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Psychology and Religion

An Introduction



London and New York

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1

THE RELATION BETWEEN PSYCHOLOGY AND RELIGION

Classic conflicts between science and religion

In the 'scientific revolution' of the sixteenth century early scientists like Francis Bacon saw no conflict between science and religion, and were prepared for science to be subordinated to theology. In the seventeenth century, Newton and Boyle thought that the laws that they were discovering, such as the law of gravity, were God's laws, that they were celebrating God's craftsmanship in designing the universe. They looked on the universe as a giant clockwork system which had been wound up by God; Newton thought that God was still actively sustaining the natural world. These scientists were religious men themselves, and their work was welcomed by theologians.

But the seeds of the first trouble were sown in the sixteenth century with Copernicus' theory that the earth is not the centre of everything, but goes round the sun, and that the earth moves, and rotates. He argued that this could explain the known movements of the sun, moon and planets better than theories of spheres and epicycles, but this was felt by many to be in conflict with the Bible. The theory was gradually accepted by other astronomers, such as the Italian Galileo, who was made to appear before the Grand Inquisitor and spent the last eight years of his life under house arrest in Florence for believing and teaching the Copernican doctrine. It was mainly Protestant scientists in England and Holland who carried on Copernicus' work, and the Germans, led by Kepler. Protestant theologians were quite accepting: Calvin declared himself in favour of scientific work and said that not everything in scripture need be taken literally. Luther said that the moon was a symbol of divine care for him but he also recognised that its light came from the sun. He referred to the universe as a 'theatre of the glory of God' (McGrath, 1997). Twelve hundred years earlier, Augustine had accepted that there was a natural order and was quite happy for the creation story of Genesis to be reinterpreted in a less literal way. Historians have suggested that Protestantism was more receptive to science than Catholicism, but in fact the situation was more variable than this (Brooke, 1991). However, to this day, as we shall see later, very few successful scientists are Catholics, though many are Protestants, and even more are agnostics.

The Bible does not state the date of the creation, but literal interpretations of Genesis have been used for centuries to produce theories about the age and history of the earth. In 1650 James Ussher, Archbishop of Armagh, calculated its age from those of biblical characters and concluded that it was created in 4004 BC on Saturday 22 October at 8 a.m. This view was not shared by geologists; some of them held a party in 1996 to celebrate the earth's '6,000th birthday'. In the nineteenth century Lord Kelvin put the age of the earth at 400 million years, a very different figure. Curiously this discrepancy does not

seem to have worried religious people much, quite unlike the disputes over the solar system and the later trouble over evolution. There was some friction, however; in 1833 Charles Lyell resigned his chair of geology at King's College, London, partly because of trouble with Bishop Copleston over Lyell's refusal to believe in the Flood, though Copleston said that any conflicts with geology could be accommodated by some biblical reinterpretation (Brooke, 1991).

One of the greatest conflicts between science and religion has been over evolution. There had been happy co-operation between science and religion in the early nineteenth century in Britain, but after Darwin things changed. In 1859 he produced his *Origin of Species*, which offered an account of the origins of mankind that appeared totally at odds with that in the book of Genesis. According to Darwin man developed from monkeys and simpler creatures, by chance; there was no design or purpose behind it, and no special creation. The situation was made more acute in Britain by his colleague T.H.Huxley having a lot of fun about our proposed monkey origins. The theory is not directly verifiable, and there are problems about the lack of intermediate species in the fossil record, but it has been very widely accepted. In 1860, at a meeting of the British Association in Oxford, T.H.Huxley had his famous debate, which he won, with the Bishop of Oxford, Samuel Wilberforce. When asked if he would prefer to be descended from an ape on his grandmother's or his grandfather's side Huxley replied that he would rather be descended from an ape than from a bishop (Brooke, 1991). In 1925 William Jennings Bryan, in the Scopes 'monkey trial' in the USA, tried to prevent evolution's being taught in American schools. He lost but there are still several states where fundamentalists have prevented evolution's being taught, or where it must be presented as a hypothesis along with others. Evolution can be seen as God's way of carrying out his job of creation, so there is no need to assume it is in conflict with religion.

