

*Spirit,*  
*Mind,*  
*&*  
*Brain*

A Psychoanalytic Examination  
of Spirituality and Religion

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## Preface

Whereas the religious literature on spirituality, both historic and recent, seems almost boundless, the current psychologic and especially psychoanalytic literature, and also the neuroscientific literature, have but little to say on the subject.

Of course the studies of William James (*The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 1902) and of Rudolf Otto (*The Idea of the Holy*, 1923) are distinguished exceptions to that perhaps overly broad generalization.

Psychoanalysts have historically disdained religion and have not troubled much to distinguish between religion and spirituality. Freud's early statements (*The Future of an Illusion*, and later, *Civilization and Its Discontents* and *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*) had little to say of religion that was favorable. In his later years, however, beginning with *Moses and Monotheism*, he expressed a more benign view.

The early followers of Freud similarly distanced themselves from even a scholarly interest in the subject. When I was a student at the New York Psychoanalytic Institute soon after World War II, expression of interest in religion, and especially participation in any religious observance, was taken as a sign of either weakmindedness or less than full commitment to the discipline of psychoanalysis.

Neuroscientists have until very recently shown little interest in the subject, probably less because of prejudice against religion than because spirituality seems so difficult to measure and observe experimentally. Even today the field is not as open to affective neuroscience as it might be. Do animals experience affect? Few neuroscientists are willing to allow that they do. Therefore, they believe that affect cannot be studied as an object of scientific endeavor, and certainly not spirituality. In very recent years, I have enjoyed the opportunity to participate in online discussion groups that dealt with the subject of spirituality and included scholars of psychology and sociology. Sociologists have not been quite as allergic to the subject as psychologists and psychoanalysts.

I realize that it may be excessively ambitious for me to undertake this task. I approach it modestly because I am not an expert in spirituality or religion or neuroscience, though I do have a good deal of experience in psychoanalysis and psychiatry. What qualifies me for the task, if it does, is my interest and at least a smattering of ignorance in the first three fields, and expertise in the last two.

My introduction to spirituality arose out of my studies in Jewish mysticism, to which I was introduced by three well-informed and good friends: Gerson D. Cohen and Ismar Schorsch, successive chancellors of the Jewish Theological Seminary, and Rabbi Stanley Schachter. My attempt to apply psychoanalytic understanding to the phenomena of mysticism was published in *Ultimate Intimacy: The Psychodynamics of Jewish Mysticism* (1995), to which I refer often in the pages that follow. That effort was encouraged by the then publisher of Karnac Books, Cesare Sacerdoti.

Although it has not been my field of primary interest, I have taken an active interest in neuroscience and its precursors, neurology and neurophysiology, for the past fifty years, and offered a few published speculations in the field, not all of which turned out to be foolish. My introduction to neuroscience came by way of psycho-

pharmacology, which is, after all, only applied neuroscience. The reader will observe that I make some small use of my expertise in that area in what follows. For my amateur understanding of current neuroscience, I am indebted to my good and wise friend, Jaak Panksepp.

My recent studies of spirituality have been informed by distinguished scholars and good friends who are cooperating with me in an interdisciplinary study of the affective resonance of the Jewish liturgy at the Jewish Theological Seminary: Martin Bergmann, Neil Gillman, Richard Kalmin, Morton Leifman, Menahem Schmelzer, and David Sidorsky.

For encouraging me in all of these endeavors, and keeping me accurate and honest in my application of psychoanalysis to these and other studies over the many years, I owe a profound debt of gratitude to my close friend and colleague Peter B. Neubauer. My good friend Elliot Zupnick has patiently heard me out and encouraged me, and for that I am grateful. Jacob A. Arlow, a serious student of the application of psychoanalysis to Jewish studies, has advised me over the years. Paula J. Hamm, who has taken the lead in encouraging the psychoanalytic study of spirituality and religion, has shared her views with me and offered her significant support. David Pincus came to psychoanalysis and neuroscience via philosophy, and has coached me on matters of epistemology—especially the importance of acknowledging contingencies and emergence in the nature of reality. He has kindly provided some of the important material on which my argument is based.

I am averse to expressing private sentiments in public, but how could I conclude these acknowledgments without expressing my immeasurable debt to my wife, Miriam, who, over sixty years, encouraged and inspired me faithfully and lovingly, even when she had appropriate reservations about my various endeavors?

## Introduction

“Spirituality” is a word that has no clear-cut meaning, but many resonances. It evokes a strong response from some people and virtually none from others. It is generally recognized as something to be respected or admired. Many people respond to it with enthusiasm, others find it of no interest. Although it has the power to move many people and bore others, it is not easily defined cognitively.

