

NORMATIVE PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION

Normative Psychology of Religion

BY

HENRY NELSON WIEMAN

AND

REGINA WESTCOTT-WIEMAN



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*“Iron sharpeneth iron;
so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend.”*

To the Students
who have been friends of ours through the years.

INTRODUCTION

Psychology of religion comprehends a very diversified field of inquiry. There are at least six different ways of approaching the subject. The treatment might be historical, descriptive, experimental, a medium for presenting a piece of specialized research, or a compendium of what others have written on the subject. Finally, one might seek to serve the practical interests of religious living and religious teaching. To this end he would study the essential functions of religion in human living and set forth the norms implicit in these functions.

Ideally all the six procedures mentioned should be included in one book. But limitations of space and time forbid. The authors have chosen the last of the approaches noted above, which they have called functional or normative. Norms, as they treat them, are inseparable from functions, being nothing else than specifications of what the functions require.

The practical interests of religious living and teaching have been the chief concern of this writing. It is plain that these interests cannot be served by a wealth of factual material unless one knows how to use it. The more elaborate and diversified the descriptive material presented, the more confusing it becomes for one seeking guidance, unless he has norms by which to select and evaluate the vast array of religious practices, methods and experiences that are described. Scientific accuracy can never take the place of critical evaluation; and evaluation is impossible without norms, either explicitly stated or implied in the appraisals.

Valid norms cannot be fabricated out of speculations concerning the nature and function of religion. They must be brought to light through a study of the religious behavior in which they are implicit. Such has been the procedure of the writers. With these norms they have endeavored to state what is better and what is worse, what tends toward excellence and what toward evil in religion. Expressions frequently occur that

contain the sense of ought, but these are not intended as dogmatic prescriptions; they are statements of what the norms imply concerning religious behavior.

However, the functions and norms of religious behavior cannot be discovered by the study of religion apart from the rest of life. Religious living must be seen in functional connection with all the most deep and intimate interests of human personality and society. It is, therefore, an advantage that one of the authors comes to the work from the field of psychology, with many years of professional experience in treating problems of the individual and the small group. Her work was not specialized in the field of religion, but covered all those interests which a clinical psychologist must treat. The other writer has specialized for years in philosophy of religion with interest always directed primarily to the needs of religious living.

The present work is part of a systematic presentation of religion involving the collaboration of several persons. Some of the further studies already undertaken and to be published are: the church in service of the reorganization of the family; the religious aspect of growth of personality; the connection between religion and the major social issues of the time; a critical survey of contemporary American philosophies of religion; the philosophy of religion; the theory of value.

Every chapter in this present book has received something from both authors but each writer respectively has written certain chapters as follows: I, II, IV, V, XIII, XIV, XV, XVI, XVII, XVIII, XIX, XX, XXI, XXII, XXIII, XXIV, XXV, by Regina Westcott-Wieman; III, VI, VII, VIII, IX, X, XI, XII, XXVI, by Henry N. Wieman. Some parts, such as the norms, have been developed in such close collaboration that it is impossible to distinguish the contributions of the two.

Recognition is here made of those writings and teachings in this and kindred fields which have contributed to the thinking of the authors. There has been constant temptation to quote from many of them individually throughout the book. The task of keeping the work within bounds has required rigorous exclusion of footnotes and references. The indebtedness of the writers to fellow workers is very great, and is deeply appreciated.

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PART ONE

ORIENTATION IN RELIGIOUS LIVING

A careful orientation is required as the first step in discussing religion today because of three kinds of confusion which befog the subject. These three must be cleared away before we can deal intelligibly with the various aspects of this great human interest.

There is, first, the social confusion of our time which makes religious living a peculiar problem. A normative treatment requires a discussion of the way religion must function in the midst of the actual conditions of the culture of which it is a part. Hence an orientation must set these conditions before us.

