

HOW DO CONTEMPORARY PSYCHOLOGISTS SEE RELIGION?

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1. Introduction

In presenting the views of contemporary psychologists on religion, several important factors need to be kept in mind.

1. The situation is very different from what it was a few decades ago. Earlier, what most of us heard about was Sigmund Freud's critique of religion (and the Christian philosopher's critique of Freud). Much water has flown under the bridge since then; there have been sweeping changes in the field of psychology, as well as dramatic shifts in the way believers understand religion and its relation to other fields of human inquiry. Changes in both fields have led also to important changes in how the interface between the two fields is seen¹

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¹ For a sample survey of developments in the field, see, for instance: S. Bruce Narramore, "Psychology and Theology: Twenty-five Years of Theoretical Integration," *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 25, 1 (Spring 1997), 6-10. I have written about the relationship between psychology and religion in: "Psychology and Religion: Allies, Rivals or Enemies?" in *Jnanodaya Journal of Philosophy*, IV (1994-95), pp.31-41.

2. In comparing the two fields, we must remember that "religion" and "psychology" are not two parallel areas of human life. Psychology is an academic discipline (with, no doubt, many applications in other areas of life, such as therapy, industrial relations, learning, etc.); religion is a blanket term indicating the way of life of individuals and communities, including doctrines, ethical codes, cultic practices, and community organization. It is far more than a field of study and research.²

3. Age-wise, too, the two fields are poles apart. Religion is as old as humankind. The major religions of the world have thousands of years of recorded history. Compared to this, psychology is a mere toddler. As a distinct academic discipline, it is a little over a century old. This is a very short span even within the academic community. Philosophy or literature or law can boast of much longer histories.³

4. There is no such thing as an answer to "What does contemporary psychology say about this point?". Psychology is vast field of research, with many subfields

² It is evidently beyond the scope of this paper to examine various definitions of religion, or to present even a thumb nail sketch of the world's major religious traditions. We shall take religion to mean the major religious traditions of the world, such as, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, etc. For reasons that will become clearer as we go along, the religion mostly referred to in this paper is Christianity.

³ The first psychological laboratory was opened in Leipzig in 1879 by William Wundt; the first psychological laboratory in the US was set up in 1883 by G. Stanley Hall; William James published his classic, *Principles of Psychology*, in 1890. These would be among the first events in the life of psychology as a separate academic discipline. See: Rita L. Atkinson and others, *Introduction to Psychology* (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1993), Appendix II.

and schools of thought which do not hold the same view on very important points. On the question of religion, as on most other central issues, psychologists hold very different positions.⁴

5. Religion, too, contains extraordinary diversity. In the World Conference on Religion held in Cochin in 1981, the delegates could not agree on a definition of religion, except that religion is whatever religious persons understand as religion. Even belief in God is not a universally accepted religious position; the Buddhists, for instance, reject this doctrine.

Add to this the irreducible variety among religions in doctrine, practice and priorities. What is normal in one religion is considered the height of irreverence in another (e.g., the use of idols); what one religion boasts of is seen as a weakness by another (e.g., having an identifiable historical person as founder); central themes are given very different interpretations (e.g., sin, salvation, incarnation).

So, too, each major religion exists as a mosaic of communities that differ in their interpretation of texts, practices and community organization. This fact is very evident not only in loosely organized religions like

⁴ "The word 'psychology' is used as a catch-all for studies in human behavior...If all the behavioral sciences were housed in a single building, with proportionate office space for the different schools of thought within each discipline, they would comprise the equivalent of a zoo...The average height and weight of all the creatures in the Bronx Zoo is senseless...Even more misleading and dangerous information follows the familiar words: 'Contemporary psychologists say...'" --Benedict J. Groeschel, *Spiritual Passages: The Psychology of Spiritual Development* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), p. 92.

Hinduism, but also in more structured religions like Christianity. A mainstream Catholic or Protestant holds very different views on the Bible and on salvation (and on the role of behavioral sciences) from, say, a Pentecostal Christian. There is no agreement on how far we can use, or be helped by, what is perceived as natural (as opposed to the supernatural).

Having made these introductory statements, let us move on to present the views of some of the leading contemporary psychologists on religion. Since most the dialogue (and mutual critique) has been between Western psychologists and the religion they were familiar with, namely, Christianity (or what is called the Judeo-Christian heritage), we need also to look at the situation in India. In the conclusion, we shall quickly summarize our findings.

