

Religious Implications of Western Personality Theory

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to outline some of the religious implications of Western personality theories. It begins with broad comments about the general theoretical tradition of the West, especially for secular disciplines such as psychology. Next, it sketches briefly the religious implications of many aspects of the three forces of psychology, i.e., psychoanalysis, behaviorism, and humanism, with special emphasis on some of the more classical theorists, such as Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, B. F. Skinner, Albert Bandura, Carl Rogers, and George Kelly. Lastly, it paints some broad brush strokes regarding alternatives to these three forces, specifically, two types of postmodern understandings of religious persons and their contexts, social constructionism and hermeneutics.

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Many Western psychologists think of *personality theory* as consisting of the prominent theories of Western psychology. Classical personality theory is typically thought to begin with the “three forces” of theory – psychoanalysis, behaviorism, and humanism. These three forces account for a large portion of the theories that contemporary psychologists, especially psychotherapists, would consider for their own theoretical orientation or professional identity. However, recent courses in personality theory often go well beyond these modern “forces” to discuss other theories and classes of theories, such as postmodern theories. In this sense, the term “personality theory” means all the main *ways of thinking and understanding* of Western psychologists, especially when it comes to applying these theories in practical settings, such as psychotherapy, parenting, and education.

The purpose of this paper is to outline some of the religious implications of these ways of thinking. Needless to say, this is a large undertaking. The variety of these theoretical approaches is numerous, and their conceptual differences are often vast, even within a particular category of theorizing. For example, the theoretical differences between Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung are significant, even though they are both considered psychodynamic. Consequently, space constraints prohibit me from reviewing all the individual theorists, though I will attempt to mention individual theorists when their work is pivotal to or illustrative of the more general tradition. I am relegated, instead, to discussing the religious implications of the more general traditions I just mentioned.

I begin with some broad comments about the general theoretical tradition of the West, especially for secular disciplines such as psychology. In other words, what is the general cultural

and intellectual context in which these theorists are theorizing? What, especially, are the assumptions they make that are often taken-for-granted but that Eastern theorists might find problematic or in need of examination, particularly in regard to the topic of religion? Next, I attempt to sketch briefly the religious implications of many aspects of the three forces of psychology, i.e., psychoanalysis, behaviorism, and humanism, with special emphasis on some of the more classical theorists, such as Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, B. F. Skinner, Albert Bandura, Carl Rogers, and George Kelly. Lastly, I endeavor to paint some broad brush strokes regarding alternatives to these three forces, specifically, two types of postmodern understandings of religious persons and their contexts.

The Western Theoretical Tradition

Although rarely acknowledged in the discipline, Western psychological theories of all types have some distinctly Western ideas that affect the study of religion. That is to say, Western psychologists typically make unproven assumptions about what theorizing is and how it should occur. By *assumptions* I mean that these theorists usually have ideas about how the world of psychology operates that are taken-for-granted, and thus rarely tested or examined. I want to mention two related assumptions here – secularism and naturalism – before I describe specific theories, because I think they are important to the study of religion.

Secularism. The first and perhaps most obvious assumption of Western theorizing is its secularism. This assumption is sometimes considered in the West to be almost *anti*-religious in the sense that all types of religion, and even some approaches to spirituality, are viewed as forbidden territory. *Studying* religious people and behavior is not, of course, forbidden. The psychology of religion is a burgeoning research enterprise. However, *looking* at the world or theorizing in a religious manner is simply not permitted, no matter how religious the study topic

or researchers might be. In “image of God” research, for example, only earthly authority figures are allowed to influence this image; God is rarely even considered as a factor in His own image (Slife & Reber, 2009). Indeed, this outlawing of religious perspectives on theory and explanation is sometimes viewed as a type of scientific objectivity, because many Western theorists fear that the values and biases of religious people will distort investigations. Consequently, forbidding religious perspectives, and thus secularizing psychological theories, is supposed to help them to be less value-laden and biased, and thus more objective and scientific.