Secondly, there is the confusion of thought concerning what religion is and what is meant by the terms which designate the major objects of its interest. We must clarify these meanings.

Finally there is much uncertainty about the values and other essential characteristics which enter into worthy religious living. A normative approach must render these marks of religious behavior visible by an orientation.

Chapter I

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL PROBLEM OF PRESENT RELIGIOUS LIVING

MAN'S OUTREACH FOR A WORKING UNDERSTANDING OF HIS UNIVERSE

Each person conceives for himself some order of being and meaning. The great adventure of life is the search for such truth in fact and significance as will enable him to accomplish this. His concepts of the nature of the universe, and of the nature of persons and of their relation to the universe provide for him the basis of whatever meaning he can discover in life—his own life and all life. His order may be a miniature one. It may be cramped by rigid definings claiming comprehensiveness. It may be fossilized or artificial or illusory. On the other hand, it may be tremendous and enlarging, hence never perfected. It may be complete for the time being, but ever challenging through keen, discriminating sensings of the inadequacies, confusions and difficulties of the body of concepts basic to it. The type and scope of a man's order are indications of the type and scope of himself and of his social grouping.

Every human being is restless until he finds a way of making himself reasonably at home in the universe. He seeks to build up an order of functioning yielding opportunities for achievement, fellowship and satisfaction. Then he so lives as to secure the highest and greatest possibilities of the meaning in which he believes, in so far as he is capable.

Religion is a profoundly rooted interest of human beings. This is so, because religious living is the groping after super-human values and the living and growing in the light of such of these as come to have recognized meanings. A man's system of religious beliefs is the frame work of his very life. It is what a man believes and not what he knows which dominates his behavior. Factual knowledge has no real power over him

until it becomes emotionally incorporated into his system of beliefs.

The conceptions entering into the building up of a system of beliefs trace back to quite different sources. A man may, as do many, receive the social heritage of institutionally authorized concepts as unwittingly and uncritically as he receives his biological heritage of neuro-muscular characteristics. Or, feeling himself the acting center of his own universe, his concepts may be adventitious. That is, they may be the accidental outcome of such thinking as he is forced to undertake in order to achieve some fairly acceptable and workable explanations of his particular experiences, past, present and future. Again, he may have achieved sufficient perspective of the movement and scope of life and of the universe to sense that the human being can never "settle down" at home permanently in the universe. In other words, one cannot truly live with fixated beliefs. No matter what the type of the total concept of the universe may be, as conceptualized at any one time by himself or his fellows, he holds this concept in the realization that the ever-continuing search for truth in fact and significance will introduce elements which will unsettle it. One who follows this third course tries to make himself at home in a universe which he knows is marked by change and movement.

DISRUPTING CROSS-CURRENTS OF TODAY

There are historical periods which seem to have allowed for, even encouraged, an intricately thorough, systematic and static order of beliefs about the universe and man's relation to it. The period of the Puritans in colonial American days, while threatening hell fire, yet offered a gratifying, uncontested and clearly defined order for adequate living in the universe to those who followed the Puritan way. The Holy Roman See at the height of its glory was relatively sure of its order. So with the Chinese during the centuries before outside interference broke into the religious beliefs and practices of their ancient order. In water free of swiftly surging cross-currents and rip-tides, coral reefs and sea weed grow and spread. So in historical periods free of swiftly surging currents and tides, a systemic order of belief grows and spreads.

Today many powerful currents are bearing upon those orders of meaning which men built up in the long and painful periods preceding the relatively assured religious calm of the recent past. As with ants whose order of universe is utterly confounded when a thoughtless school boy digs out their nest and there is disorganized hurrying hither and yon, so with great numbers of people today whose conceptual order has been essentially disturbed either directly or through disturbance of their authoritative group. There is much restlessness, hunger, ridicule and cross-ridicule, sense of futility or uncertainty, fearfull defendings, skepticism, and experimentings without criteria or controls. As with the ants, there is plenty of motion, largely commotion.

