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The Psychoanalyst and the Exorcist: Perspectives on Psychology and Religion

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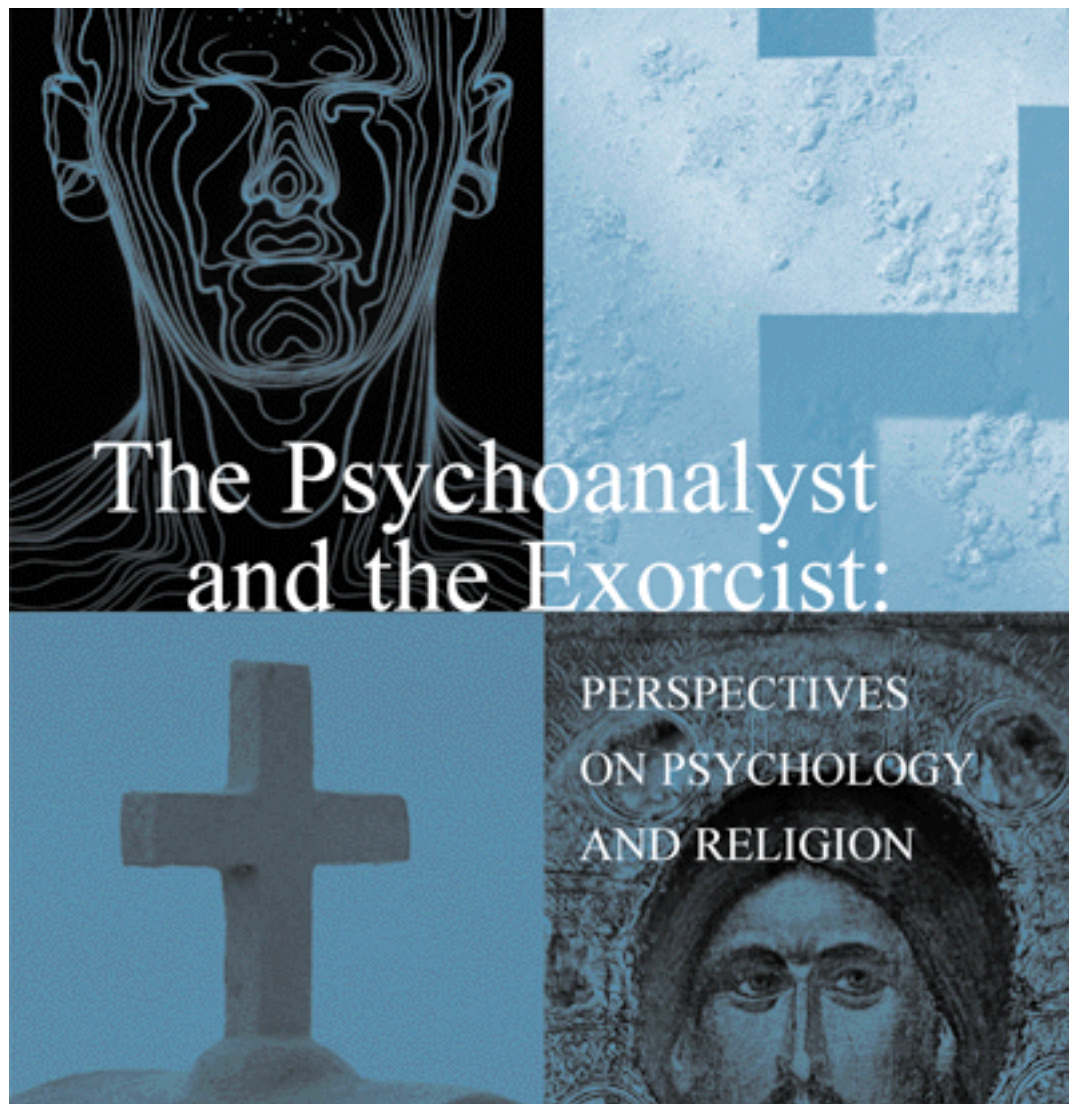
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I. Psychology's war against religion

A century ago psychology declared war on religion. Describing religion as “nothing but psychology projected into the external world,” Sigmund Freud, the first psychoanalyst, mounted a campaign to expose religion as something far worse than a comforting illusion. He tried to show that religious belief and practice were harmful to both psyche and culture. In his view religion distorted and deformed the mind by demanding that we refrain from thinking deeply or from asking serious questions. Religion forces us, he claimed, to accept the authority of others, and it promotes excessive guilt and shame for

transgressions of its mandates. In addition, he argued, it dissuades us from working toward social justice and equality: religion demands that we tolerate suffering and injustice in this life with the expectation of a blissful afterlife as a reward for our obedience.

