Religion and Psychology in Transition: How It Came to Be Written

James W. Jones

The Person, Culture and Religion group at the American Academy of Religion agreed to sponsor a symposium at their 1997 meeting on my book Religion And Psychology In Transition: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and Theology (1996). I asked Professors Diane Jonte-Pace and Bonnie Miller-McLemore if they would offer critiques, which they kindly agreed to do. Professor Lewis Rambo said he wanted to publish the discussion and asked me to write an introduction to this set of papers, focusing on how I came to write this book and to think about religion and psychology in the ways that I do. The following is an attempt to do that in the form of a very abbreviated autobiographical statement.

I was not raised in any religious tradition. My father came from a Protestant background and my mother was Jewish and their marriage was predicated on the irrelevance of religion. Secular rationalism was the milieu in which I grew up: religion was not attacked but ignored. Emotional expression was discouraged (even punished) and imagination was suspect. One was to be controlled and reasonable at all times. Order, quiet, and efficiency were to be imposed at all costs.

In my first two years of college I did not think about religion either. I had immersed myself in the world of student politics, of late-night debates over the relevance of Marxism and weeklong treks to the nation's capital to petition for an end to nuclear testing or segregation in the south. Religion played no part in this. I served under the leadership of men from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference but always saw the issues of Jim Crowism in political and legal terms like justice and fairness, not theological or moral ones.

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In my junior year of college I took a course in logic and philosophy. The professor insisted on using religious beliefs as the butt of all his philosophical argumentation. Whenever he wanted to illustrate a logical fallacy, a mistaken belief, or any other irrationality, he always chose some Judeo-Christian conviction to ridicule. Of course he was egged on in this by a coterie from a conservative Christian student group who tried, and failed, again and again to mount a defense of their cherished beliefs.

I sat in that philosophy class and watched this intellectual tennis match from the sidelines. One night it hit me: if the professor subjected his own assumptions to the same scathing criticism to which he was subjecting the beliefs of the hapless students, his would not stand up any better. This was a revelation (perhaps literally) for me. I saw in an instant how all logical arguments depend upon beliefs and convictions which are not themselves proven because they are the basis of any proofs that are offered. The very formality of formal logic with its talk of axioms and primitive propositions made this crystal clear. This professorial critic's arguments against belief themselves rested on beliefs. He asserted that his beliefs were obvious and self-evident, but that seemed to me only an assertion of professorial power. His assumptions only looked self-evident because he had accepted a non-religious, materialistic world-view in advance. His arguments (and perhaps all arguments) suddenly seemed ultimately circular.

It also seemed to me that the radical empiricism and skepticism of the professor and the dogmatic literalism of the conservative students were two sides of the same coin. They needed each other as foils for their own claims. Each could defend themselves by attacking the other and so relieve themselves of the responsibility of probing more deeply the basis of their own assertions. They could argue and stay locked in this dance of disputation because they shared the same assumptions about the literalism of truth. Although I was not aware of it at the time, at that moment began my quest for a way of understanding human understanding that would get beyond that narrow discourse. A quest in which my perennial outsider status and suspicion of authority became an epistemological position as my oppositional intellectual style was turned against the cultural rule of rationalism. The latest fruit of this quest is the second section of Religion And Psychology In Transition, on which Bonnie focuses her critique, in which I use the resources of relational psychoanalytic theory, as years ago I used the resources of philosophy of science, to develop an epistemology to get beyond the dichotomy of subjectivity versus objectivity.

Now I felt the burden of proof was on those who claimed that the reality of time and space was the only reality—a faith that to me could not withstand intense scrutiny. Going beyond rationalistic philosophy was not going beyond reason but only beyond the faith that linear rationality