Religious Experience and Benevolent Neutrality: A Critical and Pastoral Reading on Psychology of Religion

Dr. Jijo James Indiparambil  
Sanjo College of Management and Advanced Studies (SCMAS)  
Rajakkad P.O. Idukki, Kerala, India

Abstract

This research is an attempt to explore how modern people approach differently to the phenomenon of religion, especially through science, which has not yet adequately mapped in the scientific scholarships. Among the various scientific approaches such as anthropology of religion, economics of religion, geography of religion, sociology of religion, etc., the contemporary literature on both psychology and religion proves that human psychology also does a vital role to explain religion. Analysing Freudian ‘Therapeutic Neutrality’ in terms of ‘Benevolent Neutrality’ this paper tries to give a critical and pastoral comment on Psychology of Religion, as both religion and psychology are in search of potential sources of human well-being.

Key words: Psychology of religion, benevolent neutrality, science and religion, wish-fulfilment, mental health

Introduction

As human we feel that there is a divine dimension, positively addressed higher mechanism beyond human grasp, at work in the world. This type of understanding could be primarily absorbed from the document Nostra Aetate (NA 1965), the Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions of the Second Vatican Council that mainly focuses on the relation of the axial religions of the world in leading the faithful to God experience. There we read that “humans are religious beings animated by a divine dynamism that is in-built in them and their world. They follow the path of religion, namely, through the world of concerns to the universe of faith in order to discover there a world of meaning” (NA 1, 2). We respond, knowingly or unknowingly, to this scenario individually in our lives. Religion, for me, is a collective response to this divine dimension, when people from similar experience and beliefs come together and respond to it as a community.

Hence, religion could be explained as way of life, speaks of beliefs, customs and morals, norms for right living and believing. According to Paul Connelly (2013), “religion originates in an attempt to represent an order beliefs, feeling, imaginings and actions that arise in response to direct experience of the sacred and the spiritual. As this attempt expands in its formulation and elaboration, it becomes a process that creates meaning for itself on a sustaining basis, in terms of both its originating experiences and its own continuing responses.” Modern people approach differently to this phenomenon and one of these ways to draw near religion is through science.

Thus, today, we have anthropology of religion, economics of religion, geography of religion, sociology of religion, psychology of religion, and so on. Contemporary literature on both psychology and religion proves that human
psychology also does a vital role to explain religion. Religion provides answers in the line of right or wrong. But Psychology provides explanatory answers. Psychology has been patiently listening to religion too. Thus lot of interaction is taking place. Every problem has to be seen in multiple context and psychology and religion both can provide answers for the problems. In other words, psychology of religion tells us what role religion plays in the concrete daily life of people. For the purpose of this paper, we analyse Freudian ‘Therapeutic Neutrality’ in terms of ‘Benevolent Neutrality’ and tries to give a critical and pastoral comment on them.

Religion and Religious Experience

Religion from its Latin religionem (nominative religio) means “respect and reverence for what is sacred,” and a bond between man and a higher reality. It is generally seen as an organized collection of beliefs, cultural systems, and different worldviews that relate humanity by which an order of existence is created and fostered. According to T. Jeremy Gunn there are three principal theories or ways to approach religion, namely: “First, religion in its metaphysical or theological sense (e.g., the understanding truth of the existence of God, the dharma, etc); second, religion as it is psychologically experienced by people (e.g., the feelings of the religious believer about divinity or ultimate concerns, the holy, etc); and third, religion as a cultural or social force (e.g., symbolism that binds a community together or separates it from other communities” (Gunn 2003, 193-194).