Spirituality and religion are two different domains, but they are usually conflated. Even William James (1902), perhaps the finest student of the psychology of these subjects, does not distinguish them clearly. In fact, he deals with all of spiritual experience under the heading of mysticism.

I shall try in chapter 2 to suggest the dimensions of the spiritual experience and a tripartite classification: awe, Spirituality proper (which I shall spell with a capital S), and mysticism. I shall then, in chapter 3, suggest an explanation for its origin in the psychologic, or more specifically in the psychodynamic processes that emerge

sequentially in human development. Briefly, I shall try to demonstrate that pure spiritual experience of whatever kind reproduces the affective component of early contact between mother and infant.

Obviously the interface between spirituality and religion requires examination. Spirituality is not religion and religion is not spirituality, but the spiritual provides the emotional force that underlies interest in and commitment to religion. Chapter 4 is a long discussion of the spiritual basis of religious feeling and practice.

In chapter 5, I shall relate what little information we possess about the brain processes that accompany spiritual experience.

In chapter 6, I shall describe mood regulation, a psychic function that I believe to be a major determining function of our mental life, and how spirituality often contributes importantly to mood regulation. Apocalypse, which is closely related to spirituality, is the subject of chapter 7.

Spirituality and religion do not always enlighten and inspire. On too many occasions, we experience a demonic spirituality and a demonic face of god. It is this type of negative spirituality that gives rise to religious fundamentalism and especially its violent aspects, and much of the terrorism that roils the civilized world today. I approach this subject in chapter 8.

Chapter 9 focuses on the account of a week-long “spiritual quest” by a distinguished psychoanalyst. I apply the conclusions about spirituality that I have developed and compare the report with Psalm 19, a discussion of which runs like a red thread through the whole book. This final chapter serves to knit the many aspects of the argument together.

That some individuals take no interest in spirituality and others disdain it does not mean that it is of limited consequence. Spirituality in its narrow sense inspired the composition of the Bible and other religious scriptures, the construction of the great cathedrals, and the elaborations of the great religions. One could argue that it was the spirituality of the Deists in eighteenth-century England that inspired the founders of the United States in devising the American Constitution. In fact, in at least an indirect way, spirituality could be said to have driven the creation of culture in every civilization of the world. In a more immediate sense, demonic spirituality, as



expressed in religious fundamentalism, threatens our culture today, and constructive spirituality drives us to defend it.

Yet science has not dealt with the subject in any serious way. The religious literature abounds with discussions of the spiritual. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, we find it most directly in the autobiographies of the recognized Christian mystics (Underhill 1964). The nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw the growth of a sociology not of spirituality but of religion. Unfortunately the two subjects are usually not properly distinguished, even, as observed, by James, and certainly not by Rudolf Otto, whose contributions to the psychology of religious spirituality stand out (1923). I shall make no effort here to review that copious literature.

What is missing is serious, scholarly study of the psychology of the phenomenon of spirituality itself. Sigmund Freud, who argued against religion, nevertheless had a good deal to say about its supposed prehistory (see Freud 1927, 1913, 1930, 1939). He remarked that he had never experienced anything that would pass as spiritual (1930), and assumed that he had disposed of the matter by explaining the oceanic feeling as a residual memory of the predifferentiated phase of infant development. Although Romain Roland, whose comments on the oceanic feeling he had quoted, argued that that phenomenon is the “source of the religious energy which is seized upon by the various Churches and religious systems” (1930:64), Freud thought that religious needs derive from the infant’s helplessness and the longing for the father that it arouses (72). I shall argue in support of Roland’s position. Among the psychoanalysts, Ana-Maria Rizzuto has attempted to ascertain, from examining her clinical data, the sources of the images of God (1979). Her theoretical presentation is based upon a system called object relations theory. William W. Meissner, a Jesuit psychoanalyst, also has addressed “The Psychoanalyst and Religious Experience.” He quotes Rizzuto’s work approvingly and extends it. Note, however, that these deal with religion and not directly with spirituality, speaking of the latter as though it were only an aspect of religious feeling. Pargament (1997) has published an extensive and descriptive study of the usefulness of religious faith, and the “neurotheologists” have tried to establish a “neurophysiology” of spiritual and religious experience.

