

Remedies for Abusive Religiosity: An Interdisciplinary Conversation

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ABSTRACT: It is the aim of this article to analyze a few remedies that could contribute to the cure of abusive religiosity. Promoting a conversation between philosophy, psychology and theology, the article focuses on three such remedies. The first one is the holistic understanding of human nature, in all its complexity and with all its paradoxes. The second one is the proper understanding of the phenomenon of conversion with the contrast between conformation and transformation. The third one is the proper understanding and practice of authority, with all the danger that come with the exercise of power.

KEY WORDS: religiosity, abuse, holistic, conversion, transformation, authority

Introduction

Religion is one of the driving engines of human existence. Human being was created as a religious being, her needs for spiritual communion being one of the most essential. Religious communities are therefore meant to contribute to the fulfilment of human beings need for spiritual communion. They are meant to be communities where where human beings are to find safety, comfort, and help, a community distinguished by faith, hope and love (Stott 1991, 29), a community learning to make the love of God a reality, toward each other and toward the people not knowing God (McClung 1985, 142).

However, in human society, religiosity could become abusive and therefore toxic for human beings. Given the seriousness of such unfortunate transformation of religiosity, there is a need not only for a proper diagnosis of it, but also for remedies that could contribute to the cure of abusive religiosity that endanger the well being of the human beings, not only spiritually, but also psychologically and emotionally. It is, therefore, the aim of this article to underline three of such remedies for the cure of abusive religiosity.

We will start with the holistic understanding of human nature, we will continue with the proper understanding of the phenomenon of conversion, and we will end with the balanced understanding and practice of authority. The analysis of the three remedies for the cure of abusive religiosity, will be conducted in the conversation of philosophy, psychology and theology.

A Holistic Understanding of Human Nature

One of the remedies for abusive religiosity is the holistic understanding of human nature's complexity (Rotaru 2016, 29-43). Man is the most complex being, the masterpiece (Wyatt 1998, 20) of God's creation, and the last word of God in creation. As a special creation of God, being in a special relationship with God, man is paradoxically a being „with broken relationships with God, with others, with the created order and with himself (Hurding 1992, 245-246).

Thinkers in the contemporary modern history have interpreted differently this paradox, from the cynical perspective to the realistic one. Mark Twain quoted by Hurding said: "man is God's creature made at the end of the week when God was tired" (Hurding 1992, 250). John Stott arguing the realism of the Bible concerning the paradox of human nature says: „The Bible preserves the paradox that expresses the glory and also the shame of our humanity." (Stott 1996, 145). Nikolai Berdiaev said that man is „one of the phenomenons of this world.... with two images: royal one and a slave one (Berdiaev 1992, 70). Erich Fromm describes this paradox in terms of the dialectic between the two tendencies inherent in human nature: the normal tendency to growth and the pathological tendency to regression. Fromm synthesizes the two tendencies in two opposite syndromes: growth syndrome

(characterized by the love for life, independence, and love for others); and the decay syndrome (characterized by love of death, narcissism and incestuous symbiosis). Every man, continues Fromm, chooses his own direction, to life or to death, to good or to evil (Fromm 1965, 17-23). Fromm points out also the paradox of man as a product of history and as the maker of history (Fromm 1991, 10).

Based on Karl Barth's argument that the image of God is the best seen in the partnership between man and woman and in the community of human beings; and continuing with Paul K. Jewett, who affirms that the man created in the image of God is man-in-communion (Hurding 1992, 246). In the same line Stanley Jones considers:

We have dissected life and desiccated it in the process. We have picked the flower of life to pieces, petal by petal, and have lost its beauty in the procedure. We have handed the body over to the doctor, the mind to the psychiatrist, and the soul to the minister, treating these three parts as separate entities. They are not separate. Life is a whole. You cannot affect one part without affecting all three (Jones 1942, v).

To sum up, from the above considerations, we understand that philosophy, psychology and theology could meet, concerning the paradox and complexity of human nature on a common ground. Based on this, we can state that a dichotomic perspective of the human being, could lead to the idea that spirituality and religiosity concerns only the soul, that faith regards only the spiritual things, the religious activities, the sacred domain of life. Rather, to speak of human being implies a remembering of the fact that human being is a relational being (Fromm 1950, 7).

A Proper Understanding of Conversion

We have argued in the section above that one of the remedies for abusive religiosity is the avoidance of the black and white approach of human nature and life that creates a dichotomic life, divided between the sacred and profane. In this section we will discuss another remedy for abusive religiosity, that comes from a proper understanding the crises of human being's life. One of the most important of such moments is the phenomenon of conversion.