Socio-biology is the application of biological principles, particularly of evolution and survival value, to human behaviour. This has had some success in understanding human emotional expression, family relationships, and also altruism. The problem is that we do not know in these cases how much is due to innate biological factors and how much to socialisation, learning from the culture. Some altruistic behaviour can be explained by the selfish gene and related hypotheses, by saying that genes will survive better if individuals help their close kin for example. Studies of birds have found that they do indeed help close kin, and that when this happens more of the young survive. However, we do not yet know how far these principles work for humans. Altruism could also be explained by the close bonds formed with kin, or by social expectations that we should care for our relatives, and is affected by religious and other ideas in people's heads. In any case this hypothesis does not explain altruism to those outside the immediate circle of family and friends, or the complex forms of moral thinking in which people engage, which are very unlike the mechanical responses which animal models suggest. This is discussed further in Chapter 13.

Dawkins (1991) has taken an atheistic position claiming that evolution can explain all, including religion. So the existence of religious beliefs and institutions would be explained entirely in terms of their survival value. But any ideas, whether religious or scientific, would be discredited and have no claim to any kind of truth, if they are simply the result of blind evolutionary processes. Others argue that religion is more a matter of social evolution, of the gradual discovery of religious ideas (Campbell, 1975). There is

certainly some continuity since the earliest times in religious practice, experience and beliefs, and there has been almost continuous debate and trial and error.

In 1996 there was another debate at Oxford, this time in the University Church, between the ethologist Richard Dawkins and Keith Ward, the Regius Professor of Theology. Dawkins demanded that religious propositions, such as the existence of God, should be treated in the same way as scientific ones, and that they should be capable of being confirmed or disconfirmed in the same way. However, Ward (1996) argued that they are not like this at all: 'its importance [i.e. the concept of God] lies in the fact that it is essential to the rational practice of worship and prayer' (p. 104), it is about seeking personal transformation, and the human concern with truth, beauty and goodness.

As many have pointed out, evolution has not been able to explain human consciousness, or our concern with rationality, beauty or morals. To the reductionist materialist, consciousness is an irrelevant extra, unless it can be shown to enhance survival. The truth of mathematical principles does not depend on their being good for our health or enabling us to have more children.

Resolving the conflicts between science and religion

We have seen that the usual way in which these conflicts have been dealt with has been to say that science and religion have different spheres of operation. Calvin, Luther, Augustine and many other divines have been prepared to say that the book of Genesis, for example, need not be interpreted literally, that matters of physical fact are for the physical sciences to decide. As Wittgenstein was to say later, they are different language games, both of them legitimate. Not all will accept this solution: for example, biblical fundamentalists and scientific materialists.

However, religion has an interest in some factual matters, such as the resurrection, miracles, and the after-life (a fact only verifiable later). And it could be argued that religion does take account of other facts such as the experience of God, the nature of ritual, the history of religion, and the effects of religion, including the possible efficacy of prayer.

There are problems with the boundaries of science too. Physics is no longer about clockwork universes and billiard balls, but is far more abstract and mysterious. Cosmology, for example, deals with such matters as the beginning and end of time, and the limits of the universe, taking us very close to theological matters. Particle physics has produced a new view of the material world; it doesn't say anything about God or salvation, but it is much less 'materialistic' than nineteenth-century physics had been. Eddington said that religion first became possible for a reasonable scientific man in about 1927. Heisenberg, Bohr and Einstein had shown that (1) light behaves both like a particle and like a wave, and it is possible to hold two quite different models of it at the same time, (2) the act of measuring, for example, the position of an electron alters what the scientist is trying to measure (this is very obvious in the case of observing human behaviour), (3) one physical state gives rise to the next, but only in terms of probability, there is no precise determination, at the level of particles, (4) the smallest particles, quarks, seem like ultimate building-blocks of matter, but they lose their identity when absorbed into atoms, which work as a whole. At the level of particle physics,

determinism, reductionism and the independent existence of the material world fail, and it is necessary to entertain contradictory models of it simultaneously (Brooke, 1991).

