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Spirituality as a Phenomenon and Challenge of Science

Abstract Religion and spirituality has a long history as a topic of various human sciences. This chapter briefly reviews some of the main currents in the psychology and sociology of religion. In psychology, we discuss the classical pragmatist formulation of William James, and explore the role of spirituality in the work of Maslow. In addition, we discuss the influential theory of Allport regarding the internal and external forms of religiousness. Psychology in general has been an important force in advancing a more experiential understanding of religion. In sociology, the rationalization thesis of Weber has been a critical source of understanding modernity as secularization. More recently, however, religious scholars like Heelas have argued for a more fragmented societal development, with subjective spirituality gaining ground. This view is supported by the advances in the theory of post-secular society, propagated by esteemed scholars like Habermas. Religion is to be taken seriously as an experience and as a social form.

Keywords Religion · Spirituality · Psychology · Sociology · Theory

Spirituality as a Psychological Phenomenon

Of all the scientific approaches toward spirituality and religion, it has been psychology that has been the closest to the interpretation that spirituality should, first and foremost, be understood as a personal experience. There are several psychological methods for analyzing religious spirituality. Some of these strive to explain spiritual experiences with the help of internal beliefs and interpretations of religion. Meanwhile, other approaches have a critical view of religion, and see irrational and pathological traits in spirituality that have no part in a healthily developed personality. Alongside these, however, lies a branch of psychology that has a more neutral approach to religiosity, and whose interest has been focused on describing the sensations of a subject experiencing a spiritual life.

In his 1901 essay “Varieties of Religious Experience,” William James offered a classical overview of the scientific psychological analysis of religiosity and spirituality. James attempted to distance himself from religion-oriented and strict scientific interpretations alike. Religious experiences are real if the person experiencing them feels that way. For James, religion “...[is] 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 the divine” (James 1901, 31–32).

As far as James was concerned, religion had to be analyzed from the perspective of pragmatic philosophy, as a network of beliefs that generates activities, and which could have not only negative but also positive effects on the lives of individuals. Religion may have worked as an illuminating force that supported intuitive introspection and also as a force guiding toward a good life. For James, thoughts related to religion, regarding an afterlife, an invisible world and the influence of God, were not explicitly interesting because he thought that it was not possible to have unambiguous answers to these questions through means of human observation. Instead, it was essential that religious experiences so comprehensively influenced the people who experienced them. Indeed, the actual strength of spirituality lies in individuals being able to use it to

change the course of their life and to abandon their earlier “self.” A religious experience will transform an individual profoundly.

According to James, mystical experiences can usually be described using four characteristics (James 1901, 381–382): ineffability, noetic quality, transiency and passivity. First, religious experiences defy expression, and no adequate report of their content can be given in words. The quality of a spiritual experience must be directly felt and experienced. This requires a certain level of sensitivity toward mysticism. A spiritual experience cannot be imparted on or transferred to others.

Second, in the situation of a spiritual experience, the truth is clearly revealed to the seeker. Religious experiences offer an insight into deep truth, through which the entire world is presented as apprehensible. To this extent, James considers a spiritual experience to be a state of knowledge. Things are revealed to the person experiencing it that would otherwise be left in obscurity, or presented as scattered fragments of information. The mystical truth is pervasive and like a glimpse, carrying an awareness of the deeper truth to the life after the situation.

Third, religious experiences are short in duration. According to James, an intense mystical state can be sustained for half an hour, or at most an hour. As it is only possible to look at the sun briefly with the naked eye, the intensity of a spiritual experience will often make it a limited moment within the tolerance of an individual. On the other hand, even brief experiences are retained well in a person’s memory, thus enabling them to return to the experiences later.

Fourth, James emphasizes the passive role of an individual in spiritual experiences. Although the oncoming of mystical states may be facilitated by preliminary conscious techniques, when the actual spiritual kind of consciousness has set in, an individual’s own will seems to be in abeyance. The individual is seemingly grasped and held by superior powers. Although this may lead to phenomena such as prophetic speech or automatic writing, some memory of their content always remains with the individual. Even though the individual loses their “self” in the mystical experience, this moment will affect the later self-awareness of the individual for a long time to come.

