Are We Leaving Unexamined a Critical Conceptual Grounding of Psychology?

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As you can plainly see, I'm one of the certified old-farts of our Society. Until several years ago, I'd served 25 consecutive years on the Executive Committee in virtually every capacity, from program chair to President. My long tenure in this body and the prospect of this award have prompted me to reflect a bit on our Society. On the whole, I have to say that I'm proud of our work. We've examined a host of the sacred conceptual cows, found many of them wanting, and even developed some fascinating alternatives.

One important way to characterize many of these sacred cows is that they relate to differing aspects of *modernity*. Now I haven't heard the term "modernity" in our Society for a while, nor have I seen it recently in manuscripts submitted to our Journal. As you know, it can mean a period of history, notably the Enlightenment, where the new and "modern," rather than the old and traditional, are automatically given privileged status. Even today, we typically assume that "new" means "improved," as in newer publications are probably better publications. But more pertinent to my presentation today, modernity can also mean the intellectual and cultural currents that were considered new to that era. Psychology, of course, was conceived and developed during the heyday of Enlightenment influence, so it makes perfect sense that many of its conceptual themes are modernist in nature.

Indeed, it's been intriguing for me to realize just how many of our Society's major projects and collaborations over the years have critiqued the sacred cows of modernity and developed alternatives to them, including individualism, neoliberalism and consumerism, scientism, and the various types of dualism (ppt slide with associated scholars).

I could go on with more scholars and more modernist "isms," but I'd rather draw your attention to the one ism, the one and really *only* theme of modernity, I repeatedly encountered in my study of modernity that our Society has rarely broached, let alone systematically examined — *secularism*. What is this curious critter, secularism, and why is it neglected in our Society? Perhaps your first association with this pervasive theme of modern Western culture and our profession is the exclusion of religion. It was certainly mine. Yet, my study revealed that among those who take secularism seriously, it doesn't really involve the rejection of *religion* in public forums; it involves the rejection of the *dominance* of religion. Excluding religion was never the intention of those who originated the notion of secularism, such as George Holyoake, who first coined the term, or John Locke, who was a prominent popularizer of secular philosophy. Religion's voice in public and professional affairs was presumed; the issue was the dominating authority of that voice.

Even modern scholars, especially those who make a serious study of secularism, such as political philosophers, do not think of secular communities and organizations as the absence of religion. The issue, again, is the domination of *any* set of voices in the public sphere, *not* the exclusion of *particular* voices. Here John Rawls' notion of "overlapping consensus" has heavily

influenced political philosophy, where all community factions, including religious factions, should play a role in community decision-making[i].[ii]

But if secularism is intended as a pluralism that *involves* religious voices, could the very possibility of including religion be the reason our Society has resisted embracing this more inclusionary secularism? I am aware of a few intrepid souls in our midst who have ventured close to religion, especially in papers involving culture. But what has stopped these pioneering efforts from catching on, especially when we have collectively explored every other aspect of modernity? Indeed, you'd think it's glaring omission alone would intrigue us sufficiently to accept the challenge. Could the specter of religion stymy any serious examination of *either* form of secularism, exclusionary or inclusionary?

The *exclusionary* form of secularism would obviously resist consideration of religion altogether, given its definition, but an examination of the pluralist or *inclusionary* form of secularism would also be resisted, because pluralism would necessarily allow the *active consideration of religion in our Society*. And by "active consideration of religion" I mean that the inclusionary secularist could encourage expression of the religious voice in understanding psychological ontology, epistemology, and just plain theorizing. Religious *people* are already included in our Society; that's not the issue here. The inclusionary secularist welcomes religious *voices* in the interpretation of psychological data and in the theorizing of psychological ideas.

