DOES SPIRITUALITY PROMOTE AUTONOMY OR SUBMISSION?

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Abstract: *Studies on spirituality have been conducted extensively in psychology over the last decade. However, the topic has been mostly explored in mental-health setting rather than in other areas in psychology. It is not surprising, then, if the most issues explored in the studies were the impacts or functions of spirituality toward psychological well-being rather than toward the realisation of human potentials. In fact, the main reason why many scientists in psychology propose to study 'spirituality' as a separated construct from 'religion' is its unique characteristic which enable individuals to achieve their personal higher meanings or values. This article aims to examine whether spirituality and spiritual practices promote autonomy as claimed by many scientists. The insights revealed from studies on Eastern spiritualities and Western new age spirituality movement will be employed.*

Keywords : *Religion, spirituality, autonomy, submission.*

A consensus toward a single definition of spirituality as a scientific construct among psychologists has not been achieved. However, most psychologists agreed that spirituality has different concept from religion. Many psychological scientists insist that spirituality represents intimate individual experience and personal search of higher meaning which is motivated by personal consciousness. The consciousness operates at the level of the inner self that define who we are (Levenson & Khilwati, 1999). Therefore, spirituality is related to values and beliefs which give individuals meanings of their existence. Thus, spiritual experience may facilitate a 'deep and profound change' over the course of human development (Hill & Pargament, 2003). In contrast, religion is much related to a faith-based institution. Religion is assumed to be only one of many ways through which spirituality finds its expression, while spirituality can be expressed in many ways outside religion.

Pargament (1999: 6) proposed that religion should be characterised as 'the organisational, the ritual, and the ideological,' while spirituality can be seen as 'the individual, the affective, the experiential, and the thoughtful. Spirituality is associated to the dynamic process of self-transcendence, the personal search for meaning, and the search for the highest of human potential, while religion is described as a stagnant and institutionalized belief that may inhibit human potentials. Thus, the difference between spirituality and religion is often understood in the polarization where the spirituality is assumed as better than religion (Pargament, 1999).

Pargament (1999) observed that spirituality as a theoretical construct that is different from, and even opposite to, religion is a new trend. Tracing the history of psychology of religion since William James, he argued that, in its earlier period, psychology of religion was defined as 'a broadband construct' that encompasses both the institutional and individual. In this definition, spirituality has been included in the term 'religion'. He stated that the trend of distinguishing spirituality from religion is rooted from a certain social phenomenon, which is known as *baby boom*, primarily in United States in 1970s when American people, mostly young, do not trust any institution such as government, education or religion. This trend was also caused by the spread of Eastern religious beliefs and practices such as Yoga and Meditation into American and European society. Pargament

(1999) warned that adding the term 'spirituality', as understood above, into the the psychology of religion is disadvantageous primarily because there will be a polarization between individual and institutional as well as between good and bad in this discipline.

On the other hand, Pargament suggested that spirituality and religion operate within the same area because both of them are centred on the sacred. Pargament (1999: 11-12) defines religion as 'a search for significance in ways related to the sacred,' while spirituality is 'search for the sacred'. The sacred is a general term that refers to the concept of God, the divine, and the transcendent. The term also can be used on any object, quality, or attribute that are sacralised based on their representation of, and their association with, the holy. Even, Pargament (1999: 13) stated that 'spirituality is the heart and soul of religion.' However, he admitted that scientists in the field of psychology of religion recently override the search of the sacred from their discipline and tend to reduce the sacred phenomena to biological, psychological, and social motives.

The definition of religion and spirituality suggested by Pargament seems to be aimed to reach broader context. It may be aimed to give an umbrella or general definition that can accommodate the variety of socio-cultural context. Stiffoss-Hanssen (1999) responded the Pargament's concept of spirituality and religion from a Scandinavian point of view and noted that Scandinavians often describe spiritual phenomena as the existential matters such as view of life or life-meaning. For Stiffos-Hanssen, spirituality is not a part of religion but overlap with it because the main core of spirituality is 'existentiality', which is not always related to the sacred. He seemed to distinguish religious spirituality from secular one. For him, then, atheists can be a spiritual when they transcend themselves to the highest value such as principle of equality of all people.

