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SIGNIFICANCE OF RELIGION

FOR THE INDIVIDUAL

by

Mack Blackwell

for

Honors Seminar

Fall 1965

OUTLINE

SIGNIFICANCE OF RELIGION FOR THE INDIVIDUAL

THESIS: Religion plays a vital role in the life of the individual.

- I. Definition of religion
 - A. Variation in definitions of religion
 - B. Definition of religion for this paper
- II. Elements of religious experience
 - A. Individual nature of religious experience
 - B. Phases of religious experience
 1. Intellect
 2. Volition
 3. Emotion
 - C. The religious sentiment
- III. Role of religion in the life of the individual
 - A. Integrative element
 - B. Productive element

SIGNIFICANCE OF RELIGION FOR THE INDIVIDUAL

In the search for meaning in life one cannot help but notice the direction and stability that some "religious" persons manifest in their lives. On the other hand, there are those "non-religious" persons whose lives also seem to be stable. The question has arisen in the writer's mind as to what constitutes religion, what is religious experience, and what is its significance to the individual.

The primary purpose of this paper is the quest for deeper insight into the meaning of life through the channel of religion. The possibility of gaining insight in this manner is attested to by Purnell Benson:

A purpose of religion is to stimulate and to organize the feelings of people toward life so that they find importance and inspiration in what they do. In order for religion to accomplish this effectively, there should first be accurate awareness of the social and psychological factors in the processes involved. When these things are known and used by the individual, reconstruction of the feeling aspects is possible....Out of studious searching for the elements of religion emerge the materials for religious reconstruction of life.¹

The first problem that presents itself in a quest of this nature is the definition of terminology. In the attempt to establish a definition of religion, the basic realities involved become clearer and more meaningful.

¹Religion in Contemporary Culture (New York, 1960), p. 124.

The historical aspects of the definition of religion will be considered first, and then a definition for the purpose of this paper will be given.

A review of the historical background of man's quest for an understanding of his religious nature presents a bewildering variety of interpretations. However, the variety of interpretations is not necessarily a handicap because of the richness of content that is available for contemplation and study.

The many definitions that have been given for religion represent the efforts of various disciplines to get to the heart of the subject. Although some of the definitions seem to be contradictory, most of the differences in interpretation result from approaching the subject from different viewpoints. For instance, definitions presented from the viewpoint of theology, sociology, psychology, and philosophy will necessarily stress various aspects of the same entity.

One of the most often considered definitions of religion is that set forth by William James:

Religion...shall mean for us 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.²

²The Varieties of Religious Experience (New York, 1923), p. 31.

Edward Scribner Ames, writing from the point of view of functional psychology, says that

religion is the consciousness of the highest social values....These highest social values appear to embody more or less idealized expressions of the most elemental and urgent life impulses.³

Carl Gustav Jung, referring to the immediate experience of the individual, writes that

Religion...[is] a peculiar attitude of the human mind,...a careful consideration and observation of certain dynamic factors, understood to be 'powers,' spirits, demons, gods, laws, ideas, ideals or whatever name man has given to such factors as he has found in his world powerful, dangerous or harmful enough to be taken into careful consideration, or grand, beautiful and meaningful enough to be devoutly adored and loved.⁴

J. Milton Yinger, writing from the sociological point of view, defines religion as a

system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggles with...[the] ultimate problems of human life. It is the refusal to capitulate to death, to give up in the face of frustration, to allow hostility to tear apart one's human associations.⁵

According to Purnell Benson,

Religion is a system of (1) beliefs in an unseen order of higher power, (2) activities to influence this higher power psychologically to meet human needs, and (3) experiences

³Psychology of Religious Experience (Boston, 1910), p. vii.

⁴Psychology and Religion (New Haven, 1938), p. 5.

⁵Religion, Society and the Individual (New York, 1957), p. 9.

accompanying these things. The higher power is either a psychological component within personality or else a supernatural being to whom psychological traits are imputed.⁶

Henry N. Wieman, writing from the viewpoint of normative psychology, says that

Religion is devotion to what one holds to be supremely worthwhile not only for himself but for all human living.⁷

Eugene W. Lyman writes that

Religion is an experience of inward power, whether felt to be born within us or to come from beyond us, by which we are lifted above routine living and achieve more than we can achieve by sheer effort.⁸

In view of the several elements suggested as comprising religion, a basic pattern can be seen from which one can derive a working definition. For the purpose of this paper, religion is a state of being involving the whole psychic life of an individual in a relationship with a Higher Power (specifically God). This Higher Power represents the highest values of life and provides meaning for life.

Religion is a complex phenomena which presents no simple or basic elements that can be listed as component parts of a religious nature. It is significant to note that there seems to be no specific entity known as religious

⁶Benson, p. 162.

⁷Normative Psychology of Religion (New York, 1935), p. 65.

⁸The Meaning and Truth of Religion (New York, 1933), p. 56.

experience. The phenomena of religious experience are related to the normal functioning of the human organism. The human faculties that operate in every other area of life are the same faculties involved in religious experience.

This concept should help one understand the wide variation in the intensity and the expression of religious experience. The intensity of religious experience varies from that of persons who are deeply religious to the seeming lack of religious experience in those persons who exhibit few or no religious traits. Also, the various modes of expression could be placed on a continuum. This is in line with the general rule of psychology which says that human traits are not an all or none proposition, but usually vary in quality and quantity along a continuum.

Thus, religious experience can best be seen as an individual matter and as a fusion of various traits of the individual rather than an entity of specific component parts. In the words of Eugene Lyman,

religion is more than a single mood, or a single reaction, or an attitude controlled by a single idea. It is, rather, a fusion of certain persistent traits of human experience....This blending is itself variable, different traits being at different times either dominant or recessive. Hence the paradoxical character of religious manifestations....⁹

⁹Ibid., p. 75.

