ART AND THE STRUCTURE OF RELIGION

Summary

This paper identifies the dimensions of religion underlying verbal reactions to reproductions of paintings broadly accepted as 'religious', rated on previously derived adjectival scales. In a factor analysis of those ratings, paintings of people who were recognizably or explicitly religious had the highest loadings. The second factor involved the flowing style in paintings that portrayed postures of consolation, submission, or dependence. These results show the coherence with which paintings, their content, and religion itself are defined.

1. Introduction

Most of the work concerned with the structure of religion is based on ratings of verbal stimuli, which are usually presented in the form of attitude or belief statements (cf., Dittes, 1969; Brown, 1987: Chapters 4, 5). To explore commonly accepted and semantically defined elements in 'religion', Brown and Forgas (1980) collected 'the ideas or concepts' thought to be characteristic of religion in general and of religious behaviour and beliefs. Using a free-response procedure, they asked one group of Australian students to specify instances of these features of religion, and another separate group to rate each of the most common elements of religion, which covered the formally agreed dimensions defined by Glock and Stark (1965), on 16 bipolar adjective scales.

These elements included 'Church institutions', 'Church authority', clergy, scriptures, peace of mind, and faith, for example. A multidimensional scaling (INDSCAL) of those ratings produced a three-dimensional solution that contrasted institutional against individual orientations (in the previous examples), positive against negative evaluations, and what is tangible against the intangible or abstract features of religion (including miracles, salvation, mystery, God as being, and life after death). These results and those of Muthen et al. (1977) show that the coherence of the language or concepts of religion structures it (as a meaningful and well-differentiated social domain) into a set of separate dimensions.
But religious symbols and meaning are conveyed not only by rather abstract words or doctrines since traditionally sanctioned images and representations in painting, sculpture, and architecture are also important. Religious buildings and icons can focus a sense of immediate religiousness, and Churches, themselves become objects of devotion. While the relations between psychology, religion, and an artistic imagination have been explored by Pruyser (1976, 1983) and Beit-Hallahmi (1986), psychological reactions to paintings have been mainly studied by art critics (Gombrich, 1972; Steinberg, 1983) or by those in experimental aesthetics (Berlyne, 1974). Work in this last field has found several dimensions: Gaude (1972 a and b) identified 'motif, lyric tranquillity, static stylization and anguished drama', Hare and Gaier (1971) identified the dimensions of simple-complex, uninteresting-interesting and displeasing-pleasing, while Berlyne and Ogilvie (1974) found hedonic tone, arousal and uncertainty in one experiment (p.195) and classicism-order, complexity-curvilinearity, realism-subjectivism and expressionism in another (p.216). It is not clear, however if any of those features are judged to be peculiarly aligned with religions.

When Malony (1985) offered guided fantasies to women in ‘religious or non-religious’ galleries of the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena, he found that only their religious background influenced whether they reported a religious experience in those contexts. Because paintings have hardly been used at all in empirical studies of religion, the aim of the present study was to find whether a set of reproductions would reveal psychological structures similar to those identified in the language of religion. Those factor structures have ranged from a single religionism factor, through five (Clayton, 1971), to nine (Dittes, 1969) and eleven dimensions (King and Hunt, 1975). Applying the same methods to judgments of paintings, that have been used to identify the semantically-based structures in religion, should tell how different those structures are. Recent work in cognitive psychology (e.g., Paivio and Begg, 1981) and Tulving (1972) would, however, lead us to expect that the structures inherent in religious words (as semantic concepts) will not parallel those in pictures or iconic representations of religious themes and texts (cf., Mitchell, 1986).

A group of highly religious people and another group who described themselves as ‘not religious’ therefore participated in an experiment designed to establish the structure of judgments about a set of religious paintings chosen to span a range from more to less ‘religious’. The patterns in those responses were then compared with the results obtained from similar ratings of religious concepts.