

***Editorial***

**PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION**

Most human beings on the face of the earth are – either by nature or by nurture – religious, though they would differ from each other in many particular aspects. Many among them are passionately committed to a ‘divine’ centre of life, and are ultimately concerned with designing a life in accordance with its dynamics. It is true that religion is an all encompassing phenomenon in the life of any human being who is seriously religious. In fact, no sector of life could be compartmentalised or marked out as unaffected or uninfluenced by religion. In other words, religious reality is that which permeates the entire life of a person, and it could be identified beneath the motives, feelings, behaviour patterns, and value orientations of religious adherents, covering the entire gamut of human existence, activities, and the continued becoming processes. Elements that constitute the religious reality generally include, (i) a drive on the part of an individual person to cultivate a transcendental dimension of life in relation to a reality that transcends the bounds of sense, (ii) a transformative experience of that reality, which is christened as religious experience, (iii) an articulate credo, if belonging to a community of believers or an organised pattern of religion, (iv) a value system that marks the characteristic behaviours infused with moral sensitivity, (v) a set of rituals to celebrate and relive the religious experience on a daily basis, and (vi) a sense of awe, commitment, and ecstasy that pervades and transforms the entire life, leading to a balanced or integrated life – both at the personal and communitarian levels.

Religion, for many, is exclusively a spiritual reality, which is capable of animating various dimensions of human life, both at the personal and societal life. This aspect of religion does not easily lend itself to any experiment or laboratory analysis. Without denying this fact, many others consider the same religion as having a dimension which is empirical, and hence observable and measurable with scientific tools and methods. Over the last one hundred years this latter has been brought to the fore a vibrant and positively contributing discipline called Psychology of Religion. The business of psychology of religion is to analyse the religious consciousness and the data connected with religious experiences, and to suggest possible

enhancements with a view to bring about holistic human existence. Of course, those scientists involved in giving shape and perfection to such a science had no identical motives. While some psychologists of religion involved in researches to promote or defend religion, either in *toto* or in some form of it, as it existed in their contemporary society, many others had a genuine aspiration to purify and transform a particular religious tradition, or one or the other practice within it, with a hope to recover its original holistic spirit or to reshape it in accordance with modern understanding and improved sensibilities. Moreover, there were still others who “seek to discredit religion, in whole or in part, either by finding its origins in natural, sometimes pathological, processes or by demonstrating that it can have serious negative consequences, both personal and social.”<sup>1</sup>

Contrary opinions and conclusions have been found to co-exist even among the stalwarts of psychology of religion. Sigmund Freud, for example, held that religion – a dangerous illusion<sup>2</sup> that restricts the great majority of human beings to an immature phase of development – is rooted in the wishes and fears of early childhood, leading to a belief in a Father God and the scrupulous fulfilment of a set of fixed rituals. C. G. Jung’s analytic psychology, on the contrary, maintained that religion – an essential psychological function<sup>3</sup> – symbolises a deeper dimension of human existence, a vital layer of the psyche, recognition and integration of which are said to facilitate a harmonious and balanced human life. While the former proposed an allegiance to and practice of religion to be the cause of neurosis, the latter thought it to be the contrary: Jung argued that it is the neglect of religion which would lead individuals into neurotic behaviour patterns, adversely affecting even the human species as a whole. The contemporary scenes continue to witness contrary positions among psychologists as far as the religious reality is concerned. However, lack of a unified goal among psychologists has contributed towards a more

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<sup>1</sup>*Encyclopaedia of Psychology*, 2000 edition, s.v. “Religion and Psychology” by David M. Wulff, vol. 7, 34.

<sup>2</sup>Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, trans. & ed. James Strachey, New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1961, 55; see also 38-43, 62, 66-71.

<sup>3</sup>Carl G. Jung, *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, eds. Herbert Read, Michael Fordham, Gerhard Adler, and William McGuire, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969, vol. 11, 97.

holistic and thorough analysis of the religious reality, paving the way for an enhanced understanding of the same in the recent past.

