

# PSYCHOLOGY AND RELIGION

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*The purpose of this article is to clarify the relationship between psychology and religion, to bring out their mutual complementarity, to indicate avenues for reciprocal contribution and hopefully to build a solid bridge between these two areas of our human existence.*

*We shall start by investigating the possible and the ideal types of relationship between religion and psychology. Certain methodological issues arising out of their corresponding disciplines will be clarified. A psychological critique of religion will then be discussed followed by the contributions made by psychology to religion. Finally, current trends or schools in psychology will be briefly presented as signs of bridging the psycho-religious gap.*

## **Preliminary remarks**

One cannot really speak about the relationship between psychology and religion because there is no *one* psychology as there is no *one* religion. Various schools in psychology abound just as different religions proliferate. In this article we shall include in our consideration the three major approaches in psychology, namely, psycho-analytic, behaviouristic, and humanistic, together with the main world religions, namely, Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism.

Even with this restriction, the task of relating these psychologies with these religions remains too ambitious. Hence, while retaining throughout our reflection these varieties of psychological and religious experiences, we shall focus more on Christianity in its relationship to the principal schools in psychology. This does not mean that what is stated here applies only to the Christian tradition, but that our main reference points originate from Christian concepts and experience.

For the purpose of this article, we adopt the following definition of religion: "a lived and practical relationship with a superhuman being (or beings) in whom one believes." (Thouless). As a general definition of psychology, we propose "the science that studies human behaviour, seeking to formulate the laws for such behaviour, to explain its origin and eventually to modify it."

## Models of Relationship

In studying the relationship between psychology and religion, I notice an emerging parallelism between the historical development and the systematic conceptualization of this relationship. In its historical development, the relationship between the proponents of the two disciplines ranged from bitter antagonism, though passive aggressiveness, cold indifference, peaceful co-existence, benevolent neutrality, mutual respect, to reciprocal scientific recognition. In its systematic conceptualization, the relationship operated first on a conflictual model where each discipline adopted a "win-lose" position, challenged the other's assumptions, doubted the validity of the other's method and questioned the truth of the other's content; this attitude, however, changed later to tolerance of differences which eventually led to complementarity of roles and to the possibility of mutual enrichment.

What seems to be needed for a healthy relationship is the establishment of each discipline's proper identity by defining the respective specific goals, methods and areas of investigation that distinguish one from the other. This differentiation, however, constitutes only one side of their relationship and should eventually lead to an integration at a higher level. This integration would bring out the commonality of their ultimate goals, the complementary of their respective methods, the inevitable overlapping of their subject matter, and the mutual contribution to their various fields of application.

Such attempts at exploring the relationship between psychology and religion, however, have been received with mixed reactions from psychologists interested in religion and from theologians concerned about whatever is prefixed by 'psy-'. The main models or types of relationship proposed can be classified in my opinion under four categories: *reductivistic*, *inclusivistic*, *exclusivistic* and *integrative*.

The *reductivistic* model wants either to reduce religion to something purely psychological or to make of psychology a religion. Every religious phenomenon is attributed a psychological explanation or conversely, every psychological phenomenon is interpreted in religious categories. In this manner, religious truths are reduced to psychological realities or else psychology is presented as the foundation for our faith. God becomes reduced to a philosophical or psychological god. The transcendental dimension of our faith is thereby enormously reduced.

According to the *inclusivistic* model, religion is included as part of psychology or vice-versa. Thus, all religious experience comes under the scrutiny of psychological analysis or conversely, every psychological data is submitted to religious dogmatism. A relationship of dependency is thereby

imposed. As a result, psychology loses its autonomy or religion loses its transcendence.

On the other extreme pole of the spectrum, the *exclusivistic* model proposes a mutually exclusive type of relationship whereby psychology and religion have nothing in common. This attitude probably emerges as a reaction against the inclusivistic tendency. Psychology and religion are considered as two separate entities, totally independent of each other and following two parallel processes without influencing each other. Psychology follows a secularistic road, while religion adopts a disincarnated attitude.

