

Towards a Relational Spirituality Psycho-Social Perspectives

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Abstract: Today, scholars are daring to wade into spiritual waters in order to discover and encounter the healing powers of hitherto unknown spirits and forces. A new perspective is emerging on how we can be spiritual. It seems a lot more diverse than previously envisaged. Now spiritualities are expressed not only in religion-based contexts but also in a variety of other human experiential contexts. This article has explored and emphasized the relational-emotional dimension of spirituality that we think would make spirituality more easily accessible to most. Theories of modern psychology, like EQ and attachment theory, offer insights and perspectives that enrich the meaning and practice of relational spirituality.

Keywords: Spirituality, EQ, attachment theory, psychology and spirituality, relational spirituality

Introduction

In recent years, psychologists and medical personnel are daring to wade into spiritual waters in order to discover and encounter the healing powers of hitherto unknown spirits and forces. As the connection between religion and health becomes more salient and even respectable in scientific circles, questions and queries about spirituality and personal faith seem to be growing ever stronger. Cover stories in global magazines like *Time*, *Newsweek* and *Reader's Digest* about God and health or mind and body, provide abundant anecdotal evidence to reinforce peoples' beliefs in the spiritual.

Newsweek's, Claudia Kalb tells the story of:

how on a quiet afternoon, Ming He, a fourth-year medical student in Dallas, came across a man dying in the VA hospital. Suffering from a rare cancer and hooked up to an oxygen tank, the man, an Orthodox Jew, could barely breathe, let alone speak. There were no friends or relatives by his bed to comfort him. When the young student walked into his room, the man looked at her and said, 'Now that I'm dying, I realize that I never really learned how to live.' Ming He, 26, had no idea how to respond.

I thought, 'My God, the chaplain doesn't work on weekends, what do I do?' She held the man's hand for a few minutes in silence; two days later, he died. And as soon as she could, she signed up for "Spirituality and Medicine" at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical School, a course that teaches students how to talk to patients about faith and illness.¹

This little episode of the young medical student needing to learn more about spirituality and how it could help her professionally, seems indicative of a new trend acknowledging the power of spirituality in the healing profession. In same issue of *Newsweek*, Kalb reports that 72% of Americans say they would welcome a conversation with their physician about faith; the same number say they believe that praying to God can cure someone even if science says the person doesn't stand a chance.

Since psychologists are co-players in the field of healing, spirituality has also aroused their interests particularly in the area of mind-body-spirit inter-connections. Since psychology has its origins in the study of the psyche=mind=spirit, it seems natural that the renewed interest in spirituality is opening new doors of collaboration between spirituality and psychology. For example, recent studies report that:

- i. People with strong religious faith are less likely to suffer depression from stressful events, and if they do, they are more likely to recover from depression than those who are less religious.
- ii. Elderly people with a deep, personal faith have a stronger sense of well-being and life-satisfaction than their less religious peers.
- iii. Religious people live longer.²

This and similar research point to the value and importance psychologists are starting to place on spirituality. Psychologist Todd Hall sees, “a trend toward the study of spirituality in the psychology of religion which emphasizes personal experiences related to transcendence, and the search for the sacred, among other things.”³ An emphasis on personal experience rather than on the compulsive performance of repetitive and sometimes monotonous rituals and rites is psychology’s unique contribution to enriching the concept of spirituality.

The purpose of this article is to explore further, psychology’s contribution to understanding spirituality. Thanks to its emphasis on personal experience, psychology brings out the intimate connection between experience and emotion in the realm of spirituality. This enables a further refinement of the concept of spirituality with the introduction of the notion of a “relational spirituality.” The striking parallels between a relational spirituality and the psychological theories of attachment and emotional intelligence (EQ), seem to hold challenges for an integrated spirituality, where body-mind-spirit mingle in harmony.

Finally, the article will highlight some of the implications of a relational spirituality in contrast to spiritualities, particularly within the Christian tradition, that are a lot more focused on performances and observances of rituals. In this latter situation, the obsession is with fulfilling obligations and duties rather than experiencing or searching for the sacred.

How does Psychology Look at Spirituality?

