

Psychology as Foil to Religion: A Reformulation of Dualism

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I THINK ABOUT RELIGION AND PSYCHOLOGY all the time. They call to mind a huge quandary based on what appear to be irreconcilable dichotomies: faith versus empiricism (the subjective versus the objective); sin or evil versus mental illness; genetic predisposition versus free will; selfhood versus selfishness ("know thyself" versus "no thyself"), to name a few. I believe my thoughts about this conundrum are echoed by Gregory Bateson in his book *Angel's Fear*:

I find myself still between the Scylla of established materialism with its quantitative thinking, applied science, and controlled experiments on one side, and the Charybdis of romantic supernaturalism on the other. My task is to explore whether there is a sane and valid place for religion somewhere between these two nightmares of nonsense; whether, if neither muddle-headedness nor hypocrisy is necessary to religion, there might be found in knowledge and in art the basis to support an affirmation of the sacred that would celebrate natural unity.¹

Do we have a system that allows us to organize information, especially contradictory, even paradoxical, data? Certainly, our Mormon culture has trouble with this. Do any of the epistemological domains offer a solution? For instance, can psychology, a "soft science," turn to the "hardest science"—physics—as an exemplar in attempting to resolve these dichotomies? I am reminded of the words of renowned physicist Robert Oppenheimer. In his prophetic address to the American Psychological Association in 1955, he pleaded with psychologists not to base their psychological thinking on models of reality drawn from nineteenth-century physics which physics itself had since abandoned!² Still, I cannot help but

1. G. Bateson and M. Bateson, *Angel's Fear* (New York: MacMillan, 1987), 64.

2. In M. Kelsey, *Discernment: A Study in Ecstasy and Evil* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978),

wonder if an eventual resolution of the debate between classical physics and quantum mechanics might teach us something about endurance and eternity.

How can we develop a "depth religion" (in contrast to a depth psychology) that will allow our accumulated professional wisdom to be couched inside of, not in contrast to, the doctrines of our glorious gospel of Jesus Christ, one that will solve the previously mentioned dilemmas? How do we stay out of the trap noted by Morton Kelsey when he said, "Theologians have, on the whole, either accepted the conclusions of secular psychologists as gospel, or have reacted with narrow-minded anti-psychologizing which denies any value of psychologist thought"?³

Additionally, how do we take into account the amazingly ideographic nature of this gospel (where the very hairs of our heads are numbered) versus the nomothetic nature of the world? It appears so huge, and we appear so tiny in it. It reminds me of a poster my best friend had on his wall in college, a statement from a Catholic sister he admired, "Lord, protect me, the ocean is so big and my boat is so small." What a temptation to assume we are all just part of huge actuarial tables, that each of us is but a dot in an innumerable sea of numbers. What does it matter what one person thinks, how he or she behaves? Evil/sin/mental illness; which is it? Or worse, who cares? These dichotomies are so tough to tackle, no one has accomplished a solution so far. Why should we try, suspended between seemingly impossible polemics? John Sanford suggests, "In such a state of suspension, the grace of God is able to operate within us. The problem of the duality of our natures can never be resolved at the level of the ego; it permits no rational solution."⁴

This is perhaps why it matters how each of us struggles with the dilemmas I listed. It puts us in the suspended middle where grace might operate inside of us. Much is at stake; there appears to be an important work to do. Carl Jung wrote to the founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, William W., "I am convinced that the evil principle prevailing in this world leads the unrecognized spiritual need into perdition if it is not counteracted either by real religion, or by the protective wall of human community."⁵

THE INITIAL HOPE OF HUMANISM

In order to appreciate more fully the original dilemmas, it might help to situate the struggle historically. Throughout its short history, psychology has been presented almost always in opposition to religion. There are

3. Ibid.

4. J. Sanford, *Evil: The Shadow Side of Reality* (New York: Crossroads Press, 1984), 105.

5. As related in *ibid.*, 109.

a number of reasons for this, not the least of which is the historical context of humanism. At the risk of giving this short shrift, a number of bloody conquests brought Christianity to many places in the world. In addition to bloodshed, religion was often associated with superstition. One has only to read Barbara Tuchman's masterful book, *March of Folly*, to know the medieval disgraces of the papacy. The pursuit of humanism was an attempt to say: Man, not just God, has goodness to offer. Man has reason which can be used to solve the problems of the world. This tradition is rich with wonderful knowledge, of which psychology was but one outgrowth.