Despite the contributions made by psychology of religion, the relationship between professional psychologists and the proponents of religion has often been fought with controversies. While “psychology has accused religion of everything from dogmatism and intolerance to social repression and mental illness,” religion has blamed psychology of “arrogance, elitism, amorality, and selfishness. Regardless of their accuracy, these accusations point to the rift between psychological and religious disciplines.”<sup>4</sup>

The central focus of psychology of religion, to my mind, should be balanced, integrated, and religiously oriented human persons. This calls for an open, tolerant, and constructive approach towards the religious reality. That is, the idealised result of any true and healthy religion – as projected by psychology of religion – should pervade the inner recesses of human life and influence the ethos of an entire people, and an era or civilisation; moreover, it should result in an integration or wholeness both at the personal and societal levels, requiring not merely a random lapse and an occasional act, but a healthy and habitual pattern of transformed life designed after the unique vision of religion to which one is committed. It must be borne in mind that this thrust on integration, in most of the cases, does not point to a realised state or achieved plateau, but most to an ongoing process, which has to continue and converge in the life of the individual and community.

Religious orientations or affinities among individuals have been instrumental in infusing them with a sense of meaning, transformed life patterns, and a readiness to integrate all dimensions of life without any loss of orientation. Religions, for example, seem to be having a deep appreciation even for the otherwise unappreciated dimension of life in the painful experiences and catastrophic situations within the human conditions. As Pargament puts it, “that religion is closely tied to pivotal periods in life should not be particularly startling. Hardships, suffering, and conflicts have been centres of concern for the major religions of the world. Each, in its own way, acknowledges the fact that life can be

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<sup>4</sup>Kenneth I. Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping: Theory, Research, Practice*, New York: The Guilford Press, 1997, 7.

perilous.”<sup>5</sup> The attempt to integrate the seemingly opposite, unpleasant, and painful elements of human existence, therefore, is envisioned to enable those who are religious to formulate and practise their life vision on how to positively and creatively respond to those conditions.

One difficulty with this situation is the fact of the subjective dimension of religious experience, and the impossibility of objectively verifying its real character. Granted that many people are just what they seem, some prove far more religious than they appear, and some others prove far less religious than they claim. That is, the religious motive is lying far beneath the external dynamics, and it is hard even for the science of psychology of religion to screen the same with objectively verifiable criteria. There are also some who claim to have no religious affinity, and others who declare to be belonging to no institutional religion; many of them, however, acknowledge true religious perspectives and feeling, but mostly on the private domains, or on the personal dimensions of life, which cannot be objectified and verified.

Gordon W. Allport, a pioneer in the field of psychology of religion, has offered two ideal types of religious orientation. First is the extrinsic religious orientation that projects a negative attitude and a preoccupation to manipulate and use the religious reality for ulterior motives: “A person with an extrinsic religious orientation is using his religious views to provide security, comfort, status, or social support for himself – religion is not a value in its own right, it serves other needs, and it is a purely utilitarian formation. Now prejudice too is a ‘useful’ formation: it too provides security, comfort, status, and social support. A life that is dependent on the support of extrinsic religion is likely to be dependent on the supports of prejudice...”<sup>6</sup> The second, intrinsic religious orientation, regards faith as a supreme value in its own right, without giving primacy to the formal structures of religion: “... the intrinsic religious orientation is not an instrumental device. It is not a mere mode of conformity, nor a crutch, nor a tranquilizer, nor a bid for status. All needs are subordinated to an overarching religious commitment... In such a life (where religion is an intrinsic and dominant value), there is no place for rejection, contempt,

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<sup>5</sup>Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping*, 3.