It can be noted from the Stiffoss-Hanssen's response to the Pargament's argument that both religion and spirituality as constructs cannot be separated from socio-cultural contexts. The meaning of religion and spirituality, thus, also embedded in a specific cultural meaning. In Islam, for example, spirituality is similar to the term *ruhaniyyah* from the word *ruh* means 'spirit' (Isgandarova, 2005: 86). Muslims believe that 'spirit' is eternal which is opposite to 'material body' that is mortal. Spirituality is related to the awareness that their purpose of life is not for material world but for God rewards in afterlife (Isgandarova, 2005). Muslims who initiate all their actions with an invocation in the name of God wholeheartedly, the actions such as walking, eating, or sleeping, will be counted as worship. Muslims who behave as such will be called as a spiritual or religious person. In contrast, even conducting a pray or *salah* for five times in a day (the Muslim's formal worship), Muslims cannot be called a spiritual person if they do not contemplate the words they are reciting because it will become just a physical action.

In line with the explanation, Schneiders (1986: 266) defines spirituality as 'the experience of consciously striving to integrate one's life in terms not of isolation and self-absorption, but of self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceive'. From humanistic perspective, self-transcendence refers to the individual's ability to expand their self-boundary to achieve broader perspectives, feelings and behaviours which in turn give them a higher meaning. Self-transcendence is related with the individuals' capacity to make connections with other human being, God, nature, and universe. Self transcendence, according to Frankl (1996), is an inherent characteristic of human being which leads to the sense of self-confidence and the finding of a new purpose.

Thus, it can be said that self-transcendence is understood in psychology in its relation with individuals' autonomy to achieve their life-meaning. In this respect, it

can be assumed that individual will maintain their personal autonomy while they experience spiritual practices. However, some studies on psychology of religion and spirituality reported inconsistent findings on the issue whether spirituality promotes autonomy or, on the contrary, submission.

Autonomy or submission?

The concept of autonomy has been discussed in many areas; however, for the purpose of this article, psychological insights will be used to define the term. In psychological perspective, autonomy is often discussed in the frame of Self Determination Theory (SDT). According to SDT, autonomy can be defined as "self-governance" or "rule by the self", which is the opposite of *heteronomy* that refers to "regulations from outside the phenomenal self" (Ryan & Deci, 2006: 1562). SDT is basically a motivational theory that placed heteronomy (controlled regulation) and *autonomy* (true self-regulation) in the continuum. An autonomous person will behave and make choices based on their awareness of their self and rationality; while, heteronomous person' actions will be caused or controlled by external sources (Kasser & Ryan, 1999).

Some studies has examined how do spirituality and religion relate to self-control and development. Sharoglou and Munoz-Garcia (2008) studied the relationship between personality traits and religion and spirituality. They found that spirituality shares with religion both pro-social tendency and conscientiousness, but differs in the traits of 'conservation' in religion and 'openness to change' in spirituality. The 'religious' participants tend to protect shared values, while 'spiritual' participants tend to allow themselves for new experience. The result also indicated that spiritual participants were able to maintain a sense of self-control for their possible changing experiences. In this case, it can be said that individuals who experience spiritual practices have more opportunities to increase their autonomy than those who join in religious institutions.

Other research showed the relationship between religion (i.e church involvement) and authoritarianism (Altemeyer, 1996; Wulf, 1997). A stronger relationship was found in many studies between authoritarianism and religious fundamentalism (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992). Most those studies employ Altemeyer's 34 item self-report Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) scale which which is inspired by the concept of authoritarian personality from Adorno et al. (1950). RWA asses three dimension: *authoritarian submission* (to the established authority); *authoritarian aggression* (toward those perceived by authority as enemy); and *conventionalism* (strong adherence to the convention upheld by authority). The first and the third dimension in RWA are obviously refer to the submission and adherence to the authority or institution and, thus, the findings convince the assumption states that religion is an institutionalised belief which may inhibit self autonomy and, on the contrary, support an authoritarian tendency. The authoritarianism of religious institution can be seen from the practices and beliefs that reinforce submission and adherence to religious authority. It is not surprising, then, when Wink et al. (2007) found that spirituality (i.e. spiritual seeking), which is said to promote self-control, is related negatively to authoritarianism.