In addition, empiricism represented another important step forward, away from the codes of chivalry which often determined what was truth and what was not. I, for one, appreciate being able to rely on data gathered using the scientific method, rather than data which ascended to the status of "truth" based on which nobleman, in the fifteenth century, happened to be the most chivalrous at the time. However, because religion fell into the realm of the metaphysical, it "completely vanished as an area of respectable scholarship by 1930." Psychology became saturated with the spirit of nineteenth-century rational materialism. The study of the religious experience and psychology did not emerge again until the late "1970s after humanism had chiseled away the mystique of 'objective scientific inquiry.'"⁶ In the 1990s are we on the brink of being able to conceptualize the human personality utilizing religion *and* psychology?

TAKING SIDES

We must take a stand even though we might be short of a perfect solution so that we avoid being, as James states, "like waves of the sea ... or double-minded men ... unstable in all ways" (James 1:6, 8). William James suggested that religious representation or symbolization is "translations of a text into another tongue." Many of our religious feelings are the inarticulate, prethematic experience or feeling that is most primary and determinative. "Gendlin argues that while there is always a surplus of meaning in our feelings, that is, we know more than we can say, the drive to render that feeling articulate in metaphor, image, or concept is crucial."⁷

Just such an articulation has occurred in the ongoing debate between internationally known psychologists Allen Bergin and Albert Ellis. Ellis's premise is that "to be religiously devout is equivalent to emotional dis-

6. M. Alter, *Resurrection Psychology* (Chicago: Loyolla University Press, 1994), xviii.

7. J. McDargh, "The Deep Structure of Religious Representations," in M. Finn and J. Gartner, eds., *Object Relations Theory and Religion: Clinical Applications* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1992), 6.

turbance." He believes no one and nothing is supreme, that personal identity is ephemeral, morality is relative. Contrasted are Bergin's responses: God is supreme, identity is eternal, morality is based in absolutes, mental health is based in commitment, especially marriage.⁸ Bergin has gathered empirical data for a decade that refutes many of Ellis's claims. To be religious does not mean to be mentally ill. Instead, it covers an interesting array of skills and traits: believing in a loving God, a willingness to forgive, possessing a strong ethic to serve others, having faith. In a secular or psychological vernacular, comparable words might be: a reliance on something larger than the self, the capacity to accept the common faults and foibles of others, possessing hope.

In his *The Sociology of Religion* (taught to me by the remarkable Lowell Bennion whose death was a loss for us all), Max Weber states, "The significance of understanding this subjective experience is clear, and can only be done from the level of meaning of the religious behavior. Still, it calls for intelligent questioning of perceived reality."⁹

Bergin has been doing just that. In addition to this important data base, he notes that some of the prejudices about psychotherapy might be abating. In his Martin Hickman lecture on 27 March 1996 at Brigham Young University, he quoted a headline that stated, "Hinckley Praises Psychotherapists."¹⁰ Bergin was referring to a meeting where President Gordon B. Hinckley spoke about the utilization of psychotherapy; and Bergin was immensely pleased that, first of all, the reporter had gotten the story right and, second of all, that psychotherapy had been put in a positive light. We are making headway.

CULTIVATING CHARISMATA

Aside from gathering competing data bases, we need also to develop our gifts. I am reminded of Paul's nine gifts or graces, his charismata of the spirit: wisdom, knowledge, healing, miracles, faith, prophecy, tongues, interpretation of tongues, and discernment. A particularly important discernment we must make is between ideas and authors of ideas. As an example, Martin Heidegger wrote a classic contribution to philosophy in 1927, entitled *Being and Time*. His student, Emmanuel Levinas, wrote his dissertation essentially in support of this. Levinas took a detour, however, later in his writings, and we may never know if this was a result of his having spent five years in a German prisoner of war camp

8. See A. Bergin, "Life and Testimony of an Academic Psychologist," address given at the Kenneth and Mary Hardy Annual Lecture, Brigham Young University, Mar. 1995.