The actuality of this objectivity, however, is debatable. Several scholars have noted that secularism itself contains many biases and values of its own (e.g., Pannenberg, 1996). For example, the decision to omit religious points of view in psychology, before they are even investigated, is itself a kind of bias or value (e.g., religious perspectives *should* not be involved in theory) (Slife & Reber, 2009). Indeed, several scholars have argued that modern Western secularism has itself evolved into a *particular* philosophy (e.g., Reber, 2006). Originally, secularism was intended to recognize the many *different* philosophies or views of the world, *including* religious perspectives (Reber, 2006). The historical secularist wanted all the reasonable theories to be investigated and “in conversation” with one another — a kind of pluralism of theories. Now, however, Western psychologists have rejected religious approaches without investigation, and religious “voices” in the conversation have been omitted through philosophical fiat rather than empirical research. As a result, secularism has become a kind of naturalism, our next major assumption of Western theorizing.

Naturalism. Unlike secularism, naturalism is widely recognized as a *particular* philosophy or system of assumptions and biases. In fact, the historian of psychology, Thomas Leahey (1991), considers naturalism to be the “central dogma” of psychology and its methods (p.

379). In other words, the philosophy of naturalism is the hidden or unrecognized philosophy of psychological science (Slife, 2004). It can be defined in several ways (Griffin, 2000), but it typically has two distinguishing features or biases: reliance on natural laws or mechanisms, and rejection of spiritual forces or supernatural explanations (Slife & Reber, 2009). The first feature means that psychological scientists should explain the world in terms of objective principles or mechanisms because naturalism assumes that such principles and mechanisms ultimately govern the objective world. The second feature dictates that these lawful explanations cannot be viewed as religious phenomena. A Supreme Being might be understood to create the lawful universe, but such a Being cannot be viewed as currently involved in the events of psychology.

In this sense, psychological science and psychological methods are not, and never have been, unbiased or neutral in the way they investigate the world. Indeed, they are specifically formulated with this naturalistic view of the world in mind: to be effective in a spiritless and mechanistic world. For example, results should be replicated and reliable because these properties of method are indications of natural (or social) laws and principles that should be the same (and thus replicable) in different contexts. Similarly, as we will see, the theories of psychology – the hypotheses that predict these results and the explanations that account for them – are intended to propose the objective principles and laws of the world that are similar across different psychological contexts. Psychological theories, therefore, are generally considered to postulate abstractions or *universals*, conditions that are true despite changes in circumstances.

On the other hand, this naturalistic approach to theorizing implies that these theories *cannot* postulate or even *recognize* one-time or non-repeating events or processes as truthful or fundamental. Perhaps most relevant to psychology of religion research, theorists cannot give significance to one-time religious events or knowledge. If Christianity, for example, is founded

upon the one-time resurrection of Jesus Christ, or if Islam is grounded in the unique revelation of Muhammad, then these unique personages and one-time events are already (before theorizing or investigation) considered non-universal, and thus unimportant or nonmeaningful to naturalistic science.

The pivotal point here is that Western theorists make this decision about the significance of these events *before* any investigation has even occurred. That is to say, the decision about how to theorize and what to research is a philosophical (naturalism) rather than a scientific (data) decision, and this philosophical decision may bias at the outset psychological theorizing *against* many religious or spiritual perspectives. As we will see, naturalism includes other important (but not as directly relevant to religion) philosophical decisions and biases, such as dualism, that affect psychology's conceptualization of religious and spiritual perspectives. However, we will describe these as they arise in the course of our journey through the particular Western theories.

Psychodynamic

Perhaps no category of psychological theorizing exemplifies the Western characteristics of secularism and naturalism more than psychodynamic theories. These theories concentrate on the “dynamics” or conflicts within the individual psyche or within human relationships. The psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud is often considered the parent of this movement, and his work clearly embodies these Western features of theorizing. However, as the work of Carl Jung will show, there are important exceptions to these features that allow for more flexibility in the interpreting and hypothesizing of religious phenomena. Here we begin this section with the main themes of psychoanalysis, as exemplified in Freud, and close the section with some of the exceptions, as illustrated in Carl Jung.

