‘Spirituality and religion: friends or foes? Views from the orthodox Jewish community’

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Abstract

The topic of spirituality emerged strongly on the scientific scene in the 1990s, sharply distinguished from religion by some of its advocates. Some commentators have associated the emergence of spirituality with post-modernity.

The topic will be discussed with particular reference to the strictly orthodox Jewish (chareidi) community. Some features of the community will be described. Responses to the suggested spirituality/religion distinction will also be described.

Strictly orthodox Jews may be wary of contemporary spirituality movements. For some, this may be related to the enclave ideology held by many. Then for some, there is Judaism’s distinctive approach to spirituality and its relations to religious ritual. Both these grounds for wariness will be discussed, together with illustrations from research and observations in the UK chareidi community, including an outline of rabbinic views on universal spirituality.

The emergence of spirituality on the scientific scene

As we celebrate the launch of the book ‘Spirituality and Psychiatry’ (Cook, C. Powell, A. Sims, A., 2009) I would like to talk about the challenging question of whether religion and spirituality are friends or foes.

I will describe the recent emergence of spirituality on the scientific scene. Then I will offer a description of the strictly orthodox Jewish (chareidi) community, its wariness of contemporary spirituality, some rabbinic views on spirituality and how the orthodox Jewish community might see the relationship of spirituality to religion.

Since the 1990s, the study of spirituality has been added to the study of religion, as a contemporary phenomenon normally understood to involve people who prefer to define themselves as spiritual but not religious.

Prior to this, the scientific study of religion had been emerging from disrepute to a somewhat shaky level of respectability. By the end of the twentieth century, dozens of measures of religiosity were anthologised in Hill and Hood (1999). But the measurement of spirituality was only just beginning to develop. A good and popular example is The Royal Free interview for religious and spiritual beliefs (King, Speck, and Thomas, 1995). This measure is said to be appropriate for people who profess no religious affiliation, and/or who prefer to use the term spirituality rather than religion, as well as people

with a wide range of more orthodox religious identities and beliefs. Research on those who 'prefer to use the term spirituality rather than religion' was beginning to take off.

The rise of spirituality in the UK has been carefully analysed by Heelas and Woodhead (2004) following their study in Kendal, Cumbria. In The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is giving way to Spirituality, Heelas and Woodhead suggest that the emergence of spirituality is associated with post-modernity. They say that 'survey after survey' show that increasing numbers of people now prefer to call themselves 'spiritual' rather than 'religious'. They ask 'is (this) the last gasp of religion or a radical change in the contemporary sacred scene?' They offer the subjectivisation thesis to explain the decline of some and the rise of other forms of the sacred. They relate both to the 'massive subjective turn of modern culture' (Taylor, 1991) – a turn from objective roles and obligations, towards living in relation to subjective experiences, relational as much as individualistic. The key distinction is between 'life-as' religion, involving obligations, and subjective-life spirituality, involving experience.

Heelas and Woodhead claim evidence of correlations between subjective-life spirituality and growth, and life-as religion and decline. All this bears on the study of secularisation and sacralisation. The authors have sharply articulated the contrast between contemporary spirituality and religion, a contrast which is frequently echoed elsewhere.

The growth in popularity of the term spirituality, and its use as an alternative to the term religion, can now be seen, nearly ten years into the twenty-first century. There has been rapid growth in publications on spirituality (see Figure 1). For example, most academic books on religion and psychiatry (psychology) are pre-1999, while there are no pre-1999 academic books on spirituality and psychiatry (or psychology).

The strictly orthodox Jewish (Charedi/Chareidi) community.

This paper looks at how contemporary spirituality is viewed in the strictly orthodox Jewish community. These views reflect clearly on our theme, whether religion and spirituality are friends or foes.