Peacocke (1993), in his Gifford Lectures, developed a way of finding co-operation between science and religion, using science to interpret theology. He sees the whole process of the emergence of life and the evolution of mankind as part of the process of creation, so that physics and biology can illuminate how this was done. It ends with the appearance of consciousness and human personality: we are conscious not only of the outside world, but also of ourselves, we can control our own behaviour and make choices, which are rational, in taking account of the consequences, using abstract ideas and language. We also have further yearnings, beyond the satisfaction of biological needs, to understand life and death and to fulfil ourselves.

He thinks that all this can be partly explained by lower-order processes like evolution, but that some of it can be interpreted only as deliberate design. This is supported by the discovery of the 'anthropic principle'. It has been realised that the constants of the physical universe are exactly right for the emergence of the substance carbon, and other features necessary for the evolution of life (Barrow and Tipler, 1986). Another line of thinking points to the parallels between religion and mathematics. Penrose (1994) pointed out that the laws and principles of mathematics are not just ideas in our minds, but 'inhabit an actual world of their own that is timeless and without physical location'. They are not created by us but are discovered and are found to apply to the physical world. In all these ways they have some similarities to religion.

Recent thinking about science and religion, as seen in successive sets of Gifford Lectures, has realised that the two language games here are not entirely distinct (Barbour, 1990). Under the influence of logical positivism it was thought for a time that scientific propositions had to be verifiable or falsifiable to have meaning. It was soon realised that some propositions were meaningful whether they were falsifiable or not, and that scientific theories were often linked rather indirectly to the data, which were themselves theory-laden. Kuhn (1970) pointed out that scientific theories were not just intellectual theories, but involved commitment to a whole style of thinking and research, assumptions and research methods, which he called 'paradigms'. Findings were meaningful only within the paradigm; adopting the paradigm was a partly irrational process. Paradigms were like social movements, and were influenced by social, political and economic factors. This view has been criticised on the grounds that scientific changes are less sudden and less irrational, but the main point has been widely accepted. So scientific paradigms were in some ways rather like religions.

Another version of this doctrine was due to Lakatos (cited in Peterson et al., 1998), who argued that groups of scientists are committed to 'research programmes' which have a hard core of ideas that are not open to falsification, together with auxiliary hypotheses that could be modified or rejected. It has been suggested that theology can be seen as a research programme of this kind too (Peterson et al., 1998).

Religion, seen as a research programme, can be said to have its data and its core theory. The data may be thought to be sacred writings, or religious phenomena and experiences. We shall suggest later that the psychology of religion may be able to provide some of these data. On the other hand, science may be a poor model for religion, in that in science there is no direct knowledge, less emotionality, and little commitment to behaviour.

New conflicts between psychology and religion

We have seen that the main way of resolving the conflict between religion and the physical sciences is to say that science deals with the physical world and religion with the inner world. But psychology deals with the inner world too, and tries to do so in a scientific way, so how do we resolve this conflict? There are further problems. Psychology even attacks consciousness, in discovering where it is located and what it does. It has had considerable success in discovering laws from which human behaviour can be predicted. Explanations can even be given for why individuals hold beliefs. There are experiments on the production of unusual states of consciousness—by the influence of drugs, for example. Moral behaviour and beliefs can be studied similarly. And there is a lot of research that explains how human personality develops and functions. So all the spheres of human activity and experience which have been regarded as the special sphere of religion have also been studied by psychologists in a quite different, and scientific, way. We will look at some of these issues more carefully and see how different varieties of psychology have tackled them.

Behaviourism

There are no behaviourists any more; they are extinct. Pavlov, Skinner and other early psychologists studied very simple forms of learning, mainly in animals, and they discounted or ignored conscious experience in humans; reports of it were sometimes referred to as ‘Verbal behaviour’. No reference was made to feelings, thinking, or other kinds of subjective activity. This approach had some success with humans in the practice of certain kinds of behaviour therapy, especially for phobias. Some behaviourists attacked religion, saying that they could explain it in terms of learning processes—it might be due to those involved having simply been rewarded for their religious behaviour. The brain was seen as a ‘black box’, and there were models of how it worked; it was sometimes seen as a kind of telephone switchboard, later as a computer.

