

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_evangelical\\_quarterly.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php)

# The Evangelical Quarterly

APRIL 15TH, 1931

## PSYCHOLOGY AND RELIGION

THE present relations between psychology and religion are very curious. On the one hand, psychology is being resorted to, with more enthusiasm than discretion, as an ally of religion: it alone, we are told, can help us really to understand religious experience, and consequently preachers and teachers are being commanded, under peril of being charged with slackness, to study it. On the other hand there is the claim that the latest psychological theories expose religion as nothing more than a comfortable delusion, a deceptive dope. The purpose of this paper is to offer an argued protest against both these positions: both seem to me to have the hollowness of a fashion, to be expressions of the desire to be "up to date."

### (I)

The first position demands that pastoral theology (in which we may include the subject of the religious instruction of the young) be refounded and developed in the light of the present findings of psychological science; or, put practically, that a knowledge of psychology is indispensable to the cure of souls. For the minister and teacher are trying to induce in their flocks mental changes, and the laws of mental change are the subject-matter of psychology.

The argument is curiously crude. It amounts to saying that you can't do anything without a scientific knowledge of the processes involved. If this were so, none of us would have learned to walk until we had become physiologists, and no one could bake bread without having studied the very difficult chemistry of fermentation. But we not only walk and bake bread without a knowledge of physiology and chemistry; with this knowledge we could not do these things any better. Similarly, we can think and remember, and induce other people to think and remember, we can persuade, convince, educate and reform without any *psychological* knowledge of the processes involved. For such matters the knowledge of only a few processes is relevant, and the knowledge of these is gained by all of us in the common course

of experience. But we should be more efficient if that knowledge were deepened? Possibly; but the example of the best preachers and teachers is a plain enough proof that the deepening does not come only through the study of the text books of psychology. There is no necessary connection between generalised, systematised knowledge (that is, science) and insight.

It is unfortunate that the requirement of psychological credentials from ministers is being urged at a time when so many other qualifications are being insisted on. Only ministers of unusual ability and exceptional training can add to their peculiar professional attainments some familiarity with the natural sciences, anthropology, sociology and economics. To increase the burden by the further addition of psychology is the last straw. The result is a pathetic show of psychological terminology and theory in many sermons and in much religious literature, with obviously nothing behind the show. In this branch of inquiry, even more than in many others, a little knowledge is dangerous, and when dispensed from the pulpit may excite contempt from the professional psychologist, and from the devout irritation at its irrelevance. Of course, all knowledge is relevant to ministerial work, since this work is so many-sided; but it is not all equally relevant, and since that which is most relevant is so exacting, that which is less relevant may well be dropped. All this applies even more strongly to Sunday School teachers, who have usually only their spare time in which to prepare themselves both for their work in general and for each lesson. Yet they are being urged by their denominational authorities to study sensation, imagination, memory, emotion, instincts and so on, in order to "learn how to teach." The current emphasis on method with concomitant neglect of matter is expanding itself into a solemn farce. There are few things at once so ludicrous and so deplorable as the spectacle of a busy and often ill-equipped Sunday School teacher plunging into the obscurities of psychology in order to learn how to teach, before he really knows what to teach. I am convinced that if such a person were to study his Bible adequately he would have no time for psychology, and that when he has done so he will have little need of it. For religious teaching is infection. The imparting of information, which is the least and lowest feature of it, may to some extent be codified: but the impacting of one personality on another rests not on scientific knowledge but on the sympathy and insight

that develop through a candid intimacy with oneself, practical contact with one's fellows, and familiarity with the spiritual legacy of the ages.

To me the above two arguments—the one an appeal to facts, the other to a practical difficulty—seem to be strong enough of themselves, but I should like to support them with a deeper challenge. I wish to deny that we are as yet almost as little obliged to turn to psychologists for the understanding of the religious soul as we are for the treatment of it. I mean that their science has not yet proved its right to exercise authority for the simple reason that it has scarcely passed the stage of being a science in spirit and aim only rather than in achievement. The common argument that since religious experience is a mental fact, and mental facts are the subject-matter of psychology, we must turn for the understanding of religious experience to psychology, would have some cogency only if psychology were a developed science, with a considerable body of unambiguous, demonstrated and generally approved results. It is nothing of the kind, is not remotely comparable with physics and chemistry, or even with biology. Since, however, there is no popular appreciation of the fact that the science of mental phenomena, though long born, is still infantile, I must give a few indications of its infantility. But I must interpolate that this infantility is due firstly to the relatively short time within which it has been cultivated *intensively*, and secondly to its having a far more difficult task than any of the other sciences except the philosophical ones.

