



Psyche and Soul: A Woven Fabric

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I have been working as a psychotherapist in Dunedin for over 20 years. It is as a practising psychotherapist that I speak to you today. For some time I have been interested in how psychotherapists can work with religious issues when they are brought to therapy. Today I will try to think with you about how religious belief sits in the psyche, looking at the fabric from the other side as it were. I am currently learning to weave and I find that weaving with its long warp threads that hold the structure and its weft threads that cross back and forth to form the fabric is a metaphor that comes to my mind as I attempt to think about the relationship of soul and psyche in the inner world.

This is a large topic that could be approached in many different ways. I will draw out three threads for us to look at. One relates to the inner pre-conditions for religious faith or its opposite – doubt. Another tries to consider how the psychological and religious strands interweave in the person. The third looks at what might be the mental conditions for a faith open to change and growth.

As I speak to you I am reminded of the 17th century nun's prayer:

Lord, Thou knowest better than I know myself, that I am growing older and will someday be old. Keep me from the fatal habit of thinking I must say something on every subject and on every occasion.... With my vast store of wisdom, it seems a pity not to use it all, but thou knowest Lord that I want a few friends at the end....Keep my mind free from the recital of endless details; give me wings to get to the point.ⁱ

As I begin I wish to make two points. The first is to say that I am one of those people whose thinking is most stimulated by the particular person in front of me. So I want to be able to use cases as springboards for my discussion. But while I draw on clinical material, in order to preserve the privacy of my clients, I have disguised and combined cases so that they become more like fiction while, I hope, retaining the truth of the experience. My second point is that in the cases I use people generally speak of a personal God. Some of the struggles that I discuss in relation to belief in a personal God may be experienced by people for whom the content of their belief in the divine, or some ultimate meaning might be expressed in quite other terms.

The inner world of the psychoanalytic baby.

For the psychoanalyst everything begins with infancy and the earliest years of life. In this way of thinking, when a person, and particularly a child, is introduced to religious teachings, these ideas do not come into a bare, empty space. God steps through the door into an inner world that is already inhabited. The baby that psychoanalysis envisages, is not a blank slate on which the Sunday school teacher writes. Let me sketch some of the ways in which psychoanalysis pictures the inner world of the infant or small child. This is a simple, or simplified sketch, using on three foundational thinkers of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, Melanie Klein and Donald Winnicott. The Freudian toddler's inner world is dominated by erotic and aggressive drives. It is presided over by a father who is both longed for and competed with for mother, who is both authority and rival. It is filled with the experience of infantile helplessness. The inner world of the infant as described by Melanie Klein is focused on the mother. It is peopled by the figures of aggression, retaliation, hate that could bite the breast, and envy that desires to spoil anything seen as good. It is in interactions with the mother that these passions can be moderated, if not eradicated, by love, reparation, gratitude. The Kleinian baby lives in a dramatic world in which all- good and all- bad are at war and one must choose a side; it is an achievement to allow these enemies to converse so that good and bad can be seen in each person. According to Donald Winnicott, the infant is subject to primal fears which need to be contained in an experience of being reliably held by mother if a sense of security is to develop; the capacity for concern is not a natural endowment of the infant but again built up in the earliest human interactions. So when Jesus or God step through the door of a person's inner world, they have to negotiate with these existing residents for a place on the couch or a chair at the table. In other words, any religious teaching will be assimilated and incorporated into the inner world according to the mental representations and emotional templates already in place. In this negotiation religious figures or beliefs may be enlisted into the role of defending the bully who is already in charge. They may be called on to protect frightened figures cowering in the corner. Or they may find it hard to establish a place at all.

Where faith cannot be found

This last is the situation I want to think about first, that of the person who is struggling to believe and for whom their inability to believe is a source of distress to them.

[Case of 'Sarah'. Sarah is a woman who has lost the religious faith she experienced as a child and longs to find it again. She despairs of dying and fears death intensely as an endless falling into nothing.]

For Sarah the failure of faith is not a matter of the content or formulation of faith - she has not lost her faith because of seeing past the dogmas in which she was raised – rather it is a profound psychological state. I believe that this kind of religious difficulty originates in infancy. The famous English paediatrician and psychoanalytic thinker, Donald Winnicott, postulates that one of the nameless terrors of infancy is that of falling endlessly. He does not believe that a sense of being secure is the infant's natural endowment that may be lost but rather that inner security is built up through the reliable and responsive care of the mother. Somehow, I believe, this failed at the start of Sarah's life.

