

## Introduction to the Special Issue: Spirituality and Psychology, Emerging Perspectives

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“I remember that at lunch he [Swami Vivekananda] and my father [William James] were much interested in each other”  
– William James Jr. (1954, quoted in Burke, 1984–1987, v. 4, p. 78).

More than 120 years have elapsed since William James, a key founder of modern psychology, hosted Swami Vivekananda at his Cambridge home for lunch at 1:00 pm on Sunday, 29 March 1896. The eminent psychologist had been very eager for such a meeting, which evidently proved quite absorbing (see epigraph above). Unfortunately, lost to history is how that lunchtime conversation may have shaped or catalyzed James’ (1902/2012) subsequently published *Varieties of Religious Experience*, which cited Vivekananda, and has been characterized by Wulff (1997, p. 11) as “indisputably the one great classic of the psychology of religion”.

Although modern psychology seemingly lost interest in spirituality and religion with the ascendance of behaviourism soon after James passed away in 1910, spirituality

and religion are now globally resurgent as subjects of research, theory, and practice. In the twenty-first century, James’ abiding interest in this field is increasingly shared by his modern colleagues in the West, in India, and in various other parts of the world (e.g. Latin America, Esperandio & Marques, 2015). Resurgent interest is evident in psychology as well as other fields such as medicine, public health, social work, and nursing (e.g. Koenig, King, & Carson, 2012). More than 3000 empirical studies, 100 systematic reviews, and 30 meta-analyses now offer compelling evidence for causative influences of spirituality/religion on health (Oman & Syme, 2018).

Expanded psychological interest has been quite noteworthy in the USA, where the American Psychological Association has launched two dedicated journals, *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* (vol. 1 in 2010) and *Spirituality in Clinical Practice* (vol. 1 in 2014), and has published more than a dozen books on the topic, culminating in the landmark two-volume *APA Handbook of Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality* (Pargament, 2013).

Indian psychologists, too, have rediscovered an interest in spirituality and religion. The Indian Psychology Movement was launched when more than 150 Indian psychologists gathered in Pondicherry to sign the *Manifesto of Indian Psychology* (Cornelissen, 2002). Participants in this movement have now published numerous volumes focused on reclaiming psychological insights and models from indigenous Indian traditions and philosophies (e.g. Cornelissen, Misra, & Varma, 2014; Rao & Paranjpe, 2016; Rao, Paranjpe, & Dalal, 2008). Empirical studies of spirituality and religion in India are also now increasingly investigating these phenomena in general samples as well as in Indian samples adhering to specific traditions such as Hinduism or Islam (e.g. Annalakshmi & Abeer, 2011; Duggal & Basu, 2012).

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This India-focused special issue on spirituality and psychology was catalyzed by two symposia at the Centenary Conference on Psychology at the University of Calcutta (Oct. 9–11, 2015). Five of this issue's papers emerged from those symposia, which drew together Indian- and US-based psychologists. A subsequent open call drew several more articles, yielding a broader sample of cutting edge research and theory on psychology and spirituality in relation to India.

The resulting 11 papers are primarily reviews or theoretical articles. Most cite concepts from indigenous Indian traditions. Many also draw on modern empirically oriented psychology. And a large number draw on both, reflecting possibilities for coordinating, combining, and integrating the best elements of each of these approaches.

Multiple religious traditions receive attention in these investigations. Importantly, several globally widespread traditions, including Christianity and Islam, have already been the focus of much psychological research outside of India (e.g. Abu-Raiya & Pargament, 2011; Stevenson, Eck, & Hill, 2007). The largest share of attention in this issue is directed to indigenous Indian traditions, especially Hinduism, which to date has received the least psychological study than any major world religion. In the future, attention is due to all living traditions in India, which possess diverse and often distinctively Indian forms.

Before turning to the articles, we should mention that the terms “spirituality” and “religion” do not have clearly agreed-upon definitions in psychology, or in the English language (Oman, 2013). In modern English, spirituality tends to connote something individual and personal, whereas religion often refers to something more institutional or organizational. Yet many who use these terms also affirm that the distinctive purpose of religion is to support spirituality. Such definitional issues are discussed at length in several of our articles, including those by Rao, by Kristeller and Jordan, and by Oman and Paranjpe (all this issue).

Despite varying meanings, Rao (this issue) suggests that “one may find common ground between religion and spirituality in what is often described as the sacred”—and indeed, a “search for the sacred” is an increasingly influential definition of spirituality (see Oman & Paranjpe, this issue). Rao (this issue) further observes that a common feature of most or perhaps all understandings of the sacred is transcendence: “transcendence from the ego and the sensory-boundedness of human functioning to something more fundamental... transcendence from ‘I-centredness’, from ‘me’ to ‘us’”. In Indian tradition, such transcendence is understood as attainable in a condition of liberation (*moka*), which is seen as occurring through transcendence of the ego (*ahamkara*) through reconditioning and

deconditioning of personality, resulting in a “total transformation of the person” (Rao & Paranjpe, 2016, p. 14).

