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**PSYCHOLOGY AND RELIGION—  
A RETROSPECT AND PROSPECT**

By

M. A. JEEVES, M.A.

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THE VICTORIA INSTITUTE

22 DINGWALL ROAD, CROYDON, SURREY

# PSYCHOLOGY AND RELIGION— A RETROSPECT AND PROSPECT

By M. A. JEEVES, M.A.

## SYNOPSIS

This paper discusses the present relationship between Psychology and Religion in the light of the development of Psychology over the past fifty years. The contributions made by Sigmund Freud and William James are briefly reviewed and critically evaluated. It is suggested that there are to-day several points of overlap between Psychology and Religion which are still live issues. Five such points are discussed. The importance of a recognition by the psychologist of the limitations of his methodology is emphasized, but it is suggested that the religious man has at times been at fault in misconstruing the intentions of the psychologist who investigates religious experience. Attention is drawn to the dangers of attempting to defend, in the name of orthodoxy, some forms of religious experience which can scarcely be labelled Christian.

It is suggested that the experimental psychologist has a significant contribution to make in the investigation of current practical problems in parochial settings. Some examples of work already carried out are given by way of illustration.

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1. *Introduction.* It is my intention to sketch on a broad canvas the relationship between Psychology and Religion and to do this adequately I shall take a brief look into the immediate past, i.e. the last sixty years, and after evaluating the contemporary situation I shall then go on to make some tentative suggestions concerning future prospects.

It is partly through looking into the past that we are able to understand what it is that Psychology is claiming to do to-day and this will help us

to decide what status we should assign to it as an academic discipline. Psychology emerged as a separate discipline in the mid-nineteenth century. Its principal earlier connections were with Philosophy, Theology and Physiology. The Philosopher, for example, Descartes, had propounded his views on the duality of mind and matter, putting forward a mechanistic view of mind. The connection with Theology is, I suppose, almost too obvious to be worth stating, since theologians have wrestled unceasingly with the problems relating to the nature of man, whether for example he be bipartite or tripartite.

2. *The Methodology of Modern Psychology.* The actual methods of investigation employed by the Psychologist are many and varied and a brief list will serve to show how we have borrowed from other sciences to establish our own methodology. Thus in the first place Biology has taught us to give due attention to the importance of environment. Anthropology has raised problems of nature *versus* nurture. Medicine has shown us that mental illness may have a physical or a psychological basis or both. Mathematics has provided us with one of our most important tools, namely statistics. Physics has helped us in the construction of our recording instruments and, more recently, developments in electronics have provided us with useful analogical models of the human brain, and so on.

To-day then, Psychology is laying claim to its rightful place amongst the Natural Sciences, but as it does so it must at the same time discipline itself to the acceptance of the scope and limitations of the hypothetico-deductive method of the Natural Sciences. This is the method of investigation of the Psychologist who claims also to be a Scientist and we may perhaps wish to ask, "What has the Psychologist to do with making any pronouncements whatever about religious experience?" The answer briefly is that since his terms of reference are as wide as the scope of human behaviour and experience this, by the very nature of the case, also includes religious experience. Notice, however, that his brief is to explain in detail and to describe, if he can, the underlying physical and psychological mechanisms of the particular behaviour with which he is concerned. This, however, is different from any attempt on his part to pronounce upon the ultimate validity or otherwise of the particular interpretations given by the religious man in religious language of his religious experiences. When this stage is reached the opinion of the Psychologist has as much and as little claim to be heard and believed as that of any other layman, whether he be philosopher, artist, physician, physicist or chemist. Speaking on this particular subject, Sir Frederick Bartlett, until recently Professor of Experimental Psychology at Cambridge University, has written in his Riddell Memorial lectures for 1950,

"It is inevitable that the forms which are taken by feeling, thinking and action within any religion should be moulded and directed by the character of its own associated culture. The Psychologist must accept these forms and attempt to show how they have grown up and what are their principal effects. Should he appear to succeed in doing these things he is tempted to suppose that this confers upon him some special right to pronounce upon the further and deeper issues of ultimate value and truth. These issues, as many people have claimed, seem to be inevitably bound up with the assertion that in some way the truth and the worth of religion come from a contact of the natural order with some other order or world, not itself directly accessible to the common human senses," and Bartlett goes on, "So far as any final decision upon the validity or values of such a claim goes, the Psychologist is in exactly the same position as that of any other human being who cares to consider the matter seriously. Being a Psychologist gives him neither superior nor inferior authority."