Sigmund Freud. No account of psychological theorizing could omit the work of Freud (1938). The specifics of his theorizing are beyond the scope of this article, but its features illustrate the two general characteristics of Western theorizing. First, there is no doubt that Freud is a secular theorist in the modern tradition. As Nelson (2009) put it, Sigmund Freud is “no friend to religion from the beginning of his career” (p. 143). In fact, Freud cited influences by some of the more prominent Western opponents of religion, such as Nietzsche, and Freud’s mentors, such as Ernst Brucke, were leaders in the movement of Western naturalism. Second, Freud embraced universal principles and “psychic laws” in this naturalistic tradition, primarily because he assumed that the psyche operated in the mechanistic fashion of nineteenth-century physics.

Two main works elaborate his views on religion, his work *Totem and Taboo* and his book *The Future of an Illusion*. In the first book, Freud attempts to outline the human origins of morality, religion, and spirituality. Perhaps most notably, a *totem* is a sacred object that he viewed as the origination of human morality and ultimately many religious and spiritual traditions. The God of Judaism or Islam, for example, is a projection or a longing for the totem of a *primal father*. In either case, God or any other divine entity is not viewed as real, but is rather something created ultimately by the collective mental and emotional needs of humans across time. Freud attempts to account for religion in this book but does not directly advocate its elimination.

In the second book, however, Freud is explicit about the destructive potential of religions. Because the project of civilization, according to Freud, is to tame our animal natures, religion is seen as a flawed approach to this taming. Logic and science, on the other hand, are much more effective at this project than religion, because religion slows individual and cultural

development. Ultimately for Freud, mature people should leave behind their infantile attachment to a protector God and opt for the analytical reasoning of science.

Carl Jung. Jung (1964) is an example of a Western psychodynamic theorist who is much more sympathetic to religion. Indeed, his work is greatly influenced by *both* Eastern and Western religions (Henghao, in press). His comfort with some aspects of these religions not only led, in part, to a break with Freud but also a marginalization of his theory within Western psychology. In fact, Western personality theorists routinely express difficulty with Jung's work for this reason. Yet, as we will see, his theory ultimately fits the Western mold of secularism and naturalism.

The influences of religion are evidenced by several of Jung's primary theoretical constructs. Perhaps most prominently, Jung formulated his *principle of opposites* from his exposure to Buddhism, especially Taoism¹. He viewed the dialectical balancing or relating of these oppositions within the person as crucial to a healthy personality. He also used these basically Eastern religious sources in his unique understanding of *synchronicity*. Synchronicity is one of the primary "glues" or connections to previously unconnected portions of the psyche and even human interpersonal relationships. By far the most important religious influence on Jung was his view of *archetypes* and the related notion of symbols. Indeed, the most important construct of the Jungian understanding of personality, the *Self*, is virtually indistinguishable from the archetype of God. Both God and Self represent the potential for dialectical unity and personal transformation. The mandala symbol, in common across several religions such as Christianity and Buddhism, is facilitated ultimately by the images of our parents during early childhood.

Despite the inspiration of religion in his work, Jung appeared to have mixed feelings about recommending it to others. Although he believed that religion could play a vital role in a person's development, he feared that many religions were too narrow to support a fully mature self. They needed to be reframed to fully meet the psychic needs of most people. Unlike Freud, however, Jung did not consider science to be superior to religion. Science is also too narrow, because it cannot fathom the symbolic and archetypal aspects of the person that are essential to complete personhood and part of the purpose of religion. But is religion real and good from Jung's perspective? Or is religion more like science, a social creation that happens to meet the needs of many humans? Although there is some controversy about his answers to these questions, Jung seems to be in keeping with the Western traditions of secularism and naturalism. His primary answer to these questions was that humans embrace religion more because of their universal needs than because of the truth of religious phenomena. Similar to Freud, this type of theorizing tends to discount the meanings of religion for many people, even before the investigation of religious phenomena has occurred.

Behavioral

The second of the original "three forces" of psychology is perhaps the most scrupulously naturalistic – behaviorism. This second category of personality theories encompasses a wide array of conceptualizations, from B. F. Skinner's *radical* behaviorism to Albert Bandura's *cognitive* behaviorism. The primary connection among these approaches is twofold: the claim to scientific accuracy and a definitive image of human nature (Rychlak, 1981, p. 433). In the first case, science is thought to assume a naturalistic worldview exclusively, i.e., a view in which spiritual and "supernatural" entities are outlawed before investigation even begins.ⁱⁱ In the

second case, the forces of nature are considered to exclusively govern all animals, including the behavior of higher animals, humans (Rychlak, 1981).