The concept of variation in the individual's own course of development and variation among individuals should be kept in mind throughout this paper because it is basic to the interpretation of religious experience at the personal level.

The question of what constitutes religious experience will be considered at this point. The three principal phases or elements of religious experience will first be presented separately and then considered in totality.

"The principal phases of religious experience, following the track of general psychology, are the volitional, the feeling, and the thought phases."¹⁰ Consideration of each of these phases as independent factors is almost impossible because they are interrelated and thus operate in totality.

The thought phase or intellect is the core or center of religion and thus is the basis of religious experience. It is in this area of the human personality that man is conscious of his needs, interests, and values. The individual becomes thus becomes aware of God and the related values that religion encompasses. It is this God-consciousness and a characteristic relation or attitude of the self thereto that is at the core of religious experience. The individual's belief and knowledge of God and

¹⁰Frank S. Hickman, Introduction to the Psychology of Religion (New York, 1926), p. 186.

the resulting interpretation of life in the religious perspective is thus a function of the intellect.¹¹ The other elements or phases of religious experience are supportive and provide impetus and enrichment to the individual's religion.

The volitional element of religious experience has to do with the desire of the individual for a better life, the desire to live life to the fullest extent. Thus, the volitional functions are the active expressions of the religious life rather than the originator of the religious experience. The volition is the process by which the needs, interests, and values are actively sought after by the individual.

The third element of religious experience is the feeling or emotional aspect. Emotion is the complex state of feeling involving conscious experience, internal and external overt physical responses, and the power to motivate the individual to action. The emotions involved in religious experiences are not qualitatively different from the emotions in non-religious areas of life. William James has illustrated this concept very well:

There is religious fear, religious love, religious awe, religious joy, and so forth. But religious love is only man's natural emotion of love directed to a religious object; religious fear is only the ordinary

¹¹E. L. Schaub, "The Psychology of Religion," Readings in the Psychology of Religion, ed. Orlo Strunk, Jr. (New York, 1959), p. 34.

fear of commerce, so to speak, the common quaking of the human breast, in so far as the notion of divine retribution may arouse it; religious awe is the same organic thrill which we may feel in a forest at twilight, or in a mountain gorge; only this time it comes over us at the thought of our supernatural relations; and similarly of all the various sentiments which may be called into play in the lives of religious persons.¹²

Emotions contribute a vital and dynamic character to religious experience. Since religion is concerned with the deepest needs and the highest values of life it is naturally charged with emotions. The greater the interest and involvement in efforts to meet these needs and to sustain the values the more intense the emotions will be. When the interest and involvement in religious orientated elements of life decrease, the emotional content wanes and religion is no longer a vital, dynamic force in the individual's life.¹³

Having suggested the basic elements of religious experience, the next step is to consider religious experience as a total action of the organism. This is perhaps the only correct way to view any area of man's life since the human organism functions as a whole rather than as unrelated parts. Any action is the result of the total response of all the elements of the personality as it functions in an integrated manner.

¹²James, pp. 27-28.

¹³Paul E. Johnson, Psychology of Religion (New York, 1959), p. 73.

Considering religious experience as a sentiment will best suit our purpose in this respect. The complex organization of interests and emotions around a value object is known as a sentiment. Gordon W. Allport has defined the mature religious sentiment as a

disposition, built up through experience, to respond favorably, and in certain habitual ways, to conceptual objects and principles that the individual regards as of ultimate importance in his own life, and as having to do with what he regards as permanent or central in the nature of things. (in italics)¹⁴

This religious sentiment has its basis in the function of faith. Faith is a basic and integral part of the intellect and therefore, of the God-consciousness. However, faith is not synonymous with belief or knowledge of God. "Faith may include belief, but it is a larger experience than intellectual assent. It is...a dynamic intention of personality as a whole."¹⁵

Faith has a dynamic quality of devotion that permeates the total personality and is indicated in a volitional activity of purpose, commitment, and steadfastness. Faith has an emotional quality that is indicated in the basic confidence and security that gives one assurance.¹⁶ This emotional security is necessary in a healthy, stable life. Thus, the three phases of religious experience, the voli-

¹⁴The Individual and His Religion (New York, 1957), p. 56.

¹⁵Johnson, p. 200.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 200.

tional, the intellectual, and the emotional, are found in the religious sentiment embodied in faith.

Religious faith tends to integrate the contradictory impulses of life and give direction to life. "The religious quality of experience is a distinctive attitude, or emotion, which characterizes man's response to all experienceable reality..."¹⁷

Because of its productive consequences for the individual, religion is of great significance. Religion tends to integrate, organize, and direct the individual's life. It is important to the individual because of its involvement in his thoughts, goals, and feelings. Religion is a way of securing integrity. It functions creatively in the personal life and thus enhances life. Religion provides vision, in which larger realities come into view and truths are discovered.

Talcott Parsons has suggested that from the psychological point of view

religion has its greatest relevance to the points of maximum strain and tension in human life as well as to positive affirmations of faith in life, often in the face of these strains. It is most deeply and intimately involved with the 'emotional' problems of man, precisely as these are related to the higher levels of culture, to the problems to which in the widest sense man finds it most difficult to adjust....¹⁸

¹⁷ Benjamin Miller, "An Empirical Concept of the Religious Life," The Journal of Religion, XLIII (July 1963), 211.

¹⁸ Quoted by Yinger, p. 385.

In conclusion, religion is the individual and total action of man in his relationship with God. The religious experience that results "is the individual's growth toward the fulfilment of all his powers, capacities, and potentialities as a person."¹⁹

¹⁹Miller, p. 211.

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