

RELIGION

The Journal of Kansas School of Religion at The University of Kansas

Volume 14, Number 2, January, 1977



Psychology of Religion as an Academic Subject: Its Challenge to Scholarship and Pedagogical Impact

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The January, 1976 issue of this *Journal* carried a review of the historical phases whereby the subject of religion has finally—but only very recently—become a respectable research domain and a permissible topic of course instruction in the public American university, after years of acrimonious debating of Church-State issues. And so, interested parties are getting ready to build curricula, marshal resources, train instructors and make the most of the possibilities presented by the prestigious “interdisciplinary approach” that everybody seems to advocate. I am glad of this interest and energy, and I want to help the educational thrust along by calling attention to one particular scientific study of religion that has recently come out of its swaddling clothes and now proves to be quite alive and kicking. That is the psychology of religion.

Though it has a few venerable ancestors proving its respectable lineage, the psychological study of religion has been a rarefied enterprise for some time, engaging only a handful of workers, some of whom had only a half-hearted dedication anyway. But the tide is turning: students have begun to demand courses in the subject and publishers find that there is a market for books on the matter. Though William James' landmark work *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) seems to have been continually reprinted and is deservedly still enjoying enough demand to warrant paperback distribution, its age alone precipitates a quest for contemporary books on the subject. And in the meantime, the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, which started a rather precarious life in 1961, is now a blossoming enterprise with sizeable circulation; it has no

dearth of manuscripts from psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists and members of other disciplines who are seriously studying religious phenomena.

MOTIVATION AND ULTIMATE AIMS

All these scholars are realists in the sense that they find religion present in culture and history, and therefore worth studying. But when scholars have a pointed interest in religion we have to ask whether this is a conflict-free curiosity to be gratified with playful zest, or a conflict-laden preoccupation that could be rooted in excessive love, hate or ambivalence patterns regarding these scholars' own religion, if any, or religion in general. The motivation for being a student of religion is surely very complex, and Bellah has correctly remarked that much of social science has religious implications or aspects within itself.

It surely is poignant to watch the ways in which otherwise objective scholars bend their conceptual apparatus either too much or too little towards accommodation to the religious phenomena they study, or else with what selectivity they focus on any particular feature of religion. For instance, James' exposure to Swedenborgian thought and Boisen's episodes of gross mental derangement with experiences of death and rebirth made both very hospitable to mysticism. Freud was fascinated by the power of religion over man's mind and focussed on the thought control it imposes. Jung's interest was in the archetypical imagery of religion, apprehended in a kind of gnostic psychology. Reik saw religion mostly from its ritualistic side and focussed on compulsive rituals, whereas Erikson has pointed to an entirely different kind of ritual that has more to do with spontaneity than control. And since I myself, with several books on the subject, have a stake in the psychology of religion, let me add from experience that it is not easy to strike a balance between the use of objective and subjective source material, between comprehensiveness and selective interests, between phenomenological aptness and analytic acumen. In all fairness I should say that the study of religion by any of the

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social sciences, and particularly by a clinical science like my own, requires a unique integration between knowing and valuing, the various dynamics of which should be brought to the scholar's awareness by a critical self-analysis.

The ultimate aims of scholars studying the psychology of religion are not always made explicit in their works. When one teases them out, however, one finds certain trends in these aims which may be briefly summarized as follows.

1. To buttress religion and religiousness apologetically by describing its psychological necessity or inevitability. This can take extremely sophisticated forms or it can be done naively, by trying to prove that say, mental health or peaceful human relations benefit from engagements in religion—at its most flatfooted, any religion or piety will do. Numerous tracts of sub-scholarly quality have circulated some such conviction.

2. To make subjective and allegedly very private experiences objective and public by providing them with psychological understanding or explanations. Works on mysticism tend to have this aim. Sometimes studies of this genre go beyond the aim of understanding and extend to an advocacy of para-normal or borderland experiences, as happens currently in works on so-called "altered states of consciousness."

3. To bring strange, rare, deviant or sectarian forms of religion, e.g. glossolalia and other charismatic acts, often seen as "abnormal," within the range of "normal" or adaptive processes, not only perfectly understandable but also acceptable, and perhaps respectable. Or the reverse: to nail down their pathology or undesirability.

