

The Making and Unmaking of Prejudice

An Interchange between Psychology and Religion

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Abstract

Whether compassion for all beings in Buddhism, or “love of enemy” in Christianity, unconditional love is one of the principal concerns of all world religions. The profound wisdom of various religious traditions has inspired many to embrace the ideal of universal compassion. One example of such an uncompromising love is Martin Luther King, Jr., who in spite of the overwhelming hostility of his white opponents, continued to adhere to the principle of unconditional love. How do contemporary, average Christians compare? Would average believers show compassion to strangers in need by emulating the example of a Good Samaritan, or would they bypass the needy? Questions like these have been posed and processed by many psychologists for over fifty years. In what follows, I will present the results of a number of studies that suggest the complex nature of religious influences. Research shows that people who are more religious are not necessarily more loving or tolerant than those who are less religious. At the same time, research on the psychology of religion provides insight into which characteristics of religious people are associated with more tolerant behavior. Furthermore, there is growing scientific evidence that mindfulness meditation, which originated in the Buddhist religious tradition, might encourage an open-minded awareness and compassion for others. I will argue that contemplative traditions, such as mindfulness meditation in Buddhism, can become a valuable spiritual resource in fostering the ideal of unconditional love.

Introduction

As a mother would protect her only child even at the risk of her own life, let one cultivate a boundless heart toward all beings. Let one’s thoughts of boundless compassion pervade the whole world – above, below, and across – without any obstruction, without any hatred, without any enmity (Buddha, Sutta Nipata, 150).

You have heard that it was said: “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you . . .” (Jesus, Matthew 5:43-55).

[1] Whether compassion for all beings in Buddhism, or “love of enemy” in Christianity, unconditional love signifies one of the principal concerns of all world religions. The profound wisdom of various religious traditions has inspired many to embrace the ideal of universal compassion. One example of such an uncompromising love comes from Martin Luther King, Jr.’s approach to the perpetrators of racism. In spite of the overwhelming hostility of his white opponents, King continued to adhere to the principle of unconditional love. In his “Christmas Sermon on Peace,” King asserted, “Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our communities at the midnight hour and . . . leave us half-dead as you beat us, and we will still love you” (256-57). It is unquestionable that King lived up to Jesus’ ideal of universal compassion even under the most trying circumstances. The important question, however, is, How do contemporary, average Christians compare? Granted that only those with unique spiritual commitments are capable of reaching the status of ethical exemplars, would average believers show compassion to strangers in need by emulating the example of a Good Samaritan, or would they bypass the needy?

[2] Questions like these have been processed by many psychologists for over fifty years. In what follows, I will present the results of these studies that suggest the complex nature of religious influences. Research shows that people who are more religious are not necessarily more loving or tolerant than those who are less religious (in fact, there is some evidence that non-religious people might be less prejudiced; see Altemeyer and Hunsberger: 124). At the same time, studies in the psychology of religion provide insights into which characteristics of religious people are associated with being less prejudiced. Furthermore, there is a growing scientific evidence that mindfulness meditation, which originated in the Buddhist religious tradition, might encourage an open-minded awareness and compassion for others. I will argue that contemplative traditions, such as mindfulness meditation in Buddhism, can become a valuable spiritual resource in fostering the ideal of unconditional love.

The Making of Prejudice among Extrinsic and Intrinsic Orientations

[3] A renowned scholar and a committed Christian, Gordon Allport, recognized the complexity of religious influences when in 1954 he admitted that religion is a source of both love and prejudice. As he put it, “the role of religion [in prejudice] is paradoxical. It makes prejudice and it unmakes prejudice. . . The sublimity of religious ideals is offset by the horrors of persecution in the name of these same ideals” (444). Allport has hypothesized that the above paradox has its source in the existence of two different religious orientations. For those who follow intrinsic religious orientation, religion is their “master motive,” an end in itself, and the religious teachings are internalized. In contrast, people with an extrinsic religious orientation use religion in order to reach non-religious ends, such as sociability, status, or security and treat creed lightly (Allport and Ross: 434). Allport theorized that those intrinsically oriented towards religion will show compassion and love of neighbor (Allport and Ross: 441). Only those extrinsically oriented will be prejudiced.