The question is how the construct of spirituality was measured in both studies. Sharoglou and Munoz-Garcia (2008) measured spirituality using only one item (with the statement concerning 'the importance of spirituality life') in eight-items, seven-point scale of religiousness. On the other hand, Wink et al. (2007, p.326) explained in order to gain high score in 'spiritual seeking' their participants had to report a systematic engagement not in churches but in 'non-institutionalised or nonchurch-centered religious beliefs' and

practices such as meditation which 'aimed at incorporating a transcendent dimension in their everyday life.'

Although Sharoglou and Munoz-Garcia (2008) who found that spirituality relates with self-control confirmed the concept of spirituality in mainstream literatures, one-item statement they used to measure the construct of spirituality was clearly deficient. The important thing which unexplained in the way Wink et al. (2007) measure 'spirituality' is how the participants experience their 'systematic engagement' in the non-institutionalised-centered practices. Self report measurement used in the research would be unable to reveal the issue. In fact, to understand a personal spiritual experience which lead to self-realisation/development, the rituals or practices or activities through which individuals gain their spiritual experiences have to be address.

By referring spirituality on the engagement in non-church centered practices, Wink et al. (2007) also indicated that spirituality may not only be experienced personally but also 'institutionally' such as in Yoga groups, meditation groups, sects or Sufism. Indeed, some studies showed that in the beliefs and practices of those spiritual groups, individuals' autonomy and self-control may not be facilitated, even, be diminished. Based on his research on *Dhikr rituals* in a Sufi group, Helveti-Jarrehi, Geels (1996) concluded that 'the whole object of the ritual is to lose self consciousness, to be annihilated' (p.248), and his participant reported more interesting accounts: 'this means submission of personal will, of the self to group' (p.248). Although Levenson & Khilwati (1999) criticized this accounts as the participant's misunderstanding, they acknowledge that the annihilation of self/ego (*fana* in Sufism and *sunyata* in Buddhism) is basic to all mystical practices. They described the annihilation of self/ego as 'the emptying of the self so that the true reality may enter' (p. 253). They asserted that in this respect, Sufism

and Buddhist meditation do not differ with other spiritual groups such as Vedanta, Taoism, or Christian mysticism.

In Sufism, for instance, individuals have to negate themselves during their spiritual journey in order to become a part of divine personality, and remembrance of God (Levenson & Khilwati, 1999). In the spiritual journey, individuals will be guided by a teacher or guru because without the guidance of a spiritual expert they can be lost. The journey is described as a stair which each level has different spiritual quality, thus, needs different rituals and trainings. Individuals who want to climb the stairs to achieve the ultimate spiritual goal, which is a part of divine personality, have to obey all the instructions from their gurus. These kinds of relationship and practice will be naturally institutionalized in a spiritual group or brotherhood.

However, having tried to explain Sufism thought from existentialist perspective, Loutfy and Berguno (2005) argued that the relationship between a disciple and Guru in Sufism is not much to do with authority and hierarchy. The relationship is about 'how two minds reciprocally communicating'. However, they did not explain how this two different hierarchies and positions can communicate in the same level and gain mutual benefits from the relationship.

Transformative vs Defensive Spirituality

The ambiguous experience of the spirituality whether it facilitates autonomy or, contrarily, self-submission has discussed by Battista (1996) who eventually differentiate two kinds of spirituality, namely transformative spirituality, and defensive spirituality. Transformative spirituality, according to Cray et. al, (2006: 12-13):

"involves the individual in deliberate practices (whether overtly 'religious' or not)

which aim to foster mindfulness of the [transcendent] Other (howsoever conceived – e.g. God, Self, Universe) and help maintain a sense of connectedness. This spiritual mindfulness then has significance for the individual in so far as it permeates daily life, guides his or her decisions and provides a continued appreciation of the Other. When people describe themselves as 'spiritual seekers', we understand this to be engaging with transformative spirituality.

Transformative spirituality is healthy experience of spiritual practice that facilitate individuals to be connected to the divine and universe and find ultimate life meaning of their personal existence without denying their parts of whole self. Thus, individuals' autonomy becomes the characteristic that can be related to the transformative spiritual experiences. Autonomy, then, will be more likely to be gained through this kind of spirituality.

On the contrary, defensive spirituality is a false, psychologically unhealthy spirituality (Battista, 1996). The defensive spirituality divided by Battista into two different categories. First, the repressive spirituality which represent spiritual beliefs and practices that aims to support the denial of whole part of oneself to gain spiritual experience. Second, the oppressive spirituality which is described as the spiritual practices that involve the use of certain claims to manipulate and dominate others for the sake of claimants.

