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RELIGION, SPIRITUALITY, AND TRANSPERSONAL PSYCHOLOGY ¹

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The relationship between transpersonal psychology and religion recently became a matter of public debate when some transpersonal psychologists petitioned to become a division of the American Psychological Association. The existential psychiatrist, Rollo May, severely criticized the thrust of transpersonal psychology in statements that appeared in the American Psychological Association Monitor (1986, May) and elsewhere (1986, July/August; 1986). Transpersonal psychologists responded in detail to May's criticism that the transpersonal psychology movement is misguided in seeking to explore a dimension of being "which goes beyond humanness" (e.g., Letters, 1986; Hendlin, 1986; Valley, 1986; Walsh & Vaughan, 1987). May (1986), however, also raises a point about the relationship of transpersonal psychology to religion: "So far as the cosmos goes, psychology deals with that part of the cosmos that is human, and whatever goes beyond that is rightfully in the field of religion" (p. 88).

Furthermore, May (1986, May) argues: "I am convinced that a division of Transpersonal Psychology would radically confuse the areas of psychology and religion, and should be rejected by the Council of Representatives" (p. 2). ²

Contrary to May, however, transpersonal psychologists claim that transpersonal psychology has a different focus from the study of religion. Walsh and Vaughan (1987), for example, write that although transpersonal psychology and the psychology of religion have a common interest in transpersonal states, "transpersonal psychology is interested in these states wherever they occur, in psychological and scientific research and interpretations devoid of religious overlays....For these reasons, and more, the two should be regarded as distinct fields" (p. 5). Other transpersonal psychologists have also drawn a distinction between the two fields. ³

The confusing relationship between transpersonal psychology and religion becomes more understandable by considering certain attitudes towards religion commonly held by psychologists, psychiatrists, scientists, academicians, and the public in the United States. I would like to outline these attitudes, discuss how transpersonal psychology represents a response to them, and, finally, raise some issues associated with that response.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS RELIGION

According to a recent Gallup survey, the number of Americans who do not belong to a church or synagogue or attend only on infrequent, special occasions, is up from 61 million in 1978 to 78 million at present (Psychology Today, 1988, p. 6). A substantial part of American society therefore chooses to distance itself, at least publicly, from traditional and institutional religious involvement. This distancing attitude may reflect rebellion, disenchantment, ambivalence, resistance, or political, scientific, and intellectual deportment.

Seeking to distance oneself from religion has been further abetted by prevailing attitudes in Western psychiatry and psychology. Heisig (1987) states: "The psychology of religion has never been without those proclaiming a sweeping censure of religion as damaging to mental health and full human development" (p. 64). Freud, for example, believed that religion was an illusion (Clifford, 1987). In Moses and Monotheism, Freud declared: "Religious

experience can be accounted for by the same means as neurotic processes" (in Ornstein, 1976, p. 41). And until recently, Western psychiatry has made little distinction between mystical and psychotic states of consciousness (Deikman, 1977; Grof, 1987; Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry, 1977; Walsh & Shapiro, 1983, p. 6). Gerald May (1987) notes that in surveys conducted over the past decade, although 90% of the American population profess a belief in God, the percentage drops to 43% of the American Psychiatric Association, and 5% of the American Psychological Association (p. 5).

A s C a m p b e l l a n d M c M a h o n p o i n t o u t (1 9 7 4) :

It appears today that some psychologists are still influenced by preconceived notions and prejudices concerning what have been called transcendent or religious-type experiences--most often because of the traditional religious connotations associated with such phenomena. Unfortunately, such prejudicial attitudes can diminish openness and lead them to repress, deny, or in some other way block their personal development of "second tendency" or transpersonal experiences (p. 13).

