

ZOLTÁN AMBRUS

Applying Alfred Adler's Principles And Ideas To Religious Studies

Abstract:

By the integrative value-like approach to the idea of God and to the function of religion, A. Adler's individual psychology provides religious studies with considerable axiological and praxiological footings. Filling individual and societal needs within the contemporary world, religion is constituted as an essential factor in the growth and development of the sense of community as a foundation of democratic cohabitation. Adlerian psychology puts forward a holistic-integrative approach to the human being that can be applied to the area of religious studies.

The re-shaping of the table of values and of the socialization and education systems is necessary in the context of the crisis of values and discouraging influences specific to the globalized world. Feelings of inferiority are unavoidable realities of this world and, by avoiding becoming their victim and making use of a positive compensating effort, humans can convert them into facts of culture. We have a general responsibility to develop the innate potentiality of the community feeling, and to encourage it to manifest itself into desirable social behaviors.

1. The idea of God in Alfred Adler's conception

As an axiological psychology, Adler's individual psychology makes numerous references to religion and to the concept of God. We believe that, within religious studies, a methodical-scientific importance is given to the understanding and appreciation of the idea of God as well as to the significant importance this idea has for mankind, from the perspective of Adler's psychology.

In their systematic presentation of Adler's works, H. L. Ansbacher and R. R. Ansbacher (1993/1956, p. 460) state that God can be recognized and manifest only within a thinking process that moves toward the quality of height and greatness. Also, God can be evident only within feelings that experience greatness as a redemption from

Zoltán Ambrus
Ph. D.,
Associate Professor,
Sapientia University of Cluj, Romania, and The Faculty of Technical and Social Sciences, Miercurea Ciuc, Romania



Author of the books:

The Moral-Civic Education in Schools in the Context of Globalization and Transition (2004), Educational Programs: Group Activities and Methods Used for the Formation of the Students' Morality and Civism (2004), The Psychology of Managerial and Organizational Communication (2004), The Psychopedagogy of Encouragement. Value-like and Actional Perspectives (2005).

Email: z_ambrus@yahoo.com

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oppressing tensions and feelings of inferiority.

Starting with the principle that claims that, in the view of individual psychology, aim is the essence of life, mankind aspires to the remote goal of perfection understood as the right direction to be followed in spite of the fact that it cannot be reached. Thus, God, as the ultimate aim of mankind, indicates the way to be followed, attuning his efforts in the direction of the authentic purpose. Within this value-like approach, man's endeavor to gain force from the divine aim springs from a constant feeling of insecurity and inferiority.

As Adler (1938/1933) notices in his synthesis work about the sense of life, mankind's ultimate representation is constituted by the idea of God, which embodies the supreme purpose of perfection. Every human being, due to his/her own personal lifestyle, represents God in a different way, and the image created in this manner is certainly not the same as this "perfection principle." Instead, s/he is just "the concrete successful variant of the perfection target" (p. 194). We may conclude that the most significant step in the development of a human being was made when s/he realized that, by unification with God and avoidance of evil, s/he can become better and come closer to the desired perfection.

2. Religion and individual and societal needs

Researching life's significance, Adler (1958/1931) states that the meaning of life is serving mankind as a whole by developing the sense of community and love between people. The development and strengthening of the sense of community, of the feeling of solidarity and closeness between human beings are related to the essence of religion.

The sense of community, which relies on the individual's need of belonging, represents an inviolable constituent of human nature, an innate disposition that needs to be encouraged, developed, and cultivated. Individual psychology as a social science approaches this matter in a scientific manner, promoting a set of principles and methods aiming to the same purpose, namely, developing cooperation and solidarity among people, encouraging the individual to act and contribute to the welfare of humanity.

The individual's needs as a social being can be filled only within the group, and successful social integration requires social-emotional stimulation and social-emotional answers. Such stimulation, frequently labeled "spiritual," has more than a divine connotation, as it involves the highest intellectual and moral aspirations that the human being is capable of having (R. Dreikurs, 2000/1971, p. 216).

Analyzing the function of religion, R. Dreikurs (2000/1971), a close colleague of Adler, notices that, in the course of human history, religion has proved to be the most significant instrument to fill man's spiritual needs. Religious experience has provided man with strong feelings of cohesion and belonging. Through religion, man has succeeded in placing himself above the hardships of every-day life, and thus to direct his attention towards a wider life perspective.

Religion also has a crucial importance in social practice, since religious regulations have a significant influence on the thoughts and actions of community members. Nowadays, in the context of a more comprehensive globalization defined by strong competition and selfish individualism, religion gains a meaningful importance.