Religion is generally approached within this, either one or more combined, forms of theories. In order to better understand religion in psychological perspectives three facets are of particular importance, as we read in the writings of Jeremy Gunn (Gunn 2003). He explains them namely religion as belief, religion as identity, and religion as way of life. For instance, “Religion as belief pertains to the convictions that people hold regarding such matters as God, truth, or doctrines of faith. Belief religion may emphasize, for example, adherence to doctrines such as the Nicene Creed, the transmigration of souls, karma, dharma, the wisdom of the Lotus Sutra, the five pillars of Islam, or the syncretist message that many religious doctrines reveal an underlying reality. [...] Religion as identity emphasizes affiliation with a group. [Here], religion is experienced as something akin to family, ethnicity, race, or nationality. [...] Religion as way of life is analytically distinct from the previous two but is likely to be tied to one of them in the mind of the religious person, is religion as a way of life. [...] Here, religion is associated with actions, rituals, customs, and traditions that may distinguish the believer from adherents of other religions” (Gunn 2003, 200-204).

In nutshell, in search of meaning and fulfilment of life the human beings generally base themselves on their encounter with the divine which leads them to the path of religion. It is a collection or collective form of the similar personal experiences of the people. Hence, the actual encounter with the divine is what we call religious experience. Therefore, two sides of religion, as it is debated as cultural phenomenon and personal experience (Corveleyn & Luyten 2005), for me, are not distinct but a complementary reality which is always developed through the reciprocity of mutual sharing and receptivity. For, when we analyse religion, the personal and the psychological functioning of the individual on the one hand and its socio-cultural processes and effects on the other, are both related to and aims at, in a complementary way, the same experience and reality. However, Psychology of
Religion teaches that religion has obvious psychological functions such as it takes care of the need for a comforting parent figure, the need to explain difficult things, the need to fight depression, the need to deny mortality, etc. (Dow 2007). It also tells us how and why people do religious things and how religion works in the mind, and so forth.

Therefore, religion, which is a “system of symbols that acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations,” also refers to both the organized forms of beliefs and a personal lived experience by some theological principles with psychological and social influences (Corveleyn & Luyten 2005). Taking the account of personal religion and religion as cultural phenomenon, Sigmund Freud with a specific focus on latter approach tries to understand and explain what religion is in his particular psychoanalytic perspectives. He was very much interested in explaining the origin and development of religion as such, and today, after him, there is a growing attention within psychoanalysis is given for personal religion (Corveleyn & Luyten 2005). Here, in this pattern of discussion, we also find a comprehensive theoretical approach to the psychology of religion as well. Nevertheless, Freud is often being criticised of his negative attitude towards religion which was not the case as many of his later writings show. Hence, let us now critically analyse his understanding of religion with a special focus on the idea of ‘benevolent neutrality’

Religion as Wish-Fulfilment

Paloutzian and Park writes in “Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality” that “because opinions about religion are often stated as generalities, it is easy to forget that religion is not one thing but is instead a multidimensional variable that is among the most complex properties of the human mind” (Paloutzian & Park 2005). Religion is viewed and explained, thus, in different dimensionalities and perspectives. However, for the purpose of this paper, if I could summarize, what I understand Freud to be saying about religious belief, is that, religion is human construction, a semi-conscious creation, just like neurosis, designed to alleviate anxiety and recapture security, and it is an illusion which is only a psychic inventory and is insusceptible of proof. These ideas are expressed in several of Freud’s writings, such as The Future of Illusion (the word illusion in the title denotes religious belief itself), where he explains religion comparing to a childhood neurosis; Moses and Monotheism, where religion is seen as parallel to the neurosis which the civilized individual must pass through on his way from childhood to maturity; and, New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis, where he explains that “religion is an illusion and it derives its strength from the fact that it falls in with our instinctual desires” (Freud 1995 [1936]).

For Freud, religion meets our worries and satisfies our desires, that: “the benevolent rule of a divine Providence allays our fear of the dangers of life; the establishment of a moral world-order ensures the fulfilment of the demands of justice, which have so often remained unfulfilled in human civilization; and the prolongation of earthly existence in a future life provides the local and temporal framework in which these wish-fulfilments shall take place” (Freud 1961, 38).
The emergence of religious beliefs as the wish-fulfilment (of desires), as I think when I leave aside its critical nuances, is also a powerful illustration of the origin of religion. Though Freudian understanding of Religion is generally viewed to be actively hostile and simply anti-religious and he himself is perceived as atheist, present scholarship view it as a misrepresentation of his idea particularly basing on his teaching on therapeutic neutrality (Corveleyn 2000). Corveleyn and Luyten write that, although, for Freud, “psychoanalysis always should be, both as a science and as a method of treatment, neutral toward religion,” [...] it would also be incorrect to reduce Freud’s approach to religion to one completely biased by a rationalistic ideology” (Corveleyn & Luyten 2005, 83).