In addition, American psychology continues to take an overly defensive stance in asserting itself as a science modeled on the reductive, natural sciences of the late 19th century. Contemporary introductory psychology textbooks continue to call attention to psychology "as a science," a claim that would be quaint in a modern textbook of physics, chemistry, or biology. Thus, as Shafranske states: "In its urgency to dissociate itself from philosophy, to earn its credentials and respectability as an empirical science as opposed to a speculative discipline, the dimension of spirituality was ushered outside of the legitimate purview of psychology" (in Cunningham, 1983, p. 21).

Psychology's dissociation from philosophy and religion has also inhibited the recognition of Asian psychologies (Shapiro, 1986) and undoubtedly, the transpersonal psychology movement as well.

Finally, historically, an ambivalent attitude toward religion exists in the cultural and political life of the United States. While officially a doctrine of separation (distancing) of church and state exists, in many circumstances the boundary is unclear or outrightly trespassed. A recent cover story in Time magazine, entitled "America's Holy War," enumerates some of the more conspicuous examples:

To say that God is everywhere in American life is as much a statement of fact as of faith. His name appears on every coin, on every dollar bill and in the vast majority of state constitutions. Schoolchildren pledge allegiance to one nation, under him. The President of the United States ends his speeches with a benediction. God bless America. (Gibbs, 1991, p. 61).

SEEKING GREATER MEANING IN LIFE

Despite the distancing attitude held by many people towards religion, as Walsh and Shapiro (1983) point out, a quest for greater meaning to life in some larger dimension also exists:^{4,5}

Yet almost all of us have had some experience of this same pull, this same desire and curiosity to know and be all that we might become. Who among us has not puzzled over perennial questions such as, Who am I? What am I? Is this all there is to me--to life? and How do I fit into it all?(p. 4).

In his book, Religion, Values, and Peak-Experiences, Maslow (1976) points out that while the sophisticated scientist must disagree with the answers given by organized religion to many religious questions, "The religious questions themselves--and religious quests, the religious yearnings, the religious needs themselves--are perfectly respectable scientifically, that they are

rooted deep in human nature...." (p. 18). Nevertheless, Maslow also pointed out a dilemma for many intellectuals seeking a larger meaning to life:

Thus we have the peculiar situation in which many intellectuals today find themselves skeptical in every sense, but fully aware of the yearning for a faith or a belief of some kind and aware also of the terrible spiritual (and political) consequences when this yearning has no satisfaction. (1976, p. 38).

With respect to the general public, in a survey originally reported in the New York Times, Greely and McReady (1979) found that 40% of the 1,500 Americans randomly sampled reported at least one mystical experience. Moreover, despite the commonness of the experience, because of fearfulness, "virtually all of the respondents had never spoken about their experiences to anyone--spouse, friends, family, clergyman" (p. 181). A more recent survey (Greely, 1988) indicates that even higher percentages of Americans now report having mystical experiences.

TRANSPERSONAL PSYCHOLOGY: A RESOLUTION

Into this fertile arena--a distancing from traditional religion coupled with unmet existential needs for a greater sense of meaning--transpersonal psychology has emerged as an alternative framework for recognizing, legitimizing, and exploring a deeper and more fulfilling dimension of existence. The path of transpersonal psychology is also appealing because it provides a framework which is less likely to arouse various forms of resistance to traditional religious forms and practice. Allan (1987/1988), for example, states: "For many the Transpersonal Movement has allowed people to explore spirituality without which there would have been perhaps many orthodox barriers to that exploration" (p. v). Similarly, Frager (1983) states:

No psychology of human nature can leave out those central, spiritual aspects. The problem is, as Maslow wrote years ago, the words we have pertaining to the spiritual (even the word spiritual itself) are heavily loaded with Western religious connotations. It seems to me that one critical task for transpersonal psychology is to develop a new, scientific vocabulary for this field, beginning with a clear definition (p. 1).