Behaviourism was abandoned during the ‘cognitive revolution’ in psychology, which recognised not only consciousness but also its contents—plans, rules, values, theories and explanations, and whole worlds of experience, such as morals, mathematics, and the study of science. It was found that even animals have some cognitive activity; for example, rats have ‘mental maps’ of the mazes they have learnt. An important part of the human inner world is language, giving us words for referring to and categorising events and experiences, and for communicating with one another.

Consciousness, now accepted by all, in some cases reluctantly, has come to be regarded as the greatest unsolved scientific problem, the ‘ultimate mystery’. Psychologists, philosophers, neurologists and workers in machine intelligence have been trying to understand and explain it (Marcel and Bisiach, 1988). It is generally assumed that consciousness depends on the presence of higher levels of neural process, which have evolved, though how they produce conscious experience is the ultimate mystery, which seems to be insoluble.

Conscious experiences do more than reflect the outside world; they have ‘qualia’, that is, awareness of the quality of the colours, such as red, as well as the feeling of emotions

and motivations. Pleasure is the subjective state corresponding to reinforcement (Rolls, 1997). To be conscious is to be able to manipulate items in thought and imagery, together with the associated emotional imagery (Weiskrantz, 1997). These neural events which have a conscious side are able to take a causal role in directing behaviour, and can take account of reasons, values and long-term plans, as well as imagining the likely outcomes. Neural events and the corresponding conscious experiences may be two sides of the same thing, two models that operate at the same time, just as light can be waves or particles, and as a piece of wood can be described in terms of molecules, or in terms of its hardness, strength and colour (Searle, 1984). Patterns of causation can occur at the higher level of analysis: for example, of volition, choice, initiation and monitoring of behaviour.

The biological advantage given by consciousness might be (1) the capacity to solve new problems, or deal with new situations, by being able to manipulate images of acts and events, (2) being able to imagine the consequences of several different possible acts, or (3) a superior power to deal with other people through being able to imagine their point of view, to build up models of them so that their behaviour can be predicted better. It has been suggested that the reason the human brain became so large was to deal with the complexity of social life in large groups of primates (Humphrey, 1983). There is a close connection between consciousness and language, and it has been suggested that conscious thoughts are often like imagined verbal communications to others (Barlow, 1987).

The modern equivalent of behaviourism is the use of computer models of the brain. Computer programs can model cognitive processes very well, indeed, they can perform them better, as with chess-playing machines. Such machines can 'try out in imagination' thousands of alternative moves, but it does not follow that they are 'thinking'. Searle (1984) argued that a person locked in a 'Chinese room' equipped only with a rule book, and who could send and receive messages, could give the impression of speaking Chinese though he had no knowledge of the language or the messages being received and answered. The person inside the room did not understand the messages, and the same is true of machines that simulate mental processes—to understand it is necessary to be conscious. There are some other differences between brains and computers: computers can use only the programs that have been put in, and they cannot solve new problems. Machine intelligence experts are no longer prepared to say that machines which can play chess or mimic other kinds of thinking are 'conscious' (Michie, personal communication). Penrose (1994) said that consciousness depends on brain-functions which are non-computable; they are not machine-like operations, but depend on some new kind of organisation in the brain.

Psychoanalysis

Psychoanalysis poses a quite different challenge to religion from that of behaviourism. Freud offered explanations of some of the main religious phenomena; for example, that God is a projected father-figure, and ritual an obsessional neurosis. Furthermore these 'explanations' of religion suggest that religion is an infantile, neurotic and irrational activity. Freud himself thought that religion was an illusion and would fade away as science became more influential. It is generally recognised that finding a possible

psychological origin for a belief does not imply that the belief is false, if there are grounds for holding it, but it may weaken the beliefs of those who accept the explanation. In fact the father-projection theory has received some modest support, the neurotic theory of ritual has not, and the further theory of the societal origins of religion is simply untestable, as well as very implausible, as we explain in Chapter 7.

Psychoanalysis is unlike most of the rest of contemporary psychology in making less claim to be a branch of normal science, and as a result is not taken very seriously by most academic or research psychologists. Parts of it have been subject to rigorous research, and Freud's ideas about the psychology of religion have been investigated in this way. Jung's ideas are more compatible with religion than Freud's but are even more difficult to test, perhaps impossible. As we shall see, they are closer to religion in some ways, but even more difficult to verify in a scientific way.

