

THE PRESENT STATUS OF WILLIAM JAMES'S PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION

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At a conference on the present status of the psychology of religion held in 1938 there was general agreement among the distinguished psychologists present that the movement which had been launched so enthusiastically at the turn of the century and had reached so brilliant a climax in William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* had spent its force. Not only had there been a dearth of really significant new books in this field, but it was no longer academically respectable. If in any of our major universities a graduate student in psychology should submit a thesis in the psychology of religion, that thesis would not be accepted.

This paper will undertake to show that in so far as there has been a decline in the psychology of religion, it is only a recession which may be explained by the growing pains of psychology in general and that, actually, William James as a pioneer in this field is only now beginning to come into his own.

It is important to recognize that William James stood both at the beginning and at the end of an era. He was a pioneer and an explorer, but he was also a representative of the old order when philosophy and psychology dwelt together and the scientist was also a scholar who was at home in other departments of human knowledge. William James thus began as a specialist in physiology, but he became more and more absorbed in psychology, and he ended his life as a leader in the scientific study of religion and as a philosopher of the first magnitude. More than that he was a splendid incarnation of the old cosmopolitan culture, a man grounded in the study of Latin and Greek—without which he could not have graduated from college—and thoroughly at home in the language and literature of Germany and France. He was a man of broadest sympathies and widest horizon. He was a scholar of the old school at its best to whom the specialized new studies brought dazzling new vistas, which he had the power to describe in language unforgettable. Professor James's younger

associates in the psychological study of religion shared in this broader outlook. They also were trained in philosophy as well as in psychology. But they fronted more the coming age, and this early group was succeeded by specialists, men trained in the time when philosophy and psychology had been divorced and psychology was bent on establishing itself as a respectable "brass-instrument science." From this group came very few who dared to carry their inquiries over to the level of the religious, while those whose interest lay primarily in the field of religion made little use of the scientific method.

A second consideration is to be found in Professor James's interest in the psychopathological. This interest permeates the *Varieties* and provides the basis for some of its most brilliant insights. He was convinced that the phenomena of mental disease threw much light upon the everyday problems of personality and offered much more that was important to psychology than did experimental psychology. His younger associates in this country did not share this interest. Some of these were crusading against the excesses of nineteenth-century revivalism and all were critical of his interest in the pathological and his tenderness for the mystical. Thus it came to pass that the original impetus was diverted into religious education on the one hand and into the philosophy of religion on the other, while still others offered explanations in terms of the social factors. Meanwhile the promising beginnings in France and Germany were destroyed by the horrors of war. In Europe the general trend was toward a return to orthodox theological beliefs which had received emotional validation through the religious experiences of men who in time of crisis and suffering had been forced to think and feel together intensely about the ultimate values of life. The empirical approach to the study of religious experience was thus in large measure by-passed.

Meanwhile a new interest has been developed in the problems of the personality which promises to lead us back to William James's central insights. We are beginning to recognize more and more that the great driving forces of human life—love and hate and fear and anger and sense of failure and guilt—cannot be brought under laboratory conditions and that in the disorders of the personality we are dealing with the end-results of nature's experiments with just these forces. Hence a new interest in the psychopathological, due chiefly to the work of Sigmund Freud and his associates. They have found their chief source of understanding not in the laboratory but in listening to the patient in the interview situation. Instead of the old associationist psychology with its emphasis upon habit and the conditioned reflexes of the behaviorist school, they have given us a psychology based upon the stuff of experience, with wishes and dreams, love and hate, anxiety and belief as central factors. As yet the Freudians have shown little interest in religion and little understanding thereof. Freud himself regarded religion as a neurotic manifestation and most of

his followers have been interested chiefly in reductive interpretations, particularly the mistakes made by parents in the early years of life. Nonetheless, students of religion have been quick to see the implications of psychoanalytic doctrine for the study of religion. Following World War I, books on the psychology of religion, especially in England, have been based largely upon Freudian teaching. But few, if any, of these books have been based upon first-hand study, and few, if any, have attempted to employ the methods of science. Most of them have been semi-popular treatises built upon foundations which are not likely to endure.

Along with this new interest in the psychopathological has come the movement for the clinical training of clergy and theological students. As originally formulated, this movement saw in mental illness a problem which concerned the student and minister of religion quite as much as it did the medical man. Mental illness, it held, was the price we had to pay for being men and having the power of choice and the capacity for growth. It was due to the operations of conscience, and certain of its forms are manifestations of healing power analogous to fever or inflammation in the body. As such they are closely akin to the dramatic forms of religious experience so prominent in the history of the Christian Church since the days of Saul of Tarsus. These forms, which are to be sharply distinguished from those in which adaptations to defeat and failure are made and accepted, are frequently characterized by the sense of mystical identification which figured so prominently in James's philosophy of religion. In many ways this movement represented a return to William James and an attempt to take up where he left off. With him it believed that sickness of soul might have religious significance. With him it saw in mystical experience the creative source of institutionalized religion and it proposed to employ the methods of science in attacking the problems involved.

As a cooperative attack upon the problem of religious experience the clinical training movement has, for this writer, been disappointing. It has shown considerable vigor, but its main interests have diverged widely from those of William James in his *Varieties*. It has often been content to accept psychoanalysis as authoritarian doctrine, and it has often placed its main emphasis upon early conditionings and upon the techniques of counseling and of group work. The questions of central importance to the student of religion and of theology are not being asked and valid methods of cooperative inquiry are not being developed.

The anniversary of the publication of the *Varieties* therefore brings with it a special challenge to those engaged in clinical pastoral training, that of undertaking the exploration of the important territory in which William James has blazed the way in the effort to build up a body of organized and tested experience relating to the religious life and the laws that govern it.

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