The original statement of purpose of the Journal of Transpersonal Psychology concluded with the following qualification about the relationship between transpersonal psychology and religion:

As a statement of purpose, this formulation is to be understood as subject to optional individual or group interpretation, either wholly or in part with regard to the acceptance of its contents as essentially naturalistic, theistic, supernaturalistic, or any other designated classification. (Journal of Transpersonal Psychology, 1969, p. i).

The transpersonal psychology movement has also more generally rendered the exploration of religious experience more open and palatable by: (a) emphasizing the term "spiritual" in place of "religious"; (b) universalizing the transpersonal experience; and, (c) adapting approaches from Eastern religions.

SPIRITUAL PSYCHOLOGY

The term "religious" has been frequently replaced in the transpersonal psychology literature by the presumably more expansive concept of "spiritual" (which, for some, may also have a less pejorative meaning.) Vaughan (1982), for example, writes: "transpersonal psychology has attempted to expand the field of psychological inquiry to include transpersonal experiences

and their relationship to the spiritual dimension of our lives" (p. 39). And Grof (1987/1988) states: "The transpersonal world-view has reintroduced spirituality into modern thinking as an important dimension of existence" (p. 204).

In her content analysis of the scope and territory of transpersonal psychology, Boucouvalas (1980) mentions the attempt to expand traditional psychology "to study the whole person, including 'spiritual' potentialities and self-transcendent growth beyond one's own ego" (p. 41). Hutchins (1987) outlines 10 ways to explain transpersonal psychology and concludes with the statement: "The simplest definition and perhaps the one I use the most is that transpersonal psychology is spiritual psychology" (p. 12).

UNIVERSAL PERSPECTIVES

By expanding the framework of religious experience from particular theological moorings into a broader, more universal experience, and by shedding details of the forms and practices of specific religions, transpersonal psychology has developed a largely a-theological perspective which is more inviting to some people. The turn toward universals has taken such forms as focusing upon a universal order of existence, postulating universal states of consciousness for religious or spiritual experiences, and emphasizing some universal transpersonal end-state or enlightenment common to different paths.

One way in which transpersonal psychology has been universalized has been to characterize the transpersonal dimension as one in which we sense our being as a part of the universe at large. Thus, Bruck (1987) writes: "So what defines me as a transpersonal psychologist is that I start from a fundamental philosophical position of believing that there is an essential interconnectedness between us and that which is beyond us: (p. 5). Similarly, Welwood (1979) remarks: "Western psychology has traditionally taken as its subject matter the separate individual...not pursued the full implications of viewing the individual as inseparable from the world as a whole or the organism and environment as mutually 'interinclusive'" (. 32).

Bohm's implicate/explicate model (e.g., Welwood, 1979) and the Gaia hypothesis (e.g., Amidon & Roberts, 1987) are also sometimes used to support the transpersonal perspective of interconnectiveness.

Finally, there is a universalist, transpersonal perspective which emphasizes a core mystical experience common to all religions, although surface manifestations may differ. Vaughan (1982), for example, states that the transpersonal perspective "...recognizes the transcendental unity of all religions and sees the unity in the mystical core of every spiritual tradition" (p. 37). Another expression of the universalist perspective is that there is some basic, underlying state of enlightenment variously called original mind, no-mind, natural mind, etc.

MASLOW AND RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES

Abraham Maslow's theory of peak-experiences is still another example of the psychological universalization of religious experience. In his personal life, Maslow sought for a way to explore religious or mystical experience outside of any traditional theistic framework. Although Maslow "became a confirmed atheist early in his life and remained one throughout, he believed it is possible to have a mystical experience and yet remain ideologically pure--that is innocent of theistic superstitions" (Lowry, 1973, p. 14, also see chapters 1 and 5; Hoffman, 1988, e.g., pp. 2-3, 10-11,20). Maslow's theory of peak-experiences eventually became the vehicle for this ideal, for he came to believe that "the core elements of the peak experience are common to both religious experiences and those creative, self-expanding experiences that occur in art, love, and therapy" (Schmidt, 1980, p. 8). As Maslow himself expressed it in his book Religion, Values, and Peak-Experiences (1976):

