels. Some forms of action – by current Western standards – are said to indicate emotions” (Gergen 1994, p. 222). A much quoted research study by Averill (1982) shows that a person is not “motivated” or “incited to action” by emotions, but rather, one *does* emotions, or participates in them (as one would, say, on a stage, as narrative psychologist Sarbin (1986a) points out). Following Austin’s (1962) analysis of speech acts, one can say that the performative value of an utterance, say, with regard to someone’s spiritual state, is derived from its position within some extended pattern of relationships. Using Wittgensteinian (1953) terminology, Gergen (1994) argues that utterances may be seen as constituents of more extended forms of life, which may include both actions (other than verbal) and objects or environments. Gestures and facial expressions, for example, contribute to the context which renders speech meaningful, given its status as a particular kind of performative.

The “rhetorical-responsive” version of social constructionism as articulated by John Shotter (1993a, b) emphasizes and elaborates precisely this last point. Unlike earlier approaches which focused on events within the inner dynamics of the individual psyche or on events within the already determined characteristics of the external world, Shotter attends to events within the contingent flow of continuous communicative interaction between human beings. Shotter agrees with Harré (1992) that meanings, and even cognitive abilities (Shotter 1993a, p. 7), are being formed in what people say and do, rather than existing already, well-formed sources of actions and utterances, but he stresses that this is always done in relating to others. If human beings are to be perceived as speaking authoritatively, they have to acquire the capacity to respond to others should the latter challenge the claims made. Speaking to and with others, in the various forms of “talk,” is always also rhetorical: the aim is to “move” others to action, to believe, to change their perception or opinion, etc. Shotter stresses that one accounts for one’s actions in terms understood by members of the social reality of which one is a part. Contrary to earlier approaches, his focus is on the unordered “hurly-burly” or “bustle” side (Wittgenstein 1980) of everyday social life (Shotter 1993b). What is embodied in this conversational background of human life is a special kind of knowledge, unvoiced in psychology thus far: namely how to *be* a person of this or that particular kind according to the culture into which one develops as a child (Shotter 1993a, p. 19). This is a knowledge that does not need be – probably even cannot be – finalized or

⁵A related current similar to discursive psychology is even more outspoken in this regard. Regarding discourse as the characteristic feature of human life, Harré and Stearns (1995) state that there is no central processor (Shweder 1991), or any such mechanism as assumed by the “old” cognitive psychology. Psychology should not search for that. It should rather disclose the structure of the discursive productions in which psychological phenomena are immanent and seek to discover how the various cognitive skills needed to accomplish the tasks that psychology studies are acquired, developed, integrated and employed. Resisting any (neuropsychological) reductionism, they apodictically write: “There is nothing in the human universe except active brains and symbolic manipulations” (Harré and Stearns 1995, p. 2).

formalized in a set of statements before it can be applied. It is neither theoretical knowledge (“knowing that”) for it is knowledge-in-practice; nor a skill or craft (“knowing-how”), for it is joint knowledge, knowledge held in common with others. It is a third kind of knowledge that cannot be reduced to either of the other two. It is “the kind of knowledge one has from within a situation, a group, social institution, or society; it is what we might call a ‘knowing-from’” (Shotter 1993a, p. 19). It is the “practical-moral knowledge” Bernstein (1983) spoke about.

These reflections seem particularly useful for the analysis of what is involved in *bevindelijke* spirituality. For being a converted person or – more precisely – being someone about whom fellow believers think she or he may be converted has to do with this third kind of knowledge. It is not – or not just! – a matter of being able to give a theologically correct account of one’s conversion, nor of expressing oneself in the appropriate terminology. Difficult as that would be, all this could be attained by a researcher of the *bevindelijken* too. She or he would, however, still lack “inside” knowledge. For what is at stake is a knowledge that one has as a socially competent and accepted member of the *bevindelijke* culture. So, although a *bevindelijke* believer may not be able to reflectively articulate the nature of this “knowledge” as an inner, mental representation, according to questions asked about conversion and spirituality in a more general sense, she or he can nonetheless call upon it as a practical resource in framing appropriate answers. Although a *bevindelijke* will not be able to list the criteria why and when any believer should or may be assumed to be converted – since according to popularized versions of theological doctrine, no one can know or judge upon someone’s being converted, a straightforward question on this would be totally out of order – there is very often a high degree of agreement among *bevindelijken* as to the spiritual state of some of their fellow believers.