3. *Freud and Religion.* With our terms of reference now more clearly defined let us turn at once to consideration of the claims to be believed of the particular interpretation of religion and religious experience given by Sigmund Freud. Freud was without doubt one of the greatest Psychologists of the first half of the twentieth century and although he liked to think himself a Scientific Psychologist his main claim to fame was undoubtedly as a Clinician, and as the author and originator of the method of Psycho-Therapy known as Psycho-analysis. There came a time when Freud decided to turn the torrent of his genius towards the consideration of the origins and functions of religion in the history of the human race. Much of the material upon which he based his judgment was collected by him in his Consulting Room in the course of the Psycho-analysis of his patients. Most people to-day are at least aware of, if not familiar with, Freud's basic picture of personality structure. If I might be allowed to over-simplify it just now for the sake of brevity, saying just enough to give a meaningful picture of how Freud's personality theory has been bound up with his opinion of religion, and how it is essential for a clear understanding of his views, I would proceed thus. Each of us, if we consider the real me or the real you as our Ego has to balance out in daily living the conflicting demands of our Id, which is the source of all our instinctual demands and basic drives, with those of our Super-Ego. In the adult the Super-ego represents the internalization of our early childhood reactions to our environment and particularly our parents' attitude and example, and this we may partly identify with what we usually call conscience. Such a view as this makes no provision for any inherent or absolute appreciation of right and wrong and is in this sense independent of fundamental religious or moral significance. According

to this picture of the developing personality Freud saw the idea of God and the fact of religious beliefs as no more than the projection in later life of the child's relationship to his father. Thus as a child developed and grew up he found that his earthly father was not able to protect him from all the stresses and threats to his existence in his daily environment, and moreover, he discovered that the day would come when he, the growing man, must assert his independence of his earthly father and then he must face the problem of to whom or to what he would then turn to fill the resulting gap in his life. One solution would be to attribute to a heavenly father all those characteristics which the developing child had found so essential in his earthly father. It was thus, said Freud, that primitive man developed his idea of God or Gods which were in fact merely the products and projections of his own imagination. In his book *The Future of an Illusion* Freud accordingly sums up the three-fold task of the Gods as being to exorcize, to reconcile and to make amends. Thus for Freud the idea of God was in fact an illusion created by men to comfort them in the face of their helplessness when they had outgrown or been deprived of their earthly parents. The amazing thing about all this is, that despite this sudden excursion by Freud into the field of imaginative mythology, he believed and proclaimed that this theory of the origin of religion provided a rational basis for the abandonment of religion. At the same time he concluded nevertheless that mankind at his present stage of development was not yet ready for the challenge to him implied by this liberation from religious belief and, therefore, for the time being at least, it was necessary that this fiction should continue. It would seem that this myth-making once embarked upon by Freud had for him a strange and compelling fascination for he soon found himself compelled to postulate in order to account for evil as the enemy of good, a death instinct "Thanatos" at war with "Eros", the life instinct, to be found in every living creature. There is in fact a striking contrast between the brilliant contribution made by Freud on the one hand to our understanding of the unconscious factors influencing thought and feeling and behaviour in the realm of everyday life, as well as in those of neurotic and psychotic symptoms, and on the other hand, the unfettered speculations concerning religion made in his consideration of some of the philosophical implications of the same basic clinical experience.

What then is to be our answer to Freud's wild speculations as to the origins of the religious life. I want to suggest two possible answers. In the first place there are no *a priori* reasons for accepting his explanation of the origin of God with the character of the divine Heavenly Father in preference to the accounts given to us by Revelation and preserved for us in the Scriptures. Indeed, rather than saying, as Freud does, that a Heavenly Father is a projection of the earthly father figure made by man himself to satisfy his adult demands and secure his independence, we