Even as I mention this possibility, however, I'm aware of the sensibility of exclusionary secularism in this very room. Those who have already read this presentation warned me that this sensibility is so intense that the mere mention of religion in an academic forum is enough for many of you to start discounting whatever is said, which of course is my point. Exclusionary secularism *dominates* our discipline, our thinking, and our emotional sensibilities, and as I'll describe later, this includes psychology of religion. The irony is that this domination occurs despite our having challenged its modernist parent in every other way. Please consider sticking with me and allow me to confront these issues directly.

For example, an obvious question is: can we examine secularism without considering the inclusion of religious conceptions? I'm open to the possibility, but I'm doubtful. Too much of the more dominant form of secularism, exclusionary secularism, is about absenting religion altogether. I'm not sure how we examine this exclusion without also examining the excluded. To adapt a bit of Wittgenstein's terminology, exclusive secularism is currently the only "language game" in town, at least in psychology. And as the only game in town, it isn't currently viewed *as* a game, as a particular conceptual position with all its attendant assumptions and values. There have to be other games considered for it to be a particular game. Here, I recognize the Society has allowed important discussions on related topics, such as transcendence. I've had the privilege of contributing to many of them. Still, as significant as these discussions have been, they've been scrupulously *non*-religious. Conscious or not, contributors to these symposia have not challenged exclusionary secularism. They've dutifully towed the disciplinary line in remaining non-religious, playing the only game in town, and continuing to obscure its status as a *particular* game.

Why are we so dependent on this one, unchallenged legacy of modernity? There are many reasons for this dependence, of course, and they likely vary from person to person. Nevertheless, I believe we need to begin identifying them before we can ever engage in a thoughtful examination of secularism. Charles Taylor identifies some of these reasons in his book, *A Secular Age*, but as the Director of the Program for Jewish Civilization, Jacques Berlinerblau, put the situation recently: "Secularism must be the most misunderstood and mangled ism in the American political lexicon."

Why wouldn't most of us here be subject to some of these misunderstandings? Without collective Societal examination, we'll likely share layperson conceptions because we *are* laypersons in this aspect of modernity. What then are the common understandings of the exclusionary secularist, and how might they be *mis*understandings? My time limits prohibit me from answering this question completely here, especially with our secularist bias against including religion in psychology. And here I would even include those who are personally religious; many of them have long ago made their peace with secularism. What I'd like to do, instead, is show how we can at least *question* the unquestioned status of seven beliefs about exclusionary secularism *and* what it excludes — religion.

1. Exclusionary secularism is at least neutral, especially when compared to the biases and values of religious conceptions. Now I won't try to defend some of the religious fundamentalists out there[iii], but I will note that they are no more representative of religion as a whole than extremists are representative of any group. And surely our Society has dispelled the myth about some philosophy or other being neutral. All philosophies, including both types of secularism, have implicit assumptions and thus biases. Secularism, in this sense, may be just as biased as religion and influence science in ways we haven't contemplated, some of which I'll later describe.

2. Religions are fundamentally private and thus not the province of the professional. This notion is the linking of religion with modernist individualism, where people are atomized and their beliefs are considered within the person and thus personal and private. Of course if this understanding of privacy were broadly held within our Society, prominent members of our Society wouldn't have disputed individualism in this regard, and many others wouldn't have made a host of supposedly private values and moral beliefs part of our Societal discourse. Religious conceptions of providence, inspiration, and enlightenment, among many others, can all be discussed without relegating these to privacy.

3. Opening psychology to the many differing forms of religious worldview would open Pandora's Box. As obvious as this belief may first appear to our modernist mindset, it runs into many problems when considered more formally. For example, by one count there are over a 170 differing forms of psychotherapy, yet we don't outlaw the discussion of psychotherapy in our Society. We don't even say, "one more form of therapy and it can't be considered; you've past the critical threshold." In fact, the hallmark of modernity's individualism, scientism, and

dualism is their multitude forms, yet we've always found ways to address these topics conceptually.

