

Does religion hinder or enable psychological health?

Introduction

This essay examines the proposition of the title from three main perspectives: the Freudian analysis of religion, the scientific psychological analysis of religion and the Jungian analysis of religion. Jung represents perhaps the most complex of the non-scientific¹ psychological evaluations of religion and the Jungian concept of spirituality is given special consideration when assessing the proposition. Lastly, the personal experience of the author is also brought to bear to provide a controversial answer to the question.

Freud grappled with the problem of religion through all his writing. He was distinctively an atheist intellectual of his time and like many modern atheists, became increasingly anxious about religion and its continued, irrational existence, 'religion was certainly something like an obsession with Freud himself...we begin to suspect that his anxious, sometimes tortuous, theorising...tells us more about Freud than religion'². He used increasingly fanciful methods to discredit religion by attempting to repudiate any claim

¹ This term is used with some caution as Jung most certainly considered himself a scientist and even an empiricist analysing data. However, his fundamental models of the psyche are seen to belong more to the philosophical, metaphysical and transcendental realms of knowledge, considered even beyond the reach of rationality and intellect (see for example, Huskinson, L., *Nietzsche and Jung – The Whole Self in the Union of Opposites*, p57). Modern 'scientific' psychology is primarily empirical in approach with a direct, concrete connection between hypothesis, data and conclusion, much more akin to the methods of natural 'science'.

² White, V., *God and the Unconscious – An Encounter between Psychology and Religion*, London:1980, p64.

religion had to be of divine origin, He earnestly sought for an anthropological explanation upon which psychoanalysis could be overlaid:

'psychoanalytic investigation...teaches...that god is in every case modelled after the father, and that our personal relationship to god is dependent on our personal relation to our physical father...'³

Freud, perhaps anticipating or in response to sustained criticism of his original assertions within *Totem* (which have subsequently been shown to only engender limited support from anthropological research and ignored the equally significant role of the mother in the origins of the gods⁴) developed his ideas first in *Moses and Monotheism* and most fully in his *Future of an Illusion*. *Moses and Monotheism* rested upon dubious Old Testament scholarship⁵ which would not be considered reliable to any than the most unorthodox of theologians. The *Future of an Illusion* reads far more as a reasoned attack on religion generally using the typical rationalist scientific critique⁶, rather than offering any specific insights into how psychoanalysis helps understand the phenomena of religion. There is more than a passing nod to Marxist analysis of religion as reflecting the class struggle for economic emancipation:

'...at first we were tempted to seek the essence of culture in the existing material resources and in the arrangements for distribution...[but] in addition to the resources there are means of defending culture...the coercive measures and others that intended to reconcile men to it and recompense them for their sacrifices...one is a miserable plebeian, tormented by obligations...but withal one is a Roman citizen'⁷

Freud is clearly asserting that men project their longing for dominion, control and social cohesion into the god figure, '[it] makes tolerable the helplessness

³ Freud, S., *Totem and Taboo*, Penguin edition, London:1960, p196.

⁴ Argyle, M., *Psychology and Religion – An Introduction*, London:2000, p103.

⁵ McQuarrie, J., 'Psychology and Religion', *Twentieth Century Religious Thought*, London:1960, p108.

⁶ McQuarrie, op.cit., p106.

⁷ Freud, S., *Future of an Illusion*, London:1949, pp17, 22.

of man'⁸. Again in common with Marxism, religion is seen to sedate the longing of men for autonomy and freedom, 'life after death...brings all perfection that perhaps we have missed here'⁹. Freud then continues to espouse a religious faith of his own in the ability of science, 'our only way to the knowledge of external reality'¹⁰ and a truly modern confidence in the sufficiency of reason, 'in the long run nothing can withstand reason and experience and the contradiction religion offers to both is only too palpable'¹¹. Thus, Freud subtly shifts his position from religion being a mere "illusion" and thus potentially offering continuing beneficial effects to society (a concession in the early chapters), to implying that it is in fact delusional and destructive to society, 'religion...the universal obsessional neurosis of humanity...he, not suffering from neurosis, will need no intoxicant to deaden it...[let] education...not [be] abused by being subjected to religion.'¹² One of Freud's primary assertions was that religion will fade away as the need for it reduces because of the unveiling of knowledge through science and technology. Science and technology satisfy the religious instinct by fulfilling the neurotic desire projected onto the perfect parent.

