



# The Mystery of Religion ❧ ❧ ❧

A STUDY IN SOCIAL  
PSYCHOLOGY BY ❧ ❧ ❧ ❧  
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*The Mystery of Religion*

**THE MYSTERY OF RELIGION**

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*First Edition*

E-Y

*To My Wife*  
*Persis Eastman R. Martin*

## PREFACE

THIS book is a study in Social Psychology. Social Psychology is a comparatively new subject of investigation. The greatest advance in this field is to be made not by attempting to lay down general principles which will cover the whole of the phenomena to be studied, but by isolating certain specific problems and analyzing their elements according to that psychological method which leads us to the most fruitful hypotheses. The method of psychopathology is of the greatest assistance to the student in this field.

From the standpoint of Social Psychology, the religious problem is of prime importance. Not only are many facts of social behavior the outgrowth of religious motives, but these motives are themselves to a great extent social in their origin and nature. Surely the imagery and emotional fixations which have their origin in the relation of the child to its parents, and, as we shall see, play an important rôle in religious

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experience, properly belong to Social Psychology. An understanding of these motives should aid us to the understanding of many social phenomena which are not directly associated with religion.

The scope of this study is, therefore, necessarily limited. The subject of religion is so rich and varied that it has been necessary to exclude much that is of genuine psychological interest. The material upon which I have drawn is confined largely to Protestant Christianity. I am convinced that a Catholic or a Jew, using the psychological method that I have used, would paint a somewhat different picture. But this fact has its advantages. Most studies of religion are too general. One is really qualified to deal adequately with only those aspects of religion with which he has immediate personal acquaintance. Studies similar in spirit to this one should be made with the background of Catholicism, Judaism, and other religious communities. It is only through a number of such analyses that we may gain a comprehensive view of religion as a whole.

While, therefore, this book reflects a definite background of religious culture, it should be remembered that the narrowing of the scope

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here does not necessarily distort the picture of the experience so studied. The elements which are most emphasized in Protestant Christianity are not at all confined to it, but are part of the psychology of religious experience itself.

The problem of religion is of special interest in America. Much new knowledge about our world and about ourselves must be assimilated by persons whose outlook on life has been achieved under religious influences. Religion itself has become a problem. An increasing number are coming to see it as essentially a problem of human nature. To understand it better is to gain new and deeper knowledge of oneself. In the first three chapters I have dealt at some length with the symbolic significance of religious ideas because, unless one sees that religion is not primarily a knowledge affair, it is impossible for him to come to a correct psychological valuation of it. The fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh chapters should be of much interest to special students of the subject. In the concluding chapter I have suggested a solution of the problem in so far as social philosophy has a contribution to make. To follow out the implications of this suggestion would lead us beyond the scope of our

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study, which is essentially analytical. But it would appear that somewhere in this direction lies the future of religion for thoughtful people. And perhaps I may be permitted the hope that such self-analysis as I am here trying to lead the reader through is but a door opening out to a new appreciation of the spiritual values of life.

E. D. M.

NEW YORK, *October 1, 1923.*



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# I

## *Mysteries of Religion*

**R**ELIGIOUS practices and beliefs, other than those to which we have grown accustomed, appear strange to us. The ceremonies and religious ideas of the "heathen" often strike the Christian as weird, and even foolish, while the same heathen may look upon Christian practices with amazement or stand unmoved in the presence of what to the Christian mind are the most sacred realities. But it is not necessary to contemplate these radical differences in religion to discover in the various forms of religious behavior evidences of inner secrets, unspoken and inexpressible things that move the heart of the believer, but appear merely exotic when viewed from without. Catholic and Jew and the various Protestant sects have each something which the others do not and doubtless can not "understand."

What are these inner realities? To what

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motives and desires in human nature do they minister? What is here seeking to express itself? And what, viewed as forms of adaptation, is the value of these queer types of behavior?

In those moments when we pause and look over our shoulders with flashes of curiosity or illumination that seem to come from regions outside our early training and daily routine, even our own most commonplace religious practices must strike us as rather inexplicable things for creatures like ourselves to be doing. We find people, whose actions are normally fairly well adjusted to a world of familiar objects, suddenly making curious gestures, speaking strange words, using unaccustomed tones of voice, addressing invisible persons, ceasing from labor on certain days, or abstaining from food and normal sex relationships for long periods, again standing in awe of certain persons, places, books. Frequently we find our fellows and ourselves modifying our conduct according to commandments imposed upon us by some invisible authority and without regard to the ordinary results in experience. And yet again we find people calling themselves sinners, seeking to be delivered from a burden of

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nameless guilt. Ask such persons just what are the concrete misdeeds which trouble their memories and often they cannot tell.

The explanations commonly given for such actions never quite explain. They always seem to presuppose something still more difficult. And this is equally true whether the explanation is offered by the religious devotee himself or by the student of religion.