The contemporary world lacks solidarity and authentic social interest. Religious studies can and must fully contribute to the development of "the intellectual and moral

solidarity of mankind" proclaimed by the UNESCO Constitution. They should also add to the promotion of common values that would lay the foundations for a new humanism, for the development of the feeling of a common destiny. This involves knowledge and respect for the culture and spiritual values of different civilizations (Delors et al., 2000, p. 37).

According to Adler (1933), the fact that a large number of people oppose religion is not due to the essential nature of religion. Instead, it is due to the contradictions between the actions of the religious power structures and their essential nature, and probably to frequent abuse.

Thus, within the circumstances of a lesser influence of organized religion, without an orientation to some values, many people feel lost, lacking purpose in life. Disagreeing with the values of western culture, some people direct their attention towards oriental religions, in search of a community feeling and in order to fill their need for new religious experiences. Others take refuge in religion without altering their behaviors in a productive way, without taking personal responsibility for their own actions. As Adler (1946/1927) notices, "they approach their God just as they approach their fellowmen, complainingly, whining, yet never lifting a hand to help themselves or better their circumstances. Cooperation, they feel, is an obligation only for others."

This is why religious studies must take into consideration both the specific needs of democracy as a functional social equality and the wider aspects of religious experience. Moreover, considering the fact that religion has changed its meaning and content during the history of cultures, every cultural epoch having its specific religion, historical perspective becomes necessary. Within this context, we can state that "the cultural epoch of democracy" must also find its own religious expression (R. Dreikurs, 2000/1971, p. 220).

3. Religion and democracy

In Adler's individual psychology, democracy is understood as social interest in action, assuming functional inter-personal equality (T. B. Beames, 1992/1984). In his opinion, democracy means acknowledgement of the equal value of all human beings, as an axiological basis for providing the human being's fundamental rights. In this respect, all citizens have the intangible but universal right to personal dignity.

Many times, the concept of democracy is exported to different parts of the world, without a proper explanation of what democracy actually represents. Many people believe that democracy gives them the freedom to do whatever they want, as long as they don't adversely affect other people's freedom.

Acting in the spirit of democracy involves the forming of a democratic personality by encouraging the free development of each person's belief system and set of values, laying the foundations for the constructive path of life, all in an atmosphere of democratic dialogue. Within this framework of democratic practice, tolerance, respect for personal dignity, social equality, and mutual support should not remain mere concepts, but must be authentic democratic experiences in the spirit of a plurality of values (Z. Ambrus, 2004a, p. 29).

The transition to a democratic system relying on the principles of liberal democracy as well as the development of a pluralist civil society requires a systematic promotion of democratic values and practices in daily life. In experiencing authentic democrat-

ic practice in an encouraging climate, citizens must be allowed to interpret the particular events and actions that have a decisive influence on their future and on the future of the entire society. They should be allowed to build the conviction that they can influence the quality of their own lives and bear considerable responsibility for them.

Within the frameworks of Adler's psychology, man is not perceived as a victim of internal (psychological) or external (social-economic) conditions. Instead, man is seen as an agent responsible for his own as well as mankind's destiny. Through "the creative ego," every human being builds his own life, dealing with the fundamental matters of life that relate to work, inter-personal relationships, and community life. Each and every one of us is the master of his actions, and by interpreting life as cooperation between autonomous individuals, one will fully contribute to the democratic progress of the world (Adler, 1958/1931, p. 24).

At the same time, every one of us is entitled to define democracy in his/her own manner, according to his/her lifestyle. Today many people declare themselves democratic, although they strongly disagree with any concept of social equality.

As R. Dreikurs (2000/1971, p. 198) notes, the concept of equal rights is generally accepted, whereas assuming the equal value of all people generates controversial reactions. Many people strongly believe that an equality of values, and thus real democracy, is an impossible objective, since such equality has never existed in the history of mankind. Still, early Christians and many other religious groups have practiced this human equality.

R. Dreikurs (2000/1971, p. 219) pleads for a religion for democracy. In this conception, religion must be, first and foremost, humanist, focusing on man's problems and encouraging the use of internal forces to the benefit of individual and community. Also, religion must promote the empirical search for truth, encouraging scientific research based on an ethics which is pre-eminently religious. Personal ambition, the sense of justice, the sense of duty, conformity, and perfectionism are no longer sufficient for being good and successful. Living in peace and harmony with others and with oneself, enthusiasm, empathic understanding, friendly attitude, compassion, solidarity with those in need, mutual support, feelings of belonging, involvement, and courage constitute essential components of this moral code.

