

Psycho-analysis and the Spiritual Life¹

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One of the most welcome features of the contemporary Christian scene is the drive towards ecumenism. This is not only because of the potential achievement of a single united Church which alone makes sense but because the gradual removal of these virulent, self-inflicted wounds of denominational partisanship is likely to free Christians to face alternative urgent challenges. The picture is sombre and no one who really cares about the Christian faith can have any doubts that the majority of our fellow human beings find organized religion as we have known and practised it an irrelevancy. We have now reached the stage when we can no longer take refuge behind stoutly held rationalizations that this massive withdrawal of interest is the responsibility of every one except ourselves. Such anodynes are no longer effective because no one outside the Christian circles believed in them before and now we, too, have rejected them. Stripped of our customary but gradually ineffective defences, we find ourselves in a whirlpool of multitudinous and often contradictory ideologies, explanations and solutions for our difficulties. Like a person who is recovering from concussion, the Christian Church is experiencing the world round it with hazy, dimmed and often blurred reactions desperately longing, at times, to return to the tranquillity of unconsciousness.

One moment the attention is held by the new theology which eliminates God and Christ, the next by violent pressures to alter traditional morality and the very next by critical appraisal of the scriptures. When the theologians have ceased flashing their torches, the social scientists take over and recommend that priests should become sociologists, psychologists, psycho-analysts and social workers to mention but a few suggestions. That the Church must reform society is the view of others and thus became involved actively with the current problems of peace and war, colour prejudice, the under-privileged, the hungry and the immature.

All this is a far, far cry from the concern of the thirties and forties in which the spiritual foundation of my generation of Catholics was nurtured. Then our world and vision were different. First and foremost we had security and the certainty that the Church of Rome neither changed nor erred. There was always someone from the local priest through the various higher echelons of the hierarchy right

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through to the Holy Father who had an answer and the right one at that. Doubt and uncertainty were close to heresy, if not in strict theology, certainly in the minds of those who entertained them and in several of their spiritual advisers. This confidence was closely related to obedience and between them these two human traits brought peace and spiritual satisfaction to the shrinking numbers who could accept and welcome this particular hierarchical structure.

Such monolithic security was a major conscious or unconscious attraction for those personalities whose dependence needs required such a clear, rigid and stable organization. Within this community, the spiritual life rotated around the Mass and the sacraments, of which the Holy Eucharist and penance played such a prominent part. Mass in Latin delighted the intellectual few who comprehended it and gave much satisfaction to the many whose ears and eyes were attuned to the familiar sounds and ritual. Placed in the middle of the Mass was the regular Sunday sermon which occasionally involved commentaries on scriptural passages, more often concerned morals and ethics and sometimes an intensive diatribe against such familiar subjects as birth control, divorce, mixed marriages, sex, psychology and the Protestants. Morals were set in a legalistic framework of evil measured quantitatively; negation and prohibition predominated and met the needs of behaviour regulated by fear and punishment.

The authentic marks of the Church were its oneness, holiness, Catholicity and apostolicity. The Holy Father remained the most powerful symbol of apostolic continuity, although for the majority of Catholics the theology of apostolic tradition was infinitely less important or understood than the representation of power and security which the office disseminated. Catholicity in terms of universality was undoubtedly in evidence in all the four corners of the world. Holiness is not a measurable quality but a crucial one. The world certainly respected the holiness of individual Catholics, the work of priests and nuns, and admired the work of the religious communities, but more likely than not knew the Church, if at all, by its teaching on birth control, abstinence on Friday, Sunday Mass and our strict opposition to all other denominations with whom fraternization was strictly discouraged.