The repressive and oppressive spiritualities may differ in the characteristic of spiritual practice; however, both are related each other where the repressive spirituality is the root of oppressive spirituality. Battista (1996) asserted that both unhealthy spiritualities has been practicing for a long time and breed a spiritual authoritarianism.

Battista (1996) stated that in the seventies and eighties there have been emerging new religions and cults in the US with an authoritarian character which can be seen from the relationship of disciple-teacher in which teachers or gurus have an enormous power to control their disciples. Thus, individuals who decide to follow spiritual path in the spiritual group should obey all guru's order and doctrine. In this context, individuals would sacrifice their autonomy for the sake of spiritual experience they seek. Muzaffer (2003), for instance, has acknowledged that authoritarianism has been experienced by certain sufi groups for a long time and now become a crisis that poses a danger to spiritual development.

Defensive spirituality may reinforce individuals to reject some parts of their self and live submissively under the order of spiritual groups or leaders. Vaughan (1991: 106) described the defensive/unhealthy spirituality as the spiritual beliefs and practices that are "based on wishful thinking and the abdication of personal responsibility". He outlined some characteristics of the forms of defensive spirituality as follows:

(a) an escape from reality or an avoidance of the pain and difficulties of ordinary life, (b) avoidance of self responsibility by surrendering to an outside authority, (c) repressing, denying, and avoiding psychological problems, (d) self-deception and denial of the shadow, (e) inflation of spiritual insights, (f) ego inflation and projection of the negative shadow, and (g) replacing worldly ambition with spiritual ambition and making claims of spiritual specialness.

In recent years, defensive spirituality is described as rooted from Eastern mysticism which is different in essence with the Western spiritual movements, although the former has a deep influence in the growth of the latter. If Eastern spirituality and mysticism is characterised by self-annihilation and submission, Western new age spirituality is often viewed as 'heightened individualism' (Bellah et al., 2008). Many publications on spirituality in America declared that guru

system is no longer useful and campaigned that the time has come for each individual to find their relationship with direct, unmediated spiritual force (Bloch, 1998). Thus, the trend has been swinging toward the transformative spirituality.

Quantum mysticism is one of new age spiritual movements in the US that owns the characteristics of transformative spirituality. This new age spiritual movement has strong belief that individuals are creator of their reality and master of their own destiny. Individuals are not separated from each other and not separated from God. They can reach the quality of 'godly nature' by strengthening their ability to create reality, thus influence others, and their new life experiences (Amarasingam, 2008). Schneiders (2000) described this tendency as moving from the Holy Spirit towards the human spirit.

However, although spiritual seekers may experience alternative spiritualities individually, many of them engage in spiritual activities, sporadic or regular, which enable them to experience spirituality in the group levels (Bloch, 1998). In fact, many spiritual groups or affiliation based on Western tradition is still thriving until today such as Agnostic, Unitarian, Wiccan, Pagan, or Goddess spirituality and other small spiritual groups. Bloch (1998: 288) described these phenomena as 'a newly emerging spiritual brotherhood/sisterhood' in America. Likewise, Eastern spiritualities have never lost their appeal in Western society.

CONCLUSION

Spirituality is much described in many psychology literatures as individuals' deep experience of their existence which can facilitate the achievement of their perceived higher values. Spirituality differs with religion in terms of the former provides the freedom to chose what beliefs, rituals, and practices individuals would adhere, while the latter constrain the believers to adhere only what religious authorities and institution said. Thus, spirituality promotes self-control and autonomy, while religion required submission and obedience.

However, such characteristic of spirituality, which is dominant in mainstream psychology literatures, more represents Western modern spirituality rather than other culture's spiritualities. Eastern spiritualities clearly indicate the concept of self annihilation as requirement to achieve spiritual goals, while adherence and submission often becomes the essence of their rituals. Yet, although Western spirituality promote individualism, in practice Western spiritual seekers often engage in new Western spiritual affiliations or join in Eastern spiritual groups to achieve personal transformation. Despite all emphasis on individualism and self-autonomy in Western spirituality, the spiritual communities and affiliations with all their shared values, rituals, and practices which often require conformity, and certain levels of submission, are still considered as important.

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