

Receptivity and the nature of religion

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Published in: *Journal of Empirical Theology* 17(1), 115-125.

ABSTRACT

Responding to Neyrinck & Hutsebaut and to Van Uden, Pieper & Alma (both in this edition), the author addresses the topic of receptivity, a religious coping style that does not involve a personal view of God. Although Neyrinck & Hutsebaut focus on receptivity in relation to religious styles and Van Uden, Pieper & Alma deal with receptivity and coping, both research teams note that in the secularized context of the Netherlands religious coping concepts with all too personal God views fail to measure an important religious style. The author discusses some conceptual and methodological issues in this research and reflects on the theological ramifications. He critiques the interpretation of the Receptivity subscales and argues that the relation to the sacred is the distinguishing element. Finally, he offers some preliminary theological reflections on receptivity and the sacred in light of a dynamic understanding of transcendence and a relational definition of religion.

INTRODUCTION

The two research teams presenting their work in this issue of the *Journal of Empirical Theology* offer us not only further empirical insight into the complex field of religion and more specifically of religious coping, they also confront us with weighty theological questions. As psychologists of religion they are not obliged to answer these questions directly, nor are they compelled to make these questions explicit. As a practical theologian, I will take up the gauntlet to explicate these questions and explore the theological ramifications. For that purpose, I will first summarize my reading of the two papers as they merge on the topic of receptivity and discuss some methodological and conceptual issues in the research. Next, I will distill some theological questions out of the material presented, concentrating on the nature of religion. Finally, I will offer a theological vista, a perspective for developing theological reflections on receptivity and religion.

RESEARCH ON RECEPTIVITY

It is no coincidence that the present discussion originates in research on religious coping. The coping paradigm has become one of the more important and fruitful avenues in psychology of religion, not to mention the broad adherence it has

found in general psychology. Reasons for this lie in the characteristics of the coping perspective (Grzymala-Moszczyńska & Beit-Hallahmi 1996): it focuses on the active function of religion instead of the static contents. It regards the interpretive process of individuals and the attribution of meaning, both closely connected to the individual's life and religion. And it offers a framework to investigate both fruitful and fruitless ways of dealing with troubles, ranging from daily hassles to crises and traumatic events. In other words, the coping perspective offers a coherent framework for a complex phenomenon (Ganzevoort 1998, Pargament 1997).

Working with Pargament's influential contributions to this framework, the Dutch researchers encountered a problem in his underlying assumptions. Pargament's conceptualization rests on the view of an active, personal God, whereas – these researchers felt – an impersonal God is more commonly accepted in the Netherlands. Therefore, a fourth style of religious coping should be measured, one that involves this impersonal God. In fact, they found two aspects of this fourth style, Receptivity, depending on whether or not an agent is postulated. Between basic trust in general and trusting a personal God, they conclude, there are different degrees of relating to the transcendent. Neyrinck & Hutsebaut, focusing on religious styles rather than coping, found a similar relation between basic trust, receptivity, and religiousness. The correlation with basic trust varied over different religious orientations.

The research presented seeks to establish the precise meaning of the Receptivity scale. Both teams therefore have assessed the correlations between the Receptivity scale and several other measures. The consistency of their findings across different populations, and even across different versions of the Receptivity scale lends credibility to the concept. The different reliability measures reflect the samples the Alpha is computed on (personal communication with the researchers). The strong correlations with Commitment to the Transcendent, Basic Trust, and Religiosity (in decreasing order) and the negative correlation of this whole field of factors with Anxiety suggest that it is to be located in the realm of religious attitudes, but apparently it cannot be identified with one of these terms. Likewise, Receptivity is related positively to passive and interactive religious coping styles and negatively with self-directing coping styles, and again positively to symbolic belief (second naïveté) and negatively to literal disbelief (external critique). The correlations of the two types of Receptivity show that Receptive-Agent is closer to measures of religious styles and Receptive-no Agent is closer to non-religious styles.