Modern research on the first months of a baby's life fills out the picture of how the psychological foundation of trust is built up. A researcher called Beatrice Beebe has worked for the last 10 years, studying second-by-second frame-by-frame interactions between mothers and their four-month-old babies. In a book that came out this yearⁱⁱ, she and Frank Lachmann have published their results and conclusions. They have been able to spell out how even such a tiny infant builds up an unverballed expectation that 'my mother will understand me', that 'I can influence how she responds to me', the groundwork of hope and trust. What is observed at 4 months correlates with studies at 1 year and 18 months observing the security with which infants sense the parent as a safe attachment figure, who will be reliable, who can be turned to in times of fear and danger, who will be responsive. This is the foundation of basic trust. It is the necessary substrate of religious faith.

In Sarah's life the anguish of the failure of trust was sharp and painful and it was expressed in religious terms. Her childhood and adolescence were characterised not only by betrayals, failures of care and complex demands and disappointments but also by a powerful exposure to religious teaching and practice. While she was quite small she listened to religious teachings which had a lot to say about sin, punishment, and the terrible and imminent end of the world. Vivid biblical language brought into her child's imagination the possibility of being thrown into exterior darkness, totally and eternally abandoned if she sinned. Fitting on top of her infant insecurities, like the weft crossing in and out through the long, set threads of the warp, these images were engraved deeply into her psyche. These teachings were absorbed in exactly that period of childhood described by James Fowlerⁱⁱⁱ as the first stage in the development of faith, usually between 3 and 7 years of age. Joann Wolski Conn describes what goes on in the mind of the small child exposed to religious images: 'The imaginative processes underlying fantasy are unrestrained and uninhibited by logical thought'. She describes one of the dangers in this stage as arising from 'the possible "possession" of the child's imagination by unrestrained images of terror and destructiveness'.^{iv}

I believe that Sarah's predicament arose from a combination of developmental and religious factors. As we worked together I came to understand that in her case the ever-lurking terror of infancy was not sufficiently soothed by the way she was held physically and psychically. It remained, to be given form by the religious teachings absorbed by her child's mind. Sarah was in anguish: she suffered from a deep fear that at the end of life she would fall into nothingness. Even though she was no longer a church-goer, she was still haunted by a fear of eternal punishment. She could not let go of the belief that caused her terror; nor could she use it to assuage that terror.

I contrast this with two happier examples of how this substrate of trust can be built up. Most of the research has focused on the mother and infant. This observation comes from a close interaction between a father and his 8-day-old baby^v This is the incident that the researchers observed and recorded so that it could be analysed:

'Apparently the infant became fussy while being held by the mother and was handed over to the father; then fell asleep.' This is what we would see. But when the event was viewed frame by frame the detail is very moving. Here I quote Louis Sanders:

It can be seen that the father glances down momentarily at the baby's face. Strangely enough, in the same frames, the infant looked up at the father's face. Then the infant's left arm, which had been hanging down over the father's left arm, began to move upward. Frame by frame the baby's hand and the father's hand moved upward simultaneously.

Finally they met over the baby's tummy. The baby's left hand grasped the little finger of the father's right hand. At that moment the infant's eyes closed and she fell asleep, while the father continued talking, apparently totally unaware of the little miracle of specificity in time, place, and movement that had taken place in his arms.^{vi}

This interaction, of which neither infant nor parent were conscious, repeated over and over again in ordinary good parenting builds up over time, like swallows building a nest, an inner space in which trust is possible.

My second example is from a kindergarten newsletter kindly shared by friends who have given me permission to use it. The kindergarten has three wooden hobby horses which the children ride. One gets broken and the little girl who broke it is very upset. The children comfort her in various ways. Sophie, who is four, makes out of blocks a special room where the broken horse is laid to recover and she then gets the other two horses, mummy and daddy horse, they have become, whom she places lying on either side of the injured horse. 'When you are sad you need your mummy and daddy to comfort you', she explains. Later she takes it another step: she builds a second room beside the one where the injured horse is lying with a small opening through from one to the other. She demonstrates how you can lie in one room and reach through to place your hand on the hurt little horse showing that, 'even when you are asleep mummy and daddy are comforting you'.

