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## **RELIGION, SPIRITUALITY AND VIRTUE**

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## Religion, spirituality and virtue

John Radford

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*'Religion', 'spirituality' and 'virtue' are often used with the implication that they are closely related, or even the same thing, though other uses distinguish them. Of various possible modes of definition, an operational one seems the most helpful. Religion can best be taken as a polythetic concept, defined by a selection from a list of characteristics. Spirituality has several different meanings, while virtue corresponds to one entity, with much agreement, though also some disagreement, as to what counts as virtuous. The three overlap in some respects but are distinct in others. It is desirable to be clear about precisely what is meant in any discussion of them.*

'Religion', 'spirituality' and 'virtue' (or in the last case a similar word, such as wisdom, or morality, or goodness) are often used with the implication that they are inextricably linked, sometimes almost as if they are interchangeable. To give just a few examples, Jones, Wainwright and Yarnold (1986), under the title *'The Study of Spirituality'*, say: 'We are concerned with the individual prayer and communion with God, both of the "ordinary Christian" and of those with special spiritual gifts'. Hardy (1979) published *'The Spiritual Nature of Man: A Study of Contemporary Religious Experience'*. Vincent Nichols, the newly appointed Roman Catholic Archbishop of Westminster, was quoted in *The Daily Telegraph*, 29<sup>th</sup> March 2009, to the effect that 'Britain has increasingly abandoned spiritual and moral principles in favour of secularism ... social values such as compassion, respect and tolerance (will) be lost if disconnected from their roots in Christian teaching'. These all suggest identity. Others propose a close relationship. For example Whomsely and Seims (2008) argue that 'religion can be conceptualized as different from spirituality. Perhaps, spirituality can be understood as a property of the Universe that can be felt and experienced by the individual, whereas religion is the institutionalised, formalized way of experiencing that is based on faith, and what other people believe or have believed'. Similar views have become quite popular. The singer Neil Sedaka said in an interview (*Metro*, 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2009): 'I am a spiritual person – not a religious person – but I feel some higher power when I write and when I saw the birth of my children and grandchildren'. Bartlett (2006) found in a sample of 1600 American professors in the natural and social sciences, over two thirds thought of themselves as 'spiritual'. Other studies suggest that fewer than that number would be 'religious', and Bartlett found 22% of those who actually said they were atheists, also said they were 'spiritual'. For many scientists, Bartlett suggests, spirituality has replaced religion. Heelas and Woodhead (2005) make a similar claim in general.

Cline (2009), however, rejects this distinction on the grounds that there is nothing that can be said of the one that cannot also, at least sometimes, be said of the other, for example that they involve a personal quest for God (however defined), that they employ

more or less prescribed procedures, and so on. Neither is better or worse than the other. He argues that the distinction arose, at least in the USA, out of a general tendency towards the rejection of authority in the 1960s, with an individualistic 'spirituality' being seen as better than a conformist 'religion'. Certainly organized religion is currently declining in Western countries including the U.S.A. (Altemeyer, 2004). Zinnbauer, Pargament and Scott (1999) urge that the two concepts should be integrated, rather than polarized. Humanist thinkers on the other hand, for example Kurtz (1988), have long argued that moral or other 'virtues', and 'spiritual' qualities, have nothing intrinsically to do with religion. An Anglican bishop has made a case for 'keeping religion out of ethics' (Holloway, 1999). Snyder and Lopez (2007), from a 'positive psychology' perspective, assert that religion and spirituality (and perhaps by implication virtue) should not be equated.