4. To attack religion and religiousness as an atavism or anachronism by exposing its archaic origins and heritage, its primitive modes of thought or action, the unreason on which it hinges or which it perpetuates and promotes, and the thought control it fosters. Studies with these aims tend to use a historical or evolutionary framework, often influenced by an implicit (sometimes explicit) value-orientation which desires emancipation from religion in favor of another principle, e.g. reason, science, humanism.

5. To expose with benign fascination the psychic roots of religion in archaic imagery and childish wishes or defense mechanisms, so as to maximize the continuities between ancient and modern man, or between child and adult, and thereby arrive at an encompassing (but probably syncretistic) general psychology or transhistorical worldview.

6. To apply, in playful tinkering fashion, the conceptual and operational apparatus of psychology (or any of its branches such as experimental, clinical, social, etc.) to the phenomena of religion in order to see where these would lead in understanding religion. This enterprise can be reinforced by the conviction that religion has long been a taboo subject for scientific investigation, and that the time has come to break this taboo.

7. To pay respect to religion by legitimate and unpartisan curiosity about its historical persistence, power, infinite variations, richness of forms, trenchant impact on individuals and societies, inherent fascination, etc.

This is not meant to be an exhaustive list. Moreover, it is an inventory of aims, not a classification table of writers in the psychology of religion. One writer can have several aims at once, or have successive aims in different stages of his work.

THE TENUOUS JUXTAPOSITION OF PSYCHOLOGY AND RELIGION

The use of one human enterprise, psychology, for the elucidation of another human enterprise, religion, involves questions about the identity of the investigator, the auspices of his work; the impact of his religious affiliation, if any, on its outcome; the tenor of his apperceptive mass, and the way in which he handles the relative importance of "psychology" vis-à-vis "religion," especially whether and how the two are to be accommodated to each other.

A striking feature of the psychology of religion before 1968 is that books on the subject almost invariably take for granted that religion creates its own topical rubrics, which dictate the chapter headings of any psychology of religion. Thus, these books have chapters on "conversion," "beliefs," "sanctity," "mystical experience," or "rituals." Most of these words do not stem from the vocabulary of psychology, but are ordering principles that have emerged from within religion, often with pinpointed denominational reference or preference. I think it naive (or a sign of the scholar's unchecked denominationalism) to proceed on such a basis. Psychology has its own categories and conceptual system within which it grasps—nay, brings to light or shapes—whatever will turn out to be the distinctions *within* religion that are germane to a *psychology* of religion. Any scientific study of religion is to be true to its own discipline: sociology of religion must be a sociology; psychology of religion must be a psychology—acknowledged and respected among peers of that discipline even if the latter have no interest whatever in the phenomena of religion, or are ignorant of that special subject.

To put this more philosophically, I would advocate a strict perspectival approach, such as can be developed from the philosophy of Whitehead. In this view nothing is anything in particular unless it is placed in a perspective, which demarcates it, gives it a name, and starts a series of mental operations on it. Outside of a distinct perspective, the world is only a buzzing, blooming confusion. A perspective thus elicits, maybe even creates, its own data. To the extent that any academic discipline is one such definable perspective, it shapes its own data which come to light as a function of the categories that the discipline imposes. Psychologists deal with such rubrics as perceiving, thinking, feeling, remembering, judging, linguistic processes, motor movements, object relations, self-regulation, symbol formation, and a host of other processes which constantly appear in psychological literature as book titles or chapter headings. To these, the psychology of religion must be faithful; with these any psychologist of religion must identify himself if he is to remain in good standing with his confreres in psychology.

To what extent does it help or hinder an investigator to be himself religious, affiliated with a denomination or in some sense an insider to religious creeds and practices? I cannot give a categorical answer to this question, for much depends on the way the investigator holds on to his perspective on the one hand and steepes himself in the subject on the other hand. It can be an advantage to be an outsider to religious tenets and practices if one studies religion: cognitive and emotional distance may promote objectivity and add a sharpness of vision about basic assumptions that insiders are bound to lack. There are also advantages to being an insider: one tends to have a finer eye for differences within religion, he may achieve greater aptness

in rendering good phenomenological descriptions of religious states of mind or religious acts, and he is bound to use his own experience as introspective data which, in psychology, are not to be ignored. But denominational loyalty may produce blinders, especially in regard to the truth character of theological propositions. And it may produce the form of tightrope walking which I shall now describe.

