

# Gordon Allport and Mature Religion

Gordon Allport did not speak of development stages per se, but he did distinguish between mature religion and immature religion.

## Immature Religion According to Gordon Allport

In immature religion, Gordon Allport said we can find evidence of

- **magical thinking** ("If I do something wrong, God will strike me dead") self-justification and creature comfort. second-hand,
- **wish-fulfilling** ("If I pray really hard, I will get an "A" on the test tomorrow."), unreflective,
- **can be fanatic** ("All non-believers should be either converted to my faith or killed.")
- **literal-minded** ("God is a bearded, male human-like being in the sky who has human traits like jealousy and anger, judges my every word and will reward or punish accordingly.")
- **second-hand** ("I believe everything I was taught in Sunday School.")
- **unreflective** ("The Bible tells me so!")

Most of the criticism of religion is directed to its immature forms. (Allport p. 61)

## Mature Religion According to Gordon Allport

While the distinction is not absolute, in contrast with immature religion, Gordon Allport said mature religion must have at least some of the attributes listed below. While Allport used some words that are not easy to understand, I have done my best to explain what I think he meant by them, based on the text that followed. I humbly suggest that anyone with a deep interest in his work read the actual book for a clearer understanding.

### - **well-differentiated**

A person who has never had any questions about her religion, accepts every tenet and every rule, feels everything about it is perfect, a gift handed to them by the authorities would be an example of an undifferentiated sentiment. It would not be realistic. In contrast, someone who would say "well, my church has some good points, but I really don't agree with the pope's ban on contraception, for example." would be more realistic and differentiated stance. Not that the specific example is the issue. The pope may or may not be right about contraception. But the point is

accepting absolutely everything a religion says without analyzing it critically is not realistic, not differentiated, not mature.

**- dynamic in character despite its derivative nature**

The mature religious sentiment would not be driven by the desires, fears and hungers of the self ( the desire to be "saved" for example - MY example, not Allport's) The mature religious sentiment would supply its own driving power - inherent interest in the realities and mysteries of our existence. Quoting Allport: "...mature religion is less of a servant" (to the needs of the self) "and more of a master, in the economy of life. No longer goaded and steered exclusively by impulse, fear, wish, it tends rather to control and to direct these motives toward a goal that is no longer determined by mere self-interest." p. 72.

**- productive of a consistent morality**

Apparently Allport is referring to the idea that in immature religion, where morality is more motivated by fear of punishment than by personal values, there are likely to be "moral storms" where conduct is sporadically altered, whereas in mature religion, behavior is inspired more by internally derived principle than by fear of external punishment. (my interpretation - Allport was not real specific about this)

**- comprehensive**

It must "infuse all of life with motive." It "never seems satisfied unless it is dealing with matters central to all existence...includes the whole of a mature individual's horizon."(p. 78)

**- integral**

A religiously mature person must have a way of integrating all aspects of human experience into his belief system. He must be willing to admit that human conduct is partly rooted in freedom of the will and partly pre-determined. Though he offers no answers about this, Allport does insist the fact that the religiously mature person must find a way of integrating his beliefs with the realistic acknowledgement of the existence of evil.

**- fundamentally heuristic**

This means the beliefs are held tentatively until they can be confirmed or until a more valid belief comes along. This means being open to new ideas and growth as one goes along. Feeling that we already have "the one final and complete truth" would not be heuristic and therefore would not be mature. This also means a mature believer must be able to go forward "even without absolute certainty." "...the mature religious sentiment is ordinarily fashioned in the workshop of doubt." p. 83.

Many of the concepts Gordon Allport put out in this book are similar to the works of others who have written about religious maturity and it does a good job of

contrasting what is called the Faithful stage on this site ("immature religion") with what is called the Mystic stage ("mature religion.")

Allport, Gordon W. *The Individual and His Religion*. New York, The Macmillan Company, 1950. (ninth printing, 1969.)