In the world of psychology the term “spirituality” says different things to different psychologists. Ranging from extreme secular, non-theistic spiritualities to theistic ones, psychologists have started to sense the importance of spirituality in the lives of their clients. In a recent PracticeNet survey of 203 American psychologists, more than 50% said that they asked their clients about spirituality in their last treatment session. About 70% of the psychologists said that their clients expressed belief in a divine being.

The clients to the tune of 35% said that spirituality was a source of strength and coping.⁴ While a clear definition of spirituality remains elusive, it seems there is a broad understanding that spirituality has to do with the “spirit” and therefore touches the realm of religion. However, religion need not necessarily be of an institutionalized variety or its deities of a personal nature. The New Age religions are an example of non-institutionalized religions whose spiritualities seem to resonate with many; the spiritualities associated with cosmic religions like Hinduism and Buddhism may sometimes subscribe to non-personal deities or to no deities at all.

For our purposes, a broad definition of spirituality offered by psychologist Hill et al. is adequate. According to these researchers, spirituality is characterized by “the feelings, thoughts, experiences, and behaviors that arise from a search for the sacred...” (p.66).⁵ Furthermore, if the sacred is to be explored from the perspective of a personal deity then such a spirituality would be essentially theistic and “relational.” By relational is meant that there is an interpersonal relationship between the divine and the human, analogous to a relationship between humans. From a psychological perspective this opens many doors for a fruitful collaboration between psychology and spirituality. Not unlike spirituality, the principal preoccupation of all psychology is to understand the relational dynamics within the self and between the self and the other.

In order to study further the relational dynamics of spirituality, psychology researchers Rayburn and Richmond have created an Inventory on Spirituality.⁶ Distinguishing spirituality from religiousness, they define spirituality operationally, “as the vital, animating fervor transcending earthly boundaries in some small way and in some instances, inasmuch as is possible for humans to do.”⁷ They characterize spirituality as possessing qualities such as, caring for others, transcendence, seeking goodness and truth, forgiveness, cooperation and peacefulness. For those acquainted with religions, the connections are quickly visible. However, even if one were not an adherent of a formal religion, one could be

spiritual and cherish one's spirituality as a driving force in one's life. Psychology does not wrestle with the problem of the origins of spirituality and is open to a theistic as well as atheistic understanding of spirituality.

A key notion that comes across in the discourse on "spirituality" is that it has to do with, "spirit" which means force, energy, vitality, drive and the like. The concept embodies power. Spirituality empowers one to perform deeds of virtue. Hence spirituality frequently drives the religious minded, for example, to heroic acts. In fact, religion without spirituality would be a mere impotent ideology, a bag of lifeless rituals. Given that spirituality thus acts as a motivating force in human behaviour, there is a growing realization among clinical psychologists and counsellors of the role of the spirit in shaping and transforming human behaviour. Interestingly, although the psyche=soul=spirit was the starting point for the psychologists' quest for understanding human behaviour, the spirit, being non-empirical, was relegated to a secondary role in the face of scientifically more alluring empirical criteria of measurement and verifiability.

Furthermore, since an inner spirit may drive some human behaviour, there exists the real possibility that we naturally tend to seek "kindred spirits" for communication, for forming communities and for building relationships. Hence the relational aspect of spirituality comes to the fore again, both at the interpersonal as well as the transcendental levels.

The Psychological Foundations for a Relational Spirituality

A psychological theory that would provide a broad framework for understanding spirituality is "attachment theory." Attachment refers to strong and enduring emotional bonds that develop between an infant and a caregiver in early infancy. Mary Ainsworth (1973), the developmental psychologist, defines attachment as an "affectional tie one person or animal forms between himself and another specific one – a tie that binds them together in space and

endures over time.”⁸ Hence the relationship is reciprocal and there is a shared desire to also maintain physical proximity. The attachment process is a mutual system. Some psychologists even believe that the closeness between the caregivers (attachment figures) and the infant, is biologically determined and essential to the survival of the infant. In other words, we seem to be “hard-wired” towards relationships from birth. Moreover attachment is not limited to the infancy and early childhood stages, it is a life-long process. However, it is believed that attachment in the early years forms the basis for all future relationships.

Most researchers are of the opinion that attachment figures provide us with comfort and security; however, the role of the attachment figure can also occasion distress or anxiety through actual or potential separation, as is easily observable not only with infants but with adults as well.