B.F. Skinner. The epitome of this naturalist tradition is the work of B. F. Skinner (1974), arguably the most important figure in the history of behaviorism. Skinner took his naturalistic assumptions so much to heart that he rejected not only spiritual and supernatural entities as inherently unscientific but also mental and emotional constructs. In fact, Skinner considered the empiricist way of knowing the *only* way of knowing for scientists, contending that only the observable (and thus not the mental or spiritual) was allowed into the scientific realmⁱⁱⁱ. He then perceived himself to “discover” various laws of the surrounding social and physical environment that were responsible for the observable behavior of all animals, including humans (Rychlak, 1981). Most notably, according to Skinner, these animals are completely motivated and governed by the hedonistic avoidance of pain (punishment) and seeking of pleasure (reinforcement).

This Skinnerian secular understanding means that religious individuals are ruled completely by these natural forces, and thus their religious actions are motivated ultimately by the seeking of religious pleasures (e.g., treasures in heaven) and the avoidance of religious pain (e.g., hell). No truly altruistic or self-sacrificial act is possible. Even helping behavior, according to Skinner, is ultimately motivated by some pleasurable benefit on the part of the helper. However, this conception of religious motivation is completely counter to the beliefs of many religious people. Contrary to hedonism, many Mahayana Buddhists, for instance, believe that truly altruistic motives are necessary for Buddhahood (Nelson, 2009, p. 85). As another example, the personal harmony of Islam also requires a resistance to hedonistic needs. Indeed,

one of the Five Pillars of Islam is a heartfelt almsgiving that is patently impossible if Skinner is correct about the ultimate nature of human motivation.

Skinner's naturalistic notions also problematize religious worship. If we are governed completely by reinforcement principles, then humans cannot truly adore, praise, or glorify particular deities or divinities any more than lower animals can. Most understandings of worship require meaningful and purposeful action, and thus the possibility to have chosen or behaved otherwise, but this kind of possibility is impossible within the lawfully determined system of Skinner. All animals, higher or lower, must behave the way they do because of the causal forces of their social and physical natures. Therefore, contrary to many religious sects, humans cannot exhibit religious behaviors by choice because they have no real possibilities; they act in "religious" ways only because the forces of their environment have *forced* them to do so.

Albert Bandura. Although Albert Bandura (1995) clearly fits the twofold profile of a behaviorist outlined above, he fought the more radical arms of this tradition, such as Skinnerian behaviorism, in several respects. Perhaps most importantly, Bandura believed that some nonobservable entities, such as the human mind, are vital to understanding humans. His type of *cognitive behaviorism* even raised the possibility that humans had some mental control over themselves and their interpretation of the natural world, including its pleasures and pains. This style of theorizing has been recently developed into a therapy movement, *cognitive behavioral therapy*, with many scholars viewing Bandura as one of the parents of this movement (e.g., Collins & Deady, 2003).

In a scholarly exchange with Joseph Rychlak (1988), however, Bandura clarified that even the control and interpretation of the human mind is itself naturalistically determined by past experiences with the forces and laws of our surrounding environment. In this sense, cognition is

frequently viewed as a flesh and blood mechanism, where person's biology is their "hardware" and their past experience is their "software." A mechanistic model of the mind, however metaphorical, does not allow for meaningful worship or contemplation of divinities. Similar to the determinism of Skinner, computational models do not account for the deeply held meanings of worshippers, nor do they allow for the freedom of action required by most moral frameworks within many religions. Computers, and thus human minds according to Bandura, "do what they are told" and have no capacity to act ethically (Rychlak, 1981).

Bandura's resistance to Skinner's more radical behaviorism also did not prevent him from affirming naturalism's more deeply held prohibitions. Like most American psychologists, Bandura does not think twice about omitting spiritual and supernatural concerns and explanations from his work. Indeed, several cognitive behavioral therapists have presumed these concerns to be problematic to the human mind, considering them irrational or problematic cognitive interpretations of the real world (Ellis, 1980). In this sense, Bandura clearly continues behaviorism's naturalistic bent away from spiritual and religious worldviews. Although he might not object to the *study* of religious behaviors and cognitions, he would consider himself naturalistic and secular in the sense of not considering religious explanations for psychological phenomena.