Before moving on, it seems useful to address some questions of method and conceptualization. One of these issues is mentioned by Neyrinck & Hutsebaut. They note that the Receptivity scale is actually a scale of religious coping, not of religious style per se. Although they reason that its use in their project is legitimate, they also plead for further research. Neyrinck & Hutsebaut suggest basic trust to be a more general attitude and receptivity to be the expression of basic trust in times of trouble, thereby returning to the conceptualization of

receptivity as a coping style. One wonders what the outcome would be if receptivity were operationalized as a style of religiosity instead. There is some warrant for this in Van Uden, Pieper & Alma's closing remarks. They actually describe receptivity as an indicator of various degrees of relating to the transcendent. This of course interacts with the more general and fundamental question of the relation between religion and coping. Far from reducing one to the other (e.g., treating religion as coping with contingency), it is central to the framework offered by Pargament that there is an intrinsic relationship between religion and coping.

Another set of issues arises from the presentation by Neyrinck & Hutsebaut. Their aim is to operationalize three layers of belief (actually four, if receptivity is included) and to assess the relations between them. They do not, however, clarify why precisely Receptivity is hypothesized to be an intermediate step between Basic Trust and Commitment to the Transcendent. The results show a clear correlation, but not causality. For other factors there is a similar lack of theoretical clarification. The absence of Anxiety is mentioned as an exemplary condition for Basic Trust, but this is not elaborated. The Religiosity items (practice and saliency) are likewise used without explicit reasoning. The hypothesized correlations between the various styles of belief and Basic Trust all rest upon empirical findings, but the theoretical reasoning is missing. At one point theory and data counteract: theory would predict a positive relation between Receptivity and Inclusion of Transcendence, but earlier empirical findings suggest the opposite, leading the researchers to hypothesize a negative or non-significant correlation.

The methodological questions at this point reflect the need of an explanatory theory. The descriptive model seems convincing enough, but description is not yet explanation. The minimal explanatory theory stays close to classics like Erikson, Rümke, Schachtel, Fortmann, and Maslow. Given the fact that the Receptivity scale was developed to account for fundamental changes in contemporary religious culture, one could challenge the choice for these classics. As a matter of fact, the research presented offers a much needed correction and nuancing to these classic theories. The challenge is to develop more up to date theories on the nature of religion and its relation to basic trust, receptivity, and so on. In a sense, Van Uden, Pieper, and Alma provide some material for such a theory. Although they restrict their work to the field of religious coping, there is a clear suggestion that receptivity might be an important feature of contemporary religion. This suggestion is supported by Neyrinck & Hutsebaut's data-based question whether orthodoxy (or literal belief) is a religious belief. They observe that it is more like a closed cognitive system without much personal commitment and with an anxiety reducing function. In the end they tone down their statement and conclude that orthodoxy is a different type of religion.

At this point we risk blurring the boundaries between descriptive, explanatory, and normative theories. Whether or not orthodoxy counts as religion is not purely a descriptive issue. Obviously, orthodox believers would describe themselves as religious, perhaps even more so than symbolic believers. From the correlations

reported, one can assume that Orthodoxy correlates strongly with Religiosity. The careful remarks about two types of religion therefore is in place and in a descriptive treatment we cannot but treat orthodoxy as religious. To critique that at first seems to depend on the normative stance of the researchers. However, the question is not without significance, nor is it purely a normative one. It arises from empirical observations and addresses fundamental controversies on the nature of religion. There certainly is a normative dimension to the question, but more important is the fact that it challenges the concept of religion itself.

THE NATURE OF RELIGION

The point I am making here is that the question whether or not orthodoxy and receptivity are still (or already) religious depends on the unarticulated definition of religion. The measure for religiosity in this research is one of self-definition ('How religious are you?'). We do not know, however, the implicit concept of religion the participants have in mind, nor do we know what the researcher mean by the term.

To choose a definition of religion is usually a pragmatic decision. Sometimes we want to use the clear-cut measures of a substantive definition, for other purposes we try to assess the functional dimensions of religion. Defining religion or anything else is basically a strategy for developing knowledge, an instrument to use instead of a truth to adhere to. Whether or not something 'is' religious does not depend on some objective quality of the phenomenon, but on the discourse one is involved in. We need not adopt a social constructionist paradigm to accept this view of the process of defining a concept. It is after all the precise trigger for the discussion here. Researchers encounter phenomena that are not adequately addressed by the governing definitions, concepts, and theories. In this case, they find that the classic definition of religious coping with its postulated active personal God is too limited to reflect the religious landscape of The Netherlands and Belgium. The phenomena they encounter diverge from the classic concepts, but still the researchers find it fitting to call them religious. Therefore new styles of coping, trusting, and religion need to be described, and Receptivity is a proper label for that.

