

## A Misguided Approach?

No question about it. I'm no expert when it comes to the relationship between psychology and religion or spirituality and wish to make that clear from the get-go. Then there's the well known distinction between religion and spirituality. Often you'll hear people say they're not religious but spiritual. Go figure. Even though psychology and religion (for the time being let's throw in spirituality) require a certain expertise necessary for a proper understanding of both, this shouldn't preclude the desire to offer some reflections on them.

So wherein lays the desire to write about such a matter...or should I say audacity? I'm tempted to add that stupidity had a role to play, but I prefer refraining from that word. Though bordering on the truth, it begs a note of caution not to be too hard on myself. After all, the subject is a tricky one to delineate. Furthermore, to this point it's something I hadn't conceived, read about nor heard as a lecture. So wherein lays the source? It can be traced to a conversation I had with a friend who's far more agile in expressing himself. Though I was impressed with how eloquently he spoke, later he freely admitted freely that he wasn't quite sure as to what he was saying! That brought me a certain comfort as well as caution.

Another blow that was bound to happen petty much right away consisted of whether I should continue writing. What my friend said in our first conversation as well as in subsequent ones put me at greater ease though not totally. In essence I didn't find myself standing on sufficiently stable ground. As already noted, it's a topic that seemed best left to experts, not amateurs. That shifted when my friend told me that after many years of studying psychology, he saw in it a profound lack compared to what religion had to offer. Indeed, when hearing the word "religion" some red flags are bound to pop up as he admitted. For many people religion is equivalent with adherence to doctrine and a rigidity associated with it which precludes any serious discussion.

As the first paragraph intimates, there's a certain thorniness when it comes to the intersection of psychology and spirituality. Throw in a phrase such as "spiritual life" and you run the risk of complicating matters. I believe the chief reason is that such a phrase which is bantered about in some circles implies an artificial division between two forms of existence, the natural one and the spiritual one. Then there's the problem where quite a lot of people don't have a clue what's meant by spiritual

despite their preference for that term. Often it's some kind of abstract thing existing in the ether.

When it comes to a subject hard to wrap your mind around let alone to articulate, I find the best approach is to consult other persons whom I know and trust. Their contribution provides a good a safety net as any. Their input makes it easier for me to comprehend both conversations where I'm more a listener and give a report of them even though I had not been an active participant. So enough of this hemming and hawing. It's time put aside the temptation to ramble on about any hesitancy with regard to the subject at hand. This is important because in a strange way, it can keep me with a given comfort zone as well as preventing me from moving forward.

Having lived in an enclosed monastic environment for over five decades, I've been exposed to a remarkably wide variety of ways which express life in the spirit, another phrase I'm not particularly fond of but will stick with it by default. At first you'd think living in a monastery would be uniform to the nth degree but far from it. On top of it I've been exposed countless hours of exercises such as the Divine Office, *lectio divina*, conferences, books being read to us and above all else, daily exposure to the church's liturgical year. In sum, the atmosphere reeks of spiritual stuff which you'd expect in a monastic environment. After all, that's what the life is all about and is far from being stifling. Actually it's the best possible life imaginable because there's something natural about them (this is hard to grasp for an outsider but is true) as well as having many exercises done in common.

An extended time in a contemplative monastery allows for what can only be described as a unique...indeed privileged...experience where you can explore various modes of spiritual disciplines and of course, sacred authors starting with the Hebrew scriptures. After a while you settle on one disciple which has the potential of lasting for the rest of your life and then some. Here's where the experience of community members are invaluable. Most have been exposed to a wide variety of sacred authors and have a knowledge of them which surpasses anything you could find elsewhere, even in a university.

The people just mentioned have been living uninterruptedly in an environment very rare in the modern world. On top of it, they had to contend with their own limitations and managed not simply to survive but to flourish. And by flourishing I mean radiating a sense of peace and joy you'd be hard pressed to find elsewhere. It

so happened that when I had entered I was exposed to the more immediate fallout from the Second Vatican Council which put all this in perhaps a singular or unrepeatable experience. That time frame, relatively short, now is just about completely forgotten either because many who've experienced have passed on or like a case of PTSD, find it difficult to talk about.

