

THE RETURN OF THE REPRESSED: PSYCHOANALYSIS AS SPIRITUALITY

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Authors Note: I wrote this paper as a ten page presentation. I aim to develop it into a journal length article in the near future and will post the final version with full bibliography at that time.

In their 2001 survey of the relationship between psychology and religion, William Parsons and Diane Jonte-Pace note the emergence of what they label as “psychology as religion.”¹ Rather than employ psychology to interpret religion, this approach seeks to offer psychology as a religion. Presenting itself as a modern secular way to experience one’s religiosity, psychology as religion has flourished within a wider therapeutic climate as an alternative method to guide an individual’s quest for meaning and the sacred. While the contemporary rise of psychology as religion, or what is increasingly referred to as psychospirituality, has been noted by a number of scholars, attention has focused on Jungian, humanistic, and transpersonal schools.² I argue, however, that a psychospiritual lineage is also emerging within the field of psychoanalysis. In this paper, I explore this perspective by tracing the radical claim that psychoanalysis has inherently mystical dimensions and can function as a modern spiritual practice. In conclusion, I consider the current conflation of psychoanalysis and spirituality in light of the historic esoteric origins of psychoanalysis, asking if the contemporary situation might not reflect something of a return of the repressed.

Since the 1980s largely due to the influence of D.W. Winnicott and Wilfred Bion, psychoanalysis has been witnessing a fascinating rapprochement with religion, and particularly with modern, deinstitutionalized, and eclectic forms of spirituality, which are concerned with personal experience, self-transformation, and an immanent divinity.³ While often overlapping, I suggest that two main positions can be delineated in current psychoanalytic-spiritual conversations: (1) a dialogical approach which attempts to bring the two distinct disciplines into conversation, and, (2) a more provocative perspective, in which the two disciplines begin to converge, and psychoanalysis itself is seen as having inherently spiritual dimensions.

I want to focus on the latter position through a look at some of its most vocal proponents. Time considerations don’t allow for anything more than the briefest of glances. As such, I am not concerned here with dissecting, de-legitimizing, or defending a spiritual reading of psychoanalysis. My aim is the more humble one of identifying this perspective rather than explicating or evaluating its claims.

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At the forefront of the contemporary embrace of psychoanalysis as spirituality is Michael Eigen. Eigen is aligned with the relational school, although, has been best described as an affective phenomenologist.⁴ His work is a celebration of subjectivity that places the feeling self, the impact of the other, and affective experience at its center. One of Eigen's primary analytic concerns is to facilitate the self's capacity for experiencing, an ability, he implies, that is connected to a type of mystical immediacy or transparency to ultimate reality. Eigen wants the self to open to, tolerate, and digest wider ranges of experience. This includes mystical experience, which, he claims, is more common and ordinary than is supposed, an intrinsic dimension of experience that has been discarded in psychoanalysis.⁵

According to Eigen, however, despite this neglect, a strong mystical thread has been present in psychoanalysis since its inception. He argues that many analysts are mystical, use mystical imagery as intuitive models for psychoanalytic experience, and that there is a mystical aspect to the analytic process. In a series of books and articles, Eigen has developed the thought of a number of analysts—most notably Bion, Jacques Lacan, Marion Milner, and Winnicott—to recover a lineage of “psychoanalytic mystics.”⁶ Writing intimately of his own mystical experiences, Eigen outs himself as one of the latter, revealing that Buddhism and Judaism are “his umbilical connections to the universe” and that he has also dipped into Catholicism, Hinduism, Taoism and Sufism. Just as his own mystical exploration has been unashamedly promiscuous, so his understanding of mysticism and his readings of the psychoanalytic mystics are unabashedly “idiosyncratic and inventive.”

To begin with, Eigen refuses to define mysticism on the grounds of the paradoxical nature of the experiencing involved. He prefers rather to “speak around or from it.” Hence, instead of any systematic theory, we are treated to autobiographical snapshots, clinical vignettes and meditations on the inherent mysticism of a number of seminal analysts. What emerges from these excursions is an unruly multiplicity of mystical experiences, numinous encounters, and religious ecstasies. Eigen locates mysticism both with a distinct personal God and an impersonal monistic force; he values mysticisms of identity and mysticisms of difference; he connects mysticism to aliveness, vitality, and generativity yet also stresses its relationship to death, dread, and destruction. Celebrating these various mysticisms, Eigen finally settles on what he calls a “paradoxical monism”: a spirituality that embraces both the impersonal void and the personal God, difference and union, dread and ecstasy, immanence and transcendence.