### Definitions

It seems desirable to be clearer about what the words do, or should, refer to. There is a danger of thinking that because there is one word, there must be one thing to which it refers (a common problem in psychology, as witness the long debates over the meaning of 'intelligence', for example). There are various approaches to definition, for example stipulative, lexical, essentialist, operational (Radford, 2006). The first might be called the Humpty Dumpty method, stating what one intends a term to mean. The second is the dictionary meaning, how a term is used within a particular language group. The third tries to identify usually one defining characteristic, sometimes with the implication of stating what a term 'really' means. The fourth is concerned with what functions or counts as the thing in question. Each of these can be appropriate in different cases. The lexical approach is often a good start, and where better than the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Concise version (4<sup>th</sup> edition, 1951) in this case. For 'religion' this gives five senses. The two relevant ones are: 'one of the prevailing systems of faith and worship', and 'human recognition of superhuman controlling power and especially of a personal God entitled to obedience'. 'Religious' means essentially being imbued with, or concerned with, religion. For 'spirituality' there are six senses, only one being relevant here: 'quality or condition of being spiritual; attachment to or regard for things of the spirit as opposed to material or worldly interests'. But 'spiritual' includes 'of spirit as opposed to matter', 'concerned with sacred or religious things', and 'having the higher qualities of the mind'. For 'virtue' there is 'moral excellence, uprightness, goodness'. 'Virtuous' means having these qualities. (The senses I have dismissed are, for example, 'ecclesiastical property' for 'spirituality'.) 'Moral' itself can cause confusion. There is a tendency to think of it primarily in relation to sex, but the dictionary refers essentially to a distinction between right and wrong. Indeed 'virtuous' can have a slightly pejorative ring to it, a suggestion of priggishness. These definitions would certainly help a person who did not know the meaning of the terms, and that is what a dictionary is for. But they clearly raise many questions, such as, what exactly is moral excellence, or what of 'religious' systems such as Zen Buddhism which pay little or no attention to worship or a deity. An essentialist definition (which has often been applied to religion in particular) is not likely to fit, as all three terms seem to have many components. A stipulative definition can apply if we wish to restrict the discussion: 'When I mention religion, I mean the Christian religion; and not only the Christian religion, but the

Protestant religion; and not only the Protestant religion, but the Church of England. And when I mention honour, I mean that mode of divine grace which is not only consistent with but dependent upon this religion' – Reverend Thwackum, debating whether honour is possible without religion, in *The History of Tom Jones*, Henry Fielding, 1749. Rather, therefore, an operational approach seems the most useful.

### **Religion**

Taking the terms in turn, in the case of religion I have suggested that a special case of an operational definition is when there is not an exact match between different examples of what is being defined (Radford, 2006). What we need then is a polythetic or 'family resemblance' type of definition. Two farmers, for example (or perhaps two psychologists) may overlap hardly at all in what they actually do or are, yet there is no argument that they belong in the same category. Similarly with religion. If, like Dr Johnson's 'Observation' with extensive view, we survey mankind from China to Peru, we find a host of varying behaviours that count as religions. They all share some of a family of characteristics. Several writers have offered lists of these, e.g. Alston (1967) and Brown (1988). I drew on these to make a list of twenty (Radford, 2006). This is not meant to be definitive, nor are they all equally salient or peculiar to religion. Briefly, they are: belief in supernatural beings; distinction between sacred and profane; ritual; moral code; religious feelings (awe etc); prayer; a sense of purpose for the individual and the universe; a corresponding organization of life; a social group; doctrine; sacrifice; priesthood; retreat and pilgrimage; myth, legend and history; expression in the arts; spiritual development; mystical experience; iconography; ceremonies and festivals; a formal organization. Obviously each of these can be expanded at great length. A few might be regarded almost as necessary conditions for the label 'religious', for example some belief in the supernatural, whether a personal or impersonal entity, or a state of being quite distinct from that of ordinary experience. But I doubt if any one component, or even two or three, could be regarded as sufficient.

Religions can also vary in many ways, both between themselves and even within one carrying the same title. These ways are generally matters of emphasis rather than sharp divisions. Alston (1967) suggests three major groups of religious orientation, the sacramental, the prophetic and the mystical. Some of the ways in which these differ are, first, the location of the divine; respectively in things (holy objects, places, books etc) and procedures; or in human society, and revelation to humans; or in individual experience. Second, response to the divine: by ritual; or by acceptance, that is faith; or by practices conducive to mystical experience. Third, the place of doctrine: it is less important in the sacramental type, very important in the prophetic type, and unimportant or lacking in the mystical type. All these are tendencies, which intermingle, and the balance of which may change with time. It might be better to consider them as dimensions, along each of which a religion can vary. But predominantly, 'popular' Hinduism and other polytheistic religions (such as that of classical Greece, which Alston does not mention), and 'primitive' religions generally, are of the sacramental type. The emphasis is on correct procedures and rituals. Judaism, Islam, and Confucianism, Alston considers as of the prophetic type, and Buddhism and 'philosophical' Hinduism as of the mystical type. But there is, for example, a strong mystical stream in Islam, particularly in Sufism,

and a sacramental one in Tantric Buddhism. Christianity emerged from prophetic Judaism but developed strong sacramental aspects especially in the Middle Ages, as well as mystical ones with individuals such as St Teresa and many others. Today, the Roman and Greek churches tend more towards the sacramental, the Protestant ones to the prophetic, and the charismatic ones to the mystical.