[4] Initially, data collected from studies between 1949 and 1990 supported Allport’s thesis. In all thirty-two studies involving Christian participants (primarily white, middle-class

Christians; see Batson, Schoenrade, and Ventis: 295), extrinsic religion was correlated with higher prejudice of all kinds (racial and ethnic, anti-Semitism, social distance, and ethnocentrism), while intrinsic religion was correlated with low prejudice (Batson and Stocks: 418). However, many scholars have challenged these studies due to the fact that they employed self-reported questionnaires as a measure of prejudice. The reliability of this methodology was challenged since it does not tease out the inbuilt bias of the respondents (whether out of desire to appear unprejudiced or out of belief that they are unprejudiced) (Crosby, Bromley, and Saxe; Gaertner and Dovidio). To correct this problematic methodology, researchers conducted behavior based experiments that attempted to examine both overt and covert religiously proscribed (opposed) prejudice. Questionnaires were employed only when the researches aimed at examining prejudice that was not clearly forbidden by one's religious community since these results would not be likely influenced by the desire to conform to expectations from such communities. The results of such studies were complex and intriguing. In general, the extrinsic dimension is consistently linked to increased prejudice in those cases when the prejudice is prohibited by the religious community. Although the intrinsic orientation is unrelated to proscribed prejudice, it is related to increased non-proscribed prejudice (Batson, Schoenrade, and Ventis: 329). These results were consistent with researchers' expectations that the intrinsic dimension would adhere to the religious teachings on prejudice, while the extrinsic dimension might not. Specifically, the extrinsic orientation has been found positively correlated with ethnic and racial prejudice while the intrinsic orientation has been found unrelated to either of these forms of prejudice (Wulff: 231-34). Presumably, since most Christian churches are critical of racial and ethnic prejudice, the intrinsic dimension internalizes these teachings. At the same time, intrinsic religiosity is positively linked to prejudice against gays, communists, atheists, and non-believers, prejudices that are not specifically prohibited and might be tolerated or even supported by churches they attend (Jackson and Hunsberger; B. Hunsberger; Duck and Hunsberger; Batson and Burris). Furthermore, some studies link intrinsic orientation to implicit prejudice even when such prejudice is proscribed (Batson, Schoenrade, and Ventis: 324-25). It should be noted that all of the studies relating religion to prejudice are correlational, so no causal relation between religion and prejudice should be presumed. One can, nonetheless, conclude that whatever the sources of prejudice among the religious, religion does not necessarily curb the existing discriminatory attitudes in spite of its high ideals of compassion.

The Unmaking of Prejudice among the Quest Orientation

[5] Data provided so far does not present religious people in the best light since even the sincere believers show increased prejudice when specific prejudice is not prohibited by their religious communities. However, one dimension of religion, called "quest," is consistently associated with greater tolerance and lower prejudice scores. Quest orientation represents an approach that involves:

honestly facing existential questions in all their complexity, while at the same time resisting clear-cut, pat answers. An individual who approaches religion in that way recognizes that he or she does not know, and probably never will know, the final truth about such matters. Still, the questions are deemed

important, and however tentative and subject to change, answers are sought (Batson, Schoenrade, and Ventis: 166).

Quest religiosity denotes open-mindedness, curiosity, and cognitive complexity. Several studies discovered that quest is related to lower covert and overt prejudice regardless whether the prejudice is proscribed or not (Batson and Stocks: 418-19). That is, not only is quest unprejudiced towards ethnic minorities and blacks, but also is unprejudiced towards gays, atheists, non-believers, and communists.