In addition to its distinctive *goals*, other commonly identified dimensions of spirituality include its practices, beliefs, and experiences. All these dimensions of spirituality receive attention from our authors, who discuss practices such as meditation, mantram repetition, mindfulness, and non-attachment, as well as beliefs about happiness and the nature of the human being, experiences in meditation, and many other facets of spirituality. Several articles mention the four classic Indian approaches to spiritual practice that emphasize meditation (*dhyāna yoga*), devotion (*bhakti yoga*), action (*karma yoga*), and knowledge (*jñāna yoga*). Corresponding to each classic yoga has been emphasis on different practices, such as selfless action (*nikāma karma*) in the yoga of action and discrimination between the changing and the changeless (*nitya-anitya viveka*) in the yoga of knowledge. Yet in Indian tradition, these four *yogas* are not seen as mutually exclusive, and our articles note ways that these *yogas* have been integrated and continue to be integrated together (Oman & Bormann, this issue). In Indian tradition, such integration has been occurring for at least two millennia, since the recording of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, itself an exemplar of such integration.

On the ground, today's Indian society encompasses many diverse indigenous and non-indigenous traditions and subcultures, many types of belief and non-belief, and a correspondingly diverse array of views about spirituality. Not surprisingly, Indian religious life sometimes involves conflict between traditions and communities. But equally or perhaps more fundamentally, Indian spirituality and religion involve a vast daily intermingling between neighbours who may adhere to nominally distinct traditions, yet experience the “glue to bond” with one another from experiencing common adversities and challenges, sharing each other's joys and sorrows, and often sharing in greater or lesser ways each other's festivals, and sometimes various aspects of each other's rituals or practices (Kapur & Misra, 2018, p. 202). It is within the richly diverse, frequently integrated, protean, and evolving nature of Indian tradition that each of our 11 papers should be understood.

## Overview of Articles

The two opening articles are case studies of specific spiritual figures and their legacies. First, Oman and Bormann's (this issue) case study of Kerala-born spiritual teacher Eknath Easwaran (1910–1999) illustrates several ways that modern and Indian Psychology can work together and sometimes synergize. For nearly 40 years, Easwaran taught a distinctive system of spiritual practice that has become

the focus of two major research programmes yielding seven randomized trials and 30 research studies that document a range of benefits for health, well-being, skill, and spiritual growth. Easwaran's method, now called Passage Meditation, involves concentrated meditation upon memorized texts from self-realized mystics (e.g. Kabir, Mahatma Gandhi, Mirabai) or scriptures (e.g. *Bhagavad Gītā*, *Upaniads*, *Qur'an*, *Bible*) and emphasizes the oft-forgotten traditional Indian principle that “we become what we meditate on” (e.g. *Yajur Veda* 10:5:2:21). Easwaran's spiritual legacy, the authors suggest, contributes added value to Indian psychology that includes tools for respecting spiritual diversity, both between and within traditions. More prosaically, yet relevant to the global spread of Indian spirituality, the authors also note that US book sales for the *Bhagavad Gita*, *Upaniads*, and *Dhammapada* have come to be dominated by Easwaran's translations.

Next, Rao (this issue) supplies a case study of Mahatma Gandhi, his “pragmatic spirituality”, and their rich implications for psychology: for Rao, “Mahatma Gandhi's life may be seen as a modern man's spiritual search to find solutions to secular problems”. Rao's article opens by discussing various foundational issues in how psychology can define and conceptualize spirituality and religion. He also summarizes core tenets of traditional Indian philosophy, noting that within the Indian tradition, both science and spirituality are seen as complementary pursuits with the same goal, which is liberation (*moka*). Rao presents many ways that Gandhi's life and activities reflect and embody traditional Indian philosophical principles and insights, noting Gandhian practices of truth, nonviolence, love, compassion, altruism, and non-attachment (*anāsakti*). Implications for world peace are discussed. The paper ends with an invitation to psychologists from the East, as well as the West, to join in exploring Gandhian ideas and techniques of psycho-spiritual development and uncover their relevance in today's world.

The third and fourth articles are empirically oriented reviews of research on meditation. First, DeLuca, Kelman, and Waelde (this issue) note that research on mindfulness- and meditation-based interventions (MMBIs) often fails to include or investigate distinctive needs of ethnoracial minorities. Their systematic review identifies 24 US-based MMBI diversity-focused studies that offer a small beginning, but underscore the need for much more research. Similarly, in a narrative review, Kristeller and Jordan (this issue) point out that effects of meditation on *spiritual outcomes*—although a key motivator for many who meditate—are often neglected in research on meditation. They review a variety of existing findings regarding spiritual outcomes and emphasize the need for cross-cultural research.

Next, Oman and Paranjpe (this issue) directly address a key cross-cultural issue confronting studies of spirituality and religion in India: What do the terms “spirituality” and “religion” mean? Do Western psychologists' conceptions of spirituality and religion hold any relevance to India? These authors review an influential conceptual framework developed by US-based psychologist Kenneth Pargament, in which spirituality is defined as a “search for the sacred”. Despite the absence of an Indian philosophical concept that clearly corresponds to the “sacred”, these authors note numerous other points of resonance between Indian tradition and Pargament's framework and recommend that it could be a useful reference point for defining and operationalizing these concepts for studies in India.