The religious symbols and rituals must be sources that encourage pro-active and pro-social behaviors and stimulate mutual help and devotion to the welfare of mankind.

4. The holistic perspective of man – a value-like foundation in approaching the human matter

Considering the consequences of the contemporary world, defined by complexity, universality, and globalization, it is necessary to adopt a humanist and holistic-integrative approach to all spheres of human activity, including religious studies. According to the holistic-integrative conceptions of Adler and to the principles of humanist psychology promoted by A. Maslow and C. Rogers, the human being is:

- a whole in-dividuous entity, capable of holistic knowledge (cognitive, emotional, and volitional), due to the human brain's holistic-integrative tendency (the use of both brain hemispheres) (B. Wurtz, cf. C. Cucuș, 1996);
- a social being, with an innate need of belonging that transforms the community feeling (social interest, sense of solidarity) into an evaluating life attitude and an

important indicator of the individual's mental health;

- an equal being, of similar value to his fellows, having the same rights to self-determination and human dignity (according to Adler, social equality is “the iron logic” of the democratic community);
- an goal-oriented entity, human behavior having conscious and unconscious, close and distant objectives that are individually structured in a so-called lifestyle, defined as one's own way of living, shaped by one's decisions and responsibilities;
- an individuality responsible for its self-achievement, for self determination and its own destiny. Despite his weakness and imperfection, the human being is not a victim, since he can choose his attitude and behaviors in any circumstances, according to one's individual system of values.

5. The discouraging effects of the crisis of values

The alarming increase of dissocial and antisocial subcultures and of the proportion of individuals with counterproductive behaviors who are “socialized” in inactive, destructive, or self-destructive directions, is present in the contemporary world in a discouraging climate induced by the deep crisis of values. Traditional institutions, such as, family, school, or church, are losing their roles as values mediators, and are being replaced by the public opinion shaped by a media that promotes money, success, and power as exclusive values (Z. Ambrus, 2005, p.9).

Due to discouragement and growing resignation, the individual often experiences deep feelings of inability to deal with life matters, showing incapacity and incompetence when faced with hardships. The present world of ultra rapid changes, characterized by the ruthless battle for power, by immorality, competition, selfishness, cynicism, and brutality, frequently produces a marked growth of feelings of inferiority and uncertainty, of crisis of identity followed by anger reactions, destructive behaviors, and acts of vandalism. The increasing manifestation of such undesired and extremely harmful phenomena prove that a considerable number of persons, even young ones, feel deeply discouraged and are not prepared to deal with the changes and challenges of the contemporary world.

This undesirable psycho-behavioral progression is unavoidable, especially with youth, as long as society does not provide its members with the joy and safety of belonging to a community with human equality and respect for dignity and emotional warmth. In fact, those who turn to delinquency need inter-human relationships and wish to belong to a community, but paradoxically they refuse to have productive interactions and to cooperate with others. Organized violence fills this emptiness by giving to them the opportunity to find their own place among others, to gain in importance within a social group, and to enjoy its support and security.

Thus, these individuals feel entitled to take revenge on this indifferent and insensitive world that promotes exclusion, discrimination, humiliation of human dignity, and brutal violence, and even feel that they have a right to destroy it. Focusing only on the “magic,” on the exclusive attraction of immediate experience, makes violence, destruction, and terrorism become for some people a “compensation” for these destructive negative feelings, and represents a kind of completely false and destructive religious feeling.

In the context of a deep political and ethical crisis of the globalized world, a job is no longer the source of professional identity, of esteem, or of stable relationships. On the contrary, it is transformed into a source of tensions, discouragement, and dissatisfac-

tion, exerting a negative influence on the family and on community life.

Liberal democratic education is frequently confronted with unlimited tolerance, with a lack of norms, and with a general moral relativism that, in fact, emphasizes young people's conflicts and dilemmas, leading to maladapted behaviors. As a behavioral manifestation of youth discouragement, deviance is also increased by a significant reduction of family influence in shaping a child's social behavior. Changing family lifestyle, hardships in providing for basic needs, and the increasing divorce rate and rate of abandonment make an enormous contribution towards the weakening or even to the disappearance of traditional family and educational values (Z. Ambrus, 2004a).

Also, secondary socialization influences, exterior to educational institutions (written and electronic media, cinema, associations, clubs, religious sects, civic organizations, etc.), often emphasize material values and false values in place of the authentic humanist ones. As a consequence, youth adopt a variety of undesirable behaviors. In this context of rejection of authentic humanist values, it is obvious that individual estrangement and discouragement will continue to grow and the humanity crisis will worsen.

