

# **Sanctifying Personhood; beyond roles, functions, schemas and traits**

Dr. Peter Verhagen

## **Introduction**

A year ago the Spirituality Special Interest Group Executive Committee and I had our first meeting. As secretary of the World Association of Psychiatry (WPA) Section on Religion, Spirituality and Psychiatry, and as secretary of the Dutch Foundation for Psychiatry and Religion, I asked for that meeting, and your board members, sympathetic as they are, kindly invited me.

We discussed a few topics. As a result of that discussion, we started working on a position statement on Religion, Spirituality and Psychiatry. Our aim with such a position statement is to have the statement accepted by the WPA; it would be a major event if we succeeded in accomplishing that goal. Professor Cook plays an important role and has made a major contribution in the drafting of the statement thus far, which is very helpful indeed. We really think that the acceptance of a position statement could have an important function and significance.

Spirituality and Religion have often been neglected in clinical and academic psychiatry; however, they are increasingly recognized as important in the understanding of the aetiology of psychiatric disorders, in clinical assessment and in treatment. There is more to say. According to a growing group of colleagues, psychiatrists could even play a role in the dialogue of religions, and in the dialogue between ethnic groups. The co-chair of our section, Professor Moussaoui, from Casablanca, organized fifteen debates on various themes concerning a new approach to Islam, among them its relationship to other religions. Other colleagues are active in different parts of the world where there are conflicting ethnic, political and religious groups. An important contribution has been made by Professor Christodoulou and members of the Greek Psychiatric Association in negotiations between the Lebanese, Israeli and Palestinian psychiatric associations. Recently, the Lord Alderdice wrote about his understanding and dealing with the problem of terrorism based on his work in psychiatry and politics in Northern Ireland (Alderdice, 2007). These examples illustrate an important aspect of how psychiatrists might contribute. A position statement like the one we have in mind could open eyes to the importance of religious and spiritual aspects, not only on an individual level, but also on a group level, and in societies at large.

It doesn't mean that psychiatrists should take up a new kind of moral therapy, or a 12-step intervention program, but they could contribute to creating, for instance, 'a context in which disturbed thoughts, feelings and behaviour of all kind of groups could be addressed' (Alderdice, 2007).

Secondly, we discussed other ways of a closer collaboration. This programme is the first fruit of that collaboration. The second one is already announced. We really hope to welcome you all next March in Leiden, when the second International Conference on Religious Psychopathology will be held organized by the Dutch Foundation; this international conference is organized in association with the Spirituality and Psychiatry group. Besides Professor Glas, myself, and our treasurer, Dr. Van Megen, Professor Sims will

be one of the key-note speakers. Professor King from the UK, Professor Spero from Israel, and Professors Galanter and Blazer, will be there too. It is a very challenging, high level program; don't miss out on it!

(see [www.religionandpsychiatry.com/congress2008](http://www.religionandpsychiatry.com/congress2008))

In the meantime we worked further on networking, and started collaboration with the American Psychiatric Association (APA) Corresponding Committee on Religion and Spirituality last May in San Diego. Finally I am proud to announce an extensive WPA book on Religion and Psychiatry, in collaboration with colleagues all around the world; Professor John Cox is one of the editors. The book is going to be presented at the WPA world conference, September 2008 in Prague.

### **The enlightenment project: varied data, meta-analyses**

The approaches attempting to give a place to religion and spirituality in psychiatric and psychotherapeutic thinking and practice reflect the enlightenment project (Dueck & Parsons, 2007). Scientific progress relies on scientific consensus on definitions of criteria and core constructs, and their measurement. There is no self-respecting Professor of the psychology of religion who does not define his constructs and who does not construct a measurement scale; the result is a multitude of religious and spiritual variables. Many studies have been performed and, as we are used to finding, the results have been varied. However a whole bunch of new methodologies was developed, called Evidence Based medicine, which gives the tools for a critical appraisal of all those studies and all these data. According to the hierarchy of evidence, we should look for meta-analyses, if available.