II. Psychological Interpretations of Religion

One point that may surprise some theologians and religious philosophers must be stated at the outset. Religion is not a major area of interest in psychology. Many textbooks of psychology do not devote much attention to religious issues. In some cases, the attitude is one of suspicion and even hostility. As psychologist Robert McLeod writes, "one is inclined to judge the prevailing attitude of psychologists toward religion as one of wary detachment or mild hostility."⁵

⁵ R. B. MacLeod, "Experimental Psychology," in H. N. Fairchild et al., *Religious Perspectives in College Teaching* (New York: Ronald Press, 1952), p. 263, quoted in David M. Wulff, *Psychology of Religion: Classic and Contemporary Views* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1991), p. 33.

David Wulff, the author of an acclaimed textbook of psychology of religion, thinks that there is evidence of a genuine antagonism towards religion among typical psychologists. Quoting several studies, he comes to the conclusion that on both men's and women's Religious Activities scales, psychologists score among the lowest groups. This seems to be evident even during their student years. Trying to guess at the source of this negative attitude, Wulff mentions the following possible reasons: the influence of positivistic philosophy, and, even more importantly, the fundamentalist childhoods many psychologists have come from. One study shows that about one-third of the psychologists in some areas of specialization came from fundamentalist Protestant backgrounds. Wulff also quotes the reputed social scientist Robert Bellah's reference to "enlightenment fundamentalism," namely, the view that science and scholarship have disposed of religious beliefs, and that these have no place in the academic world.⁶

No wonder, then, religion is not a major concern of psychologists in general. But there have been influential contributions of psychologists about religion and its role in human life. The following is a bird's eye view of the principal protagonists.

1. William James:

William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*⁷ is a classic in the field, not only because it was one of the first studies on

⁶ Wulff, pp.35-36.

⁷ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Longmans, 1902). The book has had many editions.

religious experience by a psychologist, but also because of the author's approach. James was aware of the possibility of there being a healthy and a "sick" form of religion. He was convinced that there was something in human consciousness different from our particular sensations. Investigating religious experience (or what claimed to be that), James saw that an experience could have more than one type of explanation. Hence the need of research using empirical methods.

After analyzing religious experience, he came to the following conclusions:⁸

(1) Irrespective of whether the theories of religion are true or absurd, religious life is humankind's most important function, and a person's religion is the deepest and wisest thing in his/her life. It brings people a great sense of power.

(2) The personal value and intensity of religious experience will not convince others, but as thinkers we need to study this phenomenon.

(3) "An impartial study of religions might sift out from the 'midst of their discrepancies a common body of doctrine" (James, p.510).

(4) Religious experience gives people also a sense of there being something wrong with us and makes people want to reach out towards a higher reality.

(5) There is a struggle in human beings between a higher and a lower, between a better and a worse part.

⁸ For a summary, see: Peter A. Bertocci, "Psychological Interpretations of Religious Experience," in Merton Strommen (ed.), *Research on Religious Development* (New York: Hawthorne, 1971), pp. 7-10.

People seem to glimpse something they call their "real being."

Contact with this "higher" or "More" is what interested James.

To say more about this "higher" reality, psychology does not have the tools. We have to rely on our philosophical and theological tools.

2. Sigmund Freud:

Freud's critique of religion is among the best known to the students of philosophy and theology. It is important to make sure that we understand his position correctly, since parts of it are often misrepresented.⁹

⁹ The following summary is based mostly on John J. Heaney (ed.), *Psyche and Spirit: Readings in Psychology and Religion* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), pp.8-11. For a clear and critical presentation, see: Hans Küng, *Does God Exist? An Answer for Today* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), pp. 299-340. Freud expressed his views on religion in the following works: *The Future of an Illusion* in *Standard Edition*, vol. 21, 1961, pp.1-56 (First German edition 1927); *Civilization and Its Discontents*, *Ibid.*, pp. 57-145 (Original German edition 1930); *Moses and Monotheism: Three Essays*, *Ibid.*, vol. 23, 1964, pp. 7-137 (Original German edition 1939); *Totem and Taboo* (Original German edition 1939); *New Lectures on Psychoanalysis*. See: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (24 volumes). Translated from the German under the general editorship of J. Strachey. London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1953-74. For a brief biography and the complete list of Freud's writings, see: Vincent Brome, "Freud," in *The New Encyclopedia Britannica*. 15th edition (1985), vol. XIX, pp. 582-587.

a. *Freud's search for meaning*: Freud looked for (and found) meaning in every small detail of life (e.g., jokes, slips of the tongue), but not in the whole picture.

b. *The Oedipus Complex* is applied to explain the origin of religion.

c. "*Topographical model*" of the Psyche: Id, Ego, Superego.