Some outstanding features of Charedi (strictly-orthodox Jewish) life style (see Wieselberg, 1992, 2003; Holman and Holman, 2002, for more detailed descriptions) include the following:

Strictly-orthodox Jews generally live in enclave communities, giving access to needed religious resources, such as kosher food, appropriate schools, prayer- and study-houses, and ritual baths. There is very limited contact with the media and 'outside world', for fear of corrupting influences, particularly with regard to sexual mores, and materialism in general. In London, the largest and most Charedi community is in the Stamford Hill area, mainly Hackney and Haringey, comprising about 27,000 individuals, about 10% of Anglo-Jewry.

There is a mixture of hasidic and other strictly-orthodox groups (Wieselberg, 1992, 2003; Loewenthal et al, 1995). There are many other Charedi communities world-wide and most families have family/marriage and other ties with them. There is strict adherence to Jewish law (Halacha), for example with respect to diet, the observance of Sabbath and festivals, and family purity laws. There is no social mixing of men and women outside the family or public work contexts. Education is gender-segregated, with religious study highly esteemed. In most Charedi circles the most prestigious occupation for a man is full-time religious study (sometimes coupled with teaching or rabbinic duties). The practice of charity and helping are highly valued and widely practiced (Holman and Holman, 2002). Men pray regularly three times daily, usually in a study-house or synagogue. Children are regarded as a blessing and very large families are normative, with an average of approximately 6 children. This has a strong impact on the life-styles and well-being of both women and men (Loewenthal et al, 1995, 1997). Families are relatively poor and housing overcrowded (Holman and Holman, 2002; Lindsey et al, 2003; Frosh et al, 2005). There are numerous life-pervading obligations, with the over-riding value of the superiority of ruchnius (spirituality) over gashmius (materiality). The obligations are seen as having overwhelming spiritual effects.

Spiritual 'possessions' override material 'possessions:

> *'In material matters, one who is 'satisfied with his lot' (Pirkei Avos 4.1) is an individual of the highest quality.*
> *In spiritual matters, to be satisfied with ones lot is the worst deficiency, and leads G-d forbid to descent and failing'* (Schneersoh, 1994, quoting R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi, 1795)

This offers a picture of 'life-as' religion, involving obligations, to use Heelas and Woodhead's terms, but with the firm claim that the fulfilment of obligations is entirely spiritual.

Strictly orthodox Jews are wary of contemporary spirituality movements. Why? The short answer is that these movements fall outside the fold of strict orthodoxy.

Orthodox-Jewish wariness of contemporary spirituality movements: the enclave ideology

Some of the context of orthodox-Jewish wariness of contemporary spirituality movements lies in the enclave life-style and ideology. Rabbi Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld (1848-1932), the orthodox chief rabbi of Jerusalem, spearheaded the modern battle between strict orthodoxy and secularizing trends. He opposed secular Zionism and the introduction of secular education into Israel (first Turkish-occupied and then British-mandated Palestine) (Danziger and Sonnenfeld, 1986). Sonnenfeld encouraged the development of orthodox-Jewish enclave communities (self-imposed ghettoization), with restricted contact with the outside world. Many other orthodox leaders through the 19th

and 20th centuries also opposed the introduction of secular study into Jewish schools, as well as secular Zionism, reform, liberal and conservative Judaism.

'Spiritual Judaism' is associated with Reform and non-orthodox, marginal forms of Judaism i.e. unacceptable to the strictly orthodox, as in this example from a Reform synagogue website:

'We are creating a community that is committed to the spiritual unfolding of all its members. We teach a Judaism of the heart; a Judaism that is grounded in our unique history, yet is open to the spiritual wisdom of the world. We welcome all people at our New York synagogue, and extend a special welcome to interfaith families' (New York Reform synagogue website accessed 15.11.2009).

Note that orthodox synagogues have clear role obligations for Jewish men and women, non-Jewish participants and children. Marriage between Jews and non-Jews is prohibited. The welcoming message above indicates that none of these obligations would be regarded as essential here.

While women play strong leadership roles in strictly orthodox Judaism, they may not function as rabbis. Moreover the strictly orthodox would disagree that Judaism needs reclaiming as a spiritual practice, they would say that it already is.

