



Psychology of religion

Abstract

This editorial is an attempt to understand religion through its evolution and fulfilment of human needs in society.

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At the very outset, I would like to make it clear that what follows in this write-up, is in no way an attempt to criticise or analyse religion in terms of it being good or bad, relevant or irrelevant, and so on. What I intend to do is understand religion in a humble way from a professional point of view as to its evolution and the various needs it fulfils in a human society. Any attempt to explain anything about religion in terms of another discipline is sometimes misused and sometimes misunderstood as an attempt to undermine its very foundation. Most of the attempts at understanding religion are done either by a believer with preconceived notion that everything about religion is sanctimonious and not to be touched or by a non-believer with preconceived notion that religion is archaic, non-scientific, and not relevant any more in a scientifically addressed society. Both the procedures are inherently biased and as such do not serve much purpose. A scientific understanding of any phenomenon in no way lessens its significance or value.

The question then comes in that case why make an attempt to analyse religion? Why not let it be where it has always been – in the realm of faith? I feel that there is an urgent need to understand the evolution and purpose of religion mainly because (1) time has changed dramatically with relentless advance in scientific discoveries, (2) faith in religion to some extent is getting hypocritical and ritualistic, slowly losing its purpose, (3) God and religious teaching are being misused gainfully by vested and unscrupulous elements, and (4) religiously basic social organisation is getting replaced by political organisation of society. In view of these, there need to be some reorganisation and reorientation in religious beliefs and practices to revive its usefulness in maintaining social order and cohesion.

What is religion? No definition of religion adequately elucidates it because it encompasses large number of diverse acts with no common denominator. Besides what is considered

being religious in on society may not be considered so in another society. However, broadly religion can be conceived as a vast range of behaviour, thought, emotion, and attitude centered around moralising human mind and organising peaceful, disciplined, and conflict-free social organisation of human beings.

From psychological point of view, the most striking feature of religion is its universality. There is hardly any society in which religion plays no significant role and there are perhaps a few people who at certain point of their lifetime have not experienced some religious stirring. From this universality, one can infer that religion performs some basic adaptive functions so as to religious philosophies are involved recurrently at all times and in all places to satisfy one or more basic universal human needs.

Looking at religion from psychological point of view, it appears that the needs and functions of religious operations and psychic operations have certain core similarities. Psychic operations, as was conceived by Sigmund Freud, centers around handling the inborn, unbridled energy called 'id'. It is the energy with no bounds, seeks immediate fulfilment, refuses to accept postponement, and unconcerned about consequence, typical of a small child. If this drive is let loose into adult life, this reservoir of undirected energy might destroy the very existence of human existence. The primary aim of psychic orientation is to contain, direct, and organise this energy in a gainful way to propagate humanity and avoid anarchy.

Similarly, religious operations strive to contain undirected human wishes, desires, and impulses of human society; if uncontrolled, might destroy the very foundation of human existence through anarchy. So, it puts sanctions against inherent human tendencies like aggression, violence in the forms of killing, rape, etc. The only difference between the two appears to be that in psychic operation, the core

apprehension is uncontrolled sexual energy while in religion, it is the aggressive human tendencies.

PSYCHIATRY VIS-À-VIS RELIGION

The mutual interest of psychiatry and religion as institutions has grown dramatically in recent decades. This interest represents the current extension of contacts and influences which connected the two disciplines for centuries past. The prescientific era saw a religious psychiatry and religious psychology; at times, exclusively dominating the study of mental illnesses.

Robert Burton, in his book, "Anatomy of melancholia", [1] has attributed 'general cause' of melancholia or mental illness as 'either supernatural or demonic'. Religious psychology or psychiatry made scholarly attempts to understand the universe in religious terms. Illness, both mental and physical, was consequence of either guilt or possession of devil. Scholarly accounts of the role played by religious psychology, especially demonology is found in Zilboorg and Henry's book, "A history of medical psychology". [2]

Freud, in his essay, "Obsessive actions and religious practices", [3] explained that the term demon in demonology can be conceptualised as id from a psychodynamic perspective. So, the ancient concept of demonic possession of illness can be easily translated into overactive and uncensored id impulses and drives. This insight gave impetus to the study of psychology of religious beliefs and practices, and in 1960 and 1968, the Group for Advancement of Psychiatry, a scientific group, made in depth study of interface between psychiatry and religion.

PSYCHODYNAMICS OF RELIGIOUS PRACTICES AND PSYCHIATRIC DISORDERS

This study era began with a paper of Freud in 1907. He observed many similarities between religious practices and psychiatric disorders. In relation to obsessive-compulsive disorder to religious practices, both are (1) fixed ideas and beliefs, (2) stereotyped, (3) apparently meaningless, (4) lead to anxiety if rituals are not performed or impulses not complied upon, (5) both has similar purpose – control of undesirable wishes or impulses, (6) both function as controlling agent – the 'superego'.

This type of understanding can be easily extended to other psychopathologies:

Phobia

Phobic patient avoids situations which symbolise to him sexual temptations or opportunity. Religious persons also impose stringent prohibition in areas of sexuality and aggression. Aversion, almost of phobic intensity is developed towards situations which offer the temptations to violate these provisions. Patients of phobia avoid certain situations which psychodynamically represent sexual temptation or opportunity. Similarly, religious person avoids certain situations fearing he may be tempted to violate imposed regulations.

Hysteria

Classical hysterical attack represents a flight from genital sexuality by some dramatic disability but with symbolic sexual gratification. Hysterical behaviours have quite often enjoyed religious sanctions in many religions all over the world.

Depression

Psychodynamically in the prodromal phase of depression, the person, in an attempt to fight back impending depression, indulges in exuberance, pleasure seeking behaviour called 'paradoxical hypermotivation'. In conventional religious practices, these are not permitted. But, some religious faiths recommend them as intermediary to union with God. These overindulgence is followed by defeat leading to depression. On the other hand, persons suffering from depression tend to get more religiously oriented which can be viewed as seeking a dependent-nurturing desire with the eternal parental figure – the God.

Schizophrenia

The aspect of religion that corresponds psychodynamically to schizophrenia is the sense of otherworldliness or transcendentalism. Transcendence finds its most explicit expression in mysticism. As in mystical trances, in prodromal state of schizophrenia, the world of consensual reality is rejected. The experience of external reality is replaced by impression arising from within. Rational thinking is replaced by non-rational thinking, i.e. thoughts are governed by instinctual needs alone without regards to logic, reason, or reality.

RELIGION AND PSYCHOSOCIAL NEED FULFILMENT

Freud approached the psychodynamic study of religion from the point of view of the conflicts of the group. He analysed totem and taboo [4] invoking the principle of animism, projections, omnipotence of thought, magic, etc. He showed that the precursor of religion served the function of safeguarding group organisation. Group is protected by these mechanisms against individual antisocial ambitions, especially incest, patricide, bigamy, etc.

Religion does seem to satisfy individual needs as well. It reassures individual against misfortunes by creating the impression that one's fate is determined by one's deeds. Religion fulfils the eternal human need of dependency, nurturance, and protection by allowing them to lean on the ceaseless parental figure – the God who is omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient.

It also reassures against fear of death by promising eternal life – the soul never dies, it only changes body. Religion provides mechanism to deal with guilt by penance and self-punishment. Finally, it provides means to escape harsh realities of daily life by transferring responsibility to God – He will protect, will provide ways, and so on.

AS I UNDERSTAND

I grew up in a very religious family environment. There used to be practically endless religious functions at home. Having

had a desire to understand human behaviour from young age, I observed these functions keenly. What struck me interesting is that religious functions were conducted by a priest in a language which hardly anybody attending the function understands. In spite of that I saw genuine devotion in them. That made me think that such rituals must be fulfilling some basic needs of those getting so involved.

Since then I had pondered about various aspects of religion. I read through Gita, Bhagabat. As I grow older a vague concept slowly evolved in my mind which shortly got modified and transformed in my mind. What I felt about the evolution of religion in reference to an ordinary human being is this:

In this large universe with its never ending intimidation and challenges, every human being must have felt insecure. Although he is the superior most in the hierarchy of living beings, he felt small in front of certain forces which he cannot control. He failed to understand the calamities, felt incapable and frustrated. As a child he had his parents to run to and seek help. They did shelter him, did protect him, loved him, and nurtured him. But, even parents are of limited capability. So, human being always had a need to protect his ego and a need to feel secure. Consequently, human being is always seeking out some force, some entity who is somehow similar to his protecting and nurturing parents; but, who is omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient. So, human being created a supreme entity who besides being all these, is also benevolent, ever forgiving, and ever protecting if you place yourself on His feet. He evolved the concept and left no stone unturned to internalise the concept into human mind. Over time, He became a real entity, an entity which exists, but being too superior you cannot see Him. He is everywhere, He can see everything. This happened when human being had small society groups. With advancement, social groups became

larger, beyond the limit of personal monitoring. With it came disorders, antisocial events. Policing was imposed on society with punishments. But, intellectuals found that no amount of force can control and bring order in society. So, the all-powerful being was brought in. Human being needed Him for love and protection. Who will be protected? Those who worship Him and do what He likes most. What He likes most – Do good deeds, do not harm others, help others in need – attempt at social order and discipline imbibed into own soul.

He will take care of your insecurities:

Fear of harm – He will save

Fear of death – life is endless

Fear of guilt – your own deeds (karma); do good – get good; do bad – penance – forgiven

Reinforcing and maintain this belief – rituals and stories

So, it appears that religion has been fulfilling some basic human needs which helps in maintaining human existence in a healthier way. As such religion was relevant, is still relevant, and hopefully, will always remain relevant, albeit with some reorientation to suit the changing need of human society.

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