While Karl Marx had called religion the “opiate of the people,” Freud, in effect, called it the neurosis of the people: religion, in his view, was the “universal obsessional neurosis of humanity.” Freud also insisted upon clear distinctions between the roles of therapist and priest: his goal was to introduce a new method of mental healing, psychoanalysis, which took over from religion the goal of alleviating human suffering. These new healing professionals he described as “lay curers of souls;” he argued that they “need not be doctors and should not be priests.” Both Freud’s insistence that psychologists should not be religious professionals and his hostility toward religion in general were, in the early decades of the twentieth century, shared by psychologists throughout Europe and America. A 1916 study found that psychologists were the least likely of all professionals to believe in a God who answers prayers. The old joke about what psychologists and recidivist criminals have in common (neither is likely to go to church), expressed a sociological reality.

At mid-century, psychology seemed to be winning its war against religion. In the sixties sociologist Philip Rieff, with more than a little nostalgia for the pre-psychological era, announced the “birth of psychological man,” the “triumph of the therapeutic,” and, in effect, the death of religion. This “triumph of the therapeutic” was nowhere more evident than in the official guidebook of the psychological profession, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (abbreviated DSM), a document which provides not only a tool for a diagnosis and billing, but also a barometer of cultural attitudes. In the first three editions of the manual, religion is mentioned only in the context of pathology, thus serving to reflect, and to promote, a cultural stereotype of religion as harmful. Bizarre religious practices and beliefs—obsessively repeated prayers, rambling statements about God, Jesus, and Satan, etc.—were used to illustrate symptoms of neurosis and psychosis. Religion suffered serious losses in this clinical climate of war.

II. The contemporary truce

Today, however, at century's end, it is apparent that the scene has changed. The metaphors of war, battle, and enmity no longer apply. The contemporary relationship between psychology and religion is better described in terms of reconciliation, partnership, dialogue, or merger.

This shift to a new relationship is clearly evident in changes in the DSM. The latest version (the fourth), released in 1994, reflects both a growing interest among psychological and psychiatric professionals in the way religious practice and belief can contribute to mental health, and a growing interest in the way that religious crises can cause very real distress. The DSM IV incorporated a new diagnostic category, "the religious or spiritual problem," a diagnosis which can include "loss of faith, problems associated with conversion to a new faith, or questioning of other spiritual values which may not necessarily be related to an organized church or religious institution." The "religious or spiritual problem" is categorized not as a psychiatric illness, but as one of several "problems of living."

How does this change impact clinical practice? Under the hegemony of the previous editions of the guidebook, religious problems were quite simply misdiagnosed: either they were dismissed as insignificant or they were treated as symptoms of serious mental disorders. Crises of faith would have been ignored, while near-death experiences—which we now know are not uncommon in survivors of serious illnesses and accidents—would have been treated with institutionalization and anti-psychotic medications. Today, under the guidance of the DSM IV, crises of faith would no longer be dismissed, while reports of near-death experiences would be taken seriously as "religious or spiritual problems." The experiences would be validated, the distress honored. Therapists would attempt to work with clients in integrating the experiences into life.

The old joke may still contain some truth—psychologists do remain infrequent church goers—but today psychologists are far less hostile toward religion and spirituality than their predecessors. Examining data culled from a number of recent national surveys, psychologist of religion Edward Shafranske found that while psychologists are relatively uninvolved in institutional religious groups, they now view spirituality as personally relevant, psychologically important, and as a component of mental health.

The shift in the relation of psychology and religion is visible not only

in the clinical arena, but in a number of other contexts as well. I'll comment on three of these: the churches, the universities, and the broader circuit of popular culture. In the churches, the relationship between psychology and religion can now be described as a partnership; in the universities, it is best characterized as dialogue; and in popular culture, it takes the form of a merger.

