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A Brief History Of The Psychology Of Religion

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When I'm not delving into the science and pseudoscience surrounding autism, I have other areas of interest that I turn my attention to. The psychology of religion is one of those areas of interest.

Introduction to the subject:

Perhaps the most accurate assessment that can be made when looking at the history of the psychology of religion is its cyclical nature within psychology. As general psychology has entertained questions concerning humanity's consciousness, the study of the psychology of religion has been legitimized. When schools of thought have arisen that are more mechanistic in nature, the psychology of religion has fallen from grace.

When psychology became its own distinct branch of science in the latter part of the 19th century, it did not separate itself entirely from its philosophical roots. While psychology has never been a united field, with its scientific adherents often taking potshots at its more philosophically-minded brethren, the study of religion from a psychological perspective was inaugurated almost from the beginning of psychology's advent as a modern scientific field of enquiry. Ushered into a topic worthy of investigation under Hall and James and their students Leuba and Starbuck, the psychology of religion was initially on relatively scientific terms, with initial studies in conversion conducted in the 1890s. With the rise in behaviorism, the study of religion from the perspective of psychology languished and was taken up from religion's side and pursued from the angle of providing Christian counseling.

In the 1950s with Gordon Allport's *The Individual and His Religion*, the psychology of religion again entered the domain of psychology. In the 1960s and 1970s the interest in the psychology of religion grew as the humanistic approach made leeway over behaviorism.

Currently, there is again resurgence in the popularity of the psychology of religion as questions arise concerning the role that spirituality and religion play not only in mental

health but in physical well-being as well. It is a dynamic field today, with considerable energy and resources increasingly being devoted to it.

Definition of terms:

William James (1902/2002) acknowledged at the outset of seminal work *The Varieties of Religious Experience* the difficulties of providing an all-encompassing definition of religion, noting that a unified conception of religion might be “a thing more misleading than enlightening” (p. 27). For the purpose of his lectures, James offered the definition of religion to be “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude... in relation to whatever they may consider divine” (p. 31). Miller and Thoresen (2003) consider James’s definition of a personal religion more appropriately as a definition of spirituality and place religion as “an institutional (and thus primarily material) phenomenon” (p. 27).

Pargament (1999) notes that the only thing that psychologists in the field of the religion have ever agreed on is that “we have never agreed about anything,” especially when it comes to defining religion. (p. 4). Three things that religion is not, according to Pargament, that have been agreed upon are that religion is not reserved as an institution alone, has not been only concerned with God, nor has religion been approached as only positive or negative (p. 5). According to Pargament, psychologists are moving from defining religion as “a broadband construct” which encompasses not only the personal experience but the formalized, institutional experience, “to a narrowband construct” which is comprised only of the stifling institutional experience while spirituality “is becoming differentiated from religion as an individual expression that speaks to the greatest of our capacities” (p. 6). Pargament offers these definitions for religion and spirituality: “Religion refers to the search for significance in ways related to the sacred” (p. 11) and spirituality as “the most central function of religion,” “a search for the sacred” (p. 12).

Having presented various definitions for religion and spirituality, a definition must be tendered for the psychology of religion. Loewenthal (2000) defines it “as the study of religious behavior, thought, and feeling” while noting some difficulties in such a relatively simple definition (p. 13).

Relevance of topic:

The psychology of religion is an extremely relevant topic of study in a post 9/11 world. What creates a religious terrorist willing to sacrifice his or her own life while killing as many people of other belief systems is a topic that should be of paramount importance to researchers of pathology. The differences inherent in a devout believer who practices his or her faith with a commitment to harm none and the devout believer who pursues a holy war ought to be considered worthy of study. While I won’t suggest that the field has reached the point in its development that there is enough objectivity to study these issues scientifically and without bias, I will advocate that it is far past time to do so.

Emmons and Paloutzian (2003) assert that modern psychologists face the same challenge as the founders of the psychology of religion did: to study and examine from a psychological perspective the origin and enactment of religious beliefs in people (at a societal and individual level) and how to use “this knowledge for human good” (p. 378).