Those scholars of our day who have the habit of looking on all forms of behavior as modes of adaptation to environment would appear to find difficulty in offering an account of religious practices. A common method is that of anthropology, which seeks to trace traditional religious customs and beliefs back to some simple primitive origin. This method has its advantages; it is scientific. It treats its subject as a natural phenomenon. And by tracing the steps of the advance from the primitive to the modern it brings religious progress within the evolutionary process, shows its relations to the general advance of culture and the development of institutions, and throws much light upon the history of various religious practices.

But it can tell us very little about religion as

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experience. Thus we may learn much about the *deposits* of religion in history, but very little about religious interests themselves. What we wish to learn is why people behave in ways that may be termed religious. Why are they evidently obliged in vast numbers and for long periods to entertain certain fixed beliefs. What is the nature and real meaning of these things.

To reach if possible a better understanding of this real meaning, this secret "under-side" of religious phenomena is the aim of our present study. We shall assume that something here is seeking at once to disguise and reveal itself. Something very vital to the human psyche, yet something that is for the most part hidden from the ordinary consciousness of the believer. We shall attempt to bring to consciousness some of these unrecognized and unattended religious motives. We shall strive to see them in the light of present day psychology. We shall study certain facts of religious experience, not with the purpose of rationalizing religion as such, but rather in order that we may gain a more penetrating insight into human nature. Most men, in all stages of culture, are religious beings. Religious practices

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are therefore characteristic modes of human behavior. And while it is true that the overt ceremonies and cult ideas of religion differ enormously, it is possible that analysis of some of the more typical and familiar religious attitudes may reveal facts of mental life that are more general than would at first be suspected. Most studies of Religion deal with the subject as something given—external, as it were—a thing of impersonal traditions, institutions, or metaphysical and supermundane realities. Religion is doubtless all of these. But they lie outside the scope of our present study. Our interest is confined to group behavior—in other words, to social psychology.

As students of social psychology we seek criteria which will enable us to know what we and our fellow beings are really doing when we think we are doing something different. We wish to learn which forms of behavior are adequate modes of adaptation to reality, and which are motivated by unconscious desires that are anti-social, or are designed to resolve conflicts that lie wholly within the psyche and have the primary function of defending our self-appreciations against our own impulses. Once psychology gives us such criteria it may



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become a valuable guide in determining social policy, a "yes" and "no" saying science.

No one will seriously deny, I think, that religion has close psychological relations to social behavior. In fact, there is probably nothing in the whole range of human activity in which the determinants of social behavior may be so profitably studied as in religion. For these reasons we shall not seek to give a systematic psychological account of the whole of religious experience. This has several times been attempted, but without great success. We must confine our study to data which are most significant for our social interest, and are most familiar to persons brought up with more or less immediate acquaintance with Christianity.

The hidden motives back of religious behavior give rise to that sense of mystery which pervades religion everywhere. "The heart hath its reasons which the reason cannot understand." The tenacity with which the religious consciousness clings to its mystery, often in spite of patent and undeniable fact, is a universal testimony to the presence of the unconscious motivation to which I have referred. Sometimes the mystery appears as the occult,

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as magic. Again as an esoteric truth known only to the initiated, or as "the inner light," immediate awareness of the ineffable. Often the mystery is "projected," objectified—that is, it appears to the consciousness of the believer not so much as his own mystery as the mystery of the universe or of the spiritual meaning of life.

So large does the mysterious loom in religious experience that it is sometimes regarded as a basic reality in religion. It is said to be that which distinguishes faith from reason. Even so rationalistic a writer as Herbert Spencer seemed to feel that he was giving philosophic validity to the fundamental truth of religion when he maintained the existence of the unknowable, the eternal absolute, and inscrutable cosmic mystery.

In very truth the cosmic mystery is ever about us. But I doubt if the mere philosophical fact that we do not and cannot know the ultimate is in itself enough to give rise to a religious appreciation of life. Certain religionists often resist the rational explanation of the forces of nature, not primarily because the mystery of nature is more precious in itself than natural forces understood and mastered, but rather be-



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cause this mystery is somehow associated with their own unconscious wishes. Moreover, the so-called hostility of religion to science often has little, if anything, to do with the religious interest itself. The unctions of an established religion may be used merely as weapons by the ignorant multitude and their spokesmen in the age-long resistance of inert humanity to those readjustments which demand new intellectual effort. But the presence of the mystery seems to be an essential to faith, and the religious interest would preserve it at all costs wherever it is symbolic of the inner secret.

Here, I think, is where the older rationalist liberalism failed, through want of psychological insight and sympathy, in its criticism of religious dogma. It sought to deny the mystery, to substitute for it a rational formula. And here also would seem to be found a serious lack of understanding among many who seek to modernize religion—"bring it up to date";—they tend to reduce it to the merely ethical. Religion commonly borrows certain moral precepts in order that religious behavior may to that extent be oriented to social reality, and traditional and established religions are often associated with popular moral convention. But