would assert that rather is it the case that God in His wisdom has ordained the pattern of human family life in such a way that as we grow up in it He teaches us progressively more about the characteristics of Himself as our Heavenly Father. Thus we see that the love, the care, and the consideration, of an earthly father is but a faint shadow or reflection of the infinite love and care which our Heavenly Father has for all His creatures. At the same time it serves to prepare the way for us to a deeper understanding of His wonderful, divine Fatherhood. In the second place it is not difficult to demolish Freud's own edifice of religious theorizing with the very same principles upon which his own case is built; thus, if we permit ourselves the same kind of speculations about Freud as he has permitted himself about Moses, for example, we may justifiably wonder whether his own unresolved conflict and intensely charged feelings about his father were not perhaps as much responsible for his views about conscience and religion, as were any of his scientific abilities. Thus from this thesis we should easily see how Freud, rather than wishing to preserve his own father figure in adulthood, in the form of a heavenly Father, instead sought to be rid of his own unresolved conflict with respect to his earthly father. And therefore, he went so far as to reject any idea of a Heavenly Father. On the face of it either explanation is equally likely and equally tenable. Thus we may conclude that it remains true that Freud can claim no more authority for his conclusions than could be claimed for the subjective speculations of any one else. His brilliant ability to explain how the idea of God and the idea of fatherhood might be linked in the human mind, and how both ideas could be expected to become involved in the developing conscience of the individual is in no sense an answer to the very much wider and infinitely more important question of why the concept of God should be a part of human mental existence at all. Moreover, the fundamental philosophical fallacy at the foundation of his speculative edifice is clearly summarized for us in his own words in the closing paragraph of *The Future of an Illusion* when, asserting that Science is the only way to knowledge and truth, he writes: "No, Science is no illusion but it would be an illusion that we could get anywhere else what it cannot give us."

4. *William James*. Another figure to whom I would turn your attention in this brief retrospect is that of William James. William James' approach to the study of religion was in many ways much more comprehensive than that of Freud and I personally feel that his contribution to this field, preserved for us in his book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, has not been bettered before or since. This is not to deny that there are many shortcomings, but in general his approach and his conclusions have stood the test of time much better than those of Freud. Perhaps his most outstanding contribution was his brilliant analysis and contrasting of



the "once-born" and the "twice-born" souls. So much then for our backward glance. Let us now direct our attention to some of the places where to-day there seem to be points of overlap between Psychology and Religion. I should like to illustrate my thesis with five particular points where it is generally agreed that both Psychology and Religion have something to contribute.

5. *Some Contemporary Points of Overlap.* I shall consider first of all one of the most widely discussed topics of to-day, what is usually referred to as Emotionalism in religious experience and I shall then proceed to discuss in turn Conversion, Guilt, normal and pathological, the Christian attitude to mental illness and the Nature of religious faith.

(i) *Emotionalism*

First then let us turn to a consideration of a form of attack not infrequently made upon the validity of Christian experience in the name of psychology. This has to do with what is most often referred to as Emotionalism, by which is usually meant that Christian experience is *nothing but* emotional experience with no objective truth or reality in the professed interpretation of such experience. Now before I seek to answer such an accusation may I add a word of warning that there are times when we are tempted *for a variety of reasons*, to defend positions which in our own more sane moments we should not, for a moment, seriously wish to establish. I believe we must ever be on our guard against such a temptation in the name of orthodoxy, which in fact, may really be a cover to shield our own pride or personal prestige. In the first place, whether we like it or not, there is emotion in everything that we think, or say, or do, and so what we are concerned with is not really to explain why there are emotional accompaniments to religious experience but rather to understand what is their function and when are they rightly in balance and when are they unhealthy and pathological.

Emotional activity is part of our make-up and to maintain, as some do, that our decisions in spiritual matters must be devoid of emotional content is to be as mistaken on the one side as are those on the other extreme who seek to work up excessive feelings of guilt and conviction of sin. It seems to me that the well-taught Christian must join wholeheartedly with Psychologist and Psychotherapist in condemning that kind of evangelism which deliberately works up mass emotion or exercises undue influence over the free choice of an individual. At the same time it is a fact that all schools of dynamic psychology accept as one of their basic principles, that intellectual understanding or acceptance of a new outlook or attitude is ineffectual unless accompanied by an emotional experience of such a change. This is perhaps shown most clearly in the

Psychiatrist's consulting room where it is not at all an uncommon thing for an intelligent and well-educated patient to come along having read all about his case in one of the many readable and readily available books on psychology and yet be no better than he was before he read the book. The reason for this, amongst other things is, of course, that although he has a correct intellectual understanding of the problem there has been no emotional experience accompanying this understanding.