In the *integrative* model (my preferred model), while both psychology and religion retain their own identity and respect each other's, they integrate into their system aspects from each other. An interdependent relationship of mutual enrichment develops. For although psychology and religion should be properly differentiated, they need to be adequately integrated in their complementary roles. Accordingly, psychology may help us probe into the roots of our religious behaviour, thereby attaining a better understanding of our religious life and practices.

This type of study has developed into a science called psychology of religion. This new discipline observes and analyses religious experiences, attitudes, beliefs, behaviour and expressions. Its purpose is to discover those human structures and factors on which religious attitudes are built. Hence, the psychological study of human behaviour and of religion enlightens us on the psychological dynamisms operative in religious development, but at the same time makes us realize how this same religious development transcends the purely psychological level.

### **Methodological Issues**

Integration preceded by a proper differentiation implies that psychology and theology (or the religious sciences) have to respect their respective different methodologies before attempting to integrate their results into a coherent whole.

While psychology may investigate the human person as the subject of religious faith and even explore the diverse ways in which his or her relationship with God is expressed, it is the domain of theology to study the object of that faith or of that relationship.

Psychology, then, as an empirical science, may not include God as its object of observation. It may only study religion in the way this manifests itself and is structured in human beings. For the psychologist, God is present according to the relationship created with him by the believer through strictly human acts. Psychologists, therefore, have to exclude

methodologically whatever is transcendent from their field of study. This scientific principle prohibits psychologists from appealing to supernatural interventions in order to explain certain factors. The reason is simply that the supernatural as such is inaccessible to scientific observation.

These statements mean that psychology as a science is neither religious nor irreligious, neither theistic nor anti-theistic, but rather a-religious, a-theistic. In other words, psychology, like science, can neither prove nor disprove the existence of God or of a supernatural being. It prescinds from this. It has no right to make judgements on the truth of supernatural reality. The psychologist as such remains neutral about the issue of God's existence or death, about grace, or life eternal. As a person, however, he or she may adopt a believer or an unbeliever's perspective.

Psychology on its part has to acknowledge its limitations. It does not pronounce the final judgement on humanity just as biology does not have the last word on life. Faced with a reality that psychology has no instruments to accede to, it must remain silent. All the valid methods and techniques which psychology employs remain dumbfounded before the mystery of religious faith.

Yet, a distinction between psychology and religion does not imply separation. The human person is not composed of a series of separated compartments but is a dynamic unity that integrates the different elements. The person who acts according to a given psychological structure is the same one who believes in a supernatural being. While religion assumes, builds on and integrates psychological laws and truths, it also transcends them.

### **Psychological Critique of Religion**

Many psychologists throughout history have written to criticize religion – positively or negatively – from a psychological standpoint. Among the well-known authors one may list Williams James, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Alfred Adler, Gordon Allport, Abraham Maslow and Erich Fromm. Of all these famous writers, it was Freud, the father and founder of psycho-analysis, who in my opinion expressed the most serious objections to religion in a radical way. This is not the place to expound on Freud's views about religion for that by itself deserves a whole volume. Indeed, many scholars have already taken that laborious task upon themselves. Suffice it here to make a few brief remarks.

Freud views religion as a universal obsessional neurosis of humanity, as a form of sublimation, and God as the projection of our unconscious desires and hence an illusion.

From religious behaviour observed, Freud made sweeping generalisa-

tions. Freud's theses may only be valid about a particular moment, especially the moment of emergence, of religious belief. There is a "genetic fallacy" in criticising this type of religiosity since a false motivation at the source or origin of one's religiosity does not necessarily imply that the object of one's faith is an illusion. It could be that at first one's image of God (ex. a "stop-gap" God) may be distorted by one's needs and motives. But this may gradually evolve, and the real God may even be already hidden or prefigured in the God of one's needs and motives. The same holds true for the infant's love for the mother. Love motivated by selfish needs is an immature not a false love – it may eventually develop into real, mature love.