Vatican II has come and gone and the Holy Spirit has made us aware of the enormous gap between spiritual reality and phantasy. Our eyes have been opened to the limitations of our vision. With this realization there has come a spate of criticism, at times conspicuous for its destructive tone and quality. This is an attitude which I can understand but cannot share. The Catholic Church was the Church I lived in and loved. Its priests and bishops were good, dedicated men trying to serve Christ to the best of their ability, according to the traditions and customs of the day. I believe now that a great many things which they were trying to do, which we were all trying to do, were irrelevant to the spiritual needs of the

time. But this is *post* not *propter hoc* wisdom. Some, of course, would challenge this statement even today and will insist that the Church did not come into being with John XXIII and that we are being unduly unfair to his predecessors. This is a matter for history to decide. Personally, I do not feel entitled to criticize those in charge now when I did not consider it necessary to do so at the time. Over one matter and one matter alone I took strong issue. More than one priest warned me against taking up psychiatry which was considered a danger to my faith. I ignored this advice and I know for certain that if I retain and nurture my faith today it is principally through my experience in psycho-analysis which has illuminated the meaning of love more than any other teaching and has complemented the scriptures in a vibrant and significant manner.

It is for this reason that I chose this subject tonight. Vatican II has introduced English into the Mass, made ecumenism an urgent necessity, reaffirmed the significance of the scriptures and made us all realize, as the people of God, our collective responsibility in maintaining and extending the Kingdom of God. Personal and religious freedom are themes capturing our imagination, sexuality is about to change gear from centuries of pessimism into one of optimism, admittedly a gear hard to find and difficult to place but still grindingly present.

All this is exciting, invigorating and very necessary, but let me say at once it is not the stuff out of which the world will receive the message that Christ is in its midst. I am absolutely convinced that we are only just beginning to touch the real problems facing Christianity and that the major and most difficult challenge is to recognize in man the characteristics which have been appropriated by contemporary humanism. Until the Church recognizes in man the fullness of his humanity, man is not going to recognize in the Church his home or the Kingdom of God.

In the last hundred years humanity has made giant strides, not only in technology but in acquiring valuable and enriching insights about its nature which the Church has ignored, attacked and condemned at the cost of alienating itself from all that is emerging as basically belonging to the nature of man. This has been a needless and painful, self-inflicted wound in which the Church of love did not read accurately the signs of the times.

In his farewell discourse, Christ says in the Gospel of St John: 'I give you a new commandment, love one another; just as I have loved you, you must also love one another. By this love you have for one another everyone will know that you are my disciples' (John 13, 34). But what is the nature of this love? St Paul clarifies this when he relates love to law, a significant testimony for our contemporary upheavals, in his epistle to the Romans (Romans 13, 8-10). 'Avoid getting into debt, except the debt of mutual love. If you love your fellow men you have carried out your obligations. All the com-

mandments: You shall not commit adultery, you shall not kill, you shall not steal and so on, are summed up in this single command: You must love your neighbour as yourself.' The pre-eminence of loving is not new but Christianity has stressed the first part of this commandment without concerning itself with the details of the second part. If one can abstract one clear message from contemporary dynamic psychology it would be the clear lesson that one cannot love one's neighbour or God until one has first learned to love oneself truly and deeply. When I repeat this statement *ad nauseam* in my various groups it meets with an initial stunned and shocked disapproval. Loving oneself is so readily associated with selfishness, self-centredness, introspection, etc., that only in the course of time is its significance appreciated.

Those who seek help from psycho-analysts are those who are least capable of loving themselves and there are certain features common to all schools of dynamic psychology which I want to highlight.

Since this paper is not primarily connected with the technical aspects of psycho-analysis as such, I will confine my remarks to a few essential details. Psycho-analysis is a form of therapy as well as a research tool developed by Freud and extended by the various schools of analytical psychology. Although details in procedure and emphasis vary, there are certain factors which are common to all. Essentially the patient lies on a couch, usually facing away from the analyst who sits nearby out of sight and encourages the patient to talk about emotional feelings and experiences without any prohibitions about content. In this situation the patient freely associates, that is to say, talks about episodes and experiences which are emotionally significant and gradually begins to associate forgotten experiences and events with them. This is a way of rendering conscious unconscious thoughts, experiences and feelings which were repressed because of their painful nature. Rendering the unconscious conscious is an essential part of psycho-analysis. Secondly, the repetition of the analytic sessions, three, four or five hours a week brings a closeness into the relationship which allows the patient to experience the analyst with the same intimacy and mixture of feelings of love and hate that belong to early childhood. Only in this way can these early unresolved conflicting situations be relived in a way which allows their resolution and the making of fresh beginnings.