It has been demonstrated again and again that the transcendent experiences

have occurred to some people in any culture and at any time and of any religion and in any caste or class. All these experiences are described in about the same general way; the language and the concrete contents may be different, indeed must be different....I have, therefore, paid no attention to these localisms since they cancel one another out. I take the generalized peak-experience to be that which is common to all places and times. (p. 72, p. 74)

In a discussion of the characteristics of transcending and non-transcending self-actualizers, Maslow (1969b) is explicit about how peak experiences afford a different, less objectionable, universal framework for religious experience: "Peak experiences and other transcendent experiences are in effect also to be seen as 'religious or spiritual' experiences if only we redefine these terms to exclude their historical, conventional, superstitious, institutional accretions of meaning" (p. 43).

SPIRITUALIZATION OF ALL LIFE

Another way in which Maslow and others have universalized religious experience is by advocating the sacralization of all life:

If you focus (as I have) upon the peak-experience to have almost all the characteristics traditionally attributed to universal religious experience, not having to do necessarily with one creed or another, or one place or another, one can then talk of the religionizing or the sacralizing of all of life. (Maslow, 1969a, p. 8)

The phrase "sacralization of everyday life" was also incorporated into the original statement of purpose of the Journal of Transpersonal Psychology (1969; also see Maslow 1969b; Maslow, in Krippner, 1972; Sutich, 1976; Vich, 1986).

TURNING TO THE EAST

The turn towards Eastern religions, a strong component of the transpersonal psychology movement, may also reflect, in part, the esotericism and distance they afford to counter resistance to traditional forms of Western religion and practice. However, religions in the East, as in the West, historically have evolved into institutions and organizations which may or may not preserve a critical emphasis on actual religious experience. Western adaptations of Eastern religions have tended to be highly selective in minimizing the original religious contexts and in emphasizing the experiential and psychological components of the adopted religious practices.

ISSUES IN THE TRANSPERSONAL PSYCHOLOGY RESOLUTION

The preceding sections outline how transpersonal psychology has contributed to the acceptability and legitimacy of religious experience by substituting the term "spiritual" for "religious," by focusing on some universal psychological state of spiritual consciousness, and by adapting practices from Eastern religions. There are also some issues that can be raised regarding the way transpersonal psychology has seen fit to accommodate religious experience.

(a) Although some transpersonal psychologists have adopted the term "spiritual," others have argued that spiritual levels of consciousness are hierarchically above transpersonal ones (Kelly, 1988; Meadow et al., 1979). Even so, if we regard transpersonal psychology as being dedicated to exploring all higher states of consciousness (Harari, 1986; Meadow et al., 1979), the study of spiritual realms would certainly be included. Within the field of transpersonal psychotherapy, there is also a lack of agreement about the extent to which transpersonal and spiritual states of consciousness overlap, as well as the relationship between

spiritual teachers and transpersonal therapists.

(b) Concerning the various approaches which emphasize universal aspects of spiritual states, scholars and enlightened spiritual teachers are by no means agreed that the enlightenment state is a psychologically neutral one, uncolored by the particular paths used to achieve such states (e.g., Aitken, 1986; Enomiya-Lasalle, 1984/1985; Gimello, 1983; Jones, 1984; Katz, 1978; McNeill, 1985; Rothberg, 1986; Shapiro & Castillo, 1986/1987).

(c) Because Eastern religions are developed in different cultural settings and in particular religious contexts, the adaptation process by Westerners may be problematical. Ornstein (1976, September) characterizes this situation as the "problem of the container vs. the contents." On one hand, Western adaptations of Eastern religions, which lift them out of their original contexts, may dilute their meaning, effectiveness, and ethical safeguards. On the other hand, appropriate adaptations may lead to increased effectiveness by removing institutionalized encrustment, and by applying modern scientific and technological knowledge.

