

Psychological Understanding of Religion

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The word "psychology" is a combination of two Greek words *psyche* meaning "soul", "spirit", or "mind" and *logos* meaning "science" or "study of". The science of psychology tries to investigate every area of human experience and behavior. Psychology of religion tries to understand the cause-effect relationships of religious experiences and religious consciousness so as to be able to predict behaviors. It aims to study the religious consciousness with investigations in religious behavior patterns.

The major systems of psychology are: structuralism, functionalism, behaviorism, psychoanalysis, and Gestalt School of Psychology. Obviously, each system has its own way of understanding religious consciousness.

Psychological Definitions of Religion

About a century ago, James Henry Leuba was able to select forty-eight definitions of religion to which he added two of his own to include in his famous *Psychological Study of Religion (1912)*. Various psychologists have defined religion variously. The word "religion" poses the same problems as the word "God". Both of the above words act like an umbrella comprehending a multiplicity of meanings, some of which drastically contradict each other.

Leuba divided all his rich collection of definitions into two groups, to which he added his own third one:

1. Those definitions that treat religion as “the recognition of a mystery pressing for interpretation”.
2. Those definitions which adopt Schleiermacher's view that religion is “a feeling of absolute dependence on God.”
3. Leuba's definition that “religion is the *propitiation* or *conciliation* of powers which are believed to direct and control the course of nature and human life.”

The above classification cannot be regarded as final, since newer definitions like Leuba's easily arise. The definitions seem to be descriptions that, arising through induction, are not always comprehensive. The variety of psychological perspectives and definitions are also an issue of philosophical investigation.

As early as 1916, Professor C.C.J. Webb had said that “I do not believe that religion *can* be defined.” This does not, however, mean that the psychological definitions of religion are of no practical value. We must distinguish between definitions and descriptions. While definitions give essential meanings, descriptions state the external appearances. Obviously, the attempts to define religion are not merely attempts to describe but attempts to point out the essence of religion. Psychology understands the various rites, beliefs, and expressions of religions as reflective of a religious consciousness which it tries to investigate. The psychological definitions of religion do try to locate the essence of religion in the consciousness and not in the external “symbols”, which are only interesting as long as they lead to an understanding of religious consciousness. It is the

similarities rather than the differences which are the object of the study.

Following are some psychological definitions of religion that help us to know what psychology reveals about religion:

Sir James Frazer: Religion is a propitiation or conciliation of powers superior to man which are believed to direct and control the course of nature and of human life. Thus defined, religion consists of two elements, a theoretical and a practical, namely a belief in powers higher than man and an attempt to propitiate or please them.

E. Durkheim: A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.

The cognitive and practical sides or aspects of religion have been well related in a definition by Professor George Galloway.

Prof. George Galloway: Religion is that which refers to man's faith in a power beyond himself whereby he seeks to satisfy emotional needs and gain stability of life, and which he expresses in acts of worship and service. The cognitive side of the religious consciousness is represented by faith, and faith is stimulated by emotion and posits the object which will satisfy the needs of the inner life.... The practical aspect is denoted by the acts of worship and service which belong to the nature of religion.

"Faith is stimulated by emotion and posits the object which will satisfy the needs of the inner life" reveals that religion is that to which a person recurs to find fulfillment which he cannot find through mere physical products – terrestrial products. Needs may be divided into two:

- a. *Viscerogenic needs*. For nourishment, rest, sex, and physical safety. They are considered as subjective.
- b. *Psychogenic needs*. For goodness, beauty, truth, holiness. They are considered as objectified.

Religion, then may be called the individual reaching out to find fulfillment for his psychogenic needs. Faith in the supernatural or the mysterious, awesome, Great becomes essential to religion.

J. Bissett Pratt: Religion is the serious and social attitude of individuals or communities toward the power or powers which they conceive as having ultimate control over their interests and destinies... This definition defines religion as an *attitude*, which is used to cover that *responsive* side of consciousness which is found in such things as attention, interest, expectancy, feeling, tendencies to action, etc. The advantages of defining religion as an attitude are sufficiently manifest. It shows that religion is not a matter of any one 'department' of psychic life but involves the whole man. It includes what there was of truth in the historical attempts to identify religion with feeling, belief or will. And it draws attention to the fact that religion is immediately subjective, thus differing from science (which emphasizes 'content' rather than 'attitude'); and yet it points to the other fact also that religion involves and presupposes the acceptance of the objective. Religion is the attitude of

a self towards an object in which the self genuinely believes.