After James, the constructive psychological role of spirituality as an experiential event was analyzed by Abraham Maslow, among others. Maslow was the father of the movement referred to as humanistic psychology, and the author of the model of a hierarchy of needs, which has been used extensively in the management of people (Maslow 1954). In the 1960s, Maslow devoted attention to the role of religiosity in the creation of significant experiences. He maintained that spiritual states of bliss are particular kinds of peak experiences, which can be reached by persons who have progressed to the upper levels on the hierarchy of needs (Maslow 1964). These individuals focused on self-actualization are more open to more intense experiences and downright ecstatic states. Maslow considered one task of religion to be to transmit these experiences to those who have not yet reached a state of bliss. Viewed this way, organized religion becomes the teaching of spiritual experiences without references to the afterlife or to the theological justifications of churches.

Gordon Allport (1950), in turn, maintained that religiosity could be practiced either through intrinsic or extrinsic motivation. External spirituality approaches religion as a tool with which an individual can strive for matters external to spirituality, such as membership in a social community. The object of interest is not a mystical connection with a higher power and achieving spiritual enlightenment. Allport sees this typical religiosity as immature, as secular aspects can be found in the background of its spirituality. It was particularly in the use of religion for strengthening the coherence within a community against external “others” that Allport viewed as an immature way of practicing religion. On the other hand, mature individuals and groups would turn to the substantive bounty of a spiritual life, and stop using religion to produce external hallmarks and influences. Developing Allport’s work even further, Batson and Ventis (1982) suggested that there also exists a third type of spirituality, a quest that best corresponds to that mature spirituality that Allport was searching for. At best, religion is a kind of universal means for making one’s own life spiritual.

Therefore, psychological analysis could be seen as engaged with new spirituality, as religious and spiritual tendencies are understood namely from the premise of the unique experiences they produce.

As is common in New Age-type spiritual movements, and on the other hand in Oriental and charismatic religions, analysis through the psychology of religion emphasizes the significances of spirituality in an individual's immediate circle of life (Ketola 2008). Spirituality changes the self in this life, and deepens our view of the world. It is often related to some sort of turn toward an ethically more sustainable way of life. With regard to this, religion only acts as a social background for fine-tuning spiritual experiences, and transferring them to new practitioners of the movement.

The latest contributions to the psychological perspective have approached spirituality increasingly more clearly from the direction of the biological mechanisms and structures of the brain. In the background to this are advances made in the neurological sciences. With the help of new technology, neuropsychology has been able to analyze brain functions in various situations, and to describe rather well how the different layers and regions of the brains activate during the construction of psychological states. In connection to this, spirituality has been studied for example by analyzing the effect of meditation on brain function and states of mind (Nelson 2011). For example, the well-known Buddhist monk Matthieu Ricard (2008), a former physicist referred to as "the happiest man in the world," agreed to undergo a brain scan in a situation where he was meditating toward a harmonious state of mind. In this way, scientists were able to obtain objective information about how spiritual practices affect the biochemistry of the brain. When the brains of some Buddhist monks were studied, there was evidence that the areas focused on positive emotions are more developed than average, and that they also have stronger sections that are related to concentration (a documentary made on this topic can be viewed on the website <http://www.uitzendinggemist.nl/afleveringen/1125834>). Among other researchers, Karen Armstrong (2011) has also suggested that according to studies, the tendency toward spiritual compassion is located in the oldest layer of the brains, in the so-called "lizard brain," and is therefore an integral part of our biological heritage.

This is another way that the latest psychology of religion approaches contemporary scientific and rational culture: the effects of spirituality can be verified scientifically, combining with existing knowledge about

the physiological functions of the mind. The theological background to spiritual practices such as meditation is secondary from the perspective of scientific analysis, as they cannot be tested with objective observation methods. There is no device that could objectively measure the existence and activities of otherworldly forces and energies. Connecting spirituality to the structures of the mind and to the biochemistry of the brain makes religious trends more acceptable in the cultural framework of a contemporary human being. On the other hand, it will, in this way, also remove the majority of the mysticism related to spiritual experiences.

