Bienvenues to Psychology and Religion: Why Psychology Can Lead to Critical Collaboration, Not Necessarily Atheism

A review of

Adieu to God: Why Psychology Leads to Atheism
by Mick Power

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In a classic 1948 article, the noted atheistic philosopher of religion, J. N. Findlay, claimed that thoughtful nonreligious people “willingly mitigate their rejection [of God] with a tinge of agnosticism: they don’t so much deny the existence of a God, as the existence of good reasons for believing in Him” (p. 176). In this fascinating little book (201 pages, including references and a subject index), Mick Power communicates no such tinge of agnosticism when proclaiming in the preface of Adieu to God: Why Psychology Leads to Atheism that “my belief is that psychology (with help from philosophy, anthropology, sociology, physics,
biolgy . . .) offers a far more powerful explanation than any religious system ever will” (p. x).

A self-identified atheist since age 16, Power tries to distance himself from the likes of Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchins, who “can sound too aggressive even to a fellow atheist” (p. x). With a tone somewhat more civil than that of these “aggressive atheists,” Power nonetheless comes across with a certainty of conviction not unlike the religious fundamentalists of whom he is so strongly critical.

In other words, to the extent that fundamentalism represents a closed systemic understanding of the world that leaves no room for influence external to the system (see Hood, Hill, & Williamson, 2005), Power can rightly be called a modern scientific fundamentalist. Whereas religious fundamentalists elevate a sacred text to which they give authority, scientific fundamentalists rely on a single method as the only authority. This is not to say that Power is wrong, for his argument is frequently convincing; it is to say, however, that Power is a thoroughbred modernist who sees little value from any other sources of knowledge.

It may seem sacrilegious (pardon the pun) for psychologists such as us, who acknowledge and defend empirical methodologies as the bread and butter of our discipline, to question someone’s undying allegiance to psychology as science and, furthermore, to brand such a person with the pejorative term fundamentalist. Yet, adhering to the ideas that the scientific method is the only reliable path to knowledge and that matter is the only fundamental reality of the universe results in an entrenched view that can see the relationship of religion and science only in terms of conflict.

Conflict, however, is but one of many positions regarding the relationship between religion and science (see Barbour, 1990, Chapter 1), something Power fails to acknowledge. In fact, Power finds it difficult to even conceive of the possibility of a synergistic relationship between science and religion and thus presents the United States, where both science and religion are alive and well, as a particularly perplexing example.

Thus, although he is quick to assert that his purpose is neither to ban religion nor to predict its demise, Power nevertheless concludes that a truly objective stance toward science and religion will inevitably demonstrate religion for all that it truly is: only as (and nothing more than) an organized system of beliefs in gods and supernatural agents that offers followers the blessings of explanation, understanding, security, and other personal benefits.

**Purpose of the Book**

The purpose of the book is quite clear. In his summary chapter, Power, with the goal of presenting atheism as a convincing alternative, rhetorically asks: “Why, in the face of all the
scientific evidence to the contrary, do religions continue to grow in strength and numbers in some parts of the world and in some cultural groups?” (p. 167).

Power acknowledges, however, that atheists face an uphill struggle in that religion provides benefits that an atheistic worldview is hard-pressed to match. It is unfortunate that he did not consult Charles Taylor’s (2007) outstanding book *A Secular Age*, which presents a convincing analysis of how secularism can provide meaning.

**Structure of the Book**

From a conflict perspective, Power systematically attempts to demonstrate the superiority of scientific reasoning (particularly that seen in psychology, but also in sociology and anthropology, and with some input from philosophy) over religious belief. In Chapter 1, he argues that all cultural groups, at least since Neolithic times, have maintained some form of supernatural belief systems to explain both external and internal events (e.g., seasons, earthquakes, experiences of consciousness). Of particular interest to psychologists is his explanation of how experiences of consciousness place the individual at the center of a unique personal universe, which can lead to what he calls an “immortality illusion” (p. 38).

Power’s argument develops primarily in the next several chapters, where he questions so-called proofs of the supernatural with scientific evidence that can explain such proofs of, in Chapter 2, common psychological experiences such as dreaming and meaning making that often lead people to religious explanations and, in Chapter 3, of unusual mystical experiences such as visions. Then, in Chapters 4 and 5, he summarizes how the social structures and processes of religion and religious organizations, both in terms of their negative features and in the many benefits that can be provided to members, function in such a way to maintain their granted authority. He extends the discussion in Chapter 6 on the perceived benefits of religion, based on the now rather substantial professional literature, to health and well-being.