Though I was aware of that event's consequences, it remained somewhere out there compared with those who had been affected by it more directly. By that I means persons whose lives were more interwoven with the church. With hindsight, I'd say that to a large extent the trauma experienced back then had a lot to do with not so much rejection of traditional Christian spiritual disciplines but as having set them aside. This attitude, far from a rejection, was more along the lines of saying, hey, it's time to try out the new stuff available to us now.

That mentality chiefly was coming from psychology coupled with Eastern religions. As far as I recall...and this is a good number of years ago now...the two sometimes gave the impression of invariably being woven together. With hindsight, it seems that both simply came on the scene at the same time. Though many who adopted their practices had no intent of abandoning traditional Christian disciplines, unfortunately in some cases that turned out to be the case. Also a number of professed monks got laicized possibly due these influences.

What came from the momentous event of the Second Vatican Council had no direct effect on me because I was quite young. However, I was fully exposed to it mediated by older community members for which I was not prepared. Where did all this negatively come from, I wondered, even though intellectually I knew its source? I saw those older than me considerably troubled but couldn't grasp their reaction which sometimes was out of line with traditional monastic ways of thinking. Most of what they came off with was critical and therefore puzzling to me. With hindsight I saw it as another of many intersecting points of psychology and Eastern religion which at the time had been so baffling to me. Over the years I'd recall this unique period of time as to how negative effects influenced the practice of religion. Obviously the experience was something I couldn't run away from but had to confront it at sometime or another. Thus this article is one way of trying to identify that I prefer to view as a challenge instead of a problem.

As for the criticism leveled at religion, of course it wasn't wholesale but differed depending upon whom you asked. As a novice this was particularly difficult, having

found myself trying to maintain balance with respect to a wide variety of responses, each seeming to be more confusing than the other. So here I found myself feeling helpless and sorry for myself. If left on my own without guidance from trusted elders, I'd be at a genuine loss. No small that most who had entered as notices decided to leave. At the same time my estimation of the elders remained sky high for sticking close to me.

It should be noted that newcomers who had come not long after me were better able to deal with the fallout from the Second Vatican Council and were more persistent in wanting to learn what monastic tradition had to offer. Unfortunately they came away somewhat disappointed, having found most members of the community still were caught up with psychology. Not everyone bought into this but the atmosphere was tinged by it. In the meanwhile you couldn't help wonder how long this state of affairs would last. Obviously things weren't all bad, but the rupture between religion and psychology was sharp enough to have a lasting impact. A casual visitor wouldn't be able to detect this. One had to be immersed in community life to discover it. The saving grace, of course, was a number of elders who were veritable lifelines. They helped offset those who were caught up in a situation that was of no one's particular making.

With hindsight I could see that what I was attempting to describe represented a true seismic shift. At the time it was anyone's guess where we were being led. What comes into greater focus now was an introduction of psychological elements intended to supplement (and in some instances, supplant) long established ways of doing things. By "doing things" I mean traditions that have been around a long time, not so much observances (that was secondary) but spiritual practices. At first I was tempted to add "gradual" to modifying "introduction" but quickly realized such was not the case which I had witnessed. The introduction happened suddenly and for the most part was welcomed. Clearly I recall the excitement when some of this had been introduced as by guest speakers. The community didn't feel secure enough to branch out on its own which was clearly understandable in the post Second Vatican years.

A quick footnote. Early on I recall a Dominican giving some conferences relative to psychology which lasted a week. While that was going on, a Zen master from California was with us for the same amount of time. People were free to pick which conference they wanted!

To those who've been in the monastery a long time all this was brand new and heady stuff. I might add dangerous because a lot of what had been introduced consisted of insights from psychology which many had bought hook, line and sinker. Just stop and think. Catholic religious life, especially of the monastic variety, was conservative and had many rules and regulations that were part of daily life. The introduction of psychology pretty much all at once was bound to produce a clash. The unfortunate part was that there was literally no preparation. Add to this already potent mix Buddhism and Transcendental Meditation as already noted. At the heart of it all was a certain naivete that failed to consider how people would handle material that was completely foreign to them. With so many choices, everyone was faced with a veritable spiritual smorgasbord.

