

# 1



## What Sociobiology Explains about Destructive Uses of Religion

RELIGION AS BOTH BLESSING AND CURSE—HOW DOES ONE respond to both faces of religion as a mental health professional? How should one regard a patient's religious life when its clinical effects might be good, bad, or irrelevant? A clinician, in fact, can help a patient to become more competent and effective in making moral decisions within religious life, with the patient rather than the clinician taking the guiding role. Helping patients reach good decisions about "right" and "wrong" is not a role that mental health professionals have historically relished, however. Psychiatry and psychology originated in part through clinicians' efforts to distance themselves from the moral discourse of religion. From a zone of moral neutrality, psychotherapists from Sigmund Freud to B. F. Skinner have sought to bring science to bear upon problems of humanity.

Nevertheless, a clinician can learn how to enter a patient's world in which actions are about good and evil, right and wrong, guilt and atonement, sin and forgiveness, in addition to the more familiar constructs of perceptions, cognitions, feelings, behaviors, and roles. Experiences of moral obligation, ethical responsibility, and sense of justice can become part of clinical conversations. A clinician can address this moral discourse within an intimate inquiry that is enabled by skilled listening, well-crafted questions, and a therapeutic presence that stops short of taking over a patient's decision making. A clinical map is needed to navigate this territory successfully.

### Three Missions of Religion Exist in Uneasy Union

Risks of harm in religious life are to a great extent embedded in core roles that people most want religion to serve for their lives. Three of these roles are particularly salient in understanding how religion leads to healing effects in some instances and yet to harm in others. These three roles are interconnected but also distinct and separable. First, religion can help ensure group security, whether the group is a religious one or a neighborhood, ethnic group, or nation. Second, religion can strengthen the morale of individuals, supporting a sense of self as worthy and competent. Third, religion can attenuate personal suffering, for self or others. On the surface, these three missions may seem closely related. They do often coexist in harmony. However, they rely on fundamentally different processes, which creates fault lines across which they sometimes pull in opposite directions. Like the states comprised by old Yugoslavia, their surface tranquility disappears when too stressed, and they can tear apart at the seams.

These three missions of religion have different origins. Ensuring group security and building morale of individuals serve to mobilize sociobiological behavioral systems that originated through processes of biological evolution. The ascendancy of *Homo sapiens* over other early hominids depended upon cohesive social groups enabled by these behavioral systems. The role of religion in relieving personal suffering appears to have originated differently as a creative product of self-reflection and ethical decision making by intuitive and visionary religious leaders, a process shaped by dialogue, rhetoric, and other processes of cultural change, not biological evolution. To keep this distinction clear, the roles of religion in providing group security and morale of individuals are discussed as “sociobiological religion,” while the role of religion in alleviating personal suffering is discussed as “personal spirituality.”

#### Religion as a Quest for Group Security

Seeking safety within a strong group accounts for one of the initial thrusts of religion in human life (Barnes, 2003). If *Homo sapiens* held one decisive advantage over other early hominids, it was our species' capabilities for banding together in intelligently organized social groups for the common good (Mithen, 1996). Throughout history, religion has provided strong glue for the roles and responsibilities that make groups cohesive.

The readiness with which people sacrifice their individual lives out of loyalty to religious groups stands as one line of evidence for its importance.

Sixteenth-century Huguenots in France endured torture rather than betray their Protestant faith, while Catholics across the English Channel were suffering similar fates at the hand of their Protestant rulers. Death was considered to be a worthy price to pay for loyalty to one's particular brand of Christianity. Similar commitments have been regularly witnessed throughout history, from Jews dying in Russian pogroms and German concentration camps, to Muslims persecuted in Christian societies, to Tibetan Buddhists tortured by Chinese Communists, to American Mormons killed by American Protestants. Today many still place their lives at risk by putting forward their religious identities in settings of political conflict.

Religious group loyalty also can turn internally perverse. Too often, loyalty to one's religious group has led individuals to violate the most basic principles of morality. Religiously devout southern Christians from my Mississippi youth were silent for generations about racism and racial hate crimes that occurred regularly in their midst. Similarly, the religious today within Islam, an inclusive and tolerant religious faith, struggle to voice challenges against those who use the Qur'an and the Hadith to justify indiscriminate violence. Closer to home, confusion and anguish have run deep in the Catholic Church over revelations about pedophile priests who were protected for decades by their church leaders, who were aware of ongoing abuses of children. Examples of moral blindness of religious persons arising out of protective loyalty toward one's religious group occur so commonly as to seem mundane were it not for their awful consequences.

### **Religion as a Quest for Morale**

Morale refers to one's sense of competence as a person. Possessing good morale means that a person feels capable of meeting one's own and others' expectations (de Figueiredo, 1993; Frank, 1961). Although morale is felt as an individual, it often is more a reflection of the status of one's group in society and one's status within that group (Tajfel, 1981; Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994). Personally, morale reflects confidence in oneself as an independent, autonomous person. Morale can be impacted at either level, externally by one's standing as a group or team member or internally via personal competencies supporting a sense of self.

Frank and Frank (1991) have reviewed evidence from a broad range of sources that an episode of demoralization is the usual antecedent for religious conversion or initiation into a religious cult. For example, Kildahl (1972) found more than 85% of tongue speakers to have experienced a personal cri-

sis preceding their speaking in tongues. This crisis typically involved feelings of worthlessness and powerlessness. The glossolalic experience invariably resulted in a heightened sense of confidence and security.