### (ii) *Conversion*

The next and most controversial of all religious experiences and the one most often attacked by unbelievers is what we usually know as Conversion. I should like to turn now to a fairly detailed consideration of conversion which I hope will also serve to illustrate the general points I have tried to make thus far. May I begin this consideration of Conversion by briefly summarizing various forms of Conversion which I feel that we should not as Christians attempt to defend or justify. There are two kinds of conversion which are apt to appear especially among adolescents. First of all there are those kinds of conversion which result in unhealthy regressions to submission and authority. Such is often the case when, under social pressure from a family or Church group, a young person surrenders to his parents or his pastor's wishes and becomes "converted". This usually represents a regression to infantile submission. Such submission and obedience should be to Christ Himself and not to any earthly substitute. A similar type of experience may occur in the case of conversions which follow closely upon sorrow or failure in examinations. In such cases they may be only consolations and compensations.

Secondly, there are those types of conversion which result from the insistence made by religious groups upon a standardized type of conversion. In such cases the model tends to be St. Paul or Augustine or Wesley or the individual's own experience. It thus occurs that in some circles unless there has been an emotional crisis, doubt is cast upon the reality and validity of the individual's religious life. People converted under such circumstances are often those who in later life are the most cynical and are most likely to proclaim that all Christian experience is *nothing but* a psychological myth.

Thirdly, there are those conversions which are associated with an acute and almost pathological sense of guilt which, especially in adolescence, is often associated with the emergence into consciousness of sex life proper. Many adolescents tend to equate sex impulses with guilt and they seek relief in conversion, only to find that they are more tormented with doubt and fears than ever. To equate sexuality with guilt and then to banish it from their life is to reject what is an essential part of their nature and that is sometimes how the seeds of neurotic illness are sown. Thus there

comes to be a repression of guilt through conversion rather than the removal of it in forgiveness. These considerations of some of the types of conversion experience which take place will I hope help us to see where there is an element of truth in the accusation that Christian experience, where it is not true to the forms described in the New Testament, is a psychological myth.

(iv) *Mental Illness*

I should now like to return and take up in more detail a point which I made in passing earlier. I am referring to the question which is usually put in some such form as this, "If all you say about Christian experience is true, why is it that so many people whom I know and who claim to be Christians seem to be mentally ill in different degrees?" "Surely," the questioner goes on, "a Christian should not be neurotic or psychotic?" In the first place let me be quite clear that I do not for a moment wish to deny what I have said already, namely that conversion and that which follows should be a truly healing process. I personally like William James' definition of conversion; he wrote, "Conversion is a process gradual or sudden by which a self hitherto divided and consciously wrong, inferior and unhappy becomes unified and consciously right, superior and happy, to the establishment of a right relationship with the object of religious sentiment."

I would actually wish to alter the last phrase to read "to the re-establishment of a right relationship with God the Father through the Lord Jesus Christ".

While the power of the love of Christ is a reality in the lives of countless Christians we are bound to admit that there are also not a few Christians who have what are usually called "nervous breakdowns". As we learn more and more about the genesis and basis of mental disorders we become more and more aware of their close affinity with physical disorders and in one sense at least it is almost as foolish to expect to find less *serious* mental disorders amongst Christians as it is to expect to find less cases of acute appendicitis amongst Christians than amongst non-Christians.

We must, moreover, realize that it is sometimes the case that people who are neurotic or psychotic are drawn to Christianity because of the hope of reaching a solution to their mental problems, which in fact some of the neurotic ones do. For this and for the following reasons we should not be too surprised to find that Christians appear to be almost as much subject to mental disorders as others. It is also possible that some who call themselves Christians and who are members of religious communities are, in fact, religious neurotics. They are sometimes "escapists" who seek the shelter of Christianity whenever trouble arises and are only interested in Christianity for what they can get out of it. These people

somehow manage to ignore Christ's injunction that "If any man will come after me let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

Lastly, there are those who persist in breaking even the most obvious rules of mental and physical health. This I know is a great temptation to Christian workers who often tend to ignore the command to rest one day in seven. It is, of course, possible to use myriads of meetings simply as a means of escaping from oneself. Our answer, therefore, to the question why Christians or those who call themselves Christians still have mental disorders should, I suggest, be along two lines, firstly that there are no *a priori* reasons for believing that a random sample of Christians should be any more or less innately prone to disorders than a similar group of non-Christians and secondly that it is in fact a compliment to the claims of Christianity that so many should turn to it as a help in time of need and hence that not a few unstable personalities should be found within its bounds.