[6] In addition to apparent high tolerance and acceptance for those associated with quest, there is significant evidence that they might be more compassionate. In one study conducted by Batson et al., participants had an opportunity to help somebody who was either gay or not gay to visit his or her grandparents (Batson et al. 1999). On another occasion, the participants were provided with a chance to help a gay individual who was attending a gay-pride rally. The intrinsically religious students were less likely to help a homosexual even when such help would not promote homosexuality, as in the case of visiting grandparents. Quest religious students, on the other hand, showed no discrimination against homosexuals and were willing to help either gay or non-gay people, whether doing so promoted homosexuality or not. Thus, as Batson points out, intrinsically oriented students expressed tribal rather than universal compassion since they showed antipathy toward homosexuals. Instead of following the example of the Good Samaritan and helping any person who happens to be in need, they chose to help more often those who fit their own concept of the “correct” (that is, heterosexual) kind of neighbor. This study challenges the assumption that the intrinsically religious did not help homosexuals because they did not want to promote homosexual behavior in accordance with “hate the sin, but love the sinner.” The reluctance to help homosexuals with “innocent” activity, such as visiting grandparents, shows not just disliking the behavior, but disliking the “sinner” (see Burris and Jackson).

[7] From this study, it seems that quest orientation exhibits the Christian value of universal compassion, while the intrinsic orientation exhibits a more limited compassion. To test this hypothesis about quest orientation even further, Batson et al. devised a follow-up study. In this study, the participants could help students who were either tolerant or intolerant of gays (Batson et al. 2001). The options to help were spread among helping a tolerant or non-tolerant student to visit his/her grandparents, and an intolerant student to visit an anti-gay rights rally. Under these conditions, quest representatives were equally willing to help tolerant and intolerant students to visit their grandparents, but almost none was willing to help the intolerant student visit the anti-gay rights rally. Here, we observe a clear discrimination against the intolerant activities of intolerant students, but is it a limited compassion? Since quest members are helpful to intolerant students in visiting their grandparents, they show compassion to those unlike themselves. While rejecting intolerance, the quest orientation still displays compassion towards those who are intolerant.

[8] In light of the recent studies, it nonetheless appears that the compassion of the quest dimension has its limits. Goldfried and Miner aimed to examine whether the questing orientation would be tolerant of a religious style that is contrary to their own. Specifically, they focused on determining quest’s attitudes towards fundamentalist Christians (Goldfried and Miner). Participants of the study were given a chance to help a student to donate money

to either an unspecified religious dinner party, to a religious fundamentalist dinner party, or to a project that promotes fundamentalism. It was found that quest orientation was less likely to help a fundamentalist, even when the money was not employed to promote fundamentalism. Thus, it seems that the quest orientation is not universally compassionate, as Batson proposed. Goldfried and Miner conclude that in spite of the fact that the questers might be more likely to help in a broad spectrum of cases, they should not be singled out as more compassionate or tolerant. "Even those with an open-minded style of religious belief demonstrate prejudice. . . This suggests we all may discriminate against those who are 'unlike us' on the basis of our core values. Such understanding could temper incipient self-righteousness and allow us to pursue the humble goal of extending compassion to those 'less like us'" (694).

[9] Goldfried and Miner's findings and insights are important. They indicate that limitless or universal compassion are ideals that are difficult to uphold. Their findings show that humans have a tendency to divide reality between "us" and "them." Nevertheless, some are better than others at collapsing the rigid boundary between friends and enemies, or neighbors and strangers. A more tentative relation to one's religious perspective appears to predispose those who are scoring high on quest scale to have a greater appreciation for perspectives that differ from their own. If the compassion of the quest orientation is somewhat circumscribed, this religious orientation still shows a greater range of tolerance and compassion than other dimensions of religiosity. Contrary to what Goldfried and Miner suggest, quest might be the dimension of religiosity that needs to be elevated over others. This conclusion becomes more apparent when one studies fundamentalism, the group most strongly and consistently correlated with a full range of prejudices (Rowatt and Franklin; Whitley and Kite; Jackson and Esses; Altemeyer and Hunsberger).¹ When analyzing fundamentalist beliefs, researchers stress their exclusive nature according to which there is:

one set of religious teachings that clearly contains the fundamental, basic, intrinsic, essential, inerrant truth about humanity and deity; that this essential truth is fundamentally opposed by forces of evil which must be vigorously fought; . . . and that those who believe and follow these fundamental teachings have a special relationship with the deity (Altemeyer and Hunsberger: 118).