An excellent example of such an analysis with regard to religiosity and mental health was published in 2003 by Hackney and Sanders. One could easily think of the trend of argument. The discrepancies and contradictory findings obtained in all these studies are due to differences in the operationalization of religiosity and spirituality. Religion and spirituality are multifaceted constructs and different aspects are differentially measured and, for instance, differentially related to that other multifaceted construct named 'mental health'. Consequently, Hackney and Sanders proposed a moderately new kind of classification. Definitions, used in studies, focused on social and behavioural aspects of religion (attendance of services, participation in activities and so on) and were coded as 'institutional religion'. Definitions that focused on the beliefs involved in religious activity were coded as 'ideological religion' while operationalizations that focused on personal, internalized devotion were coded as 'personal devotion'.

One of the findings of the Hackney and Sanders' meta-analysis is that each position that has been taken within the religiosity - mental health debate has its own right. Depending on which definitions of religiosity are used, evidence could be found for each position. However it could also be concluded that 'personal devotion' produces the correlations of greatest magnitude between religiosity and mental health.

### **Criticism: weird things, the self**

I will pass by the possible explanations the authors give for these findings with regard to personal devotion. Their explanations relate, as might be expected within the scientific frame of reduction, to an empirically derived

and measurable expression of the individual. Religion and spirituality are according to this line of thinking construed in a way that can be investigated, but at the end the outcome hardly reflects the religious and spiritual language of the patient's original background. Religion and spirituality acquire essentialistic, individualistic and foundationalistic characteristics (Dueck & Parsons, 2007, 271-272).

Of course, in that way the enlightenment project with regard to religion and spirituality concurs with the world-views, assumptions and values embodied in psychiatric thinking, especially in the DSM tradition. Such thinking embodies a 'Zeitgeist', as Sadler depicted in his excellent 'Values and Psychiatric Diagnosis' (Sadler, 2005). He mentions ten weird things about Western psychiatry. I mention one of these ten 'weird things: the tightly bound self (Sadler, 2005, 270).

What does Sadler mean by that? In Western culture, the self is viewed by the individual as governed by internal beliefs, desires, commitments, thoughts and feelings that can be defined and measured. In other cultures the individual is seen as interdependently governed by social relationships, duties, responsibilities, and even by the thoughts, feelings, and the beliefs of others. This different view on the self in the Western world goes even a step further, for an important culture change came about - selfhood was elevated into a value base (Geyer & Baumeister, 2005)! Society needs to have sources of value, like religious, spiritual or historic traditions, that do not have to derive from outside sources. Value bases are important moral resources for society and its members. Former values bases were destroyed due to the Enlightenment project and during the legitimation crisis that followed, other sources were found and elevated into value bases to fill the gap. The self or selfhood became such a new value base. That meant a reversal of some traditional religious and spiritual moral norms.

Charles Taylor, most notably in his *Resources of the Self* (1989), shows what happened in a critical appraisal of the *Varieties of Religion* by William James (Taylor, 2002). It is, explains Taylor, 'a striking feature of the Western march towards secularity that it has been interwoven from the start with this drive toward personal religion' (Taylor, 2002, 13). The same stress on inwardness and commitment gave strength to the view that one should break with a religion in some of whose tenets one could no longer believe (Taylor, 2002, 14). Secular moralities place the same stress on inner commitment. So from this broader point of view, the findings of Sackney and Sanders can hardly be a surprise. They are in line with cultural developments: secularism, expressivism, loss of tradition, exteriority played off by interiority, and head against heart (Dueck & Parsons, 2007, 273). It is also, in line with Taylor's comments, a typical illustration of the strongly individualistic approach, in which labelled personal devotion - in William James's sense - is cantered on personal experience. However, a view on the 'religious connection', the mediation of the connection by the religious or spiritual community is unfortunately left out (Taylor, 2002, 24, 112).

Of course, it makes no sense to deny that the personal take on religion has its origin in our history and culture long before the Age of Enlightenment. It can be traced back to the High Middle Ages, in movements like the Brethren of the Common Life (Taylor, 2002, 9). The pressure to adopt a personal, inward form of religion reached a new stage with the Reformation, but also in

the Counter-reformation. To take religion seriously is to take it personally. Concurrent with this development, a polarization appeared between a more devotional religious practice contrasted with practice that stressed obedience to imposed requirements.