The emotional bonding with attachment figures provides a “haven of safety” for individuals alarmed by fears, anxieties and distress; it also provides a “secure base” from which to explore the environment and have the reassurance of returning to a place of emotional security when faced by threats, etc. The two constructs from attachment theory capture well the role of attachment figures while at the same time pointing to similarities in the areas of spirituality and religion.

Human emotions mediate the attachments in relational spirituality. Hence great value is placed on spiritual experiences since these can be communicated and shared with others via the language of emotions. Since the repertoire of emotions is common to all humans, one experiences a certain amount of reciprocity, a kind of give-and-take. In the light of these dynamics, an overview of the psychology of emotional intelligence (EQ) may further enhance our understanding of relational spirituality.

The Psychology of Emotional Intelligence (EQ)

During the second half of 1990’s the concept of emotional intelligence (EQ) became popularized in the international press.

It seems there was a realization that cognitive intelligence (IQ) alone was not sufficient to understand human behaviours and to conduct oneself in human relationships.

Daniel Goleman (1995)⁹ described EQ as having the following five domains: knowing one's emotions; managing emotions; motivating oneself; recognizing emotions in others; and handling relationships. While IQ and EQ are not opposing concepts they are distinct realities, which need to be developed in an integral manner within the personality. Sometimes emotional intelligence is also referred to as "interpersonal intelligence" (Gardner, 1993).¹⁰

EQ seeks to harmonize the rational with the emotional with the aim of turning out humans who relate better to fellow humans and the cosmos in general. EQ is other-directed and emotions provide the connectivity between self and the other. Finally, understanding emotions enables us to encounter others and act wisely in human relationships.

An Elaboration of the Five Domains of EQ

The five domains can be broadly categorized under two competencies: personal competence and social competence.

Personal competence determines how we manage ourselves. Three domains belong here:

1. *Knowing one's emotions*: This path to greater self-awareness, recognizing a feeling as it happens, is essential to EQ. One should develop the ability to read one's own emotions and recognize their impact. In the process, one acquires a better sense of self-assessment, knowing one's strengths and limits. In turn, this should contribute towards greater self-confidence and enhanced self-worth.
2. *Managing emotions*: Emotional self-control is key to managing emotions without at the same time repressing them. For this, the earlier step of self-awareness is crucial. One can develop the capacity to be adaptable and flexible in the face

of emotional challenges. Also, one develops the ability to quickly recover from setbacks and upsets.

3. *Motivating oneself:* Emotions are put at the service of greater achievement, striving towards a goal. Such persons tend to be highly productive, take initiative and are generally optimistic about their performance.

Social Competence determines how we manage relationships. Two domains belong here:

1. *Recognizing emotions in others:* A certain sense of social awareness developed through empathy is essential. Empathic people are more attuned to the needs and feelings of others, are sensitive and caring and highly appreciative. They also have a greater ease in reading the moods and emotions of others and relating to them accordingly.
2. *Handling relationships:* Managing relationships are in large part managing emotions in others. Greater social competence ensures greater success in leadership and interpersonal effectiveness. Such persons are good candidates for teamwork and collaboration.

The theory of emotional intelligence opens up the richness and value of the emotional life of humans. Tremendous stress is laid on managing our emotions with a view to improving the quality of relationships. Just as in the case of spirituality, the relational aspect of EQ is brought to the fore.

The Nexus between Attachment Theory, EQ and Relational Spirituality

Several common threads of thought run through these three constructs. Our focus has been to see in what way modern psychology can help us understand the dynamics of the spiritual yearnings of humans. Also, in what way can spirituality be enriched by the insights of psychology?

Social psychologists Argyle and Beit-Hallahmi (1975)¹¹ have observed that religiosity or spirituality plays a significant role in crisis situations. They noted that people turn to prayer in stressful situations. From an attachment perspective, it parallels the fact that people turn to attachment figures for comfort and security. Prayer and God seem to provide a safe haven in times of distress and fear. Similarly, in cases of death of loved ones, the bereaved people feel more religious and engage in more prayer than they did prior to the death (Loveland, 1968).¹² For the bereaved, God can serve as a substitute attachment figure when a spouse or other attachment figure has died. Lee Kirkpatrick (1997) observes that “people turn to religion, and to God in particular, in response to the same sorts of events known to activate the attachment system and that doing so often provides the comfort and security associated with attachment relationships.”¹³

Attachment figures take care of many emotional needs, e.g. belonging, security, care, protection, etc. Also, they provide strength for the person to grow in emotional self-awareness as well as social competence, both of which form the essence of EQ.