Evangelical religious leaders and groups typically proselytize by deliberately exacerbating a targeted person's demoralization and then offering religious conversion as its solution. Sermons on guilt and damnation of the soul are followed by an offer of grace and salvation. In daily life, religion is more likely to be invoked in unusually stressful times than in response to more mundane stressors. For example, Pargament (1997) has reviewed evidence that people are more likely to pray over catastrophes and health crises than such minor stressors as problems in the workplace. There is thus substantial evidence that religion, like psychotherapy, can serve a major role in supporting personal morale (Griffith & Dsouza, in press).

The quest for morale can have its dark side. Religious practices that generate hatred toward those outside one's own group seem to bolster morale as efficiently as, and perhaps more so, than religious practices that generate compassion. Sense of purpose, power, and ingroup camaraderie flow from moral contempt expressed toward nonbelieving outsiders. These processes can contribute to what Marc Galanter (1999) has termed the "relief effect," an upward surge in morale that new recruits often experience after joining a cohesive religious group.

### **Religion as a Quest for Cessation of Suffering**

According to the legend of the four passing sights, the father of Siddhartha Gautama sought to protect him from the world's suffering by providing an idyllic childhood where he would not witness human suffering. On a road, however, Siddhartha encountered an old man, a diseased man, and a corpse on a bier (Noss, 1963). After reflecting on this suffering, he devoted his life to discovery of a path that could relieve other people of such an obligation. After years of searching, he concluded that all life is suffering, we suffer because we desire, and salvation resides in renouncing all desires, cares, or attachments. Buddhism thus emerged as perhaps the purist of the world's great religions in its single-minded focus on management of personal suffering.

Most other religions have not embraced so fully the path of renunciation of desire in order to escape suffering. However, each has provided methods, roles, and ideologies designed to build resilience against life's inevitable sorrows. A Muslim may thus experience suffering as God's test of one's character and faith, which then mobilizes the effort and energy needed to prevail against the suffering. Christians' beliefs have ranged from viewing suffering as

God's just punishment, to believing that suffering contains God's hidden purposes, to feeling an assurance that God will provide sufficient strength to bear whatever suffering that life brings, to identification with Christ as a suffering servant. Each religion provides maps for navigating life's suffering, buffering its intensity, and mounting a coping response.

Unfortunately, there are myriad ways through which striving for deliverance from suffering propels religious behaviors that have untoward consequences. To the extent that one withdraws from the material world in order to reduce suffering, efforts to solve practical problems within one's society can cease, thereby augmenting suffering for others over the long term. Violence toward self by ascetics, or toward others by zealots, too often is committed in an expectation of gaining God's favor through obedience and sacrifice.

### **Religion Unequally Yoked in Its Missions**

Religion can bring harm to peoples' lives when one or more of these three missions for group security, individual morale, and relief from suffering is prioritized selectively to the others' neglect. Usually such a split occurs when group security and morale building are each prioritized, but by straying from a mission to relieve suffering. The converse also seems to hold. Personal spiritualities with a singular focus upon alleviation of suffering usually pose few risks for harming individuals but may be ineffective in strengthening, and can even undermine, security of the group.

A clinician's professional mandate is sometimes to cure disease but always to relieve suffering. A clinical strategy for countering destructive uses of religion can support all three roles of religion in the good they can do. However, it must attend to their relative influences on patients' moral decision making and how those decisions play out in their real-life impacts on health or illness, comfort or suffering. An ethical clinician generally should not support or oppose any particular religious beliefs or practices. However, a clinician can help a patient to become a competent, effective moral agent in the decision making of his or her religious life, electing choices that best support health and most alleviate suffering, for self and for others.

### **What Do the Words "Religion" and "Spirituality" Mean?**

"Religion" and "spirituality," unfortunately, are words that have become time worn, overburdened by layers of definitions and redefinitions by theologians

and scholars, yet their use seems unavoidable because there are no good alternatives. Within the psychology of religion, empirical research has begun examining differences between spirituality and religion in how people use them in their lives. Hood, Hill, and Spilka (2009, p. 9) have summarized for the psychology of religion a current perspective:

A traditional distinction exists between being “spiritual” and being “religious” that can be used to enhance our use of both terms. The connotations of “spirituality” are more personal and psychological than institutional, whereas the connotations of “religion” are more institutional and sociological. In this usage, the two terms are not synonymous, but distinct: Spirituality is about a person’s beliefs, values, and behavior, while religiousness is about the person’s involvement with a religious tradition and institution.

Hood and his colleagues emphasize that spirituality has more to do with the interior psychological lives of individuals, while religion is more manifest in group life and society as a whole. The discussion in this book incorporates similar horizons of meaning, while focusing on pragmatic and clinical effects of religion and spirituality as both are enacted in people’s lives.

### **But Does “Spirituality” Pass the Nazi Test?**

An additional criterion needs inclusion in definitions of spirituality: Can one’s description of spirituality pass the “Nazi Test”? In an October 4, 1943, speech to SS Group Leaders in Poznan, Heinrich Himmler summarized Nazi morality in the Third Reich:

One principle must be absolute for the SS man: we must be honest, decent, loyal, and comradely to members of our own blood and to no one else. What happens to the Russians, what happens to the Czechs, is a matter of utter indifference to me. Jewish Virtual Library (n.d.)