Id: A mass of impulses, the id follows a pleasure principle.

Ego: Is in contact with reality, and follows the reality principle.

Superego: Society's moral prohibitions. Conscience, according to Freud, means internalized authority figures.

d. *Sublimation*: The reality principle often does not allow us to get the desired object. Hence Sublimation. Freud believed that much religious imagery showed a desire for sexual relationships.

e. *Stages in Development* : Freud held that both individuals and cultures developed through these stages:

(a) Narcissism (infancy or primitive cultures): belief in magic; belief in magical power over reality.

(b) 'Anaclitic' Stage: Dependence on external objects (Individuals in adolescence: on others; cultures: on God and religion). For Freud, this would correspond to the cultural stage of monotheism.)

(c) 'Genital' Stage (stage of object love): In individuals this is the stage of adult maturity; in cultures, instead, this is the stage of science and of reason. This stage is characterized by health.

f. *Response to powers of nature*: People feel frightened before the powers of nature. The possible reactions are the following: (a) Humanize Nature (imagine these powers to be like ourselves), then try to appease them or bribe them; (b) give them the characteristics of a father. So we create gods to: (1) exorcise our terror of nature; (2)

reconcile us to the cruelty of fate, especially death; (3) compensate us for the sufferings imposed by civilised life.

g. *Store of ideas to make our helplessness tolerable:*

- Life in this world serves a higher purpose, perfecting the spiritual part (soul).

- Everything is ordered by the Supreme Being for our good.

- Death is not extinction. It leads to a better life.

- In the end, good will be rewarded, and evil punished.

- God or the gods will see to all this.

- Thus our fears are allayed.

h. *Religion as Illusion:*

- Freud saw religion as an illusion. He did not say it is an error. The different is important. An illusion is derived from human wishes. Wish-fulfillment is a prominent part of religious faith. There is no verification. (An illusion need not be false!).

- Religious doctrines are illusions, because: (1) there is no proof for them, and they contradict what we know; (2) their reality value cannot be proved (or refuted).

i. *The Future:*

The future belongs to the *intellect*.

Aims: the same as what we expect from God, namely love of people and decrease of suffering. Our "God" logos will fulfill these wishes, but very gradually...

j. *The Path:*

On the way, our religious doctrines will have to be discarded. Clinging to the consolation of religion will not work. What remains will be *Reason* and *experience*.

k. *Conclusion:*

Freud did not teach atheism, nor disprove the truths of religion. He did not even say that religious ideas are errors. He called them "illusions", because he believed they were the fruits of human wishes rather than of rational inquiry.

He also considered religious practices as *neurotic*. He saw religious ritual as similar to the obsessional neurotic behaviour of patients (who did things for no apparent reason, without understanding the reason). "Illusion" and "neurosis" describe what Freud about the individuals religious beliefs and practices. This is called his *ontogenetic theory of religion*.

As for the origin of religion in society, he accepted the patricide theory of some anthropologists, without proving or disproving it (how the sons kill their tyrannical father and later, smitten by remorse, worship him). This is what is termed as his *Phylogenetic theory of religion*. He does not prove it.

1. Evaluation¹⁰

Freud's views on religion have been influential in our century, though the doctrine on religion is only a minor part of his work. His major influence lies elsewhere (above all in psychoanalysis).

A . His positive contributions include the following:

1. Critique of *immature religiosity* based on helplessness, regression, dependence and fear. Religion can be, and has been, used at times to keep people fearful, dependent and immature.
2. Critique of the *morality of the Superego*: Genuine morality cannot rest on others' threats and condemnation. It should flow out of reason and reality.
3. Critique of *religious practices without understanding*.
4. Raising the questions about *religion and science*.

¹⁰ Küng, pp. 299-340.

5. The role of the *psychological study* of religion: Many elements of religion can be studied by Psychology.

B. Limitations:

1. Freud was an atheist (unbeliever) before he developed psychoanalysis. Atheism was not something proved by psychoanalysis. In fact, Freud himself said that psychoanalysis does not lead to atheism.

