



Issues of spirituality in psychology and psychotherapy¹

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Joanna Pracka^a

^a *Joanna Pracka, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2664-2816>, Institute of Psychology, University of Szczecin, Poland*

Abstract: Psychology was born from philosophy as the “science of the soul”, and was treated and practised as such by the ancient Greeks. Over time, especially after it was reborn in the 19th century as modern psychology with its origins in Wilhelm Wundt’s laboratory, it evolved into a strictly empirical science, distanced from metaphysics and detached from what is spiritual and hence immeasurable and methodologically problematic. Subsequent psychotherapeutic approaches have gone through phases from a reductionist understanding of man (psychoanalysis, behaviourism) to viewing him in a broader, also noetic perspective (existential analysis, logotherapy). There is a certain opposition here in the anthropological assumptions that shape psychology. We still use the prevailing materialistic anthropology, consistently limiting human functioning to its bio-psycho-social dimension; rationalizing all manifestations of human behaviour incomprehensible to reason (excluding the spiritual factor in its interpretation). However, we have realistic psychology and anthropological personalism, which recognizes the manifestations of man’s spiritual life. The constantly developing branch of psychology, which is the psychology of religion and spirituality, shows that the element of ratio is present in the centre of interest for modern psychologists, bringing further research on the connections between human religiosity and spirituality and his functioning in various areas. The practical dimension of psychology, i.e. psychotherapy, is based on assumptions that adepts of particular therapeutic modalities accept “on faith”, because they have no empirical confirmation. The growing popularity of using strategies and techniques derived from various spiritualities in psychotherapy shows how strongly the element fides is embedded in it. To sum up: fields such as psychology and psychotherapy, regardless of what they declare, have always been based on the elements of both fides and ratio, and today they still balance between spirituality and science.

Keywords: spirituality, fides, psychology, psychotherapy, ratio

Introduction

Contemporary academic psychology is dominated by materialist anthropology, while psychotherapy is dominated by axiological subjectivism. On these grounds, the assumption is made that there is no objective good, but only individual personal good (here one can see the implications of philosophical and anthropological assumptions: realism vs. idealism). Consequently, it is the individual “I” that decides what is good for the person, what is true and what is real. With post-post-modern relativism and subjectivism, an unspecified well-being of the individual has become one of the primary goals of therapy, while the criteria for this well-being are defined by the individual themselves. Just as everything that is subjective, this too can be subject to constant fluctuation and variability. The undermining of the assumptions of realist philosophy and anthropology

(that reality, and we ourselves, exist in an objective way) has led to modern man getting lost in his subjective ‘truths’. The surrounding world intensifies this confusion, as any sense of constancy and certainty has been eroded, and people or institutions that used to stand as authority figures have been devalued and replaced by all types of gurus, influencers or celebrities, who appear and disappear. These new pop-culture authority figures often rely on a certain syncretism of psychology, coaching and a kind of spirituality.

While declaring to rely mainly on rational arguments, the present-day human being is just as often seeking something more than what is tangible and empirically experienced. One can hypothesise that what the present-day human being is seeking is associated with transcendence. Thus we can observe a widespread, often uncritical, reliance on science; but this is also

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accompanied by the growing popularity of various currents of pop-psychology and pop-spirituality, with new theories and therapy methods emerging, including those that elude scientific verification. Some therapists admit explicitly that “knowledge is a love affair between the explored and the unexplored” (Gierszewska, 2024). The growing demand for all kinds of developmental, spiritual and healing practices and the popularity of various pseudo-therapies now has its own name: psychowashing (Gutral, 2023).

