COMMENTARY

Believing in Speech: A Response to James Day's Application of Narrative to the Psychology of Religion

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Day's article "Speaking of Belief: Language, Performance, and Narrative in the Psychology of Religion" is critically analyzed as reducing religious belief to performative speech. This approach severely constricts an understanding of belief as a dimension of a person's inner world. The use and validity of the concept of *story* is questioned and the relation of Day's approach to several other current theories is suggested.

"In the beginning was the word." James Day attempts to give new impor-tance to this ancient wisdom by facilitating a concept of narrative for the psychology of religion. In emphasizing the performative rather than the in-formative character of speech, he understands speech functionally as a means to serve human needs such as relatedness or identity. Religious lan-guage, in this sense, is of no different quality but is a subgroup of perfor-mative speech in general. Thus he concludes that belief (and probably all other aspects of human life) can be best understood in terms of sociolin-guistics—that is, in terms of stories and narratives. It is this strong general-ization that is both the strength and weakness of this approach.

For Day, the key concept is *relationship*. This is the center around which speech and action circle. Day suggests entering the orbit of the individual's

universe through his or her language, proposing that this application of a functional, constructionistic view will lead us to a deeper understanding of a person and his or her need to belong somewhere—the basis of belief.

In his interviews, Day shows how much his interviewees see their expression of belief dependent on the social context and the partner they talk to. However, his conclusion that their "speaking of belief" is *only* performative, meant to shape and maintain a relationship, and that "there is no belief independent of the narrative forms" (Day, this issue) is not totally convincing. The material Day presents also allows different conclusions. Will, Martin, and even Linda (though hers is more vague) actually have a certain concept and content of what their belief is and to which they refer.

Day claims "without a voice there is no reality," but it seems more like a circle than a one-way street. So when one of them says "I believe," this may indeed point to some element in their mental apparatus: a feeling, an image, a memory, or a sense of knowing, all referring to some kind of transcendence.

Speech and stories have an outside face and an inside face. Day thoroughly examines the outside face, the function of religious talk for the person as part of a social environment. To complete the picture, the inside face—the function of religious talk (experience, practice) for the inner world of a person (his or her emotions, attitudes, and cognitions)—has to be considered more. This is also important in understanding why it is that someone holds a special belief and another person does not, which means including the question of unconscious processes. By looking only to the functional, performative aspect of religious language, we learn a lot about the social meaning but little about the individual's psychodynamics.

Of course, religious experience is expressed and framed by words and by the social context of the believer. But does that mean that the speaker's "interior" world does not exist as an independent dimension or is inaccessible? The strength of Day's approach is certainly the attempt to use one overall concept (i.e., speech, story, narrative) to understand many different phenomenons. However, I am not quite sure how the narrative approach should be applied to research, because the case material Day presents is meant to be more illustrative than inductive, and his interviewees are especially context-oriented and not very dogmatic in their beliefs, as others might be.

So what exactly does it mean for research if "belief is best understood in terms of the words and other signs that people use"? Because Day denies a stable inner world that could be subject to research, he consequently concludes that traits cannot be measured (or perhaps do not exist). He suggests a methodology overcoming the dualism of subject–object to recognize the relational field as the object of study. The inclusion of the social context and the relational aspect of belief through the emphasis on language and narrative is convincing. But what is the theoretical, psychological basis

for the functional claims Day makes? To gain a better understanding of the internal processes, other theoretical approaches could complementarily complete the picture.

It would be interesting to examine Day's theoretical approach in its relation to already existing and overlapping theories developed in the psychology of religion. The importance of the role-taking aspect of religious talk, which emphasizes the relational and social character as Day rightly points out, has been examined in detail by Hjalmar Sundén and his students (Sundén, 1966; Capps, 1987). Starting from human perception, Sundén pointed out the need for a coherent religious reference system. Religion as role taking is, then, the believer's attempt to fit into a reference system in a given situation, in a specific social field, with its particular expectations, like Will in the taxi.

The subtle dialectic of the individual and social world ("interlocution and appropriation") may very well harmonize with the concepts of externalization, objectivation, and internalization as laid down by Berger and Luckmann (1966) and their sociology of knowledge with its special application to religion (Berger, 1967).

The importance of relationship and connectedness has also been a main focus in the application of psychoanalytic object-relations theories to the psychology of religion. To look side by side at the relational aspects of a person's religious life and his or her object relations in general has become a promising approach (Jones, 1992).

The question of religious change in the course of a lifetime, as it becomes relevant with Day's interviewee Martin, could also be looked at with the help of a constructive–developmental theory (Kegan, 1982) or the help of other developmental approaches (Meadow & Kahoe, 1984).

These are some of many theories that most likely could be successfully applied for the understanding of the presented case studies. A comparison of those different theories regarding their explanatory value could shed light on the claimed hermeneutic advantage of the narrative perspective.

The exciting contribution of Day's approach is certainly his use of only one theoretical concept, which he claims has a very strong and far-reaching exploratory power (see Day's Conclusion section). Nevertheless, I see a problem in the extremely broad use of the term *story,* which for Day not only refers to told stories and almost all kinds of speech, but to nearly all expressions of life including the scientific process itself. To conclude inversely that "we have no way of being apart from the stories and roles and words that we know" may very well be right. The epistomological benefit, however, seems indirectly proportional to the width of the concept.

Day's article, understood as a story in itself, has to be seen in its own context. Being a German psychologist of religion, I noticed how American the "speaking of belief" as a phenomenon is. Differences in history and socialization have created different attitudes about the place of religion and

religious "talk" in the United States and Europe. The reported conversation in the taxi could never have taken place in Germany without serious concern for the speakers' sanity. Talking about one's religion and belief in Europe is probably more private than talking about sex. These matters will be shared only with very close friends, if at all. So following Day, we have to ask how people believe if they do not talk about it?

Many questions arise and give evidence that, with the introduction of the concepts of narrative and stories to the psychology of religion, James Day has made a challenging contribution to a field still lacking a unifying theoretical frame. His article will certainly stimulate fruitful discussion and hopefully also influence research.

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