This child, unlike Sarah, has the foundations for faith and trust. Sophie's symbolic play demonstrates her inner experience, her conviction, that loving, comforting people, who believe that things will be all right, can be in the room with her when she is sad – psychotherapists would understand this as showing symbolically that the loving presence of her parents is a part of her inner being; she has internalised this – they are in the same 'room' or inner space. This reality of her inner space is given expression in her make-believe play. Her second gesture shows something further – mother and father are no longer just part of you, they also in some way exist beyond you. Their care goes on even when you are not conscious of it. The experience that Sophie called comfort and that I am considering as trust is both inside Sophie and beyond her, created by her and yet not created by her, experienced and also not seen but felt, conscious and unconscious. If Sophie were to have a religious upbringing and words like God, providence, Jesus were introduced to her, then she would have both the psychological foundations for religious faith and a language for it.

Faith as Defence

Let me turn now to a client who had very strong faith, both in the sense that his religious belief was of lifelong importance to him and also in the sense that he trusted in his God. Thinking about his inner world has enabled me to think further into the way that soul and psyche, religious belief and psychological processes, are deeply entwined and mutually influencing.

Let me call him George. He had to deal with dragons of the mind.

[Case of 'George', a deeply religious man with a strong religious belief and practice and a history of mental illness, eventually diagnosed as bipolar disorder. Examining a therapy session where George brings in a religious argument and the therapist's struggle to deal with this and to make use of it to understand his inner world.

George's religious expressions are often driven by his psychological defences against his psychotic thoughts or rage. But at other times he is able to use his religious, non-defensively to accept his sufferings and to be compassionate towards others.]

When I am working as a therapist my focus is the psyche. From this angle I try to think about what George might say about religion, or indeed about anything, in terms of his psychological processes at any given moment, and in the overall trajectory of his life. Frequently, in his case, talk about religion was used to ward off feelings that were believed to be unbearable and uncontrollable, particularly shame and rage. So, this otherwise compassionate man projected what he could not bear in himself into a particular race justifying their repression.

This kind of process can be seen in the individual and also in larger movements. In these terrible times we have all seen how religious beliefs can be conscripted into the armies of hatred and destruction, or used to justify disproportionate wealth and power.

But is this the whole of George's story? Somehow I have felt not. It would be possible with psychoanalytic insight, to explain, or even explain away, his altruism and acts of religiously-motivated courage, his devotion to people in need. But it was also true that his gratitude to his God and those who had been good to him, gave him a dignity and a humble sense of his value as a human being that redeemed his lifelong mental suffering. He was eventually diagnosed with cancer. There were turbulent times in his last months but ultimately he faced his death with simplicity and moving resignation. It felt to me that at this stage his religious belief in no way shielded him from the sufferings of life. Nor did it give him lasting illusions. Rather it assisted him to face and bear the truth of his own life, accepting the potential that had not been realised, the relationships that had been restricted, in a simple gratitude for what had been. At such times the maturity of his soul went beyond the confines of his psyche.

Religious faith, whatever its formulation, can be the opposite of Freud's retreat to childhood. It can assist a person precisely to move beyond what is known to the unknown and unknowable, to embrace human smallness and powerlessness in the world. It can lift a person out of 'despondency' giving the courage to face the great call of the planet and the universe, the struggle against injustice and the long work of building and maintaining community. Faced with the very things that Freud talked about, an open, evolving faith can take one forward, not back.

But what might be the psychological conditions for an open faith, capable of evolving?

A Space for God

Donald Winnicott was a great thinker about very early life and he introduced a concept which many psychoanalytic writers about religion have found useful in trying to describe a way religion may sit in the mind.

Winnicott conceived of a mental state which he called a 'space'. He attempted to describe the mental development that becomes visible when an infant can begin to see and use an object, not just to chew or suck, but to represent something else. In this state Sophie's hobby horses were for her a child and parents, embodiments of sadness and of comfort. This mental capacity he considered to be the product not of the infant's brain growing in isolation but as arising in the interaction between the mind of the mother and that of the infant. Winnicott saw this inner space as

the environment in which play was possible, psychotherapy was possible and where creative experience and cultural experience such as religion might be located.^{vii} Sophie's play came from just such an inner space.

In this mental space an object is neither just what it literally is (a wooden stick horse) nor what it is in the mind (mother, father and child). Paradoxically, it is both. For play to occur each reality is held in a tension – as the object is both negated as actual and yet retained as actual while existing as a thing of the mind. For Sophie, the three hobby horses in their room expressed an inner truth that came to realisation through these objects used symbolically. The wooden horses were in her mind truly the hurt child, and the comforting parents and also the familiar objects that they were. This is a very delicate balance and not to be destroyed; Winnicott says that we are not to question whether the child created these or they had a prior existence outside of her.