Some materially minded people, scientists and others, consider a spiritual orientation a sign of mental incapacity. Spirituality does not deal with material, palpable reality. Palpability is our usual criterion for objective, consensual reality. Yet most of these who disparage spirituality do not disparage music or art or poetry or humor or beauty, or for that matter such abstract, nonmaterial disciplines as mathematics and logic, none of which can be touched or felt. Spiritual experience is no less real as a subjective experience than is the appreciation of any of these human encounters. The first four are affective, that is, emotional experiences. Mathematicians and cosmological physicists, impressed by the evident beauty and even awesomeness of the cosmos and the world of mathematical relations, are among the scientists most likely to describe spiritual feeling. Newton divided his time between mathematical and cosmologic physics, and religion. Einstein had many comments about his appreciation of the religious spirituality inherent in science:

Now, even though the realms of religion and science in themselves are clearly marked off from each other, nevertheless there exist between the two, strong reciprocal relationships and dependencies. Though religion may be that which determines the goal, it has, nevertheless, learned from science, in the broadest sense, what means will contribute to the attainment of the goals it has set up. But science can only be created by those who are thoroughly imbued with the aspiration toward truth and understanding. This source of feeling, however, springs from the sphere of religion. To this there also belongs the faith in the possibility that the regulations valid for the world of existence are rational, that is, comprehensible to reason. I cannot conceive of a genuine scientist without that profound faith. The situation may be expressed by an image: Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind. (1956:24)

The resistance to spiritual experience, and to acknowledging it when it exists, may be traced to any of several personal factors, conscious or unconscious. For example, one may feel that spirituality reflects sentimentality, effeteness, or a thoughtless diversion

from realism. Perhaps, as I shall suggest below, openness to spiritual experience is a function of perceptual sensitivity in general.

It is important to point out that in fact, reality is not limited to palpable, material substance. We have only limited knowledge of the universe outside our minds. Our senses respond to only a limited range of incident energies—light, sound, heat, pressure—and to a limited number of the chemicals floating in the ambient atmosphere. None of the sensations that these induce is perceived objectively; they acquire distinctive qualities from the instinctual needs and tendencies that greet them with interest. The instincts that are active at any given moment create affects, as do the moods that prevail during most of our lives, waking or dream, and these affects welcome or reject the percepts to which we are exposed, and so color them as we become conscious and aware of them. So if what we discern in the outside world is significantly determined by how we feel, moment to moment, then what is reality? Is life what we think it is early on a spring morning when we are young, or what we think it is on a dark winter night, late in our lives? Is a baby a bundle of vital, happy potential, eliciting our smiles and love, or a noisy nuisance demanding care? Is red the color of love or the color of destructive fire? One could answer that in the end, all we can know of reality is the percepts that impinge upon us, colored by the feelings we attach to them. There is no perception without feeling. If there is an alternate reality that we can extrapolate from our sensations, then we can know it only in a limited way, only inferentially, as a hypothesis. Our feelings and the sensations that they embrace are our immediate reality. (For an extensive discussion of the philosophical and cognitive issues raised by the differences between the unknowable external reality and our internal image of it, see Churchland and Churchland, *Neural Worlds and Real Worlds* [2002].)

Certainly the pleasurable feelings that we enjoy while eating a good meal are real. But so are the feelings evoked by music and art and theatrical performances, even though they are not induced by anything that touches our bodies. And so too are the feelings induced in a patriotic rally. Then what is an illusion? An illusion is a sensation induced by a stimulus that is ordinarily not adequate

to induce such a sensation. In the sense that I have been describing, the illusory sensation is real, even though it comes about as a result of a special predisposition of the nervous system to respond to an ordinarily inadequate stimulus. This predisposition leads us to misinterpret the meaning of the percept. A hallucination is a sensation, accompanied by affect (as all sensations are), that comes about in the absence of any external stimulation of any of the organs of perception. Dreams are hallucinations. There may be no external stimulus whatever, but the sensation and the accompanying affect are real. If anyone doubts the reality of dream sensations, his doubts will be overcome when an anxiety dream awakens him.

The thrills that we enjoy while listening to music may be considered illusory if we assume that the sound stimulus is not adequate to cause us to respond that way. And the thrill of participation in a patriotic rally is similarly illusory; the fluttering colored cloth that is the flag would not elicit our enthusiasm if it were not for the patriotic emotion with which we view it. But evidently these nonpalpable stimuli are adequate to elicit the appropriate emotion. So the stimulus is real and the sensory response is real.