Spirituality as a Social Science Phenomenon

Another way to approach spirituality is to study it as a social phenomenon. In this case, the goal is not so much to create a background for the practice of spirituality, but rather, to understand the growth of new spirituality as a historical and cultural feature of development. During the Enlightenment, science and social thought were based on the assumption that religion and spirituality represent a primitive form of life, which will move aside as the Age of Reason progresses, making way for new rational and anthropocentric beliefs (Israel 2009). For example, the philosopher Kant (Kant et al. 1998) is said to have been relieved as he “woke up from a dogmatic dream” after having become acquainted with empirical skepticism, referring to the Christian-metaphysical philosophy based on non-apparent beliefs and assumptions he practiced previously. The sociologist Comte viewed religion mainly as a phase of evolution, which served as an intermediate stage while moving from a primitive culture toward a scientifically managed and controlled society. In Marx’s opinion, religion was an ideological tool, “opium for the masses,” with which it was possible to bend people to conformity with a capitalist social order.

The main argument of the sociological study of religion is that social activities become gradually more rational, and that during this process, the religious assumption about the forces and factors related to the afterlife becomes a less popular view of the world at the same pace. Of the classics of sociology, it was namely Max Weber (1976) who

emphasized this side in the modernizing development of a society. For him, rationalization is a universal phenomenon that sweeps forward in all such fields of life that were previously havens for holistic or mystical beliefs. The management of states moves from the hands of charismatic leaders to be implemented by impersonal bureaucracies. In economics, trends of objective indicators and analytical calculation replace intuitive management and social networks. Weber described this disappearance of the mystical and the afterlife using the concept of “disenchantment” (*Entzauberung*). Although religiosity did not directly disappear from developed Western countries, its role as the ideological engine of actions was giving way to rationality. Decisions or methods of operation could no longer be assessed and justified with beliefs related to the afterlife. The invisible world related to spirituality, and its mystical and magical traits were no longer suitable as the foundation of a culture of different communities. Mysteries had to be conquered and managed with the help of modern science and rational reasoning.

However, as the twentieth century progressed, the secularization thesis proposed by Weber and other social theorists about modern society becoming irrevocably secular did not appear to take place as expected. Organized religions, Christianity in particular, maintained their significant position in a person’s life. Their role may not have been similarly transcendent as before the Enlightenment, but for some, churches still represented the highest authority and absolute truth in questions regarding way of life and morality. It was only when the large post-war age groups entered adulthood that religiously orientated tendencies started to weaken (Ojanen 2011). The atmosphere of the 1960s, with its cultural liberation, left-wing radicalisms and alternative spiritualities was largely aimed against the previous generation steeped in church spirituality. Oriental religions and free spirituality became increasingly more interesting. Religiosity was replaced by individual multi-spirituality, where everyone was free to construct a personal spiritual style from suitable influences and movements. All flowers had to be able to blossom, and no particular religious dogma could prevent a free person from soul-searching and self-realization.

Social scientists had to develop substitute theories alongside the linear secularization thesis. One of the more popular explanations regarding

the development of spirituality is the subjectivization thesis launched by Paul Heelas and his colleagues (Heelas et al. 2005). According to this thesis, traditional monotheist religion is truly declining in Western countries, as the secularization thesis assumes. On the other hand, a new type of spirituality has emerged as an alternative to ecclesiastical religion, and Heelas calls this the spirituality of life, or simply spirituality, to distinguish it from traditional religious spirituality (religion). According to Heelas, spirituality is especially different from religion due to the former being aimed at the individual and the subjective project of the spiritualization of the individual. The idea behind spirituality is to provide belief systems, spiritual practices and healing methods while taking into consideration every person's individual situation. The idea is that the individual is the focal point of spirituality, where anyone can assemble a suitable spiritual "package" for themselves.

Heelas interprets the development of different spiritualities in the following manner (Heelas et al. 2005, 6):

Life forms, which emphasise a transcendent source of significance and authority to which individuals must conform at the expense of the cultivation of their unique subjective lives, will probably decline. Subjective life forms of the sacred, which emphasise inner sources of significance and authority and the cultivation or sacralisation of unique subjective-lives, will probably grow.

The spirituality described by Heelas and his colleagues includes a variety of different movements and methods, some of which are close to the field of traditional religiosity, and others are more closely intertwined with well-being services. Different New Age movements can be considered to be more spiritual while branches of alternative medicine, zone therapy or homeopathy gravitate toward holistic healthcare. In between lie many trends that are difficult to categorize, and which draw upon religion-like assumptions, but do not, however, claim to be actual religious communities. Among others, yoga and Tai Chi represent physically orientated methods whose background nevertheless contains a religious worldview. To some extent, for example, energy treatments, Reiki, acupuncture, healing circles and astrology also remain in a gray zone between traditionally viewed religiosity and secularized well-being trends.

