

Pathway and Pathology

What the Psychologists Say about Religion

By

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When I left my Southern Baptist faith and the Christian religion in my mid-twenties, I quickly turned to the somewhat mystical writings of the Swiss psychologist Carl Jung, in my desire to better understand myself and the meaning of life. I read much, if not most, of Jung's writings, which is no small undertaking given the voluminous nature of his collected works. For many years I described myself as a Jungian. In fact, the only tattoo on my body, which I acquired in my late thirties, is an image of the Babylonian god of Time, Aion, as depicted in a photograph from one of Jung's volumes.

Jung was an important part of my personal growth and understanding, but by the end of my third decade, having done so much "inner" work, I finally learned that life isn't about becoming a perfect person without any psychological hang ups: it's about becoming a functional human being despite our imperfections and personal issues. So, my time of concentrated introspection and self-development drew to a close as I began to focus, instead, on what I can do—as is—to be of meaningful and practical use to others and in the world. I would now consider my life a waste if not predominantly lived in service to greater causes than myself. Introspection and self-reflection are an important part of individual growth and maturation but centering our entire lives on ourselves eventually stunts our development and turns us into narcissists and makes our lives insignificant.

Fortunately, my intense and initial interest in Jung led me to study other psychologists as well. Psychology, a word that means, "study of the soul," became the source of my religious life. The first time I heard "soul" used in this way, as a living and present reality in our lives, not merely as something that might persist in the afterlife, was also the first time Peggy and I visited First Unitarian Church in Louisville, Kentucky. It was only the second Unitarian service we'd attended, and it was the congregation we later joined to officially become Unitarian Universalist in 1989. That was just a couple of years after we had left Christianity behind.

The guest speaker that day was Phil Smith, a retired UU minister turned Jungian psychotherapist. He spoke a lot about the soul, most of which went over my head. But I understood enough to grasp him saying it is something essential in this life, not the next, and its health and wellbeing is fundamental to who we are. It was the thing that was stirring inside and that compelled me to go and introduce myself to Phil after the service. I was pretty shy in those days and kept wanting to step out of the receiving line, but my soul, my psyche, insisted that I stay the course. So, I sheepishly asked if we could possibly meet sometime and, to my surprise, Phil very quickly and graciously gave me his number and suggested we have lunch later that week. And that was that start of one of the most important friendships in my life.

Phil became one of the few and most significant mentors in my life. He not only pointed me in the direction of Carl Jung but set me on the path of self-discovery and the hard inner-work I desperately needed to undertake. At some point, Phil retired and, along with his wife Sharon, also a dear friend to both Peggy and I, moved away to North Carolina and eventually to the Northeast. But we stayed in touch, and I stayed on the path he had guided me upon until it came time to branch off in a new direction.

Phil died of Alzheimer's just a few months after we moved to Spokane, so I hadn't been able to communicate with him for some time before. I wept when I learned of his death, in a way I had not when my own parents died, and that night had an unforgettable dream. I was in a funeral home where I saw Phil in a dark suit, walking about, healthy and younger than I had ever known him. It was a place where the living and the dead mingled together and were aware of each other but were unable to speak to each other. Phil gave me a reassuring nod. Then I existed and found myself walking upon a winding path in the countryside. I soon came upon Phil sitting in lotus position in the center of the path. He had been reincarnated as a baby and was wearing a very crumpled up white baby-gown.

"I guess I still have a few wrinkles to iron out," he said. Phil was a practicing Buddhist who believed strongly in reincarnation, and also had a self-deprecating sense of humor. So this was characteristic of something he would actually have said.

As I continued along the path, he instructed me to, "Eat your cake and be careful where you park your car." I immediately awoke with this phrase in my mind and understood exactly what he meant by it. Again, it was shortly after I had arrived in Spokane, and I was in love with the place and with the church and dreaded the thought of ever having to leave. But I knew what my dream-Phil was saying, enjoy yourself but don't get stuck in your ways—*eat your cake and be careful where you park your car*.

I hadn't thought about that dream in many years until the conflict in our church following the controversy that arose in the aftermath of my book, *The Gadfly Papers*. I wasn't enjoying it anymore, to say the least, and I knew things had shifted, that I'm not in the same place I was eleven years ago. Difficult as change can be, however, I agree with dream-Phil's mantra, *Eat your cake and be careful where you park your car*. Life is pointless if we don't experience some joy along the way, even if only occasionally and if it is only the joy of enduring the difficulties and overcoming the challenges that help us achieve our goals and fulfill our own purposes. Exercising to the point of exhaustion is not enjoyable, but we do it in order to enjoy better health. This, to me, is the best way to live life, not avoiding difficulties and challenges in order to remain happy, or content, or conflict-free, but to obtain happiness by working our way through them to become better and stronger in the process.