Miller and Thoresen (2003) believe that spirituality and religion can be studied objectively through the scientific method and counter arguments which deny the existence of a reality outside the physical senses as well the idea that science is not capable of examining spirituality. Miller et al. point out that the sciences outside of psychology have a long

history of studying concepts which required inferences rather than direct observation. They argue that because of recent studies, albeit flawed and “poor in quality” showing “relationships between religion and health,” more research with better controlled methodologies and more clearly defined concepts of religion and spirituality is warranted and necessary (Miller&Thoresen, p. 26).

Research Methodology:

Hunsberger (1991) attests that psychology’s approach towards religion in the 1880s through the 1910s was one which had “a strong emphasis on maintaining a positivistic, empirical approach” while approaching the subject respectfully (p. 497). However, as behaviorism took root, the examination of religion from a psychological perspective fell from favor in the 1920s to the 1950s, and was explored primarily from the perspective of pastoral counseling (Hunsberger). Hunsberger contends that research in the religion arena “continues to overuse paper-and-pencil measures in correlational studies” (p. 498) and agrees with Batson’s call “for more experimental or at least quasi-experimental research” (p. 498).

Founders of the movement:

The psychology of religion as a movement within psychology began almost as soon as psychology expanded from German universities to American universities. Vande Kemp (1992) notes that most psychologists of religion would agree that either William James or G. Stanley Hall must be acknowledged as the founder of the movement. William James is perhaps best known of the two men, and his work *The Varieties of Religious Experience* remains in print and popular more than a hundred years after publication. Hall, though, was the first to write on the matter of religion, and according to Pratt (as cited in Vande Kemp), created “the Clark school of religious psychology” (Vande Kemp, p. 290; Pratt, p. 436). Beit-Hallahmi (1977) also gives credit to Hall and James’s students J. H. Leuba and E. D. Starbuck who carried out research and published studies in the 1890s.

While G. Stanley Hall’s writings may not have received quite as much popular attention as James’s *The Varieties of Religious Experience* did, his work in the field of the psychology of religion was perhaps of much greater importance in establishing it as an established field of study. White (1992) contends that Hall’s vision of the new, scientific psychology was from its outset “fundamentally and profoundly religious” (p. 25). While the apparent thrust of much of the research that Hall carried out at Clark University involved early childhood development, a significant portion was “interested in the development of moral and religious sentiment in children—through growth and moral education” (White, p. 30). White also notes that Hall’s two volume work on adolescence is “unread today,” although are occasionally mentioned (p. 30).

According to White (1992), Hall left his studies on child development and focused his energy on religion, founding a journal for the psychology of religion in 1904, which remained in publication until 1911 as the *American Journal of Religious Psychology and Education*, and continuing intermittently under a revised title until 1915 (Beit-Hallahmi, 1977). Johnson (1945) contends that Hall’s interest in the psychology of religion dates back to 1881 in his studies of “religious conversion in the awakenings of adolescence (p. 19). Hall also wrote by 1900 and published in 1917 a work entitled *Jesus, the Christ, in the Light of Psychology* (White, p. 32). Vande Kemp (1992) acknowledges that few outside the study of the history of the psychology of religion are aware of Hall’s inaugural role in the field despite the fact that Hall and his students “were incontestably the first Americans to attempt the scientific study of religion and to set its agenda” (p. 296). Strunk (1977) credits Hall with promoting the study of the psychology of religion in part due to Hall’s role as the American Psychological Association’s creator and first president, but even more so due to

being president of Clark University.

