Running head: PSYCHOLOGY OF SPIRITUALITY AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

A Review of the Psychology of Spirituality and Personal Development

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Abstract

Spirituality and science have a long history of conflicting views. While philosophers have contemplated mystical experiences and the metaphysical for centuries, psychologists have studied the implications of such beliefs on behavior and quality of life. Presented here is a review of the foundations of the psychology of spirituality and personal development from the philosophical viewpoint of Svend Brinkman and the scientific point of Roy F. Baumesiter; raising the question, “Are our actions determined by God’s will, or free will?”

A Review of the Psychology of Spirituality and Personal Development

Psychology as an empirical science tries to quantify the cause and effect of human nature, calculating variation among individual and group differences to the greatest level of statistical significance that can be proven beyond random error. In the realm of spirituality nothing is absolute; nothing can be proven to scientific truth because all beliefs are subjective realities of the observer. Psychology as a science aims to prove that the probability of some event given its physical chance, or the likelihood that a thing has happened unpredictably without human intervention or observable cause. Herein lies the conflict between psychology and metaphysics; metaphysics is a body of knowledge for which there is no physical evidence at all. There are millions of people whose behavior is shaped by the "blind" faith that their actions will be rewarded in the Afterlife, as if under the ominous watch of a metaphysical eye. What are the rewards or punishments of such behavior in *this* realm? The present review discusses the psychology of spiritual faith and the foundations of the *psychology of spirituality* from some of the most influential psychologists of the century, who hypothesized as to the innate and environmental factors which instill existential curiosity in human nature and examine the psychological advantages of doing such.

The early 20th Century pragmatist William James viewed the pragmatic relationship between spirituality and psychology by the potential positive effects of mystical states, such as enhancing compassion and personal autonomy, which he terms "strengths of soul" (Hunt, 2003, p. 23). James described the psychodynamics of spirituality as a *proposition of value* whereby enlightenment or conversion to religion unifies the "Divided Self" (divided

by good and evil) through morality. “Religion, in short, is a monumental chapter in the history of human egotism,” (James, 1902, p. 422). James developed his theory of the potential effects of spirituality on personal character development through case studies of individual religious experiences and the personal development which occurred thereafter. He concluded that spirituality had the potential to cause enhancement of compassion, personal autonomy as strengthening the soul, spontaneity, and increased capacity for empathy.

Both James and Jung empirically analyzed the religious experiences of their subjects and deduced that spiritual behavior could be used to better the self as an evolutionary behavior. Jung was an empiricist theoretically and therapeutically in his approach because it was based on the history of archetypal expression of spirituality and on the personal archetypal experiences of his clients. Influenced by James, Carl Jung wrote, “Two Essays on Analytical Psychology” and developed his own psychology of individuation of Self, where archetypal experiences are considered as natural processes for personal growth (Hunt, 2003). Jung observed his clients’ tendency to contemplate their own mortality in the second half of life and encouraged them to have a dialogue between the “ordinary ego,” and the “imageries.” Imageries, refer to the metaphysical realm of spirituality within one’s own unconscious which may produce images that have religious content in the psyche. Jung saw importance in examination of these archetypal experiences between his subjects and the divine, whether they revealed light or darkness within the subject’s psyche. Per Jung’s conception of the self, as being made up of a unity of opposites; in the process of individuation, the polarities of good and evil gradually move

toward a greater integration and balance between personality and the “shadow of evil.” Jung cites Carpocrates, a Gnostic, throughout the *Collected Works* to emphasize the necessity of assimilation of the shadow in the process of individuation whereby one reflects on the propensity for evil inside one’s self (Jung, 1927).

Jung understood one’s experience with the divine to be strictly intrapsychic; a natural experience, that is, “a function of the unconscious in its impact on consciousness understood as two dimensions of a single all-inclusive organism, the human psyche” (Dourley, 1995, p. 179). Both James and Jung rejected the ideas of the existence of deities outside of one’s unconscious manifestation of them. The world of gods and spirits is acknowledged as “truly nothing but the collective unconscious inside me.” (Jung, 1935, para. 857). Therefore, the deities worshipped by religiously pious people were understood as mere archetypes of the ultimate or perfect being, which all human beings strive to embody.

Jung’s appreciation for spirituality stemmed from his perception of the psyche’s religion-creating propensities. Jung’s psychology points out religion and other forms of spirituality as both the ultimate enabler and inhibitor of humanity. He envisions the saving grace as an embrace of collective ideologies into contemporary cultural spirit but concedes that none of the current ways which we express the metaphysical (i.e., separate religions) can offer humanity any unification (Dourley, 1995). From the Jungian psychological viewpoint, the way to a collective conscious lies in the recovery of a sense of reality and the power of archetypal energies within the psyche in order to move towards greater integration of balance and personality. Thus, Jung’s conception of spirituality is one

which equates the ultimate goal of maturation and psychological advancement with the realization that the most profound religious experience is contained within one's own psyche.