We analyse now this idea of neutrality critically and theologically.

**Benevolent Neutrality**

The expression ‘benevolent neutrality’ is coined by Edmund Bergler at the Symposium on the Theory of the Therapeutic Results of Psycho-Analysis in 1937. Over time, the term neutrality was interpreted in two ways that on the one hand, some analysts adopted an excessively cold and indifferent, even amoral, attitude to the things, and on the other hand, as it is suggested b Kernberg, like ‘technical neutrality’ that distinguishes between a ‘lack of spontaneity and natural warmth’ and an authentic concern for the patients that protects their autonomy, independence and capacity to accomplish their work on their own’ (Kernberg 1976). This term benevolent neutrality characterizes the counter-transference attitude that the psychoanalyst is supposed to adopt throughout the psychoanalytic treatment. Though Freud did not use the phrase benevolent neutrality as such, the climate of abstinence that he stresses in his psychoanalytic treatment makes this idea very evident. A re-reading of Freud’s therapeutic neutrality shows clearly that “this neutrality is not indifference; it is a sympathy-based attitude toward the patient, [which] has the intention of leaving to the patient as much freedom as possible to (re)discover for himself or herself personal standpoints concerning the really important things in life” (Corveleyn 2000, 344). In this way, Corveleyn and Luyten observe that although Freud seems to be an atheist, “and his theoretical writings describe religion as an illusion, in his clinical writings he actively promoted benevolent neutrality toward religious issues” (Corveleyn & Luyten 2005, 93).

In therapeutic relationship, though ‘neutrality’ stresses strict ‘impersonality,’ as Freud would see, like “being a perfect mirror,” the therapist must also “try to do something human for the patient based on real sympathy, which in turn implies “neutrality toward the content and sympathy and compassion for the patient” (Corveleyn & Luyten 2005, 94). This thinking is, in fact, very much applicable to religion and spirituality as well. For psychoanalysis demolishes all the imaginary illusions including one’s illusory religious beliefs. It shows that when religious beliefs become illusory, it should be cured for further personal development. Examples for the illusory religious behaviours could be eccentric religious attitudes; exceptional religious behaviours; and, extraordinary attachment towards it that we see in and around us. In the same way the expression of solitary religious experience of a person is often a testimonial for others to have and understand this same experience in a similar manner. But when one is involved too deeply, in an extra-ordinary way, within this experience, it may turn into torments. For instance, when dreams and promises deeply believed and awaited voyages too intensely, it may turn to the dramatic events of possessions, apparitions, dream visions and similar experiences. Therefore, we should resist this temptation to
dwell on what is extravagant (Beit-Hallahmi & Argyle 1997). These things could be seen in the outward expression of their impulses that cannot be conformed to societal norms.

Freud writes that, “in itself psycho-analysis is neither religious nor non-religious, but an impartial tool which both priest and layman can use in the service of the sufferer” (Corveleyn 2000, 347-348). This neutral position, in fact, creates greater freedom that leads to further personal development, which in turn, either fosters the development of a personal religious experience or frees oneself from oppressing religious practices. Though psychology directly aims at the psychological factors of the person, it also generally account for the factors that determines humanity, and this is the particular concern of religion as well, and we see here, not contradicting but complementary attitude that incorporate both psychology and religion in the same axis. This sympathetic neutrality of the therapeutic commitment is termed ‘benevolent neutrality’ when it is in the religious representations and it even characterises the working relations in the therapy.

