

# COOPERATIVE INQUIRY IN RELIGION

by

ANTON T. BOISEN

Reprinted from the September-October 1945 issue of RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

# COOPERATIVE INQUIRY IN RELIGION

ANTON T. BOISEN\*

**A**MONG THOSE who have been chiefly instrumental in founding and promoting the plan for the clinical training of theological students there has been considerable difference of opinion on matters that are important. Dr. Cabot thus rejected the psychogenic interpretation of mental illness and considered the mental hospital, where the plan was first begun, as least important among the institutions which claimed the attention of the student of religion. Others saw in mental illness a problem which is fundamentally spiritual and considered the mental hospital to be of primary importance. On one point, however, there has been complete agreement: Religious experience can and should be studied before it has gathered dust on library shelves and the living documents are the primary sources for the understanding of human nature.

The task to which this paper addresses itself is a consideration of the present status of the point of view on which the Council for Clinical Training is agreed. It seeks to answer the question, What is now being done in the matter of cooperative inquiry in the field of religious experience?

## WHAT THE JOURNALS SHOW

Scientists are wont to say that the story of any science is to be found in its journals rather than in its books. The journal, they say, is the vehicle of the cooperative inquiry which is of its very essence. It reports the results of research while those results are still fresh and it invites criticism and interpretation. The book, on the other hand, usually seeks to cover some entire field from a particular point of view and it

may or may not contain a new contribution. Most books, in fact, are not written for the scientific worker but for a more general circle of readers.

The first fact revealed by this study is the paucity of journals in the field of religion which can lay claim to scientific standing. Books are many but journals few. In spite of the size of the professional group concerned, there are certainly not more than nine such journals published in this country. The professional group of psychiatrists, on the other hand, numbering hardly 4,000 persons, has 13 scientific journals and these thirteen journals have in the aggregate more than twice the number of pages found in the religious journals.

The second fact is that in the journals which we do have, empirical<sup>1</sup> studies of human nature are conspicuous by their absence. Thus in the *Journal of Religion* for the 14 years from 1931 to 1944 there were 283 articles. These articles were distributed as follows: theology and philosophy of religion, 113; church history, 45; New Testament, 37; comparative religion, 29; Old Testament, 13; psychology of religion, 13; sociology of religion, 11; religious education, 8; biography, 7; current issues, 7. Of these 283 articles only 8 were empirical studies of religious experience, and only five other articles made use of empirical studies by other workers. A good many of the remaining articles represented careful documentary research, but the great majority represent merely unchecked observation and reflection.

In the *Review of Religion* for its first nine years the situation is much the same.

\*Dr. Boisen is Chaplain at the Elgin, Illinois, State Hospital.

1. For the purpose of this paper the term "empirical" is used to denote the point of view under consideration — controlled observation of actual experience before it gets on library shelves.

The field which it covers is somewhat more limited. Its own division of its field is primitive religion, ancient religion, Oriental religion, Judaism, historical Christianity, contemporary Christianity, and general theory of religion. Nearly half of its articles would be classed under "general theory of religion" and about a third under "ancient religions" and "historical Christianity." Of its 102 articles none could be called empirical in its methodology and only two made use of empirical studies by others.

In *Religious Education* for the seven years from 1936 to 1943 there were some 200 articles. With scarcely an exception these articles dealt with contemporary Christianity. An examination of these articles showed that the overwhelming majority represented merely general observation and reflection. Many of them were indeed written by participant observers whose reflections were based upon accurate information, but there was seldom any attempt to marshal the evidence or to use quantitative methods. They were rather articles which might have been dashed off by a well-informed man on the basis of his general fund of knowledge. Not a few were symposia, involving the exchange of insight and information regarding some controversial subject, or some live current issue. Only eighteen were quantitative studies, attempts to check hypotheses by means of statistics, and only a few others were attempts to give an exact account of the present status and the historical development of some clearly defined and limited situation, group or institution.

Of the quantitative studies thirteen were based upon the use of the questionnaire, most of them of the type which calls for a Yes-No answer or from a selection from a number of suggested answers; three others combined questionnaires with interviews and two were case studies. An examination of these articles impresses one with the peripheral, non-significant character of most

of the questions asked and with the failure to relate the findings to universal principles.

*Contributions of the Institute of Social and Religious Research*

The Institute of Social and Religious Research, which was in operation from 1921 to 1934, has to its credit some impressive contributions. Among them are the following:

Studies of Town and Country Churches by Brunner and others,

Studies of City Churches by Douglass and others,

The Character Education Inquiry by Hartshorne and May,

The Education of American Ministers by Kelley and May,

The Laymen's Foreign Mission Inquiry,

Interchurch Relations by Douglass,

Middletown by the Linds.