Not only do fundamentalists believe that there is one set of truths that only they have a grasp of, but they also believe that the rest of humanity is in the wrong. This rigid outlook commits them to a dualist account of reality composed of good versus bad, right versus wrong, etc. Correspondingly, fundamentalists divide reality into "us" and "them," where there is "a very small 'us' and quite a large 'them'" (Altemeyer). In addition to disapproving of atheists, they also disparage those who have beliefs similar to theirs. This attitude stems from heightened identification with their religious in-group and heightened rejection of the religious out-groups (Altemeyer; 20; Jackson and Hunsberger; 511; Hood, Morris, and

¹ Individuals who score high on the fundamentalism scale are not necessarily prejudiced since some individuals are atypical, see Hunsberger: 125-26. The presence of some flexibility among fundamentalists is discussed in McFarland and Warren: 163-74.

Watson). It is no surprise that such an over-identification with their own group would lead to favorable estimations of their own group and rejection of views of the others.

Buddhist Meditation as a Means of Unmaking Prejudice

[10] In light of the research on religious prejudice and compassion, there is mounting evidence that religious people with a flexible and open-minded approach to religion are the least prejudiced and the most compassionate (see Sciarra and Gushue: 473-82). While the precise mechanism of this correlation has not been discovered, the studies show that this flexible religious orientation is more capable of embodying the unconditional love ideal present in world religions. Both the Christian command of loving the enemy and the Buddhist principle of compassion for all beings aim at destroying a convenient division of the world into “us” and “them.” Thich Nhat Hanh, a Zen Buddhist monk, discusses at length the danger of a rigid division into “us” versus “them.” To him, taking sides implies a dualistic response motivated by anger that ultimately leads toward polarization. In contrast, an appropriate response is one that strives for reconciliation and peace rather than conflict. At the heart of reconciliation is love that embraces the whole of reality (1996: 93). Integral to Hanh’s argument is a Buddhist teaching of dependent co-arising that affirms “the interconnected and interdependent nature of all things” (1997: 55). Reality is not built of separate entities, but rather each being is inextricably linked to all other beings. Every part of the universe is affecting every other part. Therefore, the well-being of each individual is interlinked with the well-being of the whole human race. Humans “inter-are” so deeply that “the only alternative to coexistence is co-nonexistence” (1993: 120). Taking sides does not make sense from this perspective, because every side is “our side.”

[11] One could oppose Hanh’s thinking by pointing out an intrinsic human need “to identify some people as allies and others as enemies,” a need that “evolves from the individual’s efforts to protect his [*sic*] sense of self, which is intertwined with his experiences of ethnicity, nationality, and other identifying circumstances” (Volkan: 219). While it is the case that we tend to identify with our own national groups, families, etc., this natural tendency for separating into so-called “friends” and “enemies” should be acknowledged and carefully assessed. Such a separation does not need to automatically translate into rigid, dualistic categories of “us” versus “them.” While this separation might not ever be completely overcome, Hahn thinks that the only way to reach compassion towards others is by aiming at a less polarizing attitude toward them. That is, while our opponents might not become our closest friends, we need to move into the direction of recognizing the profound connections that we share with others as members of the same human family who hold similar goals, needs, and concerns.

[12] From Hanh’s perspective, one may arrive at a non-polarizing attitude toward others by practicing mindfulness, a form of meditation that seeks to become aware of one’s states of mind. Practicing mindfulness has been associated with developing a flexible, receptive, and non-judgmental mindset that awakens compassion for oneself and others (Hahn 1996: 53-54). While mindfulness meditation originated in the Buddhist tradition, its practice has received plenty of attention in contemporary psychology, outside of its original cultural and religious context. Since the late 1970s, western clinicians have incorporated the mindfulness practice into various mental health treatment programs, from treating anxiety, stress,

depression, and pain, to assisting those with eating disorders and alcoholism (Ma and Teasdale; Speca et al.; Marlatt et al.; Kristeller and Hallett). Although the research into mindfulness meditation is still in its initial stage, empirical review suggests that mindfulness training offers promising mental health strategies (Baer; Bishop et al.; Allen et al.).

[13] While there are many approaches to practicing mindfulness meditation, their underlying themes and goals are similar. A simple sitting meditation highlights well the basic principles involved in the mindfulness training. After assuming a comfortable position,

We observe the breath as it flows in and out. We give full attention to the feeling of the breath as it comes in and full attention to the feeling of the breath as it goes out . . . And whenever we find that our attention has moved elsewhere, wherever that might be, we just note it and let go and gently escort our attention back to the breath, back to the rising and falling of our own belly (Kabat-Zinn 1990: 64).