Throughout these chapters, Power argues that religion and religious organizations are well-greased machines, the “ultimate curate’s egg” (p. 3), that provide tremendous benefits (though sometimes with social costs) such that religion is unlikely to go away, despite the pronouncements of sociology’s secularization hypothesis. Finally, in Chapter 7 (“How to Be a Healthy Atheist”), he considers the potential of an atheistic alternative, in particular, how atheism might be able to achieve benefits of a similar nature by addressing the human needs of purpose and meaning, a sense of belonging, a set of personal values and goals, and a healthy lifestyle.
Assessment

Power has provided a thought-provoking analysis and a book worth reading for those interested in the relationship of psychology and religion. However, he is guilty of not distinguishing between “explaining” something at one level (how something works, in this case, at the psychological level) and “explaining away” something at another level (accounting for something and thereby proclaiming it to be of no value, in this case, at the religious level). There is a failure in logic to say that explaining at the psychological level can explain away at the religious level, unless one assumes that religion is nothing but psychological processes (and this is an assumption).

This is precisely what Power does. For example, in responding to the potential objection that his approach is reductionistic, he says,

In their book *The Psychology of Religious Knowing* (1988), psychologists Fraser Watts and Mark Williams summarize and attempt to provide an explanation for religious experience. However, their stance is that any psychological explanation is necessarily reductionistic and to be avoided, because such experiences should be taken as proof of a spiritual realm. The stance taken here is that because these experiences are psychological, a psychological explanation cannot, contrary to their view, in principle be reductionistic. (p. 55).

However, a more accurate statement of the position that Power takes throughout the book is not that religious experiences are psychological but, rather, that they are only psychological. In addition to the fact that this quotation is a serious misrepresentation of Watts and Williams’s argument (they argue that such experiences should be taken not as proof of a spiritual realm but as something that leaves open the possibility of the spiritual realm), we disagree with Power and suggest that his approach is indeed reductionistic, not because his argument is psychological, but because he contends that his psychological argument explains away the validity of another (in this case, religious) viewpoint.

To reduce a phenomenon for analysis purposes is frequently necessary in science and, in itself, is not problematic. It becomes a problem, however, when the reduction becomes a reductionism and is used to explain away a more complex phenomenon, something that “scientific psychology and religion/theology, by their very nature, cannot do” (Paloutzian, 1996, p. 66).

Furthermore, a psychological account of religion can be convincing if one carefully selects only certain manifestations of religious acquaintance, particularly those that represent the margin. By carefully selecting particular slices of the religious pie that are perhaps the most vulnerable to psychological explanation (such as taking only literal readings of all of scripture—something that even many conservative Protestants, for example, do not
practice), as Power has done, one can easily convince someone without a thorough knowledge of the complexity of the phenomena being reduced (i.e., religious experience).

Power’s analysis is less convincing to the perspicacious reader who is aware of the complexity and variety of religious and spiritual experience. It is one thing to be critical of, for example, the minority of Christians who take a literal creationist view from Scripture versus those with a far more complex and nuanced view of what is being taught in the Genesis account.

The book will likely make few converts except among those who are willing to make, or have already made, a philosophical leap of faith that will include such assumptions as reductionism and scientism. However, many psychologists have made such a leap, and for them the book provides a forthright and, in some places, insightful analysis of why psychology, for some, might lead to atheism.

But might psychology, for others, lead to theism (or religious and or spiritual beliefs more generally)? If psychology has taught us anything in these past 100-plus years, it is that a truly objective stance is truly difficult to come by. By this, we must ask whether the psychologist is being objective in his or her observations, analysis, and conclusions about religious belief. Were Freud, for example, and others who chant(ed) his mantra objective in their analysis and conclusions about religion? Have academic psychological observations and analyses about religious belief in this past century been skewed by the individual psychology of one of its founding fathers?

Sorenson (2004) has detailed the impact of Freud’s theories in contributing to a strong antireligious sentiment in psychology up until roughly the 1970s. But research in developmental psychology during the past 40 years has influenced the psychology of religion, especially demonstrating that an understanding of personal psychology influences personal religious beliefs, or the lack thereof.

In this vein, psychological, historical, and biographical evidence suggests that the most strident atheists themselves may have had early caregiver and cultural experiences that precipitated their atheism. (See Rizzuto, 1998, and Vitz, 1999, for more on the psychology of atheism based on the early psychologies of Freud, Marx, Sartre, Camus, and Nietzsche that gave rise to their later atheistic philosophies.) So it would appear, then, that “the science of psychology can be used to say much about the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of religion” (p. ix) and the “how” and “why” of atheism.

Hoffman (2005) astutely observed,

A person’s understanding of God is frequently underestimated as a rather simple reality. However, the manner people come to conceptualize God is anything but simple. It is much closer to the truth to state conceptions of God evolve out of one of the most complex relational matrices known to human existence. (p. 129)
Given the complexity of religious experience, philosophy of science, psychological research, and the forces that shape and influence them all, we lament Power’s dependence upon the conflict model, which oversimplifies the relationship between psychology and religion. Rather than bidding Adieu to God as Power has done, one wonders if a more collaborative and welcoming model of the relationship between psychology and religion is called for, something akin to Bienvenues to Psychology and Religion. Such a model, we propose, would lead to a productive critical collaboration and conversation about God and religious belief.

References