In the first place, psychologists are not agreed on what psychology is : its very scope, the set of phenomena it is to study, is not yet determined. For one school it is exclusively the interpretation of nervous and muscular processes ; for another the science of instincts ; for another the description, and explanation in terms of one another, of conscious events ; for another pre-occupation with events which consciousness, it is supposed, strenuously screens. Some schools base their theories on the facts of animal life, others on the study of the morbidly abnormal in human experience, others on the myths, cults and other relicts of primitive races. By way of illustration I may mention that as a university teacher of psychology I have been obliged by the requirements of a diploma syllabus to teach students the behaviour of the amœba, the sea-anemone and the marine sponge.

Obviously the science has ragged and ill-defined boundaries. Secondly, a similar confusion reigns in regard to methods. A few of us still maintain that introspection is fundamental; the behaviourists reject it because they hold that psychology has nothing to do with any sort of consciousness; the Freudians reject it as inherently deceptive, but follow a method very different from that of the Behaviourists; while the primary method of Professor Spearman and his school seems to be mathematical—assigning numerical values to mental achievements and capacities, elaborating them in accordance with the usual mathematical rules, and then eliciting a law in the form of an algebraic formula. To enumerate all the different conceptions of province and method would require extended space, but perhaps sufficient has been said to show that psychology is not yet comparable with the material sciences, which, though they teem with problems, have well defined areas, generally accepted methods, and a large corpus of mutually corroborative results.

The conclusion to be drawn is that the appeal to "Psychology" has scarcely any meaning. There is no actual "Psychology"; there are instead many psychologies, and until there is only one it is comical to settle a question by the solemn statement "Psychology says . . ." Now this conclusion holds too—though to a lesser degree since the province is less indeterminate—of the "Psychology" of religion. The term defines an ideal, but in fact indicates a large variety of discordant investigations and theories. Each school naturally brings its own conception of the nature of the mind and of the methods by which this should be investigated to that particular phase of experience which we call religious. In saying this I am not making a criticism but pointing to a fact, and the fact alone shows the futility of appealing to *the* Psychology of religion; the unanimity and authority implied in such an appeal do not exist. But some direct criticisms do need to be made. (a) Many investigators do not seem to be aware that the inadequate data warrant only qualified conclusions. The biographies and autobiographies of saints, for example, are of necessity fragmentary, fragmentary also in the deeper sense of not always being perfectly expressive of the subtler aspects of their experiences; and whatever interpretations a psychologist may put upon them cannot be verified (since the dead cannot reply) and therefore have little *scientific* value. Conclusions may and must be drawn,

but not laid down authoritatively. Psycho-analysts, by the way, exhibit themselves characteristically when they apply to the silent writings of the dead a diagnostic technique which, by their own admission, is successful with the living only after many months of intensive questioning and answering. As for the use of questionnaires—a method which is said to have inaugurated the scientific study of religious experience—it must surely be seen that few people, if any, for whom religion is the most sacred and intimate affair of their lives will or can put down on cold paper for a stranger's eyes the things that matter most to them; and again, when the investigator has drawn his interpretations, he does not check them by returning to his sources of information to question them afresh, but credits his initial data with finality. It may be objected that this is all he can do under the circumstances. I agree; I am simply urging that where the conditions of strictly scientific proof cannot be fulfilled scientific authority should not be claimed. (b) Too many psychologists assume that their training in psychology alone enables them to understand any and every form of experience. They forget the respect in which mental events differ from all other events, namely, that to be *given* (in the rigorous scientific sense of being directly apprehended) they have to be experienced; any but the inner view is second-hand. I cannot see how anyone can fruitfully examine religious experience who hasn't any himself; he is shut off from the very data. This is a non-oracular way of saying that spiritual things are spiritually discerned. (c) It would be difficult to find a sphere of alleged scientific enquiry where generalisations are made so easily as in psychology, although it is precisely in the realm of mind where individuality, uniqueness, is the most widely and deeply realised. We are for ever being told, for instance, of the religion of such non-existent beings as *the* child and *the* adolescent. Fortunately, there is now in process of birth what is known as a "psychology of individual differences" which in time should check the tendency to abstraction implicit in scientific methods which were devised for, and have been justified by, the material world in which significant individuality is scarcely, if at all, to be found.

## (II)

My second point concerns apologetics. Apologetics is theology defensively adapting itself to its environment, and

consequently changing the mode and field of its defence with environmental changes. In each age the religious attitude has had a predominant enemy—for example, mechanism in the eighteenth century, and evolutionism in the nineteenth. In the present century, we are told, the chief menace will come from psychology; religion will be explained away in terms of suggestion, sublimation and so on.