This technique embodies the key components of mindfulness: non-judgmental, non-reactive, present centered awareness. Although the description of sitting meditation sounds rather simple, its challenge lies in reversing our customary ways of thinking, that of constant evaluating, and constant drifting into our past or future. When one experiences negative or worrisome thoughts, there is no need to fix or change this state of mind. Rather, one needs to observe such thoughts with an attitude of acceptance and “remind ourselves to be receptive and open to whatever we are feeling, thinking, or seeing . . . because it is here right now” (Kabat-Zinn 1990: 39). Whenever distraction occurs, attention to the breath serves as a reminder to always center back on the breath. By doing so, one prevents further elaboration on emotions and thoughts. Sustained attention on the breath leads to developing flexibility of attention as one switches back and forth between shifting thoughts and breath.

[14] Closely related to accepting any thought or emotion is the idea of accepting any results of the meditation, whatever these may be. Letting go of any expectations allows one to experience the present without fixating on the past, future, or one’s ability to control reality. Focusing on this present moment while accepting one’s mental dynamics does not signal resignation or defeatism. On the contrary, researchers point out that processing one’s life from the standpoint of “here and now” increases mental, cognitive, and behavioral flexibility (Roemer and Orsillo: 174-75; Brown and Ryan: 843-44). Emphasis on process (acceptance of whatever comes one’s way) rather than end-result (acceptance of pleasant events and thoughts) is directly responsible for facilitating psychological well-being. Our habitual thinking strives for the elimination of distressful states of mind and for the preservation of pleasant state of mind. Studies have shown, however, that efforts to control internal events by suppressing them or avoiding them are nonproductive in the long run (Orsillo et al.; Wilson and Murrell). This is so because our internal experiences are impossible to control. Paradoxically, an accepting attitude provides a more effective way of dealing with challenging thoughts and emotions. Thomas Borkovec illustrates how focusing on the present moment and on the intrinsic quality of the process offers a more successful approach to living. He admits to hating washing the dishes, but states that when he conceptualizes doing the dishes out of love for his family, this keeps him in the present. A hateful chore is transformed into a joyful process. In his own words, “I remain in joy as long as I remain focused on intrinsic

values that give me joy, and the likelihood that I will do each of the tasks with a high degree of quality is increased, because the focus of attention is on quality in and of itself” (79). Were he to focus on the unpleasant emotions associated with washing the dishes, he would have more likely experienced negative emotions, which in turn would have affected his performance in a negative way. Borkovec tangibly describes to us a paradox of the acceptance approach: one has to let go of the preferred outcome in order to attain it.

[15] Another valuable result of mindfulness practice is what psychologists call “decentered” relationship to one’s thoughts and feelings (or metacognitive awareness). By observing thoughts without ruminating on them or assessing them, meditation fosters a complex cognitive awareness. That is, a person becomes aware that one’s thoughts are not necessarily facts; they are simply one’s thoughts. There is no guarantee that the content of one’s mental acts directly corresponds to the world outside (Teasdale et al.: 286). Realizing that our minds are filled with fleeting thoughts, we come to know that what we experience are passing thoughts and feelings that may or may not be truthful (Teasdale et al.: 276). To acknowledge that my thoughts are not “me” prohibits one from identifying personally with one’s thoughts or feelings. Instead, one is able to see thoughts and feelings as “contextual, relativistic, transient and subjective” (Bishop et al.: 234). It is not surprising that research links ruminative thought with unhappiness and depression, as devoting much time to elaborating on negative thoughts robs one of experiencing the joy of the present moment (McIntosh: 41-42; Ma and Teasdale: 31-32). As we let go of being trapped in excessive attention to our thoughts, we are able to assess more realistically our internal and external worlds.

