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Tracing the History of the Discipline of Psychology of Religion, Major Developments and Methodological Differences Utilised By Scholars in America and Europe

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Abstract

The psychology of religion has stemmed from the mainstream psychology. Due to the increased interest by psychologists to study religion from a scientific perspective, gave rise to study of religion from a psychological point of view. This essay endeavours to establish the history of psychology of religion; the major historical developments and methodological approaches used by the American and European scholars. The essay acknowledges the interesting journey the field of psychology of religion and spiritualities has taken from a philosophical conception to psychology. It highlights the methodological challenges it has and still faces from the American and European perspectives. The psychology of religion is both an interesting and challenging field, which has undergone a lot of changes, denials and shortcoming because of the nature of religion and spiritualities. However, this article establishes that tremendous job has been done both American and European efforts.

Key words: Humanistic, Psychoanalytic, Behaviouristic, Methodologies, Descriptive, Science

Introduction

Loewenthal (2008) argued that, the all history of the psychology of religion began with Wilhelm Wundt in 1879 as many scholars unanimously regard it him to be. He further stated that, while working at the University of Leipzig in 1879 Wilhelm turned psychology into a science by establishing the first ever-psychological laboratory. He however observed that some other

scholars argue defiantly that it was actually an American psychologist William James who emerged as a major figure in the psychology of religion. Nelson (2009) stated that William James was said to have been very instrumental in the realization of the psychology of religion; and that in 1891 James published his magnum opus “*The Principles of Psychology*” and then in 1902 “*The Varieties of Religious Experience*”. Even though William was actively a philosopher lecturing in the department of philosophy at Harvard University his magnum opus “*The Varieties of Religious Experience*” contributed greatly to psychology of his later writings.

Discussion

Pre-History of Psychology of Religion

During this period psychologists sought to separate psychology from philosophy and the study of religion from theology, observed Upton (2008). He further stated that Max Muller in 1873 wrote “*The Introduction to the Science of Religion*” and in 1889, he wrote “*Natural Religion*”. E.B Taylor in 1871 “*Wrote Primitive Culture*”. It should be noted that these publications gave rise to the new methodologies in the study of religion. Hence, the beginning of the application of the newly emerging methodologies in the study of religion.

Connolly (1999) observed that American scholars are said to have pioneered the psychological investigations into the study of religion. Although European scholars such as Francis Galton in his statistical investigations into the efficacy of prayer of 1869 contributed as well to the scientific study of religion, however, not as much as American scholars did. He further noticed that actually an American psychologist Starnley Hall even founded the first school of religious psychology at Clark University. Loewenthal (2008) added that it was Hall who actually invited Sigmund Freud and Karl Jung to America in 1909 in pursuit of psychological discoveries. Hall was specialized in the moral and religious education of children. Psychologists of religion have unanimously traced their field back to 1882 when Hall published an address on moral and religious education.

Major Historical Developments in the Study Psychology of Religion

The historical breakthrough came about when the two major trends were realised in how to study religion within psychology. Kruger (1981) stated that, there were basically two fundamental

trends in the development and study of psychology of religion; that is descriptive and explanatory. Descriptive trend approaches religion from within. It's rooted in the religious writings such as scriptures of religious traditions, non-canonical works for spiritual elevation such as St Augustine's confessions. While the explanatory trend approaches religion from without. He argued that this trend could be traced back to 3rd century B.C.E when Greek philosophers such Euhemerus to enlightenment period with philosophers such as David Hume who concluded that religion was a product of fear hence religion was not what it appeared to be. Therefore, this approach wishes to explain religious phenomenon outside its religious writings. Philosophers Euhemerus, Lucretius and psychologists Ludwig and Freud were very instrumental in the use of this approach. Upton (2008) noted that, although it was possible for scholars to utilize both trends only one can be emphasised as is the case with the entire psychology of religion literature. These trends gave birth to methodological approaches in the study of psychology of religion.

The Methodological Differences between American and European Scholars

There are two methods that have prevailed in the history of psychology of religion. These are quantitative and qualitative research methods and sometimes both of them have been combined (mixed method) in the study of religion. However, Kruger (1981) observed that the American theorists and psychologists have preferred quantitative methods while their European counterparts have preferred qualitative methods. Quantitative research methods have been referred to as 'scientific approach'. This has been linked to the studies of Clarke, Hall, Starbucks, and Leuba among other American scholars. Kruger further observed that the European psychologists and scholars have tended to use internal approaches to the study of religion rather than rigorous scientific approaches that study what can only be verified by our sense experience which is dependent on external data.