I do not argue the need for these developments, nor the meaning of the results of these studies. What I want to take seriously – and perhaps in more depth than the researchers have presented it – is the question what we want to acknowledge as religious and how that might influence our definition of religion. In other words: if Orthodoxy is perceived as questionably religious and Receptivity as religious beyond a personal God, does that mean that the meaning of 'religious' has changed? It would be my guess that this is the case. The development of the Receptivity scale is more than a new language for the same phenomena. It seeks to tap into evolving shapes of religion.

To understand this change, some reflection on the background is in order. There has been much debate and research on the privatization of religion. In earlier

days, the social dimension of religion was more on the foreground and the institutionalized shapes of religion were defining features. This is not to underrate the personal involvement in religion of the past, but the choices of the individual were more or less restricted to accepting or rejecting the religious system. This religious system was characterized by a personal God and by cognitive content. I am aware of the overgeneralization of my statements, but it may do for the present discussion. In comparison, contemporary religion is deinstitutionalized, fragmented, and less content-focused. This is one important reason why newer measures are needed and why research outcomes concerning secularization merit at least critical inspection. If religion is taking on new shapes, we need new concepts and measures as well, as these research teams demonstrate.

At this point, we have to consider how much continuity is assumed between the various concepts of religion. Not without reason, Hick (1989, 4) follows Wittgenstein's family resemblance approach in defining religion. Instead of a set of defining characteristics there is a network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing like the resemblances and differences among the members of a natural family. Religious phenomena then do not have one common essence. Somewhere at the core of family features is Tillich's notion of 'ultimate concern', or as in Pargament's concise definition of religion the search for significance in ways related to 'the sacred'. Other important resemblances may be found in a comprehensive worldview, scriptures, moral claims, belief in a transcendent divine reality, and so on. Members of the family (shapes of religion) may share more or less of these features.

The sacred, Hick quotes Eliade, is a unique and irreducible element in religion. Even if we don't speak of a common essence, it would be hard to conceive of religious phenomena that are not related to the sacred. We could apply functional definitions of religion to for example mega-parties with 30.000 young people ecstatically dancing in front of a DJ's altar, but if the music, the environment, and the ritual officers are not in some way representatives of a symbolic or even sacred order, such an interpretation of the party as religious would deviate from the participants' self-understanding. Religion has to do with the sacred. We may not call that God anymore, precisely because the word God might invoke too many personalistic connotations. We may even join the new language of spirituality and interpret the sacred as an energetic dimension of life (Josuttis 1996). But it has to do with the sacred.

It seems to me that this accounts for the difference between Receptive-Agent and Receptive-No agent. I am not immediately convinced by the interpretation given by the researchers that Receptive-Agent refers to an active agent that is present and reveals, presents, and shows something, making it possible to imagine this agent as a more or less personal God, nor that Receptive-No agent refers to opening oneself to fate or the laws of the cosmos with an agent absent and something revealing itself. The central items in Receptive-Agent resemble religious language in that they refer to 'faith', 'eventual revelation' and 'deeper significance'. All the other items of this factor use passive verbs. In comparison,

the factor Receptive-No agent only speaks of 'unfold', 'being struck', 'fall into place', and 'arise'. The point, I would say, is not necessarily the presence or absence of an agent. In the formulation of the Receptive-Agent items the agent is completely implicit. Whether or not an agent is postulated at all is not clear. All we have is the language of the sacred. Likewise, we have no way of knowing whether participants of this research have thought of fate or the laws of the cosmos. I would expect them not to, because the 'laws of the cosmos' would be rather close to the sacred. This interpretation of the two factors being distinguished by the sacred could be supported by the classic (e.g., biblical) use of the passive verbs to refer implicitly to the divine. That is not just another way of describing God; it is an expression of restraint and deference toward the realm of the sacred. To move from the unspeakable into clear statements is in itself a profanation and to abstain from speaking of God directly is an indicator of sacred language.

