

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF PRAYER AND WORSHIP: A SURVEY

Introduction

Anyone who is at all familiar with developments in contemporary psychology will realize that there can be no such thing as *the* psychology of prayer and worship, in the sense of one unified and agreed psychological account of these religious phenomena. The discipline of psychology is characterized by profound and hotly debated disagreements in theoretical orientation, reminiscent of the kind of strife with which theologians have been familiar for many centuries. So far as that aspect of psychology which has studied religious behaviour is concerned, a recent survey of the field (Argyle, 1958) traces at least seven different theories, based on concepts as various as social learning, frustration, fantasy, obsessional neurosis, and cognitive need.

In view of such diversity, I shall make no attempt in this paper at a definitive or exhaustive account of the subject matter. All that seems possible is a sampling procedure, providing some brief sketches of the main view-points. Moreover a further observation needs to be made about all psychological accounts of religion: Despite some appearances to the contrary in the controversies they have provoked, such accounts do not constitute either a proof or a disproof of the truth of the beliefs being studied. The point is put clearly by Argyle (*op. cit.*, p. 1):

There are two quite different sorts of questions about religion. The psychologist or social scientist is only concerned with the causes or empirical conditions for religious phenomena. He is not concerned with the other kind of question about whether the beliefs are true, the experiences valid, or the rituals useful; these are problems for the theologian. . . .

With these points in mind we may now survey psychological studies of religious behaviour, following the rough and ready division suggested by my title; first *prayer*, understood as the devotional activity of the *individual*, will be examined; and then *worship*, understood as *group* devotional activity, will be discussed.

Prayer

We may begin with William James' Gifford lectures, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, both because they are the classical text in the

field of psychology of religion and because they represent a wholly individualistic approach to religious phenomena. James' definition of religion is: '... the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine' (James, 1901, p. 50).

In line with this individualistic starting point, James' description of prayer is in terms of *transactions* between the believer and the Divine Unseen Powers. Prayer is a sense that something is happening between the individual and his God. Thus prayer must be regarded as the very soul and essence of religion. If the sense of interrelation with the divine is a delusion, then the professed intellectual beliefs are a delusion. But if religion is a genuine human experience, then the activity of prayer releases energy which otherwise would be bound, producing effects either in the universe at large or (more conservatively) on the mind of the praying person. Effective prayer, then, is the core of that experience known as 'religious'.

Our view of the adequacy of James' account will depend on our assessment of his general philosophical-psychological theoretical stance which may be identified as both *experiential* and *pragmatist*. James is interested in that which is both useful to and illuminating for the individual. In the believer's experience of prayer, he finds both of them fulfilled. Thus at the lowest estimate,* religious experience is regarded as a part, perhaps a central part, of the genuinely human experience.

A quite different account of the religious behaviour of the individual is given by the Freudian school of psychology. In *Civilisation and its Discontents* and *The Future of An Illusion*, Sigmund Freud saw religion as a maladaptive defensive reaction to anxiety. Plagued in adult life both with the insecurities of childhood and the many frustrations of sexual and aggressive drives imposed by civilization, some individuals seek refuge in religious activity. The wish to be safe, to be loved and to be relieved of the pain of guilt and of mortality is fulfilled in the ascription to the universe of a divine will or purpose through which all wrongs are righted, all wounds healed. Thus prayer is seen as an attempt to escape from the harsh realities of intrapsychic conflict and interpersonal frustration. Freud conceded that his account of religious behaviour did not disprove the possibilities of the existence of God, since the establishing of such a proposition was beyond the scope of psychological theory: but he felt convinced that, whether or not God existed, religious activity was a poor method of adjustment to adult responsibilities. Thus Freud, in total opposition to James, views prayer as destructive of human growth potentialities rather than as productive of them.

* In fact James takes the argument considerably further than this, seeking to establish the probability of a God upon whom these experiences depend.