What is the relationship of such spirituality to psychoanalysis? Eigen moves between advocating a dialogical approach and embracing the places where the two fields converge and conflate. Dialogically, he calls for the cross-fertilization of the two disciplines, arguing that they can correct and amplify each other. Using his patients as examples, he discusses how mystical experiences can be transformative and life-enhancing or used for defensive and destructive ends. Analysis, he suggests, can help people metabolize the impacts of spiritual experience and use their mystical capacities in ways that further rather than stunt personality growth.

Mysticism and psychoanalysis can operate, therefore, as distinct practices that potentially correct the deficiencies and excesses of each other. Eigen also believes,

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however, that boundaries between the two are porous, overlap, and ultimately dissolve in the face of the “one reality” that pours through them both. Beyond aiding in the healthy psychological integration of mystical experiences, psychoanalysis is itself a psychospiritual journey, both spiritual process and practice.

In support of this claim Eigen draws from Winnicott, Milner, Lacan, and Bion. Most central, however, is a creative and controversial hermeneutic of Lacan’s concept of *jouissance* and a more faithful but still provocative reading of Bion’s understanding of the analytic attitude as an act of faith and O. To give a taste we can glance at Eigen’s presentation of Bion who has left the richest legacy for a mystical understanding of analysis. Bion called for analyst to relinquish the drive to know and refashioned the analytic attitude as an “act of faith.” This is captured in his famous call to approach a session without “memory or desire.” Eigen reads this analytic unknowingness as a contemplative praxis, claiming that analyst begins to overlap with mystics when they practice with radical openness. Moreover, while the religious significance of Bion’s concept of O has been the subject of analytic debate, Eigen has no hesitation in fully claiming it as a mystical referent. O is Eckhart’s godhead, Kaballah’s Ein Soph, the Christian Incarnation; it is also the ultimate reality of an analytic session, the impact between analyst and patient, the emotional truth revealed in analysis. O represents the ultimate reality and the realness of anything. Hence, in experiencing the truth of one’s emotional experience in analysis, one gets closer to O, one becomes O. Analysis, then, for Eigen, is ultimately a journey to, in, and, as the divine O.

Arguing that there is no reason to set artificial limits on how far or where the analytic process can go, Eigen challenges analysis to move beyond a technology of cure towards a deepening of the soul. For him, analysis has always been a “holy business,” involving one’s whole being, a form of prayer as much a matter of technique.

Just as Eigen refashions the analytic enterprise as a spiritual unfolding so he treats the unconscious to a mystical makeover. Eigen understands the unconscious as both bridge to and mediator of the sacred. The timeless-spaceless aspect of the unconscious, the indivisible dimension that Matt-Blanco pointed to, does not replace God but rather provides a privileged point of contact between the transcendent “Unrepresentable One” and psychic life. “It is one of the special places in which the psyche plugs into divinity” and, “it mediates and filters the intensity of the divine through dreams, myths, and narratives.”⁷

Similar themes to Eigen’s have appeared in the work of other contemporary analysts. For example, James Grotstein, who is heavily influenced by Bion, has declared that he wishes to return the unconscious to its former gnostic status before Freud. According to Grotstein, within the sacred architecture of the unconscious is the “Ineffable Subject” a preternatural second self that is separate from, but as near as we can get to, a divinity that is utterly beyond contemplation. This immanent numinous presence is the analytic third that is birthed in the therapeutic encounter and signifies the point where analysis and mysticism converge. Reunited with the Ineffable Self, one attains the “transcendent position,” a transient state in which we become one with O, directly experiencing our pure beingness and aliveness. This is not to be rarified as any other-worldly ecstasy, however, but is rather an immediacy of one’s emotional reality

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without defense in which one realizes the sacred in the mundane, the extraordinary in the ordinary.⁸

Drawing from Winnicott and negative theology, Gerald Gargiulo, distinguishes natural spirituality from dogmatic religion and finds within analysis an “everyday transcendence” that grounds the human condition rather than attempts to escape from it. Gargiulo understands psychoanalytic theories as living metaphors that create the found world amongst a midst of infinite possibilities. Rooted in an apophatic perspective that embraces the creative potentialities of unknowing, analysis becomes a natural spirituality. It discovers within the self a sacred ground of being: a profound aloneness or great emptiness that is paradoxically teeming with life. This opening to mystery and personal creativity is, Gargiulo claims, ultimately the goal of both analysis and spirituality.⁹