6. The feeling of inferiority and the effort of compensation

In Adler's psychology, feelings of inferiority are generated by negative psychodynamics, representing erroneous self-evaluations that are manifest in experiencing, more or less intensely, imperfection, deficiency, weakness, uncertainty, frustration, or a low valorization of the self. Feelings of inferiority are universal, so they can be viewed as normal, natural for the human condition. According to Adler (1958/1931, p. 49), "it seems that our entire human culture relies on feelings of inferiority." Thus, feelings of inferiority represent a challenge, an opportunity, even a propulsive force that stimulates the individual to productive self-fulfillment.

At the same time, feelings of inferiority constitute a driving force to some of the most varied forms of undesirable, antisocial behavior. The destructive impulses directed against the community are reduced and even disappear when feelings of inferiority are diminished and the individual learns to appreciate his own values (E. D. Ferguson, 1999/1984).

R. Dreikurs (1989/1953, p. 23) draws attention to the fact that neither the absence nor the presence of feelings of inferiority indicate the individual's real value. Thus, many people who are extremely valuable and accomplish important achievements experience deep feelings of inferiority. On the other hand, it is possible that no trace of feelings of inferiority will be found among persons with mental disabilities. Feelings of inferiority can be perceived as "erroneous feelings" or "prejudice" and occur in a relational environment that favors their appearance and maintenance, thus generating a faulty appreciation of oneself.

Reaching the maturity of his theoretical formulations, Adler admits that, if young people would be raised in a cooperative and egalitarian climate and not in one driven by competition and vertical ambitions, feelings of inferiority would be avoidable. These sentiments would be replaced with those of belonging, of holding a secure and appreciated position within the group, of conferring on oneself personal value and importance.

One may distinguish between three main types of feelings of inferiority. First, humans suffer from the fact that they realize their biological inferiority, in the dangerous context of the forces of nature. Second, acknowledging how small they are in the

universe, humans have “enriched” themselves with feelings of cosmic inferiority, for which they try to compensate through religion, philosophy, and arts, longing for eternity and perfection, for an alliance with the supreme transcendental force. These two types of feelings of inferiority influence humanity as a whole and stimulate all humanity to create and diversify culture. Third, people are affected, probably in the most painful manner, by feelings of social inferiority. Unlike the other two types of feelings of inferiority, which bring the individual closer to other human beings, resulting in solidarity, the feeling of social inferiority stimulates the individual, turns him against others, and drives him to avenge the humiliation of his personal dignity.

Due to the fact that relationships of superiority-inferiority and competition are promoted in all spheres of life, the feeling of social inferiority will influence the development of the community feeling, as a sense of human solidarity, and, implicitly, the individual's mental health. Thus, one cannot develop feelings of belonging and pro-social sentiments if one feels s/he is despised, rejected, left aside, or relegated to a position of inferiority.

Often, individuals cannot defeat or compensate for their feelings of inferiority due to a complete lack of trust in their own abilities. De-motivated and deeply discouraged, they give in to resignation, experiencing an inferiority complex as a pathological form of the feeling of inferiority. Perceived subjectively as a feeling of incapacity and a depressing and paralyzing inability, the inferiority complex represents the “dead end” to any psychological development. Resigned, with the deep conviction of a lack of any personal value, the individual does not hide his deficiencies and imperfections. Instead, he starts to openly prove his insufficiency, the “deficiency,” as a non-stimulating and de-motivating pretext, isolating himself from life's realities, from any collective activity and inter-human relations.

Adler writes (1995/1933, p. 83) that the inferiority complex as a permanent manifestation and perpetuation of the consequences of the feeling of inferiority is explained by the severe lack of the feeling of social community. Whereas the feelings of inferiority lead from one aspect of the law of compensation to the other, by useful, constructive ways (positive compensation) or useless, disruptive ways (negative compensation), the inferiority complex represents a passive attitude that clearly shows the individual's isolation in a depressive state. Still, we believe that the inferiority complex is not fatal, an “incurable disease.” Instead, we think that it can be defeated, overcome if the feelings of inferiority that it incorporates are constructively, systematically, and skillfully modified.

Compensation has a universal character, viewed as a strong ascending impulse or as an impulse of elevation from a disadvantaging unfavorable position of inferiority to a profitable, favorable position of superiority. We all wish to overcome the hardships of life and strive to reach an aim that will make us feel strong, important, and complete. This ascending defeating psycho-dynamics of overcoming the feelings of inferiority starts in early childhood and continues throughout our lives.