A recent attempt to make a positive assessment of private devotional activity, whilst remaining within the categories of Freudian psychology, is to be found in Roy S. Lee's *Psychology and Worship*. For Lee, 'Prayer is the activity of the whole personality, to the extent that it has attained wholeness' (Lee, 1955, p. 94). The gist of Lee's argument is that genuine religious activity proceeds from a union of the wished for and the actual; or, in the psychoanalytic jargon, of the harmonious interrelationship of the ego, superego (or conscience) and ego-ideal. The craving for an all-protective heavenly father figure characterizes an *infantile* type of religious behaviour. The prayer of the *mature* believer is as much a facing of present reality as an aspiration for that which transcends the known and the rational. A similar position is taken by two American writers, Henry Nelson Wieman and Regina Westcott-Wieman. They list among the conditions of effective prayer: 'facing the situation or problem squarely' and 'meeting all other conditions for its solution that one can'. Thereafter one commits one's wants to the 'transforming growth of meaning', with faith in the effectiveness of such an action. The Wiemans summarize the value of prayer as follows: 'Prayer is mightily effective with God when one meets the conditions. Without prayer the growth of meaning and value in the world is disastrously crippled. When prayer is added to other required conditions, a marvellous growth of beauty, goodness and love occurs' (Wieman and Westcott-Wieman, 1935, p. 146).

Much more has been written on the theme of the psychological causation or the psychological effects of private prayer, but these selections may suffice to illustrate the muddiness of the waters. We may observe that, if James might be criticized for lack of theoretical formulation, the other writers we have glanced at seem to theorize with little of James' faithfulness to the data. I shall be returning to this point at the end of the paper.

Worship

When we shift our attention from the praying individual to the worshipping group the concept of 'mob psychology' immediately comes into view. This term has an old-fashioned ring, but in the more refined form of 'group pressure' it still figures strongly in analyses of public worship. A particularly interesting and striking study is that of William Sargant in *Battle for the Mind*. Sargant brings together a body of seemingly diverse data to illustrate the mechanics of indoctrination. He moves with apparent ease from the traumatic neuroses of war and the treatment of these with drugs and shock treatment, through the trances induced by Voodoo rituals, to the effects produced on congregations by the preaching of John

Wesley! The theoretical structure which unites these phenomena is a modified form of Pavlov's stimulus-response theory. Sargant argues that radical changes in personality and belief can be brought about by subjecting the brain to excessive stimulation which produces an inhibition of normal patterns of response. Given the right conditions, a flip-over to a complete reversal of normal behaviour can then be effected. The rituals of religion, Sargant argues, serve to produce the phenomenon of conversion by this means. Thus he quotes with approval some remarks of Aldous Huxley (in the appendix of *The Devils of Loudun*): 'No man, however highly civilised, can listen for long to African drumming, or Indian chanting, or Welsh hymn singing, and retain intact his critical and self-conscious personality' (quoted in Sargant, 1961, p. 148).

Of course Sargant is not claiming that all forms of religious worship produce or are intended to produce the dramatic effects of the examples he has selected. He has deliberately chosen extreme cases to illustrate his theme of assault on the brain through hyper-stimulation. Yet lurking in his concluding chapters there is the implication that the effective propagation of religious faith will depend on the understanding and controlled use of such brain washing methods: 'Must a new concentration on brain physiology and brain mechanics weaken religious faith and beliefs? On the contrary, a better understanding of the means of creating and consolidating faith will enable religious bodies to expand much more rapidly' (Sargant, 1961, p. 239).

A totally different approach to that of Sargant can be found in the work of James Bissett Pratt. Pratt argued that it is necessary to distinguish between *subjective* and *objective* worship (Pratt, 1920, p. 290 ff): *Subjective worship* attempts to induce some desired mood or belief or attitude in the mind of the worshipper; whereas *objective worship* is aimed at making some kind of effect on the Deity or in some way communicating with him.

Having drawn the distinction, Pratt goes on to make several sweeping generalizations – the Catholic mass is objective, but Protestant services are subjective; traditional Hindu temple ceremonies are objective, but the worship ceremonies of Hindu reform movements are subjective, and so on.

