Psychology of Religion in America

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When America was first discovered it was a new world and offered the opportunity of a new beginning in the history of man. This utopian concept of a new world has continued to shape the course of American history. Early colonists were infected with the fever of freedom to cast off old traditions and create a new society, to do as they pleased and become whatever they might desire. This fever has affected religious developments with the excitement of mass revivals, the ecstasy of intensely vivid experiences, and the proliferation of new religious sects and denominations. The prospect of new life through religious awakening has so captivated the imagination of the American people that church congregations continue to grow and religious devotion is a vital interest.

Another manifestation of this utopian motif is the development of modern science. The fever to discover and create a new world has risen to a crescendo of scientific theories and experiments, inventions and technologies which have changed the whole frame of human life. These scientific achievements have encouraged a kind of unlimited optimism to believe that man by his own genius can know everything and do everything. In this respect, scientific faith has become a religious cult offering to free man from the toils of his mortal bondage and save him from every doubt and distress. With such claims by quite different methods and presuppositions, it is inevitable that science and religion will meet, whether as rivals or allies, and consider how to come to terms with each other.

1. The Experimental Approach

So we find psychology as a science of man undertaking to comprehend religious behavior. Modern scientific psychology dates its beginning in 1879 when Wilhelm Wundt founded his psychological laboratory in Leipzig. At the same time William James was setting up instruments in a room provided by Harvard University for psychological experiments. It was here that G. Stanley Hall completed the first American Ph. D. in psychology in 1878 with a laboratory dissertation on the muscular perception of space, before going to Leipzig to be Wundt’s first American student in the new laboratory. Returning to America, Hall established psychological laboratories first
at Johns Hopkins University and then at Clark University, and gathered around him a number of young scholars in experimental psychology.

The experimental approach to psychology of religion was initiated by Hall in studies of conversion which he reported in a Harvard lecture in 1881. Many of his students also conducted empirical studies of religion which were published in the American Journal of Psychology which he founded in 1891, and the Journal of Religious Psychology which he founded in 1904. Hall examined correspondence, personal testimonies and mission records to study religious conversion and identified it with the sexual and social maturing of adolescence. James H. Leuba and Edwin D. Starbuck used interviewing, questionnaire and statistical methods to gather further information on religious conversion and religious beliefs.

These and other experimental methods have been widely used to measure various aspects of religious behavior. Psychometric and sociometric devices are multiplying, new methods of observing, classifying and analyzing religious phenomena are employed with great ingenuity. In this crescendo of scientific optimism there have been high hopes that important knowledge about religion could be won by reducing it to exact quantitative measurement. "Whatever is can be measured" was the slogan. A vast amount of data has been gathered on the age and conditions of religious conversion, variously defined statements of religious belief, behavior at worship services and revival meetings among selected or random populations.

Yet we must seriously question the significance of these results, impressive as they may appear in parading the exactitudes of statistical procedure and quantitative measurement. What is open to measure in such ways is only the external and obvious features of religious behavior, not the deeper, inner meaning of profound religious experience. Gordon Allport has pointed out the folly of reducing the uniqueness of individual personality to the indiscriminate level of any least common denominator. For what you have in a statistical treatment of common traits in a large population is nothing but surface appearances which do not reach the deeper concern or larger meaning of religion. Every person stands in a unique position from which

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