4. Unlike religious worldviews, exclusionary secularism allows for reason and experience, the foundations of science. This particular dichotomy between faith on the religious side and reason and experience on the secular side is yet another artificial modernist dualism. Religious people do not have to abandon reason and experience to exercise or even decide their faiths. Indeed, most would cite their spiritual experiences as well as their logical reasons for *being* faithful. Recall that the radical empiricism of William James is completely inclusive of spiritual experiences. And only the staunchest of rationalists would presume that science has cornered the market on reason, especially when there can be many different forms of reason.

5. Many religions are inherently hegemonic and would try to take over the Society and psychology. This hegemony notion is a variation on the neutrality belief. Somehow, secularism is less subjective, less value-laden than religion. Well, again, I have my doubts about *any* philosophy being neutral, but even if this were true, why presume it? Why not examine it? The neutrality notion also overlooks the number of devoutly religious people in this Society, here and now, who have long cooperatively listened and even developed all kinds of nonreligious research programs. And really, aren't all of our pet theories and conceptions hegemonic? As Paul Meehl termed it many years ago, we're all "crypto-missionaries" of one sort or another. Persuading people to our way of thinking is what we do — we assume our assumptions; we value our values.

6. Much like the United States government, psychology needs the separation of church and state. As important as this conception of separation undoubtedly is for many nations, political philosophers have rarely assumed that church and state were ontologically separable. This belief is the coupling of secularism with modernist dualism, where church and state are supposedly atomistic entities and thus inherently separable — a supposition that many scholars have challenged. Taylor, among others, casts considerable doubt on whether church and state *can* be separated, especially in practice. What the separation of church and state really means is the diligent monitoring of the inappropriate influence of church on state and state on church, not the exclusion of religion in the public sphere.

7. The legacies of modernity are no longer relevant, because intellectual culture has moved on from modernity to postmodernity. Now even if this belief were true, it doesn't mean that the discipline of psychology has somehow become postmodern. As I outlined at the outset, most of the themes of modernity are still present and prominent in psychology. But this final belief typically runs deeper, with queries like: doesn't postmodernity not only presume secularism itself but also cast doubt on the meta-narratives of religion[iv]? First, postmodernism's presumption of exclusionary secularism makes it *more* intriguing to examine, not less. Why does postmodernism affirm this one legacy of modernism, especially in light of postmodernism's more inclusive tendencies? Second, the notion that religions require meta-narratives can itself be understood as a secular stereotype of religion. A thoughtful examination

of secularism could entail how many aspects of religions — the excluded — resist meta-narrative, and that's presuming such meta-narratives are obviously bad.

Again, I'm intending my list here only to start the conversation, indeed, to make the case that a conversation is possible. Any one of these seven beliefs could itself be debated, and that's my point. None that I can see or foresee prevent us from examining exclusionary secularism[v]. But *why* examine it? Is this neglected legacy of modernity merely an intellectual curiosity? Or is it impacting psychology in practical ways that require the unique skill set of our Society? I want to answer this last question with resounding affirmation, because *our discipline needs us.* Even if all we did was open up secularism to inquiry, it would help mitigate the current reification of secularism in psychology. And who else could open an inquiry into such hidden assumptions? Secularism is currently taken for granted, and when it's recognized at all, it's considered transparent, a harmless background conception that doesn't affect our data or our theorizing.

Permit me to offer some examples where I believe this simply isn't so[vivii]. I think you'll see where even a modicum of disciplinary awareness, awareness that we could help engender, would go a long way. The first concerns a field within psychology that you'd already expect to be alert to these issues — psychology of religion. Here, the flagship journal has an explicit editorial policy that forbids articles from challenging exclusionary secularism[viii]. Any inclusion of religious conceptions is expressly outlawed. This forbidden territory even extends to the interpretation of research with religious people as participants. A recent lead article in the flagship journal explicitly banishes any interpretation of data that isn't reductively secular[ix]. Never mind, as we know, that all research interpretations are *under*determined by the data, and other interpretations may fit the data equally well. The dogma of secularism regulates interpretive freedom before the data are even gathered — so much for the neutrality of secularism!