Transpersonal psychology, initiated by Abraham Maslow, similarly describes spirituality as being the personality trait related to imaginative absorption or openness to experience. At the pinnacle of his hierarchial model of all human needs is Self Actualization, seen as a spontaneous unfolding guided by "peak experiences" of enlightenment (Hunt, 2003, p. 23). The behavioral effect of such "peak experiences" was described as a shift away from what Abraham Maslow called "deficit motivations" (self esteem, interpersonal relations, etc.) toward metaphysical "being values" of the second half of life. "Being values" are motivations with developmental goals of seeking the maximum wisdom and integrity possible. Self Actualization is marked by increased acceptance and detachment, orientation to here and now, nurturance and compassion, and increased openness and spontaneity. Notably, analyses of this spiritually enlightened behavior is evident of the development of a higher cognitive and emotional stage, also described as a positive mental health.

In the *Varieties of Human Experience* (1902) William James sought to close the divide between scientific views, which eliminate the possibility of the existence of metaphysical phenomena, and classical religious views which idealize the realm of God as beyond the physical world of humans. After examining three forms of spiritualism (Theism, Monism, and Pluralism) James concluded that he disliked the theistic concept of separating God and humankind. At the other end of the spectrum, he rejected Monism, the

belief that humankind and the divine universe are One, out of respect for individual differences. James wanted to overcome the duplicity of mind and matter and make religion practical with Pluralism. “Things are ‘with’ one another in many ways, but nothing includes everything, or dominates over everything” (James, 1902, p. 326). In a pluralistic world there is no finite answer to the meaning of life, there is always room to make more meaning. James argued that religion, just like everything else, has both internal and external environments. “A spiritual soul should be internally unified enough to have the solidarity of character to be a unique individual, and yet externally incomplete enough to be open to connection and change,” (Bredo, Garrison & Podeschi, 2002, p. 28).

James collected, catalogued, and described in detail profound “spiritual” experiences that had transformative effects on people’s lives in an effort to find causality. In his assessment of these experiences, James theorized that ideological influences from the metaphysical realm should influence actions in the real world through “helpfulness in general human affairs” (James, 1902, p. 346-347). This pragmatic view spoke of spirituality as a benefiting behavior, termed as the “Will to Believe” which seeks to examine the way in which we transform our behaviors, judgments, and moral codes through active, reflective, compassionate, and creative faith. Intertwining methodological and metaphysical perspectives, James (1902) defined religion as *“The feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider divine.”*

A century later, psychologists are now critical of James’s pluralistic view of spirituality, pointing out its entanglement with theology. In “A down-to-earth approach to the

psychology of spirituality a century after James's *Varieties*" the psychological treatment of theology by William James is said to be disturbing to some psychologists by treating the the existence of God as an aspect of the human mind, rather than as existing as a distinct entity (Helminiak, 2005). Helminiak (2005) argues that empirical psychology attempts to supply ready-made definitions of spirituality and provide documentable criteria for normative judgments of value. This presents problems to empirical psychology by introducing it into non-falsifiable, fully intractable, and potentially competing metaphysical suppositions.

In contrast, Helminiak (2005) presents an inherently human explanation of spirituality on the basis of human subjectivity, "the capacity to be aware of one's own awareness," (Helminiak, 2005, p. 6) and to wonder about one's experience; thus, achieving insight and understanding of the inner self. The reflective awareness of our insight is presented as an explanation for the mysticism of the spirit, as a dimension of the human mind which can be reached through introspective practices like meditation or prayer. Spiritual growth is seen as nothing other than ongoing integration of one's inherent capacity into the structures of one's personality (Helminiak, 1987). Helminiak (2005) proposed an understanding of spirituality that agrees with William James's judgment that spirituality is ultimately about "helpfulness in general human affairs" and extends it further to encompass the possibility of exercising causal or "existential judgment," of scientifically explaining spirituality through it's appeal to the human spirit. Thus, presented is a view of spirituality as an enhancement of advanced human development, "envisaging a future global community with rich diversity of cultures that can unite around a common human core of spirituality empirically grounded in

psychological research" (Helminiak, 2005, p. 83).

In addressing spirituality, psychology enters a new frontier in which there are resources for extraordinary experiences of self-reflection, understanding, and emotional growth. These new insights have many implications in clinical and counseling psychology. For instance, Behavioral Analysis examines behaviors acquired through conditioning and attempts to reform them. Psychological experiments on behavior as fundamental as Pavlov's studies on classical conditioning have shown evidence that behavior is modified by the rewards and punishments which it merits. Perhaps the discovery of one's own spirituality will be rewarding enough to transform both the inner self through introspection and reflection and incite outward compassion and empathetic understanding of others on their own spiritual journey. Thus, modifying behavior by examining oneself as a part of a whole, and examining the implications of ones actions in a greater schema. The psychology of spirituality as previously described William James, Carl Jung, and Abraham Maslow, is theorized to shape human development by increasing sensitivities to the repercussions of individual actions on the greater whole of society by instilling moral values of compassion and righteousness. While Maslow believed progression toward Self Actualization as inherent and natural, today there still remain questions if such values are inherent within our psyche, or learned behaviors through spirituality. A modern perspective bridging the polar gaps between the science of psychology and the metaphysics of spirituality through a non-metaphysical application grounded by empirical research may present new possibilities for the improvement of social behavior and the betterment of society as whole.