Can a particular definition of spirituality distinguish between Mother Theresa and Heinrich Himmler? That is, does it help distinguish between someone whose purpose and commitment are anchored in compassion for society’s excluded and exploited and someone whose meaning and commitment are anchored in exclusion and exploitation of those outside one’s group of identity? If the difference appears obvious, it often isn’t.

Generally, definitions that primarily characterize spirituality as a source of ultimate meaning or connection have trouble passing the Nazi Test. In

recent years, many have sought to separate spirituality from formal religion by regarding spirituality in more personal terms as one's source of meaning and purpose in living or one's sense of connectedness with others, so much so that nearly anything providing meaning and connection can count as "my spirituality." In educating physicians, the Association of American Medical Colleges recently announced its support of medical school curricula about spirituality and health, considering spirituality to be "an individual's search for ultimate meaning through participation in religion and/or belief in God, family, naturalism, rationalism, humanism, and the arts" (Association of American Medical Colleges, 1999, pp. 25–26). Putting spirituality in such terms of ultimate concerns, deep sources of meaning, or positive emotions is certainly inclusive of most spiritual traditions. However, such definitions have difficulty distinguishing between saints and demons when both are drawing energy from sources greater than themselves.

Two themes of personal spirituality best discriminate it from ideological "isms": a commitment to person-to-person relatedness independent of any social categorization and an ethic of compassion that extends to all persons, even those outside one's own religious or social group. Other prominent themes of spiritualities discriminate less well. It is possible to live a life of devotion to God, derive purpose from sacred teachings, find fellowship with other believers, and devote oneself selflessly to religious group missions, all the while showing indifference, or even hatred, toward those who not belong to one's religious group or share in a common religious identity. Awareness of and responsibility for the well-being of those on the outside best discriminates personal spirituality from other powerful social processes, religious and nonreligious, that also provide existential meaning and sense of connectedness with others. The Nazi Test focuses attention upon the quality of relatedness with those who live outside one's group. Spirituality embraces persons, not categories. Spirituality extends human relatedness to those not observant of one's own beliefs and practices or who do not belong to one's spiritual community. Religiousness is not spirituality when it sets relationships by first distinguishing whether a person is "one of our own."

Separating personal spirituality from religious or ideological zeal is critical. My personal recollections of these differences often have been poignant. As a concrete example, a classmate in high school was a member of the Ku Klux Klan. His conversations were an even blend of Biblical scriptures and White supremacy, all worked out in a logically tight ideology. He, in fact, put me to shame with his religious devotion. His dreaminess, conviction, and joy in talking about a society that would protect our racial purity made it obvious that he would fight, perhaps even die, for his beliefs. How would this be different from any of Jesus's disciples who died martyrs' deaths?

Over the years I have met other dreamy ideologues who were Jewish, Muslim, or Hindu, as well as from a variety of Christian sects, each restricting empathy and compassion to their own religious group. Making the distinction between personal spirituality and religious zeal became a pragmatic concern as I began working professionally in multicultural settings that juxtaposed many different ethnic and religious groups. The problem, it seemed, was that religion could uplift, energize, and fortify individuals for life's struggles through multiple pathways whose superficial similarities belied deep differences. One pathway, sociobiological religion, was made available through the ideology, roles, responsibilities, and hierarchy of one's religious group. A different pathway, personal spirituality, became available instead through emotional relatedness between individuals who, person to person, touched each others' lives in the uniqueness of their beings.

### **Using a Sociobiological Lens to Untangle the Confusion of Religious Life**

Religion describes a wide and messy swath of human life instead of a cohesive and singular factor that bears consistent effects upon people. Sociobiology and evolutionary psychology provide tools that can render religion more comprehensible by unraveling some of its complex psychological and social effects.

Sociobiology consists of the interdisciplinary efforts by biologists, sociologists, ethologists, anthropologists, and archaeologists to explain complex social behaviors in terms of evolutionary advantages that particular behaviors may have held for early human species (Wilson, 1978). Evolutionary psychology, an offshoot of sociobiology, has studied the origins of human intelligence, including such social capacities as the ability to make psychological sense of another person's thoughts, feelings, or intentions (Mithen, 1996). Evolutionary psychologists have demonstrated how religion is expressed via multiple sociobiological behavioral systems (Kirkpatrick, 2005).

Sociobiological systems are compartmentalized behavioral systems that evolved according to the principle of inclusive fitness in order to solve specific survival problems faced by early hominids from 200,000 to 2 million years ago (Mithen, 1996). These sociobiological systems are fully operative today and organize how humans structure their groups and interpersonal relationships. As such, they both express and shape religious life. Sociobiological systems that are particularly salient in religious life include those for attachment, peer affiliation, kin recognition, social hierarchy, and social exchange.

*Attachment: "God Is My Good Parent."*

The attachment system evolved to ensure that mothers and their offspring would bond securely and protectively. Within the brains of mammals, the attachment system is organized to guide motivational, emotional, and memory processes with respect to significant caregiving figures. Children and parents are each driven to seek closeness with each other when alarmed or insecure (Siegel, 1999). The attachment system governs person–God relationships as well.

