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## SPIRITUAL PSYCHOLOGY TRACED IN KHALIL GIBRAN'S ON PRAYER

**Dr. K. KAVITHARAJ**

Assistant Professor (English)  
PSGCAS, Coimbatore, TN.



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### Abstract

Spiritual Psychology is an innovative branch of psychology that examines man in his integrity of his spirit, soul and body. It is a way to identify the factors that determine an individual's mind and behaviour which is a development beyond personal level. Lajoie and Shapiro have described spiritual psychology or transpersonal psychology as the study of humanity's highest potential, and with the recognition, understanding, and realization of spiritual and transcendent state of consciousness that gives a more expanded view of human wholeness and transformation that attempts to integrate wisdom with modern psychology and translate spiritual principles into contemporary language. The theory expands the human spiritual development from their needs to the existential crisis and explores spiritual or religious experience. In this paper, the Spiritual or transpersonal psychology is traced through Khalil Gibran's poem *On Prayer*. This poem is taken for study as it is not bound within any particular religion and common to all individuals in the world despite the innumerable differences.

**Keywords:** Spiritual, transpersonal, Psychology, transcendent, consciousness, human behavior, religious experience, mysticism.

### Psychology and its development

Psychology is the scientific study of mind and its mental processes, function and behavior. It also deals with the feelings, emotions, thoughts and action of individuals. It concerns with the observation and explanation of human behavior as individuals and in group. Hence it deals with a group of related facts and principles that describe the human behaviour. Therefore psychology has strong connection to the medical science, social science, education, literature etc. As literature is a reflection of life which expresses human nature, their role as an individual and in their society, their trauma and

triumph towards their aspiration can be traced using psychology. More than behaviour, psychology implies the reason or the mental state of the characters behind the reality as William Wundt describes that psychology is the study of consciousness.

Before 1870, psychology was not considered to be a separate discipline but was studied under philosophy. It was William Wundt who was considered to be the father of psychology opened first experimental laboratory in psychology in 1879 at the University of Leipzig, Germany. Another notable contribution was the establishment

of American Psychological Association in 1892 by G Stanley Hall. In 1896, John Deney and William James supported the functionalism of psychology. In 1896, Sigmund Freud developed the theory of psychoanalysis. Meslow, Roger Watson, Pavlov and Thichener were other important contributors in the development of psychology as science.

### **Psychology and Spirituality**

In psychology, spirituality is sensitivity to the spirit or soul, specifically a concern for God. Spiritual psychology is a school of psychology that integrates the spiritual aspects of human experience within the framework of psychology. It is the study and practice of the art and science of conscious awakening which make an individual identify, recognize and navigate positively within the context of spiritual reality. Walsh and Vaughan define it "as experiences in which the sense of identity or self extends beyond (trans) the individual or personal to encompass wider aspects of humankind, life, psyche or cosmos".

### **Emergence of Spiritual or Transpersonal Psychology**

William James was an American philosopher, historian and psychologist who is considered to be a leading thinker in the late nineteenth century in the United States. James along with Charles Sanders Peirce, established the philosophical school known as pragmatism. He is also the founder of functional psychology. A survey published in 1991 in American Psychologist ranked James's reputation in second place next to William Wundt. His works had influenced Emile Durkheim, Edmund Husserl, Bertrand Russell, Hilary Putnam etc. his scholarly writings include topic of metaphysics, education, philosophy, religion and mysticism. Some of his most influential works are The Principles of Psychology, Essays in Radical Empiricism, The Varieties of Religious Experience etc.

William James is considered the father of modern psychology. His book *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* lay the foundation for the psychology of religion. James had articulated the principle elements of

transpersonal orientation by the early twentieth century. Also he made the first recorded use of the term 'transpersonal' in 1905. As Robert McDemott refers James philosophy is "transpersonal" and James along with Jung as a "forebear" in the field (Walsh & Vaughan. 1993, p. 209). The most remarkable part is that James's most powerful writing attempt to make spiritual experience acceptable to a scientific form at mind.

It comprises his edited Gifford lecture on natural theology which were delivered at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland between 1901-1902. It is a psychological study of individual religious experiences and mysticism and to identify commonalities in religious experiences across various traditions. His writings concern the psychology of religious experiences rather than the institutions of religion. He insists that his purpose is to understand the origin of religious experiences rather than judgemental on any of the religious values. To him Religion is that which combines a moral system with positive sentiments. There are two key distinction in James's treatment of religion. The former is the healthy minded religion, a religion of life's goodness and the latter which is the religion of the sick soul that cannot overcome the radical sense of evil in the world. James believed that religious experiences can have morbid origin in brain pathology which can be irrational but largely positive. In his work, James had not restricted his ideas to any particular religion.

William James emphasized that religion gives a new zest and causes "a temper of peace, and in relation to others a preponderance of living affections" which freshens and reflects extraordinary influence on actions and endurance. He identified three essential characteristics of the religious life. They are:

1. The visible world is part of a more spiritual universe from it draws its significance.
2. Harmonious relation with the higher universe is the true end.
3. The prayer or inner communion with the spirit is a process where the spiritual energy

flows in and affects the psychological or material within the phenomenal world.

Thus it is evident that the principles and practices of spiritual psychology provide the core for living into the awareness of everyday life. It is highly valued if it transforms the world into a more peaceful and better place to live in the present and also subsequently for the future generation.

