

Running head: Psychoanalysis, the Church and Transformation

Psychoanalysis and the Church: Implications for Transformation

Gabrielle T. Taylor, M.A.

January 20, 2003

Psychoanalysis and the Church: Implications for Transformation

When Freud's views on the human person were made known ninety years ago, the tension between psychoanalysis and religion began. It was the publication of his book, *Future of an Illusion* that begot the ideas, faith is an illusion, faith practices are a "form of compulsion neurotic ceremonial," and religion is manifested neurosis (Zilboorg, 1962, 54). Religious leaders began to quote Freud in order to substantiate the case that psychoanalysis antagonizes religion. Both the Protestant and Catholic churches have been overtly vocal against psychoanalysis. This opposition stands in a more mild form today. It was at the 1962 American Psychiatric Association annual meeting two rabbis were quoted as saying psychoanalysis could very well aid religion in its mission to produce peace of mind for which every human being strives (1962). It might have been this meeting that began a more explicitly positive relationship between psychoanalysis and religion.

The relationship between psychoanalysis and religion has become favorable, largely due to psychologists attempting to make room for faith experience within the psychological model. As evidenced by the publication of journals addressing the integration of psychology and religion. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, *Journal of Religion & Health*, *Journal of Scientific Study of Religion*, *Zygon: Journal of Religion & Science*, *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, and *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* the two distinct disciplines have been adjoined. Though it may be understated, psychologists and theologians have always been interested in similar material-- the human being. Whereas this remains psychology's primary and quintessential focus, theology takes an interest in the Divine.

“No other human preoccupation challenges psychologists as profoundly as religion. Whether or not they profess to be religious themselves—and many do not—psychologists must take religion into account if they are to understand and help their fellow human beings” (Richards, 2000, 3). Deviating from Freud, the American Psychological Association has taken a stance on the importance of addressing religious experience in psychotherapy for the following reasons: Religiosity is cultural, so training in religious and spiritual diversity attaining multi-cultural competency is essential for psychologists. Obtaining competency allows psychologists to experience more credibility and trust with religious clients, leaders and communities at large. In essence, it is their ethical obligation to recognize client’s religious experience. APA recognizes the importance and validity of accessing resources within religious communities for the primary goal of assisting in coping, healing and ultimately, transforming lives (Richards, 2000).

In this paper I am proposing the psychoanalytic environment provides a necessary space for personal transformation. Briefly, I will critique how the Judeo-Christian Church has inhibited transformation by invalidating parts of the human experience and unsuccessfully providing an appropriate environment for human transformation. By detailing the components of the psychoanalytic environment, I will propose transformation offered through the psychoanalytic environment can enhance the Judeo-Christian experience. It must be made clear that I am not proposing psychoanalysis as a Church to those who have failed to receive transformation through the Church. Though psychoanalysis might offer a similar experience to what the church calls confession, it fails to purport the other essential characteristics-- worship, sacraments and prayer. I am

merely making an argument psychoanalysis has something to offer the Judeo-Christian church that might enhance its process of transformation.

Throughout history theologians in the Judeo-Christian Church have given their lives to the cause of sharing the mystery of the Transcendent. Focusing on God and interpreting God's intentions for humanity has been transformational for many lives. People at rock bottom have turned their lives around to become empowered participants of society. God and God's involvement with humanity has had a profound impact on the human experience, enriching what it means to be human. At the same time, I would propose the way the Church has presented God has had detrimental effects on human experience. God has become the ideal and God's standards the measure of the Christian life. Church has become a place to strive to be different from who you are, striving to be Christ-like. "We must always act as Christians, act as other Christs. There should be no time where we act otherwise" (Christmas Mass sermon, 2002). The message of "shoulds" in the Church places pressure to perform Christianity rather than live Christianity. There is a huge gap between what one ought to be doing and what one is.

"If religion cannot include our destructiveness, then it is not tough enough to survive; it will only add to a virulent us-them world that promotes the persecution of others" (Ulanov, 2001, 11). Throughout time groups of people have been ostracized by the Church. Women have been and continue to be oppressed. Minorities have been targets of racism and slavery because of an uneducated and un-contextualized reading of scripture. Homosexuals have been labeled profound sinners, turned away from many a church door. It is as if to preserve the goodness of God, the Church has squeezed out groups of human experiences deemed *wrong* in God's name, leaving room only for those

who have lived up to Holiness. Church must find a way to include the wide range of human experience in order to convey messages of hope and change. By gleaning from the environment of psychoanalysis, where space is given to the variety of human experience, the church can offer transformative healing to human beings.