Any large urban center provides a field where this commotion may be observed in full swing. Every order, ancient or building, deeply sincere or opportunist, theistic or atheistic, supernaturalistic, naturalistic or humanistic is represented by some size and sort of following. Circumstances of life are such that in some vicinities there is much shopping about by individuals in an effort to discover an order of belief that meets their present inclinations and their desires for the future. There is much shifting from denomination to cult, and from cult to "ism". Some, not finding a system of belief to their liking, invent a new one more promising or convenient or believably true. Then these gather a following, sometimes a large one with many material evidences of its growth.

Wherever social cross-currents and rip-tides have tugged loose the rootages of persons in any number, there will be found this restless commotion of confounded orders of belief. Sometimes the disturbing influences act upon groups and authoritative bodies, sometimes upon single individuals. Southern California is one very good example. It is notable as a Mecca for those whose orders of universe are changing or disrupted. The immediate causative incentives vary, and include illness, lure of fictitious income or fame, retirement from the habitudes of some active occupation, enticement of the play spirit, inexpensive living, appeal of a delightful land whose climate encourages easy living, broken family bonds, and an unquiet spirit. Looked at from one point of view this confused commo-

tion on such a large scale is rather appalling. From another angle it is reassuring, for it is an indication that there is enough human outreach toward meaning in the universe and significance in living to prompt adventurous searching. It would be more reassuring if the searching were less directly ego-centered, and more intelligently guided and evaluated.

OPPOSING ELEMENTS IN THE CHAOS

Religious behavior cannot be separated from the rest of behavior. It is moved and shaped by whatever deeply affects human life. If only one powerful cross-current had tugged at the religious rootage of the people of this era, there might have been fewer and more clearly marked trends of change. But there have been several quite different ones. It is important to the understanding of religious behavior to know the more influential of these.

First, the intermingling of peoples of many cultures resultant from immigration and the further contacts in the World War forced comparisons of systems of beliefs, questionings regarding long cherished concepts, and awareness of the number and variety of positions of avowed non-belief.

Until the last fifty years, the possibility of seeing marked contrast in cultures was reserved for the traveler or the student. The impact of contrast either through change in one's own grouping or through influx of many new elements within a short period of time did not come in a force to be discernible within the life span of the great majority of individuals. There was even in that time perennial worry about the unsettled young people lest they depart from the way of their fathers, but it was ameliorated by the feeling that, in time, they would "join the fold". Such an eventual conforming was almost certain to occur in areas where there existed only one dominant system of belief. The coming of babies usually brought wandering young parents back into the institution devoted to the prevalent religion. It took a tremendous, and, at that time, self-ostracising resistance to do other than come into communion with the authoritative majority. All of life was organized on the assumption of such a communion.

Today there is no such authoritative majority for most

individuals. Rather there is a variety of beliefs and positions within their observation which is bewildering. This is all the more disturbing because, though held in deep sincerity or even in militant loyalty, these beliefs and positions are in some respects contradictory in fact or spirit. In the midst of such, who can any longer hold that he has built his order of universe upon all the truth and only the truth? Nor is the type or quality of living under these different beliefs and positions sufficiently characteristic to develop strong prejudices for or against. Religious authority is under fire.

Second, the speedy growth of population has put the individual out of the bounds of community sanction and control in most regions. Many religious bodies, sensing this, have turned from threatening the sinner and the hardhearted to baiting with promises or attractions. But it rests largely upon chance whether or not an individual will become connected with some community organization through which he feels the compulsion of religious action and control. Organized religious control is markedly diminished.