Two further dimensions might be these. One might be termed elitism, the extent to which all can participate fully in every aspect of the religion. Some regard all members of the religion as themselves an elite, compared to those outside it: a 'chosen people'. Others have as it were grades of membership, such as priests and laity. The other dimension is the emphasis on what might be called good conduct, rather than procedures, faith or personal experience. The Emperor Ashoka in the third century BCE adopted Buddhism, and is said to have regarded it as expressing the essence of all religions, which he summarized as '*Few faults, many good deeds, pity, generosity, truthfulness, purity*'.

### **Spirituality**

'Spiritual', and 'spirituality', it seems to me, are in a different case. Rather than a set of family resemblances, the words are used with several distinguishable meanings, though these frequently overlap. One is 'religious' in a formal sense, as in Lords Spiritual and Temporal. A second is 'not materialistic', concerned with things of higher value in some sense. A third might be called 'experiential', but in a special sense, which in religion would be called 'mystical'. Mystics such as Thomas Merton (e.g. 1976) may assert that their experiences are unique in several ways. But it seems too restrictive to deny the word 'spiritual' to non-religious heights of experience, such as profound feelings of empathy and compassion. Both the second and third senses are close to the dictionary meaning of 'higher qualities of mind'. And a fourth sense is belief in, or awareness of, a realm of existence other than that of normal reality. Most if not all religions have held that there is some form of non-corporeal existence, whether of humans (a soul), or some other beings (gods, demons) or both. Or some impersonal 'transcendental' level of existence. But such beliefs, again, can also be held with no religious implications.

We can go further. Aesthetic experience too, in creating or appreciating great art, can surely be said to be spiritual. Those who excel at sport report something at the highest levels of achievement that is very like a mystical ecstasy. Indeed this idea has become something of a cliché in oversimplified Western notions of Zen Buddhism. Eugen Herrigel's book *Zen in the Art of Archery* (1953), which was not really Zen, has been followed by more than two hundred similar titles, as well as films such as *The Karate Kid* (1984), and sequels. Several writers have broadened the concept and considered 'spirituality' in a general, inclusive way as 'the search for being fully human' (King, 2001), or as 'an innate human characteristic [which] involves the capacity for self-transcendence: being meaningfully involved in, and personally committed to, the world beyond an individual's personal boundaries' (Perrin, 2007). This author writes from a Christian standpoint, but that world could be simply other humans, or in a Buddhist way, 'all beings'. Such views might almost substitute the word 'virtue' for 'spirituality'.

### **Virtue**

The second and third meanings of spirituality quoted above, 'higher qualities of the mind', are close to that of 'virtue'. But this is again different. Here there seems to be one 'thing' to which it refers, namely a set or sets of desirable human characteristics. The question is what these are. They are perhaps mainly considered in terms of behaviour and personality traits (such as generosity, courage, devotion and so on), but also in terms of experiences and emotions (such as delight, ecstasy, compassion). Probably every culture, and every religion, has had an explicit or implicit set of traits considered admirable. They vary in many ways. One is in stressing the benefits either to the individual (such as salvation), or to society (as in philanthropy). Another is in regarding them as innate qualities of a select few, often a nobility or aristocracy, or attainable in principle by all, in a meritocracy. And, of course, there are various lists of the traits actually considered admirable. It is easy to think of specific examples where there would be sharp disagreement. 'Turning the other cheek' would not be highly regarded in warrior cultures such as those of Homeric Greece or mediaeval Japan. Our own (Western) culture generally admires heroic self-sacrifice, but balks at kamikaze pilots and suicide bombers. Genghis Khan is supposed to have said: *'To kill your enemy, seize his horses, rape his women, enslave his children – that is true happiness'*, and presumably true virtue (few people would consider that what they value most highly is morally wrong). Fortunately not many would agree with Genghis.

