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Xenophilia as a Cultural Trap: Bridging the Gap Between Transpersonal Psychology and Religious/Spiritual Traditions

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Xenophilia, seen as a type of romanticism, is proposed as an explanation for the tendency within transpersonal psychology to privilege so-called exotic religious and spiritual traditions, as opposed to the xenophobic tendency within mainstream Western psychology of religion and spirituality to privilege the Judeo-Christian tradition. Claims made in a recent article published in a major psychology journal that Buddhism does not rest on supernatural faith and is the most psychological spiritual tradition are challenged as examples of this type of romanticism. Demographic trends showing conversion rates to Buddhism in the US are contrasted with conversion rates to Christianity in South Korea, also evidencing this tendency to embrace religious and spiritual traditions in accord with xenophilia.

In previous writings, I have been critical of both the prevailing romanticism within transpersonal psychology and the complementary scientism within mainstream psychology (Friedman, 2002, 2005). Perhaps scientism finds its worst expression in some of the Western psychology of religion and spirituality, especially when implicitly based on Judeo-Christian premises that are presented as universal, rather than particular to just one cultural context, and couched in scientific language that obfuscates its theocentric underpinnings and grants apparent scientific legitimacy to its project. However, elevating such a parochial worldview through misconstruing it as part of a universalistic science may in actuality diminish its perspective in subtle ways (e.g., by reducing genuinely important supernatural beliefs to only a natural framework), as well as comparatively disenfranchise alternative worldviews. This is congruent with the charge of ethnocentrism, perhaps even xenophobia, although fortunately there has been somewhat of a recent renaissance of multicultural perspectives within the psychological study of religion and spirituality (e.g., Fukuyama & Sevig, 1999).

In stark contrast, transpersonal psychology has been much more multicultural than the psychology of religion and spirituality (e.g., Friedman, MacDonald, & Kumar, 2004; Hastings, Balasubrahmanyam, Beard, Ferguson, Kango, and Raley, 2001). However, often the opposite bias has prevailed, namely a xenophilia extolling non-Western traditions, such as explicitly privileging

Asian and indigenous religious and spiritual insights as superior. As one poignant example, I recall attending a presentation at the Sixteenth International Transpersonal Conference in which a keynote speaker decried, and even laughed at, the Judeo-Christian parochialism within the mainstream psychology of religion and spirituality, while his presentation ironically ended with a chant to the Hindu deity, Shiva, whose statue was prominently placed next to his podium, sadly evidencing an opposite form of parochialism. I consider this xenophilia to be an important subcategory of romanticism and one that acts as a cultural trap (see Bohannon, 1995).

In order to explore xenophilia as a cultural trap within transpersonal studies, this paper focuses on a noteworthy recent example of unfairly privileging one religious and spiritual tradition over others. Wallace and Shapiro (2006) offered a thought-provoking way to bring Buddhist insights under the purview of psychological science, including surveying important empirical findings and pointing to potential future research avenues. This paper, which has a decidedly transpersonal perspective and was published in the flagship journal of the American Psychological Association (the world's largest psychological organization with over 150,000 members—see <http://www.apa.org/about/>), represents a major advance in the acceptability of transpersonal thought into mainstream Western psychology. However, Wallace and Shapiro made two very troubling assertions, namely that Buddhism “is widely considered the most

psychological of all spiritual traditions” (p. 690) and “it does not begin with arousing faith in a supernatural being” (p. 690). Without disparaging the otherwise excellence of this paper, these two assertions require challenge.

First, I openly acknowledge that Buddhism is rich in psychological insights, but is there reliable evidence that it is the most psychological of all traditions? Wallace and Shapiro (2006) supported this claim in their paper by providing only a single reference to an introductory book on world religions. As evidence to the contrary, I note there are voluminous literatures relating psychology to many other Eastern (e.g., Hinduism; see Paranjpe, 1998) and Western (e.g., Christianity; see Jeeves, 1997) religious and spiritual traditions, as well as to various other traditions (e.g., folk psychologies; see Wringer, 2002). Asserting that Buddhism is uniquely the most psychological of all of these traditions appears to be an unwarranted opinion that privileges Buddhism and is indefensible on any empirical or logical grounds. In contrast, Rue (2005) discussed how every successful religion, including but not limited to Buddhism, has much to offer scientific psychology.