William James is considered by many historians and psychologists to be the founder of the psychology of religion. Strunk (1977) gives James the credit for establishing “part of the future pattern” for the psychology of religion (p. 27), despite James’ own acknowledgment of E. D. Starbuck, Henry W. Rankin, Theodore Flourney, and others in his preface to *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902/2002). Strunk credits James with investing the movement with a “humanistic spirit” (p. 27). Johnson (1945) notes that James’ preferred method of the study of the psychology of religion used biography and autobiography. James’s interest in the psychology of religion did not fit within the narrow confines of the science of the day and rejected looking at religion only from a functional perspective; instead it called “for broadening the metaphysical options of psychology” (Hood, 2000, p. 534).

J. H. Leuba, a student of Hall’s, published numerous articles concerning the psychology of religion, as well as four books on the psychology of religion. Beit-Hallahmi (1977) contends that this gave Leuba “the leadership position in the movement as long as it existed” (p. 19). Hood (2000) backs this up, noting that as long as Leuba was the editor of the *Psychological Bulletin*, articles concerning the psychology of religion appeared. According to Wieman and Wieman (1935), Leuba was one of the few psychologists willing at the time to look at not only the attitudes and practices of individuals in religion, but to also deal with “the nature and existence of God”, even if it was to treat god as an illusion (p. 44).

E. D. Starbuck, a student of both James and Hall and began studying religion from a psychological perspective as early as 1890, presenting papers on the subject and putting out “two questionnaires” (Beit-Hallahmi, 1977, p. 19). In addition, Starbuck published a study on conversion in 1897 and wrote the first book entirely committed to the subject, *The Psychology of Religion*, in 1899 in which James provided the preface (Beit-Hallahmi). Johnson (1945) credits Starbuck with pioneering “in questionnaire studies, basing his *The Psychology of Religion* (1899) largely thereon” (p. 24). Leuba (1900) reviewed Starbuck’s work, noting that it was essentially the combination of Starbuck’s conversion study published in 1897 and his study “into the line of growth in religion in individuals” (p. 509), placing much more emphasis on the portion covering conversion and criticizing Starbuck’s failure to meet the “conditions imposed by the statistical method” (p. 516).

The movement’s first decline: the 1920s and rise of behaviorism

Beit-Hallahmi (1977) contends that the psychology of religion saw a “rapid decline and final demise” at the end of the 1920s (p. 21). By 1928, publication of studies in the area had all but disappeared and courses in the subject area were also ceasing to be taught (Beit-Hallahmi). Douglas (as cited in Beit-Hallahmi) proposed six reasons for the decline in the field: psychology of religion remained attached to the philosophy of religion and evangelism, psychology became more interested in being regarded as a science, psychology of religion’s methods of research were “often uncritical and incompetent”, behaviorism was on the rise, the study of religion was “conflictual” because of the “personal investment in religion”, and psychology’s move towards empiricism (p. 22).

Psychology of religion becomes religious psychology

When the psychology of religion was no longer considered a valid area of research for science-minded psychologists, those in the movement who had religious affiliations picked up the charge and continued to write extensively on the subject matter, but from an entirely different perspective, that of a theological perspective (Beit-Hallahmi, 1977).

Henry Nelson Wieman was a pragmatic theologian who believed that “the fundamental concern of science and theology” was the “satisfaction of human interest” (Anderson, 2002, p. 165). In 1935, Wieman and his wife wrote a textbook for courses in the psychology of religion entitled *Normative Psychology of Religion*, which looked at “the essential functions of religion in human living” (p. vii). While Henry Nelson Wieman wrote the book from the perspective a theologian and philosopher, Regina Westcott-Wieman approached the work from the perspective of a clinical psychologist. Because the text is written not only to inform the reader or student about normal religious behavior, but also designed as a supplemental text for readers seeking guidance in how to conduct their own religious behavior, the thrust of the book is clearly outside the scientific realm. Wells (1936) notes this tendency and is scathing in his review of the text, calling it a “somewhat illegitimate mixture” of “neither philosophy nor theology not psychology” (p. 300). As such, and with no scientific studies to back up any of its claims, it is representative of the shift from psychology to theology that the psychology of religion made during the 1920s through 1950s.