Therefore, benevolent neutrality is not passivity but stimulates the freedom of the person, and I fully agree with Corveleyn who says that “when the client is hesitant to mention belief of unbelief, the therapist may not remain indifferent of passive; rather, he or she must actively stimulate the client to overcome his or her resistance and shame in relation to the spiritual or religious domain” (Corveleyn 2000, 350). This interpretation of the concept of benevolent neutrality in relation to religion and spirituality could also lead to the relationship of religiosity and spirituality with mental health.

Religion and Mental Health

There is always a correlation between religious involvement and mental and physical health. Persons who are religious have positive effects and they have high self-esteem, are less depressed, and have longer life. People somehow tend to think that religion causes mental illness, which is not always the case. As Shafranske rightly points out that the religious commitment somehow is associated with mental health by reducing risk factors, enhancing positive emotions that “transform individuals for better, helping them to be more resilient, more creative, and wise, more virtuous, and more socially integrated” (Shafranske 2005, 496). Humans are both physical as well as spiritual. Hence, there is a great urge for spirituality today and healing/health/religion was always part of human life. Moreover, religion or spirituality serves as “the overarching framework for living, [...] and as the ‘ultimate value base’ upon which personal goals are established and resources for well-being and psychological coping are found” (Shafranske 2005, 497). A deep analysis of this correlation would also unravel the profound inclination of religious variables and mental health outcomes to each other over the life course, on depressive expression, death anxiety, general anxiety disorders, and overall distress (Miller & Kelley 2005).

Factors such as identity constituents, motivation, prayer or ritual practice, social support, some type of personal devotion or feeling of closeness to the divine, and intensity of belief can influence mental health (Miller & Kelley 2005). This religious orientation can be both extrinsic and intrinsic. Extrinsic religiosity refers to a ‘means’ approach, in which a person uses religion as the means to some secular end, and is generally found to correlate
with higher levels of psychological distress, less effective coping abilities. Intrinsic religiosity, on the other hand, refers to an ‘ends’ orientation, in which the belief and practice of the religious life is the goal; this style of worship is related to greater well-being, and more appropriate social behaviour. However, some religious configurations, such as deluded beliefs and exacerbating guilt and worry, inflame psychopathological expression. Because very often “psychiatric difficulties can coexist with ecstatic spiritual experiences and normative religious affiliation and practice” (Shafranske 2005, 498). In this regard, humans have a mental capacity to create images of unobservable agents who cause real thing to happen (Dow 2007). Prayer, raising hearts and minds to that agent, God, could also be explained as psychologically a coping mechanism. We cope with any situation. But when situation is difficult, we try to cope it with attributing to a higher reality, God. Prayer connects with others. This takes place, when I pray for others. Prayer thus helps us to understand that I am not the only one who suffers of certain sickness. There are many people who suffer. I am connected with all these people.

Since, adolescence is a fertile period for the study of religion, spirituality, and mental health, “a foundation of psychological well-being is necessary in childhood in order to engender strong and protective spiritual or religious adherence,” and it is said that “depression suffered in childhood can lead to decreased or distorted form of religiosity in adulthood” (Miller & Kelley 2005, 465). If someone asks why a mental patient speaks religious language, the answer could be given that it is partly because of socialization. But, “the origin of childhood spirituality is not entirely a socialization process, but could be innate, [...] which could be moderately influenced by genetic factors” (Miller & Kelley 2005, 466). It also fosters the notion of innate or inherent spirituality or religiosity. But growing up in an environment deficient in hope and happiness distorts one’s sense of spiritual.

Generally, mood disorders, anxiety disorders, Schizophrenia-Spectrum disorders, and obsessive-Compulsive disorder are the most discussed psychopathologies in relation to religiosity and spirituality. For instance, depression is the most discussed clinical disorder in relation to religiosity, as many religions try to convey hope, happiness and a fulfilling worldviews; and that the private beliefs and activities such as faith and prayer are seen as the most helpful in coping with it (Miller & Kelley 2005). At the same time, since the content of delusions and hallucinations is sensitive to the cultural, political and religious climate the sufferer is embedded within, the religious delusions and hallucinations are relatively common among patients with schizophrenia (Miller & Kelley 2005). At the end, indications show that religiosity and spirituality have a positive influence on mental health and functioning, which also can be subverted. Therefore, religion (even personal religiosity) and mental health are intrinsically interwoven and most probably reciprocally interact, and one should always “consider two directions of causality, one going from religion to the individual psyche, the other from the individual psyche to religion” (Corveleyn & Luyten 2005, 91). From here we move on to some more pastoral reflections on psychology and religion.
Pastoral Reflections on Psychology and Religion