There are other studies. The list is fairly long. The Institute's studies are characterized by thorough and painstaking work and exacting standards. From the standpoint of this study the question is whether in the effort to maintain scientific standards the Institute did not confine itself to more or less objective material and avoid those problems which relate more directly to the dynamic aspects of religious experience.

LIVING DOCUMENTS AND PRINTED BOOKS

*Theology*

Theology may be regarded as the cooperative attempt to organize and test religious experience by scrutinizing religious beliefs and inquiring into the origin, the meaning and the consequences of these beliefs.

It is assumed in this definition that man is a social being and that religious experience is the sense of fellowship raised to the level of the universal and abiding, together with the resulting feel-

ings, attitudes and actions. Religion is thus concerned with a biological fact which is operative in the lives of all men whether they recognize it or not.

Under this definition theology belongs among the social sciences. It has to do with the internalization and with the modification of the socially accepted values and with the accepted hierarchy of loyalties. The question therefore arises, how far are its problems being approached through the methods of science. Our study of the journals may therefore be supplemented by an examination of some of the more important books.

From the standpoint of our problem attention is at once drawn to a book which bears the title, *Theology as an Empirical Science*.<sup>2</sup> Examination of this book reveals, however, that the expectation evoked by the title is by no means justified. As an empirical science, according to this author, theology is concerned with the activities of God, and the scientific theologian must select from the manifold of religious experience those elements which give knowledge of God. These he finds in revelation. In his book he is therefore chiefly concerned with the problem of religious knowledge, and nowhere does he attempt to examine the religious experience of actual men. Neither does he draw upon the studies made by other men, even in his consideration of the conversion experience. In a later book on *The Problem of Religious Knowledge* the same author does give some attention to what psychologists and psychiatrists have to say, but he soon dismisses them and holds to the thesis that there is such a thing as cognitive religious experience which is able to stand the test of practical, intellectual criticism.

Another book whose title leads to high expectations is *The Psychological Ap-*

*proach to Theology*.<sup>3</sup> It is indeed an interesting and valuable attempt, but it suffers from the fact that its psychological data are not based on direct observation but are gleaned at second hand from the writings of Freud, Janet, Hadfield and others. Acquaintance with living human documents should have raised some questions in the mind of a competent student of religion regarding certain psychiatric shortsightednesses which this author accepts as authority.

Another prominent theological philosopher regards "radical empiricism" as the one valid method of getting knowledge. That term seems to mean to him something very different from the scientific principle of empiricism. His starting point is not the study of particular experiences or situations, made either by himself or by others, but rather certain common experiences and concepts. As a philosopher of religion he is concerned with that which is most worthy of devotion, that upon which man is dependent for love and for values of all sorts. His method of testing religious insights is the use of a precise and discriminating dialectic which defines clearly each term and then draws out the implications to see if the hypothesis stands up in the light of empirical reality.

Another influential theologian defines the task of modern theology as that of recapturing the human experiences out of which the classic doctrines of Christian thought arose.<sup>4</sup> He does not however place much reliance upon empirical studies of present-day religious experience. Even in his consideration of mysticism he merely reflects upon mysticism in general.<sup>5</sup> He does not attempt to examine the experiences of particular mystics; neither does he take account of the studies which others have made.

2. Douglas C. Macintosh, Macmillan, 1927.

3. By Walter Marshall Horton, Harper, 1931.

4. E. E. Aubrey, in *J. of Religion* for 1932

5. "Man's Search for Himself", Cokesbury Press, 1940, pages 63-70.

One of the most widely read of our modern books on theology is *The Nature and Destiny of Man*.<sup>6</sup> The author begins with certain Christian conceptions and "seeks to relate these to the observable behavior of men." His references to empirical studies of human nature are very limited. They are seemingly determined by the need of finding support for his own views. His discussion of the problem of sin leaves one with the impression that his standpoint is not that of one who is trying sympathetically to understand the frailties and misbehavior of men, but rather that of one who looks upon them from the standpoint of the Almighty and finds in pride the greatest of all sins.

One of the most important modern books is *God and the Common Life*.<sup>7</sup> This contains 34 pages of notes, whose value is, however, seriously impaired by their relegation to the back of the book according to the style so widespread in modern religious books. These notes cover a remarkably wide range. There are 40 references to philosophers, 50 to theologians, 28 to sociologists and social philosophers, 18 to psychologists, 9 to psychiatrists, 7 to physicists, 5 to biologists, 5 to astronomers, 8 to physiologists, 5 to mathematicians. In general, however, the data on which the conclusions are based have been gathered from books "twice or three times removed from the laboratories and the original papers of specialists." In dealing with the Christian doctrine of "vocation" this author starts with the historical positions of Christianity and ties into the findings of such men as Weber, Troeltsch, Tawney and others. He builds thus upon a more or less objective foundation.