2. Freud accepted the atheistic views of Feuerbach and his followers (the projection theory) and added a few psychological motives. Like their atheism, it is a hypothesis *without proof*.

3. The influence of psychological factors on religious belief *does not prove or disprove* the existence of God.

4. Religion can be a regression, an expression of immaturity, but *not necessarily*.

5. Freud has a faith - a faith in "science" as he understood it. He believed that science (reason) will one day answer our questions. Today's scientists themselves have no such belief. It is unscientific to put unquestioned faith in the unlimited ability of science.

6. Freud did not study the Bible in depth, nor did he examine the sophisticated writings of brilliant theologians.

7. There is no serious support among anthropologists for the patricide theory of the origin of religion (the killing and eating of the totem God).

"His critical writings on religion amount to a single plea for *honesty in dealing with religion*". (Kueng, p. 307).

3. G. W. Allport:¹¹

Allport looked at the positive and the negative impact of religion on its adherents. Quoting religious authority, people have been cruel, intolerant, narrow-minded and self-righteous; they have also been forgiving, generous, kind, humble and open. Hence, religions can be interpreted differently. Those who take it seriously, see in it a motivational source for being and doing good; the doubters see it as a sign of immaturity and weakness, tending to perpetuate both. As a psychologist, Allport is more interested in the psychological reality of religion than its truth claims. As he says in *Becoming*, "Religion, engaging as it does reason, faith and love, becomes for him morally true. Most religious people claim that it is also metaphysically true because they feel that outer revelation and mystical experience have brought them supernatural assurance." (p. 95)

As for the origins of religion, Allport's stand is miles away from Freud's: "The roots of religion are so numerous, the weight of their influence in individual lives so varied,

¹¹ Allport discussed religion and related issues in several books and articles. To list the main titles: *The Individual and His Religion: A Psychological Interpretation* (New York: Macmillan, 1950); *The Nature of Prejudice* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1954); *Becoming: Basic Considerations for a Psychology of Personality* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955); "The Religious Context of Prejudice," *The Graduate Journal* (University of Texas), 1966, 7, 115-130; *The Problem, the Mystery: Some Reflection on Theological Education*. Official Bulletin of the Episcopal Theological School, XIV, 1967; G.W. Allport and M. Ross, "Personal and Religious Orientation and Prejudice," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1967, 5, 432-443.

and the forms of rational interpretation so endless that uniformity of product is impossible."¹²

So, too, the particular forms taken by religion depend on so many factors that it is impossible to say whether reason or rationalization is at work.

What about the change religion brings about in a person? Allport speaks of intrinsic and extrinsic religious attitudes, depending on whether the religious factor is formative in shaping the inner core of the ego, or not. Most religious people, according to him, fall somewhere along the continuum. "The extrinsically motivated person," says Allport, *uses* his religion, whereas the intrinsically motivated person *lives* his...In theological terms, the extrinsic type turns to God, but without turning away from self."¹³

Because of this, "to know that a person is in some sense 'religious' is not as important as to know the role religion plays in the economy of his life." (Ibid., p. 442) Allport himself has influential studies on prejudice, and how extrinsic religion can be utilized to buttress one's prejudice and privileged status.

Allport is, therefore, neither against religion, nor in praise of all forms of religiosity. He held that the search for an adequate belief system must go on. Yet, "as a science, psychology can neither prove nor disprove religion's claims to truth. It can, however, help explain why these claims are so many and so diverse...The final truths of religion are unknown, but a psychology that impedes the understanding of religious potentialities of man scarcely

¹² Allport, *The Individual and...*, quoted in Bertocci, p. 29.

¹³ Allport & Ross, p. 434, quoted in Bertocci, p. 29.

deserves to be called the logos of the human psyche at all..."¹⁴

Allport also distinguishes between mystery (the primordial ground of all problem-solving) and problems. "Problems by definition are manageable; mysteries are not. The intellect stammers when it tackles true mysteries."¹⁵

Taking up the issue raised by Freud, Allport says, "On the basis of sheer probability we could say with Schopenhauer or Freud that hope is essentially an illusion. But hope springs eternal; it resists reduction to probability."¹⁶

4. Other Psychologists:

For the sake of brevity and convenience, we shall group together the following psychologists, who have written directly or indirectly about religion and its role in the lives of people

(1) Carl Gustav Jung is well-known for his study of archetypes and the impact of religion on the individual's life. He has influenced several branches of research, especially Transpersonal Psychology.¹⁷ It must be noted that Jung does not admit or deny the truth claims of religious doctrines. What matters for him is the "psychological truth" of a statement, that is, the part played by this belief in a person's life.