Theologians, however, have been very interested in psychoanalysis, and have found it more sympathetic to their outlook than more scientific varieties of psychology. It appears to deal with some of the same topics as religion—the search for salvation, close relationships, moral decisions and guilt feelings, for example. A number of theologians have looked for parallels between the two systems. Undertaking a course of psychoanalysis is similar to religious instruction and conversion. In both cases you have to adopt a new style of thinking, follow daily and weekly rituals, and hope to be changed. In becoming a Christian, for example, you have to believe in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit; in being psychoanalysed, to believe in the Ego, the Super-ego and the Id (Robert Thouless, personal communication). And there is evidence that both kinds of activity are good for you. We explore later the similarity between getting married and making a leap of faith in religious conversion. Many more parallels can be dreamt up with little difficulty. Psychoanalytic ideas can be used to interpret the meaning of Bible stories, like that of Adam and Eve, in terms of sexual symbolism (see p. 102).

The religious life and the pursuit of religious truth have something in common with psychoanalysis. Watts and Williams (1988) suggest that the knowledge of and insights into oneself which psychotherapy may give provide a good model of religion. Both in religion and in psychotherapy people are seeking salvation, trying to solve their problems and find out how to live a better life. And both activities are quite different from the physical sciences.

However, there seems to be no way of deciding which, if any, of the parallels and interpretations suggested by Freudian theory are correct—and this is why psychoanalysis has not been accepted by most mainstream psychologists. Furthermore there are many religious phenomena for which Freudian theory does not seem to have an explanation. God as a father-figure, yes, but not the Holy Spirit or similar entities. Worship perhaps, but not sacrifice. Not religious experience. The theory of ritual has not worked.

The conclusion is that we must turn to more rigorously scientific kinds of psychology, if we can do so while retaining an interest in the topics relevant to religion.

Social and related areas of mainstream psychology

Social and related areas of psychology are broad fields, covering social behaviour and beliefs, as well as research into well-being and social relationships. They include most

aspects of the psychology of religion. They are more rigorous than psychoanalysis, but less reductive than behaviourism. They include some biological topics, such as the origins of facial expressions, and some aspects of linguistics, since most human social behaviour involves speech. They overlap with parts of sociology. And they take note of the historical and cultural setting of behaviour, and make use of ideas from anthropology and sociology. We may note that the founders of sociology assumed that religion was the result of deprivation and would probably fade away through secularisation. Sociology certainly studies behaviour, but it takes account of the meaning of the behaviour to those who produce it and those who respond to it. These are varied topics, but they have in common a commitment to rigorous experimental or statistical methods of research.

Personality psychology also takes account of individual differences in personality, but does so in an empirical manner, to find the origins of personalities and how they function in different situations; this is rather different from the treatment of the topic of personality by philosophers.

We look for laws of social behaviour, in the form of regularities of causality or correlation, the causes and effects of behaviour. This has been successful in locating such regularities, and they are often found to be replicated in many later studies. This makes possible some degree of prediction, though this is a matter of probability rather than prediction of individual behaviour. In the case of language, the aim has never been to predict what someone will say, but only the rules that he or she will follow when saying it.

There are 'softer' approaches to social psychology, which say that experiments are inappropriate, since they treat people like machines, or that there are no laws, as Kenneth Gergen (1982) has argued. The answer to this is that many laws have been found, by the use of experiments and other methods. Harre and Secord (1972) argued similarly that we should not do experiments, but should try to understand behaviour by asking those involved for 'accounts' which explain why they acted as they did. However, this does not lead to a body of empirical laws which could be used for practical purposes, or to a body of theory to explain social phenomena in general.