These are just a few of the more important books on theology. They represent the best of modern liberal thinking relatively uninfluenced by the Neo-

orthodox return to the authority of revelation. The value of these books is not in question. From the standpoint of this inquiry it is, however, a striking fact that these attempts to deal with the central problems of Christian faith make so little effort to attack these problems empirically or to utilize empirical studies by other workers.

#### *Church History*

According to Henri de Pirenne<sup>8</sup>, all historical construction rests upon the postulate of the eternal identity of human nature. One cannot comprehend men's actions at all unless one assumes that their physical and moral beings have been at all periods what they are today.

If we accept this view the question at once arises, where do our church historians get their knowledge of what is and what is not constant in human nature?

A glance through the journal articles and through several books on church history reveals very little effort to grapple with this problem.

A pertinent article is one by Professor Riddle in the *Journal of Religion* for 1932. He makes a plea for more attention to the psychological factors in the study of New Testament times. He proceeds, however, to minimize the constants in human nature and to magnify the role of tradition and of "ideology." Orientals, he holds, can hardly be understood at all by the Western mind. It is important to recognize that Jesus belonged in the Oriental, Jewish world, whose religion is one of achievement, whereas Paul belonged rather to the Graeco-Roman world in which individual salvation was the major interest.

A striking example of the failure to take account of verifiable assumptions regarding human nature is to be found in

6. Reinhold Niebuhr, Scribners, 1941.

7. Robert L. Calhoun, Scribners, 1935.

8. *Methods in Social Science*, Stuart A. Rice, Editor, University of Chicago Press, 1931, page 442.

9. *Journal of Religion*, 1944.

an article on "Demonic Confessions of Jesus"<sup>9</sup> in which the author says, "It is unnecessary here to attempt to answer the inevitable question as to the nature of demons, as to what we mean by the term, as to whether demons really exist at all." Later on he says, "But the mental content of insane or possessed persons varies from age to age and from one culture to another. Insane persons in any culture have the same ideas as normal persons in the same culture." For this statement no evidence is offered either in the shape of first-hand observation or of cited authorities. The author is clearly not aware of the fact that there is considerable evidence to the effect that psychotic ideation shows many important similarities regardless of race and regardless of culture.<sup>10</sup>

#### *Comparative Religion*

There is much emphasis today in anthropology upon the first hand study of primitive peoples. Students like Radcliffe-Brown, Malinowski, Rivers, and Margaret Mead have made expeditions to the East Indies, to Patagonia, to the South Sea Islands, and have spent years in getting acquainted with a particular people. In the field of religion there is a peculiar opportunity to make such studies due to the presence of foreign missionaries all over the world. So far as I am able to discover, however, empirical studies of religious experience in other cultures are deficient. There are indeed some happy exceptions, such as Pratt's *India and Its Faith*<sup>11</sup> and his *Pilgrimage of Buddhism*,<sup>11</sup> Kulp's *Country Life in South China*,<sup>12</sup> and Embree's *Suye Mura*,<sup>13</sup> but for the most part our studies of the great world religions are based

upon documentary studies with little attention to the *living* documents of today.

#### *Psychology of Religion*

At the turn of the century a movement for the study of the psychology of religion set forth with great enthusiasm under the leadership of William James, Stanley Hall, Starbuck, Coe, Pratt and Leuba. This movement has to its credit some enduring achievements, but it seems now to have spent itself or to have been diverted into religious education or into the philosophy of religion. Most of the books which appear today in this field lean heavily upon the writings of Freud, Jung, Adler, Rank and Kuenkel, with only a slender basis in controlled, empirical observation.

#### *In General*

This survey of the present situation shows that there is indeed a strange lag in the employment of the methods of co-operative inquiry in the study of present day religious experience, and even in the use on the part of theologians of such studies as have been made. It also reveals the difficulty of the task involved. It is no easy matter to formulate the important problems of religion and theology in such a way as to make possible quantitative verification. With few exceptions the quantitative studies thus far made have dealt with peripheral factors rather than those of central significance and the more penetrating studies have relied upon general observation and reflection.

#### ISSUES IN THE STUDY OF HUMAN NATURE

In the attempt to explore human nature there are, however, a number of crucially important problems which are demanding attention and must be answered if they are answered at all by systematic, painstaking, cooperative observation of actual experience. Here are some which challenge the attention and the intelligence of the student of religion:

1. *The Body-mind Problem*. Academic

10. Cf. John Dollard, "The Psychotic Person Seen Culturally," *A. J. Soc.*, March, 1934; also, Alfred Storch, *Primitive Thought in Schizophrenia*, Nervous and Mental Disease Publishing Company, 1924.