If the nature of religion circles around the sacred, then the relationship with the sacred is the hallmark of the religious person. Receptivity evidently is not identical with such a relationship with the sacred, but it is an indicator (and Receptive-Agent is a better one than Receptive-No agent). Probably it is a better mark than religious convictions and beliefs. To say the least, the measures developed and used in these research projects have succeeded in surpassing religious concepts, convictions, and beliefs. With the Receptivity scale, they seem to tap into the relationship with the sacred. That is why I would be disappointed if the outcomes were interpreted again as indicators of religious convictions such as god views. To me they are most meaningful if they are understood on the level of relating to the sacred.

This notion of the relation to the sacred is all the more necessary if we take into account the transfigurations in the religious landscape that I alluded to earlier. The deinstitutionalization of religion joins sides with the new focus on the experiential dimension of religion. Religion and its truth claims are not located in the convictional domain anymore, nor in the collective structure of the religious tradition, but in the personal experience and perspective. For theology then, the main challenge here is to develop discourse that reaffirms this personal and experiential domain of relating to the sacred and downplays the once so dominant role of the convictional.

With this in mind, we can return to the question whether orthodoxy and receptivity are properly described as religious or not. Measured by the criterion of relating to the sacred, I would claim that the Receptive-Agent scale addresses a religious attitude, whereas Receptive-No agent does not. This is consistent with the findings of the projects, but it seeks to offer a theoretical basis to interpret these findings from the notion of the sacred instead of the 'agent'. The Religious Coping scale of Self-Directing should also be interpreted as non-religious, because it explicitly focuses on the negation of such a relation. The word most commonly used in the items of this scale is 'without'. It would be useful if the Pargament-scales could be adapted in such a way that Self-Directing was framed positively,

perhaps even with a more spiritual language. My hypothesis would be that such a restated scale would correlate positively with Basic Trust and – depending on the precise language – perhaps even with religiosity and commitment to the transcendent. Still, it would be a different style of religious coping, different even from receptivity.

For orthodoxy, the case is a bit more complex. There is a correlation to commitment to the transcendent, but it is much lower than for Second Naïveté (symbolic belief). Neyrinck & Hutsebaut may be correct to suspect that orthodoxy is a (closed) convictional system and not a religious belief. What I would add to their reasoning again is the relation to the sacred. Orthodoxy probably does not imply such a relation, precisely because it treats the sacred as directly accessible through our knowledge and language. That is, by turning it into a system of convictions, the sacred has been profaned.

A THEOLOGICAL VISTA

This last part of my paper is dedicated to an initial exploration of possible theological discourse on receptivity and the sacred. I focus on Receptive-Agent, being the more religious subscale. This scale correlates strongly with Commitment to the Transcendent; of the four religious styles it correlates most strongly with Second Naïveté. Given the position of Receptivity somewhere in between Commitment to the Transcendent and Basic Trust (and given the difference between the two subscales), I tend to interpret Receptivity as a soft transcendence. It is not so much the conviction about a transcendent reality but the entrustment to a transcendent possibility. That is a fundamental shift and not only so in theological parlance. It moves the concept of transcendence from the ontic level to the epistemic, from the convictional to the relational, and from the propositional to the metaphorical. These changes are, in my view, essential for empirical theology as much as for psychology of religion. Transcendence as a realm or quality beyond our reality is by definition beyond empirical research. As a consequence, in empirical research we have already limited ourselves to convictions about transcendence. The price to be paid for that is that our theological enterprise has become rather indirect and at times frustrated by too positivistic criteria. In the end however, as theologians we need to work on God-talk, which should be more than measuring ideas about the transcendent.

The shift to the transcendent possibility and to knowing in the mode of entrusting, focuses our attention to the dynamic transcending process of human individuals and groups. The boundaries of our lives are constantly transcended from the outside in (as in experiences of revelation) and from the inside out (as in magic and desire). These transcending moments are within the realm of empirical investigation, but we need relational measures like the Receptivity scale to address them. Working with such measures, we can develop theological theories of contemporary attitudes in the relation with the sacred.

Perhaps we also need another definition of religion. As my contribution in the present discussion, I propose the following: *Religion is a transcending pattern of construction emerging from and contributing to the relationship with what is contextually understood as sacred, in such a way that it shapes and transforms convictions, experiences and/or behavior.*

The first part of the definition, *a transcending pattern of construction* builds on a social-constructionist epistemology and a dynamic understanding of transcendence. It is basically a functional definitional strategy that stresses the nature of religion as construed. In that sense, it focuses mainly on transcendence inside-out, addressing human attributions of meaning and performative actions focused on what surpasses the limits of human existence.