Such approaches, however, give rise to a reflection on the nature of the human being, which cannot be reduced to a merely measurable biological-cognitive-emotional plane, and whose noetic dimension (Hornik, 2024; Popielski, 1994) demands, as it were, to be updated. The human being has a strong urge to seek the transcendent: that which transcends the surrounding reality and the human being themselves. This is related to transcending the temporal realm; which responds to the need for meaning in humans (Frankl, 2010, 2012; Solecki, Rusin, 2024). It can be fulfilled in different ways: in both theistic and atheistic spirituality/religion (Tyrała, 2013). Anything can become a ‘God’, and religion may be concerned with very specific things that bear no relation to institutional religiosity. One instance is the cult of a healthy, muscular body; its fanatics have a tendency towards bigorexia, following rituals in the form of strictly observed meal times and training hours, as well as a ‘declogue’ of what one is allowed to eat and what one is not allowed to eat under any circumstances (Modrzyński, Mankowska, 2022). There are many other instances of how spheres of contemporary human life that were not originally considered “sacred” have been “made divine”. This does not necessarily imply a clinically diagnosed addiction, but it is possible.

1. The philosophical roots of psychology as a science

In this context, how should a scientific field such as psychology and its practical application in psychotherapy be understood and perceived?

In order to attempt to answer this question, it is necessary to start by examining the origins and roots of psychology itself. By way of reminder, the

very etymology of the word psychology from Greek is psyche: soul and logos: word, thought, reasoning. The term “psychology” thus means the science of the soul. Psychology was practised as early as antiquity. The ancient Greeks, however, did not use the name “psychology”; instead, when referring to psychology, they used the phrase *περι ψυχής* (*peri psychis* – about the soul). Not a distinct discipline at the time, psychology was treated as part of philosophy. Philosophers were most interested in the specific character of the mental processes: whether they are material in nature or the function of a separate substance (the soul). The philosophers who made the most significant contributions to the development of psychology were Plato (who was the first to describe the internal conflicts, biological, cognitive and religious functions of the soul; Plato, 2021), Aristotle (who made a systematic classification of the mental process and developed the laws of association; Brentano, 2023; Aristotle, 2021), Saint Augustine (who studied introspection and human behaviour; sometimes referred to as the father of Christian psychology; Charry, 2006) and Descartes (who developed such constructs as innate ideas and nativism; Descartes, 2024). The very name “psychology” was artificially created only in the 16th century, first appearing on the title page of a 1590 book by Goclenius, a German Philosopher: *Psychologia: hoc est, De hominis perfectione, animo et in primis ortu hujus, commentationes ac disputationes quorundam theologorum & philosophorum nostrae aetatis*. (Psychology: or the perfection of the human being, the mind and, above all, its origin, commentaries and discussions by some theologians and philosophers of our time; Stachowski, 2000).

Ancient thinkers did not distinguish between the soul as the principle of life and the psyche as understood today. This division of psychic functions into two dichotomous dimensions stemmed from the failure to distinguish the psyche as an intermediate dimension, connecting the spiritual soul to the body. The origins of the identification of the psyche as a separate construct, now studied in psychology, lie in the distinction of Descartes’ *cogito* (Descartes’ dualism has received much criticism, e.g. Damasio, 2022). In the age of modern philosophy,

psychology as a science and its subject – the psyche did not exist. Ancient, medieval and modern philosophical thought do not distinguish or name the psyche as a distinct dimension of the human being. While moving away from metaphysics to turn their attention to the emerging natural sciences, scholars made a breakthrough, enabling the emergence of psychology as a new science.

2. The emergence of modern empirical psychology and the directions of its further development

Psychology is considered to have been constituted as an independent empirical science when Wilhelm Wundt founded the first psychology laboratory at the University of Leipzig in 1879. Wundt systematised a method of recording subjective sensations, referred to as introspection. The introspective method was based on the assumption that one can only investigate mental processes “from the inside”, by recording conscious sensations. (Pankalla, Stachowski, 2011; Radu, 2019).

As psychology has developed as an academic science, research paradigms have changed. New directions and schools of psychology have emerged, and continue to emerge, with a variety of research goals. These research agendas feature various philosophical schools. Although psychology is gradually beginning to abandon philosophical assumptions in favour of experimental research, one should not overlook the role of the philosophical concepts that underpin the theoretical foundations of these psychological schools. Moving away from metaphysics and turning attention to the natural sciences led to the emergence of psychology as a separate science with its own methodology and research focus. At the same time, this has resulted in psychology being reduced to a detailed science, limiting the scope of research into the depths of human nature to its own methods. Ever since its debut as a science, psychology has selected only those psychological processes that can be observed and measured (perception, attention, behaviour, memory, etc.) while ignoring psycholog-