Such a polarization can also be seen in various periods of Islamic history, with the traditions of compliance with the shar'ia, contrasting with traditions of Sufism (Taylor, 2002, 17). However, in other religions like Hinduism, devotional moments are important without devaluing of collective rituals (Taylor, 2002, 12). Nothing prevents these two traditions from combining in one religious, spiritual movement. However, we are familiar with how much ego-investment goes into such matters.

### **Beyond an adjusted life**

Both approaches, on the one hand to religion and spirituality, and on the other to the self, are one-sided, limited and fall short. The resemblance, however, between these two sets of constructs is that they both seem to have a quality which escapes the subjective/objective dichotomy. It is clear that no form of compartmentalization (between objective states and traits on the one hand, and subjective experience on the other), nor encompassing frameworks, bring us further. A capacity to tolerate ambiguity appears in our field of vision. The dynamics of these two constructs open up a realm that exceeds the subjective/objective split. Let us focus for a moment on these dynamics. What are they like?

It is said that all religious and spiritual traditions sanctify personhood (Olson, 2002, 369-370). Let us have a closer look. Religious and spiritual traditions oppose various forms of reductionism and made clear long ago that knowing a so-called objective fact about somebody, for instance a diagnosis or a personality trait is not the same as knowing the person. Human development itself is often construed religiously as a process of sanctification. What kind of process is that?

When I was a boy, we sang a song about the only famous beetle we had in our country. We called him Jack. It was a sentimental song that told us about the life of the little beetle. Little Jack liked to climb and to sit on a gate, but as the rain fell down, Jack became wet and was washed off the gate onto the ground. However, even in Holland there is always sunshine after the rain - every cloud has a silver lining - and so the sun made our beetle dry again and Jack did what he liked to do best; he climbed up the gate again. One of our most famous professors in theology during the last century used the song about the beetle's life as a metaphor for the stages of inner or spiritual life. There is ascent, decline, and standstill. The ascent has only one goal, to get above the world, to get above oneself. However we have to struggle with much relapse. Spiritual life can become barren and dried out - a desert can even become an abyss or a labyrinth of fear and anxiety. In short, all the stages are characterized by leaps, breaks and struggles. Whatever the aim, be it unitive consciousness, enlightenment, harmony, holiness, reconciliation or obedience to God's will, the journey goes ahead for a greater good, a more meaningful life of greater value, toward social relations characterized by love, justice, and peace.

All kinds of religious and spiritual traditions affirm a virtuous life of wisdom, and compassion, which happens to be far more than merely an

adjusted life! I assume that you are all aware of the kind of models, spiral paths and the like, that try to specify and to visualize the form and content of such developments; I refer to the excellent work of Robert Cloninger, and his book 'Feeling Good'. In relation to DSM V, he proposes amending the chapter on personality disorders bearing in mind that religious and spiritual categories may provide a better way of conceptualizing certain phenomena. He suggests, as I understand it, using the idea of virtues and vices. It certainly means another take on the dynamics we are looking for. Actually, he uses (without saying so) the idea of the traditional deadly sins as the religious forms of these vices, as for instance, did the Pastoral Theologian Donald Capps in three or four surveys. Capps used the motive of the deadly sins and linked them to the stages of the life cycle as formulated by Erikson. The idea is that these virtues and vices constitute in some way the inherent moral, religious and spiritual dynamic, telling us something about the way people are struggling in a downward spiral of distress or an upward spiral of well-being with life, trying to live not merely in a well-adjusted way but in a more exemplary manner and with self-fulfilment.