Most radically, analyst Kerry Gordon has discussed the inherent mysticism of Christopher Bollas, Grotstein, and Eigen and interpreted psychoanalysis as a contemporary manifestation of the gnostic quest for an immanent divinity. Gordon believes that there has always been a powerful spiritual current within psychoanalysis that has been neglected to make it palatable to the majority of atheist or agnostic analysts. For him and many of his patients, however, psychoanalysis is a psychospiritual process that reunites the sacred and mundane and responds to a universal human drive to experience the divine.¹⁰ Recognizing some of these voices and many others, Dan Merkur has recently argued, and I fully agree, that these psychoanalytic mystics belong to a distinct, deinstitutionalized, nontraditional strand within the history of mysticism.¹¹

To get a sense of how this currently sexy but still somewhat marginal conversation is reflective of and informing the larger analytic world, I have been conducting some supplementary fieldwork. One conference, I attended, titled “Sitting on the Couch: Psychoanalysis Considers Spiritual Practices,” and hosted by the Psychoanalytic Institute of Northern California, supported a psychospiritual reading of analysis.¹² Themes enthusiastically discussed, for example, included the impact of intersubjectivity on rendering prevailing models of the unconscious inadequate; the recovery of a generic mystical dimension of the psyche; the arising of mystical states within the analytic hour, and the potential of analysis as a modern spiritual practice. What was striking to me was the absence of any suspicion, let alone dismissal, of spirituality. Analysts seemed more concerned, rather with getting in on the spiritual act, being particularly keen to celebrate the mystical aspects of Bion’s thought.

Now, this admittedly might have had something to do with the fact that the conference took place in San Francisco. So in case of a Californian bias, I contacted all of the American Accredited Psychoanalytic Association Institutes in North America to ask what their general orientation to spirituality was: Did they, for example, have any faculty members specializing in spirituality, and did they, or had they recently offered any classes or events on spirituality and psychoanalysis? Results were, as might be expected, more conservative: out of 30 institutes contacted, 15 replied, and of these 8 reported that they had faculty interested in spirituality who had organized related events. Only three institutes offered classes on religion and spirituality for training analysts. An examination of conference material and syllabi, and conversations with

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faculty revealed dialogical approach. There was little appearance of psychoanalysis as spirituality although plenty to suggest an interest in exploring similarities between the two fields.

In conclusion, I want to offer some reflections on how we might theorize this growing psychoanalytic embrace of spirituality. One can point to numerous interpenetrating factors that have facilitated this occurrence.¹³ Massively significant is the cultural shift from the modern to the postmodern and its corresponding undermining of science, rationality, and universal objective truth. The postmodern emphasis on the constructed nature of truth has dethroned positivistic science and undone a strict opposition between science and religion. Theoretical developments within psychoanalysis, such as the relational turn and a concern with self-experience, have also rendered it more sympathetic to religion. Nor, can one underestimate the role of the individual. Many of the analysts pioneering the dialogue are spiritual practitioners, in some case even teachers, and analysts report an increase in spiritually-oriented clients, some of whom integrate psychoanalysis into their spiritual regime.¹⁴

However, while recognizing the importance of all the above, in the spirit of the psychoanalytic mystics, I want to offer a more provocative perspective. Over thirty years ago, Hans Loewald declared that the religious dimensions of the unconscious were more repressed than its sexual aspects.¹⁵ Following Loewald, the contemporary emergence of psychoanalytic spirituality might well reflect a return of the repressed. By this I refer specifically to the recovery of the esoteric historic origins of psychoanalysis. In his classic *The Discovery of the Unconscious*, Henri Ellenberger demonstrates that the discovery of a dynamic unconscious was to be traced back not to Freud but to those animal magnetism practitioners who preceded him by a century.¹⁶ Extending Ellenberger, Adam Crabtree has redrawn attention to the formative historic role of mesmerism in the discovery of the unconscious and the significance of the esoteric milieu out of which psychoanalysis grew. Crabtree shows how psychoanalysis was the beneficiary of what he calls the “alternate-consciousness” tradition and how it could not have developed without it. Psychoanalysis was so successful, however, that it very quickly eclipsed this tradition and connections between the two were forgotten.¹⁷

Most significant, however, is French sociologist Bertrand Meheust’s account of the metaphysical origin and esoteric debt of psychoanalysis.¹⁸ Meheust argues that psychoanalysis both forgot and incorporated elements of its metaphysical roots. He claims that it functioned as a “battle zone,” a mediating barrier or protective filter between competing metaphysical and materialist worldviews. By domesticating select aspects of the esoteric models of the psyche, psychoanalysis rendered them acceptable to the reigning materialism and scientism of the day. In order to preserve and gain scientific respectability, psychoanalysis filtered and nullified more metaphysical aspects of the psyche. At the same time as resisting these aspects, however, it also participates in them. It acts, as Meheust puts it, as a “Guardian of the Threshold.” As the need to uphold a strict scientism is displaced by constructivist epistemologies, I end with the suggestion that the emergence of psychoanalytic as spirituality signifies a rupture of such barriers. I leave the question of whether this is a lamentable regression or a valuable recovery to you.