A. Psychology and religion in the churches

An initial period of defensive isolationism followed psychology's fin de siècle declaration of war against religion. By mid-century, however—ironically, this was around the same time that Rieff had announced religion's demise—leaders of Protestant churches began to express an interest in psychology. More and more ministers sought training in clinical psychology to augment their pastoral roles. Today many Protestant ministers routinely receive psychological training as part of the preparation for ordination. What is now called “pastoral care and counseling” is a thriving field with numerous graduate programs, several journals, and an annual conference. Even conservative evangelical Protestant groups, long resistant to psychology, are currently engaging in a new sort of ecumenical partnership. In recent evangelical publications, for example, Christianity is presented as a psychology, biblical texts are mined for their formulations of mental illness and health, and confessional and penitential practices from the early church are described as introspective psychologies.

Similarly, Roman Catholic clergy and lay professionals, long skilled in “spiritual direction,” have begun in recent decades to incorporate psychological methods and practices into their work. This new kind of partnership between Catholicism and psychology is illustrated clearly in what I call “the new European exorcism.” In recent years, Roman Catholic bishops throughout Europe, encountering an increase in problems associated with claims of charismatic spirit possession or demonic possession, have appointed numerous exorcists. The church in France today, for example, has five times more exorcists than it had twenty years ago. Trained in psychological practice as well as in church doctrine, liturgy, and theology, these new exorcists work closely with a support team that includes church workers, psychiatrists, and psychologists. And they utilize a discourse that is remarkably psychological. The exorcist of Notre Dame in Paris, for example, while acknowledging that “some people believe there is a spell on them,” adds quickly “of course, the evil spirit often disguises a serious

mental problem.”

The new exorcist serves as a paradigmatic figure for the current reconciliation between psychology and religion. He borrows the tools of the psychologist, yet he maintains the practices and traditions of traditional Catholicism. He differentiates his role as exorcist from the role of the lay psychiatrists with whom he consults: “A psychiatrist is not there to further one’s spiritual life. That’s not his job. He does not give blessings...I as a priest believe in the power of prayer.” Freud would express deep concern: the exorcist as “curer of souls” functions as both psychologist and priest. Freud’s “lay curer of souls,” on the other hand, was to be neither doctor nor priest.

B. Psychology and religion in the universities

At the same time that the pastoral care and counseling movement was beginning to expand the psychological expertise of pastors and priests, scholars in the universities initiated a related similar process of borrowing. Seeking correlations between religious doctrines and psychological concepts, they explored connections between sin and guilt, salvation and health, confessional and therapeutic discourse. Some of the contributors to this dialogue sought to differentiate pathological forms of religion from religion’s healthy manifestations. Authoritarian religions, they argued, were pathological; humanistic religions were beneficial. Authoritarian religions demanded communal identity, insisted on unquestioning obedience, practiced formalistic rituals, and promoted intolerance; humanistic religions, on the other hand, encouraged individuality, personal conscience, inner spirituality, and tolerance. Theologian Paul Tillich, existential psychologist Rollo May, and humanistic psychologists Gorton Allport, Erich Fromm, and Abraham Maslow were major figures in this conversation of “dialogue between theology and psychology” flourishing in the post-war years.

While the scholars engaged in the dialogue between theology and psychology were primarily interested in western religious traditions, another dialogue with a broader focus soon emerged in the context of the university. Historians of comparative religion began to explore Hinduism, Buddhism, and other non-western traditions from psychological perspectives. Emphasizing mysticism and spirituality, this “psychology-comparativist dialogue” has produced a number of studies of spiritual masters like the Indian saint Ramakrishna, some important analyses of meditative practice, and several studies contrasting eastern and western healing traditions.

The university was also the site of a related endeavor, a project we might call an “interpretive dialogue,” which attempted, using a variety of methods, to analyze or explain religion psychologically. One group of interpretive theorists, the “depth psychologists” (so named because of their interest in the unconscious “depths” of the psyche revealed in dreams, symptoms, and myths), drew upon the work of Freud, differentiating Freud’s war against religion from his interpretations of religion. Freudian theorists focus on oedipal dynamics embodied in religious texts and practices: they look for parricidal tensions between fathers and sons, and erotic incestuous fantasies. St. Augustine’s account of his deep attachment to his pious mother and ambivalence about his uncouth father, recorded in his autobiographical text, *The Confessions*, for example, has attracted the attention of numerous participants in the interpretive dialogue.