¹⁴ Allport, *Becoming...*, p.98.

¹⁵ Allport, *The Problem, the Mystery...*, p.16.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹⁷ Jung's major work in this area is: *Psychology and Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1938).

The following quote in some way summarizes Jung's stand: He ends his book with these words: "Nobody can know what the ultimate things are. We must, therefore, take them as we experience them. And if such an experience helps to make your life healthier, more beautiful, more complete and more satisfactory to yourself and to those you love, you may safely say: This was the grace of God."¹⁸

(2) Another writer whose ideas have influenced philosophers and psychologists of religion is *Rudolf Otto*. In his well-known work, *The Idea of the Holy*,¹⁹ Otto takes up the theme explored by James. Moving beyond Schleiermacher's thesis that religious experience is marked by a feeling of absolute dependence, he insists that this is qualitatively different from any other form of dependence. Otto stresses the idea that there must a nouminous object objectively given in consciousness. (This is pushing James's idea a step further.) According to him, religious consciousness cannot be reduced to other forms of awareness. "We are not to assume that we know what human nature is before we come to the religious experience."²⁰

(3) For *Erich Fromm*, what matters is to unfold the love we are capable of. "The mentally healthy person is the person who lives by love, reason, and faith, who reflects life, his own and that of his fellowman..."²¹ Even when he speaks of the love of God, Fromm makes it plain that he

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 114, quoted in Bertocci, p. 20.

¹⁹ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (German original: *Das Heilige*). Translated by J.W. Harvey (New York: Oxford University Press, 1923).

²⁰ Bertocci, p. 11.

²¹ Erich Fromm, *The Sane Society* (New York: Rinehart, 1955), pp. 203-204.

does not mean this in a theistic sense, but rather as an ultimate concern.

The following two citations help to make his positions clear:

"God is I, inasmuch as I am human... The truly religious person, if he follows the essence of his monotheistic idea, does not pray for anything, does not expect anything from God; he does not love God as a child loves his father or his mother; he has acquired the humility of sensing his limitations, to the degree of knowing that he knows nothing about God. God becomes to him a symbol in which man, at a particular stage of his evolution, has expressed the totality of that which man is striving for, the realm of the spiritual world, of love, truth and justice."²²

"There exists no spiritual realm outside of man or transcending him."²³

(4) We must mention another great psychologist who belongs to the psychoanalyst tradition, whose psychological studies of Luther and Mahatma Gandhi have become classics, and whose stage theory of human development has been among the most influential. I refer to *Erik Erikson*. Though Erikson's direct or central interest is not religion, his study on Luther²⁴ reveals a stand quite different from his mentor Freud's. Unlike Freud, Erikson takes Luther's faith seriously. He believes that religion need not be regression; that it can promote creativity.

²² Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (New York: Harper, 1956), pp. 70-71.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

²⁴ Erik Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History*. New York: Norton, 1958.

Erikson's theory of life stages has been extensively used by religious counsellors and spiritual guides. Though well-known and very influential, it need not be presented here, since it does not concern our topic directly.²⁵ From his study of life stages and of two well-known religious men, Erikson comes to conclusions very different from Freud. Religion, according to him, can be distorted to pathological uses, or be a vital force for maturity and social support.²⁶

(5) *Abraham Maslow* is another contemporary psychologist who writes explicitly about religion, and whose views have had great influence in counselling and religious circles. From being a militant atheist, Maslow became more and more attuned to the mystical dimension of life.²⁷ His study of self-actualizers has been both accepted by religious writers, as a useful indicator of personal growth and critiqued as a dangerous secular version of holiness. Maslow's work led to research on religion, peak experiences and the links between self-actualization and piety.²⁸

²⁵ Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: Norton, 1963); *Identity and the Life Cycle* (New York: International Universities Press, 1959); *Identity, Youth and Crisis* (New York: Norton, 1968); *The Life Cycle Completed* (New York: Norton, 1982).