9. In M. Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963).

10. See A. Bergin, "Theopsychology," address given at the Martin Hickman Annual Lecture, Brigham Young University, Mar. 1996.

or finding out later that his mentor was a Nazi. Levinas eventually argued in opposition to Heidegger and wrote *Time and the Other*, a request that we all recognize what we come to be, not through ontological awareness of ourselves in time, but through interactional awareness of ourselves in another's presence, and that we are enormously indebted to others for our very being, "that it is not the knowledge of Being, but ethics—meaning our responsibility for the other person—that is the true subject of first philosophy."¹¹ It is here I would like to introduce the idea of foil, a person or thing that makes something seem better by contrast. I offer it as a compromise between positivists on the one hand and relativists on the other.¹²

In my own work as a psychologist trying to help clients recover previously lost lives, I have found the ideas of Sigmund Freud most useful. I could not bear using the ideas of what appears to be a godless theory, however, so I embarked on a journey these last ten years that has required assiduous reading. It is interesting to note that while Freud himself did not believe in religion, he did not dissuade his patients from using its comforts. Also, many of Freud's followers have been and are religiously devout. Interestingly, when Freud began writing, the clergy kept pace with his publications, particularly a contemporary clergyman named Pfister. For instance, when Freud wrote *Future of an Illusion* referring to the infantile regressions religion represents, Pfister answered with a widely publicized retort, *Illusion of a Future?* suggesting it was psychoanalysis that did not have a future and accusing Freud of succumbing to the ideology of science. (Freud apparently thanked him for the compliment.)

My search allowed me to know that Freud was not an evil man. He was, however, unwilling to defer to a higher authority, certainly to his own detriment; but many of his ideas, and his sincere wish to alleviate human suffering, have benefitted us. We need to develop ever-increasing abilities to separate out fabulous ideas and theories from foolish, insincere, or even evil authors of those ideas. I continue to hone my abilities to discern what is useful and what is not useful from the father of psychotherapy. I believe this is a discernment that I must continue as long as I choose to treat seriously troubled people for whom there are few depth psychologies such as Freud's. I like a position stated by Antoine Vergote, who creates a possibility of avoiding the reductionism of science or the reactionary apologetics of some religions by stating:

11. R. Manning, *Interpreting Otherwise than Heidegger: Emmanuel Levinas's Ethics as First Philosophy* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1993), 8.

12. L. Laudan, *Beyond Positivism and Relativism: Theory, Method, and Evidence* (Westview Press, 1996).

To open new possibilities does not mean, however, that religion is simply a dim reflection of a positive mystical faculty latent in the psyche. My refusal to entangle the bonds between religion and the psychic system is as firm as my refusal to sever them. These two orders of activity, although distinct, become so closely related that one can say of this type of psychology what St. Augustine said about philosophy: true religion is true psychology, and true psychology, in turn, is true religion. It is my contention that religion is so intimately enmeshed in the walls of psychological circumstance that religious pathology is always an effect of psychic causality.¹³

In my continued search I have found powerful accounts from devoutly religious psychoanalysts, in particular, Marion Milner's books *The Suppressed Madness of Sane Men* and *In the Hands of the Living God*.¹⁴ The latter book's title is from the D. H. Lawrence poem, "It is a terrible thing to find yourself in the hands of the living God; it is an even more terrible thing to find yourself falling out of them," which expresses graphically the poignant tension Christianity often affords us. A huge, complex literature from these object relationist theorists¹⁵ encourages the exploration of "God as object" in efforts to repair a client's relationships to him. I am indebted to Freud for having been a foil for object relations theorists who came after him, who based their increased knowledge on his pioneering work, and who eloquently write of the beginnings of the human psyche as it develops in relationship to a "good enough" mother and father, just as I am grateful to Heidegger for having been the foil for Levinas.

FIRST FAITH

The dilemma of dualism, the increased need for discernment, requires of us not just synthesis, since some dilemmas in our lifetimes may not yield to synthesis, but increased faith as well. I have discovered several authors who have helpful things to say about discernment and such problems as good and evil. Margaret Alter has written a gem of a book, *Resurrection Psychology*. First of all, reading it reminded me that I must be willing to be surprised by God and his plans for us, since surprise is often in contrast to control. In fact, Alter's definition of evil is "the deeply hidden longing in each human being to be in absolute control, and that this

13. A. Vergote, *Guilt and Desire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 29-31.

14. M. Milner, *The Suppressed Madness of Sane Men: Forty-four Years of Exploring Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1987); M. Milner, *In the Hands of the Living God: An Account of Psychoanalytic Treatment* (New York: International Universities Press, 1969).

