Emotions and the Sacred in Human Lives

A review of

Spiritual Evolution: A Scientific Defense of Faith

by George E. Vaillant


Reviewed by

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At 10 p.m. one night in November 1940, the cofounder of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), Bill Wilson (Bill W.), agreed to meet in a rented room in New York City with a limping and overweight stranger who came knocking unexpectedly at his door. The visitor turned out to be a nonalcoholic Jesuit priest from St. Louis, Fr. Ed Dowling, who greeted Bill W. with a simple observation: “A Jesuit friend and I have been struck by the similarity of the AA Twelve Steps and the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius” (Fitzgerald, 1995, p. 2).

Over the next 20 years until Dowling's death in 1960, the two men developed an intimate friendship and conducted a long and probing conversation about the nature of spirituality, AA's “Higher Power,” and the Twelve Steps as they structured the addict's return to sanity. Over the years, Dowling gently prompted Bill W. to consider conversion to
Catholicism. Bill W. came close to embracing his friend’s religious tradition but concluded that he could not intellectually accept the tenets of that faith. Dowling acquiesced, “I have the feeling that anyone who sincerely tries to apply the 12 steps is following in Christ’s footsteps” (Fitzgerald, 1995, p. 52). In Dowling’s empathic estimate, Bill W. was carrying out God’s truth by humbly walking the path of AA’s spirituality.

Though never mentioning Bill W. by name, George E. Vaillant, a well-known clinical psychiatrist and psychoanalyst at Harvard Medical School, enters forcefully into the continuing conversation about the nature of spirituality in this volume and does so with an intimate familiarity with AA that enriches his contribution to the exchange. A nonalcoholic himself, Vaillant has devoted almost four decades to the study of alcoholism as it runs its natural course across the lives of adult men (Vaillant, 1983, 1995a, 2003) and was, for six years until 2004, a trustee of AA (Vaillant, 2006).

Vaillant’s interest in alcoholism arose within a larger concern for the contours and structures of adult development more generally. Since 1972 he has served as director of the longitudinal Study of Adult Development at Harvard (SADH), an ongoing project that combines the “Grant” study of Harvard undergraduates initiated by Arlie Bock and Clark Heath in 1938 and the nondelinquent control group of Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck’s “inner city” study begun in 1939 (Vaillant, 2002). Throughout his years with the SADH, Vaillant has been fascinated by the role and origins of healthy and constructive defense mechanisms (such as altruism, humor, and sublimation) as they serve to protect from harm or change the trajectory of an otherwise deteriorating life course among adults (Vaillant, 1977, 1995b, 2002). Beginning in 2001, he began an association with the Center for Positive Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania at the invitation of Martin Seligman. And, for two years (2005–2006), Vaillant offered the Templeton Research Lectures in Religion and Science at the same university.

In *Spiritual Evolution: A Scientific Defense of Faith*, Vaillant presents a broad psychological introduction to the seven positive emotions he argues are most closely tied to authentic spiritual experience: faith, love, hope, joy, forgiveness, compassion, and awe (or mystical illumination). He launches this effort with a succinct definition of spirituality: “the amalgam of the positive emotions that bind us to other human beings—and to our experience of ‘God’ as we may understand Him/Her” (pp. 4–5). The second half of his definition clearly echoes the wording of AA’s Third Step: “Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him” (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001, p. 59, italics in original).

He acknowledges a historical paucity of studies about these positive emotions compared with the broad clinical and research literature regarding negative emotions such as sadness, fear, hatred, disgust, grief, and contempt. Nonetheless, more recent decades have witnessed a flourishing research concern for positive emotions in neurobiology as well as by various cognitive, personality, and clinical psychologists. Vaillant eagerly cites these studies as the empirical foundation to support his book’s subtitle—a “scientific defense of faith.”
Vaillant proposes that the positive emotions that undergird an individual's spirituality are the result of three interlocking and progressive evolutionary processes: first, the genetic evolution of the mammalian and eventual hominid nervous systems, particularly in the connection between the limbic and neocortical regions of Homo sapiens; second, cultural evolution as mediated by language across remote and, especially, recent human history; and finally, each individual's adult development, which permits further affective and cognitive advances beyond the species' overall forms of phylogenetic inheritance and cultural adaptation.

Ultimately, spirituality in Vaillant's view is fluid and continually matures across the life span. “In the modern three-year-old, Neolithic animism is still alive and well,” he says (p. 57). But, “as we mature, our frontal lobes become more securely wired to the rest of our limbic system” (p. 61) and, as a result, we become capable of exploring and embracing the positive emotions of truly spiritual adults.

Vaillant argues that each positive emotion has been hardwired into the nervous system. Whereas current research points to specific brain regions, he proposes a tentative neural substrate for each emotion. For example, “love lives within that part of the brain where smells, caretaking, and memory all come together—especially in the limbic anterior cingulated gyrus” (p. 92). Otherwise, Vaillant frankly acknowledges the limitations of current neurobiology. Hence, he notes that

neuroscientists have not located joy, for joy is more complex than a mere pleasure center…
Joy involves more of our central nervous system than just the septal area and nucleus accumbens, which serve the pleasure of cocaine or heroin addiction, more than the hypothalamic centers motivating sex and hunger or the amygdala nuclei that ignite anger and fear. (p. 124)

Vaillant offers detailed and astute descriptions of each emotion and, most valuably, distinguishes between affective notions that superficially appear similar to the positive emotions of spirituality. For example, the intense emotion of joy relates to “reconnection with a power greater than ourselves” (p. 120), “God's—well, somebody's—infinit generosity” (p. 122), “connection with others” (p. 124), and “the returning human face” (p. 125). Thus, joy is not pleasure, excitement, or happiness, the last of which is “all about drive reduction for the self” and, compared with joy, is “tame” (p. 124). Further, Vaillant argues that joy “is the motivational system that reinforces return” (p. 127) so that parents will risk even their own lives to retrieve a lost child. Like each positive emotion, joy serves an adaptive evolutionary purpose in Vaillant's judgment.