²⁶ For a summary, see: David Wulff, *Psychology of Religion...*, pp.369-410.

²⁷ Abraham H. Maslow, *Religions, Values and Peak Experiences* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1964); *Towards a Psychology of Being* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1968); *Motivation and Personality* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970); *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature* (New York: Viking Press, 1971).

²⁸ To quote one study that may interest the ACPI participants: When the US Catholic Bishops commissioned a study of American Catholic priests, carried out by psychologists at

(6) Another major, pioneering study on a religious phenomenon that must be mentioned here is marine biologist *Alister Hardy's* study of religious experience. The centre he set up in Oxford has published several volumes on the findings on this on-going study. It is probably the world's largest study on religious experience.²⁹ According to the centre's findings, many more people than is usually believed seem to have had what they consider a religious experience, and such experiences cut across cultural, educational and age barriers; nor does the experience seem to be necessarily linked to church practice.

(7) Psychologists have studied a related phenomenon and compared it to the practice and effects of psychotherapy. I refer to *mysticism*. There are several studies on mystics by psychologists. This is understandable, since psychologists are not directly interested in the truth claims of religion (as philosophers are), but rather in the emotional spill-over of what is claimed to be an experience of God. The other reason for this interest is also understandable: How do we know whether what is claimed to be religious experience is actually such, or the symptom of neurotic or psychotic disorders?³⁰

Loyola University of Chicago, the Personal Orientation Inventory (measuring self-actualizing tendencies) was one of the four psychological tests used. See: Wulff, p. 609; Eugene C. Kennedy and V. J. Heckler, *The Catholic Priest in the United States: Psychological Investigations* (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 1972).

²⁹ For a description of the study, the methodology used and a summary of the main findings, see: Alister Hardy, *The Spiritual Nature of Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

³⁰ To quote but two studies: Arthur J. Deikman, *The Observing Self: Mysticism and Psychotherapy* (Boston:

(8) There are also highly acclaimed studies on religion and spirituality by reputed *psychiatrists*. They want to examine how religion, which is supposed to be a force for love, unity, healing and service, has also been used to promote hatred, division and destruction. These writings not only analyze this paradox, but also look for ways to direct the psychic energy of religions away from destruction to creative forms.³¹ One of the chilling documents examined by them is the *Malleus Maleficarum* (Witches' Hammer), an infamous manual for witch hunters allegedly inspired by a Papal bull, and reluctantly approved by the Faculty of Theology of the University of Cologne. The authors' hatred of women and the cruel tone of the document are frightening.³²

(9) Another group of psychologists/psychiatrists who interact with the world of religion studies the religious experience of ordinary people, as well as the incredible heroism of persons inspired by faith, which no amount of psychologizing can explain away. How to explain the height of commitment of a Bonhoeffer or Dorothy Day or of little Ruby (an African American child who met an abusive white mob with a smile)? This is the type of question that interests Harvard psychiatrist Robert Coles.³³

Beacon Press, 1982); William Ernest Hocking, "The Meaning of Mysticism as Seen through its Psychology," in Richard J. Woods (ed.), *Mysticism* (.....), pp. 223-239.

³¹ See, for instance: Paul Fleischman, *The Healing Spirit: Explorations in Religion and Psychotherapy* (New York: Paragon, 1990). Fleischman has also written on the therapeutic action of Vipassana meditation, a practice he himself is faithful to.

³² Wulff, *Psychology of Religion*, pp. 331-332.

³³ Robert Coles, *The Spiritual Life of Children* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1990); *The Harvard Diary*,....(in which he deplores the fact that people go to psychologists

(10) One more type of study undertaken by psychologists needs to be mentioned. In recent decades, there have been laboratory experiments to measure the emotional and physiological effects of religious/spiritual practices, such as, prayer, meditation, yoga and Zen. There have been many well-controlled studies on the physiological impact of Transcendental Meditation and of yoga. This happened after both these practices became popular in the West, particularly among young professionals.³⁴

(11) Except in the study of meditation just mentioned, the religion examined by psychologists is Christianity (or the Judeo-Christian tradition), for the obvious reason that most pioneers in psychology are Westerners, with the largest number being based in the United States. But there is also a growing body of psychological research on other religious traditions. The reasons are not far to seek: (1) the growing interest in the West in such practices as yoga, Vipassana, Zen and Transcendental Meditation; (2) the presence of new religious minorities in the United States and other Western countries.