Again, family life, which formerly emphasized religious nurture, has either dropped or lessened this function. Frequent moving with consequent disturbance of stability, crowded living quarters, the insistence toward speed and complexity in daily living, competitive interests, intermarriage of religious cultures, and growing personal indifference to organized religion are among the factors operative upon this interest in the family. The effects of a childhood where life was shared with a family sincerely religious are never entirely lost. No amount of teaching or preaching, and seldom even study, can penetrate so deeply as does religious nurture through devout family sharing of experiences. There are a large and growing number of families who realize and regret the neglect of this function, and who are seeking seriously to restore it; but they say frankly that they do not know how to carry it on in a modern family. They are intelligent enough to see that many mistakes are being made in church nurture in religion in many places. They realize that this function is a difficult one and that whatever is done is telling in influence one way or the other. But they feel helpless and unprepared. They meet also the large problem of the con-

fusion the child experiences through comparing his various findings concerning religion in the church school, family and playground.

Fourth, the period of prosperity now behind us gave many a sense of their own power, and a resulting self-sufficient complacency which stunted all outreaching beyond human power toward higher possibilities of value. In every period of prosperity there are those who decide that they do not need a god. They seem able to feel commensurate with the needs and possibilities of the universe as they sense it. The behavior which expresses this view is often cold, cruel, narrow, selfish and productive of tragic outcomes for those who must deal with these complacent persons.

Again, the behavior of those who put full trust in the sufficiency of human beings partakes of the nature of high religion in quality and outcome, even though all connection with religion is disavowed.

Contrary-wise, a period of depression, confusion and deep trouble marks a concomitant period of turning toward religion, particularly authoritative religion. There are many who seek in this way to find "something to tie to", something to sustain them. And usually they who seek thus want something very clearly defined, certain, and dependable. Increase in number of communicants during a period of confused social transition is not necessarily a measure of healthy institutional growth. Much of it indicates a direct self-seeking on the part of the new communicants. It puts a heavy challenge before the intelligence and sincerity of those church bodies which are more interested in religion than in numbers. Several movements containing basic theses felt subjectively to be solid have carried the attention of many people, especially in the years 1932 to 1935—the so-called Oxford Movement and Barthianism among them.

Sixth, the profit motive in the intense form experienced in these opening years of the twentieth century sharpened inventiveness in the material and mechanical areas of living. Long-range dealings are combined with short-range feelings. These long-range dealings are carried out through long-range tools and media,—radio, swift ships, trains, telegraph; money systems and shares of stock as symbols of value; a series of middle-

men for every step; and many more features. This means that much personal and group living is on a basis of indirect contact. There is much less keen and responsible understanding of the effects of individual choices and actions upon other human beings comparatively remote. Obligation toward the rest of the universe can become comfortably vague. An individual is biologically and socially protected against forgetting his own interests. But great distances and many middlemen evaporate his interest in those persons of more remote sections who are unknown yet deeply affected by his business transactions.

Not only is this true, but even where there is active and genuine intention of good will, long range dealings make adequate acquaintance between both parties in the dealings a practical impossibility. When the attitudes, standards and ideals of each are known by the other only very slightly or from an alien point of view, there can be no assurance for the one that what he does in the best faith and intelligence possible to him, will be felt by the other as highly just and considerate dealings. A high value for the one may be an unknown or discarded value for the other. It is difficult to "deal justly and love mercy" with those whose systems of value and of belief are not appreciatively known. There is as yet no pattern for the functioning of religious principles in modern, long-range interactions among men.

Then, because of this sixth opposing element, a seventh evolves. Religion becomes more and more an individual, private matter, entering less and less, as a conscious factor, into the dealings of human beings with each other. Some formulated religions become more easily estranged from the practical world of work and play than do others, for some were formulated in periods where the social organization and interaction were of markedly different type and quality. There has been much discussion recently as to how integral a part of our present social order the Christian religion can be. It grew in a small, pastoral world, and was fitted to the life of such a world. Ours is a complicated, highly mechanized, individualistic yet interdependent civilization. One Christian religious sect is being charged with the responsibility of having been, quite unwittingly, an important agent in fostering oppressive capitalism.