Despite the polemical tone and speculative content of the work and the patent failure of religion to wither before science and technology, Freudians still assert his central thesis:

'...[Religion] is neurotic because it is based on quasi-sexual desire for the mother and hostility to the father, and is associated with guilt and

⁸ Freud, op. cit., p32.

⁹ Freud, op. cit., p33.

¹⁰ Freud, op. cit., p48.

¹¹ Freud, op. cit., p94.

¹² Freud, op. cit., pp76, 84, 85.

obsessional tendencies, keeping people immature...Christianity is ascetic and world-rejecting, making it psychotic, paranoid in rejecting other religions, sometimes megalomaniac.¹³

In common with the naturalistic explanation for religion Freud may be seen to be in agreement with Leuba's prior analysis of mystical experience (although Freud was notorious for his lack of acknowledging any dependence on other work):

[Leuba] seeks to account for it in psychological and physiological terms, as by assigning it to the sublimation of the sexual passion in the ascetic life, by comparing it with the states of consciousness induced by certain drugs, by showing its affinity with such pathological conditions as hysteria and epilepsy¹⁴

Thus, Freudian analysis of religion would seem to suggest a purely negative effect on the modern psyche even if it had previously produced beneficial effects in society. The scientific psychological study of religion and its effects perhaps provides the most direct challenge to the assertions of the Freudian view of religion that Freud would undoubtedly approve of because it *is* scientific.

Scientific psychology endeavours to provide an empirical framework of measures by which religion may be "objectively" assessed. If religion "works" according to this framework of measures, then religion, in the general and generic sense, can be safely seen to be a good thing. It attempts to offer an approach to answering the question initially posed requiring no input from psychoanalysis or indeed, any other meta-psychological theory. It is concerned only with measures considered neutral in themselves. Thus, this framework considers how religion affects happiness, marriages, attitudes to

¹³ Argyle, M., *Psychology and Religion*, pp102-3.

¹⁴ McQuarry, 'Psychology and Religion', p106.

mortality (including fear of death), work and achievement, altruistic attitudes (charitable and other giving), social welfare initiatives, levels of crime in a community and social integration.

By using a multitude of scales and measures, the scientific psychologist (sometimes citing Jung and his psychological type theory¹⁵) can definitively answer the question for us of whether religion is beneficial for mental health or better still, 'well-being' encompassing the social, mental and physical realm. Taken using these measures, Argyle endeavours to show¹⁶ that numerous studies will tell us that, overwhelmingly overall, religion though a social phenomenon is beneficial both to the individual and society at large. If there is a drawback to religion, it is in the "fundamentalist" flavours where 'loss of cognitive freedom'¹⁷ can lead to dogmatic attitudes and prejudice against those not part of the group. Most encouragingly, for Jews and Protestants, they score the highest, so would the scientific psychologist neutrally recommend Judaism or Protestantism?

Of course, you are required to accept the narrow implied definition of the psyche available to empirical measures and a rather wooden definition of religion that is judged by the physical manifestations and perceptions of the investigators. There are no insights here as to what it means to be a "whole" person – many a Jew and a Protestant may be the highest achievers within society by all sorts of measures, non-criminal and outwardly religious but still

¹⁵ Argyle, *Psychology and Religion*, p108.

¹⁶ Argyle, *op.cit.*, pp140-199.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

consider themselves “unfulfilled” as persons. The author knows many an unfulfilled but “successful” Christian, filled with emptiness and a gnawing meaningless to existence.

Thus it is surely telling and significant in Argyle’s summary, that measures of “healing”, both physical and mental, were found to be associated more with *intrinsic religiosity* (the author would call “spirituality”) rather than its extrinsic forms (ritual, rite, symbol). However, empirical testability or profiling of this “spirituality” is really beyond natural science. The case to be argued in the remainder of this essay is that genuine spirituality (whatever name that is given to it) is the component that needs to be added to the *forms* of religion to make it truly beneficial to the mental wholeness, of a person:

“...a...living story that is developing within you...that enable[s] imaginative and creative dialogue within ourselves and from ourselves to others...a narrative that shapes and affects us...in which we make sense of ourselves and it reveals to us...how we might develop into something different...that which sustains our rootedness to the world...to heal and transform impotent, unworkable life experiences into ones that are productive and enriched ...not [a] closed narrative...it sanctions values of wholeness or completeness of being”¹⁸

This is a statement from a post-Jungian perspective and it is to the Jungian models that it is expedient to turn. Jung had a very positive view of religion:

‘...Among my patients in the second half of life...there has not been one whose problem...was not that of finding a religious outlook on life...It is safe to say that every one of them fell ill because he had lost that which the living religions of every age have given to their followers.’¹⁹

Thus, White spoke glowingly of Jungian techniques:

“[his techniques have led many a patient on an] interior religious pilgrimage which leads to something like a religious conversion...a deep

¹⁸ Huskinson, L., ‘Introduction: Ordinarily mythical’, *Dreaming the Myth Onwards*, Huskinson, L. (Ed), Hove:2008, pp2-8.

¹⁹ Jung, C.G., *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, pp264ff.

and successful analysis is more like a religious retreat than most religious retreats...it is less stereotyped, less conventional, more moving, more imperative”²⁰

Jung saw the healthy mental state as one in which the “Self” individuates from the collective and personal unconsciousness by appropriating the primordial archetypes. By engaging with the archetypes and integrating them into the psyche, an individual moves to wholeness. Thus, this process has rational and beyond rational components:

“...in a purely empirical sense, the ‘self’ would prove to be the aim of man...man is called to share in the being and the life of transcendent God. The self provides an abstraction of the psychic realities of man which may be seen to be fundamentally beyond rational proof but the effects can still be seen.”²¹

However, Jung’s notion of the psyche, Self, the relation to God and religion is complex, sometimes inconsistent and needs careful examination to try and determine just what his model of healthy spirituality implies. The first general statement about Jung is perhaps to make it clear (if that is possible) what he did *not* say and that will help to understand why there is such a polarity of atheism and theism in Jungian and post-Jungian thought. Jung considered himself a “neo-Kantian” for the reason that he did not actually, *in his published work*²², definitively judge on the true nature of God as an ontological being, “the ultimate nature of reality...can not be...explained in terms other than itself”²³. Thus, to Jung, ‘God is an archetype, an unknowable part of the

²⁰ White, V., *Psychology and Religion*, p72.

²¹ *Ibid*, p267.

²² There are, however, letters (where Jung strongly rejects the accusation that he was an atheist) and a television interview where Jung seems to suggest *knowing* God as an entity in His own right.

²³ McQuarrie, J., ‘Psychology and Religion’, *Twentieth Century Religious Thought*, London:1960, p109.

collective unconscious, but experienced through symbols'²⁴. This, on the face of it, seems to concord well with Kantian philosophy with very similar ideas expressed by Kantian religious philosopher John Hick in his justification for a pluralistic approach to God seen through his many "faces". Indeed, Jung's analysis had been accepted as being consistent with Kant but his theory has been shown²⁵ to be conceptually inconsistent with Kant. Thus, the following statement can be made by a Jungian explaining Jung's concept of God:

"the ancient people, they still believe that gods exist, or at least God with a capital 'G' exists...in spite of the fact...there is no more evidence to justify a belief in the literal existence of Yahweh than for Zeus...It is the genius of Jung to argue that 'gods' exist but only metaphorically and only in the natural dimension...in the psyche."²⁶

This clearly has the implicit import of an atheistic interpretation consistent with Jung but needs to be contrasted with Jung's own words:

"I could say that the 'self' is somehow equivalent to God. To a theological mind, such an assertion must undoubtedly be disturbing, for it sounds as if a substitution for God has been made. But to a psychologist this interpretation seems equally absurd...When as a psychologist I speak of "God" I am speaking of a psychological image...Similarly, the self is a psychological image of human wholeness...This has nothing to do with God as such. How could any sane man suppose he could displace God..."²⁷

This concept of 'Self' and its relation to God is further elucidated by another of Jung's personal correspondences:

"I can establish the existence of a psychological wholeness to which our consciousness is subordinate...but this 'self' can never take the place of God, although it may, perhaps be a receptacle for divine grace..."²⁸

This passage almost has a Christian assumption. "Grace" as a positive, creative, transforming power is very much a Christian concept. Jung's

²⁴ Argyle, op.cit., p107.