At the end of World War II, John Bowlby (1973) originally conceptualized attachment theory to explain the different patterns of distress shown by children who had been separated from their parents during the London blitz. Bowlby identified as key elements of the attachment system: (1) "proximity," as a child seeking nearness to a primary attachment figure; (2) "secure base," as a child's playing and exploring with ease only when a primary attachment figure is close at hand; and (3) "safe haven," as a child seeking out a primary attachment figure when feeling threatened or insecure. When God is an important attachment figure, these themes of proximity, secure base, and safe haven are lived out in relationship with one's personal God.

Whereas the attachment system among other mammals is based only upon physical proximity to a parent, human attachments are organized around the felt presence and emotional responsiveness of a caregiver (Bowlby, 1973). In an attachment relationship, one's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are largely oriented toward that relationship. Early attachment to parents or other primary caregivers becomes internalized into an enduring attachment style that reflects attitudes about relationships, their importance, and how they ought to be managed. If early life attachments are problematic, absence of a sense of secure base can produce an attachment style organized by insecurity, with impaired play, exploration, and social interactions (Siegel, 1999).

For many religious people, God is one of their most important attachments. Kirkpatrick (2005, p. 52) has noted that "the perceived availability and responsiveness of a supernatural attachment figure is a fundamental dynamic underlying Christianity and many other theistic religions. Whether that attachment figure is God, Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, or one of various saints, guardian angels, or other supernatural beings, the analogy is striking." In his studies of different kinds of prayer, Hood, Spilka, Hunsberger, and Gorsuch (1996, p. 394) have noted how some types of prayer seem preoccupied mainly with the responsiveness of God rather than petitioning God to intervene on one's behalf through actions. For example, contemplative prayer is an attempt to approach and to relate deeply to one's God, and meditative

prayer mainly reflects concerns about the quality of one's relationship with God.

People with insecure attachments to their Gods can be more vulnerable to demoralization when adversity strikes. A secure attachment to a personal God can act as a potent buffer against demoralization, even substituting for failures in human relationships where attachments may be insecure (Griffith & Dsouza, in press; Rizzuto, 1979).

*Peer Affiliation: "I Feel Secure as a Member of My Religious Group."*

Like wolves and dogs, human beings appear hardwired to seek security as a member of a pack. Unlike other mammals who are limited to gestures and displays, humans can use language to signal desire for togetherness. Religious beliefs, rituals, ceremonies, and other practices commonly enable a sense of belonging to a group.

Peer affiliation refers to the bonds of brotherhood and sisterhood that usually do not carry the intensity or constancy of maternal attachment, but are more flexible, transient, and exchangeable. Peer affiliation is about relatedness by social category, roles, responsibilities, and loyalty to one's group. Religious identification often serves as a medium that facilitates cooperation, encouraging alliances and coalitions among those who share a common identity.

Drawing from his research on cult membership, Marc Galanter (1999) has articulated a theory of religion based on human needs for group affiliation. Religious groups are typically characterized by social cohesion so that personal circumstances of individuals are interlinked closely with other group members. There are shared concerns throughout the group. In cults, this social cohesion is intense, extending to uniform manners of dress, idiosyncratic language, and joint ownership of material possessions. Such mutuality fosters reciprocal altruism through which group members give freely to each other, assured that the same generosity will be given in return. For many, a church, synagogue, temple, or mosque is their key social network. Ken Pargament (1997) has detailed the many different ways in which people provide mutual social support within their religious groups.

A person who joins a cult often has felt debilitating loneliness and demoralization prior to joining. As mentioned earlier, Galanter's (1999) clinical research found in members of religious cults a reciprocal relationship between the lowering of pre-cult anxiety and depression symptoms and the rise of social cohesion within the group, the "relief effect." This finding is further supported by social identity theorists who have documented the importance of member-

ships in national and ethnic groups for individuals' self-regard (Kirkpatrick, 2005).

Peer affiliation thus appears able to protect morale in the face of adversity. However, the strength of peer affiliation can depend on management of a firm boundary between those in the religious group and others outside it. This has unfortunate consequences when this boundary becomes a barrier to empathy toward those outside, justifying stigma, or in worse cases, coercion, exploitation, or violence.

*Kin Recognition: "My Religious Group Is a Family That Looks Out for Its Own."*

A social group must manage its boundaries with the outside world in order to survive. If there is no way to recognize who is or is not a group member, then the group ceases to exist. Religious groups appear to rely on kin recognition mechanisms that became components of human sociobiology eons ago. Neural circuits that underpin kin recognition operate at fundamental levels to discern biological features among family members, such as facial contours or smells (Daly & Wilson, 2005). The social processes of religious groups seem able to recruit these neural systems by evoking the experience of "family" through family metaphors and such descriptive language as "brother," "sister," and "father" applied to group members. Crippen and Machalek (1989, p. 74) described religion as a "hypertrophied kin recognition process" in which "kin recognition mechanisms are 'usurped' to form communities of fictive kin" (p. 68), which, in turn, encourages "individuals to subordinate their apparent self-interest to the collectively-expressed interest of sovereign agencies" (p. 70). Kirkpatrick (2005, p. 249) has noted that religious beliefs represent "a kind of cognitive error in which psychological mechanisms misidentify unrelated in-group members as kin, in much the same way that our taste-preference mechanisms can be fooled into enjoying soft drinks or potato chips flavored with artificial sweeteners and fat substitutes."