The significance of analysis for the spiritual life lies in the fact that it is a journey of self-discovery and integration in which the positive, creative and loving components of oneself are helped to take the initiative from the negative, destructive and inhibiting components. God is a mystery, experienced as a person unseen and unknown except by faith and the bonds formed through baptism. This bond is a developing relationship mediated initially by the links forged with our parents. They are the first people who have *received* our love and anger, and it is *from* them that we have first experienced love, anger, frustration and disappointment. God as a

person is the recipient of experiences displaced from our parents. If the latter were unsatisfactory our relationship with God is bound to be vulnerable though repairable. *A successful analysis not only alters our image of ourselves but permits a second look at the being we call God now separated from the distorted images of our parents and authority figures. God and our neighbour stand to gain from a rediscovery of ourselves.* What does this rediscovery involve? Among several factors I have selected three to describe and even these in essentially limited terms: trust, self-acceptance and emotional dependence.

Trust

One of the essential needs of the infant and young child is to be surrounded by reliable people, its parents, who will provide in its early years consistent and trustworthy experiences. This basic need may be denied, through the absence of parents, their early loss or unreliability. The latter may be expressed by long absences, contradictory behaviour with alternating loving and rejecting responses, preoccupation with their own needs, illness or sheer incompetence. One of the essential qualities of the analyst is that he or she is always there, except for illness or holiday. They can be relied upon to be present and available at the appointed time for the fifty minutes or so without fail. This is a new experience, which make take a long time to make its impact on the patient, that, as far as availability is concerned, they will not be let down. The analyst, like the good parent, like God, must never become unavailable. Within the limitations imposed by illness or holidays, the patient acquires a new experience in which he learns to trust one human being implicitly. For those who have never had such an experience, God's reliability is an experience taken on faith without equivalent human cognizance and carries all the dangers of an ideological, abstract awareness lacking existential reality foundations. The spiritual reality takes on a renewed vigour when the gap between intellectual and emotional contact is narrowed if not eliminated.

The presence of the analyst does not guarantee the quality of the reception offered. In addition to reliability the young child needs security which entails diminution of anxiety, the absence of aggression and the care of its various needs. In the early years of life the capacity to control anxiety is limited and the child is frequently threatened with being overwhelmed by it with painful, depressive consequences. A basic trust is enjoyed when first mother and then father are capable of shielding it from this anxiety sufficiently until it can cope by itself. For the vast majority of those seeking help this phase in development has not taken place either because their constitution was prone to excessive anxiety or because the parents reinforced rather than diminished this trait. The analyst plays a vital part in communicating an atmosphere which gradually reduces anxiety and makes inter-personal contact less painful.

Aggression is intimately related to anxiety, both being linked with frustration. In its early years the child is a seething mass of emotional and physical needs with a very limited capacity to tolerate frustration. The absence of immediate or 'soon enough' satisfaction leads to frustration, anxiety and anger expressed in crying and rage. If the mother retaliates in equivalent behaviour, there is no basis for trust at all; if she does not retaliate but fails to meet the need promptly and satisfactorily, she is equally experienced as a bad object and untrustworthy. But it is not only the parents who can foster these negative feelings. All emotional development has to consider the environment in the form of the parents, the strength and quality of the constitutional make-up of the child as well as the intrinsic experience of its inner world. These inner, unconscious experiences are, of course, beyond conscious memory but child analysts have been making observations for years on children's behaviour and have drawn various conclusions, albeit tentative in nature. One feature figures prominently, namely the child's phantasy of damaging and hurting the mother in response to unsatisfactory experiences. Through such phantasies the child experiences itself as damaging, hurtful and unreliable. When these phantasies and feelings are reinforced by mother's rejecting and hostile objective behaviour, there can be no safety at all. This is so threatening that the young child employs a number of mechanisms, technically called defences, to reorder its inner world to make it as safe as possible. These defences, which are unconscious, may involve projection whereby inner hostile feelings are emptied from within the self and pushed into other people. It is they now who are angry, nasty or destructive, forming the beginnings of paranoid experiences in which other people are felt as hostile. Denial is an alternative defence in which the unpleasant experience is psychologically extinguished through repression. Idealization employs denial mechanisms and allows the child to consider the parent as good while retaining for itself any unpleasant features. These and many other defences permit some safety to enter into inter-personal relations.

