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What Is Religion?

OUTLINES OF THE PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION. By HORATIO W. DRESSER. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co. 1929. \$3.

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THIS well written and interesting book represents a reaction against works in which religion is judged by its less promising origins, such as its being a survival from primitive times, or a substitute mechanism, or mode of relief from repressions. As one inclined towards Quakerism and a moderate mysticism the writer has a special aversion to those who explain the mystic experiences in terms of sex. He apparently has in mind Leuba's treatment of the mystic absolute as the god of the gonads, when he speaks of recent psychology depending more and more on the sense organs, on biology, and on the study of the glands.

Dresser prefers authors like William James, Starbuck, and Pratt, and would gather his data from "books on religion by religious people, by people who earnestly adhere to their faith." But here he seems to go too far, for in his complacent accounts of historic conversions he declares that while "the intensity of the experience can be explained on psycho-neurotic grounds in some cases, the real question is to account for the quality of the change, the thoroughly healthy "sentiment" of one who becomes dedicated to the "Fatherhood of God." This is dubious. Take but one case that Dresser cites. In the "Confessions" of St. Augustine we find not only a lurid description of the early sex life of the African Father, and a specific statement as to his soul being "sick," but also a definition of the attributes of Deity which logically allows for the damnation of infants. Dresser's own reaction to such dreadful doctrines may explain his statement in the chapter on Adolescence that:

If reason is fostered at this fortunate juncture, the youth may postpone all religious decisions, and so may have the rare privilege of reflecting on various important subjects before doctrines and dogmas have established an intellectual "set" that can only with difficulty be overcome in later years.

Nevertheless the author does not carry out his suggestion of the cultivation of suspended judgment, nor sufficiently allow for that type of youth for whom the study of religion is a bore and a waste of time.

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Between the flamboyant type and the "sick soul," representing the extremes of optimism and pessimism, there might be put the neutral type which looks on religion as a curious subject of study, and collects strange doctrines as he might rare postage stamps. It is possible for the objective observer as "the spectator of all time," to make a hobby of queer sects and, this type of person is particularly allowed for in Dresser's own statement that "we need not assume that religious emotion is essential and universal."



However the writer does not accept the dictum that religion is one of the major passions of mankind. He rather inclines to a moderate mysticism, a rationalized form of quietism. His views here are most valuable, for he has actually humanized a subject bristling with difficulties. Thus a behaviorist like Leuba represents one extreme with his emphasis on sex, while the "high church" mystic like Evelyn Underhill represents the other extreme in her statement that introversion is "the characteristic mystic art." As a compromise between these points of view there follows a very fine definition which avoids the occultisms either of the brutal physiologist or of the abnormal introvert:

Mystical experience is not then a mystery, as if one must be initiated into the secrets of a lodge. It is not unique, does not involve a special faculty, or belong in a category where analysis has no place. Nor is the mystic to be set apart from the rest of humanity, as if he possessed something beyond the capacities of other men. The differences are in degree, not in kind: the degree of interior openness or responsiveness, in contrast with the absorption of the majority of men in external affairs. It is partly a question of attention and partly of the unusual response of the participant to his experience, a response comparable to that of the rapturous lover of music who dwells for the nonce in the ideal world of a symphony opera, or oratorio. As the music-lover may claim that it is music and music only which lifts the soul to the ideal world, or reality-in-itself, so for the mystic there is an experience which lifts the soul beyond awareness of limitations, and (apparently) beyond all distinctions both within and without the soul of itself.