I bring this up as an example of how studying psychology on one's own, as a novice, not as a professional, can give direction and bring meaning to one's life, just as much or more than

any other source of inspiration. If, after all, the soul, or psyche, is a significant presence in our lives, not merely something to be saved for the afterlife, shouldn't we turn to the writings of those who have most studied it to better understand it and how to save it right now so that it is healthy, happy, and whole?

I believe the answer is, yes. Which is why, when working on my Doctor of Ministry, I decided to write my dissertation on the psychology of religion. My advisors initially expressed some concern about my proposal, especially the section I entitled, *Fundamentalism as Fixation*, which I explained by saying:

I have found the similarity between Fundamentalism and the developmental description of preschool children too precise to overlook. These common characteristics include; 1) black and white (extremist, irrelative) thinking, 2) inconsistent reasoning (illogical, contradicting), 3) holding irrational/nonsensical beliefs (magical thinking), 4) authoritarianism (yielding to an unquestionable superior, usually a patriarch), and 5) a punitive mindset (meaning the solution to all wrongdoing is monolithically retributive).

My primary dissertation advisor was concerned that I might offend somebody. Even then, around 2009, the dread of saying anything controversial, even if true, had made some academics fearful of saying anything meaningful. After all, us liberals wouldn't want to say anything that might offend Fundamentalists. Still, I insisted the evidence was on my side and that I would only draw conclusions based upon what the research indicates. My conclusion was and is that the Fundamentalist mindset is a form of psychological fixation, which means its adherents are stuck—fixated—at an immature level of moral and cognitive development. This is evidenced by the same characteristics ascribed to the thinking of preschool children, which is characteristically black and white, magical, punitive, and authoritarian.

My research surveyed what classical psychologists had to say about religion, including William James, Sigmund Freud, Theodore Reik, Carl Jung, B.F. Skinner, and Erich Fromm, among other less familiar psychologists. It also considered the perspectives of several developmental psychologist like Jean Piaget, Lawrence Kohlberg, James Fowler, Carol Gilligan, Robert Kegan, as well as other less familiar developmentalists. And, in addition to many respected figures in other fields, like philosophy and theology, I included some of the most recent research from experts on Fundamentalism, like Karen Armstrong, Martin Marty, and Charles Strozier, among other less familiar experts on the subject.

These figures represent a rather wide range of thoughts and opinions on the matter, but the simple question binding all of them together regards what psychology has to say about religion. I included chapters about the tendency of most major religions to be or to become patriarchal, fundamentalism in terms of developmental psychology, the tension between freedom and belonging that is inherent in the human condition, how our theological ideas

evolve in line with our psychological development, and the tendency of religion to foster magical thinking.

For example, we know that the early Christians established egalitarian communities in which they shared their belongings and in which there was “neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female,” meaning there was no racial, class, or gender discrimination. Unfortunately, this social experiment was short-lived and Christianity soon reverted to authoritarianism and inequality. The question I considered is how does psychology help explain this shift? Why is it, as Erich Fromm says, that “Christianity, which had been the religion of a community of equal brothers, without hierarchy or bureaucracy, became ‘the Church,’ the reflected image of the absolute monarchy of the Roman Empire.”¹

According to Fromm, it happened because the “original religion was transformed into another one.”² As I put it myself, “The change occurred, not because the original faith eventually spread throughout the Roman Empire, but through its misappropriation by the Empire, eventually changing it into the very thing it was born to resist.”

Like other primates, Sigmund Freud presumes small human hordes were originally governed by one dominant male. After a time, resentful sons banded together to kill their overbearing father. Feeling resentful, they eventually erected a totem to serve as a surrogate father that they then worshipped and feared. “In the Christian myth,” he says:

man’s original sin is undoubtedly an offense against God the Father, and if Christ redeems mankind from the weight of original sin by sacrificing his own life, he forces us to the conclusion that this sin was murder. According to the law of retaliation which is deeply rooted in human feeling, a murder can be atoned only by the sacrifice of another life; the self-sacrifice points to a blood-guilt. And if this sacrifice of one’s own life brings about a reconciliation with god, the father, then the crime which must be expiated can only have been the murder of the father.³

In other words, Christianity became patriarchal out of guilty, and Jesus’ martyrdom came to be seen as a blood sacrifice to alleviate that guilt. If Freud is right, this explains why human gods are usually male, but also why human societies, at least primitive human societies, are usually patriarchal. Freud says, “The reconciliation of the father is the more thorough because simultaneously with this sacrifice there follows the complete renunciation of woman, for whose sake mankind rebelled against the father.”⁴ By this he means the dominant male controlled access to the females, which is why the sons killed him to begin with. So, after their patricidal act, they projected their guilt onto females. It’s her fault: just as Adam blames Eve for having disobeyed his Father’s command.

