

# THE PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

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**THE PSYCHOLOGY OF  
RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE**

TO MY FRIENDS  
THE MEMBERS OF THE  
HYDE PARK CHURCH OF DISCIPLES  
CHICAGO

## PREFACE

THIS work undertakes an investigation of the religious aspect of normal human experience. The point of view employed is that of functional psychology, which is necessarily genetic and social. The method adopted involves the use of much material from anthropology, the history of religion, and other social sciences, but an attempt has been made to organize this material and to interpret it from the psychological standpoint. The hypothesis that religion is the consciousness of the highest social values arose from studies in these fields, and this conception has been strengthened by further investigations. These highest social values appear to embody more or less idealized expressions of the most elemental and urgent life impulses. Religion expresses the desire to obtain life and obtain it abundantly. In all stages the demand is for "daily bread" and for companionship and achievement in family and community relationships.

These cravings constitute the inner continuity and identity of motive in all the diverse types of religion, primitive and modern, Pagan and Christian. The social consciousness arises in every group in the mediation of these needs, in the struggle for existence, and in the aspiration and endeavor to make life more varied, more adequate, and more ideal. In their simpler expressions among primitive peoples these

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cravings struggle blindly, being dominated by rigid custom, and by magic. In higher forms they are gradually freed from superstition, are guided by tested experience, and are incorporated in more elaborate symbols.

In this conception of religion as the consciousness of the highest social values, lies a partial justification for the rather ambitious task of bringing together in a single volume an outline treatment of so many problems. Several studies have appeared treating of primitive religion and the religion of particular races; others have dealt with the phenomena of conversion, of faith, of mysticism, and of other special interests with which the current *religious reconstruction* is concerned. It seems desirable, however, to bring all these phenomena into the perspective of a comprehensive psychological inquiry. Such a treatment, it is hoped, may contribute to a better sense of proportion and to a clearer understanding of the interrelation of the various aspects of the religious consciousness.

During the past year the chapter on "Religion as involving the Entire Psychical Life" appeared in the *International Journal of Ethics*, and the chapter on "Nonreligious Persons" was published in the *American Journal of Theology*. Other material from this book was used in an article published in the *Monist* under the title "The Psychological Basis of Religion."

I wish particularly to acknowledge my very great indebtedness to my colleagues, Professor James H. Tufts and Professor William I. Thomas, not only for suggestions from their published works, but for criti-

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cisms and assistance in various ways during the progress of this investigation. I have also much for which to thank those students who have worked with me in this field in the past six years. Acknowledgment is also made of the valuable services of Dr. Ella H. Stokes, who has read the proof-sheets and prepared the index.

EDWARD SCRIBNER AMES.

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO,  
August 1, 1910.

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# **PART I**

## **HISTORY AND METHOD OF THE PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION**



## CHAPTER I

### THE HISTORY OF THE SCIENCE

THE Psychology of Religion, if it may be dated from the first books published under this title, appeared as a distinct subject of investigation only ten years ago, with the pioneer volumes of Starbuck and Coe.<sup>1</sup> Each of these authors distinctly states that the investigations were prompted both by scientific and by religious interests. They shared the new scientific impulse which was extending to all aspects of individual and social mental life. The whole science of psychology, under the lead of the biological sciences, was then undergoing a complete reconstruction, which still continues. It was inevitable that the extensive areas of experience organized in the religious consciousness should ultimately yield themselves, however reluctantly, to a most fundamental reconsideration. The very attitude of sensitiveness and reserve with which these phenomena seemingly withheld themselves from the methods everywhere else employed added intensity of interest to their study when it was begun. The characteristic eagerness of science to discover and treat all the facts of experience could not be abated by the feeling that this set of facts was guarded by peculiar claims and by keen emotional resistance.

<sup>1</sup> A valuable history of the beginnings of this science is contained in a paper by James Bissett Pratt, "The Psychology of Religion," *Harvard Theological Review*, vol. i, 1908.

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This demand for scientific thoroughness was reinforced by the assumption of the unity of the mental life, and it was of the utmost significance to determine whether this postulate, already so widely justified, could be maintained with reference to religious knowledge and faith. Besides, there was a growing conviction, now well substantiated, that many facts of religious experience might afford assistance in understanding the typical processes treated by general psychology, such as those of habit, attention, and emotion, both in normal and in abnormal forms.

The religious incentive was of a more immediately practical character. Those interested in propagating religion, whether by education or evangelism, began to realize the necessity of understanding the psychological processes in order to control and direct them. Professor Coe expressed this in the preface to "The Spiritual Life," in these words: "There is reason for doubting whether even the spiritual teachers and guides of the people really grasp the mental processes with which they have to deal — the evident decay of the revival, the alienation from the Church of whole classes of the population, the excess of women over men in Church life, the apparent powerlessness of organized religion to suppress or seriously check the great organized vices and injustices of society, the failure of the Sunday-School to make the people or even its own pupils familiar with the contents of the Bible — these facts ought to raise a question as to what, among the matters upon which we have laid stress, is really practical and what mere ignorant blundering."