Other depth psychologists engaging in this dialogue broke away from Freud’s oedipal interpretations by adopting the methods of ego psychology, object relations theory, and post-structuralist theory. Erik Erikson, a psychoanalytic ego psychologist interested in the intersections of body, psyche, and society, devoted several important studies to the lives of religious thinkers. His studies of Luther and Gandhi initiated an important branch of scholarly inquiry, the psychobiography.

The psychoanalytic object relations theorists, another group of depth psychologists, revised Freud’s oedipal assumptions by exploring pre-oedipal mother-child dynamics in religion and ritual. Jesuit psychoanalyst William Messier, for example, has produced a masterful psychobiography of Ignatius of Loyola, examining the significance of Ignatius’ interrupted relationship to his mother in the psychological foundations of his conversion experience. Other revisionist depth psychologists, such as psychoanalytic post-structuralist theorist Julia Kristeva, extend Freud’s interpretive legacy by exploring the origins of taboos and rituals of sacrifice in the infant’s pre-verbal “abjection” of the body of the mother. Kristeva’s work serves not only to interpret the psychological origins of religious ritual but also to uncover some of the sources of cultural misogyny. Other theorists like Peter Homans, extended the depth psychological interpretive dialogue in the direction of social theory in an effort to explore the historical relation between the decline of religion and the rise of psychological modes of introspection and theorizing.

The interpretive dialogue between psychology and religion utilizes other methodologies as well. Empirical studies approach religion as observable, quantifiable behavior, or as the outcome of physiological processes. Neurophysiological studies, for example, examine activity in particular regions of the brain during meditative or ecstatic states. Meditative experiences of calmness, unity and transcendence have been shown to be associated with increased activity in the brain's frontal lobes and decreased activity in the parietal lobes. The "neurotheologians" doing this sort of work do not claim that religious awe, numinous vision, or mystical experience is "reducible to neurochemical flux." Rather, they suggest, these neurochemical patterns are the concomitants of religious experience.

Thus, in the context of the university, scholars in the psychology of religion are less likely to continue Freud's war against religion than to engage in dialogue of various sorts—theological, comparative, and interpretive—with religion.

C. Psychology and religion in popular culture

Psychology and religion intersect most visibly and most directly in the realm of popular culture. In this context the relationship between psychology and religion is best described as a merger: psychology becomes religion, psychology resolves the problem of meaning, and spiritual growth is seen as part of human development. Religion in this context is typically defined as non-institutional. The explosion of popular publications on new-age religion, self-help psychology, and personal spirituality so visible in bookstores throughout America is one mark of this merger. Another is the longevity of titles like *Women Who Run With the Wolves* (Clarissa Pinkola Estes's examination, grounded in Jungian theory, of mythical motifs in women's lives) and *A Road Less Traveled* (F. Scott Peck's Freudian/Jungian guide to interpersonal relationship and personal spirituality) on the bestseller lists.

This vision of psychology as religion is shared by the transpersonal psychology movement, a movement visible in the popular arena, the clinical arena, and the university. Offering itself as a modern unchurched way to map one's religiosity—and integrating a focus on mysticism, meditation, and altered states of consciousness—transpersonal psychology constructs a form of psychotherapy that adds authentic spirituality, wholeness, and self-actualization to the goal of healthy psychological functioning.

III. Psychology and religion: The larger picture

Although the contemporary reconciliation between psychology and religion has led to a decrease in hostilities, we still have much to learn from Freud and his collaborators who battled so fiercely against religion. Freud articulated a tension that remains just under the surface today even in the borrowings, dialogues, and mergers of the contemporary culture of reconciliation.

Both the war declared earlier this century and the partnerships, dialogues, and mergers between psychology and religion are part of the larger landscape of modernity. We are citizens of a territory in which psychological and religious ideas intersect in complex and conflicting ways to shape our lives, our thoughts, our practices. In our attempts to map this territory it is important to maintain a focus on both the tensions and the borrowings, the war as well as the peace. Let us imagine the lively debate sure to emerge among the exorcist, the transpersonal psychologist, and the first psychoanalyst. The exorcist brings psychology into religion; the transpersonal psychologist brings religion into psychology; and the psychoanalyst, as we've seen, insists on the importance of a cultural and professional space for "lay curers of souls who need not be doctors and should not be priests."



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