<sup>6</sup>G. W. Allport and J. M. Ross, “Personal Religious Orientation and Prejudice,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 5 (1967), 441.

or condescension toward one's fellowmen."<sup>7</sup> Although there are both types of orientations found among the adherents of different religions, or one or the other at different periods in the life of an individual adherent, realization of the religious reality would be positively enhanced only in the intrinsic one. The source of an "overarching religious commitment" that Allport refers to, can be located in what Rudolf Otto calls a "creature-consciousness," or a "creature feeling," which is identified as a response to the numinous found in religion. According to Otto, "it is the emotion of a creature, submerged and overwhelmed by its own nothingness in contrast to that which is supreme above all creatures."<sup>8</sup> A person who is enabled by religion to understand not only his/her own strengths, but also the basic insufficiency, or the "nothingness" of his/her being in the presence of that being – "the numinous" or the "*mysterium tremendum*" – is made intensely aware of a religious possibility of filling the ontological vacuum by drawing on that ultimate source or being. It is the centrality of this non-rational experience of "the holy" or the "wholly other" that finally turns out to be the cornerstone of the intrinsic orientation of religiosity. Its essential bipolar nature, which is at the same time "frighteningly awesome and overpowering" and "alluring and fascinating,"<sup>9</sup> that generates an all-enveloping commitment in those who experience the religious reality.

History is the witness to many persons whose lives have been radically transformed by the intrinsic religious motives. Although most of such persons have not been recognised by and large – as they turn out to be the ordinary in our ordinary religious sphere – we can identify some of the stalwarts in almost all religions. A powerful image, accepted both by the religious communities and secular groups, acknowledged by people of almost all faiths, and acclaimed by rich and poor alike, is Mother Teresa of Calcutta. She is a symbol of the immense possibilities that could come forth from an intrinsic religious orientation: although a frail and lone lady as she was, placed in an unfamiliar culture and ethos, with meagre or non-existing material resources, surrounded by abject poverty and irredeemable situations of the people, Mother Teresa set out to do the impossible. The only strength or source that was at her disposal was her faith in the person

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<sup>7</sup>Allport and Ross, "Personal Religious Orientation and Prejudice," 441.

<sup>8</sup>Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, London: Oxford University Press, 1950, 10.

<sup>9</sup>Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 35.

of Jesus Christ. It was this source that finally turned out to be her unceasing inspiration to leap into the abysmal poverty and painful desertions that her *neighbouring* people had been experiencing and to reach out to them as a powerful beacon to all who came in contact with her. Her psyche was radically transformed by the faith in Jesus; in fact, she was not that frail and lone lady who had reached the shores of India: she could withstand all the odds that came on her way, and plunge into many vicissitudes of life through the strength of a new religious consciousness that was infused with a set of new values arrived at through a Christian perspective. Later, what had begun as her personal ministry, finally, turned out to be an effective network to save and serve a lot of forsaken people. She could single-handedly manage its affairs with efficiency and meaning, but without losing its humane face and foundational religiosity. Thus, the Christian faith for Mother Teresa was not merely an abstract system of dogmatic beliefs, meaningless rituals, and uninteresting symbols, but an existential reality that pervaded her entire body, mind, and soul, making her feelings and relationships as vibrant as she could, transforming not only her personal life, but of many others whom she had reached out through her acts of life and love.

Of course, on the positive side, religion is one of the most effective and creative motivating mechanisms. However, when it is used to serve the ulterior motives of a vicious psyche, the same religious orientation may turn out to be counterproductive, and detrimental not only to the individual but also to the humanity at large. Whenever the integral vision towards religious reality is threatened, and the extrinsic orientations take control of religious persons and communities, psychological and religious distortions abound, finally making the religion itself a farce and a tool of manipulating human existence and sensitivities. Psychological distortions found to exist in the religious sphere can be far more destructive and dangerous than many other distortions, as religious orientation is so deep and powerfully motivating within the psyche of those who are religious, genuinely or with a fundamentalist bend of mind.