Another way of approaching this is to look at creative experience. If I go to a play, for instance, I will not enter into the artistic experience if I only see the actors as people I might know in real life. On the other hand if I believe that what is taking place on the stage is real, I am equally incapable of entering into the theatrical experience. You might recall the scene in Jane Campion's *The Piano* where the Maori audience leap onto the stage to stop a 'murder'.^{viii} To enter into the theatrical experience, I have to be able to believe that what is occurring on the stage is simultaneously real and unreal. Coleridge (1817) talked of 'a willing suspension of disbelief'.

This inner space, or mental capacity is reflected in contemporary research. James Fonagy and his colleagues^{ix} distinguish in the very young child 'two modes for representing internal states' which they call 'psychic equivalence' and 'pretend' modes (p.253). In the former mode 'ideas are not felt to be representations but, rather, direct replicas of reality' (p. 257). In play mode, on the other hand, they suggest, 'it becomes possible to free representations from their referents and allow these freed representations to be modified, creating a more flexible mode of thought' (p. 261).

[Case example. 'Paula' can not see her visions as anything else than literal while her therapist sees them only as illusory. The inner representation of her parents splits them into good and bad as two separate entities and she similarly splits 'God' into two.]

The capacity for a creative space, what Winnicott called a play space, is different from true make-believe. In make believe parents indicate by subtly observed gestures and exaggerated expressions that this is pretend. Daddy is not really going to gobble the child up. But I believe that this concept may be useful to us when we move, as very many thinking believers in our time are doing, away from literal pictures of God, as father or Don Cupitt's 'policeman', to a faith language that is more figurative, more fluid and symbolic, more open to paradox and ambiguity, more representative of personal inner space.

From this space we might listen to the great Dominican Thomas Aquinas who wrote at the beginning of his *Summa Theologica* that everything that theology might say about the divine is 'by way of analogy'. What if we think of the way of not knowing? We might hear a friend of mine who said to me the other day, as we chatted in her house in North East Valley, 'For me God is the connection between everything.' Or we might read the poet who speaks to God as 'the deep innerness of all things'.^x We might listen to the deep experiences of our inner selves. We may find ourselves swung

loose from the certainties in which we were raised, needing to ‘find our way onward’, in the words of the cartoonist Leunig, ‘by feeling.’^x

And perhaps this is what I will leave you with also – paradoxical truths: that certain religious ways of being are shaped and determined by psychic processes; that spiritual and religious maturity is not co-equivalent with psychological maturity. That beliefs are shaped in individual inner space and that inner space itself is a product of human relating. In this view psychotherapy and religion can lead in the same direction^{xii} – search for truth as honest as we can make it and efforts in human relatedness, intimate love and community. Sometimes one thread dominates, sometimes another.

ⁱ [http: www.spirit-path.net/nunsprayer.htm](http://www.spirit-path.net/nunsprayer.htm)

ⁱⁱ Beebe, B. and Lachman, F. (2014) *The Origins of Attachment: Infant Research and Adult Treatment*. New York and London: Routledge.

ⁱⁱⁱ Fowler, James, (1981) *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*. New York: Harper Collins.

^{iv} Conn, J. (ed.) (1986) *Women’s Spirituality: Resources for Christian Development*. New York: Paulist Press, pp 226-232.

^v Sanders, 1984, cited by Beebe (2014).

^{vi} Cited in Beebe (2014), Chapter 9.

^{vii} Winnicott, D. (1971) *Playing and Reality*. New York: Basic Books.

^{viii} O’Neill-Dean, R. (undated). ‘An analysis of Jane Campion’s film, *The Piano*, as if it were a dream.’ Unpublished talk.

^{ix} Fonagy, P., Gergeley, G., Jurist, E., Target, M. (2002, softcover printing 2004) *Affect Regulation, Mentalization, and the Development of the Self*. New York: Other Press.

^x Burrows, A. and Macy, J. (1996) *Rilke’s Book of Hours: Love Poems to God*. New York: Riverhead Books.

^{xi} Leunig, M. (1991) *The Prayer Tree*. North Blackburn: Collins Dove.

^{xii} C.f. Symmington, N. (1994) *Emotion and Spirit: Questioning the Claims of Psychoanalysis and Religion*. London: Karnac Books.