ical phenomena that are more subtle or less visible. Over time, this has given rise to the idea that the invisible does not exist, and has, in some ways, erased the recognition and value of a deeper psychological and spiritual life (Buju, 2016). This has resulted in a shift in the conceptual apparatus of psychology away from metaphysical concepts. Concepts such as “free will” (in modern psychology synonymous with motivation); human values (now in psychology synonymous with basic motivational goals), character and its formation (now: discovering and developing one’s own potential/strengths), or forgiveness (in systemic constellations, forgiveness is a negative phenomenon, as it places the victim above the perpetrator; Hellinger, 2006). One can venture to conclude that concepts describing the human psyche and relating, to some extent, to spirituality have become a problematic issue for the modern psychologist or psychotherapist (Monk, 2012). In summary, modern psychology has largely adopted the methodological tenets of behaviourism and, as the heir to positivism and neopositivism, has narrowed its focus to human cognition. What has a *raison d’être* in psychology is only what is evidence-based, in line with the “do not theorise, but test” principle.

3. The influence of materialist anthropology and psychological reductionism on the development of psychotherapy

How has this informed the psychological trends that shape the approach to the human being in an applied field, such as psychotherapy? Freud, considered to be the father of psychoanalysis, assumed that religious experience was fully explainable by psychology as a neurotic mechanism, both at an individual and social level, and this influenced psychotherapists’ attitudes towards the patient’s spirituality for many years. Freud’s “projection theory” of religion assumes that belief in God is merely a product of the human desire for security, and psychoanalysis provided a satisfactory explanation for atheism. Religious belief came to be attributed to irrational human psychological needs. This heavily reductionist attitude has

been put into practice as a postulate of neutrality, with the rationale being that a religious attitude is a highly morally judgmental one, in conflict with the ethical principles of psychotherapy.

Psychoanalysis reduces the human being to their instincts and drives. It is notable that attempts to reconcile the reductive attitude of psychology, especially psychoanalysis, with the spiritual dimension were made in the field of psychology by such eminent scholars as C.G. Jung and E. Erikson. A highly interesting field itself, one that inspires multitudes of people (not only psychologists and psychotherapists, but also artists and creators) and is part of our culture, psychoanalysis is based on the assumptions that, while very interesting and profound, are mostly empirically unproven (Paris, 2017). When asked what they think about there being no confirmation of psychoanalytic theories on scientific grounds, some practitioners of psychoanalysis reply that these theories have not yet been proven, but that it is a matter of time. The purpose of this article is not to criticise psychoanalysis, without which all modern psychology would not exist. When researchers encounter many personality concepts (not only psychoanalytic ones, by the way) they intuitively have a conviction of something transcendent (at the level of intuitive processing/thinking), but there are no tools (or according to some: not yet) to verify these theories through rational processing. The fact that the personality theories underlying therapeutic approaches are unverifiable does not mean that psychotherapy itself is not effective (Shedler, 2010). Still, it has been argued that what proves to be effective in therapy (more than or even independently of the approaches, strategies or techniques used, something that is common to all therapeutic modalities) is the bond that develops between the therapy participant and their therapist (Król-Kuczowska et al, 2018; cf. also Czabała, 2006).

The behaviourists, led by John Watson, called for the study of the human being as a “black box”, by analysing the connections between incoming stimuli and responses. This limits the perception of the human being to their behavioural sphere. At the same time, one should bear in mind that Skinner considered a person’s thoughts as behaviour as well

(Skinner, 2022). While cognitive-behavioural therapy has emerged as one of the psychotherapeutic perspectives with the best empirically proven clinical efficacy, it is often considered a therapy associated with reductionist thinking about the human being. It is notable that the 1980s saw the emergence of religious/spiritual cognitive-behavioural psychotherapy (R/S CBT), which has continued to be developed. In this strand, religion and spirituality issues are deliberately and intentionally integrated into the psychotherapy process, yielding positive results (e.g. de Abreu Costa, Moreira-Almeida, 2022).