15. Compare A. Rizzuto, *The Birth of the Living God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979); and P. Vitz, *Sigmund Freud's Christian Unconscious* (New York: Guilford Press, 1988).

wish presents itself to us at the conscious level quite sensibly as wanting to be safe."¹⁶ The main tenets in her modest book are the centrality of forgiveness, holiness, responsibility, the danger of perfectionism, and the danger of certainty; that is, when we demand that God should rescue us, make us prosper, keep us safe. She notes that practicing Christians have their own version of narcissistic entitlement. Her book centers on a few assumptions about human need, personal fulfillment, the social group—all based squarely on the premise that, first, there is a God in the universe who is intensely interested, available, and full of love for us; and, second, Christ assumes all humans are burdened with a need for forgiveness. Two additional books that surprised me were Kelsey's *Discernment: A Study in Ecstasy and Evil* and Sanford's *Evil: The Shadow Side of Reality*.

WHAT'S IT ALL FOR?

The sixteenth-century Anglican clergyman Thomas Cranmen recited the liturgy, "From lightning and tempest; from earthquake, fire and flood; from plague, pestilence and famine; from battle, murder and sudden death, Lord, deliver us." Kelsey suggests today's liturgy might be, "From floating anxiety and formless terror; from loss of meaning, futility and depression; from guilt and shame; from blind hate and hostility; from compulsion and neurosis, Lord, deliver us."¹⁷

To find our true, deep feelings about the phenomenology of the spiritual is a worthy goal. To emphasize the spiritual is not to demean the temporal. These co-exist. I wish fervently to see God face to face. But meanwhile I must prove my devotion by living in the world he provided, relying on the spiritual as the way to come as close to him as I can. Partially this requires that I face the earthly facts about mental illness. In Ber-
gin's research, mentioned above, he discovered that there are certainly unhealthy aspects to our religion. Of course, this does not mean that there are no healthy aspects to our religion. There are! Still, some of the unhealthy ones include: (1) *Extrinsic religiosity*: we can role-play and be incongruent; (2) *Perfectionism*: we can be over-controlled, ritualistic, overly scrupulous, self-punitive; (3) *Authoritarianism*: we can control others, be rigid and dogmatic, intolerant and prejudiced, emotionally insensitive; (4) *Narcissism*: we can be self-promoting, status-seeking, charming, competitive; (5) *Aggressiveness*: we can be abusive and violent, anti-social, sadistic; (6) *Dependency*: we can be obsequious, compliant, conflict-avoidant, passive-aggressive; and (7) *Hyper-spiritualism*: we can be oddly mystical, have poor reality testing, be hallucinatory or delusional. Ber-

16. Alter, 151.

17. Kelsey, 87.

gin's data do not replace faith with fact; rather, they provide a list of tangible traits we must seek to overcome in this world.

I have also had several conversations with Dr. Lorna Benjamin, an internationally known researcher who teaches at the University of Utah. She proposes a way to conduct psychotherapy based on her circumplex model, the Structural Analysis of Social Behavior, one of the most elegant such models in existence.¹⁸ Her decade of living and working in Utah has afforded her a particularly close and personal view of the peculiar psychopathology our culture appears to promote. In addition to the work Dr. Bergin has conducted, we need to be appropriately curious about the accurate observations of others, such as Dr. Benjamin, who represent critical sources of information.

FINALLY

Our experience of dissonance is what encourages us to make meaning of these dilemmas. Perhaps we will be able to articulate a view that will contain the sacred as well as the profane, that will transcend dualism, that we may have an adequately complex theory of human personality. Perhaps it could be entitled, "The Search for the Exquisite Soul," using Goethe's term *Die Schone Seele*. Jesus tells us in Luke 12:7, "But even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore." If he can keep track of the sands of the sea, and the hairs on our head, he can keep track of each one of us as we struggle with this. Certainly such a skill represents an intellect that is beyond ours; nevertheless, I believe this is within God's capacity, matched only by the immense capacity he possesses to love us. Because of this, I know we can discern, define, and articulate such a view, and, in the language of Levinas, develop "Ethics as First Psychology."

18. L. Benjamin, *Interpersonal Diagnosis and Treatment of Personality Disorders* (New York: Guilford Press, 1996).