To be sure, conversion is a necessary happening in the spiritual experience of a person. The human necessity to grow includes transformation but is equally true that the conversion phenomenon can suffer deviations that affect the human being's personality and character. One of the errors that can lead to the distortion of conversion phenomenon is the view that conversion is a moment that confers *spiritual immunity*. In many cases baptism is considered as being such a determinant moment.

What can happen and indeed happens many times, is the beginning of a process of external conformation, or „automaton conformity” (Fromm 1991, 159) to a set of rules (confession of faith!), rather than the normal and biblical process of transformation after the image (eikon) and example of Christ, which is the characteristic of the real conversion (Sider 1993, 101-118). When conversion is regarded as a moment rather than a process, there is a tension between two opposite models, the *external conformation model* (usual in many churches) and the *internal transformation model* in a long-life process. Most of the times the external conformation model requires a „holiness” of separation, the isolation from the dirty world outside, based on the desire of remaining pure.

Although it is true that being pure in an impure world is clearly a biblical requirement, yet it is equally clear that nobody can achieve purity in another way than Christ was pure and holy. Christ' holiness is beautifully expressed by Michael Ridell:

For Christ holiness was not only external but internal, grounded in his relationship with God. For Jesus separation is a separation to rather than separation from.' Jesus is holy not because he isolated himself from either people or the world, nor because some elaborate system of ritual purification. He is holy because he is consumed with passion for both God and the world. Because the love of God is burning in his heart, Jesus is holy. And because he is holy, the entire world has become clean to him (Ridell 1998, 80).

There are also psychological effects of the external conformation model that requires separation from the world. This is clear in the psychologist's argument of the importance of social network for the recovery from psychological problems. For example, the Romanian psychologist, Lazarescu,

says that “social isolation can be a socio-psycho-pathogenetical factor.” He also points out the importance of the social network for the psychological welfare of a human, saying that even in case of psychic illness „the bigger the social network is the quicker the recovery is” (Lazarescu 1994, 96-101).

The openness to the world is a necessary part of the human development. From the psychological point of view, the isolation could lead to regression in earlier human development stages. In this regard, Erich Fromm says that when the individual is exposed fully to the world outside there are two possibilities: First, he can progress on positive freedom, namely, “relating to the world in love and work, in genuine expression of his emotional, sensuous, and intellectual capacities.” Second is the possibility “to fall back, to give up his freedom, and to try to overcome his aloneness by eliminating the gap that has arise between his individual self and the world. This escape is characterized by the more or less complete surrender of individuality and the integrity of the self” (Fromm 1991, 120-121).

Yet not only the social isolation (as a consequence of external conformation model) is dangerous, psychologically and spiritually, but also the phenomenon of subculturalization, namely, the tendency to oppose Christ to the culture (Niebuhr 1951, 45-82), the result being the creation of a denominational subculture that will lead to differences that the Bible does not require, to legalism, and to escapism (Jurca 2002, 9). When legalism passes the personal level and becomes in respect to, the norm for somebody else’s spirituality, then this could be a form of spiritual abuse, because it could develop a „world of fantasy” disconnected by the reality of the present world (Inch 1972, 30).

In this context, the conversion of an individual is many times, a conversion to a denominational culture and not to Christ, whom not only that did not create a subculture of his own but also confronted energetically those who did that, as exemplified in Matthew 23. The mission of such churches could be described in the words of John Stott, as „irresponsible escapism.”

Too many of us evangelicals either have been, or maybe still are, irresponsible escapist. Fellowship with each other in the Church is much more congenial than service in an apathetic and even hostile environment outside. Of course, we make occasional evangelistic

raids into enemy territory (that is our evangelical specialty); but then we withdraw again, across the moat, into our Christian castle (the security of the Evangelical fellowship), pull up the drawbridge, and even close our ears to the pleas of those who batter on the gate (Stott 1979, 14).

Such churches become often spaces where people are rejected or accepted according with their performances required by the denominational subculture. Such churches are important candidates for the following judgment: Churches where tired, wounded people are given formulas and advices to help in time of need, or are shamed for having a need, do not represent the true King” (Johnson & VanVonderen 1991, 206). The result at the personal level could be perpetual immaturity or even deconversion. Or in the words of Stanley Jones:

Many start out with high aspiration toward the Tree, God, and then they stop at some dead branch of religion and fasten themselves on that. They stop at a good resolution and fasten themselves to that; but no mere good resolution can hold anyone up amid the storms of life. Others fasten themselves upon an institution – a good thing, but not good enough to fasten one’s life upon. Nor will a rite or ceremony do; it will let one down in the crisis. Others fasten themselves upon a favorite minister and pin their faith to him. No man is good enough to be the center of one’s faith; he may let one down. Others fasten on ideas about God instead of their acquaintance with God. Go clear to the central trunk-God. Don’t stop short (Jones 1942, 21).