Freud appears to have always thought that the religious person remains either neurotic or infantile, or else becomes atheist. However, in other domains, he does envisage the possibility of neurotic, archaic, unconscious motivations to be superceded, sorted out and elaborated. Why cannot a believer also grow and accede to human maturity? If Freud were right, once people mature psychologically, they would abandon their religion, which is not the case with many mature persons. They abandon infantile religiosity not religion or God.

Also, Freud was not right methodologically, as a psychoanalyst, in deducing his affirmations about religion from psychological considerations. While one may adhere to his psychoanalytic theory and technique, one need not accept his personal statements on religion. I personally agree with many of Freud's basic insights on the complexity and depth of the human person. Yet, I do not consider his theses on religion as logical conclusions to his psychoanalytical doctrine.

Nevertheless, we should take Freud seriously in his criticism of religion for it ought to make us re-examine our ideas on religion and our notions and images of God. Such a serious reflection would help us purify our religion from an infantile type of religiosity to a more adult, mature faith and from an external belief based on convention to an internalized faith based on conviction. Freud does not speak about God, but about the god which we have created, and maybe that type of god does not exist.

### **Contribution of Psychology to Religion**

On a more positive vein, let us now mention areas in which results derived from psychological research can be applied to throw light on our religious beliefs, attitudes and behaviour. We can list these applications according to branches in psychology, according to levels of application and according to schools in psychology.

Various branches of psychology may contribute towards a better

understanding of our religious life and practices. *Developmental* psychology provides us with a knowledge of childhood, adolescence and adulthood for adapting the communication of our religious message according to the stages of one's growth. *Differential* psychology teaches us to distinguish in our religious education between men and women psychology, character types and individual differences. *Clinical* psychology makes us aware of the psychotherapeutic aspects involved in helping people with problems of a psycho-religious nature. *Psychopathology* warns us of possible deviations in practicing our religion and opens our eyes to the delicate way of dealing religiously with the psychologically disturbed.

Four levels of application of psychology to religion can be described. At the *individual* level, what has been mentioned in the previous paragraph should suffice to indicate possible avenues for study. At the *group* level, the vast amount of research in group psychology with special interest in small group processes and group dynamics can have wide applications to building basic communities, to religious rites in a group setting and to the use of group media in communicating the content of our religious instructions. At the *organizational* level, recent developments in industrial/organizational psychology have much to offer to religious leaders on management, planning, leadership, and organizational skills in general. At the wider *societal* level, social psychology with its specific areas of research like attitude or opinion formation and prejudice, may guide our search in determining the extent and manner of our socio-political involvement as an integral aspect of our religious commitment.

Each of the three major schools in psychology has its specific contribution to religion. *Psycho-analysis*, with its discovery of the unconscious, may help in clarifying religious language, in understanding religious symbolism, in distinguishing sources of guilt feelings, in establishing a morality that takes into account unconscious sources of behaviour, in purifying our religious motivations, in warning us against a superstitious, magical type of religiosity, and in guarding us from pathological forms of religious expression. In a word, psychoanalysis challenges us to develop a mature, adult faith.

The *behaviouristic* or experimental approach in psychology has produced results based on scientific research which question some of our traditional beliefs. We are more conditioned than we like to admit. Our behaviour is strongly influenced by situational variables and by social factors. Our beliefs, values and biases influence our understanding and description of phenomena. We rationalize and re-interpret events to suit our expectations and prejudices. A change in attitude does not necessarily bring about a change in behaviour, on the contrary, behaviour change often brings about attitude change. Applied to religion, this might imply that

religious belief does not always lead to action, cognitive assent to dogmas does not guarantee practice of good works, and a virtuous attitude is acquired through habitual acts. In this respect, I believe that the roots of atheism in a person are mostly of a psychological, affective or emotional nature more than intellectual, cognitive or rational. More generally, behaviourism has quite a contribution to make to religion in the important areas of learning and education in general.