4. The noetic dimension of the human being in psychology and psychotherapy: a new (old) perspective on the human being

These reductionist tendencies in the understanding of the human being, in both psychoanalysis and behaviourism, triggered a response, leading to the emergence of humanistic and existential psychology. Maslow developed the concept of a pyramid of needs, with self-actualisation at the top (Maslow, 2013). More hope for overcoming the reductionist view of the human being by psychology and psychotherapy came with the emergence of Viktor Frankl’s logotherapy, which assumes that the individual comprises not only the cognitive-emotional, biological and behavioural spheres, but also the spiritual sphere. Logotherapy triggers the spiritual, noetic and existential dimension (Szykula, 2022). It contradicts determinism, emphasising human freedom. Frankl discussed the need for meaning and the areas in which it can be discovered: in a mission that we dedicate ourselves to, in the attitude towards suffering that one adopts (Frankl, 1998), our relationship with a fellow human being based on love or a relationship with a god/superpower. In his existential analysis, the founder of logotherapy went further than his humanist predecessors: it is the need for self-transcendence, i.e. a need related to the noetic dimension of the human being, that is placed at the top of Frankl’s hierarchy of human needs, above self-actualisation. Furthermore, Frankl in some ways

modernised Maslow's approach to needs (whereby the satisfaction of lower-order needs is a prerequisite for the satisfaction of higher-order needs) by demonstrating that the insufficient satisfaction or lack of satisfaction of lower-order needs does not preclude the realisation of higher-order needs, with self-transcendence at the forefront. This was corroborated by cases of people in concentration camps (Frankl being one of them), who preserved their human dignity and were able, in the face of such extremely harsh and destructive conditions, to transcend beyond the "here and now" towards something that surpassed them. The implications of placing transgression/transcendence beyond the self at the top of the pyramid of needs indicate that when one relinquishes, to an extent, self-actualisation and becomes concerned with the realisation of "self-transcendence" needs (through the pursuit of such higher values as, for instance, love, goodness, God, freedom, etc.), this self-actualisation appears in one's life somewhat incidentally, as a "side-effect" of the values pursued.

In Poland, a broader, non-reductionist view of the human being was proposed by Kazimierz Dąbrowski (2021), with his theory of positive disintegration, showing a perspective of transcendence and development of the human being. Speaking of Dąbrowski, it is interesting to note that although his achievements have not received much attention in Europe, North America has for some time been witnessing a renaissance of interest in his work, including in its practical, or therapeutic, aspect. The noetic dimension of the human being is so very "human" that even the rapidly developing artificial intelligence, which is predicted to be able to eliminate the need for human presence and activity from many areas, is unlikely to replace the human being in this dimension (Strzelecki, 2024).

5. Spirituality and related concepts from the perspective of psychological research

For many years now, one has witnessed how the concept of spirituality has infiltrated psychology. In psychological publications, authors are ever more

likely to distinguish a person's spiritual sphere, referring to spiritual development, spiritual intelligence and moral intelligence (e.g. Soejanto et al, 2024). Positive psychology is concerned with such constructs as intellectual humility (e.g. Kroplewski et al, 2022), gratitude (e.g. Wong et al, 2024) and virtues (Seligman, 2005), to name but a few. In terms of content, the concepts of "spirituality" and "human spiritual dimension" are related to concepts already found in psychology: the noetic dimension of personality (Popielski, 2018), self-actualisation (Maslow, 2013), a sense of coherence (e.g. Schaffer et al, 2023) or transgression (Kozielecki, 1987).

One of the topics that researchers frequently address in the context of religion are issues in the area of religious psychopathology, such as religious delusions (i.e. Dyga, Stupak; 2018). Scholars themselves acknowledge that distinguishing religious beliefs from religious delusions remains challenging, given the spiritual and supernatural nature of the former. (Sofou et al, 2021). Some scholars argue that a clinical perspective on religion and spirituality should transcend the limitations of statistical and diagnostic manuals, such as DSM-5 (Prusak, 2016). Diagnosing and interpreting whether a given case of "odd behaviour" falls more under psychopathology or under the spiritual sphere, i.e. distinguishing between what is "disturbed" and what is "spiritual and demonised" is a highly challenging and problematic task. It requires, once again, dissecting the human being separately into their functioning at the spiritual level and their functioning at the psychological level. Many researchers do not regard this as a dilemma, assuming that the spiritual does not exist. They treat symptoms interpreted by exorcists as demonic as dissociative symptoms of a traumatised, divided self.