²⁵ Huskinson, L., *Nietzsche and Jung – The Whole Self in the Union of Opposites*, Hove:2004, pp76-8.

²⁶ Adams, M.V., 'Does myth still have a function?', *Dreaming the Myth Onwards*, Huskinson, L. (Ed), Hove:2008, p87.

²⁷ Jung, C.G., Letter 1948, cited by Frei, G., in Appendix to White, V., *God and the Unconscious*, p267n.

²⁸ Jung, C.G., Letter 22nd Sep 1944, cited by Frei, G., in Appendix to White, V., *God and the Unconscious*, p258.

periodic ambivalence to Christianity (sometimes describing it as a dead narrative) and yet his reaffirmation of the importance of the Church, indicates an unresolved tension in his thought. Indeed, some would see this 'union of opposites'²⁹ as quintessentially the Jungian mode of individuation active in Jung himself.

However, Jung *may* be interpreted to have dramatically departed from the Christian interpretation of evil. Evil is something that is required to be drawn from the shadow and *added* to the conscious for proper individuation. By the ego assimilating the "darkness", light can come. It is by the continual tension of opposites that the divine creative energy can continue to flow and complete the realisation of self; God is not excepted from this process. Jung saw the anti-Christ as the shadow of Christ, equal and opposite, "There is another Son who represents the dark side of God, and his name is Satan...his brother and adversary, his shadow..."³⁰. However, Jung's use of 'evil' may imply a different import than that normally understood within Christian theology³¹. Evil is not used by Jung as synonymous with 'bad'. Linguistic arguments aside, God had a dark side and because Job had seen it, God was required to initiate the incarnation.

Such an inclusive interpretation of evil is perhaps extreme and not really attested to except by Jung's dubious exegesis³² of the biblical texts.

²⁹ Huskinson, *Nietzsche and Jung – The Whole Self in the Union of Opposites*, pp35-56.

³⁰ White, V., *Soul and Psyche*, London:1960, p151.

³¹ *Ibid*, p155.

³² The Book of Job is probably the most misunderstood book of the canon and highlights all the dangers of hermeneutics that ignore the wider context of scripture and the importance of

However, the necessity to confront and *overcome* evil (as opposed to add) is very much a part of Christian thought and the development of a mature mind.

A more measured post-Jungian interpretation is thus:

“Because the...Self expresses ‘evil’ and ‘negativity’, individuals must actively confront such unpleasant feelings within themselves if they are to endure them and control them to their advantage...they must assimilate what conventional morality has taught them to reject, without being seduced into an over-identification with it by its ‘forbidden’ power.”³³

White, as a Christian interpreter of Jung, very much sees value in Jung’s emphasis on confronting and assimilating evil, though still challenging that it is possible to integrate evil:

“...if I accept the disorder in the sense of liking it...it will continue to misbehave...it is hard to see how I can ‘integrate’...for it is itself a certain disintegration...integration of the shadow can not mean...the addition of evil to good, but the overcoming of evil by good. Integrated evil ceases to be evil.”³⁴

Jungian theory and technique is thus inseparable from the spiritual. This “spiritual” aura has meant a marginalisation of Jungians amongst the psychoanalytic community and the more traditional sciences. The “excesses” of Jung in later years by investigating the byways of Eastern mysticism and Alchemy added to scepticism amongst his critics of his methods and the sometimes indulgent mysticism of practitioners can mean a lack of intellectual credibility outside Jungian circles.

textual/form criticism. Although an enigmatic book, an interpretation compatible with the goodness, honour and integrity of God is possible. The use of 2nd Isaiah’s “I create evil and good” again represents a very poor standard of exegesis and a failure to apply basic hermeneutic rules. Hebrew verbs can carry a permissive or a causative sense according to context and similar scriptures within 2nd Isaiah clarify the intended meaning. This scripture is best understood as God asserting His sovereignty over both good and evil.

³³ Huskinson, L., *Nietzsche and Jung – The Whole Self in the Union of Opposites*, p89.

³⁴ White, op.cit., pp157-161.