To illustrate, consider a hypothetical set of researchers studying changes in the decision-making of mosque members, such as changes to an ongoing mosque building project. If the mosque members interpret the changes in their decision-making as the influence of Allah, the researchers are not allowed to give this religious interpretation any credence in their own interpretation of the changes. They have to attribute the changes to solely natural causes, such as sociocultural or neurochemical factors. To be sure, the researchers can *report* the religious interpretation of the mosque members, which also happens to explain *all* the data. However, the investigators are expressly banned from using this religious interpretation themselves and would be summarily rejected from acceptance to the journal if they did.

Now I realize, as I give this example, that this situation might seem perfectly appropriate to our secular mindset, the investigators' explaining their results as solely determined by natural events. Consider, however, that their favoring of this interpretation is not due to the data per se, because the religious interpretation of the mosque members *also* fits the data. The research interpretation is due, instead, to our custom of only considering natural events. If the researchers, for example, were open to Muslim interpretations — which, as it happens, would consider *both* natural and supernatural events — they might further investigate the spiritual

experiences of the mosque members to explore potentially religious interpretations of the data.

My point here is that a vital part of data interpretation (and perhaps even subsequent investigation) stems from the hidden presumption of exclusionary secularism. If an examination within our Society could lead to even a simple awareness of this presumption, this "raised consciousness" could be monumental in helping our psychology-of-religion colleagues recognize the role of secularism in their findings.

Another unintended consequence of unidentified and unexamined assumptions is the effect they can have on consumers of research. What if, for example, our hypothetical mosque members believe in the objectivity of science, which they take to be, quite reasonably, the researcher's "findings" or data interpretation? And what if, further, the members of this mosque were to read the researchers' findings about their own mosque decision-making? It seems quite possible these members could take the researcher's favoring of an exclusionary secular interpretation as *the* objective finding and realize that their own religious interpretation of these changes was not affirmed. It doesn't seem a stretch to speculate that enough of these "objective" results could begin to undermine faith in their own beliefs.

This consequence, which I believe is representative of many readings of the larger psychology-of-religion literature, is one of the more pernicious byproducts of exclusionary secularism in my view. With attention to only non-religious events in data explanation, research consumers may presume that non-religious events are somehow more real than the spiritual experiences of study participants. Yet this selective attention is a product of interpretation custom and not necessarily the data. Indeed, even if you *personally* favor some form of interpretive secularism, is it the business of researchers to undermine participant religious beliefs? And even if you believe this undermining is unavoidable, shouldn't we at least alert the research consumer that interpreted findings are as much a product of pre-study biases as they are data?

To punctuate this point, let's consider another example of the interaction of secular and non-secular beliefs in a social science discipline outside of psychology — anthropology. I've written elsewhere about the acclaimed British anthropologist, E.E. Evans-Pritchard, who famously studied the Azande, a "primitive" tribe in central Africa. Evans-Pritchard was specifically interested in the Azande belief in witches. As he describes his interactions with the Azande around these beliefs, he found himself one day — in a complete breach of his own training and methods — proclaiming to the Azande that supernatural entities, such as witches, simply cannot exist. Science has proven this fact[x].

As much as we might want to agree with his proclamation, it's simply not justified. Scientists don't typically investigate witches, and they certainly hadn't investigated Azande witches. Moreover, the Azande believe they have perfectly reasonable supernatural explanations for the phenomena of their lives, explanations that might be just as parsimonious as Evans-Pritchard's. His exclusionary secularism, however, didn't allow him even to consider this possibility. Indeed, he found himself attempting to undermine their beliefs as if his own beliefs were obviously

true. Evans-Pritchard confused our Western secular custom of permitting only natural events to explain data with the notion that only natural events *can* explain data. He confounded his interpretation of the data with the data themselves.

My point again is that this kind of confounding goes on all the time, in many parts of psychology, as many of you have shown in your work with other assumptions. Still, this confounding seems especially problematic when researchers study people with spiritual experiences, of which, we should remember, there are literally billions. Without organizations like ours to conduct the needed theoretical investigative work, this confusion regarding data interpretation will continue.