Concerning the self, the no-self, and the 'technologies' of the self, I need to explain what this line of thinking has to do with the self in relation to religion, spirituality and personhood. As stated before, the self became subjected to the enlightenment project, as happened to religion and spirituality. Contemporary psychology assumes the self to be autonomous, unencumbered and individual. However, we need to be accurate. Self as experience describes our phenomenological self - our subjective experience through time. The representational self is something different: it is an internalized concept of who or what we are, made up of a shifting amalgam of representations and self-images (Epstein, 2006). Yet the experiencing self, the experiential reality of the sense of self is central. It is the first -person perspective, which means that only I can feel, perceive, and think in the way I am feeling, perceiving and thinking. And in that way we see in this experience a form of self-relatedness. As Levinas says, 'To be an ego is not only to be for oneself; it is also to be with oneself' (Dueck 2007). Far more fundamental than any enlightenment theory of self-determination is the understanding of this self-relatedness as dependent on relatedness to others!

'Others have begun with me' (Glas, 2006, p.133). The essence of the so-called doctrine of predestination, that 'horrible degree', (although the translation should be 'awesome degree') (McGrath, 1994, 396), is its consolatory meaning: that somebody else has begun with me, and will not turn me down, whatever rain might wash me away, like the little beetle of which we used to sing.

'In the beginning is the relation', Martin Buber stated. Human nature is essentially relational. For Buber, the primacy of relationships precedes the primacy of individuality. It was not entirely strange that the first man was disappointed after he saw and called all the living beings, because he could recognize himself in the other he needed to be himself. And recognize his delight when he sees her, the other who makes the difference; for being oneself is responding to a difference in oneself, a difference between how others see me and how I perceive myself.

According to the Buddhist view, the self does not exist! That is important to notice and a warning. Notions of self, like the enlightenment

views on the self, are potentially imprisoning because of our inherent tendency to cling unproductively to whatever gives a sense of security (Epstein, 2006, 224). Clinging to the self may be thought of as a form of narcissism. The Buddhist negation of the self is not a negation of personhood! On the contrary, the doctrine of Anattā does not seek to annihilate the self, but when practiced, people find that they have crossed over into a richer existence (Armstrong, 2001, 115). How could that be possible? Foucault investigating in his 'History of Sexuality' what he called the cultivation of the self, simply said: one must take care of oneself. Mrozik used her research in her recently published study "Virtuous Bodies. The Physical Dimensions of Morality in Buddhist Ethics (2007). She shows that according to Mahayana Buddhism, this so-called technology of the self (where Foucault speaks of cultivation of the self ), in the interplay of the care of the self and the help of the other, has its interest in the ways in which individuals shape each other into ideal ethical subjects. The ethical subject is said both to take form within and by means of a broader community. 'Grateful openness to others' is what it is called (Mrozik, 2007, 55).

Mrozik is a more critical than needed towards Foucault. Foucault explains, to be sure, that the cultivation of the self intensifies and valorizes the relation of oneself to oneself, which is an experience of great pleasure that one takes in oneself. However, it constituted, not an exercise in solitude, but a true social practice (Foucault, 1988, 66, 51) ; that is what Mrozik wants to point out (Mrozik, 2007, 54).

What I tried to explain is that the quality which escapes from the subjective/objective dichotomy has, in a fundamental way, to do with our relatedness, with our self-relatedness and otherness, reflected in more or less mature stages of development. The concept of sanctifying personhood within the realm of religious and spiritual traditions means a take on the dynamics of the nature and/or strengths of tendencies, attitudes, desires, habits, emotional proclivities, schemas, and so on, from the perspective of our relatedness.

### **'Who am I, who are you?': our relatedness**

I will finish my presentation by summarizing my take on the importance of our relatedness, the other and otherness with regard to what makes a person a person. 'Who' or 'what' asks for a definition or a description. It is a cry for articulation. Wanting to know who you are is a primordial cry, faced with a given world and thus always answered via comparison with others already existing. 'Am' or 'to be' is a cry for security, for ground. It has to do with two basic facts: I have not always been there, and I will not always be there. So being has something of overcoming not being. The metropolitan of Pergamon Zizioulas (2006) for that reason calls it a doxological cry! At the same time there is the hidden fear of non-being. 'Being' for that reason is also recognition of its limitations. The 'I', or 'you', or 'he' means a cry for particularity, for otherness. Other beings are! So 'being' can be applied to many others, but this third ingredient, the 'I' or 'he', implies a kind of uniqueness, in an unrepeatable way! It is clear from philosophical discussions that this uniqueness and unrepeatability cannot be based on features and characteristics that we share with human beings. These features are necessary but not sufficient conditions.