The “third force” in psychology – the *humanistic* orientation – has promoted values that are common to most religions: freedom, responsibility, meaning and purpose in life, dignity and wholeness of the person, and so on. It lends itself easily to an integration of the psychological and the religious, the material and the spiritual, the human and the divine. It offers a philosophy that is compatible with many religious conceptions except that in certain authors the transcendental dimension appears to be missing (for instance, Fromm’s ‘humanistic religion’).

### **Psycho-synthesis**

The psychoanalytic, behavioristic and humanistic schools in psychology, traditionally considered as the three major approaches to the study of the human person, have provided various types of links, albeit loose at times, that may form a possible chain in relating psychology to religion. A more concrete bridge to unite psychology with religion on more solid foundations has recently begun to be built with the advent of a fourth school in psychology.

This more contemporary approach in psychology takes into account the spiritual dimension in us. Besides physical and psychic energy, there is inside us a powerful spiritual source of energy that has not been sufficiently tapped. While the humanistic school emphasized self-realization and self-fulfilment as the ideal, this new approach proposes “self-transcendence” as its goal. This form of transpersonal psychology has been appearing under various names, but it has been amply expounded systematically in Psycho-synthesis.

While Freud’s psycho-analysis explored the lower regions of the unconscious, psychosynthesis attempts to lead us to the higher levels or the “super-conscious” – unknown abilities, higher potentialities, latent psychic energy, and our capacities to create. Metaphorically, Freud was mainly interested in the basement of the human building or the psychological underground of our life, psycho-synthesis is concerned with the top floor, the terrace and with sky-scrapers. While not against psycho-analysis nor behaviourism, psychosynthesis insists on the need for meaning, for higher values, for a spiritual life and considers these as real as biological or social

needs.

While psychosynthesis bears some resemblance with the humanistic approach, nevertheless, in many respects it differs from, and sometimes goes beyond, the humanistic psychologists. Psychosynthesis lays emphasis on the *spiritual* dimension and on spiritual growth, which is minimized by some humanists.

“Spiritual” in psychosynthesis includes specifically religious experiences but also the whole range of aesthetic, ethical and humanistic values. Besides negative experiences, there is also in psychosynthesis a recognition of positive ones like peace, harmony, unity, creativity, etc. and these can be actively induced through psychosynthesis methods.

The process of growth according to psychosynthesis takes place in three stages. The first level, personal synthesis, aims at freeing the person from emotional blocks and intra-psychic conflicts. The second phase, spiritual synthesis, aims at an integration around the higher spiritual centre by actualising the superconscious capacities of personality – meaning, values, beauty, creativity, etc. The final stage, transpersonal synthesis aims at developing a harmonious relationship with other persons, with humanity, with the universe, with ecological and with transcendent reality (“God”).

More than providing a theoretical framework to help us understand personality, practical psychosynthesis offers techniques in order to awaken and release in us those superconscious energies which bring about personal and social transformations. These techniques or exercises may be used as therapy, as preventive measures in the form of education or as didactic training.

Most techniques in psychosynthesis are based on different types of awareness: sensory, tactile, olfactory, taste, auditory, kinesthetic, spatial, and so on. Some examples of these techniques are: Symbolic identification, Guided fantasy, Meditation, Self-discovery, Self-identification, Recognizing one’s sub-personalities, and Will-training.

Psychosynthesis is neither a philosophy nor a religion. Its aim is not to give a metaphysical or theological explanation, but as Assagioli, its founder, puts it: “it leads to the door, but stops there.”

With psychosynthesis, however, the ultimate question still remains as to whether the spiritual or religious pertains to something immanent in us or belongs to a transcendent domain. For me personally and for Christians, God is both immanent and transcendent.

## Conclusion

Let us conclude. We have discussed in this article the various types of relationship between psychology and religion – their common concerns,



points of agreement and of conflict, their mutual contribution and perhaps their possible marriage that could yield fruitful offsprings. In the final analysis, however, the real integration of the psychological and the religious will have to take place not so much in the abstract notions of psychology and theology but concretely in the depth of the human person who is simultaneously a psychological and a religious being – or at least in the process of becoming so.

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