The sixth and seventh articles return the focus to spiritual practices—in this case, non-attachment and prayer. Chandur and Sriram (this issue) report a carefully conducted empirical study of *anāsakti* (detached action) based on field work involving numerous qualitative interviews at a Vaiava gurukula near Bangalore. They describe how *bhakti* (devotion to the deity) can be a foundation that supports *anāsakti* (non-attachment) as participants draw on their tradition and practices to cope with stressors, develop resilience, and maintain well-being. Next, the article by Ladd, Ladd, and Sahai (this issue) focuses on the psychology of prayer, one of the most cross-culturally universal spiritual practices. Using Western psychological notions of theistic prayer as a point of departure, they explore expanded views of prayer that accommodate both personal and impersonal ideas of higher spiritual realities. They offer such an expanded view as a tool for understanding the substantial number of people who do not adhere to traditional forms of religion, and for facilitating an East–West dialogue.

The theme of Indian-Western dialogue and collaboration is continued in the next two papers. First, Oman and Singh (this issue) offer 12 researchable questions as starting points to catalyze Indian/Western or modern/traditional collaboration on the psychology of spirituality/religion, especially with reference to Indian traditions. They argue that the most comprehensive study of religion/spirituality requires combining the Western attention to modern forms of empirical knowledge with the Indian Psychology Movement's attention to realization-derived knowledge. Next, Nagar (this issue) offers a more critical perspective, analyzing modern psychological conceptions of the nature of happiness and contrasting them with Indian perspectives. She identifies numerous problems with modern psychology's predominant hedonic conception of happiness, such as its individualistic ethos and unsustainability, contrasting them with traditional Indian conceptions involving transcendent consciousness, self-regulation, and realization of interconnectedness.

The final two articles investigate spirituality- and health-related issues. Perera, Pandey, and Srivastava (this issue) review the literature on religious/spiritual coping, that is, how people draw on religion and spirituality in dealing with stressors. After describing key concepts, they focus on how professional nurses employ religious/spiritual coping. Like Abu-Raiya and Pargament (2015), they find both differences and overlap in how such coping occurs in different cultures. They recommend the development of coping measures that are more culturally sensitive. Finally, Shukla and Rishi (this issue) report an empirical investigation among 80 advanced-stage cancer patients. Patients who experienced greater sense of personal control over their health showed significantly higher levels of emotional and functional well-being, but relations with spiritual well-being were small and not statistically significant. Such findings invite questions about whether religious/spiritual coping or other processes may at times exert different effects on spiritual well-being beyond other forms of well-being. More investigation of spirituality and coping with cancer could inform Indian palliative care, where spirituality has been understudied (Gielen, Bhatnagar, & Chaturvedi, 2016).

### Many Connections

We hope that this collection of articles will stimulate and help practitioners as well as teachers and researchers. Overall the articles emphasize the need for psychology, as a discipline, to engage more deeply with the potentials and implications of spirituality and religion. Most articles mentioned evidence linking spirituality or religion to better mental health outcomes, with some presenting evidence for effectiveness of spiritual interventions and others offering conceptual tools for improving mental health practice (e.g. DeLuca et al, this issue; Oman & Bormann, this issue). Discovering pathways to achieve well-being and reduce human suffering is not the sole prerogative of either spirituality/religion or science. Creating or perpetuating artificial schisms between different ways of pursuing the same goals takes away from understanding the complexity of human experience. As noted earlier, Rao (this issue) highlights how in the Indian tradition, both science and spirituality were, and are, seen as complementary pursuits with the same goal, which is liberation (*moka*). More generally, this special issue reaffirms the need to foster dialogue and collaboration, and to deepen mutual understanding between science and spirituality/religion.

Equally important is the deliberation upon societal concerns, where religious traditions have been a source of both problems and solutions (e.g. Oman & Nuru-Jeter, 2018). Many of this issue's articles offer insights or

identify resources to support society in tolerating or even flourishing with social diversity, and for living in peace. Such resources are especially noteworthy in Rao's (this issue) case study of Mahatma Gandhi, but also emerge in several other articles concerned with cultural tailoring or diversity in education, management, or health care (e.g. DeLuca et al, this issue; Oman & Bormann, this issue). Hinging on the idea that peace lies in individual hearts, it is our hope and expectation that every article in this issue will make its own distinctive contribution by touching individual readers and further helping to build a society, and a world, that is able to flourish in diversity.

A century ago, when William James' 13-year old son was escorting the turbaned Swami Vivekananda across Cambridge Common to his lunch appointment, the youth felt a "fear of being conspicuous" (1954, quoted in Burke, 1984–1987, v. 4, p. 78). Today, we need not fear that this topic is out of place. Psychologists who address spirituality and/or religion in their teaching, practice, or research will soon find that they can connect with a large and expanding international network of professionals who recognize the importance of spirituality and religion and will welcome further contributions from India, which are greatly needed.

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