What about the sensation of awe, which responds to the perception of scenes of great beauty, enormous structures, extraordinary human qualities, music, and art? The literal qualities of the stimulus do not account for these feelings. I shall argue below that it is not what we see that directly induces in us a sense of awe, but what it reminds us of that we don't see. The sensations themselves and the awe that they inspire must be considered both illusory in that they are not directly given in the stimulating scene, and real in that they embrace us and establish a real mood.

Awe is a spiritual quality, and yet, in the sense in which I have discussed it, real. It is only a small step from externally generated awe to internally generated spiritual experience. The quality of otherworldliness applies to each, and the experience of one is as real as the experience of the other. Even the hallucinations of the mystical experience and the affects that accompany them are no less real than dream hallucinations and reflect the real state of mind and brain.

I am arguing that the events of our minds, no matter how stimulated, are real for us even though it is important to know to what

extent they are determined by imposed stimuli and to what extent by the receptive state of our minds.

To summarize these comments about reality and spirituality: some experiences, hallucinations, are determined exclusively by the state of the subject's brain with minimal external input, but all the other subjective experiences are determined by both the qualities and qualia of the impinging stimuli and the affective readiness of the mind-brain. The experience is real no matter what the nature of the impinging stimulus.

That said, we must take note of the difference between spiritual perception and nonspiritual perception. We think of perception as becoming consciously aware of receiving an indication of some change in the outside world within range of our perceptual receptors. For example, when we converse, we hear and take note of what is being said to us, think about it, and reply appropriately. This is a fully attentive conscious experience. But we also perceive things preconsciously. For example, when we drive, we perceive any number of visible and audible signals to which we respond. Our cognitive apparatus cannot process all of these signals in consciousness simultaneously, but we respond to them appropriately even though we may not notice them consciously. We attend to the road, but not to each of the myriad details, many of which guide our responses automatically, that is, without conscious acknowledgment. When asked about a particular detail, we may say that we had not noticed it, as though we had seen it only "out of the corner of my eye." Yet we had probably responded appropriately to it.

Still other percepts are not processed cognitively at all but arouse affective responses. Music, art, attractive people, beautiful landscapes, and offensive scenes as well, for example, may all elicit appropriate emotional responses without the intervention of studied cognition, though we may contemplate them cognitively after processing them. Communication among subhuman animals is probably purely affective in this sense. A lion's roar elicits an affective response among other lions and doubtless, among other animals in the vicinity. I sometimes wonder whether semantic communication may have been differentiated from this affective modality during the evolution of *homo sapiens*.

But spiritual perception is different, a third variety. Here the primary influence is affective, though a cognitive message may accompany it, for example, the revelation that is usually given along with the hallucination. But in perceiving the surrounding world, many of the functions of perceptual consciousness that we ordinarily take for granted are suspended or altered. Time may seem to stand still or to rush by; motion to be arrested or to become frantic; colors to be unusually bright or dull; people and places inappropriately familiar or unfamiliar; objects larger or smaller than we ordinarily see them; sounds louder or softer. God may appear as the thunder and lightning above Mount Sinai or as the still, small voice that Elijah heard in the cave in Horeb. The entire scene may appear unreal or hyperreal. In other words, many or most of the parameters of sensory experience may be altered so that the percept acquires a distinct stamp of the unusual or even unreal.

One could argue that, in a sense, the spiritual experience is real, but one of its parameters, the sense of reality, is altered so that the illusion of unreality is created. *Déjà vu* phenomenon combines a sense of reality with a recognition of unreality. The sense of unfamiliarity or depersonalization, for example, could be triggered by anxiety or other disturbance of mental function or direct abnormalities of brain function. These are individual components of the complex of regulatory parameters that normally keep us in contact with the outside world, so that we can live and function in it effectively.

The spiritual experience, prompted by powerful affective needs, which we shall study below, can apparently derange these regulatory parameters so as to create an alternate sense of reality, in effect, an apparent escape from the world of reality, so as to transport us to a more welcoming world—or, if the effort miscarries, to a more frightening one. It is in this sense that the spiritual experience is unreal. I argue that it only appears to be so; the unreality is an illusion. The phenomenon is essentially a real one in that it is the real mental state that prevails at the time.

The ultimate argument between the religious and the secular is whether the spiritual affect responds to or makes contact with a supernatural external influence, perhaps divine, or is generated only

by intrapsychic dynamics. The sensation is real in either case, but it may reflect what it seems to reflect, or may be an illusion.

All of this is, of course, introductory. In what follows I shall deal with the nature of the spiritual experience, its origin, its precipitating causes, its elaboration, its effects, and how it relates to mood and the major orientation of our strivings.