Psychology of religion in fact helps us to see, on the one hand, the possible interaction, positive or negative, between religiosity and mental health, and on the other hand, makes a theoretical, clinical and psychopathological study of religious behavior (Corveleyn 2009). It also helps us to understand “how exceptional religious behavior can be distinguished from deviant religious behavior and, how so called normal behavior can be distinguished from deviant religious behavior, taking the social context into account” (Corveleyn 2009, 87). Both these terms remind us about certain behaviors, beliefs, feelings, attributes, relationships, and experiences associated with our life and practices. Hence, psychologically, even for Freud, personal religion, with its personal desires, fantasies, and conflicts, is linked to the individual’s personal history and his or her encounters with significant others (Corveleyn & Luyten 2005). Therefore, for any analysis of human life today, particularly in pastoral field, both psychology and religion has a great significance.

Both religion and psychology speak about ‘soul’. However, psychology calls it psyche while religion calls it spirit, and both approached problems concerning spirit/soul/psyche differently. In other words, let us say that the scientists upheld secular whereas religion upheld sacred, and which is also a dichotomised experience as well. When we dichotomise, we pathologies/brings in sickness. Today, we need to be living in holistic approach to it. Religion is assigned to denote more the organizational aspects, today, while the construct of spirituality has increasingly been used to denote the personal aspects (Paloutzian & Park 2005). Though religion and spirituality have been a part of human experience throughout the human history, it is very recent that psychology of religion reaches from its non-paradigmatic past to its current position of multilevel interdisciplinary paradigm that “recognize the value of data at multiple levels of analysis while making non-reductive assumptions concerning the value of spiritual and religious phenomena” (Paloutzian & Park 2005, 6). The Freudian analysis of drive psychology that focuses on the hidden personal desires and conflicts in religion “testifies the deep awareness of the reciprocity between individual desires and conflicts and given cultural environments, [and] the ego psychology focuses on the other side of the psychic conflict, namely, the capacity of the ego to defend against personal drives and to adapt to reality” (Corveleyn & Luyten 2005, 84). In this way also the psychology of religion tells us about the role that religion plays in the concrete daily life of people.

Moreover, religion cannot be done away with. For, it provides/fulfills certain needs of human beings. It gives us security and the more believe in, the more we are happy. For instance, the concept of life after death gives us more security and hope in life. Likewise, religion gives us identity, belongingness, and a kind of connectivity. Christianity says ‘we belong to the mystical body’, and in India there is also a Hindu concept called ‘vasudhaiva kutumbakam’ (Shukla 2010), a Sanskrit phrase meaning that whole world is one single family, which means ‘we all belong to one family’. ‘Vasudha’ refers to the Earth or to the entire Creation, meaning the vast cosmos. ‘Eva’ means “certainly.” ‘Kutumbam’ means a family or blood relations, and kutumbakam technically means a little family. So here the Vedic sages are saying that the entire world is truly just one family. The world is like a small, tightly knit, nuclear family. In Hitopadesha, 1.3.71 we read that “This is my own and that a stranger – is the...
calculation of the narrow-minded. For the magnanimous-hearts however, the entire earth is but a family” (Shukla 2010).

In the same way identity, who I am, gives us meaning in life and this meaningfulness gives us happiness. Therefore, religion also functions as a meaning-making machine. One of the quests of humans is to get happiness. Religion gives individual meaning (salvation) and collective meaning - all the followers believe in one particular meaning. For instance, we Christians believe in the resurrection of the body. But when this meaning is disturbed, it disturbs the identity and thus causes for physical and mental troubles. Religion also identifies a particular community and its followers may use it as a lens or filter to see their lives in a homogeneous community, and problems arise when all these religions try and want to keep their identity intact. In this regard, we can also say that “understanding all of the psychological mechanisms underlying human religiousness is an aim inherent in the process of psychology of religion” (Paloutzian & Park 2005, 18).