#### (v) *The Nature of Religious Faith*

Traditionally the word faith has been used in two senses, perhaps best expressed by *fides* and *fiducia*. "Fides" has been taken to denote the act of knowing God and knowing or believing that there is a God. "Fiducia," on the other hand, denotes the worshipper's attitude of practical trust in God. Faith in the New Testament sense includes all three attitudes towards God.

A psychologist sees in faith three different though again related types of belief which are best expressed perhaps in shorthand form as credulity, credence and conviction. The first, *credulity*, is the attitude exemplified most clearly in infancy.

To children in their early years everything is real and upon this attitude depends all the later non-believing attitudes for their existence. With infants perception through the senses is to be equated with reality and yet we, as adults, must learn to interpret our immediate perceptual data. Thus, for example, we learn that what appears to be a wet patch on the road on a hot summer day is but the result of a particular manner of refraction and reflection of the light above the hot surface. There is, however, an adult correlate of this infantile attitude, namely, the kind of unquestioning intellectual assent under accepted authority which at times seeks to pose as faith.

Secondly, there is *credence* which denotes that kind of intellectual assent which can only follow upon doubt, and yet this attitude can result in conceptual belief which can even supersede and dislodge the evidence from immediate sense data.

*Conviction*, the third part of belief, involves first credulity and credence but with the difference that it also involves the total personality at the

deepest emotional level. At this stage an individual commits himself to the truth of the proposition or the trustworthiness of the person in whom he has believed. That a belief of this kind involves and affects the whole personality is confirmed by many psychological researches in the field of what is known as personality dynamics.

6. *The Contribution of the Experimental Psychologist.* I have left until now what to me, as an experimental psychologist, is potentially the most interesting point of contact between psychology and religion to-day. I am referring to the assistance which the experimental psychologist should be able to give in the investigation of the practical problems which arise in most parochial settings

During the past few years a number of techniques have been evolved in particular by students of psychology and the social sciences which are capable of being applied with some profit to some, at any rate, of the practical problems of the Church. These techniques aim at obtaining data which are fuller, wider and more objective than those which can be obtained by the lone observer working on his own unchecked observations. As examples of the type of work envisaged I should like to sketch very briefly three particular studies which have already been carried out. Quite the most famous and comprehensive piece of work already carried out is the study of conversion and religious development during adolescence made by Professor Starbuck and published under the title of *The Psychology of Religion* as long ago as 1889. Starbuck was able to produce quantitative data about the ages at which conversion most frequently takes place, showing that for boys there seems to be a steady rise until about the age of 16 followed by a steady fall whilst for girls there are three peaks at 13, 16 and 18 years. For the second example I should like to cite a study made by Professor Allport of Harvard and his collaborators *The Religion of the Post-War College Student*, *J. Psychol.*, 1948, 25, 3-33). They were interested in the nature of the religion of the post-war college students (that is the post 1939-1945 war), and I quote from the first paragraph of their report: "It is said that among young intellectuals religion is a thing of the past, contrariwise it is asserted that the shattering experience of the war has caused modern youth to become unusually responsive to the values of religion. Assertions and counter-assertions of this order are necessarily based on selective observation and run the danger of reflecting the anti- or pro-religious bias of those who make them. What actually are the facts for the case? It is important for Social Theorists, Educators, Religionists and for the students themselves to know." The report went on to give a detailed study of the religious life and views of young people. The instrument used in this study was the traditional, and far from perfect, device of the questionnaire. From the many very interesting findings which emerged

from this study I can quote but a few. For example, it was found that seven out of every ten students feel that they require "some form of religious orientation or belief in order to achieve a fully mature philosophy of life". Or again that only one in ten among women and two in ten among men declared definitely that they have no need for religion and only about 15 per cent deny altogether participating in religious activities or feeling some religious states of mind during the preceding six months. The strongest single psychological influence upon the "felt need" for religion was the intensity of religious influence in the student's upbringing. Another point which emerged was that the rarest of the twelve influences mentioned was sex turmoil, a fact that tends to discredit the derivation of religious sentiment solely from this root.