The concept of religious attitude as a response or consciousness leading to religious practices is important in the study of the psychology of religion. In Frazer's thought, "belief clearly comes first, since we must believe in the existence of a divine being before we can attempt to please him. But unless the belief leads to a corresponding practice, it is not a religion but merely a theology." Since the psychological method can be implemented with the availability of observable data, symptoms, practices, behavior, etc, observable practices are crucial for any possibility of the psychology of religion. Religious behavior is important to be identified and studied before any psychology of religion can be formulated.

Dr. R. H. Thoules: Any definition of religion to be adequate must include at least three factors: a mode of behavior, a system of intellectual beliefs and a system of feelings... Religion is a felt practical relationship with what is believed in as a superhuman being or beings.

Beliefs, feelings, and behavior are the three minimum factors that compose religion. Behavior includes things done and things-not-to-be-done, ritual and taboo. Thoules goes on to say:

... The main business of the psychology of religion is to study the religious consciousness. But it is impossible to study that alone; we must investigate religious behavior as well.

All the above and the many definitions of religion point to the fact that man has a particular bend toward the

"Higher-Superhuman". Archaeology, anthropology, ethnology and sociology have greatly contributed towards the field of psychological study of man. It is not the diversity of religions but the similarities between them that point towards the 'religiousness' of the human in any context, whether he is a remote tribal or a sophisticated urban. Psychologists agree that these similarities spring from such facts as the universality of human needs, spiritual no less than physical; from the same impulse towards unity and completeness; and from the same awareness of powers that appear to operate within the world and yet are external to it.

Though the study of human religious behavior is important in psychology, it is not all. Religious behavior is only a door towards the opening of real understanding regarding the mind of man which by its bend towards the mysterious incomparably differs from the brutes. The varieties of rituals and taboos (religious behavior) point towards something common to every man. In addition to religious behavior, a study of the beliefs is also important. Beliefs are important to the understanding of behavior.

Linguistic researches have shown that the meaning of the word 'soul' etymologically means similar in most of the known languages. In Assyrian, Hebrew, Arabic, Greek, Stoic, Latin and Sanskrit it means breath, spirit, or wind. The various taboos and rituals cannot be studied in isolation from their related beliefs. The belief in soul or souls is characteristic of most religions. Psychology tries to explain the origin of the idea of the soul in relation to the survival instinct of man and also his possible cogitations on the dream, waking, and unconscious states. The soul's relation to breath might have been thought on the differentiation of a corpse (that doesn't breathe) and a

living person (who breathes). The relation between soul and breath is a concept not alien to even the primitive tribes. This belief expresses itself in certain rituals and taboos. Thus, psychology reveals that religious beliefs and religious rituals and taboos are closely related.

This relation has been a regular feature of any religion. For instance, the belief of the identity of breath with soul is illustrated in a living example which Jung found during his researches among the mountain tribesmen of the Elgony; who, in the morning at the rising of the sun, 'hold their hands before their mouths and spit or blow into them vigorously. Then they turn their hands round and hold the palms forward to the sun. Jung explains that this particular ceremony is an offering to the sun which for these natives is *mungu*. If they have spittle on their hands, this is the substance which, according to primitive belief, contains the personal *mana*, the force that cures, conjures and sustains life. If they breathe upon their hands, breath is wind and spirit. The action means "I offer my living spirit to God." It is a wordless, acted prayer, which could equally well be spoken: "Lord, into thy hands I commend my spirit."

Perhaps the command "not to eat strangled meat" in the Bible is based on the assumption that strangling stifles the breath while the outflow of blood (in which the soul dwells) pours the soul out, a requisite of every sacrifice of blood in Judaism, at least symbolically. Thus, whether it is manmade ritual or a "divinely" commanded taboo or ritual, psychological connexions between attitudes, beliefs, feelings, and behavior can be found through the study of beliefs and behaviors. The strength of the connexion in a person depends on the time and degree he/she has been connected to the religion. Age and context do matter.

Psychology reveals that the human soul is religious. Human beings consciously and unconsciously respond to the mystery of the Supernatural, the mystery of life and death. Psychological experiences may be behind certain beliefs regarding self and the universe. These beliefs lead to certain practices of ritual and taboo. As far as the validity of the beliefs is concerned, that is not the domain of psychology; it is the domain of philosophy and science. For psychology it is the responses that are focal. And a psychological perspective of religion often views it as man's responsive attitude to the 'sacred'.

Resource:

Spinks, G. Stephen. *Psychology and Religion*, Margaret Gorman (ed), New York: Paulist Press, NA.