'Others have begun with me'. Not the fact that we share characteristics like ideas, convictions, emotions and needs, wishes and desires make me the person I am. I share these characteristics with all human-beings. The convictions and wishes and all these characteristics that have first-person meaning for me make me the person I am. However, it is not sufficient yet. I am who I am neither by choice by myself alone, neither is it foisted upon me by others. It is constituted by a consensus in which my claim is endorsed by others. I can only develop as a person to the extent that others endorse my identity and recognize me to be the person I claim to be. We need to be valued and to be loved (Brümmer, 1993, 234; Verhagen, 2006). Again in the words of the metropolitan of Pergamon: 'outside the communion of love the person loses its uniqueness and becomes a being like other beings, a thing without absolute identity and name, without a face. Life for the person means the survival of the uniqueness, which is affirmed and maintained by love'.

I have tried to share a few thoughts with you with regard to our ideas on the concept of the person and personhood. I have also tried to take up a few ideas and concepts from religious and spiritual thinking, hoping to provide ideas for a better way of understanding the person in turmoil. It is my position that it takes more than looking for how beliefs are embraced and adhered to as expressions of symptom formation or as vehicles for the expression of neurotic needs and conflicts, however important these functional aspects are in clinical practice.

## References

- Alderdice, J. (2007). The individual, the group and the psychology of terrorism. *International Review of Psychiatry*, 19 (3), 201-209.
- Armstrong, K. (2001). *Buddha*. London: Penguin Books.
- Brümmer, V. (1993). *The Model of Love. A study in philosophical theology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Capps, D., Cole, A. H. (2000). The Deadly Sins and Saving Virtues: How They are Viewed Today by Laity. *Pastoral Psychology*, 48, 359-376.
- Epstein, M. (2006). The structure of no-structure: Winnicott's concept of unintegration and the Buddhist notion of no-self. In D.M. Black (ed.), *Psychoanalysis and Religion in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Competitors or Collaborators?* (pp. 223-233). London: Routledge.
- Cloninger, C. R. (2004). *Feeling Good. The Science of Well-Being*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dueck, A., Parsons, Th.D. (2007). Ethics, Alterity, and Psychotherapy: A Levinasian Perspective. *Pastoral Psychology*, 55, 271-282.
- Foucault, M. (1988). *The Care of the Self. The History of Sexuality. Volume 3*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Glas, G. (2006). Person, Personality, Self, and Identity: A Philosophically Informed Conceptual Analysis. *Journal of Personality Disorders*, 20 (2), 126-138.
- Hackney, Ch. H., Sanders, G.S. (2003). Religiosity and Mental Health: A Meta-Analysis of Recent Studies. *Journal of the Scientific Study of Religion*, 42 (1), 43-55.

Mrozik, S. (2007). *Virtuous Bodies. The Physical Dimensions of Morality in Buddhist Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Olson, R.P. (ed.) (2002). *Religious Theories of Personality and Psychotherapy. East meets West*. New York: The Haworth Press.

Sadler, J. Z. (2005). *Values and Psychiatric Diagnosis*. International Perspectives in Philosophy and Psychiatry. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Taylor, Ch. (2002). *Varieties of Religion Today. William James Revisited*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.

Verhagen, P.J. (2006). Forgiveness: a critical appraisal. In N.N. Potter (ed.), *Trauma, Truth and Reconciliation. Healing Damaged Relationships* (pp. 203-227). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Zizioulas, J.D. (2006). *Communion & Otherness. Further Studies in Personhood and the Church*. London: T&T Clark.

© Dr. Peter J. Verhagen

e-mail: [pverhagen@meerkanten.nl](mailto:pverhagen@meerkanten.nl)