Shared religious language and practices can thus define an ingroup, with ingroup members receiving privileges and respect not afforded to those in outgroups. Fundamentalist religions are largely about establishing and defending an ingroup that is defined by specific beliefs and practices, relegating those who do not observe them to outgroup status. Fundamentalism is thus a form of religion in which coalitional psychology dominates rather than other kinds of psychological or social purposes (Kirkpatrick, 2005).

This is perhaps the best explanation for the perplexing observation that religious traditions founded upon ethics of compassion, generosity, and love

for others nevertheless can turn in a moment to coercion, intimidation, and violence toward those who are not members of the religious group. As Primo Levi observed in Auschwitz, “Compassion and brutality can coexist in the same individual and in the same moment, despite all logic” (Levi, 1988, p. 56). Those in religious outgroups—pagans, heathens, infidels, Jews, or gentiles—may not be recognized as full-blooded human beings. If not, there are no feelings of guilt if they are abused.

*Social Hierarchy: “I Accept My Position within God’s Order and Rule.”*

Within a single generation after its founding, nearly every religion has proposed a social order that claims to have originated by divine decree. Often, God or other supernatural beings are regarded as a powerful leader, the “alpha male,” of the religious group. Exegeses of sacred scriptures provide rules, commandments, and other prescribed behaviors to which group members must submit in order to achieve status, prestige, honor, and respect. One gains closeness to God not through emotionally intimate interactions but through behavioral submission and obedience. Commonly, religious language reflects this psychology of social hierarchy, as in references to the kingdom of God or to God as ruler of all.

Galanter (1999, p. 4) has noted that religious cults are distinguished by the degree to which group behavioral norms influence group members’ conduct and by imputing divine power to the cult leaders. The power of religion for prescribing a social hierarchy with attendant roles and responsibilities sets the stage for obedience to directives from group leaders, particularly if divinely attributed, even though they may conflict with a group member’s spontaneous feelings or moral reasoning. Buss (2005, pp. 344–345) has noted:

Status, prestige, esteem, honor, respect, and rank are accorded differentially to individuals in all known groups. People devote tremendous effort to avoiding disrepute, dishonor, shame, humiliation, disgrace, and loss of face. Empirical evidence suggests that status and dominance hierarchies form quickly. . . . If there were ever a reasonable candidate for a universal human motive, status striving would be at or near the top of the list.

Justified as obedience to God’s rule and order, religious groups can neglect, exploit, or commit violence while preserving a sense of righteousness. When roles and responsibilities are perceived to be divinely prescribed, moral reasoning by individual persons is easily discounted.

### *Social Exchange and Reciprocal Altruism: "God Ensures That Life Will Be Fair and Just."*

Most religions articulate ethical rules and norms that prescribe correct social behavior. In nearly every religion, there are moral precepts about reciprocal altruism, what constitutes fair social exchange, and how cheaters are to be caught and punished (Kirkpatrick, 2005, p. 257; Krebs, 2005). Lerner (1980) has proposed that an extrapolation of social contract thinking to the natural world may underlie a belief in a just world. People everywhere tend to believe that a moral quid pro quo is built into the normal workings of the natural world: People get their just desserts, the good are rewarded, and the wicked are punished. When bad things happen to good people, an unfortunate but common conclusion is that those who suffer must not have been good people after all. As Pargament (1997, p. 227) has noted, God is nearly always viewed as just, someone who does not punish or destroy without purpose but always for a good reason.

Social exchange and reciprocal altruism can set the stage for exploitation when an individual persists in roles or behaviors that entail abuse or neglect, because of an expectation that suffering in the present will be requited at some future time through cosmic justice. Perversely, it can transmute into scapegoating the unlucky when those who suffer misfortunes are further burdened by being labeled as moral transgressors.

### **The Scope of Sociobiology in Religious Life**

Religion is perhaps so powerful because it activates many different sociobiological systems simultaneously. Religion recruits not only attachment behaviors between an individual and his or her God but also social processes of peer affiliation with attendant alliances and coalitions; social hierarchy with dominance, submission, and status seeking; kin recognition with demarcation of an ingroup apart from outgroups; and expectations for a just social exchange that includes reciprocal altruism. These sociobiological systems shape a person's interpersonal and social worlds in ways that have aided *Homo sapiens* in prevailing as a species over the course of human evolution.

This line of thinking does not argue that religion itself was a product of evolution. Religion may be more like a hermit crab occupying old shells built by other creatures at earlier times. Presumably these sociobiological systems evolved initially for survival purposes unrelated to religion. Once available, however, they became recruited into use by the psychological and social

agendas of religious life. Religion thus is more like music or marriage, using biologically evolved brain systems for social and psychological ends unrelated to the original processes that gave structure to the brain. Religion activates the full range of sociobiological systems, and so completely that one might have predicted its spontaneous appearance were it not already omnipresent in human life. What aids moral reasoning within religious life is mindfulness of the extent to which these sociobiological systems can dictate both the form and the content of religious behavior.

### **Spirituality and Well-Being of Individuals**

Relief of personal suffering is a mission for religion that appears to have originated independently from its ties to sociobiology. Between 800 B.C.E. and 700 C.E., charismatic religious leaders emerged who helped transform religion from its archaic tribal orientations to focus on the moral self-consciousness of individuals (Barnes, 2000, 2003; Armstrong, 1993). These religious leaders sought to discriminate institutionalized religious practices from an individual's personal religious experience, with the latter emphasizing beliefs, practices, and communal ways of living that alleviated suffering of individuals. They moved religion's field of interest from away from welfare of the group to the interior lives of individuals. The fruit of their labors was the emergence of personal spirituality as a form of religion within which the lived experience of an individual person is given priority.