An example of how the psychology of religion moved from a scientific footing to a theological perspective is excellently provided by Knight Dunlap (1946) who, as a professor of psychology for the University of California, wrote the text *Religion: Its Functions in Human Life*, in which he soundly denounced any and all other texts with the psychology of religion in the title, suggesting that they might “usefully be avoided” except for William James’ text, which while excellent still dwelt too much on pathology (p. 350). Dunlap makes clear in several places in his work his disdain for those psychologists who examined the psychology of religion looking for examples of abnormal functioning while insisting that the proper avenue of research in the psychology of religion should be on its normal functioning in everyday life and to that end a significant portion of his book is spent in a historical, comparative role of religion.

Reemergence of movement in the 1950s:

Although books continued to be published on the psychology of religion from the 1920s to the 1950s, the perspective tended to be from a theological one rather than a scientifically-based perspective. Gordon Allport, best known for his work within the personality perspective, altered this trend with his publication in 1950 of his *The Individual and His Religion*. Leak and Fish contend that Allport “remains the most influential psychologist to theorize about the essential features of religious maturity” (p. 84). According to Loewenthal (2000), Allport, by taking up the research of religion in the individual and the relationship between religion and prejudice, was setting “himself against the current thinking in the scientific establishment, where the Zeitgeist was very much anti-religion and anti the study of religion” (p. 132).

Current state of affairs in the movement

Belzen (2005) notes that the current atmosphere within psychology today is one increased interest in the areas of religion and spirituality, especially “in the field of psychotherapy and other mental-health related issues” (p. 1) but is concerned that the focus is too much on these issues of mental health and that psychologists are receiving inadequate training on how to help clients when it pertains to issues involving religion and spirituality. Belzen (2005) argues that people are not by their nature religious; religion and religiosity is cultural in nature. As such, psychology must not only study “the personal counterpart of religion, we need to give full attention to the different forms of religion in which the individuals and groups happen to be studied are embedded” (p. 6). Belzen (2005) makes an impassioned plea “for phenomenologically well-informed research on real forms of

religion and spirituality” from a broad, cultural perspective. (p. 14).

Emmons and Paloutzian (2003) note that although “the psychology of religion is alive, well, and growing” (p. 394), it would appear that to a large degree the research being done on the field is not being incorporated into the entire range of psychology; for the most part, it is restricted to “clinical applications and health psychology” (p. 395). Despite its lack of attention by psychologists in other areas of interest, the psychology of religion is “a strong research enterprise whose topics interface almost all areas of psychology, whose scholars produce an impressive body of research” (Emmons&Paloutzian, p. 395). Hood (2000) contends that the psychology of religion remains marginalized, “driven by a relatively few investigators” (p. 531).

Fuller (2006) views psychology of religion in a different light and proposes that psychology’s very popularity as field of study and in the culture is due to psychology’s “resonance with the nation’s popular religious imagination” (p. 222). This is not quite as revolutionary as it may initially appear. People, especially those who are secular and have turned away from traditional, institutionalized religion, turned towards psychology, looking for it to answer those questions that have the most profound meaning: who am I?, why am I here?, how should I live my life? The problem in the past with psychology is its narrowness in defining religion, as well as its overthrowing of the “religious horizon of psychological theory” by Watson (Fuller, p. 228). Fortunately, psychologists followed Watson who put these concerns back in to psychology, such as Erikson, Jung, Frankl, Wertheimer, Allport, and Rogers (Fuller).

The research into the role that religion and spirituality play in shaping people’s lives (both interior and outer) and health is enjoying a renewed surge of popularity. It is no longer a taboo subject relegated to those interested in the subject from a predominantly Christian perspective (and hence somehow less scientific perspective). It is a subject considered valid and worthy of scientific study irrespective of the researcher’s personal religious beliefs. Interest and awareness in the differences of cultural perspectives in religion are altering the ways in which research is conducted, in addition to creating a richer and more varied array of questions to ask about the topic.

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