Humanist

The last of the three forces of Western psychology, humanism, is frequently perceived in the West as the friendliest of the three categories of theory to religious and spiritual concerns. This perception is widespread, in part, because the theories of many founders of humanism, such as Carl Rogers and George Kelly, contained features that many Western religious leaders

considered sympathetic to religion. Chiefly, perhaps, Western humanists appeared to affirm the *teleology* of human nature, i.e., the goal-oriented and even free will of humans.

This affirmation was correctly viewed as challenging significant aspects of naturalism. Human goals and free wills, according to many humanists, are not captured in theories that emphasize naturalistic mechanisms (e.g., Rychlak, 2003). Even the most sophisticated mechanisms, computing machines, are frequently viewed as incapable of either free will or striving to reach goals of their own. This humanistic challenge to the naturalistic tradition of mechanism led humanists to question other naturalistic assumptions, including the prohibition against investigating supernatural “variables.” Humanists now routinely explore and examine spiritual and even “transcendent” meanings, even if they still assume that these events are ultimately explained in a naturalistic manner.

Carl Rogers. Clearly one of the parents of modern psychological humanism in the West is Carl Rogers (1961). As it happened, Rogers was a pivotal transitional figure for humanism, because he conceived of a naturalistic teleology that bridged the more traditional naturalism of the first two forces of theory with the teleology of the humanist movement to come (Rychlak, 1981). Naturalistic teleology, for Rogers, meant that humans could only “behave for the sake of” goals or destinies that were implicit or inherent in their natural bodies^{iv}. In this sense, human problems occur when societal forces (e.g., parental approval) obstruct unique and natural bodily destinies. Rogerian, person-centered therapists are thus charged with removing these societal obstructions (e.g., through unconditional positive regard) so that clients can move onto the authentic telic purposes of their individual lives.

This prizing of the person’s uniquely individual destiny or purpose also reinforces the *liberal individualism* already implicit in Western psychology (Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon,

1999). Western individualism is related to the idea that a person's desires, autonomy, and independence take precedence over social obligations and responsibilities. Often linked to Roger's work in particular, the *expressive individualism* of Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton (1996) is a particular species of general individualism. Bellah et al (1996) describe expressive individualism as "each person [having] a unique core of feeling...that should unfold or be expressed [to realize] individuality" (p. 334). Rogers' work is viewed as both facilitating and capitalizing on this type of individualism in the West.

For this reason, the Rogerian views community-oriented religions, such as Islam (Nelson, 2009, p. 365), as potential obstructions to the individual, because communal obligations and moral injunctions can thwart the person's individual freedom and actualization of his or her own unique purpose. Rogerian individualism also implies that people should be understood more in relation to their own unique moral code and goals rather than religious revelation and morality (i.e., individualist relativism). In fact, these humanistic conceptions have led Western psychotherapists largely to abandon religious moral frameworks in treating clients. Many psychotherapists, instead, attempt to conceptualize their clients in relation to the client's own singular morality and goals in this Rogerian tradition.

George Kelly. George Kelly (1955) is not the best-known humanist in Western psychology, but his work does help to illustrate the wide-range of Western humanism. Although Rogers was focused on the body as the source of teleology, Kelly's source of purpose and even morality was more cognitive. In fact, Kelly's work on cognition is frequently considered foundational to the psychological school of *constructivism* as well as some branches of cognitive behavioral therapy. Not unlike Jung (above) and Taoism, Kelly emphasizes a *dialectical* understanding of the mind, where personal "constructs" or meanings are considered to imply

their contrasting meanings. To cognitively understand the meaning of goodness, for instance, is to have some knowledge that this meaning is *not* badness, suggesting that goodness entails knowledge of badness.

This type of dialectic is also thought to imply that humans have access to possibilities and choices, because a person can behave for the sake of *either* the meaning of goodness or badness (Rychlak, 1981; 1988). That is to say, the dialectic is a kind of possibility generator. In conjunction with teleology, it implies that alternative goals and meanings are available to actualize or realize. For perhaps the first time in mainstream psychology, a person's free will or personal agency was not only systematically explained but also implemented in the work of Kellyan-style psychotherapy.