Since spirituality is characterized by its inner workings and inner vitality, it essentially relates to the emotional life of the person. Hence a healthy emotional life would also provide a base for a healthy and productive spirituality. Relational spirituality with its thrust towards the other has strong interpersonal and transpersonal aspects to it that can be strengthened and affirmed through the timely development of EQ.

A spirituality influenced and shaped by EQ would emphasize the emotional-affective qualities in the relationship with the sacred/divine. Furthermore, it would do so in an intelligent manner, that is, with due regard to reason and other cognitive abilities available to the human. Also, spiritualities unduly focused on the cognitive/rational, tend to be “dry” and run the danger of lapsing into compulsive and meaningless religious practices that fail to nourish the soul of the person.

Implications of a Relational Spirituality in the Christian Context

1. A relational spirituality would highlight the qualities of a covenant relationship so pervasive in the Old Testament. There is a personal, emotional relationship between God and His people; a sense of mutual attachment runs through the whole story of how God liberates His people while they in turn remain attached to Him. Here spirituality has the connotation of a journey, which implies mutuality of companionship. The presence of God brings joy and strength and confirms the attachment while absence brings about anxiety, confusion and pain.
2. A relational spirituality would also help one to come to terms with the ups and downs of emotional relationships. Given that EQ equips one to manage one's emotions and those of others, it has an impact on the quality of relationships. Such management skills could be brought to bear in our relationship with the divine. Spirituality then takes on a perspective of partnership with a high degree of reciprocity and emotional awareness.
3. Since by and large the emphasis within the Christian tradition seems to be on the cognitive, reason-based approach in relating to God, the emotional is sometimes looked down upon as of lesser value. Hence, liturgical celebrations and other practices leave little or no room for emotional expressions of joy, happiness or gratitude. Emotions are sort of suppressed with a liturgical decorum of silence and stylized actions in the form of official rubrics. A relational spirituality creates room for individualized expressions of one's relationship with God and fellow-humans.
4. The theories of attachment and EQ can facilitate the process of making spirituality relevant and meaningful by pointing out the emotional needs of people. Spirituality is essentially a search for the sacred in the context of relating to fellow humans, the cosmos and the divine. A relational spirituality would assume an openness to engage present day realities and thus remain relevant.

5. A God-experience, which at times seems so elusive in certain Christian traditions, would seem within easier reach when understood and experienced as part of the emotional life of every individual. In the context of relational spirituality, a God-experience parallels a fellowship-experience between humans. Then, God-experience is no longer a distant or a privileged experience of a chosen few. God-experience would be more readily accessible since God is sought in the daily reality of life.
6. A relational spirituality would seem more integral in so far it seeks to bring together the emotional and the spiritual, in other words, the personal and the transpersonal. In the world of today, the immanent and the transcendent, the human and the cosmic, all form part of the total spiritual experience of the human.

Conclusion

A new perspective is emerging on how we can be spiritual. It seems a lot more diverse than previously envisaged. Now spiritualities are expressed not only in religion-based contexts but also in a variety of other human experiential contexts. This article has explored and emphasized the relational-emotional dimension of spirituality that we think would make spirituality more easily accessible to most. Theories of modern psychology, like EQ and attachment theory, offer insights and perspectives that enrich the meaning and practice of relational spirituality.

In addition to strictly religious factors, scientists also highlight psycho-social factors as constitutive of spirituality. Hence healthy and functioning relationships also contribute to wellness and an experience of harmony and inner peace similar to experiences reported in religious contexts. A new branch of psychology, labelled, positive psychology, explores the concept of wellness and studies how wellness can be pursued in its own right and not as an antidote to psychological illness. In this regard spirituality and positive psychology share a common platform. In fact a new model for research is being worked out that goes beyond the

“psycho-somatic” to “theo-somatic” whereby stress is laid on the interaction between a pluralism of body-mind-spirit.¹⁴

Notes

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