There have been many attempts to establish a universal system of virtues or morals, of what is right and wrong. Some have considered virtues to have some supernatural source, in monotheistic systems often directly handed down by God, as the Ten Commandments were to Moses, and the Qu'ran to Mohammed (via the Angel Gabriel). A minority of the human race believe each of these particular myths, and each version is defended as the only true one. A second approach might be called intuitive. An example would be the American Declaration of Independence: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, etc.' The problem with this is that it is not self-evident. (The 'truth' did not prevent them owning slaves, so it was not as self-evident as all that, even to them.) What the Founding Fathers might better have said is that all men ought to be considered equal. A third approach is the logical, rational one, exemplified by Immanuel Kant's 'categorical imperative'. *'Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.'* Philosophical debate has continued ever since as to whether this or similar grounds are sufficient. An objection at a simple level is that it is very difficult to see how it applies to particular cases. Is it good to give to the poor? If so, how much, and to whom precisely? And what would be the consequences if it did become a universal law? (This objection was raised by the Emperor Julian 'the Apostate' to Jesus' injunction to a rich man to sell all he had and follow him.)

There is certainly much variation in what is considered right or wrong, as in the aims and nature of 'spiritual' development. But at some level, there is also a great deal of commonality. Moses, for example, was told 'Thou shalt not kill' (Exodus 20:13). The precise meaning of this is debated, but God also ordered the death penalty for cursing

one's father and mother, and adultery, and any number of other sexual transgressions (Leviticus 20). This exemplifies the matter. Almost certainly, nearly all human beings would agree that it is, in general, wrong to take a human life. A few would take this as an absolute, with no possible exceptions. But the vast majority would qualify it, in different ways, for example for self-defence, protecting others, legitimate wars, capital punishment, abortion, religious sacrifice and so on. Broadly, the lists of rights and wrongs of probably all religious and non-religious systems overlap to a great degree. As I have put it elsewhere, the devil is in the detail.

A fourth approach appears to be helpful, which can be called empirical, based on examining what people do in fact consider right and wrong. The 'positive psychology' movement led by Martin Seligman and others has focused on human happiness. This is related to desirable personality traits. Their analysis gives six 'virtues', each associated with a number of 'character strengths', or aspects of that virtue. The six are wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. Studies of the character strengths across forty different countries yield very high levels of agreement as to their desirability, with correlations of around .80. Agreement is highest for kindness, fairness, authenticity or genuineness, gratitude and open-mindedness. These are followed by prudence, modesty and self-regulation. There are no significant cultural, ethnic or religious differences (Seligman, Steen and Peterson, 2005).

Hauser (2006) argues that underlying cultural variations there is 'a universal moral grammar', deriving from common properties of the human mind that constrain the range of possible development. This seems to be true in other dimensions of human experience such as language, music, sport and religion. Hauser refers specifically to Chomsky's idea of an innate potential for language, such that children can acquire a specific one without having to learn separately every detail of it. Hauser uses the word 'instinct'. I would prefer the term of the perhaps forgotten British psychologist William McDougall (e.g. 1932), 'propensity', an inherited tendency towards certain sorts of behaviour, which are, of course, modified by environmental factors. Hauser reports studies in which subjects, in different language groups, made judgments of moral dilemmas. These were very largely consistent with two established legal principles, one 'the prohibition of intentional battery', roughly that one should not go around hitting people, the other that of 'double effect', that some harm may be condoned if it is not intentional, and the intention was to achieve some foreseeable good which outweighs the harm. In one study up to 90% followed these principles. But of these, 70% were unable to state the principles when asked to justify their decisions. This is not surprising as it has long been established that we often can't state reasons for judgments (Evans, 1989). Thus, it is argued, we often know what we ought to do but not why. If this is correct, we might suggest that gods were invented, not so much to make us do things, as to explain why we do them. Several writers have proposed that why we do them, is because they have proved successful in the course of evolution, for example, Broom (2006). Complex animal societies, he says, are most successful if members minimize harm caused to one another, and if collaboration occurs. Here are the roots of morality, which in humans is codified and given the authority of religion and/or law. This is of course very similar to the view of religion itself proposed by anthropologists such as

Atran (2002) and Boyer (2001), evolutionary psychologists (Bulbulia, 2007), and the classical historian Burkert (1996).