7. The development of the sense of community – a premise for democratic cohabitation and for individual mental health

The main points in Adler's theory are not the feeling of inferiority and its compensation, as many believe. Instead, its focus was the sense of community that, in Adler's psychology, is not a mere feeling, but an evaluative attitude towards life, the fundamen-

tal process by which the individual constructively achieves his or her potentialities.

The sense of community develops due to the human being's need to belong to a social community that would give him the identity and quality of a social being. This complex psycho-social equipment involves cognitive processes, emotional attitudes, and feelings with respect to the individual's place in a community. Every human being has an innate potential for developing this feeling for and with the community (E.D. Ferguson, 1999/1984, p. 5).

The true sense of community involves the feelings of sharing, of reciprocity, and of admitting the fact that being a member of the group is important for the welfare of the community. One can assume that the sense of community represents an index of adaptation and mental health; thus, the more developed the sense of community, the lesser the individual's feelings of inferiority, alienation, and isolation (Z. Ambrus, 2004b, p. 25).

The sense of community or the social sense is an innate potentiality that, similar to the character features that depend on it, comes to life, becoming a general evaluative attitude only in a social context, within the framework of inter-human relations. As an authentic value, the sense of community is manifest in the emphatic attitude, explained in a plastic formulation by "seeing with the other's eyes, hearing with the other's ears, and feeling with the other's heart."

Mention should be made of the fact that both the concept of community and that of a sense of community may be abused, for instance in demagogic rhetoric the other's sense of community is always appealed to. That is why a correct and profound understanding of these concepts helps us avoid this sort of misuse (H. L. Ansbacher, R. R. Ansbacher, 1993/1956, p. 140).

Developing the sense of community in school and encouraging community spirit with pro-social group activities contribute to preparing youth to deal with the three main matters in life, namely: work and professional career, couple relationships and love, and friendship and integration in community life (Adler, 1996/1929). Dealing with these life matters from the perspective of the sense of community gives to Adler's theory an axiological and praxiological content, with important significations for the young generation's moral socialization and mental hygiene. The development of social feelings, of social-emotional abilities, represents the foundation for both productive social behavior and for the individual's mental health, preparing him/her for "optimal experiences" that can take place only within a social context (M. Csikszentmihalyi, 1991).

Encouraging a child's social feeling of belonging supports the development of a self-image built around self-value, seen as a feeling of competence and being useful. Thus, the attitude towards others will be characterized directly by trust, decency, and cooperation. The child develops the feeling of his own identity only in the context of social life.

Developing the sense of social equality represents an opportunity to demonstrate the sense of community and, as a consequence, of democratic life. Equality does not mean uniformity; instead, individuals are recognized as unique, each with an unmistakable and infinite interior worth, and have the universal right to be treated with dignity and respect.

Youth will develop their capacity to cooperate only if they feel that, despite existing differences, they are not fundamentally different from others, have a similar social value as equal human beings, and a similar need of belonging. That is why their capacity to cooperate can be seen as a measure of the development of the sense of communi-

ty. When an individual has the conviction that one belongs to the community, aiming for cooperation and contributing to its welfare, one has a high level of self-esteem and courage. Thus, the sense of community, together with a corresponding level of self appreciation, gives him the courage to experience new things, to deal with weighty matters of life, to interact with others, to work in teams, and to focus on the essential aspects of everyday life.

Self esteem and the sense of personal worth can be understood as derivatives of the sense of community. Thus, when a person cooperates for the welfare of others, this strengthens one's self esteem. When s/he is discouraged because of life's hardships, the sense of community will lead him/her to adopt behaviors that will very probably help him/her develop trust in one's own abilities. This process is self-reinforcing: if, initially, the person is certain of his/her position within the group, this conviction leads to self-trust and the development of the sense of community. If, later on, the person is faced with discouraging experiences, the high level of sense of community will enable him/her to handle the hardships more successfully, which will help him/her regain trust in his/her own abilities and reshape the feeling of personal and social competence.

The sense of community, as social interest, presents a perspective that allows the individual to act bravely in a great variety of life situations and challenges. When the individual is not interested solely in defending and proving his own status, he becomes "free" to appreciate and to interpret much more objectively a great variety of life situations and to learn from a multitude of experiences. In Adler's opinion, cooperation happens both in relationship with other human beings, at an inter-personal level, as well as in life in general (E. D. Ferguson, 1999/1984).

We conclude that the sense of community does not guarantee success in life or that all obstacles will be easily overcome; yet, the most consistent courage required in life comes from the orientation towards community, from the social feeling, and ensures productive social behaviors throughout life.

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