The mental framework of some individuals, who seem to be genuinely religious, at a closer look, reveals some deep-rooted distortions, like self-righteousness or a fundamentalist attitude. Many of these people, however, may not be aware of the distortions involved, as they are either made to believe or brain-washed or indoctrinated that this, in fact, is the only genuine way of being religious. Religious motivation – being a

product of orienting human psychic energies in a particular direction due to the perspective that is adopted by an individual or a group – can be equally powerful whether animated by intrinsic or extrinsic orientation. Therefore, even if distorted and far removed from proper religiosity, individuals or groups either with vested interests or with fundamentalist attitudes (both adopting everything to manipulate the power of genuine religiosity) tend to *use* religion. In fact, misusing religion for perpetrating anti-religious causes seems to be commonly shared by many ‘adherents’ of different religions. A typical case in point is from the contemporary history itself: the claims and counterclaims of Osama bin Laden of Al Qaeda network and George W. Bush of USA and Tony Blair of UK. Referring to the dynamics of their tricky and malicious tendency to call upon religion for justifying whatever claims they make and the enormous number of crimes they commit, either for personal gain or glorification, or for the *cause* of the organisation/nation that they represent, Noam Chomsky puts it succinctly as follows:

An inauspicious sign is that in both cases the crimes are considered right and just, even noble, within the doctrinal framework of the perpetrators; and in fact are justified in almost the same words. Bin Laden proclaims that violence is justified in self-defense against the infidels who invaded and occupy Muslim lands and against the brutal and corrupt governments they sustain there – words that have considerable resonance in the region even among those who despise and fear him. Bush and Blair proclaim, in almost identical words, that violence is justified to drive evil from our lands. The proclamations of the antagonists are not entirely identical. When bin Laden speaks of “our lands,” he is referring to Muslim lands: Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Chechnya, Bosnia, Kashmir, and others... When Bush and Blair speak of “our lands” they are, in contrast, referring to the world. The distinction reflects the power that the adversaries command. That either side can speak without shame of eradicating evil in the light of their records – that should leave us open-mouthed in astonishment, unless we adopt the easy course of effacing even very recent history.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Noam Chomsky, *Pirates and Emperors, Old and New: International Terrorism in the Real World*, London: Pluto Press, 2002, 145-146. Power that is commanded by both political figures and religious readers tends to have more or less

There is no reason to single out these three figures, except for the international attention and extensive damage done by their policies and actions – whether they objectively qualify for international terrorism or not. There are many other situations, spread across the globe, which tend to be perpetrating the same type of manipulation of religious feelings and sensibilities for the ulterior motives of one or the other: highly tensed situations existing between Israel and Palestine in the Middle East, and between Hindus and Muslims in India, etc., tend to be following similar dynamics or patterns of religious psyche. Emotionally charged individual believers are manipulated to such an extent that they are ready to assume the garb of ‘martyrs’: the result is the rampant human bombs and suicide squads. Religious belief is deeply rooted in the personality of all such believers so much so that many willingly sacrifice their own lives, come what may. Is there any other urge in the life of ordinary human beings that is so powerful to move them into an altered psyche, and actions that no one would otherwise dare, even to the extent of self-sacrifice and extinction?

These conflicting faces of religious belief and action, seemingly the most powerful motive of the individual and collective psyche, tend to create an alarming situation in the contemporary societies – at the local and international scenes. Indeed, understanding the dynamics of human psyche as far as its religious feelings and influences are concerned is a vital issue that is yet to be mastered by scientists and psychologists. We do still lack proper scientific tools to measure and analyse one of the most promising areas of human behaviour that is motivated by an array of different religious phenomena. Hence, this issue of the *Journal of Dharma* makes an attempt to delve into the inner recesses of Psychology of Religion, with a hope of understanding the religious phenomena from different perspectives, and to reaffirm its effectiveness, if canalised through the proper routes and in the right direction.

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the same impact, especially when the political leaders also increasingly tend to call upon their religious affiliations as a vital source of power. Indeed, the ideal situation hopes that power is vested in both these groups for the good of the people (that is, to animate religious adherents or citizens in being and becoming good through right actions), although experience and reality, in most situations, are to the contrary. Chomsky writes in the same work: “It is only in folk-tales, children’s stories, and the journals of intellectual opinion that power is used wisely and well to destroy evil. The real world teaches very different lessons, and it takes willful ignorance to fail to perceive them” Chomsky, *Pirates and Emperors, Old and New*, 144.