A particularly helpful aspect of this volume comes in the author's attempt to grapple with the differences between life-affirming and constructive forms of spirituality and their toxic counterparts. In doing so, Vaillant links himself to a long tradition of spiritual writers who have proposed various strategies in the “discernment of spirits,” as St. Ignatius of
Loyola termed it (Ganss, 1991)—that effort to distinguish valuable and healthy spiritual movements personally and collectively from unhealthy or destructive forms. For example, Vaillant argues that a test of beliefs must always ask “whether they are empathic or paranoid” (p. 75). So, if inner illumination leads to empathy, it is “almost always valuable,” while projective intuitions are “almost always unhealthy” (p. 77).

Similarly, in outlining the role of forgiveness in spirituality, Vaillant poses a series of four questions by which to authenticate that an individual experiences actual forgiveness rather than counterfeit or potentially dangerous alternatives. The depth of the writer's own clinical wisdom permeates the text in subtle and compelling ways. So, he aptly cautions that “the transformation of vengeance into forgiveness is a slow process. It cannot be rushed. As is true for relief from any addiction, appeal to the victim's spirituality helps, but temporary relapse into bitterness is common” (p. 149).

At times, his disdain for how psychoanalysis and academic psychology have disregarded the positive emotions is sharp and harshly ironic. At one point he observes, “Almost since its inception, psychoanalysis has been fascinated with the dynamics of shame and revenge, but psychoanalysis has totally ignored the dynamics of forgiveness” (pp. 137–138). Freud particularly comes under criticism: “Although Sigmund Freud was able to focus upon many emotions that others found unbearable, especially grief and lust, he blinded himself to human attachment” (p. 90). Similarly, “if Freud could not acknowledge joy, no wonder he was such a pessimist. What an irony it is that in German Freude means joy” (p. 131). University researchers receive an equal measure of censure: “If poets are blind to love, psychologists are struck dumb. For decades psychologists tried not even to mention love” (p. 89).

From the outset of this text, it is evident that Vaillant makes a sharp distinction between spirituality and religion. This divide serves as both a strength and a weakness for his analysis. The author adopts a mostly benign stance toward the phenomena of religious belief and communal practice across the world's diverse sacred traditions. Vaillant is no Richard Dawkins or Sam Harris, generally denouncing religion as a parasitic or intrinsically invidious aspect of human civilization. In his final chapter, the author directly confronts how spirituality differs from religion and suggests five points of divergence. While certain points are relatively noncontroversial (“religion is more cognitive and spirituality is more emotional,” p. 188), some contrasts may elicit from readers varying degrees of dissent because they seem to be too simplistic, overly contentious against religion, or insufficiently skeptical of various forms of spirituality.

Thus, when Vaillant argues that “religion arises from culture; spirituality from biology” (p. 187), his dichotomy seems all too neat and lacks the kind of nuance that many psychologists of religion would expect. And when he seems to side with critics of religion in the West that “spirituality is tolerant and religion is intolerant” (p. 190), I wish he had qualified his observation of religion with a phrase like “too often” or “at times.” Nonetheless, he does affirm that “the rituals and cultural formats of the world's great
religions form the surest way to pull our positive emotions into conscious reflection” (p. 191).

Errors appear to be mostly absent from the text. I caught only two egregious ones, both in respect to Roman Catholic history. St. Theresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross were 16th-, not 13th-, century mystics (p. 170). And, the doctrine of papal infallibility was defined in 1870 at the First Vatican Council, not in 1879 as the author asserts (p. 188).

The strongest feature of this text seems to me to come from Vaillant's fundamental decision to sidestep the all-too-intractable conflicts that can arise from contrasting alternative religious beliefs and cultural practices and to focus solely upon spirituality as a distinctive domain of human experience. In doing this, he offers a psychological bridge that spans the world's religions in an  irenic and ecumenical synthesis. I suspect that many academic psychologists would want a more explicit tally of the advances made by researchers into the psychology of religion as illustrated by volumes such as Wulff's (1997) or Paloutzian and Park's (2005). They will not find those kinds of references here.

Rather, it seems to me that Vaillant's experience over more than four decades with AA offers an alternative approach of depth and scope. Scorned at times by some psychological critics (Vaillant is withering in his dismissal of the Sobells' early work on controlled drinking; e.g., Sobell & Sobell, 1973), AA affirms how central spirituality must be to the human struggle, works effectively in the treatment of the severely addicted, and models how to deploy spiritual concepts while respecting the diversity of individual beliefs and religious traditions.

Here, Vaillant adapts these insights for the broader public beyond Twelve-Step movements and fashions them into a psychological paradigm for everyone. If psychologists and the general reader approach this book with the kind of humility that Vaillant cites from his work with AA members, I expect that they will come away with new insights into the power of authentic spirituality to shape their lives for the better. This may not be the last word in spirituality's continuing renaissance, but it is surely an engaging and mostly satisfying one.

References