Wallace and Shapiro’s (2006) second troubling assertion, namely their claim that Buddhism is not faith-based, also needs to be more deeply examined, but it first needs to be acknowledged that the complexity of all major religious and spiritual traditions, including Buddhism, makes any generalizations across their varying geographical and temporal expressions difficult. With that stated, Buddhism is sometimes portrayed as devoid of any faith-based assumptions (such as in claiming that one only has to practice Buddhist meditation to experience its validity), but clearly the Buddha’s foundational teachings are embedded within complex networks of faith-based or supernatural assumptions (e.g., the karma principle assuming casual chains resulting in painful reincarnations avoided only through attaining a presumed mystical state of enlightenment) and Buddhist practice typically starts with an initial implicit, if not explicit, faith, both in the Buddha’s supposed enlightenment, and in a context which makes such a claim of spiritual attainment meaningful. This alleged achievement promotes emulating the Buddha’s path through viewing him as spiritual model (Oman & Thoreson, 2003) and perhaps even a divine figure (Norezayan & Hansen, 2006) because, without initial faith in his alleged extraordinary achievement, few would embark on the path the Buddha taught. In addition,

portraying Buddhism as being a purely secular belief is quite misleading in terms of how this rich religious and spiritual tradition is widely varied in its practice within its own more immediate cultural contexts. For example, in many avowedly Buddhist cultures, there is frequent worship of the Buddha as a supposed divinity, which is intertwined with various magical rituals.

I hold great respect for Buddhism and believe that it offers many insights into human psychology. However, my early, and admittedly romanticized, notions of Buddhism were changed considerably during a visit I made to Thailand. I was surprised to find that it was common for many Thai people to pray and make material offerings to statues of the Buddha, clearly approaching the Buddha as a deity and even kissing the toes of his icons with great reverence. In addition, many of the temple walls were full of depictions of various deities and other supernatural figures (e.g., demons) from the Hindu tradition from which Buddhism derived. I was also surprised to learn how some Buddhist beliefs were implemented in such a way as to seemingly bypass their presumed intent, such as how the prohibition against killing animals led to the rise of an occupational class of butchers composed predominantly of Muslims exempt from this prohibition, and how it was common for Thai Buddhists, including monks, to eat meat, as long as they were not personally involved in the killing of the animals, which was left to the non-Buddhist butchers. Perhaps the part of my trip to Thailand that most helped me put my idealized notions of Buddhism into perspective involved a legal dispute that was in the newspaper headlines for many days during my visit: this involved the so-called “King of the Monks,” the top hierarchical leader in that country’s Buddhist power structure, who was zealously using the power of law to prosecute an errant monk for teaching an unorthodox form of meditation, which was deemed heretical by the Buddhist establishment. Admittedly, these shortcomings can be found in most any religious tradition. However, for Wallace and Shapiro (2006) to claim that Buddhism is somehow unique, that it is not faith-based, or to imply that it is otherwise exempt from the questionable trappings of other religions, is unwarranted.

So why is it problematic to misrepresent Buddhism in these two ways? To understand this, consider that many Westerners reject their own religious roots in favor of foreign traditions, exemplified by the dramatic growth in conversions to Buddhism as well as to numerous other traditions, such as Native American

and various forms of so-called New Age spirituality, in the U.S. (Pew Forum, 2008). According to this source, in the U.S. between 1974 and 2004, the overall percentage of the population consisting of Christians decreased markedly, particularly due to a loss in the number of Protestants by nearly 14% (the number of Catholics remained steady, primarily due to Latin immigrants), while there was a dramatic growth in the number of both the religiously unaffiliated (from 6.8% to 14.2%) and those affiliated with non-Judeo-Christian traditions (from 0.5% to 8.1%); included in these numbers is a remarkable near 200% growth in Buddhism within the U.S., where it transformed into the 4th most widely practiced U.S. religion. Nearly three-fourths of U.S. Buddhists converted from other religions, demonstrating its great appeal in this one Western culture.

However, this trend is paralleled by an equally remarkable growing acceptance of Christianity, along with rejection of traditional Eastern religious and spiritual traditions, in some Asian countries. For example, in South Korea between 1982 and 2001, the percentage of the population consisting of Buddhists decreased by 7.1%, while the percentage of Christians increased by 15.8%, so that over a quarter of South Koreans are now Christian (Pew Forum, 2008). In terms of power related to the social class of its followers, some even see Christianity as now the most important religious tradition within contemporary South Korea (Bushwell & Lee, 2005).

One way to understand these demographic trends involves considering the possible effects of a tendency to romanticize certain religious and spiritual traditions over others through the process of xenophilia, especially those traditions that are perceived as exotic and therefore can be more easily idealized because they are not well understood outside of their own cultural context (see Friedman, 2002, 2005). For example, I have informally noted a great deal of enthusiasm toward Buddhism among many Westerners who have left their Judeo-Christian roots for Buddhism, but I also have found a quite similar enthusiasm toward Christianity from many South Koreans who have left their Buddhist roots for Christianity. In fact, many South Koreans who have converted from Buddhism have lamented about their felt sense of meaninglessness in following Buddhist practices they saw as empty rituals, as well as their disdain for the perceived corruptions in the Buddhist power structure, feelings quite parallel to the complaints I have heard from many in the West who

have left their Judeo-Christian tradition for Buddhism or other forms of religious or spiritual expression. I conclude that, as many Westerners from the Judeo-Christian tradition are inspired by the deep insights within the Buddha's teachings, so too are many South Koreans from the Buddhist tradition inspired by the deep meanings in Christ's teachings. I propose that attractions to exotic cultures, xenophilia, can explain both why some Westerners elevate Eastern, while disregarding the richness equally available in their own Western, religious and spiritual traditions, and vice versa for some Easterners.