The analytic transference is an intimate reliving of these early experiences. The analyst now interprets the meaning of feelings, thoughts, attitudes and behaviour in terms of such defences. The patient experiences the therapist in these early hostile and damaging terms but these feelings are gradually replaced by non-hostile experience of the analyst. When he is recognized as at least emotionally neutral, he is also felt as safe and reliable and the patient now reaches the point when he is free to look at his own inner generation of hostility and face it without the fear of being overwhelmed either from within or through the retaliation of the analyst. Through this liaison of trust in which neither the patient nor the analyst threatens to extinguish each other by destructive anxiety or aggression, the way is paved for self-acceptance, a crucial aspect of love.

Self-Acceptance

Such basic trust forms the essential background for self-acceptance which is given to the child initially by the unconditional acceptance of the infant by its mother. By meeting its needs in a way that is fulfilling, the child experiences itself as satisfied and good. This is relatively easy in the presence of a mother who is able to cope and a child whose needs are neither excessive nor complex. The alternative at its worst can be hunger, dissatisfaction, lack of attention, frustration, resulting accumulatively in feeling bad for needing. This remains a life-long condition in certain people who continue to be desperately in need of attention all their lives, feel guilty about it and are unable to incorporate help and love even when it becomes available. These people express the epitome of despair and cynicism as they feel themselves trapped in endless and unfulfillable needs. Analysis can alter this. The analyst becomes the person who takes the place of the parent and provides a second opportunity for the patient to experience himself in a dialogue of emotional giving and receiving now freed, through interpretation, of the original impediments which rendered the exchange painful and sterile. The analytical exchange is also painful but, if successful, no longer sterile as the patient learns, for the first time, to incorporate good experiences and recognizes that he himself has something to offer which is acceptable and good.

In normal development this initial phase of self-acceptance, which is conferred by the mother on the child, gives way to a phase of autonomy in which the child acquires rapidly the powers of locomotion, speech, manipulation of objects, creativity in words and deeds. This is a vital phase for self-acceptance when the child feels free and able to acknowledge all these acquisitions as truly belonging to itself and recognizes them as good. Such enriching experience is mediated through the presence of parents and siblings who are capable of acknowledging, accepting and appreciating its deeds and whole self. The child remains acutely dependent on acceptance of itself by its parents as a condition of self-acceptance. Part of this acceptance are its instinctual drives furnishing gratification from its oral, anal and physical intimacy experiences. Bodily pleasure is just as important as intellectual and emotional gratification for self-acceptance and here more than ever the developing identity will depend on parental verification that the body is precious and valuable. Self-acceptance thus needs parents who are capable of acknowledging, encouraging and accepting the child's growing experience of itself and a child free from developmental difficulties capable of appreciating and enjoying its own development.

Several difficulties may arise with both these requirements. A recurrent one is the presence of parents who are incapable of communicating acceptance to the child, who are critical, high in demands, low in praise and appreciation, difficult to satisfy, pre-occupied consciously or unconsciously with their own needs, using

the child to assist them rather than the reverse. In these circumstances the child is endowed with a bad identity confirmed in terms of naughtiness, disobedience, greed, self-will, stubbornness, withdrawal, unreliability, etc. Since the child needs the parents more than they need him, depending on their approval and acceptance for survival, it will accept this bad identity and idealize the parents in some way. The parents are endowed with good characteristics, their bad ones denied, thus attempting to preserve an ideal model with which ordered, reliable loving relationships can be preserved. It is, of course, a cheating situation in which the child is denied its needs and a precarious solution because sooner or later the falsity of the relationship will be exposed. This may not happen until years later in marriage where the intimacy of the relationship revives the original intimate bonds of parent to child or in the relationship with God. In either situation, idealization breaks down and so does the relationship now found completely wanting.