As a final consequence of psychology's unexamined, exclusionary secularism, consider how those who don't embrace it, such as the Azande, are considered primitive — that is, not in the swing of modernity. The dominance of exclusionary secularism marginalizes the beliefs of not only this African tribe but also those in the mosque and, yes, even our religious colleagues in this Society. Many people in this very room feel restricted from speaking or writing about what they consider the truth about the world. Indeed, when I've discussed related topics in presentations like this one, I've been struck by the number of people who later whisper to me: "Your presentation meant a lot to me. Just don't ask me to admit my own religious worldview in an academic presentation, because I know my work will be discounted." And this is the last consequence I'll mention about exclusionary secularism — discounting. There are, of course, religious people who prefer such secularism, but there are many others, right here, right now, who are in the uncomfortable position of feeling some freedom to express their religious worldview in the broader culture, but feeling outlawed from that expression in their disciplinary culture.

The irony here, as I conclude, is that an *original,* inclusionary secularism would avoid all these problems. As I've described, however, we cannot underestimate the resistance to religion that a truly inclusive intellectual community would engender. I've here attempted to debunk many of the main reasons for this resistance by showing how they can be challenged. I've also tried to show the high stakes involved in refusing inclusivity. Academic freedom is curtailed; customs of interpretation are reified; and certain explanations are discounted without a hearing. Nevertheless, I'm not naïve enough to think that this resistance is overcome through rational argumentation alone. There is also a deep and abiding emotional foreboding at the inclusion of religion in psychology that even many religious people experience. One of my religious friends calls it "fear of medievalism." I think he might be right.

I guess my concluding question today then is: should we allow this emotional foreboding and these intellectual reservations to prevent us from examining this final legacy of modernity? I'm old enough to remember a psychology without qualitative methods. I can still recall my colleagues resisting these methods. And their resistance wasn't totally reasoned. If anything, their emotional resistance seemed to lead to their rational resistance. Cries of "we'll never be a science!" were not uncommon. Now I recognize that this analogy to qualitative methods is imperfect, but I'll end my presentation this evening with two lessons from this analogy that I

believe do apply. First, we should never cease to examine our ingrained historical biases, our "fears of medievalism;" we may just find that they are currently unfounded. Second, we should always cultivate inclusion, rather than exclusion, as our first even emotional impulse. After all, the prejudice against religion is still prejudice[xi].

[i]Many cultures have considered themselves secular when, to Western eyes, they clearly involved religion, such as when the Japanese enforced State Shinto. These amalgams of religion and culture are also the reason so many NGOs define secularity in line with Rawls and other political philosophers. When these non-governmental organizations try to understand what it means to thrive in a particular culture, the common ground is found among many community groups that have religious identities.

[ii] The vast majority of cultures don't even separate culture and religion. The notion that culture and religion *can* be separated is considered a product of Western modernity. It's another false modernist dualism.

[iii] Attorney General (USA) William Barr's rant about "militant secularism" is a good example of why we need to *enter* the dialogue with reasoned and thoughtful discussion, not *abandon* it to the politicians.

[iv] Metanarrative here means narrative of a historical narrative, an overarching legitimation of supposedly societal movement.

[v] There are many other reasons for exclusionary secularism. Here's another:

8) Religion involves all sorts of non-conceptual elements, such as rituals and practices, that aren't appropriate to the discipline of psychology. It is true that I have in mind primarily religious *worldviews*, the intellectual side of religion. However, it would be wrong to think that we do not, as a discipline, engage in all sorts of practices and rituals, including the serial monologue we practice religiously at conferences. Indeed, the inclusion of religion might sharpen our awareness and understanding of these practices. I also wonder what the inclusion of religious *worldviews* would sharpen. If Wittgenstein is right that conceptual contrasts are necessary to full examination, it would be hard to imagine a greater worldview contrast to psychological theories than the inclusion of religious worldviews.