I tend to reserve the term 'religion' for those constructions that become part of a pattern, a system of meaning and behavior. If there were only incidental transcending constructions we might speak of religious fragments, meaningful and worthy of investigation, but also elusive in terms of research. The main reason, however, to focus on patterns rather than fragments is that these fragments can only be understood as religious because of their (implicit) reference to an absent pattern. Such a pattern or system derives its plausibility from its internal coherence, its constituting experiences, and its legitimizing audience. As with all systems, there is a dialectical relation between the meaning of the whole and the meaning of its parts. Experiences are construed in terms of the prevailing pattern, while the pattern is corroborated or invalidated by these experiences.

The second part of the definition, *what is contextually understood as sacred*, is consonant with functional definitions in that the sacred is taken not as describing some intrinsic quality of the object of worship but as indicating the attitude of worshippers (McGuire 1992, 13). This is also reflected in the notion of contextual understanding. Even within Christianity a range of places, times, objects, actions are found that are understood as sacred in one context but not in another. With this definition I wish to include all that counts as sacred for the participants. In that sense, it is not purely functional but takes a substantive approach on the level of religious praxis. If certain objects (e.g., icons, vestments, bread and wine, or even trees) are considered as sacred and therefore religious items by the participants, then they function as sacred for theologians.

This applies to the ultimate as well. We can contextualize the definition by inserting God as 'the sacred' by excellence. In other contexts we might use terms like the Transcendent, the Ultimate, Ultimate Reality, the Supreme Principle, the Divine, the One, the Eternal, the Eternal One, or the Real. (Hick, 1989, 10). In substantive formulations, this may be specified as the God of the Christian tradition, Allah, and so on. In functionalistic definitions, whatever works for the participants of first order discourse as God, 'God', or 'something like God' would count. If for example soccer heroes like Pele, Baggio, Del Pierro, and Maradona are referred to as Gods, this may be interpreted as simply metaphorical, but there is a ring of truth to it in that they may be the object of devotion and inspiration.

Soccer fans may form a community that is characterized by loyal faith and celebration, and even seeing soccer as a way of life. In the same vein, economy and democracy can be interpreted as centers of meaning in western culture with (quasi?) religious proportions. Whether one should investigate all these phenomena as religions depends on the research problem formulated. It does not depend on the nature of the phenomena as such.

There is however a further specification in the definition that I think is essential to a practical theological approach. This notion, supported by the development of the Receptivity scale and my interpretation of it, is *emerging from and contributing to the relationship with ... the sacred*. This does not only prevent the development of speculative theology about a deity detached from humans, but also treating religious experience and beliefs as detached from the divine. For me as a practical theologian, precisely this relationship is the focal point in research and theory. Inserting this notion in the definition means that I would treat phenomena as religious only insofar as there is a relationship with the purported divine. I would not, for example, discuss a soccer hero as god or treat soccer fans as religious in a general sense, but I might do so in the specific case where soccer fans experience a relationship with the hero that is surpassingly meaningful to them. Likewise, as a practical theologian I am not interested in describing 'God as such' but in the way believers and non-believers live in a certain relationship with God.

The definition then tries to do justice to the dialectical nature between human constructions of the sacred and the experience of the sacred that both precedes and follows these constructions. Stating that religion is a response to the self-revelation of God is therefore as true and as false as stating that God is the product of religious construction.

Practical theology investigates how people transcend their existence in the relationship with the ultimate, the divine, God. The way they construe themselves and the world around them as religious or non-religious is the first element in our descriptive task. The second, interpretive, element regards the question how this pattern of construction is embedded in their biography and their tradition, and how it affects their lives. This involves insight into the various dimensions of religion, including convictions, experiences, and (coping) behavior.

CONCLUSION

If the realm of the sacred is accepted as central to religion, it should also be a key element in our theological research on religion. Receptivity and Second Naiveté then are close to the nature of religion, because they involve the precise openness and symbolic restraint that are essential in relating to the sacred. For theologians, the relation to the sacred should be the main interest.

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