Sudhir Kakar, an Indian psychoanalyst, has made a psychological study of India's healing traditions. He claims that what Westerners call therapy goes on in many Indian religious shrines and in centres run by religious healers.³⁵

and psychoanalysts to solve problems which these experts cannot solve; and invites the reader to be challenged by extraordinary human beings like Dietrich Bonhoeffer or Dorothy Day, in front of whom he feels humble).

³⁴ See David Wulff, *Psychology of Religion...*, pp. 172-194, for a summary presentation of current research.

³⁵ Sudhir Kakar, *Shamans, Mystics and Doctors: A Psychological Inquiry into India and Its Healing Traditions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1982).

In another study, he makes psychoanalytic reflections on religion and mysticism, using the famous life history of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa. In this book, he touches also on the relationship between sexuality and ecstatic mysticism³⁶

Others have compared Western psychology and India's ancient psycho-spiritual practices, such as yoga. There are also attempts to propose new paradigms in psychotherapy, integrating elements from Indian (and other Eastern) traditions.³⁷ In fact, some observers of the current scene think that there is greater interest in India's philosophical and religious traditions among Western psychologists than among Western theologians and philosophers. (I remember Father Bede Griffiths telling me this after one of his lecture tours in the United States.)

(12) Still another type of study carried out by psychologists will be encouraging for adherents of religion. The survey of psychological research between January 1991 and December 1996 includes several studies that highlight this finding: there is an inverse proportion between religious practice and psychotism. (In other words, there seems to be less mental illness among people who are

³⁶ Sudhir Kakar, *The Analyst and the Mystic: Psychoanalytic Reflections on Religion and Mysticism* (New Delhi: Viking, 1991).

³⁷ See, for instance: Swami Rama, Rudolph Ballentine & Swami Ajaya, *Yoga and Psychotherapy: the Evolution of Consciousness* (Honesdale, PA: The Himalayan International Institute, 1976); Swami Ajaya, *Psychotherapy East and West: A Unifying Paradigm* (Honesdale, PA: The Himalayan International Institute, 1983).

genuinely religious.) There is no evident correlation (or lack of it) with neurosis, however.³⁸

Conclusion:³⁹

As we can see even from this brief presentation, the scene is rich, complex and challenging. There is much scope for a mutually enriching dialogue that can clarify, critique, and lead to stronger collaboration. When religion, humankind's oldest and probably deepest concern, is willing to face the challenges and insights of one of the most influential academic fields today, the results can be expected to be rich and controversial, deep and provocative. Serious research shows that neither field has anything to fear from the other, but only from misconstructions of each other's nature and purpose. Much

³⁸ See, for instance: John Gartner, Dave B. Larson, George D. Allen, "Religious Commitment and Mental Health: A Review of Empirical Literature; Special Issue: Spirituality: Perspectives in Theory and Research," in *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 19, 1 (Spring 1991), 6-25; Lislle J. Francis et al., "Personality and Religion among Undergraduates in the United Kingdom, United States, Australia and Canada," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, 14, 3 (Fall 1995), 250-262.

³⁹ When I planned this paper, I thought I would present the psychologists' views in the first part, and then take up the following topics after that: the views on religious writers on psychology, the areas of collaboration between the two fields, and the areas of mutual critique. The many books, articles and journals devoted to the interface between psychology and religion is a striking sign of the times. Since the presentation of what psychologists say about religion has already taken up the space assigned to a paper, I shall stop here, and propose to do the rest of the intended research in another paper.

dialogue is already going on--in pastoral counselling, Christian formation, spirituality, personal development programmes, retreats, spiritual direction, community organization. When psychology and religion meet, there is always an understandable excitement in the air, since both fields touch us at our deepest core; but a sobering thought for Christian philosophers is that the meeting does not take place, as a rule, in the house of philosophy.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ I do not mean that philosophy is less relevant than either religion or psychology. What I want to say is: Most of the areas where psychology and religion meet (or challenge each other) do not regard the main issues philosophers normally discuss, such as, the theory of knowledge, the nature of reality, the existence of God, the validity of God-talk, the foundation of ethics, or the method of science. The main interlocutors in the religion-psychology dialogue are: Developmental, personality and clinical psychology, on the one hand, and religious doctrines and spiritual practices that seem to have a bearing in these areas.