Some psychologists of religion have sought to select a psychological theory, often a particular personality theory, whose premises, methods, epistemological assumptions, and "image of man" are felt to have some philosophical affinity with a particular religion, or which has an alleged ethos or tenor congenial to piety. This, to me, is a grave danger, for it bends psychological theory to religious aims, and is thus almost always an exercise in religious apologetics. It is also fallacious, for no personality theory of stature has taken religious phenomena for its focal interest—nor should it do so, for personality theory aims at generality rather than particularity of interest in what persons do, are, or live by. The ultimate outcome of such an effort at selecting an a priori "friendly view" is that the investigator's "psychology" will become, say, a "Baptist psychology" or a "Pentecostal theory of personality." I myself prefer the use of a "hardnosed psychology" which has discriminating power and explanatory potency—not only out of loyalty to my discipline, but also out of respect for the intricacy of the subject matter to which it is being addressed, namely religion, which warrants both comprehensiveness and detailed attention of the highest quality. Bargaining for special treatment from tender-minded psychologists is in itself a religious or pious plea which inherently puts religion in a weak position and ultimately denigrates its stature.

Finally, the scholar of religion, especially the psychologist, needs to exercise judgment about the religious phenomena he encounters. Not everything in religion is equally mature, developed, differentiated, healthy, adaptive, etc. One will recognize that these words are evaluative terms, mostly of a functional sort, operating within certain psychological frames of reference. To put it popularly, religion is such a vast arena of human thoughts and doings (it is such a "large circle," said Tillich), that its particulars are bound to range from the sublime to the ridiculous, from the sophisticated to the platitudinous, from the healthy to the pathological, from the primitive to the developed. This enormous diversity of qualities is another reason why religion should not plead for any special (i.e. overly friendly) treatment from psychology. Psychology should have complete freedom to place the myriad of religious phenomena in its own framework and evaluate them according to its own criteria.

PEDAGOGICAL BENEFITS TO STUDENTS

When I think of higher education and its ethos, I see at least three rationales for its unique tasks and opportunities. The first one is that students, now well beyond drill and training, engage with pointed freedom in the appropriation of knowledge—at whatever level and in whatever way packaged. They avail themselves of an opportunity to exercise their cognitive talents, with considerable autonomy. The second rationale is that students in higher education gain insight into the relations between knowledge and the sources and methods used to obtain it. They learn to appraise extant knowledge critically and to participate in the production of new knowledge skillfully and enthusiastically. The third rationale is the student's right to be exposed *in vivo* to the working minds and hearts

of teachers who demonstrate by instruction and research the *interrelations between knowing and valuing*. These interrelations include the vagaries of adopting particular perspectives in which certain phenomena come to light. The latter can be worded in Whiteheadian terms as the processes whereby certain "prehensions" occur which give rise to "conscrescences," not only on the basis of cognitions but also in the basis of feelings.

It seems to me that courses in the psychology of religion, with the books studied and the experiments done, have a particularly high pedagogical value since they capitalize, by the nature of the subject matter and the demand for the teacher's portraying a clear identity, on the third rationale for higher education I have just outlined. Like other courses, offerings in the psychology of religion also partake of the first and second rationales, but they are likely to be chosen (or avoided!) with considerable existential involvement by prospective students. The choice is charged by curiosities, apprehensions, defensiveness or enthusiasms that may bespeak a conflictual origin of the student's interest. Courses in the psychology of religion are bound to bring latent conflicts into the open.

Rather than ignoring these factors and getting by didactic means straight to the data and theories, in splendid objectivity and with emotional detachment, the teacher of a psychology of religion course has an opportunity, nay, an obligation I think, to deal from the start with his students' hopes and fears, with their diverse value positions and existential postures. The teacher will have to deal with the various types and degrees of personal involvement which the students bring not only to religion, but to the very possibility of regarding religion in the light of some non-religious discipline. This requires a seriously playful attitude, which may at first be above some students' power. But with some help from the teacher, particularly by the teacher's demonstrated capacity for a loving, seriously playful posture of excitement and curiosity, students may gain the courage to plunge in and embark on an intellectual and axiological venture.