Conclusion

Freud, scientific psychology and Jung all clearly have some merit when dealing with the nature of the psyche. Freud's outstanding contribution was the principle of repression of infantile experiences colouring the experience of God. This is not necessarily a negative impact for mental health, being a neutral psychological principle; Jung accepted Freud's data but evaluated it differently. Jung saw the natural father as the first prototype for the infantile mind of God. His great contribution was firmly place the spiritual at the centre of mental health and to provide a wealth of case studies demonstrating the positive effect of religion.

However, Jung's complex analysis and theorising generated at once a paradoxical syncretic model of spirituality, assigning equivalence to most religions. His persistent search for the symbols of the archetype relied heavily on imports from Eastern religions and his occult³⁵ religious experience. This, in the author's view, is the key weakness in his theories. The mystical assertions flowing from these philosophies have patently been shown to be at odds with physical reality having no more intellectual credibility than the Flat Earth Society's continuing assertion that the earth is flat. The simultaneous adoption of paradoxical positions, implicit in some Jungian discourse, is logically questionable. For God both to be the process and the end seems to

³⁵ This is of course a judgement based upon the personal experience of the author in the occult. To assert that dreams and visions are in themselves independent from demonic intrusion and thus manipulation of the dreamer the author would consider naïve. This is not to disparage their usefulness in therapy as they most certainly reveal the architecture of the recipient's soul but simply that their contents and any special 'revelation' need also to be tested against the integrity of scripture.

lack coherency in the definition of God whilst ignoring external evidence that He can directly be known in Christ.

Jung's assertion that Christianity had atrophied provided the justification for his search for God outside Scripture and this confidence in mere "spirituality". However, *real* Christianity has never atrophied because it is a spiritual operation even if what calls itself the Church has. The 20th century saw some of the most remarkable outpourings of the experience of the Holy Spirit since the birth of the Church and a testimony to the literal truth of biblical scripture, allowing of course for idiom and context. The mass conversions in the developing world, particularly with the Pentecostal churches of Korea and South America, the 3 million strong meetings in African nations of Reinhard Bonnke, suggest a specific uniqueness about the Christian message and a religious experience suggesting a reality *even amongst those for which alternative spiritual experience was an everyday occurrence*. The reality of confrontation between spiritual entities for those experiencing deliverance from the demonic as they leave apparently equivalent expressions of the divine to enter Christianity must call into question the central assertion that God (even Christ) is to be found equally in the world's religions.

It seems patently unreasonable for God to be a Person and to make the path to full individuation obscure and irrational, accessible only to the elite, "God in the salvation of men, deals with them as rational and intelligent creatures"³⁶. This is not to disregard the key importance of supernatural revelation and

³⁶ Edwards, J. , *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James, W., New York:1982, p229.

mystical experience³⁷ but such experience is always tempered and grounded within the boundaries of scripture. The Gnostic error was to adopt a mystical quest beyond the safe frontiers of scripture and was unequivocally described as 'Anti-Christ' by the apostle John, the most mystical of biblical writers.

The author would assert that a man can only be *truly* considered mentally healthy and whole if he is not deceived³⁸ regarding the nature of God and the religious experience. Heroin may be an enjoyable drug but it kills. Spurious religious experience is just as real and enjoyable but as equally as deadly³⁹. The final word on mental health must surely relate to Jesus' self-declaration as the Son of God: "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me."⁴⁰ To deny His unique status and message, in the author's view, despite the overwhelming weight of evidence both rational and irrational, qualifies as insanity.

Approx 3000 words.

³⁷ The author is a great proponent of the mystical.

³⁸ This sounds dangerously like fundamentalism but the author would wish to stress he is not challenging an individual's right to have complete intellectual freedom and autonomy or that God can only be experienced by assent to pure doctrine. The author himself is 'liberal' if liberal implies that he believes that God can be met *both* in the intellect and in the spirit. However, he believes that the Bible represents a unique, fullest testimony to humanity and that God commits Himself within those pages to meet those personally who seek Him *in spirit and truth* (John 4:24). Many search just in spirit and meet him and everything else that inhabits the spirit realm, unable to distinguish the truth from a lie. Thus, the experience is not purely mystical but rational also.

³⁹ This, again, is the author's assertion from personal experience:
<http://www.apocalypsenow.cwc.net>.

⁴⁰ John 14, 6.

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