### **Relationships**

Considering religion, spirituality and virtue in terms of definitions, a lexical type was a starting point. Both the essentialist and the stipulative modes seem inappropriate. When we look at how the words are actually used, in an operational way, it appears that the three words 'religion', 'spirituality' and 'virtue', refer to rather different kinds of thing 'Religion' refers to a conglomerate, which generally includes among other things a belief in non-material existence, and a set of values, with an associated code of conduct. 'Spiritual' refers to several things, which overlap with religion but also have non-religious application. In addition 'spiritual' has a meaning of aesthetic or other excellence which religion does not (of course there is art that expresses religion, but that is another matter). 'Virtues' indicates a set of desirable traits, which overlaps with both religion and spirituality, but is also free-standing, as it were.

The question then arises of just how each of the three relates to the others. Observation suggests that they are not to be equated. There are clearly, for example, both religious and non-religious individuals who are virtuous, or aesthetic or indeed spiritual, or on the other hand lack these characteristics. Church-going can be merely formal, and many avowedly religious persons have been insensitive to any higher qualities. Conversely compassion, self-sacrifice and artistic achievement are not rare among the non-religious. Saucier and Skrzybinska (2006), with a sample of 375 American adults, compared 'tradition-oriented religion' (TR) and 'subjective spirituality' (SS). Using a battery of measures, they found that TR and SS are highly independent, that is scores on one do not predict scores on the other. Each does correlate with other factors: TR correlates highly with authoritarianism and traditionalism, to some extent with collectivism, and to a small extent with openness to experience. There is a high reliance on tradition-hallowed sources of authority providing shared practices including rituals, and rules for social and sexual behaviour. SS is associated with absorption, fantasy, dissociation, beliefs of a magical or superstitious sort, eccentricity, high openness to experience, and a conviction of the importance of individual experiences, including intuitions and fantasies. These two dimensions are not to be equated, however, with particular denominations or even whole religions. But those who do identify with a denomination tend to be higher on TR. These differences also show up in non-religious people. An individual can be tolerant or neutral towards traditional church-going, but scornful of 'mystical' experiences, or vice versa; or of course positive, or negative, to both. The authors warn against generalizing from a purely American sample, but these results do seem to show that it is a mistake to lump 'religion and spirituality' together as a single aspect of human behaviour. Similarly MacDonald (2000) sought to relate spirituality to the well established 'Big Five' model of personality. He distinguished five components of spirituality, concluding that it is a complex yet identifiable construct that includes but extends beyond religion and religiousness.

One way in which religion and virtue appear to differ is just this one of commonality, or agreement. There is pretty well universal agreement that some set of 'right'

characteristics is desirable and achievable. There is honour even among thieves. But there is strong disagreement as to whether religion as such is desirable, and if it is, whether it can or should be one system. For some it is the most vital of human experiences, giving meaning to all the rest, while to others it is at best a dead-end and at worst positively harmful. Similarly, there is as noted widespread agreement as to which characteristics are, in general, good ones, but there is notoriously conflict, all too often violent, over the merits of different religions, and even over variations within the same faith. For thirteen centuries Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims have been at loggerheads over the true successor to the Prophet. Roman Catholics are split over birth control, Anglicans over women bishops, and so on endlessly. Somewhat similar points could be made about spirituality and virtue. The widow of Edward Johnston, the great calligrapher, said 'My husband was a saint. But saints can be terribly difficult to live with'.

### **Conclusion**

It seems that human beings have a range of propensities, to use McDougall's term, which includes such things as visual representation, music, language, as well as religion with its various components, spirituality in its different senses, and virtue however considered. Older writers used the word 'instincts', as does Hauser. Many evolutionary psychologists speak of 'modules'. These uses may not all be exactly equivalent but they appear to be approximately so. There is clear evidence that such traits have a genetic element (e.g. Bouchard et al., 1999; Bradshaw and Ellison, 2008), but are also the product of culture and environment. These propensities are at least partially independent of each other. It appears that each of the triumvirate of religion, spirituality and virtue can exist, in some form, independently of the others. None provides necessary and sufficient conditions for either of the others. Theoretically at least, an individual might occupy one of eight positions, from possessing all three characteristics, through any combination, to none at all. At the same time there are complex interconnections between all three. It is desirable to sort these out, and to be clear what it is that we are referring to on each occasion.

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