Personal spirituality emerged at different locations worldwide within a narrow span of time. Lao Tzu, a succession of Hebrew prophets, Jesus Christ, the Buddha, and Mohammed were among the leaders who presented new religious beliefs and practices and reinterpreted older ones. Each of these innovative religious movements has continued until the present as a source of inspiration for individuals committed to personal tranquility and compassion toward others. Motivated more by moral reflection than sociobiological agendas, these religious reformations have been commonly referred to as spiritualities. These spiritualities were sometimes coopted and reinstitutionalized by later generations of their followers, who kept the names but made their contents concrete and formulaic. Yet each has also stood the test of time by continuing to nurture the moral reasoning, self-reflection, and personal growth for many who adhere to them.

The most intense religious ferment occurred during the 800–200 B.C.E. period, termed the Axial Age by Karl Jaspers (1953). In *A History of God*, Karen Armstrong (1993, p. 391) characterized the religious transformations of this historical era as follows:

Compassion was a characteristic of most of the ideologies that were created during the Axial Age. The compassionate ideal even impelled Buddhists to make a major change in their religious orientation when they introduced devotion (*bhakti*) to the Buddha and *bodhisattvas*. The prophets insisted that cult and worship were useless unless society as a whole adopted a more just and compassionate ethos. These insights were developed by Jesus, Paul and the Rabbis, who all shared the same Jewish ideals and suggested major changes in Judaism to implement them. The Koran made the creation of a compassionate and just society the essence of the reformed religion of al-Lah. Compassion is a particularly difficult virtue. It demands that we go beyond the limitations of our egotism, insecurity and inherited prejudice.

Spiritualities associated with Taoism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and other traditions shared notable themes. These themes have been central as well for the work of more recent spiritual leaders, from Mahatma Gandhi to Mother Theresa and Martin Luther King<sup>1</sup>:

1. *Whole-person relatedness*. Spiritualities give primacy to “whole-person to whole-person” relatedness, which means opening oneself and responding fully to the other as a person. Interest in understanding the other’s experience, despite acknowledged differences, is characteristic. Distinctions about social status, class, ethnicity, gender, or other such social categories are put aside. Whole-person relatedness fosters dialogue in which back-and-forth speaking, listening, and reflecting occur. Differing perspectives can be articulated, each considered respectfully, side by side. This relatedness has been described by Martin Buber as “I–Thou” rather than “I–It” relations (Buber, 1958). Emmanuel Levinas characterized such rapport between individuals as a “face-to-face relationship” that in its ethics seeks a good beyond being (Levinas, 1961). Anthropologist Victor Turner (1969, 1974, 1982) described it in terms of a social process of “communitas,” evident during ritual observances when distinctions around social hierarchy and boundaries disappear, a powerful awareness of bonds that connect people takes hold, with “men in their wholeness wholly attending” (Turner, 1969, p 128).

2. *Commitment to an ethic of compassion*. Even the most inward focused of spiritualities ends consistently in an ethics of compassion toward other human beings. This compassion means that one responds to the suffering of any other person with understanding, caring, and efforts to heal or protect, without regard to social status. In some spiritualities, this ethic of compassion is extended to all living creatures (Armstrong, 1993).

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<sup>1</sup>These themes of spirituality have been discussed in greater depth in *Encountering the Sacred in Psychotherapy* (Griffith & Griffith, 2002, Ch. 1).

3. *Compassionate care for self.* Compassion for others is reflexively extended to self as well by most spiritualities. This compassion shared with others is distinguished from narcissistic care for self that is built upon indifference toward others. Compassionate care for self provides containment for personal woundedness, which interrupts cycles of revenge and retaliation.

4. *Emotional postures of resilience.* Spiritualities typically generate coherency, hope, purpose, gratitude, joy, and other existential postures that confer personal resilience in the face of threat, uncertainty, and suffering (Griffith & Griffith, 2002).

5. *Encounters with the sacred as personal, evocative experiences that stimulate reflection, moral reasoning, and creativity.* In a generic sense, the sacred is regarded as the realm of human encounters with suprahuman agency, such as the actions of supernatural forces, gods, spirits, or transcendental reality. Within spirituality, such experiences lead to personal reflection rather than to efforts to use the power of the sacred to control other individuals through magic, as in primitive religions, or to rule societies or fight enemies, as has often happened in classical religions.

6. Prioritizing the well-being of individual persons, whether self or others, over the needs of religious groups. Spirituality is person-centered religion.

These six themes of spiritualities are only some of those of concern to theologians and psychologists of religion. However, they do catch a great deal of what quickly becomes problematic about religion in their absence. Attention to these six themes helps monitor what is missing when religious life becomes defined solely by its sociobiological agendas.

