
HUMANISTIC PSYCHOLOGY

the new global religion ?

by

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The spark for this article was Margaret Novakovic. I spent a couple of hours with her because we wanted to get to know each other. As the Chair of AHP, she asked herself - 'what is and what is not humanistic psychology? What is to be in - and what excluded?'

And I heard myself saying that surely humanistic psychology needs to be inclusive rather than exclusive, unifying rather than divisive. Does it not maybe have the potential to serve as the new religion, a new unifying force world-wide?

I think best with my fingers on the keyboard of a word processor. So my thoughts begin with questions and observations which I would like to tie together and make sense of.

My 'spiritual framework' has been, for a very long time, the American AHP, mainly because it encompasses both the personal and the political, the individual, social and organizational aspects of contexts in which people try to make sense out of their lives.

I came to live and work in London in 1981 because it was a bridge between America and the continent and I felt that a bridge was needed

between the new ideas of the New World and the ancient roots of European traditions.

I was a German from Eastern Europe, and I helped to create the European Association of Humanistic Psychology by organising conferences in Geneva. I had lived and worked with Moshe Davidowitz, an American Rabbi who had designed a number of AHP conferences in the US. He introduced me to my first 'seders'. I was surprised to experience the language of liberal Judaism as being so much 'New Age'

In London, I created the lecture series TURNING POINTS at St. James's Church, Piccadilly. Although this was an Anglican church, the subjects offered were from all denominations and standpoints and I was touched by the spirituality of the language.

So what happened between my confirmation as a protestant teenager, my noticing the observation of an American therapist that spirituality seems to wake up with adolescence, and the path that led me to St. James's when I was thirty-eight?

I remember how, as a teenager I read philosophy rather than going to church; that I had fainted when I first meditated with my given mantra for transcendental meditation when I was twenty-two, and that my four years of Jungian analysis seemed a waste of time compared with TA, Gestalt, bioenergetics, massage, Rolfing and the many different kinds of groups I had attended.

Donald Reeves, the Rector of St. James's, invites people to 'bring their lamp'. That's what I wanted to do: contribute to his vision of building a little utopia, a little bit of heaven, the happy family of mankind which I was too shy to describe in a TA workshop when I saw it before my inner eye in 1975.

. . .

Donald is famous for his celebrations. However, in his services I do not experience the spirit of celebration as I have discovered it in countless workshops. John Rowan's 'Ordinary Ecstasy' does not require a Christian service either.

So what is the bridge between religion and humanistic psychology? How come the twain meet at St. James's but rarely in other churches?

When I discussed this article with Vivian Milroy, he mentioned semantics a number of times. And yes it is about language, but it is much more the spirit behind the language that intrigues me.

And I remember the Gestalt therapist who said to me: 'Speak

poetry to me', 'sing what you want to say to me'. But Marty Fromm does not believe in life after death . . . So Gestalt maybe is a way of experiencing the Spirit here and now, but not there and then . . .

The spirit behind the words, the attitude underlying all actions, the values which form our beliefs, that's what we are trying to convey and to experience, I suppose. And when we experience that, we also may touch the spirit in the cosmos, God and the universe.

Religions, I believe, are the attempts to 'organise' the collective energies that rise in groups. Religion, I think, is institutionalised spirituality.

In the end, all teachings about ourselves are to do with our relationship with ourselves, other people and the cosmos.

What Western religions seem to have left out of their teachings, is the /experiential part for understanding, the opportunity for experiencing myself, so that I may experience the cosmos and the difference between me and you.

Religions, I think, are about concepts and qualities. They also create group experiences, but my hunch is that the creators of these experiences are not aware of what they are doing because they are not aware of themselves. Feelings are talked about, but not expressed, not experienced.

Thanks to humanistic psychology, I have learnt about concepts which I

had not heard about before: I had experiences which I had never dreamt I might have: I changed my attitudes towards myself and towards other people: I developed qualities which had been dormant: I became more aware of better feelings which led me towards activities I would never have thought possible before I encountered humanistic psychology.

Eastern religions may provide for more individual experiences and are by their very nature more foreign, more mystifying, more unknowable. The language is different, the concept behind the language may be difficult to convey in Western language.

In our search for meaning in life and what Maslow called 'self actualization', I believe we need permanent contact with the unknown as well as the known. Too much of the same is not exciting. And, if going to church is always the same, then why Bother?

A group, however, is never the same. No matter what the technique, the individual members are changing all the time, experiencing different degrees of openness, sharing and insight.

So, in the end, it seems to me as if the major contribution that humanistic psychology is offering to existing religions is the training in experiences, the experiential way of teaching, the experience of group energies, knowledge of group dynamics and the use of collective energies for individual learning.

Humanistic psychology is diffused in its teaching. There is no one master, no one doctrine. That's why it has the power of becoming a new religion, one based on the experience of the individual. Like the gnostics and the cathars, the ones who knew rather than believed. Like Jung.

The leaps from psychology to humanistic psychology and spirituality and religion are for me as follows: psychology was based on psychiatry used to cure the sick. Humanistic psychology says 'Let's develop what's in us, no matter whether we are sick or not'. Spirituality is innate and gets lost, thanks to an education which is too head-bound and thus too divisive. Religion is the attempt to organise spirituality, the link (religion) and binding between God out there and spirit within.

All major movements of thought have occurred in more than one place in the world at the same time. The faster people and information can travel, the easier it is for movements to become global, for people to become international.

The hardest to bridge are the barriers of language, but then there are more and more multilingual people around.

I see that Europeans went West in the search for the new and better world, and once they reached California, they either went inside or went further East. By the same token, gurus from the East moved West, and the West begins in

California. Where East meets West, Yin meets Yang: the diffused group and community meets the hard-headed and hard-nosed Western individual.

Politically and spiritually, Europe wants to find its identity beyond its language separations. It needs to become One, not only viewed from outside the US, but also from the inside.

Just like the individual who also needs to become One, not only from the outside, but above all, through inner experience.

It has always saddened me that, in the US, humanistic psychology was separated from transpersonal psychology. It is also noticeable that churches have a different function in America than in Britain and Europe; the separation from the state is one aspect, the sheer length of tradition is another one, and the general ease with social contacts and gregariousness is yet another one. Finally, presumably the greater European familiarity with hierarchies in organizations, be they spiritual or political.

I would like to think that humanistic psychology, at least in Europe, could expand its horizon towards the established churches and religions by including, within its investigations and practices transpersonal and spiritual experiences. Furthermore, I would love to believe that there are enough individuals around who have learned to become themselves, body, mind and spirit, and who are also able to remain themselves in organizations and institutions.

In America, there is a very active Organization Development Network and its spiritual offshoot, the Organisation Transformation Network. However, I have not yet seen many humanistic organisations in operation: groups of people that foster the realisation of all its individuals by applying networks and networking techniques and principles.

The idea of 'networks' was first introduced to me by the American AHP and it is not only for organisational, but also deep personal, ie spiritual needs. A decentralised religion, a philosophy that can be alive in everybody's heart because it does not live in books or gurus but, above all, in groups, and in the coming together, is that maybe what Jesus taught and what the gnostics practised?

Only today, 2000 years later, there is more than one master, there are many individuals and communities, and the whole movement is global.

Humanistic psychology could fill spiritual gaps not only between nations, but also between religions.

It takes, however, a lot of humanistic work on oneself to become that individual that is so universal, so pan-religious and international.

But the beauty is that it is possible.

If not now, when?
If not here, where?
If not us, who?