While acknowledging the importance of narratives as shaping and expressing human subjectivity (Belzen 1996b), social constructionism calls attention to “narration” (Gergen) or to “words in their speaking” (Shotter). As pointed out earlier, an account of *bevindelijke* conversion will only be accepted if – correct content and phrasing being assured – all kinds of characteristics of the speaker that may seem irrelevant to outsiders (like dress, body posture, pitch of voice, glance, facial appearance, breathing; but to some extent also features like geographical, family and educational background) correspond with the expectancies of the *bevindelijke* listeners. Indeed, it is very hard to be “recognized” as being converted, and almost impossible to convert *to* this tradition!

Body, Culture and Religion

The characteristics just cited, by way of examples, call attention to the eminent importance of the body for a psychological understanding of the *bevindelijke* tradition. In scholarly, say, theological, reflections on the *bevindelijken*, the importance of the correct account of conversion is stressed. Without denying this, I would like to reflect on embodiment, a theme increasingly recognized as being of central

importance to cultural psychology, as it refers to the recognition of humans being socialized into both a linguistic and a bodily community of practices such that what is said and the embodied quality of how it is said are simultaneously engendered and inextricably intertwined (Sampson 1996).⁶ One should think in this connection of seemingly “simple” examples (how human mouths, lips, lungs, vocal chords are socialized to form the sounds appropriate to spoken language), but also of complex bodily practices (how to stand and move, how to comport oneself through various circumstances and situations in life). As introduced briefly in Chapter 3, Bourdieu’s concept of the *habitus* is illuminating here and can serve as a supplement to social constructionist considerations.⁷ Bourdieu describes *habitus* as “a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks” (Bourdieu 1977, p. 82) or as “a set of historical relations ‘deposited’ within individual bodies in the form of mental and corporeal schemata of perception, appreciation, and action” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 16).⁸

Bourdieu tends to unite in the concept of the *habitus* what Westerners usually separate: body and discourse, as they go together in, say, the articulatory style of a

⁶Criticisms of the neglect of the body in psychology, indeed in Western thought in general, have been offered by philosophical anthropologists and phenomenologists like Nietzsche, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty (for instructive reviews, see e.g., Csordas 1990; Merwe and Voestermans 1995; Stam 1998; Voestermans and Verheggen 2007). In fact, good reasons may be put forward to argue that human beings can understand and think as they do because our more abstract understandings are grounded in preconceptual embodied structures (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Johnson 1987). A contribution from evolutionary biology to these reflections is provided by Sheets-Johnstone: she points out that major abstract concepts (including notions of death, numbers, agency, etc.) derive from an original corporeal logos. Suggesting that the roots of human thinking lie in the hominid body, she asserts: “meanings are generated by an animal’s bodily comportment, movement and orientation [...] semanticity is a built-in of bodily life” (Sheets-Johnstone, in Sampson 1996, p. 618). Cf. also Sacks (1990) who describes how bodily activities evoke a self (p. 46). It would take me too far afield to develop these ideas here. For one of the rare – strongly Lacanian psychoanalytically oriented – attempts at conceptualizing the interwovenness of the human body and culture in psychology-of-religion research, cf. Vergote (1978/1988); also cf. O’Connor (1998).

⁷In fact, it is a matter of discussion whether social constructionism is in fact sufficiently sensitive to the embodied aspects of human life (cf. Baerveldt and Voestermans 1996; Sampson 1996).