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¹ William B. Parsons and Diane Jonte-Pace, "Introduction: Mapping Religion and Psychology." in *Religion and Psychology: Mapping the Terrain*, edited by William B Parsons and Diane Jonte-Pace. (London and New York: Routledge, 2001).

² See, for example, William G. Barnard, "Diving into the Depths: Reflections on Psychology as a Religion." in *Religion and Psychology: Mapping the Terrain* (eds) Parsons and Jonte- Pace. 297-318.

³ See David M. Black (editor) *Psychoanalysis and Religion in the 21st Century Competitors or Collaborators?* (London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis, 2006).

⁴ Kerry Gordon, "The Tiger's Space: Some Thoughts on Psychoanalysis, Gnosis, and the Experience of Wonderment" in *Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, 40:5-45 2004.

⁵ Mysticism appears in Eigen's writings, then, both as the capacity to experience and as particular types of experience.

⁶ See particularly Michael Eigen, "Stones in a Stream" *Psychoanalytic Review* 82: 371-390, 1995; Michael Eigen, "Mysticism and Psychoanalysis" *The Psychoanalytic Review* 88:455-481 2001; Michael Eigen, *The Psychoanalytic Mystic* (London and New York, Free Association Books, 1998), Michael Eigen, *Coming Through the Whirlwind: Cases Studies in Psychotherapy* (Wilmette, IL: Chiron, 1992). My summary of Eigen is derived from these primary sources.

⁷ Both quotes are from Eigen, *Coming through the Whirlwind: Case Studies in Psychotherapy*. 41.

⁸ James Grotstein, *Who is the Dreamer Who Dreams the Dream? A Study of Psychic Presences* (Hillsdale, NJ: The Analytic Press, 2000).

⁹ Gerald Gargiulo, *Psyche, Self and Spirit* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Press, 2005).

¹⁰ Kerry Gordon, "The Tiger's Space: Some Thoughts on Psychoanalysis, Gnosis, and the Experience of Wonderment" *Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, 40:5-45 2004.

¹¹ Dan Merkur, "Psychoanalytic Contributions to the Mystical" in *Changing the Scientific Study of Religion* edited by Jacob A. Belzen (Netherlands: Springer Press, 2009), 111-140. William B. Parsons has identified this strand of mysticism as the *psychologia perennis*. See William B. Parsons, "Psychologia Perennis and the Academic Mysticism" in William B. Parsons, Diane Jonte-Pace & Susan Henking, (editors) *Mourning Religion* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 2008), 97-123.

¹² "Sitting on the Couch: Psychoanalysis Considers Spiritual Practice" a one-day seminar hosted by The Psychoanalytic Institute of Northern California February 7th 2008.

¹³ For an intelligent discussion of these factors see James W. Jones, "The Return of the Repressed: Narcissism, Religion and the Ferment in Psychoanalysis" in *Spirituality and Religion: Psychoanalytic Perspectives* edited by Jerome A. Winer and J. W. Anderson (Catskill, NJ: Publisher: Mental Health Resources, 2007), 47-65; and also Cynthia Stone, "Opening Psychoanalytic Space to the Spiritual" *Psychoanalytic Review*, 92:417-430, 2005.

¹⁴ William Parsons makes the same point when discussing the new social base of psychoanalysis in William B. Parsons, "Psychoanalytic Spirituality" in *Spirituality and Religion: Psychoanalytic Perspectives* edited by Jerome A. Winer and J. W. Anderson (Catskill, NJ: Publisher: Mental Health Resources, 2007), 83-96.

¹⁵ Hans Loewald, *Psychoanalysis and the History of the Individual* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1978)

¹⁶ Henri Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious* (New York: Basic Books, 1970).

¹⁷ Adam Crabtree, *From Mesmer to Freud: Magnetic Sleep and the Roots of Psychological Healing* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

¹⁸ Bertrand Meheust, *Somnambulisme et médiumnité (1784-1930)* (le Plessis-Robinson: Institut Synthelabo Pour Le Progres de la Connaissance, 1999). My discovery and reading of Meheust is entirely indebted to Jeffrey Kripal's excellent discussion of Meheust and the paranormal in Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2010).