The core of the subjectivization thesis lies in the statement according to which spirituality focused on the internal spiritual development and well-being of an individual is taking the place that used to belong to religion. This is evident in the statement, "I am spiritual, but not religious." In contemporary culture, commitment to the forces of the afterlife is old-fashioned. Traditional organized religions are seen as strongholds of conservatism that suffocate individuality and tolerance. Persecution of nonbelievers, lust for power, and religious wars are regularly highlighted in their history. On the other hand, free spirituality represents for many the opposite of traditional religion—a fresh and natural method for practicing spirituality. With that, the individual, acting like a consumer, can choose suitable elements from different movements. While in traditional religiosity, the self of an individual was subjected to God's will, different theological and philosophical movements within the new spirituality flexibly bend to their client's needs and development situation at any given moment.

However, Heelas et al. (2005, 127) emphasize that the rise of internal spirituality and the regression of traditional religions have not undermined each other. The decline in the popularity of denominational religion has not been replaced by a similar corresponding amount of new active practitioners of subjective spirituality. The main trend continues to be growing secularization, and the related decline in the popularity of faith in God. In the end, people who have moved toward new spirituality represent a relatively small section of the population. Likewise, free spirituality has not been able to attract all social groups, such as adult men, to participate in its activities. In modern societies, the main trend is still a movement away from Christianity and toward a completely nonreligious way of life, and identity.

Heelas' analysis is mainly focused on the USA and England. Let's take another example from my own sphere of experience: Finland. International comparative material strengthens the image that Finnish people are strongly committed to church, although they do not consider themselves to be particularly religious. Finnish religious scholar Ketola (2011) states that the religious moderation of Finnish people is partly evident in the fact that Finns do not attend church much, or participate in a spiritual life in other ways. Neither do Finnish people believe in supernatural powers or miracles. At the same time, however, four-fifths

of the population belong to the Evangelical Lutheran Church. However, some people do say that they practice religious spirituality privately. This trait is probably related to the personal relationship to god, which is emphasized in Protestant Christianity, differing from the church-centered and communal spirituality culture in Catholic and Orthodox countries, for example.

On the other hand, when analyzing the structural change in the field of religiosity and spirituality, the picture is somewhat different. Ketola (2008) has studied the development of the amount of religious communities in Finland over a long historic period. Based on this, he states that the number of spiritual communities has grown rapidly during past decades. The new movements are mainly alternative trends based on Oriental spirituality, which has marked a decrease in the relative proportion of Christian communities. The trend started to increase already in the 1970s, and it has accelerated from the 1990s onwards. As far as Christian churches are concerned, only Pentecostalism and the Charismatic movement have grown as organizations. According to Ketola (2008), religions that have expanded in recent times share a more democratic organization compared to traditional churches, emphasizing the journey toward spiritual experiences within an individual and informal scope, instead of formal hierarchies and theological dogmas. From this perspective, the esoteric tradition, Oriental religions and Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity are similar, although they have different theological premises. In Finland, free spirituality is also gaining an advantage over traditional religious spirituality.

In addition to the subjectivization perspective of Heelas, there have also been weightier discourses regarding changes in the balance between spirituality and modern rationality. Many leading social theorists have been forming a new kind of view, where spirituality and religiosity are given a stronger role than before regarding cultural dynamics (e.g. Taylor 2007). For example, in his recent works, one of the top names in critical social sciences, Juergen Habermas, has been pondering an alternative idea of a “post-secular society,” an alternative to the secularization hypothesis (e.g. Habermas 2008). According to Habermas, religion still has an influence in public and institutional life, so that the area of traditional church spirituality is more limited than before, with modern

organizations taking over fields of well-being and pastoral care that used to belong to religion, and that spirituality has become a part of the private sphere (Heelas et al. 2005). In a post-secular society, religiosity and spirituality together with secularized financial and government institutions influence the lives of people. That is why Habermas thinks that various religions and belief systems should be approached respectfully, striving toward a dialogue between them (cf. Hicks 2003). This will help to ensure a better unity of societies and organizations compared to banning and isolating religious spirituality as something alien to a modern way of life. Spirituality continues to be an important ingredient in a social sense of community.

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