#### Khalil Gibran and his works

Khalil Gibran was a Lebanese-American writer, poet and artist, born on January 6, 1883 in Ottoman Syria and later immigrated to the United States in 1890 with his family. He lived most of his life in the United States and wrote his best known works in English. He was also the prominent person in a Romantic movement that transformed Arabic literature in the first half of the twentieth century. Gibran's education in Beirut, Boston and Paris made him influenced by the European modernists of the late nineteenth century. His notable work is *The Prophet* which was published in the United States in 1923. It was his best-selling book which was translated into more than 100 languages. His other known works are *The Madman*, *Broken Wings* etc. Also Gibran was a most influential writer of Arabic poetry and literature in the first half of the twentieth century. Gibran's artistic and literary works are romantic in nature and was influenced by the Bible, Friedrich Nietzsche and William Blake. In his works, Gibran had discussed different themes and had explored diverse literary forms considered as "an artistic legacy to people of all nations"

Gibran's simple and direct-style of writing was a revolution and inspiration to other writers. His themes were love, death, alienation, disruption, loss of rural beauty reflected with the experiences of his readers. Also his themes are full of lyrical outsprings and are expressions of Gibran's deeply religious and mystic nature. Gibran found admirers and imitators among Arabic and English writers which built his reputation as one of the key figures in literary circle.

#### *On Prayer*

A priestess asks about prayer, and the response for this interrogation would transform the mentality of a commoner and would make him

recognize and comprehend his role in the world of spiritual reality. The poem explains that prayer should not only be made in distress and need, but also in fullness of joy and in days of abundance as prayer is the expansion of oneself into "the living ether". If one weeps when the soul give summons to prayer, then the soul should continue until he laughs. While praying, the soul rises to meet everyone who prays at that moment as prayer is an ecstasy and sweet communion. Also it is enough to reach "the temple invisible" through our prayers rather than bargaining, regretting and crying. If one enters the temple invisible just for asking something, then he will never receive it. If prayer is to humble oneself, he will never be lifted up or if it is to beg for others, he shall not be heard as it is enough that one enters into the temple invisible. Ultimately, nobody can teach how to pray because God hears only those words He utters through human lips. Like the unheard prayers of the sea, the forests and the mountains, the prayers of human beings can be found in their heart which could be heard in the stillness of the night in silence. It is the will of the Almighty, "our winged self" that makes individual move forward. It is His desire that make individuals desire and aspire anything as His urge that would turn the nights into the days. In brief, it is not necessary to ask or demand God for any needs because He knows what the needs are, even before it is thought or aspired by human beings. So God is all, everywhere and in everything. Just by praying or visiting the temple invisible without any requests or bargains, God gives us all.

Transpersonal psychology embedded on "On Prayer"

There is a conscious spiritual awakening in the poem which is explicit by the following lines:

You pray in your distress and in  
your need; would that you might  
pray also in the fullness of your joy  
and in your days of abundance.

Thus the poem revolutionize the concept of praying which is not just to request for something, be humble or to plead for others, but just to visit the temple invisible which is an ecstasy and sweet communion.

In the poem, Gibran enriches the concept of praying and brings forth that the visible or materialistic world is part of the spiritual world where prayer brings the heart and soul together of beings who pray at the very hour. This is illustrated in the following lines:

When you pray you rise to meet  
in the air those who are praying at  
that very hour, and whom save in  
prayer you may not meet.

Thus one of the characteristics mentioned by William James is substantiated in the above quoted lines. The lines reflect that prayer could be felt and experienced rather than expressed and uttered. Also these lines channelize what prayer is irrespective of any religion and common to all which is a sweet exchange showering happiness. Gibran writes:

Therefore let your visit to that  
temple invisible be for naught but  
ecstasy and sweet communion.

The above lines reflect the harmonious relation with the higher universe. The poet explicitly explains that prayer is not a demand but devotion just for what it is, being selfless and happy. Furthermore, he comments that prayer is not heard by God as He Himself utters them through human beings. Another instance for the harmonious relation with the higher sense is reflected that prayer is not just for human beings, it is for and in all the creations of God which are the prayers of seas, forests and mountains that could be heard by heart. Thus Gibran gives a comprehensive perspective of prayer which is more than what an ordinary individual generally think of. So this communion and ecstasy make mankind feel harmonious and pleasant relation with the universe which is the true and ultimate end of spiritual or religious life as outlined by William James.

The poem ends with a complete surrender to God. The inspiring lines are:

Though art our need; and in giving  
us more of thyself thou givest us  
all."

Such a spiritual life would inspire human beings to be better persons with better understanding of their

role in the visible world and their necessity to reach the temple invisible through their prayers from heart which would rise in air and meet who prays at the same time which is a ecstasy and bring meaningfulness in the rest of their life.

### Conclusion

The perception in the poem On Prayer is beyond the personal level of materialistic life. It enhances the importance of mankind's highest potential to recognize, understand and realize the spiritual state of consciousness which gives wholeness and attempts to integrate wisdom amidst human being. Thus the poem On Prayer stands as a perfect instance to explore transpersonal psychology which is the need of the fast- moving world of less morals and values. Henceforth, William James aspects on transpersonal psychology and characteristics of religious life holds good for human to be humane of some use to themselves and others, leaving the world a better place to live in with humanity and trust.

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