⁸Bourdieu’s (typically French) writing is not easy to read, not even in translation. Let us take just one more look at a description of what he means: “[...] the principle generating and unifying all practices, the system of inseparably cognitive and evaluative structures which organizes one’s vision of the world in accordance with the objective structures of a determinate state of the social world: this principle is nothing other than the *socially informed body*, with its tastes and distastes, its compulsions and repulsions, with, in a word, all its *senses*, that is to say, not only the traditional five senses – which escape the structuring action of social determinism – but also the sense of necessity and the sense of duty, the sense of direction and the sense of reality, the sense of balance and the sense of beauty, common sense and the sense of the sacred, tactical sense and the sense of responsibility, business sense and the sense of propriety, the sense of humor and the sense of absurdity, moral sense and the sense of practicality, and so on” (1977, p. 124, emphasis in original).

social class – or, for that matter, of a religious tradition like the *bevindelijken* – noting how a group’s very lifestyle becomes embodied. Discourse should not then, in a Bourdieuan sense, be understood as being of a solely linguistic character; on the contrary, it is a *praxis*, and it even includes ideologies, class characterizations and politics. Although these can be distinguished on a societal or cultural level, they do not exist in the abstract or disembodied. Domination, for example, is an embodied reality; submission is most often not a deliberate act of conscious concession to anyone’s force, but is “lodged deep inside the socialized body. In truth it expresses the ‘somatization of social relations of domination’ (...) an imprisonment effected via the body” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, pp. 24, 172). Bourdieu suggests that the actual body is molded to carry within its very tissues and muscles the story of a given ideology.

Notions of embodiment, like the *habitus*, are important since they allow us to overcome the old conceptual separation of subject and world that has been haunting psychology for so long. Whereas the body might be conceived as an individual entity, embodiment cannot: because embodiment is about culture, about “world,” not only about material worlds, but also about possible worlds. Thanks to embodiment, human beings are able to engage in the world so as to fashion semblances and configure social worlds, in short, we are able to symbolize. For an understanding of what is significant about embodiment for social religious life, it may be useful to remind ourselves of work done by Goffman (1951) who pointed out that symbols of class status carry both categorial and expressive significance. The categorial significance is concerned with matters of denoting or claiming identity; the second significance expresses the style of life or point of view of the person concerned (cf. Radley 1996). The dark clothes of a *bevindelijke*, the stony face, the grave look, the walk with a stoop, the dragging speech – these and other embodied characteristics do not just identify a person as a member of the *bevindelijke* tradition. They are also the expression of a way of life; they portray the conception of a human being who knows that the “pleasures of the world” are treacherous, is bowed down by the realization that (s)he will be doomed because of her or his sins, who knows that (s) he is totally dependent on grace, something for which a person can only humbly wait. The “socially informed body” (Bourdieu) is in these cases the medium individuals employ to display things that matter to each other, and how they matter. Such displays are not to be confused with non-verbal communication; they are expressive forms that do more than communicate ideas about selves in abstraction (Radley 1996, p. 562). Such displays are “enactments with the body that symbolize certain ways of being, that make certain social worlds appear” (p. 566).

With other religions, or probably more correctly, with other traditions within a certain religion, being a believer may have to do with membership in some church, with affirming specific theological doctrines, with joining an “inner circle” or even with being able to account for one’s religious experiences in a certain stylized way (e.g., with evangelicals) and with alterations in behavior. All of this is not specific enough to characterize what being a *bevindelijke* is or may be. Being a *bevindelijke* has to do with an all-pervading “style,” belonging to a specific “life form” (Wittgenstein), displaying itself in and through the body. Knowing the doctrine,