Relationally, these themes span the scope of human relatedness with self, with others, and with the divine. Relatedness exists both interpersonally and intrapersonally, both between people and within the self. Whole-person relatedness and a personal ethic of compassion are mainly directed toward interpersonal domains. Encounters with the sacred, compassionate care of self, and generation of existential postures of resilience largely operate intrapersonally. Prioritizing the well-being of an individual over group concerns is an ethical commitment that spans both interpersonal and intrapersonal spheres of relations. The message of spirituality is that religion is about connection, whether with self, other people, or the divine. As Prince Myshkin, Dostoevsky's exemplar of spirituality, put it, "It's just laziness that makes people classify themselves according to appearances, and fail to find anything in common" (Dostoevsky, 1869/2004, p. 25).

These themes of spirituality also underscore how religion is about social cognition. Sociobiological religion, but not personal spirituality, is formed by

perceptual distinctions that are regulated by the different sociobiological systems. Personal spirituality, on the other hand, is mainly formed by perceptual distinctions involving attunement to emotional states of individuals.

### **Spirituality Provides What Sociobiology and Biological Evolution Failed to Provide**

Spirituality can be regarded as a person-centered corrective for what biological evolution and sociobiology failed to provide. Personal spirituality is religion for the person. It adds to religious life a capacity for managing suffering inherent in an individual's lived experience, overriding sorrow and demoralization with hope, purpose, communion, and joy, helping people desire to live because life's pains can be made bearable. Its value was captured in the life and words of Albert Camus, a man who was pointedly nonreligious: "In the depth of winter I finally learned that within me there lay an invincible summer" (Klempner, 2006, p. 19).

Well-being of individual persons is not of particular consequence for biological evolution. The suffering of any particular person rarely, if ever, could imperil the species. To the contrary, early disappearance of weak individuals by death or failure to reproduce could strengthen the gene pool. Personal spirituality motivates compassion and care of the weak even when this does not make good evolutionary sense.

By contrast, sociobiological systems evolved because they were effective in promoting survival for the human species as a whole. Sociobiological systems are each teleological, imbued with specific purposes and ends within a social world: a mothering attachment; peer relationships; a social structure with roles, responsibilities, and leadership that ensures work gets done and enemies are kept at bay. The sociobiological systems share a general behavioral program with other mammals. To the extent that a successful group accrues benefits for individuals within it, sociobiological systems can enhance the well-being and enjoyment of its individual members, but this is a by-product when it happens, not a primary aim. Like a winning political party or an army dividing the spoils of victory, there are advantages to serving on the winning side. However, this kind of "good" does not necessarily enrich or enliven an individual's existence.

The behavioral programs of personal spirituality often go far afield from evolutionary aims dictated by inclusive fitness. Each sociobiological system has its primary task to accomplish, and personal spirituality serves none of them well. As discussed in the next chapter, compassion, an important theme in personal spirituality, was built upon an evolutionary platform of pain systems

for detecting physical threats and avoiding them. In the emotional ethics of spirituality, however, compassion initiates movements that differ in direction from the design directives of a physical pain system, sometimes even moving toward, instead of away from, a source of pain when care of another person requires it.

Placing spirituality on a time line within human history risks implying that personal spirituality is “mature” religion, while sociobiological religion is “primitive.” Indeed, a recent trend in North American and European culture has been to demarcate sharply the distinctions between religion and spirituality, regarding spirituality as personal, self-realizing, and creative but religion as institutional, rule driven, and stultifying (Hood et al., 2009). Human life seems more complex than that (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005).

Personal spirituality and sociobiological religion may differ in fundamental ways, but the differences simply mean that they are useful for different ends. Except under pathological conditions, personal spirituality and sociobiological religion typically operate in harmony. There are rare Dag Hammarskjolds who live lives of profound personal spirituality absent any formal religious structure, but they are exceptional (Hammarskjold, 1964). As Pargament (2007) has noted, empirical studies of religiousness find that the vast majority of religious people access spirituality through their formal religious practices. For example, the observance of Seder is a ritual that lies at the heart of Judaism as an organized religious tradition. For many, it also is the heart of personal spirituality, as an encounter with the sacred, a source of purpose, and a point of communion with fellow worshippers, past, present, and future. Other religious traditions likewise provide specific methods and means that are intended as paths to spirituality by utilizing their beliefs, spiritual practices, sacred stories, rituals, and communities (Griffith & Griffith, 2002).

Leaders who have introduced spirituality into their societies, whether the prophet Isaiah or St. Francis of Assisi, usually have been astute in navigating their sociobiological religious contexts, enough at least for delivering their messages. Some, like Mahatma Gandhi, have been politically savvy and utilized their knowledge of religious sociobiology to mobilize populations for effective action. By contrast, Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot* was seemingly unable to take stock of the hierarchies, boundaries, and role expectations guiding others around him. The power of his person-focused empathy and compassion opened relationships even with those who wanted to dismiss him. Nevertheless, his acts of compassion, blind to their sociobiological contexts, ended tragically for those he tried to help and left the prince in an insane asylum (Dostoevsky, 1869/2004). Spirituality may take a leading role in religious

life, yet still needs adequate input from a sociobiological perspective for its missions to be realized.

Awareness of sociobiology clarifies that religion is about more than spirituality when people speak prayers, observe rituals, and attend churches, temples, and mosques. Religion is validly also about friendships, finding community, teaming with others to pursue common goods, and knowing “to whom I belong,” aims other than those of personal spirituality.