[16] By not obsessing or fighting our thoughts, we free up energy to be open to new experiences and unexpected possibilities. This openness and receptivity to new perceptions is referred to as the “beginner’s mind” (Kabat-Zinn 1990: 35). Rather than filtering experience on the basis of our beliefs and desires, one observes everything as if for the first time. Beginner’s mind allows us to jettison our habitual responses controlled by automatic pilot, and awakens us to consider alternative responses appropriate for each unique situation. Meditation practice cultivates such a flexible response by creating “a spacious, non-judging, nonreactive mind” (Kabat-Zinn 2003: 150), a mind that is receptive to and accepting of whatever happens. But how is this attitude different from self-defeatism? Kabat-Zinn explains that acceptance does not mean giving up on eliminating self-destructive behavior or one’s desire to change:

Acceptance as we are speaking of it simply means that you have come around to a willingness to see things as they are. This attitude sets the stage for acting appropriately in your life, no matter what is happening. You are much more likely to know what to do . . . when you have a clear picture of what is actually happening than when your vision is clouded by your mind’s self-serving judgments and desires or its fears and prejudices (1990: 39).

What Kabat-Zinn suggests is that the practice of meditation facilitates our capacity to perceive the relationships between our thoughts, feelings, and actions. Instead of rushing from one habitual thought or habitual feeling to another, mindfulness slows down these inner processes, and, as a result, we see more clearly the interworking of our minds. It is not so much that one becomes numb to emotions; rather one is receptive to a full exploration of

emotional states without being controlled by them (Rosenberg: 70). Instead of past judgments, prejudices, and emotions conditioning us to react in any given context, mindfulness creates space where one can consider other choices that are more appropriate. Thus, by obtaining a fuller understanding of oneself, one is better equipped to eliminate any self-destructive behavior.

[17] Researchers and practitioners of mindfulness meditation inform us that this practice fosters adaptive, flexible, and receptive awareness. By employing nonjudgmental, accepting awareness of one's own feelings, a person develops not only a flexible awareness, but a more compassionate stance towards one's emotional states. Sameet Kumar, a Buddhist scholar, observes that mindfulness and compassion are two interdependent aspects of Buddhist practice since mindfulness is "an extension of compassionate attitude, while at the same time compassion is necessary for mindfulness" (42). Whether anger, hatred or greed, all emotions are not perceived as the enemy, and so all are welcomed. As Hanh phrases it, "If we annihilate anger, we annihilate ourselves. . . If you struggle in that way, you do violence to yourself. If you cannot be compassionate to yourself, you will not be able to be compassionate to others" (1996: 53-54). Any attempt at crushing our anger would display a lack of compassion toward ourselves. Since from a Buddhist perspective, we are inextricably linked to all other beings, without compassion for ourselves we cannot love anybody else. Resisting categorizing emotions as friend or enemy leads to a compassionate response toward our own experiences. Likewise, getting rid of rigid, judgmental attitudes toward others awakens compassion for "our neighbors." Studies have shown that cognitive and emotive empathy increases pro-social behavior (Stephan and Finlay; Batson et al. 2007; Kenworthy et al.: 286-88). In addition, it has been demonstrated that there is a reciprocal relation between empathy and self-awareness (Brems, Fromme, and Johnson). This is consistent with a developmental theory that implies that "people need to possess self-knowledge before they can empathize with others and that once people are able to empathize they are also likely to be aware of their own feelings" (Brems, Fromme, and Johnson: 197). Thus, as Kabat-Zinn informs us, mindfulness not only helps in getting rid of fears and prejudices towards ourselves, but also is the first step to a more empathetic attitude towards others. The less dualistic attitude we cultivate towards our own thoughts, the less likely it is that we will promote the division into the rigid categories of "us" versus "them" in our relationships with others.