frequenting the conventicles, or being able to tell about her or his spiritual experiences in the required way, would not, on this basis alone, be accepted by *bevindelijken* as proof of being a “true” believer, let alone “converted.” And, conversely, if a believer’s body expresses experiential-subjective knowledge about misery, redemption, and gratitude, if the face is marked by the struggle with God, if the voice is characterized by the afflictions endured, if body and clothing express the knowledge of being dependent on grace, then even a theologically doubtful way of talking about spiritual experiences will be accepted. No *bevindelike* will ever claim to be converted or talk about her or his conversion, but the more the body reveals the “experiences with the Lord” this tradition induces and requires, the more easily one’s fellow believers will judge someone to be converted (or at least to be a person “who is being visited by the Lord”). Better than being elected as elder to the congregation, it is the “countenance, conversation, and clothing” (as one of the group’s “winged expressions” has it) that must bear public testimony to a person’s inner spiritual state. Since what matters for the *bevindelike* is not only the acceptance of a new doctrine and membership in a different denomination, but an inclusive style as a component of an integral “life form,” it is understandable that a person not born and socialized in it will hardly qualify for acceptance as a believer in this religious subculture. It is similarly understandable that almost no conversions to the *bevindelike* subculture are known to occur.

Concluding Comments

Bringing the body (back?) to the psychology of religion may transform the discipline, Hutch (1991) and McGuire (1990) claimed. Affirming as I do the importance for psychology of religion of dealing with the theme, or perspective, of embodiment, I would like to make a perhaps less ambitious but certainly no less encompassing assertion: attention to the body must be embedded in and is necessary from within a culture-psychological perspective. Attention to embodiment (although very important!) is not only a requisite for enabling the study of religion to participate in new theoretical developments in psychology;⁹ it is also necessary, for at least three reasons, from the perspective of empirical research.

1. In our society, a society which is rapidly becoming more heterogeneous and pluriform, “religion” is not always, everywhere, and for everyone the same, nor does it mean the same. This is becoming consistently more clear to Western

⁹For the psychology of religion, coming to an understanding with these new theoretical developments will be the more fruitful since their representatives are much less averse to religion than earlier generations of psychologists tended to be. Authors such as Boesch (1983, 1991, 2000, 2005), Gergen (1993, 1994), Much and Mahapatra (1995), Obeyesekere (1985), Sampson (1996) and Scheibe (1998), while not counted – even by themselves – as practitioners of the psychology of religion, do in fact again include in their work a consideration of a variety of religious phenomena.

psychologists as well. Inasmuch as every religion produces religious experiences and behavioral dispositions of its own, it is of eminent importance to examine how a given religion (as a cultural phenomenon) “works” psychologically: how it transmits, generates, facilitates these experiences and dispositions and makes them function.

2. All psychological characteristics are incarnated and habitually organized. Deep-rooted practices, needs, and emotions are anchored in the body and often only to a limited extent accessible to reflection. A cognitive viewpoint, therefore, is too limited for empirical research: aside from having instruments for “measuring” explicit (i.e. carefully considered) meaning-bestowal, ideas and views (even with reference to oneself), one must employ or develop experience-near techniques to be able to examine obstinate, unreflected, patterned behaviors in primary relationships (Voestermans and Verheggen 2007).
3. In this manner, the scope of the psychology of religion can be broadened. Not only people able and willing to cooperate in tests, questionnaire-research, and experiments but also an array of minorities will in this way become accessible to research. Although criticism of psychology as being based on white middle class students has been around for decades, numerous research projects in the psychology of religion are still based on this category (Batson et al. 1993; Loewenthal 1995, p. 152). Also in many conversions to so-called new religious movements the “test-persons” concerned came from this segment of society. Socially less advantaged and less well educated people, however, are frequently not accessible to the “pen and pencil” research practice that has become standard. In addition, minorities which for religious reasons may not be accessible to questionnaires and other quantifying methods may in this manner be involved in the research as well. An empirical phenomenon like a *bevindelijke* conversion may thus be studied by psychology nevertheless.

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