Because so many community members were enthralled with so much so quickly, it seemed no one was concerned how it affected those in formation. Though the novice-master was an exceptional person, he as one person couldn't ward off all these new influences flowing in at once. I recall something parallel to this which was transpiring in the classic departments of universities. Suddenly they were brushed off as irrelevant. The chief argument (and with some merit) was that no one could make a living by majoring in that field.

So as a young person what do you do once you've entered a contemplative religious order with the rightful expectation to be fed material belonging to its particular tradition? While the novice-master did his best to offer support in this area, without a doubt community members are the principle agents responsible for one's formation. This, of course, is because novices are exposed to them all day long. The seniors, almost always those who aren't priests, turned out to be the wisest and gave the most lasting impression. Often I've wondered why this was so but have yet not reached a conclusive answer. Somehow I think it was because non-priests who used to be called lay brothers did a lot of manual labor. They lived closer to the earth, if you will. True in one way but this wasn't the complete picture.

These imperfect observations represent an account of how traditional Catholic spirituality interacted with psychology. The example is from an enclosed contemplative male community is not representative of the church as a whole. Still, it's a microcosm where the human response to new ideas can be observed more carefully when it comes to spiritual matters. As for such a community, typical of most monastic ones, over the past four or five decades a growing sense of

conservatism has taken root chiefly in response to what I had just described. It perceived the introduction of psychological elements as somewhat invasive. If you didn't subscribe to this vantage point, at least it was spot on by identifying the problem. Furthermore, as for theology or spirituality, it saw their worth though often did so with a much needed updated approach.

This inclination towards the conservative side of things was something to be expected. It was the only correction most people knew that would work which produced immediate results though one can't but help wonder about long term consequences. Perhaps after time the cycle just outlined may repeat itself. It's one of those instances where only time will tell.

So when you have two opposing points of view facing off—perhaps not a completely accurate way of putting it—you wonder which one will prevail. Such are the stakes from our limited point of view, not being able to take in the larger scheme of things. As it stands now, the psychological camp seems to have the upper hand by reason of its modern approach and supposed updated view of the human condition. The language it uses is sophisticated and appeals to a wide audience. Perhaps the most attractive part is that it avoids dogmatic statements which can appeal to those who've found religious expressions more or less repressive.

Essentially the approach taken by psychology is descriptive and does a damn good job. However, a closer look shows that this is its very weakness. Over several decades I had seen a wide variety of people getting therapy or whatever you want to call it but with little or no improvement in their situation. I got the distinct impression they were being ripped off without even knowing it. On top of it communities were shelling out a pretty penny. From my vantage point, the benefit I've witnessed consisted in these good folks having garnered more information about themselves. That left them with a partial satisfaction which they thought was a cure-all or if not, an excuse to continue their therapy. It was as though they were given a manual which wrote glowingly about the destination but passed over directions of how to get there.

What's attractive about psychology is that it leaves us with the view that the description of our hang-ups is equivalent to a cure of a person's given problem. A closer look, however, reveals that we're at ground zero and never have left. Because the approach is descriptive as noted above, one can be exposed to year upon year of therapy yet never get anywhere, long term-wise. Yes, there are improvements,

sometimes major, but never are they fully curative. That was how some people in the community functioned. They'd spend years seeking help—and spending oodles of money—while essentially going nowhere. Treading water would be a good analogy. The sad part is that at heart they knew it. After a while my suspicion was that they looked at this as a kind of relaxation, a change of pace.

After several decades where psychology enjoyed free reign, religion was pretty much allowed to wither on the vine. That meant religion had devolved into a kind of living fossil. Those who subscribed to it were conveniently labeled conservative and sometimes less than flattering names. So if you saw the flaws in psychology, better remain quiet about them. In the meantime should you subscribe to the principles of religion, the best approach was to access it through the medium of *lectio divina*. Surprisingly that venerable practice remain untouched though was not as prominent as in the pre-psychology days, if you will.

So while psychology was reigning pretty much supreme, uneasy as that had been, religion approached from the *lectio* point of view was silently gaining more traction. In addition to practicing it, two or three people came together on their own initiative in order to discuss the benefits of *lectio*. The only disadvantage was that *lectio divina* didn't flourish as much as could due to an environment dominated by psychology. It required the native soil of religion.