A third example I would take to illustrate my point is reported in a paper which appeared in the *British Journal of Psychology* in 1946—"An attempt at an experimental approach to the Psychology of Religion" and in it the Rev. A. T. Welford, a Lecturer in psychology at Cambridge, has reported a study in which 182 subjects were given four prayers of differing language and somewhat differing subject matter and asked to place them in order of preference. The four prayers used were: (a) Help us, O Lord, to strive hard to control ourselves and to help our fellows that our lives may be useful in this world. (b) Almighty and everlasting God, we beseech Thee that by the gracious gift of Thy Spirit dwelling in our hearts we may endeavour ourselves to follow after righteousness, and loving all men, may ever seek the path of charitableness, for Jesus Christ's sake. (c) Prevent us, O Lord, in all our doings with Thy most gracious favour and further us with Thy continual help that in all our work begun, continued and ended in Thee we may glorify Thy holy name, through Jesus Christ our Lord, and (d) Teach us, Almighty Father, to serve Thee as Thou deservest; to give and not to count the cost; to fight and not to heed the wounds; to toil and not to seek for rest; to labour and not to ask for any reward save that of knowing that we do Thy will.

In this study Welford was able to indicate how the preference for different types of prayers varied amongst groups of clergy, ordinands, churchgoers, non-churchgoers and various groups of children. It was interesting that the question of whether a prayer was expressed in old-fashioned or modern language, appeared to be an unimportant factor as compared with other factors such as the beauty and dignity of the prayer or its simplicity or the more affective aspects of its subject matter.

It seems to me not unreasonable to suppose that numerous questions facing us to-day in the Churches should be answerable by such an empirical approach. I have in mind questions such as, "What is the optimum age at which boys and girls should be confirmed, in order that it should have the greatest meaning for them at the time of confirmation and the most lasting significance in later life?" and, "At what age should we attempt to

introduce children in the Anglican Church to a liturgical form of worship? ” Or again, “ In the case of children between, for example, 11 and 14 years is a Sunday School or a Children’s Church most likely to produce, in a given locality, regular churchgoing at a later age? ” and again, “ In a given type of town or country district, what results are likely to follow the holding of a mission, and how often should such missions be held? ”

From the examples given it will be seen that the type and method of investigation advocated is of an essentially practical and applied nature and is not intended to consider such matters as the rightness and value of Christian institutions.

7. *Concluding Summary.* It will have become evident that I did not have any cut-and-dried answers to present in this paper, indeed, I believe that any attempt to present cut-and-dried answers would, by the very nature of the case have indicated failure on my part to grasp the contemporary situation in psychological research, which is in a state of flux and of rapid advances, at times followed by wild theorizing. Having made this proviso I would wish to maintain that (1) Insofar as psychology to-day as the science of the study of behaviour lays claim to the status of a science, it must, with that status, accept the scope and limitations of the scientific method. So far as any final decision upon the validity or value of any claim which asserts that in some way the truth and worth of religion comes from a contact of the natural order with some other order or world not in itself directly accessible to the common human senses, the Psychologist is in exactly the same position as that of any other human being prepared to study the matter seriously. I quote again from Bartlett, “ being a Psychologist gives him neither superior nor inferior authority.” (2) In his interpretation of the origins and functions of religion Sigmund Freud stepped out into the realm of excessive mythology. Moreover, his own theory of the origins of religious beliefs can be easily demolished starting from the principles enunciated by him in his theory of personality. (3) that emotion is a real and essential part of all of our profound and most significant experiences, whether they be religious or otherwise. There are, however, dangers in excessive emotionalism to be found in certain types of mass evangelism. (4) True conversions are a human and unifying process. There may, however, be several forms of conversion which are but immature escapism and which will not bear the fruits of a spirit-filled life. (5) We must be done once and for all with the fallacy, common even in some Christian circles, that mental illness is in some sense a detrimental reflection upon a person’s spiritual life. This is nonsense and the sooner we realize this the better. (6) There is, as yet largely unexplored, a real and definite positive contribution for experimental psychologists to make in the study of practical and applied problems arising in the typical parochial setting.