Spirituality as a psychological concept has the status of a theoretical construct, which is not directly measurable. In this respect, it does not differ from basic psychological concepts, such as personality, intelligence, cognition or will. The psychological measurement of religiosity is an attempt to address the scientific approach to the study of religiosity in psychology (Jarosz, 2011). Tools relating directly or indirectly to religiosity or spirituality are being developed (e.g. Chaim, 2021; Falewicz et al, 2023;

Pingani et al, 2021). In their work, researchers address such topics as psychological factors influencing de-conversion (Krok et al, 2024; Zarzycka et al, 2023a; Zarzycka et al, 2024a), religiosity as a protective factor (Rodzeń et al, 2021), the impact of spiritual well-being on psychological well-being (Zarzycka et al, 2024b), the mediating role of forgiveness and hope in the relationship between religiosity and life satisfaction (Rydz et al, 2024), religious struggle (Zarzycka, 2023), the role of prayer and religious orientation (Zarzycka et al, 2023b), the relationship between everyday spiritual experiences and life purpose (Adamczyk, et al, 2022) and the relationship between religious support and psychological functioning (Zarzycka, 2023c). The number of new publications at the intersection of psychology and religiosity/spirituality demonstrates that this area to be of interest to many researchers.

6. Effectiveness of therapies incorporating a transcendental aspect using spirituality resources

Although psychotherapy itself prefers the model of a worldview-neutral therapist who makes no reference to the sphere of spirituality and religiosity, unless the therapy participant themselves raises this topic, it does use methods that address the spiritual sphere, whether explicitly or not. One of these, known worldwide, is Mindfulness Stress Based Reduction. Authored by Dr Jon Kabat-Zinn, a neuroscientist at the University of Massachusetts, USA, the MBSR course is now the most popular and clinically researched stress reduction programme in the world. The benefits of meditation have been demonstrated in a number of clinical studies (e.g. Arrastia-Chisholm et al, 2024; Radon, 2017; Zangri et al, 2024).

Another approach that clearly addresses spirituality is Bert Hellinger's family constellations method albeit in a way that makes use of occult assumptions. While being very popular in Poland (Kromer, 2024),

it is not a recognised therapeutic method in Germany, Hellinger's homeland. The constellations are based on the "knowing field" theory, whereby a complete stranger placed symbolically in the place of someone from the patient's family has the same feelings as the person they represent although they know nothing about the person. Therapists working in this stream refer to the occult work of Rupert Sheldrake and his morphogenetic field (Sheldrake, 2016).

Conclusions

Modern psychology increasingly appreciates such spheres of human functioning as religiosity and spirituality and, as a science, studies and explores them.

It should be mentioned that, there is also a large group of therapists in Poland who come together and rely on the noetic dimension in their activity, e.g. the Polish Institute of Logotherapy, which focuses on the sense-making effect of values (Solecki, 2024), and those who develop the "Christian psychology" current in centres affiliated to the Association of Christian Psychologists (and this is accompanied by an ongoing dispute: is there such a thing as Christian psychology, or is psychology one and only its practitioners have a particular worldview). In Kraków, there is a group within the Karol Wojtyła Thought Institute, bringing together psychiatrists, psychologists and psychotherapists who draw on Karol Wojtyła's personalism in their work (Wojtyła, 2020; Harciarek, 2008).

Therapists who embrace a Christian perspective deem faith to be an experience that produces the desired change (Barbaro, 2008). The results of a meta-analysis of dozens of studies of "spiritual" therapies conducted between 1984 and 2005 on people suggest that a spiritual approach in psychotherapy can produce positive effects (Smith et al, 2007). One can thus recognise the beneficial effects of religiosity/spirituality on human psychological wellbeing and to also consider religion as a powerful as a powerful tool for handling stress and life crises (Ostaszewska, 2014).

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