The issue is not a new one; the psychological scare is simply the evolutionary scare in a new dress. The weapon of both is an historical account paraded as an explanation. The way is often prepared by making the account of a thing's origin do service for a description of the thing. If religion began with fear, it simply is fear. As well might we say that an oak tree is an acorn. It is tedious to be forced to plead that a thing is what it is and not what it sprang from. Another way in which explanation is facilitated by first misdescribing the thing to be explained, is the analysis of the thing into its elements. Now the analytic procedure is characteristic of, and indispensable to science; but it has no virtue until it is thorough, and it is not thorough until it lays hold of relations as well as elements. I mean that a thing is not simply what it is made of, but these together with the way in which they are organised. Westminster Abbey, for instance, though made of grains of sand, is more than these, and diamond and soot are still diamond and soot, even though the chemist has shown them both to be made wholly and solely of the same stuff, namely carbon. To analyse a thing into its parts, then, without noting the mutual relations of these parts, is to falsify the description. The same must be said of the analysis of religious experience. Religious experience is a whole, having distinctive characters not possessed by its parts, and its parts have distinctive characters which they do not possess outside of that whole. Fear may certainly be found in it, though it is the fear of evil rather than of God (the "fear" of God as a recognised religious emotion is not, of course, fear but reverence, a highly refined, not an "instinctive" attitude). Love too will be found in it, though the kind of love that is characteristic of it is only caricatured when it is called sexual. Indeed, every element and process of mind may be and often is in it. But it is neither any one of these, nor all of them as a mere heap; it is a peculiar arrangement of them. Religion may well be defined for psychological purposes as the organisation of the entire personality under the idea of God.

An experience, then, is not accurately *described* either when its origin is traced, or when its elements are simply enumerated. Nor does its origin always *explain* its continuance. I originally believed that Shakespeare was a great poet because I was told so, but I retain the belief because I have tested it and found it to be right. Most of our present knowledge rested first on external and uncomprehended authority ; it has since changed its ground, and had it not done so we should not now be holding it. It is one of the commonest facts of experience that a belief is kept alive through causes quite different from those that generated it. And yet there are many living psychologists who will say that if belief in God was spanked into you as a child, this is why you now believe : your own testimony is curiously ruled out as worthless. I would suggest that the fundamental difference between the old psychologies and the new ones is that the former could justify their inferences by appeal to the general axioms of reasoning, while the inferences of the latter implicitly follow principles that will not bear naked abstract statement. One of these implicit principles is that a thing is what it sprang from : another, that a thing is what it is composed of : another, that a thing's continued existence is wholly explained by that which brought it into being.

But the worst of the implicit assumptions that run through current psychologies—and through anthropologies, sociologies, speculative extensions of evolutionary biology, and so on—is the assumption that *value* is explained in terms of factual origin. The worth of a thing is conferred by its birth-certificate. To be specific, the truth-value of our belief in God is being assessed by the circumstances of its origin either in individuals severally or in the race. For this position I have never seen any evidence offered, and it is such a strange position that the onus of proof lies on him who maintains it. I am sure it is a natural, not a doctrinaire, supposition that the questions why I first believed in God, and whether God exists, are not both answered when the first is. The answer to the first is simply a little chapter of mental history, which a psychologist may write if he pleases ; the answer to the second is a piece of philosophy, involving extremely difficult considerations concerning the nature of evidence in general, the various forms of evidence and their respective value—involving, that is, considerations that fall outside the province of psychology, *a fortiori* outside the current psychology (which strenuously proclaims its independence of all



philosophy). Lest I be suspected of special pleading, let me add an illustration from another sphere of the distance between questions of origin and questions of value. Shakespeare's most majestic utterances are traceable ultimately to his infantile howlings, and a painter's greatest pictures to his childish scribbles: yet clearly these facts have no bearing whatever on the question whether those utterances and pictures are beautiful.

The failure to appreciate this elementary distinction is responsible for much of the cloudiness of present-day discussions. Those psycho-analysts who brand religion as a comfortable delusion instinctively grounded exemplify it in a singularly crude form. In making all knowledge an expression of the instinct of curiosity they must include their own psycho-analytic theories, since these claim to be knowledge. Now if psycho-analysis, being knowledge, springs from a mere instinct and yet is true, religious belief, according to them springing from a mere instinct, may be true. If, however, it be argued that religious belief is untrue simply because it can be traced to an instinct, the same conclusion ought to be drawn concerning psycho-analytic theories—and concerning *all* knowledge. There is no escape from the dilemma except by admitting that origin and value reside apart, each calling for a distinct line of investigation, and for a different technique on the part of the investigator, psychological in the first place, philosophical in the second. A parallel answer may be given to the facile charge that religious belief is nothing but the result of suggestion. Suggestion is certainly operative. But it is operative in a vast amount of non-religious belief as well; it is operative when the public accepts theories from psychologists, and when psychologists accept them from one another; and in any case the supposition that because a belief makes its entrance into the mind through suggestion it must be false is evident nonsense. The theories of instinct and suggestion, with that of sublimation, have no peculiar reference to religious belief; the denials based upon them have an incidence wider than that usually recognised. Religious people may remain calm before attacks which by implication make nonsense of morality, science and commonsense beliefs as well as of religious ones. It is impossible to deny the existence of God, the possibility of morality, or the significance of moral values, without denying a great deal else.

T. E. JESSOP.

University College, Hull.