Coursework in the psychology of religion requires the students' (and teachers') freedom to place the values of scholarly inquiry, intellectual integrity and observational acumen at the top of the value hierarchy, at least during the period of the study. This freedom means a Socratic detachment from one's habitual basic assumptions in order to submit them to scrutiny. It is an exercise in the purposeful, temporary suspending of one's belief system. Such suspending can have maieutic power: it leads to reappraisals, possibly to a reappropriation of one's old beliefs at a new level of consciousness.

PROPRIETARY ACADEMIC BICKERING

In the meantime, none of the foregoing puristic adhortations for productive scholarly work in the psychology of religion should lead to proprietary claims among academic departments about who is entitled to teach the courses. To say that psychology of religion involves the work of psychologists does not mean that members of other disciplines (e.g. scholars in comparative religion, philosophers, ethicists, sociologists, historians) are not entitled to use these psychologists' works in their own teaching and course offerings. After all, the subject matter of *religion* is a content area that legitimates the introduction of *any* vantage point on religion within a department of religion, a divinity school or a seminary. Augustine's *Confessions* may well be used in language departments for its theoretical and practical pointers on rhetoric; it would be ridiculous to claim

that only theologians have a right to teach courses on Augustine. I would hold that no knowledge belongs in a proprietary way to any discipline. Knowledge is public. Furthermore, no discipline is pure. A good psychologist knows much more than psychology—he borrows appropriately and sometimes substantially from physiology, philosophy, literature and other disciplines, possibly including theology! Therefore, clear thinking demands that no proprietary intentions or pretensions muddy the question of “Who can teach what” in the “halls of learning” in which “learning” is purported to be closer to erudition than to drill.

NEW RELIGION COURSES INTRODUCED

Three courses are offered by the School of Religion for the first time this Spring Semester. Each one is scheduled vertically to meet once a week. Easy access enrollments are accommodated:

Religion 602 Special Topics: The Theology of Rudolf Bultmann. Richard Jeske, Instructor

Rudolf Bultmann, one of the theological giants of the 20th Century and whom many have referred to as the greatest New Testament scholar who ever lived, died on July 30, 1976 at the advanced age of 91. This course will review the immense impact Bultmann has had, not only on the world of technical scholarship, but also on theological thinking in general. The problem of myth, the church in society, non-Christian religions, the philosophy of Heidegger, the theology of Barth—all are problems which for Bultmann posed direct challenges to the witness of the 20th Century church. Prerequisite: either REL 304 or REL 376 or an equivalent thereof.

Religion 602 Special Topics: Contemporary Roman Catholic Theology. Mary Collins, Instructor

Changes in the Roman Catholic Church are good copy for journalists. The theological thinking which undergirds the changes is less accessible to the educated reading public. This course will survey selected topics and issues under discussion by Roman Catholic theologians.

Religion 591 Religion and Culture in Education. Lynn Taylor, Instructor

A basic understanding of religion and its relationship to the development of American culture. Legal context and propriety of religion studies in the secular program of education; academic approaches and selected areas for public school study. Especially designed for public school teachers.

Two courses introduced a year ago are rescheduled this semester:

Religion 104 Search for Meaning. James Woelfel, Instructor

Religion 475 The Loving Relationship. Robert Shelton, Instructor

KCPERS NEWS

The Kansas Center for Public Education Religion Studies has prepared a text for the emerging new field in elementary and secondary schools, religion studies. The first comprehensive textbook for teachers, it is expected to be released in time for the 1977 summer workshops.

BOARD HEARING COMING

The Executive Committee of the Trustees Board will schedule an open hearing on the proposed integration of the School with the University. The date—to be midwinter—will be announced.

RELIGION

Published quarterly in October, January, April, and July by Kansas School of Religion at The University of Kansas at Lawrence, Kansas 66045.

Editor, Lynn Taylor
Associate Editor, Mary Collins.

Subscription \$1.00 per year.

Second Class Postage Paid at
Lawrence, Kansas

1054