Personal spirituality can be regarded as a reformation of religion to accommodate emergence of a moral individual self. It is one possible outcome of religious life. Personal spirituality emerged out of a human history of religious sociobiology, and the two cannot be separated as if they bore no kinship. Personal spirituality often needs the structure of organized religion. It can be effervescent, dissipating over time without some support from traditional religious beliefs, practices, or community life. Personal spirituality and sociobiological religion are the muscle and bone of religious life, inseparable in any religion that is vibrant. Both the differentness and kinship between them are keys to understanding how religion so powerfully effects healing in some contexts and harm in others.

### **Personal Spirituality and Sociobiological Religion Sometimes Sharply Diverge**

As a general rule, religion risks destructive consequences for individuals when any of six themes of personal spirituality discussed previously is constricted or absent, such that religiousness becomes defined solely by its sociobiology. Sociobiological religion is constituted by its responses to normative specifications from social systems. Spirituality, like art, is constituted by creative expressions of individual sensibilities. When religious life ceases to function as a medium for individual expression, risks enter for potential harm to persons.

Personal spirituality and sociobiological religion can diverge at points of vulnerability when their primary aims fail to dovetail. There is a built-in tension. Many of the gravest abuses of religion involve violence toward “the stranger” who is outside the religious group. Racism or tribalism is a natural consequence when kin recognition and peer affiliation obscure commitment to whole-person relatedness with those in outgroups. Members of religious groups are themselves at risk when submission to role and authority negates a compassionate relatedness toward self, as vividly recounted in Karen Armstrong’s (2004) *The Spiral Staircase*. Powerfully experienced encounters with the sacred, common within personal spirituality, often lead individuals into

idiosyncratic paths at odds with the religious behaviors prescribed by ecclesiastical authorities.

Polish foreign correspondent Ryszard Kapuscinski (2008, p. 36) described well this human conundrum as he reflected on the violence he witnessed firsthand in Africa, Asia, and Central America: “Man when he is alone is usually more ‘human’ than when he is a member of a crowd, an excited mass. Individually, we are wiser and better, less inscrutable. Becoming part of a group can change the same quiet, friendly individual into a devil.” Sociobiological religion is a source of “crowd-ness” in religious life, and personal spirituality a source of its “alone-ness.”

The clinical case illustrations in these chapters largely focus on interventions that draw upon the themes of personal spirituality—whole-person relatedness, an ethic of compassion, personal encounters with the sacred, mobilization of existential resilience, and prioritizing of person over group—to restore a voice of spirituality within religiously informed decision making by medical and psychiatric patients.

### **Making Sense of Harmful Religious Behaviors**

A sociobiological perspective helps a clinician to grasp perplexing cognitive and emotional perspectives that might not be otherwise intuited when patients have strong religious, or ideological, identities. Chapter 6 extends this sociobiological discussion to explain how patients belonging to tightly cohesive religious or ideological groups can operate with dual selves—a public sociobiological self and a private personal self—each with its own circumscribed awareness, sensibilities, values, and commitments. Only the sociobiological self may be revealed in a clinical encounter. This sociobiological self is particularly sensitive to a clinician’s actions when they touch on attachment, peer affiliation, kin recognition, social hierarchy, and social exchange relations. Such an understanding can provide critical guidance when interacting with patients and planning therapeutic interventions.

Assessing whether themes of personal spirituality are present or absent in a patient’s religiousness is key to gauging risks of potential harm. This assessment walks a fine line between intervening for justifiable clinical and ethical reasons and respecting a patient’s right to practice a religious faith however he or she chooses. Destructive uses of religion are sometimes so explicit as to require little discussion, as with religious justifications for racist acts or domestic violence. An ethical or legal obligation to impose control exists when there is imminent risk of harm, as with threats of suicide or violence. More

often, harmful effects are less extreme and more subtle. Then it is best to try to engage the patient as a collaborator in discerning the real-life effects that his or her religious behaviors have on self or others.

The clinician's role is one of consultant to a patient's moral decision making. The clinician's aim is to aid a patient in noticing moral impulses from one's personal spirituality that can help inform ethical discernments. An awareness of the themes of spirituality that religion ought to bring forth in a person's life guides assessment. Specific questions can help discern whether religious practices support relational dimensions of spirituality. Examples of such questions include:

- ✦ Does the patient's attachment style with his or her God promote security or insecurity?
- ✦ Do religious encounters with the sacred evoke fear or aggression, or do they stimulate reflection and creativity?
- ✦ Are interactions with others in the patient's religious group dialogical or monological in character? That is, can a person, regardless of role or status, expect to be able to speak, to be heard and understood, and to have one's perspective taken seriously within the group? How is the least powerful person treated?
- ✦ What kind of person would feel embarrassed or ill at ease in this gathering?
- ✦ How are people in outgroups regarded? In practice, are they respected and valued as full human beings?
- ✦ Is ethical decision making guided by whether a person is first identified as an ingroup or outgroup member?

The practice of a religious faith also should support such existential postures as coherence, hope, communion, agency, purpose, commitment, and gratitude. These existential postures are essential for care of self in the face of adversity. A red flag of concern is raised when the fruits of religious practices are not these, but rather confusion, despair, isolation, helplessness, meaninglessness, detachment, or resentment (Griffith & Griffith, 2002). A clinician can inquire how well these existential postures are supported by a patient's attachment style with God, peer affiliation within the religious group, relatedness with those in outgroups, and ethical practices grounded in just expectations for social exchange.