Such xenophilia is especially problematic when it is touted in a scientific way, such as portraying any particular tradition as more aligned to the field of transpersonal psychology. Although one can draw important parallels between various religious and spiritual teachings with transpersonal psychology, their fundamental orientations are quite dissimilar. Trying to fit the richness of a lived faith-based tradition into the narrow confines of psychology, which is consensually seen as scientific (Friedman, 2002, 2005), may well promote colonizing the latter tradition in ways contrary to its purpose. In regard to Buddhism in specific, its soteriology may superficially resemble some of the directions encouraged by psychology, but its ultimate goal is radically different. Misunderstanding it this way poses the danger of oppressing a vibrant religious and spiritual tradition by misappropriating it outside of its cultural context (see Davis, 2003). Those who misinterpret Buddhism as being merely a variant of scientific psychology congruent with its more modest psychological goals reduce Buddhism to an inaccurate caricature. Of course, the soteriological goals of the predominant Western Judeo-Christian tradition are equally incommensurate with scientific psychology, despite its expression as supposedly universal in much of the mainstream psychology of religion and spirituality, since it too is supernaturally underpinned. Religious and spiritual traditions, both Eastern and Western, are clearly distinct from psychology as a science in terms not only of their goals, but also of their underlying ontologies and epistemologies. Attempts to characterize any religious and spiritual tradition as being a science also dilutes the scientific process by bringing in extra baggage connected with the richness of these lived traditions (e.g., the quest for enlightenment in Buddhism is based on a supernatural belief valuing the avoidance of karmic suffering that is incommensurate with the

naturalistic ideals of seeking health and ameliorating pathology through scientific psychological practices).

While it is laudable to examine these traditions in terms of what they might offer Western psychology, any bridge building should be approached with great circumspection to avoid extolling any one tradition as ultimately, or even relatively, better than others in terms of its importance or relevance to psychology. Scientific approaches, such as fostered through an empirically-based transpersonal psychology, can go beyond merely studying extant traditions through creating new approaches that further knowledge from a vantage devoid of supernatural premises, something that cannot be defensibly claimed for Buddhism, which is unavoidably steeped in supernaturalism. Furthermore, proclaiming any singular religious and spiritual tradition as offering more, or less, to psychology compromises the neutrality (i.e., agnosticism) about the supernatural required in scientific approaches—although this does not imply that psychological science is better or worse in any absolute way from Buddhism or any other religious and spiritual tradition but, rather, simply that there are profound differences between the underlying assumptions and purposes of science in contrast to these.

Wallace and Shapiro's (2006) article has contributed much of value through relating important themes within Buddhism to scientific psychology, but they have unfortunately also romanticized this in a way detrimental to Buddhism, to other religious and spiritual traditions, and to psychology and more broadly to science itself. Extreme caution has to be taken in relating religious and spiritual traditions to psychology, as it indeed is treacherous terrain, and this applies especially to transpersonal psychology, which is easily subverted if researchers and scholars confound their own religious and spiritual values with their psychological work, similar to the cultural trap inherent to cultural anthropologists doing field work in which often they lose their anthropological perspectives and go "native." Most major faith traditions profess tolerance as an important value, but portraying any one religion as best, either in terms of what it offers to psychology or in terms of its underlying assumptions being based on anything other than faith, is undoubtedly a type of intolerance or spiritual arrogance (see Levin, 2008) that could lead to serious abuses and sorely needs to be resisted by transpersonal researchers and scholars. It is crucial to recognize the significance of differences among cultures within transpersonal psychology, as well as any

approach to the psychology of religion and spirituality, but I have stated previously that romanticizing any culture or aspect of a culture as being overall better or worse, including in its religious or spiritual traditions, is to be avoided, as follows:

The point is that science, including its applications in professional practice, should not be tied to any particular religious or spiritual tradition although it can clearly be used appropriately within the context of such a tradition. In addition, traditions might be sources of fruitful hypotheses for beginning to scientifically explore within transpersonal psychology, but a skeptical scientific attitude should prevail unless support is evidenced. Finally, I intend no disrespect for those in any religious or spiritual tradition as long as they do not try to characterize their tradition as science and do not try to stop scientific inquiry." (Friedman, 2002, p. 178)

In conclusion, avoidance of the cultural trap of xenophilia is essential if transpersonal psychology is to develop as a science.

Notes

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