Social psychology usually adopts a 'non-ontological' approach to questions of religion or politics; that is, it avoids taking any position on whether beliefs are true or not. It may be possible to have a double vision here, the external view of psychology and the internal view of those who have the beliefs or experiences. This is different from the idea of keeping religion and science separate; it is saying that the two points of view can operate simultaneously. In the case of politics, psephologists seem to have no difficulty in understanding why other people vote as they do, and then on occasion voting themselves. In the case of music something similar happens: music students may have to take courses in the physics of musical sounds; this does not persuade them that Beethoven is bunk, but merely explains some of the principles of sound production. The horticulturalist grows roses, and can advise on the use of manure or fertilisers, but to re-create the beauty of the rose requires an artist or a poet. Again, the same person can play both roles. Creative writing and art can be studied by psychologists, but no one could predict what is going to be created without creating it themselves. In all these cases the object of study, e.g. art or music, mathematics or politics, is taken seriously, and accepted as valid, not seen as an illusion to be explained away by psychology.

This means that we can accept the findings of social and related branches of psychology without anxiety that they will debunk religion. They may help us to understand how religion works, as physics does for music. They may be able to provide new data about religion which were not previously available. This book presents materials of this kind. They may provide us with a wealth of data about religion; for example, about the nature of religious experience, the basic phenomenon of religion. And psychological research can provide crucial data on the effects of religion, whether it is good for us and, if so, from which kinds of religion we can benefit.

A number of research methods have been used in the psychology of religion. (1) *Social surveys* have been widely used to find the extent of religious activity in a population, how it varies with age, gender, class and other factors, and historical changes. More sophisticated designs have used statistics to find the independent influence of separate variables, and the causal sequence of events leading to healing, for example. Research on the effect of religion on health, mental health and happiness is done in a similar way, using self-report, or objective measures of well-being. (2) *Experiments* have the great advantage of making clear which the direction of causation is, and of holding unwanted variables constant. However, few experiments have been done in this field, the main ones being on the triggers for religious experience and the effects of religion on helping and other good works. Some of these experiments have been designed to test alternative theories about the causes of events. (3) *Field experiments* are where the study is carried out in a real-life setting, e.g. giving people different drugs in church. (4) *Quasi-experimental designs* are where use is made of naturally occurring phenomena, without the investigator's having to make any interventions. Studies of the effects of conversion, or of joining sects, are examples. Some of these involve longitudinal methods, assessing people at two or more points in time. (5) *Individual differences* are studied by correlational methods, and by comparing contrasted groups. Statistical methods are used to find the dimensions of religiosity, and how they relate to other personality traits. Some studies use physiological measures, e.g. of brain activity.

What follows

Chapters 2–3 describe the development of religion in children, the phenomenon of conversion and other changes with age, and whether religion is associated with any particular kind of personality.

Chapters 4–5 report research into religious experience: how far is it universal? what are the effects on those who undergo it? what are the worldly conditions that produce it?

Chapters 6–7 deal with religious beliefs, what people believe, what is meant by holding religious beliefs, whether they are literal or metaphorical, theories of symbolism due to Freud and Jung.

Chapters 8–9 describe the main forms of religious ritual, such as worship, healing and sacrifice, using ideas from anthropology to explain how they work, and psychological research to find out if, for example, healing works.

Chapters 10–11 ask whether religion is good for us, in terms of happiness, health, mental health, and other benefits, and whether there are any costs.

Chapters 12–13 look at the links between religion and morals and whether there are benefits for the community in the form of better moral and pro-social behaviour.

Chapters 14–15 document whether there has been a decline of religion in modern society and a growth of secularisation. It examines the rise of new churches and sects, in the West but also in the East and the Third World.

Conclusions

- 1 Astronomy, geology and evolutionary theory have produced major conflicts between science and religion. One solution is to say that science deals with the physical world, religion with the inner world. However, psychology claims to study and explain subjective phenomena too.
- 2 Behaviourism was quite incompatible with religion, but is now extinct, and conscious experiences are no longer ignored. They are the most immediate evidence for a non-material world. Psychoanalysis claimed to explain religion away, but there is little empirical support for its claims, or for its argument that psychological explanation for beliefs implies that the beliefs are false.
- 3 Mainstream psychology deals with some occurrences regarded as part of the phenomena of religion, such as moral behaviour, personality, attitude change, and beliefs. However, a non-ontological approach makes it possible to study these things while making no judgement on their reality.
- 4 A final step can be made, to take seriously the objects of experience and belief, as in the cases of mathematics and music. The same could be done for religion. The role of psychology now is to help to understand rather than to undermine.