Many religious people in the West consider *free will* (or agentic) accounts, such as Kelly's, as more sympathetic to spiritual concerns (e.g., Vanderstoep, 2003). Several Western religions, such as the Abrahamic religions, consider humans to be "created in God's image," which frequently includes a kind of freedom of action. As also mentioned above, moral frameworks are often thought to require a kind of agentic capacity, because personal responsibility for right or wrong action necessitates the person having possibilities to "do otherwise." The notion of sin, for instance, is also understood in some religions as the person choosing *not* to will God's will. Without some personal (agentic) responsibility for one's actions, this type of sin is impossible. Moreover, Kelly's account of how humans can reinterpret our "reality," through the dialectic, would seem to allow for greater compatibility of humanistic theories with some forms of Buddhism and Taoism. It should be noted, however, that Kelly's theory, similar to Rogers', is still a variant of humanistic individualism because human cognition and the dialectic are viewed as contained within the individual self.

Postmodern

At this juncture, we have outlined three of the more prominent *modernist* genres of theorizing in psychology. These theories are modernist because they are generally recognized to make *dualist* assumptions. That is to say, they assume, like most naturalistic conceptions, that psychology must account for two very different “worlds” or realms of being, the subjective or cognitive world within a person’s skin or mind, and the objective or natural world outside the skin. This dualism is the reason the modern natural scientist studies the objective world by distinguishing it from the biases of the subjective world. In other words, a person should attempt to eliminate as many subjective biases as possible to get an accurate description of the objective natural world (Slife, Reber, & Faulconer, in press).

Postmodern theorizing, by contrast, specifically attempts to avoid this type of divided world, and thus challenges this aspect of naturalism directly. Interestingly, as Nelson (2009) notes, many of the world’s religions also deny this form of dualism, including strands of Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity.^v Some scholars even contend that many Confucian sects avoid dualism (Whyte, 2001). Is the nondualism of postmodern theories in psychology even friendlier to religion than humanism? As we will see, it depends greatly on the type of postmodernism. We review two main approaches here: social constructionism and hermeneutics.

Social constructionism. Kenneth Gergen (2009) is perhaps the leading social constructionist in Western psychology. Gergen believes that virtually all that matters, from morality to truth, is *socially constructed*, or formulated by the co-actions of people within a community. Gergen explicitly rejects dualism in this social construction process. He does not believe that societal values and meanings are created within a person’s subjective mind, nor does

he suppose that what is considered truth is discovered “out there” in the objective world. He argues, instead, that people (including scientists) experience a *constructed reality* in which the subjective interpretation cannot be separated meaningfully from the objective reality. Perhaps more specifically, he contends that the meanings and experiences of our lives are interpersonally negotiated. We are, in this sense, *relational beings* more than we are individual beings, and some recent psychodynamic theorists have moved in this relational direction (Mitchell, 1988).

With regard to religion and spirituality, this social constructionist approach implies that religious “truth” is itself interpersonally constructed. These truths cannot be absolutely real in the sense that the beliefs and principles of a particular faith are *the* Truth. What matters to the religious person, according to Gergen, is literally and entirely the creation of the local community, without objective existence or Truthful grounding (Gergen, in press). Religious people become fervent or devout when they inappropriately reify or concretize these constructed beliefs. This devotion and commitment is understandable and perhaps even inevitable, Gergen admits, but it is a problem that can promote vehement disagreement and even violence among sects, such as religious terrorism. Gergen contends, instead, that we acknowledge not only that our moralities and religions are without ultimate foundation but also that we completely depend on one another for our survival and the very meanings of our lives.

This contention is obviously at variance with many spiritual and religious traditions that claim their propositions and meanings are more than merely human constructions (Netland, 2001). This is not to say that many religions would not acknowledge a constructive or interpretive element in many lived religious meanings. Nevertheless, it is one thing to assume that this element is *one* factor in the lived experience of religious people and quite another to assume that this constructionist element is *the* factor (see Slife & Richardson, in press).