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It would be difficult to find a more striking illustration of the way in which scientific research is ultimately motivated and occasioned by practical interests. The utilitarian impulse in these first publications is also clear in the particular problems treated and in the scope of their inquiry. They deal chiefly, almost exclusively, with conversion, taking that term in its broadest sense. It is in this process of conversion that the whole task of Protestant Christianity has been felt to focus. The work of the Church has been conceived to be that of making converts. Therefore, the understanding of this process with a view to controlling it successfully among all classes attains first importance. The question of methods in religious work turns upon the psychology of religious experience. The relative value of revivalism, and of religious education, depends upon the comparative significance of the different types of conversion and upon the means by which they are occasioned. The demand of the Church, under an increasing realization of tension between it and many developments of modern society, has been for a more efficient method of winning its own children and securing recruits from the "world." The other functions of religion, in evangelical churches at least, appear to presuppose this "experience," and consequently it has been the centre of attention. Investigations have also been made with reference to such problems as the nature of faith, prayer, revelations, and mystical states.

Another and broader demand for the aid of psychology in dealing with religion has grown up with

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the work of the historians and anthropologists. Comparative religion has brought to attention a great variety of faiths, often with elaborate ritual, theology, and sacred books. Various theories of their origin, interdependence, and relation to Christianity have been advanced. The application of the principles of historical development to these diverse religions has led to the study of their earliest forms, and to the demand for a knowledge of their origins. Here anthropology has taken up the task in connection with the whole problem of the beginnings of human social interests, customs, morality, and art. But the data furnished by this science, while affording much indispensable material, have yet required the aid of psychology in their interpretation. The remains of early peoples and the customs of existing *natural races* afford some problems which the psychologist alone is prepared to consider. Along with other inquiries concerning this complex life of the race, it is natural that there should be undertaken a psychological study of the origin and character of religion and religious institutions. And it was this interest in something beyond the range of history and anthropology which contributed to the rise of the psychology of religion. This fact is expressly stated by Professor Morris Jastrow in "The Study of Religion": "In order to trace its history, to lay bare its doctrines, to examine its ethical principles, and to investigate its myths, a consistent application of historical methods is all that is required; but when we proceed further and endeavor to determine the causes of its growth, to penetrate to the secret of its influence and to account for its decline, historical research

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needs to be supplemented by a study of human nature.”<sup>1</sup>

Among the typical problems which emerge for psychology from the results of historical and anthropological research are those of the nature and scope of custom, or social habit, in early society, and the relation to custom of ritual, sacrifice, prayer, taboo, magic, and myth. In connection with these habitual reactions, involved with the maintenance and furtherance of the life-process, much light is shed upon the nature of animism, fetishism, and other theories of primitive religion. The striking uniformity of early man's attitudes, together with a diversity in the content and formal expression of his experience, offers a psychological problem of the greatest importance. Something more is required here than the naïve assumption of the ancients that it is natural and necessary that all peoples have their own religions, or the equally unreasoned attitude of certain developed, aggressive religions, that all peoples have their own religions, but that all are utterly false or merely poor imitations except the one aggressive religion itself. The great number of independent religions which historical and comparative study have made known raise the questions for the psychologist: How did religion arise in the race? What are the psychological grounds of the differences and likenesses which exist?

From still another side there is a demand for a scientific psychology of religion. The philosophy of religion and the related fields of theology and apologetics are forced to deal with such topics as inspiration, faith,

<sup>1</sup> Morris Jastrow, *The Study of Religion*, p. 273.



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knowledge, the nature of the soul, personality, religious genius, and the significance of such conceptions as God, free will, the world, evil. All these questions involve the consideration of psychological processes, the treatment of which becomes a necessary stage in any adequate philosophical discussion of religion. The conflicting points of view, the partial and unsatisfying nature of the various attempts to attain a philosophy of religion, force the inquiry back again and again to a reckoning with the results and standpoints presented by the rapidly growing science of psychology. This is characteristic even of those systems of thought which make a radical distinction between the scientific method with which psychology works and the philosophical apprehension and statement of truth. The value of psychology is necessarily felt to be much greater where the metaphysical and ethical problems are held to be simply the further elaboration and explication of certain psychological problems.

A survey of the philosophy of religion abundantly illustrates the inevitable return to psychological problems, just as the course of philosophy itself has been marked by an increasing regard for the underlying facts concerning the states and functions of consciousness. Schleiermacher made religion a matter of feeling. With Hegel it was intellectual. Ritschl and Kant renewed emphasis upon the difference between the theoretical and the practical reason. The religious consciousness is here entirely separated from the sphere of knowledge, and has to do exclusively with value judgments. The "Outline of the Philosophy of Religion," by Auguste Sabatier, attempts to make a psy-