Some may ask and rightly so for an example of religion as a means of addressing our human condition with all its vicissitudes. For some years I've been reading spiritual texts in the Syriac tradition. More recently my attention has been on Narsai, a poet theologian born in 399 and who lived to be one-hundred and three years of age. The most recent three texts that struck me were from his liturgical homilies, both on the Ascension. That's when Jesus Christ had ascended from earth into heaven, taking with him his humanity and inserting it into a completely different milieu. The first text I have in mind runs as follows: "O earthy one, who has left the earth, the mother of his body and entered to dwell in the womb of a mother who is not such by name!" (p.180.285). Offhand it sound a bit odd but represents a remarkable insight coming from religion. It takes the stuff of which we are formed and situates it in a realm wholly different from what is natural to it. Yes, quite a remarkable insight which has a wonderful way of working on you.

The second text is from the same homily on the Ascension (p. 170.145-146) and consists of just two lines: "He (Jesus) showed a new ('wonder' implied) after his

death by the extraordinary way that he ate and drank with his heralds and assured them (that it was he).” A key word is *tksh* which is a transliteration of the Greek *takash* or order. Also *lvr* for “by” can be rendered as “outside” and hence “outside (from) order.” As for this *tksh*, it’s the one in which we’re rooted physically. Jesus showed (*ch*;<sup>1</sup> also to make manifest) something new or *chdt* which is the adjective alone.

The question that comes to mind is how did Jesus do this? It consisted simply in eating and drinking while the apostles looked on in amazement. You could tell by these words that Jesus enjoyed doing this in front of them. Note that the apostles are called heralds, from the verbal root *krz*. Their heralding, if you will, will consist in transmitting this eating and drinking with regard to a new order. It’s bound to scandalize some people because nothing extraordinary seems to be at work. At this point it’s important to be aware of the adjective *chdt* or new as just delineated. *Chdt* sets it off from the customary consumption of food and drink.

The third text is from Lk 22.16: “for I tell you I shall not eat it (Passover) until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.” The context is, of course, the Last Supper. As for this fulfilling, we can apply the intake of food during the earthly Passover as a reality that will have a direct correspondence between heaven and earth once Jesus has ascended. It’s another example of how something so physical is raised to a level that’s completely opposite to its nature. Again, a verse from Narsai: “Our nature is the one which mounted the wind and bridled the air...He (Jesus) is the one who has opened a new way in the moist air.” (174.197 & 199)

Such quotes have far more reaching implications than at first glance. We tend to almost blithely pass by these verses and others like them for essentially two reasons. Those of us who’ve been raised as Christians have become so familiar with the way religion has presented basic teaching that no longer do we pay attention to it as able to move us. A differently worded verse may grab our attention here and there, but that’s it. More fundamentally, we’ve grown accustomed to treat doctrines basic to our faith as myth in the conventional sense. To subscribe to it would in essence be a step backwards.

This implies that the step forward lays with psychology but doesn’t prevent us from acknowledging that Jesus had assumed human mortality. That’s where we stop, nothing more, nothing less. And so we access psychology which provides us

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<sup>1</sup> The letter “o” is between *ch* and the glottal stop.

with the supposed real work of getting down to healing those ills which plague our human brokenness. Then someone like Narsai comes along with his poetic way of combining the two different realities—divinity and physicality—without making them one and indistinguishable from each other. That's no small trick to accomplish.

Narsai indeed inserts human nature with all its foibles in the train of Jesus as he ascends into heaven, hence the profound value of the Ascension which we tend to acknowledge in a passing fashion. It turns out that we miss a lot, an awful lot. As for the process itself (I use this word for lack of a better one), there are three phases. First we have Jesus on earth, our domain. Third is his final destination popularly called heaven and often depicted as “up there.” There's a second phase, the one from #1 to #3, that which Narsai often calls the air. This realm serves to make a transition from the heaviness of earthly components to the light ones of heaven. Getting from #1 to #3 doesn't mean a shedding of earthly components but a lightening of them.

Once Jesus has taken his place at his Father's right hand the two discuss what had happened during the previous three years. The information Jesus gives his Father is essential for sending the Holy Spirit. He doesn't want to dispatch the Third Person willy-nilly, hence the fifty odd days before Pentecost as a time of discernment. Note that the very essence of Spirit is *Pneuma* or breath. Though it partakes of the heavenly realm and has never left there, now is the time when it must do so at the combined bidding of Father and Son. His descent will be far easier than the Son's by reason of his airy composition. Note too that there's not account of his ascension. He seems to remain on earth. Yes and no. Yes in that he doesn't leave his newly established church and no in that he can freely ascend into heaven at any time. To put it more accurately, the *Pneuma* as breath can “blow” with ease between the earthly and heavenly realms.

