

Psychoanalysis and Religion

DAVID HOLT

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At the OPCS meeting on October 22 I defined the kind of pastoral organisation I was interested in as one where the psychoanalytic critique of religion, and the religious critique of psychoanalysis, could be addressed.

These notes are to fill out that definition a bit, having in mind also OPCS events since that meeting.

1. The psychoanalytic critique of religion

I've come to see this as inspired by a special kind of suspicion. I take the word suspicion from Paul Ricoeur's study of "the hermeneutics of suspicion" as compared to "the hermeneutics of faith" in his great book on Freud (*Freud and Philosophy: an essay in interpretation, 1970*).

Psychoanalytic suspicion has a spiritual quality to it. It seems to me to be akin to the kind of doubt in which Christians sometimes speak of faith as being grounded, doubt which is itself a movement of the spirit. Suspicion of this kind is more than scepticism as that has been spoken of in our European tradition. It is both mystical and methodical. I find the suggestion of some scholars that Freud was consciously or unconsciously influenced by the Jewish mystical tradition persuasive. But Freud was also methodical, and has bequeathed a method. Psychoanalysis combines mystique and method. Counselling and psychotherapy are heavily indebted to psychoanalysis, and there is no way in which they can escape from the influence of its combination of method and mystery.

Psychoanalysis does something of its own with the "hermeneutics of suspicion". It allies it with sexuality. It is this alliance which gives psychoanalysis its historical dynamic. Suspicion and sexuality have as it were joined hands in order to work together. This joining may be, as some psychoanalysts seem to believe, unprecedented. I'm not sure. It has certainly been a formative influence on the 20th century. We don't know what its further consequences will be, but we can expect that they will be as disturbing as anything this century has seen.

A personal example may help to show how this is relevant to the kind of OPCS I can get enthusiastic about.

When I first began with psychoanalysis in 1948 my dreams immediately confused my own family of origin with three variations on Christian family life: the family of Mary and Joseph and Jesus which we celebrate at Christmas; the marriage of Christ with his Church, involving also his mother in some rather confusing way; and the strange threesome of Father, Son and Holy Ghost (as It called Itself in those days). So for all my adult life thinking and feeling about central moments of the Christian faith have been suffused and saturated with psychoanalytic suspicion of what goes on in the daily and nightly business of family sexuality. With the result that a phrase like “begotten not made” can mean more for me in my consulting room than it does in church.

2. The religious critique of psychoanalysis

(I am of course not a psychoanalyst. I have recently described myself to a colleague as a psychoanalytic outsider, which I think does to be going on with.)

There are all sorts of things wrong with psychoanalysis. For a religious critique we can start with two, time and body. Psychoanalysis is wrong about time, and it is wrong about body.

Many psychoanalysts are aware of this and recognise the need for their profession to change. But I think Freud started them off without enough room. Psychoanalysis is like an egg waiting to be broken. Whether for hatching or cooking we'll see in due course.

Religious experience is familiar with questions about time. We know how much difference it makes to promise, hope, contrition, forgiveness, if they are grounded in experience of time as created. Various Christian traditions have been trying to define this difference, and to draw out its implications for private and public endeavour, for centuries.

I don't think it is unfair to say that psychoanalysis is lazy about time. I speak with some animus, as I've been trying to “raise” questions about time within my own tradition, the Jungian, for twenty five years, with virtually no response. Religious experience of time as created is something psychoanalysis just doesn't seem to want to know about.

But there is a public who are hungry for an opportunity to test psychoanalytic and religious experience of time against each other. We've met some of them in our workshops.

As with time, so with body: Freud started psychoanalysis off without enough room. There are problems about body and word, body and community, body and food, body and death, which

are with us from generation to generation. Psychoanalytic suspicion is coming up with fresh (or perhaps forgotten) ways of approaching them. For instance, on the violence involved when (biological) *incarnation* and (social) *incorporation* get across each other. But it doesn't give itself enough room. There's a history to these problems which gets left out.

Our religious traditions are full of that history. They have been wrestling with problems of incarnation and incorporation from older testaments, from long before the advent of psychoanalysis. Take for example what seems to be a main concern of mine at present: the Christian Eucharist. Its history constitutes a critique of all that we mean by body which psychoanalysis has yet to take on board. (And when it does - I hope I may be forgiven for saying this - the Eucharist will never be the same again.)

3. The responsibility of fear

What I have in mind is a two way critique, and I don't want to give precedence to either direction. The dialogue which I am looking for can begin either from a religious or a psychoanalytic position. What I am calling psychoanalytic suspicion affects me religiously, and if the Eucharist gives me ground for criticising psychoanalytic understanding of the body, then I have to remember that I came to the Eucharist through psychoanalysis.

But a two way critique of this kind is dangerous.

When I stand back from all I have learned and suffered through "pastoral counselling" since I chaired the Guild of Pastoral Psychology in 1969-1970, and Bill Kyle invited me to join him at the Westminster Pastoral Foundation in 1971, two words present themselves: holiness and madness.

Religious experience owns the holy. It makes holiness its business. Psychoanalysis does not. Psychoanalysis makes madness its business. Not only the florid and exotic forms of madness immediately recognised as such, but all those partial manifestations of our crazedness which we speak of as splitting, displacement, denial, dissociation of feeling, encapsulated depression, delusional transference, windows of psychosis, schizogenic families, double binds...

I think what draws many of us to pastoral counselling is an interest in the overlap of holiness and madness.

Which is very much more dangerous than I once thought.

Indeed I am beginning to wonder if I shall ever learn just how dangerous it is. What we feel and know in the presence of the holy, and what we feel and know in the presence of the mad, are not the same. But they are sometimes uncannily alike. They do overlap, and the overlap can be fascinating, exhausting, wasteful. If that is what draws me to pastoral counselling I still have much to learn.

What I have tried to do over the years is to teach myself and others a certain tact, tact of a special kind. I prefer to speak of "tact" rather than the more traditional "discernment" because it keeps us in the body. Tact is interested in behaviour, manners, gesture, intonation, touch.

I also like the word tact because it sounds just like the German word Takt, meaning musical time, beat, measure. Working in the overlap between holiness and madness we are introduced to times with a truly terrible beat. To stay with that beat, to recognize its urgency, to be measured in our response, we need Takt.

But we have to recognise also that there are things we can't touch. Some things are too hot to handle. And there are times to pick up the receiver, and times to leave the message unacknowledged on the answerphone. There are times when if we wish to be in touch apprehension is a better guide than comprehension.

Because we deal in danger. Let us be in no doubt about that. Mixing psychoanalysis and religion is very dangerous indeed. Feelings are invoked which are both infantile and cosmic. Violence is sacred. It goes without saying. Violator and victim change places. The creation of time entails an absolute terror of disappointment. The crossing of incarnation with incorporation calls for circumcision as well as baptism, and though there may be all kinds of anaesthetic available the fact of pain remains.

Danger of this kind has to be taken seriously. We must be careful not to dare too much. There is always a bridge too far. Our limitations need valuing rather than overcoming. Pastoral counselling has to allow for fear. Fear is how we respond to danger. It is not something to be ashamed of. Fear is responsible. If we are to work together responsibly we need each others help in owning fear.

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