According to Kruger's (1981) observations; Francis Galton was said to have been the first to carry out the studies of religion in scientific nature as he studied the objective efficacy of petitionary prayer. Durkheim similarly applying methods of statistical correlation established his treatise "*The elementary Forms of Religious Life*". Moreover, psychologists such as Starnley Hall introduced the questionnaire method of the scientific approach in the collection of religious

data. His students Starbuck and Leuba utilized the same scientific approaches in their study of religion. Upton (2008) stated that Starbuck in his study of the psychology of conversion used statistical analysis by means of frequency distributions and percentages. It could be noted that most American scholars were inclined to using laboratory tabulation and statistical references in their study of religion. This could be so because during this period as seen earlier, scholars were seeking to explain psychology of religion by the means of scientific methods.

The biological foundations of religion approach in America has been a very controversial one in that it called for the relationship between mind and body. According to Connolly (1999), this approach tries to establish that bodily conditions have a profound influence on psychological states of a person. It argues that many religious rituals and practices appeal to our senses. Hall in his study of adolescent conversion became the first to use this approach stated Connolly (1999). He further stated that the other theorist to have used this method is L.L Dawson in his study about comprehending cults. However, he observed that other scholars have argued that actually this method was first used by Sir Francis Galton when he carried the first ever experiment in psychology of religion on the objective efficacy of petitionary prayer.

On the contrary, in Europe, psychologists of religion have been deploying different methods to the study of religion. Connolly (1999) stated that, Wilhelm Wundt explained religions through the means of laboriously reconstructing religion's past and hypothesizing an evolutionary process. He noted that, Karl Girsensohn of the Dorpat School applied the method of experimental introspection to the study of religious experience.

The Germany psychologists such as Sigmund Freud 'Moravian born', Oskar Pfister and Karl Jung employed psychoanalytic method. Sigmund Freud who believed that religious beliefs and practices are rooted in the fears and wishes of childhood pioneered this method. Religion is viewed as the unconscious mind's need for fulfillment. Furthermore, Religion was developed through psychosexual stages of development as stated by Loewenthal (2008).

Moran (2000) observed that Europeans also championed the phenomenological approach through the likes of Rudolf Otto and Freindrich Heiler. Creswell (2013) described Phenomenology as an approach that uses qualitative research and focuses on the commonality of

lived experience within a particular group. The fundamental goal of the approach is to arrive at a description of the nature of the particular phenomenon. This entailed a paradigm in religious studies that one needed to begin by suspending or blanketing personal beliefs and withholding personal judgments and academic theories about what he/she wanted to investigate prior to the study.

Upton (2008) argued that Cognitive developmental approach to religion became very instrumental in understanding how a child adapts to environment and interprets events around him/her. He stated that Jean Piaget theorised that there were cognitive structures that underlined organized patterns of behavior known as schemata and that there was a gradual move with age and experience from mental activities based on observable behaviors to symbolically represent the cognitive structures. According to Nelson (2009), this theory further stated that there is a relationship between age and mental development. He further argued that, this theory created a basis for religious theorists to explain religion and its elements. Theories such as moral development of Lawrence Kohlberg and religious development by Ronald Goldman (1960's) were inspired by this approach. During 1970's, James Fowler applied Piaget's stage theory more expansively to religious development. Piaget's approach became an important method of studying religion in Europe through linking it to child cognitive development.

European psychologists such as Ivan Pavlov and B.F Skinner used Behaviorism as a method to study religious behavior. Upton (2008) argued that Behavioristic approach to the study of religion was tasked to explain religious observable behaviors in relation to environmental stimuli. He further observed that the theory is grounded in empiricism which emphasises sense experience rather than reason as the source of knowledge. This method is founded on an assumption that fundamental facts of faith are measurable.

Humanistic approach to the study of religion focuses on what it means to be an individual human being with the ability to choose our actions and find fulfillment. Humanistic theorists emphasise our personal responsibility for our actions and our power to plan and choose our behavior, elaborated Nelson (2009). He argued that the One of the main figures of this approach is William James (1891) with his famous works of *"The Varieties of Religious Experiences"* which was emphasising humanistic approach. The notable European humanistic psychologist is Abraham

Maslow (1908-1870) who studied religious satisfaction and experience through humanistic methods. Nevertheless, Upton (2008) argued that the American theorists might have started this method though it was more embraced by the European counterparts. European theorists tended to stress qualitative methodologies in the study of religion through humanistic approach unlike the Americans with the likes of Starbuck, Coe and Leuba who stressed a rigorous scientific method.

Conclusion

As discussed above, it could be noticed that psychology has rich history at its disposal. However, religion possesses a lot of challenges to be studied scientifically and psychologically, due to its association with metaphysics and human events that cannot easily be analysed with empirical framework. Fortunately, the different approaches engaged in the study of religion in the field of psychology ranging from external to internal approaches have made psychology of religion a success in trying to explain what religion and all its elements are, as can be concluded from the above findings.

Competing Interests

The author declares there is no conflict of interest.

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