The Holy Spirit consults Jesus as to his recent ascension, he about to depart in the opposite direction. Jesus had descended to the human realm earlier but did so by being born in the human manner. Not so with *Pneuma*. It will descend through the air gradually taking on some form but not entirely as did Jesus. However, the form was just enough to assume that of fire resting on the apostles. And so the interaction of the divine with the human consists in a descent (Jesus) followed by an ascension (Jesus) and a second descent (*Pneuma*).

Though I found it difficult to come up with an adequate distinction between psychology and religion, hopefully this document will bring closer attention to the issue. One thing is certain. We have to be on guard against the Siren song of psychology which despite its benefits, runs the risk of explaining away things belonging exclusively to the realm of religion. Again, the way it explains things is what makes it so attractive. Often its language is more sophisticated up against that of religion. However, when you look at some of the Church Fathers—and I have in mine those of the Syriac tradition—they have what a noted English scholar called a poetic sense of Christ. You'll be hard pressed to find that anywhere else. Really, nothing can compare with how the Syriac Fathers articulate matters not only to the faith but to the human condition.

Though the following doesn't fall directly under the purview of the subject of this document (hence the green color and different font), I wish to include some reflections on Book Six of Plato's **Republic**. It's important to understand before Book Seven which deals with the famous example of the cave. If you don't read it, you're in danger of missing the point of one Plato's most important texts. I'm aware of the danger of making reference to psychology with the content of Book Six, but there might be a connection or perhaps better, parallel with regard to what goes on there. If there's a definite relationship, that could be expounded in a different article.

Perhaps those who commandeered the ship may be likened to the undue influence of psychology whereas the captain represents religion as I've tried to present it. Note that the captain is called by the delightful name *meteorolesxes* or a stargazer. Such a person doesn't engage in divinization commonly understood. Rather, he pays attention to the night sky watching the stars to lay out a course for his ship. It seems those who've committed mutiny cannot stand such a person and would love to do away with him permanently. As it turns out, *meteorolesxes* is a word for someone who's a *philosophos*, a friend of wisdom.

Part of Book Six (489a-490a) <sup>2</sup> may be outlined as follows. What makes this book so important is that a handful of passengers on the ship think they have correct insight as how to guide it across the ocean. While the passengers get out of control

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<sup>2</sup> **Ship of Fools**: a movie from 1965 about a vessel crewed by the foolish, mad or morally corrupt, meant to satirize society or dysfunctional governance. Apparently it was made with Book Six in mind.

and take over the ship, they spur the captain and others who have the proper knowledge and experience to guide them across treacherous waters. Nevertheless the captain remains on board, a virtual prisoner. This might be stretching it, but I won't be satisfied until I hack out the similarity. If I fail, that's okay. What counts is that I've learned something important.

Without going further, it's best to look at the following key excerpt from Book Six and see if we can learn anything from it in preparation for Book Seven (the cave analogy) and as already noted, if it can tie in with the article at hand.

I don't think that you need to examine the simile in detail to see that the ships resemble cities and their attitude to the true philosophers, but you already understand what I mean. Indeed I do.

Then first tell this simile to anyone who wonders why philosophers aren't honored in the cities, and try to persuade him that there would be far more cause for wonder if they were honored.

I will tell him.

Next tell him that what he says is true, that the most decent among the philosophers are useless to the majority. Tell him not to blame those decent people for this but the ones who don't make use of them. It isn't natural for the captain to beg the sailors to be ruled by him nor for the wise to knock at the doors of the rich—the man who came up with that wise crack made a mistake. The natural thing is for the sick person, rich or poor, to knock at the doctor's door, and for anyone who needs to be ruled to knock at the door of the one who can rule him. It isn't for the ruler, if he's truly any use, to beg the others to accept his rule. Tell him that he'll make no mistake in likening those who rule in our cities at present to the sailors we mentioned just now, and those who are called useless stargazers (*meteorolesxes*) to the true captains.

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