In the first article, "Assault on Religion from Modern Behavioural and Natural Sciences," Jose Thadavanal, an educational psychologist, makes a critique on the attempts made by atheists and agnostic scientists in making use of new scientific discoveries and their fresh insights and facts to attack and destroy the credibility of religious faith. Highlighting the need of cultivating a positive outlook towards the scientific innovations as possible tools or occasions "to cleanse religions of their deadwood and apparent errors, if any," the author asserts that faith and science are complementary, and not contraries or contradictories, as both of them are genuine partners in the perennial search for truth. This, according to him, calls for a position that "with the passage of time human's understanding of the Divine and other spiritual realities must also evolve and grow; it must be dynamic rather than static."

Jose Nandhikkara, a Wittgensteinian scholar, addresses the question whether there could be a private religion, a religion devoid of language, rituals, priests, and church, or a religion essentially as "a matter between God and the believer only"? He holds that a *private* religion which is totally unintelligible to the other and restricted strictly to subjective experiences "would be so *private* that it is logically impossible for another person to follow." First, he argues negatively that "a radically *private* religion is without content; even the believer cannot practise it; it cannot have objectivity and normativity and, therefore, no use; it is a mere fantasy!" Positively, he argues that "though religion is a matter between God and the believer, it is a joint venture of nature and nurture sustained by God," a fundamental way of being human that essentially requires a passionate commitment.

In "Spiritual Wellbeing of Young Female Adults," Elizabeth C. S. presents a psychologists perspective on religious practices and their positively enhancing results, drawing on her research among college-going youngsters. Her contention is that religion, if practised wholeheartedly, can bring about holistic wellbeing of any person, covering a conglomeration of several human basic dimensions such as psychological, spiritual, social, and physical. Among these, however, the author insists that the spiritual health has a central place, as spirituality – with its basic orientation to an experience of God – provides an overarching umbrella to cover the entire gamut of human reality.

Religious fundamentalism has become one of the most difficult religious attitudes to handle. It has also turned out to be the most dangerous dimension of religion that poses pertinent challenge to the very

value of religion. Antony Puthenangady, an expert in clinical psychology, looks into the details of a fundamentalist religious attitude, and opines that “a mixture of religious bigotry and political opportunism” is the real factor that motivates destructive activities initiated by many religious fundamentalists. He rightly concludes that any fundamentalist attitude can be rooted out only in “experiencing of the peace and joy of oneness,” which includes also a “self-emptying journey” in the case of all religious believers.

The rest of the entries take up some particular issues related to religion in one or the other tradition. While Maheshvari Naidu makes an analysis of the religious consciousness of Indian settlers in South Africa, with special reference to Hindu women, Esmailpour adopts an Iranian outlook towards Manichaeism, and tries to see how they were mutually influential. Onimhawo, in his article “Role of Religion towards Peaceful Co-existence in Nigeria,” makes a critical examination on the role played by different Nigerian religions in establishing and maintaining peaceful co-existence among people of various religions and denominations. Finally, Ignatius Jesudasan undertakes an attempt to re-interpret the Adam myth from the Old Testament from a psychological perspective, proposing that this myth is not a story of the past, but should instil a personal sense in being and becoming human in the present.

Religion is a positive dimension of human existence, and it imparts meaning and direction in the life of many believers, individually and collectively. Psychology of Religion, as we have already seen, is a scientific discipline that approaches and analyses this religious reality from a critical and creative angle, so that it is purified and revitalised to appropriate the ideal that it represents. As history testifies, there would continue to be many unbecoming practices, vicious designs, and fundamentalist projects, politically motivated misuse of religious feelings, etc., under the pretext of religion. In fact, a scientific attitude adopted by psychology of religion, if not pushed to the extremes of annihilating the religious reality itself, would definitely keep the tracks clear for open-minded human beings and communities to integrate the depth dimension of human existence represented by religion, so that a holistic life could be realized.

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