A Balanced Understanding and Practice of Authority

Another remedy for abusive religiosity is a balanced understanding and practice of authority (Nash 1997, 46). When a leader uses his position of authority to manipulate, to hurt others, consciently or unconsciently this could be categorized as spiritual abuse. Johnson & VanVonderen in their book argue: „In abusive spiritual systems, power is postured, and authority is legislated. Obedience and submission are two important words often used” ((Johnson&VanVonderen 1991, 11). Speaking about the need for balance concerning authority, Paul Negrut says: “...authority means *autoritas* that denotes “wise word”, but also *imperium* that means order, power, and

government” The two (*autoritas* and *imperium*) has to coexist if the progress of community is to be preserved (Negrut 1996, 9-10). In the same line Michael Ridell writes:

In pre-modern times the hierarchy was accepted as divinely ordained. Under modernism the basis of authority was knowledge, and post-modernism is characterized by an alliance between power and knowledge (Ridell 1998, 65).

One of the causes of authority abuse is the narcissism of leaders (McIntosh&Rima 1997, 94-103). The danger of narcissism is real for people in a position with almost unlimited power (Fromm 1965, 66). Fromm speaks about the dangers for the persons in position of authority, namely, *moral hypochondriasis* (the fear to be guilty). Such a person is preoccupied with himself, does not listen to the others, is very sensitive to any critic, and all these can be hidden under an artificial attitude of modesty and humility (Fromm 1965, 69-70) whilst the reality behind is that of „skilled incompetence” (Thomas 1999, 160).

It is necessary to note also another aspect of the authority abuse. Many communities are in such a way structured that the decisional power is concentrated in the hands of one man or in the hands of few. Many churches are pyramidally structured in such a way that in the top of the pyramide is the pastor, the priest, the leader, or a group of people, who are „called” to do the ministry. In many cases, to have a theological degree is the only necessary and sufficient condition to be „called.” Not underestimating the importance and the necessity of the divine call-in ministry, we are aware that this can be falsified, and the mechanism is that presented above.

In such pyramidally structured communities all members are looking toward the top for the solutions for all their problems. In the fortunate case when the leader has vocation for his ministry, soon he will be exhausted both, emotionally and spiritually. In such cases the church is the one that exercises the spiritual abuse. When the person in the top has no vocation for his ministry and is not equipped accordingly (the degree does not offer the required expertise!) the danger is that in order to maintain his position, that person could create a system in which paradoxically everybody is dependent

on what he says or does. In the same time, nobody else does enough in order for the „ministry to work.“ The institution becomes more important than persons (Warner 1999, 123), their families and their lives (Fromm 1965, 85).

To sum up, in such communities the result is fellowship without relationships, a compartmentalistic view of life that leads to poisoned relationships (Hurding, 1992, 252), rather than to helping relationships (Brammer 1973, 25), based on the induction of feelings as guilt and shame, and to the acceptance of „appropriate behavior“ and not of persons. If the individuals in such communities are coming from families, where they were abused physically, emotionally or spiritually. Instead of maturation people are kept in „emotional illiteracy“ (Goleman 1995, 231), or they even could develop sado-masochistic relationships between them and the abusive leaders. In such cases, the church instead of being the space of helping them to deal with their traumas, rather it is the space where their problems become more complicated. Communities, in which relationships are rather pathological, often propose high aims for their members and when those are not reached the guilt of the community is invoked. Consequently, the fear of failure not only that paralyzes any creativity, but also could lead to resentments and anxiety (Goleman 1995, 229). The faith and life of such men could become toxic leading to alienation from themselves and from others (Fromm 1965, 50-51). Those people could become more in touch with their religious ideas, than with God (Arterburn&Felton 1991, 31). Such people could end by suffering of what is called „the cult of personality,“ being extremely egocentric, jealous, proud, and even developing „the infallibility syndrome“ (Sanders 1993, 211-216), and ending by worshiping power (Fromm 1965, 53).

Conclusion

We have argued in this article that there are remedies for the reality of abusive religiosity. We have tried to reveal them in the necessary conversation of philosophy, psychology and theology. First remedy that will be efficient for the cure of abusive religiosity is the *holistic understanding of human nature*, considering its limits but also its potentials for achieving through development and growth, the plenitude of its capacities for good. To have a

holistic understanding of human being means to acknowledge that different domains of life are inter-connected and influence each other, in such a way that dealing with one domain means to consider the entire network of human nature. The second remedy that will be efficient for the cure of abusive religiosity is that of a proper understanding of conversion. The third remedy that will be efficient for the cure of abusive religiosity is that of a balanced understanding and practice of authority.

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