Preface

I must begin by explaining the origins of this book, since they have a crucial bearing on the form in which it has finally emerged. Shortly after publishing ‘Race’, Racism and Psychology. Towards a Reflexive History in 1997 my friend Rob Iliffe, a now eminent Newtonian scholar at Imperial College London, invited me to contribute a conference paper on the relationship between Psychology and religion to a symposium he was organising for a major history of religion conference. I cobbled something together with which I was fairly smugly satisfied. It quickly dawned on me that the topic was ripe for fresh historical treatment and that, given the crucial issues with which it was concerned, was, in a sense, ‘the Big One’. In Richards (1998) I published a programmatic paper ‘Psychology and Religion: A Suitable Case for Historical Treatment’ in the British Psychological Society’s History & Philosophy of Psychology Section journal. At that point, I assumed the book would involve a relatively straightforward application of the same approach as I had adopted in ‘Race’, Racism and Psychology. I was wrong. Provisional plot-lines kept collapsing, the scale of the research and learning required for such a work kept expanding, and I was ever more acutely aware of the reflexive dimension of the project. To embark on it with one’s 60th year looming, necessarily put one on the spot. I would finally have to clarify my own attitude to religion. And one’s ‘attitude to religion’ is a very profound matter indeed. However, I wanted to maintain as impartial a position as possible for the job in hand, viewing both religion (primarily, of necessity, Christianity) and Psychology as alternative ways of addressing human nature and routes for self-knowledge, subordinating neither to the other. Smugness evaporated.

The material itself was nevertheless both fascinating and distracting as I found myself having to detour into James Martineau’s Unitarian theism, Rudolf Otto’s The Idea of the Holy, and 1950s–1960s debates between British theologians and

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1 Throughout this work I adopt my usual practice of differentiating between upper-case Psychology/Psychological and lower-case psychology/psychological. The former refer to the discipline, the latter to its subject matter. This avoids ambiguity and clumsy circumlocutions, especially when referring to the relationships between them. I have been plugging this for over 20 years and a few others have now begun to adopt it. It will of course pose problems for any future German translation!
philosophers in the wake of Wittgenstein. As a result, the end-product includes a few short chapters which are hardly historical at all, while much of my research found no place in it. I also became intensely interested in the Methodist minister Leslie Weatherhead and the role of British religious figures in the origins of the now booming counselling profession as well as in popularising Psychology more generally. This yielded my 2000 paper ‘Psychology and the Churches in Britain 1919–1939: Symptoms of Conversion’.

In 2002 I agreed to write the present book for Plenum Press, still optimistic I could forge ahead and produce it within a year or so. Yet it quickly became stalled. The list of chapters kept expanding, a few were completed, many half-written, and the others no more than headings. The problem was partly conceptual or philosophical in that I became progressively more confused as to what kind of topic I was actually dealing with. I also found myself physically less well placed to research the ever growing range of material I felt obliged to tackle. And a viable plot-line remained as elusive as ever.

To cut to the chase, in April 2008, at the British Psychological Society’s History & Philosophy of Psychology Section’s Annual Conference I had a sudden moment of clarification listening to Kenneth Gergen. At one point he exhorted us to abandon our confining obsession with sticking to a formal academic style. If our work was to have any real impact, it must be accessible to everyone. I did not interpret this as meaning we should abandon scholarship or rigour, but rather that a more relaxed approach was both more psychologically honest and that we should not get too hung up on trying to produce grand complete accounts, or diverted by completist citation fetishism. This struck a chord, although it was not an entirely new thought to me, and given the cultural resurgence of religion since 1997 (as well as revived interest within Psychology itself) seemed particularly apposite.

What I have decided to do then is present a series of essay-like chapters addressing particular episodes or topics which shed light on the relationship between Psychology and religion, without any pretence at being comprehensive or any claims that a coherent chronological historical story can be told (by me at any rate). Some of these are more conventionally academic than others, and no doubt the overall register or tone oscillates somewhat. The upshot is that the work serves more to lay out an agenda of questions than to answer them, and to subvert received assumptions rather than provide neat replacements. I hope this failure to achieve an integrated analysis will be taken charitably as signifying not so much an intellectual inadequacy on the author’s part but rather a more realistic reflection of the patchwork character of its subject matter. The work thus differs from most others which have tackled the topic, usually from the Psychology of Religion angle, in that it is not written from an advocacy position: it is intended neither as a defence nor an attack upon either religion or Psychology, nor is it aimed at either promoting better relations between the two camps or insisting on their severance. In a concluding chapter I have, even so, attempted a provisional drawing together of the threads regarding their historical relationships. I also felt it was only fair to indicate my own current view of religion in the light of what the project has taught me. It is now my 70th year which is, if somewhat distantly, approaching and the wind begins to howl.
Psychology, Religion, and the Nature of the Soul
A Historical Entanglement
Richards, G.
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