Hermeneutics. Hermeneutic scholars, such as Charles Taylor (1992) and Hans-Georg Gadamer (1989), have historically criticized social constructionist theorizing. Although hermeneuticists agree that the world should not be divided into the modernist dualism of subjectivity and objectivity, they would *not* agree that the truths and moralities of the world are completely ungrounded and invented wholly from the mere co-action of community members. As hermeneuticists Richardson, Fowers, and Guignon (1999) have framed the issue, the context of any event puts parameters on the interpretations or constructions that can reasonably be made of the event. The impedance of progress, for example, that one feels as one trudges up a steep mountain is not an optional construction in this sense. One can “construct” this impedance in various ways— such as it is “good for me” or it is “exhausting” — but one cannot construct it away entirely.

Consider perhaps the more relevant ethical event of a large truck accidentally hitting a small girl. Some constructions of this event simply are not reasonably available, such as the mangled and bleeding girl being “beautiful” or “delightful.” In other words, the meaning of this event is not solely and arbitrarily invented in the co-action of a community. Indeed, if this invention of meaning were true, and humans were aware of it, there would be no compelling reasons to commit ourselves to any particular set of truths or beliefs. Religious values and beliefs, in particular, would be ultimately arbitrary and hold no power to make humans conform to them.

Hermeneuticists argue, instead, that social constructionists like Gergen have extended unknowingly the dualist worldview of the modernist. They have located the meanings of the world, whether truth or morality, within the co-action of the *social* or intersubjective world and left them unconnected to the larger context of the *natural* or objective world. This disconnection

is similar to the separation of subjectivity from objectivity in conventional dualism. If, by contrast, world meanings can be understood to be grounded in the lived and ethical world, then they can be understood to reflect a practical truth and a meaningful reality. The meaning of the truck hitting the little girl is some variation on “tragedy,” because there is a meaningful reality to her suffering or death. Similarly, there may be a meaningful reality to many religious meanings, such as the Buddha for Buddhists, however culturally tinged these meanings may be. Indeed, from a hermeneutic perspective, the meanings of the world *must* be culturally situated for them to *be* meaningful and truthful to the culture in which they occur, even if they are not solely dictated by these cultural factors.

Conclusion

Our journey through the various modern and postmodern personality theories of Western psychology has revealed an interesting trend. Our starting points, the theories of psychoanalysis and behaviorism, were, with a few exceptions, thoroughly secular and naturalistic. Not only did they reject the supernatural, such as Islam’s angel Gabriel (Ruthven, 1997, p. 24) or Buddhism’s spiritual beings (Nelson, 2009, p. 84), they also rejected the human nature necessary for religion to be meaningful, such as the capacity for possibility and the relevance of spirituality. Jung and the humanists, however, began to question some of these naturalistic assumptions, leading ultimately to the nearly complete denial of naturalism in postmodern theories. It is not coincidental, then, that these trends away from naturalism, at least in some parts of psychology, are correlated with an increasing Western interest in studying religion, and even perhaps greater interest by Chinese researchers in Eastern religion. Questioning naturalism and even secularism, not only may make this interest and study possible, it also makes it relevant and worthwhile.

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ⁱ Such as the yin and yang of Taoism (Rychlak, 1981).

ⁱⁱ This outlawing of the spiritual is totally at variance with many Islamic scholars who stress that science should have a spiritual as well as an empirical dimension (Saliba, 2007).

ⁱⁱⁱ Islamic psychologists often reject reductionistic approaches to science, where the heart (*qalb*) and spirit (*ruh*) are as important as the intellect or self (Nelson, p. 366 – 367).

^{iv} This is not dissimilar to the Islamic *fitah*, “a God-given innate state.” Unlike Rogers, however, Islamic scholars view this innateness as an “inclination to believe in God” (Muhammad, 1995, p. 2).

^v One of the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism is that suffering stems from the creation of illusory dualisms (p. 84), especially the creation of an independent reality such as objectivity (Nelson, p. 85). Islam also resists this type of dualism, opting to move away from divisions between self and world (p. 366-367). Christianity has historically championed some forms of dualism, but as Nelson (2009) comments, recent scholarship in Christianity rejects dualism and emphasizes the “unitive state” of life (p. 90).