[18] Specifically, when facing a conflict with somebody else, mindfulness practice prepares us to slow down and pause before responding in a habitual way (Marlatt et al.: 282). Whether by focusing attention on the breathing or by becoming aware of the growing tension in our body, we are provided with an opportunity to select a response that is not reactive. Recognizing what we brought into the situation that opened us to the angry reaction allows us to dissipate the pull of negative emotions and to develop tenderness towards ourselves and towards the other (Kabat-Zinn 1990: 269). Retaliating only further escalates anger for all involved parties and maintains convenient division of the world into "us" and "them." While being compassionate to another does not encourage retaliation and aggressiveness, neither does it encourage passivity. Instead, a flexible response engages respect for both parties involved, that is, "When you are willing to be secure enough in yourself to listen to what other people want and how they see things without constantly reacting, objecting, arguing,

fighting, resisting, making yourself right and them wrong, they will feel heard, welcomed and accepted” (Kabat-Zinn 1990: 375). It is when we do not feel overwhelmed by the pull of our own emotions, when we arrive at the more calm and centered self that we can be present more fully for others (for example, Singh et al. present how mindfulness training proved to be an effective procedure in regulating aggressive behavior of adolescents). By not following our ingrained reactive pattern, we create a space where an actual interchange of ideas and disagreements occurs, a space where the dissolving of the rigid boundary between “us” and “them” takes place.

Conclusion

[19] Psychological research supports the value of Buddhist insights into creating a less reactive, open-minded awareness. The studies so far deal with the Eastern forms of meditation, but the resources to develop a more flexible mindset present in the Western contemplative traditions also need to be explored (see Keating; Merton; Johnston). Investigation of religion and prejudice has shown that fundamentalism with its rigid, dualistic account of reality is the most prejudiced Christian group. Quest orientation, on the other hand, represents a more open-ended and flexible approach to reality and is linked with fewest prejudices. Mindfulness meditation offers one possible solution on how to promote open-minded awareness. In spite of the fact that all religious groups affirm the importance of love, acceptance, and compassion, such teachings alone are inadequate by themselves to eliminate prejudice. This is so because interactions with other groups involve not only explicit (conscious) attitudes, but also implicit (unconscious) attitudes “shaped by less deliberative mechanisms such as emotional conditioning, early experiences and so on” (Hunsberger and Jackson, 820; see Rudman). Mindfulness meditation could become an effective practice in making ourselves aware of the implicit, conditioned ways of perceiving others. In learning more about the way we process information, both about our own internal events as well as about the external world, mindfulness supplies valuable spiritual resources that may engender concern for the other.

[20] This is not to say that mindfulness meditation is the only practice that might assist in weakening one’s overt or covert prejudice. Scholars who work on reducing prejudice and discrimination point out a number of strategies that have shown some success in reducing prejudice towards others, such as value confrontation and intergroup contact (see Whitley and Kite. These and other strategies have shown limited success in reducing various forms of prejudice; nonetheless, all known measures should be employed to eradicate prejudice and encourage compassion for the other. Mindfulness meditation is one such strategy that promises to cultivate an accepting, loving attitude toward oneself as well as toward others.

[21] All strategies promoting compassion need to be utilized so that religious people are not just talking about universal love and tolerance but also embodying these ideals. Already in 1954, Allport observed that interaction with targets of prejudice and promoting their well-being is more effective than learning about prejudice or hearing sermons about tolerance (485, 495). As stated earlier, Allport believed that religion can “unmake” prejudice, but the unmaking of prejudice takes personal transformation and action on behalf of others. This is still a great challenge as evidenced by an oft-quoted headline, “Sunday morning at 11 remains the most segregated hour of the week” (e.g., *Atlanta Constitution* [August 9, 1987]:

11-A). Although this headline appeared in 1987, one suspects that not much has changed in this area. Clearly, segregation is not found only in religious communities. Stuart Oskamp, a researcher of prejudice observed that contacts between diverse groups in most modern societies are stalled by the fact of segregation. As a result, “contacts across ethnic or class lines will rarely be of a self-involving or personalized sort, let alone featuring equal-status relationships or cooperative activity toward common goals” (11). One does not need a scholarly opinion to learn about this state of matters. Still, the lack of contact across ethnic and class lines in churches and religious communities contradicts their most valued religious principles. Contemplative traditions, such as mindfulness meditation, provide a much needed resource towards developing a life full of compassion for oneself and for others. Jesus’ and Buddha’s call for unconditional love does not have to belong to the realm of a theoretical reflection. Mindfulness meditation supplies an example of a spiritual practice that cultivates the type of universal compassion taught by Jesus and Buddha. The practice of mindfulness meditation might lead to the unmaking of religious prejudice by default.

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