11. Macmillan.

12. Bureau of Publications, Teachers' College, Columbia University, New York, 1926.

13. University of Chicago Press, 1939.

psychology has been proceeding on the assumption that its task is to explain mental functioning in terms of physiological processes. In that task it has made little progress. The great contribution which Freud has made is a psychology built on the basis of desires and experiences of men rather than upon stimulus-response mechanisms. Meanwhile the interrelationship of body and mind is being attacked anew through the study of the interrelationship of emotion and organic disease. The body-mind problem is receiving increasing attention in the diagnosis and treatment of both mental and physical disease and it presents also a problem of great significance to the student of religion.

*Sin and Guilt.* Just at a time when many of our theologians were discarding the old idea of sin, the psychopathologists were discovering it. Among them it is a very live issue. Their findings call for careful re-examination of the old theological positions.

*The Nature and Function of Conscience.* Ever since Freud published his *Ego and Id* the doctrine of the "Super-ego" has been central in psychoanalytic theory. Few psychiatrists, however, have any acquaintance with Mead or Dewey or Hocking, and few students of religion have any understanding of the experiences on which Freud based his theory. Cross-fertilization is needed.

*The Foundations of Psychotherapy.* The procedures and the dynamic factors involved in psychotherapy are of profound interest to the theologian. What is involved is the problem of sin and salvation, and the principles relied upon are those of confession and forgiveness.

*The Social and Psychological Roots of the Idea of God.* Psychopathological experience indicates that the idea of God stands for something which is operative in all men whether they call themselves religious or not. It represents that which is supreme in the social relationships, that

of which standards and values are merely functions. As such it crops out spontaneously under certain conditions, apparently without much regard to previous indoctrination. The forms which it assumes and the conditions under which it appears are challenging problems.

*The Nature and Significance of Mystical Experience.* Mystical experience tends to appear in association with crisis experiences and constitutes the fountainhead of religious movements. Some of these crises are turning points in the struggle for personal self-realization which in their more severe forms assume pathological features. Some crises, such as war and economic depression, involve shared strain and are social in their nature. Such experiences need further investigation.

*The Interrelationship of Religion and Culture.* The types of religious and mystical experience and the symbols they employ in different cultures cannot be determined by the study of books. Only the study of living documents can give the answer. Such studies are much needed. So also are exact and specific studies of the influence of different religions upon the ways of living and working together.

*The Constants in Human Nature.* Henri de Pirenne's dictum that all historical construction rests upon the postulate of the eternal identity of human nature calls for careful studies of the elements in human nature which do remain constant and those that vary as we pass from one culture to another and from one age to another.

*Major Religious Decisions.* Conditions under which they are made, mystical elements, emotional accompaniment, results, means of inducing them are important problems both from the practical and from the theoretical standpoint.

*The Concept of the Self and Its Significance.* Some students of the personality look upon an individual's idea of

himself and of his role as the nucleus of the personality. What evidence is there for or against this view? What are its implications for the psychology of religion?

*Indulgence, Abstinence and Self-Control in relation to Religious Experience.* This is a problem of practical and theoretical importance on which we need additional evidence.

These are merely some of the problems, suggested for the most part by work in a mental hospital, which ought to be in some measure solved by means of controlled observation.

#### THE CLINICAL APPROACH

The clinical approach is by no means the only one which provides an opportunity for the empirical study of religious experience. The rural parish, where everybody knows everybody else, the urban parish in its reflection of the pressures of city life, contact with service men seeking to adjust themselves to military discipline or to the horrors of battle, mingling with people of other cultures, these and many other areas of experience furnish their own unique advantages. But dealing with badly maladjusted or sick people (for which alone the term "clinical" should be reserved) seems especially important. Just as in medicine the study of disease has led the way to the knowledge of normal physiology, so also we may hope that the study of mental and physical breakdowns and social deviations may contribute to the understanding of the normal personality and of normal religious experience because it furnishes the nearest approach to experimental conditions with reference

to the great drawing forces of human life. Clinical experience in any of the recognized training centers is not, therefore, to be regarded as an addition to the theological curriculum. It is rather a new approach to the problems with which theology has always been concerned and an attempt to modify the methods of teaching. A consideration of the different types of institutions in which clinical training is now being offered indicates that the problems with which each confronts the student fall within the following specialized fields:

#### The Mental Hospital:

- Psychology of religion
- Theology
- Social pathology
- Religious education
- Personal counseling
- Pastoral care

#### The reform school and the child guidance clinic:

- Religious education
- Social pathology
- Personal counseling

#### The general hospital:

- Pastoral care
- Personal counseling

#### The infirmary:

- Pastoral care.

This analysis is subject to some discount by reason of the writer's particular bias. His own work has been in a mental hospital. Perhaps if his lot had been cast in some other type of institution he would have discovered in them a wider range of problems. He is, however, very sure that in a mental hospital the student is confronted with problems whose implications for theology cut very deep.