We are prone to term some of the experiences that often go beyond our comprehensions as religious, mystical and spiritual. But Corveleyn and Luyten write that “people tend to interpret certain experiences congruent with their pre-existing beliefs [and] thus, experiences as such are not religious, nor spiritual, nor mystical; they are endowed with such meanings by human beings” (Corveleyn & Luyten 2005, 89). Therefore, a personal belief structure of the individual, which is linked with his or her personal history, has to be brought in the discussion and reflection when we deal with the cases of extravagant or extra-ordinary religious practices and behaviours. A psychological investigation into the interactions of the life history of the individual is indispensable to understand and deal with him or her. It also helps us to interpret the relationship of the representations of the significant others.

Freud’s concept of religious ideas as arising out of wish fulfilment could be received only in the realm of the historical origin of religious belief. Because, even today, many approaches religion as source of wish fulfilment (Nicholas 2004). Here, we cannot forget the fact that religion represents today both the cultural categories and psychological process within the individual, and that the religion and spirituality largely service the same psychological function (Paloutzian & Park 2005). At the same time it is also something beyond the human psychic representations and it covers all the spheres of human life. Religion is also a comprehensive meaning structure for the society. With the fear of losing the identity often religion does not relativise its absolute claims such as of chosen race. Psychologically it is of the after-effect of the feeling of insecurity. Thus, this identity turns to be a protection device and brings conflict with other people with other religious identities. In this way the virtue of self-sacrifice may lead to the emergence of suicide bombers when religion offers false ideas that encourage prejudices among its adherents. This in turn labels even the worst of things as holy and sanctifies certain dehumanizing behaviours and practices.

On the contrary, religion always has got a genuine reputation generally in negotiating conflicts and facilitating peace with its more visible moral adherence to the sanctity and dignity of human life. It also has got a compassion aspect that reaches out to the suffering of the people. Main observances of all the religions are love, forgiveness, humility, non-violence, etc. and it teaches inter dependence and stands for social justice. Psychology does not
challenge the claims of the religions. The value of trust could be the foundation of our religious experience. As a helpless child purely trusts its mother or others for growth, we grow by trust into a fully human realm. Trust leads to relationship. Psychology teaches us that trust is a within and without experience by which a self is explored within oneself and it is fully open to others. Psychology does not negate religious experience and experience of others. It is a compliment and a supplement to one’s own experience. Religion offers us security, meaning, belongingness, identity etc. and calls us to believe and have trust in it. Psychology throws light on various, mental, emotional, psychic and behavioural needs of humans.

Conclusion

Psychology of religions functions as more active in stimulating the people to explore and rediscover the religious and/or spiritual dimensions in their lives. Religion finally turns to be a lived experience of a belief. There is an all encompassing awareness that there is a positive association between religion, spirituality and mental health. For, both religion and psychology are in search of potential sources of well-being. Because as psychoanalysis is directed toward the demolition of the imaginary illusions of the people, it also cures his or her illusory religious beliefs. It also promotes a greater freedom and improves further personal development, which in turn can either possibly foster the development of a personal religious experience, or set the person free from oppressing religious representations or practices. The benevolent or sympathetic neutrality toward religion and religious issues in fact help us to understand and explain the religious experiences that each one has or posses. Because neutrality does not mean any indifferent or stiff behaviour with no human interest or concern and is not against sympathy or compassion. Hence, this neutrality maintains maximum respect for the personal freedom of the individual within the domain of spirituality and religion. This religiosity and spirituality contribute to mental health and a distorted spirituality and religious beliefs causes for many psychiatric disorders. Finally psychology of religion helps to find more psychological mechanisms in religion such as religious facts, individual behaviour and cultural living.

References:


