TEOLOGIA DUCHOWOŚCI

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The Normative Aspect in the Contemporary Understanding of Spirituality

Aspekt normatywny we współczesnym rozumieniu duchowości

Abstract: In today's world, the concept of spirituality – which is more and more complex – has attracted a great deal of interest. As first named and developed in the Roman Catholic context, it now has become universal and nearly all-embracing. Today, not all current conceptions of spirituality are grounded in, or linked to religion. The Western thought has been dealing with it for some time now and the Polish academic milieu is likely to follow suit. Thus helping people mature in their spirituality has become far more demanding than it used to be in the past when one could refer to a set of guidelines, prescriptions or commandments developed within traditional religions. In this paper, we try to describe various concepts of spirituality and analyze some universal theoretical and empirically-based proposals of assessing when someone's spiritual growth is healthy and when it is not.

Keywords: religion, spirituality, growth, norms

Abstrakt: W dzisiejszym świecie pojęcie duchowości budzi ożywione zainteresowanie, a jednocześnie stało się bardzo niejasne. Początkowo rozwinięte w kontekście rzymskokatolickim, obecnie stało się bardziej uniwersalne oraz inkluzywne. Nie wszystkie obecne koncepcje duchowości są powiązane z religią. Tendencja ta jest wyraźnie widoczna w świecie zachodnim, jednak najprawdopodobniej utoruje sobie również drogę do polskiego środowiska. Ta sytuacja sprawia, że pomaganie ludziom w dojrzewaniu duchowym jest o wiele bardziej wymagające niż w przeszłości, kiedy można było odwoływać się do zestawu wytycznych, przykazań lub zaleceń pochodzących z religii. W tym artykule staramy się opisać różne koncepcje duchowości, a także przeanalizować niektóre uniwersalne teoretyczne i empiryczne propozycje oceny tego, kiedy wzrost duchowy jest zdrowy, a kiedy duchowość nie prowadzi ku dojrzałości w człowieczeństwie.

Słowa kluczowe: religia, duchowość, rozwój, normy

Introduction

In today's world, the concept of spirituality – apart from becoming more complex – has caught a great deal of interest. Its complexity arises from the difficulty of putting into words spiritual experiences. The Western thought has been dealing with it for some time now; the Polish philosophical milieu is following suit.[1] One thing is obvious: the concept of spirituality has changed enormously over the last few decades. At first named and developed in the Roman Catholic context, it has now become universal and nearly all-embracing. Spirituality is commonly defined as the awareness of a connection to something greater and beyond self, to Transcendence or the Sacred. Today, not all current conceptions of spirituality are grounded in or linked to religion.[2] We can perceive spirituality as a construct falling into one of three categories: *God oriented* spirituality where theologies are the basis for thoughts and practices; *world oriented* spirituality where ecology, nature and the individual's relationship with the two is emphasized, or; *humanistic* spirituality, also identified as *people-oriented* spirituality, where the focus is on human potential and human achievement.[3]

At the beginning spirituality was viewed "from above," which means that it was defined in relationship to theology and especially associated with the notion of grace. Spirituality was related to dogmatic and moral theology, thus containing a strong prescriptive or normative component that also gave some clear guidelines for living an honest, respectable life. Today however, spirituality is most often defined as being "from below," thus designating it as related to the social sciences of anthropology and sociology and even more so to psychology.[4]

Spirituality seen "from above" is approached from the metaphysical or theological perspective. Generally, one can designate it as an „ontological approach" which delves into the nature of spirituality. This ontological context asks questions about the existence of God or, more broadly, the Sacred and how we connect to it.[5] This is the more traditional approach to understanding

[1]   A.K. Jastrzębski, *Concepts of Spirituality at Universities of Today*, "Roczniki Teologiczne" 66/5 (2019), pp. 99–113.

[2]   P.C. Hill, K.I. Pargament, R.W. Hood, J. McCullough, E. Michael, J.P. Swyers, D.B. Larson, B.J. Zinnbauer, *Conceptualizing religion and spirituality: Points of commonality, points of departure*, "Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour" 30/1 (2000), pp. 51–77.

[3]   Ibidem.

[4]   A.K. Jastrzębski, *Concepts of Spirituality…*, op. cit.

[5]   D. Oman, *Defining religion and spirituality*, [in:] *Handbook of the psychology of religion and spirituality*, R.F. Paloutzian, C.L. Park (eds.), New York 2013, pp. 23–47.

spirituality as found in Christian thought and can also be called the "foundational" approach.

Spirituality viewed "from below" can be labeled a phenomenological approach which is for the most part descriptive, as it is mainly interested in the spiritual experience in and of itself. Spirituality in relation to psychological research is argued to have developed across the lifespan of an individual and parallels the general development process.[6] The significance and relevance of spiritual issues are documented on both clinical and experimental research levels across diverse cultures, including that done by persons with no formal religious training.[7]

Spiritual practices respond to people's deepest needs, concerns and problems in different ways. Research indicates that some of these practices possess significant healing power.[8] One can name this approach "pragmatic," as the predominant focus here is the impact of spirituality on human life rather than its actuality, which would comprise a transcendent component in a spiritual relationship. In the pragmatic approach, a direct description of the subject involved in spiritual practices is more valued than any ontological argumentation.

We cannot say of people who do not identify with a particular religious tradition that they are religious: they consider themselves spiritual. In light of this, spirituality is a broader concept then religiosity. Hence, religiously inclined people live their spirituality within an institutional religion and partake in both the religion's set of rules and religiosity as a personal, individual, and subjective way of living out this religion. There is growing evidence that most religious people define themselves as both spiritual and religious.[9]

Spirituality may be viewed in a similar way. It can be based on individual and unique ways of experiencing the Sacred, but there has to be something parallel to religion, something which presents an objective point of reference. Religiosity is linked with a religion and usually has a clear vision of what it takes to develop one's spirituality; it also has a set of tools that allow one to verify their progress along their spiritual journey.[10] We can designate it as a "hard"

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[6] A.K. Jastrzębski, *Concepts of Spirituality…*, op. cit.

[7] P.C. Hill et al., *Conceptualizing religion…*, op. cit.

[8] A. Paukert, L. Phillips, L. Cully, J. Romero, A. Stanley, *Systematic Review of the Effects of Religion-Accommodative Psychotherapy for Depression and Anxiety*, "Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy" 41/2 (2011), pp. 99–108.

[9] T. Gall, J. Malette, M. Guirguis-Younger, *Spirituality and Religiousness: A Diversity of Definitions*, "Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health" 13/3 (2011), pp. 158–181.

[10] A.-M. Rizzuto, E.P. Shafranske, Addressing religion and spirituality in treatment from a *psychodynamic perspective*, [in:] *APA handbooks in psychology. APA handbook of psychology, religion, and spirituality*, vol. 2: *An applied psychology of religion and spirituality*, K.I. Pargament, A. Mahoney, E.P. Shafranske (eds.), Washington 2013, pp. 125–146; L. Sperry,

version of spirituality. In the case of non-religious spirituality, the same process becomes more challenging because there are no clear guidelines on how to evaluate one's state of spiritual maturity. We can name it as a "soft" version of spirituality. Developing a normative frame of reference that can be applied universally to any spirituality is one of the major contemporary challenges in this field.

A contemporary frame for understanding spirituality

One hundred years ago, William James was not familiar with the word 'spirituality.' What we call spirituality today, he referred to as "personal religion" and defined it as "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine."[11] He also proposed to define the term 'divine' very broadly, as denoting "any object that is godlike, whether it be a concrete deity or not."[12] As the understanding of both, spirituality and religion remains very ambiguous and imprecise, the relationship between the two continues to be a frequent topic of discussion among scholars of different backgrounds. The fact that there is no agreement on what religion and spirituality are complicates this dialog significantly. Nevertheless, we can say that spirituality has remained one of the essential elements of religion.[13]

Spirituality in a religious setting will usually be understood as related to a belief in God, who is a Person. At present, spirituality goes far beyond the Christian tradition. This contemporary understanding of spirituality that also comprises other monotheistic traditions such as Judaism and Islam, as well as Eastern and Native religions and finally non-religious spiritualities, requires a new conceptualization.

To address this challenge, Sandra Schneiders[14] proposes to define spirituality as a conscious experience of integrating one's life through self-transcendence toward what one perceives as the ultimate value.[15] Along these lines, Daniel

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Distinctive approaches to religion and spirituality: Pastoral counseling, spiritual direction, and spiritually integrated psychotherapy, [in:] *APA handbooks...*, op. cit., pp. 223–238.

[11] W. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, New York 2010, p. 36.

[12] Ibidem, p. 38.

[13] D.A. Helminiak, *The Role of Spirituality in Formulating a Theory of the Psychology of Religion*, "Zygon" 41/1 (2006), pp. 197–224.

[14] S.M. Schneiders, *Spirituality in the Academy*, "Theological Studies" 50 (1989), pp. 676–697.

[15] Ibidem, p. 678.

Helminiak[16] proposes to define spirituality more broadly as self-transcendence or the dimension of the human mind which creates meaning.[17] Likewise, David Elkins[18] underlines the following dimensions of spirituality: the desire to relate our existence to something beyond ourselves; the desire for something transcendent; the desire for an object that is a separate and higher reality.

Modern spirituality adherents are perceived to be eclectic with a „supermarket approach" to religious traditions and practices in an effort to construct a highly individualized form of spirituality that remains private to them and is a conception of the divine as being innate within them.[19] In one of the more phenomenological studies, researchers asked over 200 participants what their perception of spirituality was. It was first of all viewed as an integral part of an individual's identity, shaped through the personal experience of the Sacred conceived from the traditional to more contemporary forms.[20] In this modern perspective, spirituality can be defined in many similar ways:
– as a fundamental dimension of our existence,
– as a specific sort of experience,
– as reaching a deeper union with the universe,
– as searching for a higher meaning of life,
– as acquiring a balanced and tolerant attitude towards life,
– as developing such characteristics of being as humility, joy, and compassion,
– as being a humble and loving self,
– as reaching the essence of existence.[21]

As one can see, the contemporary understanding of spirituality encompasses a wide variety of phenomena. It can still be related to prayer or meditation as well as to an experience of someone who through spiritual practices is trying to achieve their full human potential but is no longer limited to the Christian Tradition. Understanding of spirituality has thus shifted from describing the entire experience of one's faith to fostering the fullness of one's personal life, including its somatic, psychic, and socio-political dimensions.[22] Whatever the

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[16] D.A. Helminiak, *Confounding the Divine and the Spiritual: Challenges to a Psychology of Spirituality*, "Pastoral Psychology" 57 (2008), pp. 161–182.

[17] Ibidem, p. 162.

[18] D.N. Elkins, *Beyond religion: A personal program for building a spiritual life outside the walls of traditional religion*, Wheaton 1998.

[19] W. Parsons, *On Mapping the Psychology and Religion Movement: Psychology as Religion and Modern Spirituality*, "Pastoral Psychology" 59/1 (2010), pp. 15–25.

[20] T. Gall et al., *Spirituality...*, op. cit.

[21] S.M. Schneiders, *Spirituality...*, op. cit., p. 678.

[22] K.A. Wojcieszek, *Na początku była rozpacz... Antropologiczne podstawy profilaktyki*, Krakow 2005.

case, spirituality would normally be accompanied by an appropriate *praxis*[23] and this practical side of spirituality still needs some guidelines. As Lisa Cataldo[24] explains:

> To the extent that traditional religious frameworks have lost their power for many people, and as "religion" becomes more and more a word associated with political agendas or rigid exclusivity, traditional religion has become both more threatening and less meaningful in Western culture. (…) Because spiritual experience is often framed as individual, personal, or subjective, it seems freer and more open to interpretation. Spiritual experience has an inward quality, a sense of "depth," that would seem to make it less vulnerable to superficiality, intellectualization, or abuse. Yet herein lies the danger. When we see spirituality as an area of experience that inevitably fosters experiences of peace, joy, love, and intuition – when we set it up uncritically as a moral "good" – we run the risk of diminishing its power as a morally neutral force in the human person and society. Additionally, we can find ourselves ignoring the contextual and conditioned nature of experience, assuming then that our spiritual experiences are somehow outside of or beyond our psychologies.

Normative dimension of spirituality

We wonder whether these new conceptualizations of spirituality will allow the development of some useful guidelines to assist people in their quest for spiritual maturity. Helminiak seems to be optimistic on that point and states that a normative dimension of spirituality can be developed which he calls "a real science of spirituality;"[25] and more recently[26] he refers to it as "spiritualogy." This science should be able to determine "what genuine humanness requires by way of beliefs and ethics."[27] For the contemporary mind, spirituality pertains

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[23] J.B. Rubin, *Psychoanalysis and spirituality*, [in:] *Psychoanalysis and religion in the 21ˢᵗ century: Competitors or collaborators*, D.M. Black (ed.), New York 2006, pp. 132–153.

[24] L. Cataldo, *Can There Be a Psychoanalytic Spirituality? A Response to Kenneth Porter*, "Psychoanalytic Perspectives" 10 (2013), p. 274.

[25] D.A. Helminiak, *Confounding the Divine…*, op. cit., p. 163.

[26] Idem, *Spirituality as an explanatory and normative science: applying Lonergan's analysis of intentional consciousness to relate psychology and theology*, "The Heythorp Journal" 52 (2011), p. 598.

[27] Idem, *A Down-to-Earth Approach to the Psychology of Spirituality a Century after James's Varieties*, "The Humanistic Psychologist" 33/2 (2005), p. 81.

especially to meanings and values, which do not necessarily involve any existing religious tradition but rather are one of the inherent aspects of being human, which is meaning-making.[28]

Spirituality is of interest to many sciences such as philosophy, psychology, sociology and theology. In the theological approach there is a clear normative dimension. Normally, members of a concrete religion are told about what serves their spiritual development as well as what could be considered obstacles on this road. The main challenge for a universal approach to spirituality is to develop a normative/prescriptive dimension beyond the usual explanatory level applied in social sciences. In this descriptive approach there is no question of "why?" nor study of "how things are." Helminiak expresses it very well:

> Social science describes, analyzes, and compares people's convictions and commitments, but it ignores an essential quality of these convictions and commitments, namely, that beliefs can be true or false and values, wholesome or destructive, and that these differences have real-life consequences before which real human beings are hardly neutral or value-free. So 'normativity' or 'prescriptivity' is the challenge to social science. Without a normative component, social science cannot address the burning issues of our times, and without a breakthrough to explanatory status, social science can hardly be normative.[29]

A value-free, only descriptive approach is not very useful to help people develop a healthy spirituality, especially for those who want to become pastoral counsellors or psychotherapists. In principle, each spirituality is value-oriented, and normally proposes some rules to be lived by. In this regard, a theological approach seems to be the most helpful because it presents clear values and rules to be followed.[30]

Generally, every human person holds some understanding about life and shapes their life according to that understanding. Moreover, each person normally intends to achieve some kind of 'growth' that can also be a

> deliberate commitment to self-transcendence, along the lines of the meanings and values that one holds. (…) Insistence on this concern functions precisely to specify spirituality as a deliberate dimension of living different from the passive possibility of living without any deliberate pursuit of growth or self-enhancement

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[28]   Ibidem.
[29]   Idem, *Spirituality…*, op. cit., p. 598.
[30]   Idem, *The Role of Spirituality…*, op. cit.

consonant with one's chosen beliefs and values. Hence, spirituality is understood as an active and deliberate endeavor.[31]

Therefore, what we need to do in order to develop a normative dimension of spirituality is "to determine the structures, mechanisms or processes, and triggers that pertain to spiritual integration and growth."[32] Finally, "the legitimate scientific question about spirituality would be this: What is going on in people, how, and why, when they are engaged in spiritual pursuits, including what some might call 'relationship with God'?"[33]

In a universal approach to spirituality, we would come to a very insightful discovery: if spirituality means any human functioning that involves experience, understanding, judgment, and decision, then unless we are in an unconscious state such as in a coma, all other human actions are related to spirituality. We all have a spirit, but not every one of us makes full use of spirituality, whether for good or ill.

> If the spiritual is an inherent dimension of the human mind, every human activity is spiritual. This is simply to say that activity that proceeds from the human mind, which is psyche and spirit, must by definition be spiritual. The human spirit shows itself in the generation of a world mediated by meaning and motivated by value. But every human being lives with some set of meanings and values, ideas and ideals, visions and virtues. In part these spiritual components are constitutive of human experience. Indeed, devoid of meanings and values, the distinctive qualities of humanity, an experience could not rightly be called human. Therefore, all human experience is spiritual. All human experience depends on the functioning of the human spirit.[34]

Some empirical and clinical considerations

A growing body of works suggests that religiosity and spirituality are helpful for the aged population, providing them with hope and meaning regarding death and the end of a life cycle.[35] Spirituality is also found to be effective in coping

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[31] Ibidem, p. 202.
[32] Idem, *Confounding the Divine...*, op. cit., p. 164.
[33] Ibidem, p. 166.
[34] Ibidem, p. 172.
[35] P.C. Hill, *Conceptualizing religion....*, op. cit.

with negative life events, disability and illness.[36] Research studies report the benefits of religion and spirituality on well-being, mental health, attachment, and self-control.[37]

In Koenig's[38] systematic review around the terms *spirituality*, *religion*, and *health*, there are about 3000 quantitative research studies. Among them, 326 were related to well-being, 72 to hope and optimism, 45 to meaning and purpose, 69 to self-esteem, and 21 to a sense of personal control. Furthermore, 444 were related to depression, 141 to suicide, 299 to anxiety, 278 to alcohol abuse, and 185 to drug abuse. Overall, spirituality and religion were related to positive emotions and inversely correlated with negative emotions.

While we accept the importance of positive spiritual growth, at times, despite their good will, some practitioners of spirituality may be misguided in their pursuit because distorted and misinterpreted spirituality has been known to lead to various degrees of error and even to devastating destruction, as witnessed in the events of 9/11. In view of that, one should say that there can be both true and false spirituality. We need an approach to spirituality that gives us tools to uncover false spiritualities, just as psychiatry uncovers healthy and unhealthy mental experiences.[39]

Spiritual beliefs and practices are normally oriented towards guiding people in the direction of a fullness of life and happiness, but they often bring opposite results. For example, religious beliefs can help one endure suffering, but certain beliefs can also become a source of anguish, an obstacle to development, or cause the destruction of relationships between people. For instance, the dark side of some spiritual traditions is that, in the name of preserving the sacred order of affairs, women cannot openly question anything, younger people cannot admonish elders and are neither allowed to speak freely nor to "disobey" the rules of group leaders. Often the physical aspect of a human being is considered to be something completely negative and therefore it should be dominated through radical asceticism. Some practices of meditation or prayer also cause complete separation of people from the community and even from oneself.[40]

There is also evidence that many people experience periods of difficulty and struggle with their faith. Pargament names three types of religious struggles:

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[36] K.I. Pargament, *The psychology of religion and coping: Theory, research, practice*, New York 1997.
[37] Idem, *Spiritually Integrated Psychotherapy. Understanding and Addressing the Sacred*, New York–London 2011.
[38] H.G. Koenig, *Spirituality and health research: Methods, measurement, statistics, and resources*, West Conshohocken 2011.
[39] D.A. Helminiak, *Confounding the Divine...*, op. cit.
[40] J.L. Griffith, M.E. Griffith, *Encountering the Sacred in Psychotherapy*, New York 2003.

struggles with a deity, which involves questioning one's relationship with God; *interpersonal struggles*, related to faith community tensions; and *intrapersonal struggles*, such as questioning one's faith or moral code of action.[41]

Exline and colleagues have developed *The Religious and Spiritual Struggles Scale*, where they propose an interesting conceptualization of spiritual struggles. The name supernatural struggles, related to conflict with supernatural beings such as negative emotions towards a deity or demonic struggles as struggling with the devil in difficult situations; interpersonal struggles, meaning conflicts with others regarding some spiritual ideas, and, finally, intrapersonal struggles, meaning conflicts with oneself regarding faith, morality, or meaning in life.[42]

Many spiritual leaders gain power and personal profits by using spiritual rhetoric. Spiritual vocabulary, thanks to its powerful metaphors, touches people, but once devoid of its original meaning, can give a distorted, perverted message if used for hateful, egoistic objectives. For example, S. Milosevic used the Slavic myths to arouse hatred among his soldiers, who then in the name of the Holy Trinity carried out acts of mass genocide. Often one can hear about pastors stealing from their own communities, or about charismatic leaders who maintain abusive sexual relations with their members. Spiritual vocabulary is also frequently used for manipulation. For example, Serbian psychiatrists J. Raskovic and R. Karadzic used the knowledge of mechanisms of paranoia for political purposes. They wanted to induce the indignation and fear necessary to fuel nationalistic attitudes. This led to a rekindling of people's primitive suspicions and fears, to the point of eradicating the long history of mutual kindness and goodwill.[43] During the same conflict, to Ratko Mladic, commander of the Serbian forces, the Bosnian Muslims were no longer fellow members of a once--shared country but the worst enemies of his nation. He was thus convinced that liberating the sacred land for his own people was his holy mission.[44]

The abuse of a spiritual relationship is evil whether a person is made a 'scapegoat' in order to allegedly save the community, or one group must be subordinated to another. This is already a systemic evil. It always starts with the establishment of boundaries within the community, with the emergence of those 'equal and more equal', with the saturation of everything with spiritual phraseology, in which everything is explained by the necessity of serving

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[41]   K.I. Pargament, *Religion and Coping: The Current State of Knowledge*, Oxford 2010.

[42]   J.J Exline, K.I. Pargament, J.B. Grubbs, A.M. Yali, *The Religious and Spiritual Struggles Scale: Development and initial validation*, "Psychology of Religion and Spirituality" 6 (2014), pp. 208–222.

[43]   J.L. Griffith, M.E. Griffith, *Encountering...*, op. cit.

[44]   D. Halberstam, *War in a time of peace*, New York 2001.

God better or protecting the community. Such a group of more equal can be formed from a variety of categories including the elites or racially, gender or culture-biased individuals. A variety of psychological and sociological phenomena contribute to the emergence of a systemic evil, which is hidden behind spiritual vocabulary and has nothing to do with spirituality.[45]

Many people are unable to integrate the reality of evil with the way they come to terms with themselves, others, and the world, especially when they deny the existence of evil in themselves and yet project it onto others. This situation is visible in terrorist attacks because it is very easy to transform "projecting evil onto others" into "attempting to eliminate those others" perceived as a source of evil. The greatest spiritual challenge is not to eliminate the dark parts of oneself but to integrate them and accept that all humans are capable of both good and evil.[46] Spiritual intolerance is another destructive dimension of spirituality. It takes on a variety of forms as religiously based prejudice, fanaticism, shunning, and finally resulting in religious wars. The aim of all these practices is to destroy the spiritual opponent.[47]

Destructive behaviors occur most often on the outskirts of mainstream religion and involve both leaders and groups who are convinced of a special mission commissioned to them directly by God. Those who are involved are very often convinced that they are making conscious choices, guided by the voice of God. In addition, many spiritual traditions emphasize the necessity of obedience and promote the acceptance of suffering in the name of faith.[48]

Unfortunately, spiritual extremism can become self-perpetuating because it contains its own rewards, both spiritual and even secular. The violence of religious fanatics provides them with a purpose and their self-assurance displaces all doubt and ambiguity. When they look at the sins and shortcomings of other mortals, they see themselves as holier-than-thou and what is supposed to be a natural yearning for spiritual perfection becomes a self-absorbed, fanatical pursuit that is far from the commonly shared spiritual values of humility, forgiveness, mercy, and compassion. In such cases, all means, including harming oneself and others are justified and even praised in the name of the Sacred. In the final analysis, spiritual extremism fails because it leads people away from their deepest spiritual desires.[49]

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[45] J.L. Griffith, M.E. Griffith, *Encountering...*, op. cit.
[46] K.I. Pargament, *Spiritually Integrated Psychotherapy...*, op. cit., p. 148.
[47] Ibidem.
[48] J.L. Griffith, M.E. Griffith, *Encountering...*, op. cit.
[49] K.I. Pargament, *Spiritually Integrated Psychotherapy...*, op. cit.

Many psychoanalysts prefer the development of some personal form of spirituality, something like an individually defined mysticism devoid of rite, structure and religious authority, while strongly criticizing all forms of fundamentalism, dogmatism, or primitivism present in religion.[50] Among psychoanalysts, there is a prevailing conviction that religious ways of thinking serve to escape the real conflicts experienced by people in life. The point is that specific states of consciousness (prayer) can be used as a way of circumventing conflicts at lower levels, which can result in serious negative consequences in the life of the person who uses them. It often leads to a psychical breakdown in early adulthood. Such a process often concerns people who unilaterally try to overcome successive stages of spiritual development.[51]

Towards developing universal normative criteria for assessing spirituality

Being able to characterize a healthy spirituality seems to be of crucial importance for our time. To begin with, we can say that in a healthy spirituality there will be a balanced attention given to various dimensions of our life such as the self, relationships, work, emotions, and others. Rather than hinder, spiritual practices should help in establishing the connections with all those elements of being human. For example, a healthy spirituality would normally foster expressing one's emotions. There is also a shared conviction that, for spiritual growth to take place, spirituality has to be in line with psychological or therapeutic work. The fruit of a healthy spirituality would be greater compassion for others and for oneself. A healthy spirituality relies on a set of values and on a community that cherishes them. This community becomes a guiding principle or teacher for a person and supports them in their spiritual growth. Finally, a healthy spirituality includes an element of some involvement in the real world with real people helping others to live a better life[52] as well as awareness and acceptance of present moment circumstances.[53]

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[50]   R.B. Blass, *Beyond Illusion: psychoanalysis and the question of religious truth*, [in:] *Psychoanalysis and religion...*, op. cit., pp. 23–43.

[51]   Ibidem.

[52]   G. Picciotto, J. Fox, *Exploring Experts' Perspectives on Spiritual Bypass: a Conventional Content Analysis*, "Pastoral Psychology" 67/1 (2018), pp. 65–84.

[53]   C. Cashwell, H. Glosoff, C. Hammond, *Spiritual Bypass: A Preliminary Investigation*, "Counseling and Values" 54/2 (2010), pp. 162–174.

Spiritual growth should be a healthy enterprise, as it can be related to the advanced stages of personal development. If we want to develop a normative component for a universal approach to spirituality, we will need to distinguish between true and false spiritualities by determining the mechanisms or processes by which a healthy spirituality functions. In order to do so, one should be able to define, establish and adopt behaviors that, given time and effort, eradicate that which is dysfunctional, replacing it by a healthy, active spirituality.[54] An authentic spiritual maturity is a way of remaining open to the demands of spiritual growth expressed in the willingness to accept both positive and negative life experiences.[55]

Both psychological and spiritual developments require leaving something behind, giving up familiar ways of behavior. It means rejecting the temptation to become everything that I could be. In psychoanalysis, the work focuses on renouncing outdated and unattainable ways of being, giving up narcissistic imaginations and accepting reality. However, this should not become a negative process with some masochistic propensities as in pathological self-denial.[56]

Like any other human activity, this reaching out toward something beyond that we call spirituality, is part of being human, and can be used in both heathy and harmful ways. Spirituality can be mature or immature, healthy or unhealthy, authentic or false. The healthy spirituality is marked by compassionate, loving, powerful, and intuitive attitudes. Unhealthy spirituality is characterized by the self that is indifferent, hateful, powerless, and confused.[57] According to Zinnbauer[58] healthy spirituality can undergo rational and empirical assessment and demonstrate its internal logical sense related to positive indexes of adaptive functioning and wellbeing.

In the Biblical tradition a healthy tree is recognized by the fruits it gives. According to Roy,[59] the fruit of a successful spiritual growth or true spiritual experience is concrete change in terms of knowledge, wisdom, attitude, and motivation, which can lead to personal transformation. Some fruits come right after spiritual experiences while others require some time to ripen as a tree that

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[54] D.A. Helminiak, *The Role of Spirituality...*, op. cit.

[55] J. Fox, G. Picciotto, *The Mediating Effects of Spiritual Bypass on Depression, Anxiety, and Stress*, "Counseling and Values" 64/2 (2019), pp. 227–245.

[56] M. Parsons, *Ways of transformation*, [in:] *Psychoanalysis and religion...*, op. cit., pp. 117–131.

[57] L. Cataldo, *Can There Be a Psychoanalytic Spirituality...*, op. cit.

[58] B.J. Zinnbauer, *Models of healthy and unhealthy religion and spirituality*, [in:] *APA handbook...*, op. cit., pp. 71–89.

[59] L. Roy, *Transcendent Experiences: Phenomenology and Critique*, Toronto 2001.

has been cultivated for a long while.[60] William James[61] posits that the fruits of conversion are convictions that

> (1) the visible world is part of a more spiritual universe, from which it draws its chief significance; (2) that union or harmonious relation with that higher universe is our true end; (3) that prayer or inner communion with the spirit thereof – be that spirit 'God' or 'law'– is a process wherein work is really done, and spiritual energy flows in and produces effects, psychological or material, within the phenomenal world; (4) a new zest which adds itself like a gift to life, and takes the form either of lyrical enchantment or of appeal to earnestness and heroism; (5) an assurance of safety and a temper of peace, and, in relation to others, a preponderance of loving affections.[62]

After James, Gordon Allport in his classic work *The Individual and His Religion*[63] described a healthy (mature) spirituality as rich, open to criticism and revision, and flexibly maintained with functionally autonomous and transformational motives or values. Healthy spirituality produces consistent effects in one's life as it provides a philosophy of life or existential meaning, and tolerance for diversity. On the other hand, immature spirituality is uncritically accepted, exclusionary, self-centered, and prejudicial, fanatical, impulsive, and primitive. It does not really influence one's conduct as it is intolerant, incomplete, and does not provide any response to existential questions or revise one's beliefs when necessary.

In the more recent conceptualization of Richards and Bergin,[64] healthy spirituality is characterized as positive intrinsic, actualizing, renewing, nurturing, reconciling, interpersonal, and inspiring. According to the same authors, unhealthy spirituality is narcissistic, aggressive, extrinsic, perfectionist, authoritarian, dependent, and hyper-spiritual.

Lisa Cataldo summarizes this point very well:

> Spirituality, as an aspect of human life, can be lived out in both positive and negative ways. On the positive side, it can lead us to good-humored acceptance of our flawed selves as both miniscule blips in a wide, wide universe and glorious examples of creativity and love. It can make us aware that "nothing human is

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[60]   Ibidem.
[61]   W. James, *The Varieties...*, op. cit.
[62]   Ibidem, p. 377.
[63]   G.W. Allport, *The individual and his religion: A psychological interpretation*, Oxford 1950.
[64]   *Handbook of psychotherapy and religious diversity*, P.S. Richards, A.E. Bergin (eds.), Washington 2000.

alien to us," that we are as human beings capable of the most elevated acts of service and selflessness, as well as the most base acts of greed, hatred, and destructiveness. This is humility, and it is perhaps the greatest feeling of "real" to which we can aspire. But if it is not experienced as inseparable from our flawed human selves and placed in the wider context of human life, including the power of culture and the reality of suffering, spiritual experience can also lead to solipsism and inflation, a kind of "happy blindness" to our own pain and the real pain experienced in the bodies and minds of others.[65]

Final thoughts

Understanding spirituality in the contemporary context has become a demanding task. Today's concept of spirituality is very broad, universal, and… for the same reason very vague. If we want the notion of spirituality to include all phenomena that today fall under the umbrella of spirituality, its definition will become more and more vague and ambiguous. Despite these changes, people still need guidance in their lives. In the past as well as in the present, spirituality lived in the context of a specific religion normally equipped people with a set of concrete rules and guidelines on how to develop spiritual maturity. Nevertheless, for people engaged in a non-religious form of spirituality, the same principle becomes a challenge. How does one assess any spirituality regarding its effectiveness in helping a person in becoming a better human being? William James[66] already believed that we need more than a pragmatic spirituality that brings to light only what serves human self-actualization. We need a pragmatic component (self-actualization) but also normative one, pointing to the ways of self-transcendence, as Victor Frankl[67] wished to see it in his logotherapy. It would not only be a soft but sometimes a hard version.

In this article, we have presented some reflections on how to understand spirituality in the contemporary context and we have provided concrete examples of how spirituality can be assessed. The project of developing practical rules for developing a healthy spirituality is far from complete and has to be continued, but these are at least some preliminary ideas, proposals and points of departure for future reflection and continuing research.

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[65] L. Cataldo, *Can There Be a Psychoanalytic Spirituality…*, op. cit., p. 283.

[66] W. James, *The Varieties…*, op. cit.

[67] V.E. Frankl, *The Will to Meaning. Foundations and Applications of Logotherapy*, New York 1988.

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