(d) Contemporary scholarship in the field of religious studies often reflects broader definitions and characterizations of religion than in the past. Thus, the following examples of definitions of religion might well find acceptance by transpersonal psychologists: (1) "Religion is a means of ultimate transformation" (Streng, 1976, p. 7); (2) "Religion is human involvement with sacred sanction, vitality, significance, and value" (Nielson, Jr., Hein, Reynolds, Miller, Karff, Cochran, & McLean, 1983, p. 7); (3) "Religion is the varied symbolic expression of, and appropriate response to, that which people deliberately affirm as being of unrestricted value to them" (Cavanagh, 1978, p. 286); (4) "Religion is a system of significance that provides humans with a way of getting a handle on what is ultimately real" (Schmidt, 1980, p. 18).

Scholars in religious studies have also pointed out that "the very attempt to define religion, to find some distinct or possible unique essence or set of qualities that distinguishes the 'religious' from the remainder of human life, is primarily a Western concern" (King, 1987, p. 282).

CONCLUSIONS

Rollo May has argued that sanctioning a division of transpersonal psychology in the American Psychological Association will necessarily confuse the areas of psychology and religion. His position becomes more understandable from a broader consideration of resistance towards traditional religion in American society. Such resistance can lead to various forms of distancing oneself, at least publicly, from an association with religion. But despite such a tendency, concerns about the larger meaning of life continue--concerns previously more often resolvable within traditional religious contexts. The role of religion in American society is confusing: politically, intellectually, and existentially. Rather than adding to the confusion between religion and psychology, however, transpersonal psychology affords a way out of the confusion by offering an alternative, more open framework for the exploration of the spiritual dimension, and one which may arouse less resistance. Transpersonal psychology therefore represents an important vehicle for restoring legitimacy to the quest for a greater meaning to life within a spiritual dimension.

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FOOTNOTES

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². An author for the Encyclopedia of Psychology (1984) goes so far as to claim that transpersonal psychology itself may be a new religion: "In transpersonal psychology the humanistic movement finally cast anchor from its founders' aspiration for a humanistic psychological science. Without apostolic authority, it seemed to be setting itself up as a latter-day religion" (Smith, Vol. 2, p. 157). Vich (1986), the current editor of the Journal of Transpersonal Psychology, refutes such a characterization: "Transpersonal psychology is not a religion; it has no dogma, no list of precepts, no theology, and no church" (p. 7).

³. The following are some other examples: (a) "Transpersonal experiences are not simply 'religious,' and many transpersonalists are atheists (as Maslow was), or are not concerned with religious issues as usually defined" (Koltko, 1986, p. 2); (b) "The field was established to investigate experiences of transcendence occurring in a predominately secular society, outside formal religious contexts" (Vaughan, 1986, p. 2); (c) "I have found that people appreciate the opportunity to examine their peak experiences and questions about ultimate meaning, transcendence, etc., in a non-religious and non-dogmatic context characterized by sophisticated psychological theory and an orientation to empirical data" (Davis, 1986, p. 2); (d) Transpersonal psychology includes experiences which "have usually been defined in biased language by various religions and theologies, and that a major task of transpersonal psychology is to bring these ideas into psychological language and a scientific framework" (Transpersonal Psychology Interest Group, 1982, p. 1).

⁴. Some well-known scientists have also called attention to the quest for a larger dimension of meaning in life, for example: (a) "What is the meaning of human life, or of organic life altogether? To answer this question at all implies a religion" (Albert Einstein, 1949, p. 1); (b) "most painful is the absolute silence of all our scientific investigations towards our questions concerning the meaning and scope of the whole display (Erwin Schrodinger, in Deikman, 1983, p. 174).

⁵. This quest also seems to increase with age. Perhaps as members of the humanistic psychology movement grew older, their own existential search for a greater meaning in life helped give birth to the transpersonal psychology movement.