Freud’s student, Theodor Reik believes this further explains the bizarre account in *Genesis* in which Adam effectively gives birth to Eve, when she is fashioned from his rib, and the Greek myth of Zeus giving birth to Dionysus from his leg and to Athena from his forehead.

In one Greek play, Orestes is acquitted of murdering his own mother when Apollo successfully argues “The mother is no parent of that which is called her child,”⁵ as proven by the birth of Athena. So, at least according to psychoanalysis, as Freud says, “Religion would thus be the universal obsessional neurosis of humanity; like the obsessional neurosis of children, it arose out of the Oedipus complex, out of the relation to the father.”⁶

This view isn’t very flattering to religion, and some psychologists, like William James and Carl Jung have more positive opinions about its function in our lives. My point here is only to give you a brief example of how psychoanalyzing religious myths, as if they were a patient’s dream or fantasy of stream of consciousness, can work. I won’t go into the other topics covered in my dissertation today, although much of it has been distilled in many of the sermons I have given over the years.

Since coming here, I have especially enjoyed learning about the relatively new branch known as Evolutionary Psychology, particularly ETAS theory, which stands for Evolutionary Threat Assessment System. Evolutionary psychology analyzes human behavior by considering how it might add to our survival as a species, and ETAS is the theory, as Cognitive Therapist, Paul Gilbert explains, that “the most important question faced everyday by all animals, including humans, is whether their immediate environment is dangerous or not.”⁷ So the first thing we consider in each situation is, “Am I safe?” How we respond to this question is an indicator of our general psychological health. If, once we assess there’s no danger and can relax, we’re in pretty good shape. Remaining in a state of hyper-alertness and chronic anxiety or tension, even where there’s no danger present, indicates something is awry.

I bring ETAS up only to point out that my interest in psychology hasn’t decreased over the years and I continue to explore it is a primary source of insight in my own ongoing evolution and growth as a human being. But what I want to begin to close with is the insight I found most valuable through researching and writing my dissertation. This I can state in a single sentence: *Religion can be used to drive us deeper into our delusions or help us better cope with the reality around us.*

Religion can be used to drive us deeper into our delusions or help us better cope with the reality around us. As I stated earlier, my interest in Jung began to wane in my late thirties as I became more comfortable with myself, thanks to him, and could begin to use my agency, imperfect as it is, to make a positive difference in the world and in the lives of others. This explains why in my later years I’ve become more a devotee of the social psychologist Erich Fromm, whose psychoanalysis of society has helped me shift from inner-work to outer-work.

The reality around us, as beautiful and enjoyable as it can be, can also bring us fear and suffering. So, we develop many unconscious coping mechanisms that can cause us to avoid

the reality around us or to deal with it. Religion is one of those mechanisms. We can use it to avoid and deny reality, or to accept it.

A particular religion, like Christianity, for example, can be used to justify our abuse of others in order to achieve our own selfish interests, by focusing, for example, on the innate evil in nonbelievers who deserve to be punished for their sins. Or we can focus on its teachings about compassion and justice to recognize our responsibility to help alleviate the suffering around us. The point is that the same religion can be a means of accepting the difficult realities around us or of denying them. Likewise, before Buddha was enlightened he was a Prince who had grown up behind triple-thick walls, unable to experience the outside world. When he finally ventures out, he immediately recognizes the suffering around him and his entire journey toward enlightenment is about learning to cope with the harsh reality outside himself, outside the unconscious walls erected to protect him from experiencing life's agonies.

This is why, at the end of my dissertation, I theologize that God is Reality. Everything that exists must be real. Reality is the only thing that exists and is, at once, the most abundant resource in the Universe and its rarest gem. For, like the fictional god of Moses, we are only able to catch small glimpses of it. Reality is too expansive for us to ever comprehend in its entirety. Yet religion is one of those tools that can help us understand some of it, or to avoid it altogether by remaining behind the thick walls of our unconscious minds. The choice is up to us and what we decide might just save our soul.

¹ Fromm, Erich, *The Dogma of Christ*, (A Fawcett Premier Book, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., New York, NY, 1955, 1963), p. 65.

² Ibid., p. 62.

³ Freud, Sigmund, *Totem and Taboo*, (Barnes & Noble, New York, NY, 1913, 2005), p. 146.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Eisler, Riane, *The Chalice and the Blade*, (HarperSanFrancisco, Harper Collins, New York, NY, 1987, 1995), p. 78.

⁶ Freud, Sigmund, *The Future of an Illusion*, (W.W. Norton & Company, New York, NY, 1961, 1989), p. 55.

⁷ Flannelly, Kevin J., and Galek, Kathleen, *Religion, Evolution, and Mental Health: Attachment Theory and ETAS Theory*, *Journal of Religion and Health* (2010) 49-337-350, Published online, March 17, 2009, Springer Science+Business Media, LLC, 2009, p. 340.