A final note is that the teaching of kabbala is widely practised nowadays in conjunction with the Jewish spirituality movement. Kabbala is Jewish mysticism based on a tradition usually associated with Rabbi Isaac Luria (16th century), although there are earlier texts. The teaching of kabbala by those without adequate grounding in traditional learning, and/or by the non-observant, is not at all positively regarded.

Wariness of contemporary spirituality movements: the strictly-orthodox community and the spirituality/religion distinction.

It should be clear that for the strictly orthodox community, the growth of spirituality in the 'outside world', and of 'spiritual' forms of Judaism arouses strong suspiciousness. There is no acceptance of spirituality in the Heelas and Woodhead sense, with feel-good experiences as a primary aim, without the ties of obligation.

Nevertheless, among the strictly orthodox, prayer, meditation, mystical experience and religious observance can and should be enjoyed. Serving G-d with joy is a religious obligation in its own right – but obligations cannot be dispensed with.

Judaism has a clear approach to spirituality and its relations to religious ritual. In Judaism, religion expresses itself tangibly in daily life. It is understood that this has infinite spiritual effects. However, for most Jews the quest for

intimations of such effects would be secondary to the creation of these effects.

The Hebrew term for (religious) commandment is mitzvah, which has the same etymology as binding to the divine, i.e. performance of the commandments those results in spiritual union.

There are some schools of thought in Judaism where more conscious attempts are made to heighten spirituality by contemplative prayer and the study of mystical teachings, which can both lead to heightened consciousness. The hasidic movement is particularly known for this. (e.g. Loewenthal, 1990).

Rabbinic views on universal spirituality

So far, this paper has looked at strictly orthodox Judaism, and the ties between religious observance and spirituality. It might be thought that these views on religion and spirituality are confined to a very small target group – the Jews. In fact, rabbinic thought on religious obligation and spirituality has a strong universal aspect. Judaism is not a proselytising religion but rabbinic thought claims that all can merit the world-to-come ('heaven') by the performance of religious obligations (Clorfene and Rogalsky, 1987). There are seven groups of obligations for non-Jews (the seven laws for the descendants of Noah), including the unambiguously spiritual obligation to believe in one G-d and not to worship idols.

Other groups of obligations are frankly practical. These are prohibitions against: murder (Genesis 9:6), theft, sexual promiscuity (not to commit any of a series of sexual prohibitions, which include adultery, incest, bestiality and male homosexual intercourse), and blasphemy (it is required to believe in the unity of G-d). There is also the dietary law not to eat flesh from a living animal (Genesis 9:4), and the requirement to have just laws, to set up a legal system and law courts.

It is understood that these basic requirements enable harmonious societies in which people live spiritually purposeful and contented lives.

Conclusions

Heelas and Woodhead (among others) have clearly contrasted religion, involving apparently tedious and unpleasant obligation, with spirituality and its feel-good, experiential connotations. Strictly orthodox Jews clearly live a life invested with religious obligations. They are likely to be wary of contemporary spiritual movements, since such movements (within Judaism) often have non-orthodox features.

Within orthodox Judaism, practical religious obligations are regarded as intrinsically spiritual – therefore the religion-spirituality split is not valid in this

view. Some strictly orthodox Jews encourage meditation, contemplative prayer, spiritual enthusiasm and other spiritual practices. The hasidic movement is noted for this.

For the orthodox Jews, religion and spirituality are friends, very close partners indeed.

This view may be held by other religious groups: in a USA study (Zinnbauer et al,1997), while there were participants who identified themselves as spiritual but not religious, all those identifying themselves as religious also identified themselves as spiritual.

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Figure 1: Ages of books on Religion and Psychiatry/Psychology, and Spirituality and Psychiatry/Psychology: mean age, % pre-1999, and oldest (Source: Amazon.com, using the first eight academic texts listed under each set of search terms)