Clearly Pratt applies his distinction in a clumsy way, as anyone familiar with the complexities of Catholic and Protestant worship traditions will recognize. Yet the general point he is making seems important. To describe worship solely in terms of the effects it has on the participants is a partial description only. The consciously expressed intentions of most worshippers include 'objective' references, couched in terms of service of or response to a Deity. Certainly it is open to any psychological theorist to dismiss such

references as rationalizations of subjective motivations of one kind or another. But a more balanced view would be one which put the objective reference out of the scope of psychology (it would be a bold psychologist who attempted to study effects on the Deity!) and which restricted the scope of description to psychological factors in the worshipping group.

Given this restriction in scope, several other types of description of the worshipping group can be briefly mentioned. In *Totem and Taboo* Freud described worship – and in particular the Christian Eucharist – as an acting out of primitive desires to kill and eat the father. Theodore Reik (following on a suggestion of Freud's) saw similarities between the rituals of religious practices and the compulsive acts of obsessional neurosis (*Dogma and Compulsion*, 1951). Other writers – notably those in the Jungian school – have focussed attention on the use of visual symbols and of symbolic action, posture and gesture in worship. In Jungian theory the symbolizations of religion (as of art) give the individual access to the hidden, non-rational depths of his personality. Thus worship functions – or can function – to bring both self-realization to the individual and cohesiveness to the group (*vide* C. J. Jung, 1938; G. Cope, 1959).

Finally, the results of empirical surveys of personality variables of worshippers could be summarized by indicating that in Western Christian denominations Church attenders are more conservative, more authoritarian, more prejudiced, less delinquent and less sexually active than the population at large. In the age range 16–39, regular worshippers may possibly be more neurotic than the general population, but in the elderly religious belief and practice is associated with *better* emotional adjustment. (See Argyle, 1958 for a full presentation of these findings.) The problem with such empirical data, however, is one of interpretation. Particularly so far as worship is concerned, it is not clear whether we regard the differences between worshippers and non-worshippers as a *cause* of their participation in worship or an *effect* of such participation.

In summary, we may say that psychological interpretation of worship is in a considerable state of disarray. Theories abound, and there is a considerable volume of empirical data, but the relationship between the two is far from satisfactory.

Summary and Conclusions

In the light of this survey a few general observations about the present state of psychological studies of religious practice can now be made:

1. It is unfortunate that the specialized study of the psychology of religion has been cut off from the mainstream of psychological theory

and research. For most of its development it has been little more than a meandering and brackish sidewater. With the notable exception of William James' Gifford Lectures, it has received scant attention from academic psychologists. The great bulk of theorizing has come from the Psychoanalytic school – the most speculative and controversial of all contemporary psychological orientations. Much more work needs to be done in the formulation of a body of theory and the testing of hypotheses through sustained research in order to give the study of religious practices the same solidity as, say, studies of perception or of emotional maturation. Little can be said by way of summary of established findings to date, except that the data so far available fail to support the Freudian contention that religious practices are defensive and maladaptive responses to emotional stress. Indeed, a basic weakness in all the studies has been an over-concentration on emotional factors and on almost total neglect of cognitive aspects of religious experience.

2. The distinction drawn by Pratt between objective and subjective aspects of prayer and worship has been too often overlooked. As a result there has been a tendency either to *attack* religious practice as a form of mass delusion (Freud), or to *defend* it as the harbinger of psychological integration (Lee, the Wiemans). The truth of the matter is that psychological description offers no more than *one* perspective on a complex and multidimensional phenomenon.

3. A heavy bias in the literature toward the practices of Western Christianity must be noted. This bias needs to be corrected by more investigation of the rituals and meditative practices of other religions. If the psychology of religion is a viable study at all, its scope must not be restricted by the personal religious commitments or cultural conditioning of those who in the past have made it their concern. Since the question of the truth of beliefs is not appropriate to such studies, there need be no threat implied in placing the practices of Christianity within a broader frame. Indeed such a broadening might help us to see the unique features of Christian worship more clearly.

In conclusion, it can be said that unless new developments of the kind suggested are actively pursued, the psychology of prayer and worship will remain a subject with one classic text (*The Varieties of Religious Experience*), which marked both its beginning and its end.

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