In the analytic situation this encounter takes place with the analyst who is initially idealized, these feelings giving way under the pressure of interpretation to the original bareness but now with an opportunity for a new beginning. This new beginning is the opportunity to form fresh human bonds in which the humanity that is offered by the analyst is an entity capable of being accepted and incorporated as a series of new, good experiences which are learned for the first time. Similarly the analyst is able to accept the characteristics of the patient who experiences himself for the first time as a donor of good feelings, thoughts and actions.

In the absence of this final phase of integration, a person can be left with disillusionment and despair, incapable of feeling or believing that man or God can be truly a giver or a receiver of good experiences. Spiritual life and personal relationships suffer even more when the idealization persists, thus making authentic, emotional contact impossible. Closeness is striven for on a basis of intellectual recognition and communion with God's or the neighbour's love. The enormous emphasis on metaphysical reality, reason and intellect makes the contrast between intellectual rather than emotional closeness one of the truly great challenges that faces Christianity permeated by a theology whose infidelity is not the adoration of the golden calf but of the intellect. Intellectual awareness and proximity is a poor substitute for authentic emotional closeness. In this respect psycho-analysis has given man new means whereby he can respond to man and God in a fuller human way.

When neither the quality of parenthood nor the constitution of the child present insurmountable obstacles, there remains a normal hazard of development. With the advent of autonomy and the gradual independence there are inevitably clashes between the wishes and drives of the child and those of the parents. Some frustration, with feelings of hostility and anger, is inevitable and with this the growing

person begins to experience ambivalence, mixed feelings of loving and hating the same person. Ambivalence is associated with guilt feelings when hate, anger, destruction, greed or envy are experienced. Such ambivalence is part of normal development and is inescapable. Under normal circumstances there is a predominance of good rather than bad feelings and in the presence of stable, loving parents, there is always an opportunity for the child to make reparation, be reconciled and vice versa. Parents must not emphasize the badness of the child so that feelings of guilt and the need for metanoia become the principal characteristics by which the growing person feels acceptable to the parents. It is vital for self-acceptance that the central core of our self-recognition is not our badness or guilt marginally touched by our goodness but rather our basic goodness tainted by our badness and guilt. It is my firm conviction that if humanism was pressed for a central theological tenet it would be its belief in the basic goodness of man, a view that Christianity has to recognize and foster. Until Christianity pays more attention to the scriptural revelation that man was created in the image of God, God who according to St John is love, then it will fail to identify with this optimistic evolutionary development of man who longs to feel his goodness and value. The Judaeo-Christian tradition is one of faith, hope and love and man needs actively to experience the optimism inherent within it rather than feel internally and externally persecuted by the arrows of fear, guilt and self-diminution as the resounding instruments of salvation. This is not to ignore the importance of evil and sin, seen in this context not as experiences in which man turns away from God but as the failure to capture the fullness of his humanity. Sin avoidance in these terms will be seen as the motivation and determination to become fully human.

Dependence

With trust and self-acceptance, the growing person remains in a diminishing dependent relationship for some fifteen to twenty years, growing throughout these years increasingly independent physically, emotionally, and intellectually. The degree and ease with which independence is achieved depends on the prevailing cultural and social atmosphere which either enhances and promotes this characteristic or emphasizes the opposite of obedience, gradual emancipation and deference to authority. The tension within the Church, which has stressed the latter against the prevailing ethos, is well known and recognized, and efforts are made to correct the existing bias. These efforts are not fast enough for some Catholics, including myself, but I am acutely aware of the difficulty of changing overnight life-long patterns or the abandonment of rigidity as a defence against new developments which must be threatening in the extreme to some members of the Church. The tensions are bound to exist for some time to come and are inevitable after long periods of stagnation and lack of change.