[vi] What follows in the presentation is primarily concerned with science and research (e.g., freedom of ideas and study, awareness and lack of discrimination in data interpretation). However, I would hold that there are a number of new ideas from various religions that might also be significant (also see #2 in Reasons above). For example, I believe that Weber's notion of modernist conceptions ushering in conceptions of disenchantment is intriguing in this regard. I believe that the exploration of spiritual or even re-enchantment conceptions would help to bring about the dialectic between disenchantment and re-enchantment that he desired (rather than exclusive secularization in my terms) as well as possibly fresh ontologies for psychological theory (i.e., that are not mechanistic, materialistic, and naturalistic). Consider also how psychology of religion instrumentalizes all quasi-religious activities, including prayer, love of god, gratitude, and forgiveness. This field of research seems to assume that all such activities exist purely for our own individual benefit (e.g., therapy, well-being). That is, these activities are rarely understood as possibly for the sake of something larger and Other than self (e.g., divinity). I wonder too whether we'll ever understand terrorism until we can truly take religion seriously. As Porpora (201x) has argued, we cannot properly consider anything in research when we automatically discount it, as the widespread psychology of religion's instrumentalism exemplifies. Religious epistemologies could also be explored. Rohr and Manoussakis, among others, advocate a "love epistemology" where true knowing and knowledge cannot occur without the relational intimacy that only love can provide. Indeed, many recent ethicists have championed the centrality of humility for any thoughtful ethos, and as Pulitzer Prize winner Paul Horgan has observed, there is no

humility like the humility that religious faith provides. Finally, I for one would welcome Rohr's Franciscan perspective, where our Society could explore liberation theology: "The vast majority of people throughout history have been poor, disabled, or oppressed in some way (i.e., "on the bottom") and would have read history in terms of a need for change, but most of history has been written and interpreted from the side of the winners. The unique exception is the revelation called the Bible, which is an alternative history from the side of the often enslaved, dominated, and oppressed people of Israel, culminating in the scapegoat figure of Jesus himself."

[vii] "The world becomes a communion of subjects more than a collection of objects" as the "geologian" Fr. Thomas Berry (1914–2009)

[viii]Consider, for example, how the previous editor of the *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* affirmed exclusionary secularism, at least as defined here: "Papers that aim to use theological constructs as explanatory variables in psychological models are similarly inappropriate" (Piedmont, 2009, p. xx). Consider also the current editor's approach: "I feel strongly that as a science, psychology should not and cannot admit into its domain non-empirical approaches such as theistic psychology" (Crystal Park), Society for the Psychology of Religions and Spirituality Newsletter, October 2017. It is frankly hard for me not to see some naturalistic biases in this regard, especially when the equation of science and a particular ontology (naturalism) has not been defended or even examined.

[ix] These guidelines and assumptions [of psychology, and thus of science more generally] include that we are studying the processes of the natural world" (Paloutzian & Park, in press, p. 20); "claims about supernatural or otherworldly processes or those otherwise posited to be outside the world of nature…have no bearing on the conduct or interpretation of psychological research" (ibid, p. 5).

[x] E-P doesn't cite the proof of science explicitly in this context. However, a broader reading of his work evidences this claim. Bowie (2006), for example, cites E-P's penchant for asserting "his own Western, scientific outlook" (p. 14), and Grieffenhagen and Sherman (2008) believe that it is "obvious" that E-P believes that "science produces true and objective knowledge" (p. 9). (See Slife, Starks, & Primosch, 2014.)

[xi] This type of prejudice recalls to mind Gadamer's famous notion that Western scholars are prejudice against prejudice, or prejudice against religion because it is assumed to be itself prejudicial. The crucial issue, from his perspective, is the main point of this presentation. It's not that we should avoid prejudice, because he believed we cannot escape it, but rather that we should become aware of it, so that we can take it properly into account.