In the midst of so many sufficient reasons for rebellion against authority, what is not so obvious to many who exhibit these characteristics is that they are rebelling against legitimate, social, economic and authoritarian patterns which are *at the same time* symbols of violent emotional conflicts, in which the Church is experienced as a controlling, dominating, depriving parental figure. This has to be seen in terms of the human development of the child who, instead of experiencing a growing self-awareness, acceptance, mature freedom, choice and initiative, remains emotionally dependent on parent or substitute authoritarian figures who are needed for the strength and security they provide. This is the result of an upbringing in which the parents were excessively authoritarian, rigid and controlling, or of a constitutional make-up of the growing person who is timid, over-anxious, shy and inhibited, needing to cling to parents or parent substitutes. Since normal maturation requires this drive for independence, there is marked frustration whenever there is failure to achieve it. The Catholic Church attracted amongst its converts, priests and nuns a number of such emotionally dependent personalities who found safety in the prevailing atmosphere of authority, clarity and security within the Church. The price, often unconscious, was a seething anger which they did not feel safe to express. The post-Vatican changes have made it safer to release these pent-up feelings and some of the outbursts seen throughout the Church are a compound of legitimate anger and infantile rage, sometimes culminating in total breaks with the Church which is experienced as an imprisoning and suffocating parent. The break may have been necessary for the individual's further development, although the price is alienation and isolation from the soma whose pleroma is the freedom of resurrection.

Psycho-analysis offers an opportunity to unravel this emotional dependence by making it possible for the patient to experience increasingly their own power and value, to realize that the analyst does not wish to hinder this growth or take away the fruits of this independence. On the contrary, like the behaviour of a good parent, it is encouraged. The failure to achieve a realistic appraisal of self carries the risk that in its place will be found the infantile marks of omnipotence, which belongs to the first two or three years when the child controls its world through magical omnipotence, or of narcissistic needs of extreme preoccupation with one's self. These phantasies of omnipotence and self-aggrandisement are continuously interpreted, allowing contact with reality in which emotional development begins afresh. Independence is now achieved without a total break with the analyst, now experienced as a person who can accept dependent needs in the patient without threatening to take independence away as the price for providing receptive support. *This makes possible a loving relationship between man and God on a basis of equality achieved through the incarnation, in which the price for closeness and oneness with God is not a denial of one's unique significance, value or*

independence. On the contrary, the fuller the possession of self the greater is the mature dependence which is not afraid to recognize human limitations and accept them without losing the overall goodness of the self. Total independence, which can acknowledge total dependence without diminution of self, is the model of the Trinity mediated through love and it is the model of close relationship between man and man, and man and God.

The increasing knowledge acquired through dynamic psychology has emphasized the importance of recognizing and acknowledging the inner emotional state of human beings, conscious and unconscious. It is a stage of vital development in understanding the nature of man and the most useful corrective to thousands of years in which the emphasis has been on reason and the intellect, aspects of man which remain vital but grossly insufficient to mediate relationships of love which depend on a balance of the affective components of love and aggression in man. The emphasis on the early years of life has focused our attention on our inner experiences of being, rather than on our external actions. This is neither new nor revolutionary. It was clarified repeatedly by Christ but not sufficiently grasped by Christianity which by emphasizing the decalogue concentrated on what men do rather than what they are. In the quotation of St Paul, 'You shall not commit adultery, you shall not kill, you shall not steal and so on are summed up in the command you must love your neighbour as yourself', we find the answer that, if we are capable of lovingly accepting ourselves, we shall be less motivated or in need of damaging our neighbour. If we first possess ourselves lovingly, we shall be able to give with greater freedom more of ourselves in loving relationships with others and with God. Psycho-analysis and the associated sciences are developing the means of achieving precisely this and the sooner Christianity involves itself with their findings and participates in their research the better.

It may be argued that few are so disturbed as to need the services of analysts who in any case will never be available in sufficient numbers to meet the needs of the community. The answer to the first point is the realization that the difficulties encountered in those who are being analysed are not qualitatively but quantitatively different from the rest of the population. We are all liable to experience these difficulties but in different degrees. Secondly, it is absolutely true that psycho-analysis can never be the answer to all human problems, but the knowledge we have acquired through it can be extended to all relationships and mediated in the Church as a community of love.

Ultimately all close human relationships have a healing and growing component in which we act as agents of wholeness and holiness to each other. Increasing understanding of the actual details involved will make loving inter-personal relationships more effective. Traditionally, one definition of love has been wishing good to another person. This remains true but we are beginning to translate this rather arid statement into a more detailed and fuller human experience.