The Psychoanalytic environment consists of the following components: neutrality, free association, the frame, empathy and confidence/competence. I will show how each component contributes to an environment of transformation. Though some might understand neutrality to connote an emotionless, stoic-like interaction, neutrality in the psychoanalytic environment refers to remaining equidistant from the conflicted and fragmented parts of the client's self. Aligning with a particular sub-self in the client will limit the therapist from coming to know the client's full self-- ultimately preventing the client from knowing him or her self. Neutrality is critical in creating a welcoming environment for the client. Neutrality sends a message that there is nothing in the client's experience that is out of range of the human experience, even painful experiences. Neutrality creates space for a deeper and fuller meaning of life.

Free association invites the client to relinquish narrative control. It is based on the notion that the brain is an associative mechanism. Unhindered sharing reveals one's unconscious, showing how one's internal world is organized. This revelation speaks to how one operates in the world. In essence, one behaves the way one does largely in part to how one has organized one's internal world. The process is similar to an infant depending on one's mother to manage and help organize one's world. Free association helps build trust within the psychoanalytic relationship, enabling the client to navigate the world in a safe "holding environment." This safe space is critical to the transformation

process because it comes without judgment or retribution. It gives the client a new and transformational way of relating where the whole self is welcomed.¹

The frame consists of constant and human components, creating a sense of dependable non-judging space. Each piece does not directly facilitate transformation but the gestalt of the frame plays a significant part in facilitating transformation, making a description of the frame necessary. The constant components: place, time, fee, availability outside sessions, physical contact, and responsibilities, provide stability, predictability, security and safety in a concretized manner. A client in analysis knows where to go, how the room feels, what it looks like, when to be there and how much it costs. The client knows to engage in verbal exchanges rather than physical contact, what one is being asked to do, and how to get a hold of the analyst if needed. There is so much unknown and fluidity in psychoanalysis, the constant components help set up a scaffold to structure space where the client's inner life can come out unhindered. The human components: a holding/containing place, anonymity, and neutrality² (Ott, 2001).

Winnicott's "holding environment" holds and contains in the way a mother holds a child. The anonymity allows the therapist to refrain from personal opinion and self-revelation in order to engage with the client. Though the therapeutic relationship establishes the essential background to the frame, it is the client who takes the foreground of the relationship. This attunement to the client is necessary to the transformational process.³

¹ I will expand on this topic a bit more as it is a running theme throughout, while addressing some of the other elements of the psychoanalytic process.

² Neutrality acts as a central component to psychoanalysis. This is similar to the notion of neutrality mentioned earlier, it helps set up the environment and the specificity of the frame.

³ The therapist may participate in his or her own therapy in order to address his/her own issues.

Neutrality in the frame is the therapist being “nonjudgmental, non-punitive, and not invested in particular communications or actions from the client” (Ott, 2001, 27).

The frame provides an “experience of being contained by the body and psyche of the other” (Bollas, 1999, 6). A space open to a free-flowing communicative process where the client can engage in free associating helps reveal what needs transformation. It is the “main background determinant of the unconscious implications of the transactions between patient and therapist, their meanings, purposes and functions, offering the patient a therapeutic hold and a container for his pathological projective identifications” (Langs, 1979, 526). The frame provides a space for painful and wounding experiences to find their way out of the client, to be held and reshaped by both client and therapist. It is to this stable space that the earthshaking process of transformation is invited.

Melanie Klein said empathy is the mother mirroring the child, demonstrating attunement to the child’s internal world, reassuring the child of the mother’s emotional presence. Confidence and competence tells the client the therapist is capable of navigating the unpredictable world revealed. Much of the client’s internal world is a mystery until a skilled, well-trained therapist can help sort through it. The client is being “formed and transformed by the analyst’s silences, perceptions, imaginings, constructions, interpretations, and vocal engagements, all reflecting an unconscious formal response to the movement of the patient’s character as it uses” (Bollas, 1999, 10). Due to the delicacy of the work, it is critical the therapist authentically convey his or her ability to do the work of psychoanalysis.

The Church has tended to align itself with those who are living rightly and demonize those who have not lived up to Christ-like standards. Both neutrality and free

association can help the church embrace the fullness of human experience, aligning with the whole human who walks through the doors of Church. The constancy of the frame concretizes God's presence in the Church⁴, whereas the humanity of the frame speaks to the space necessary for a human being to live, breathe and have one's being. Empathy and confidence/competence ensure a safe, emotionally present space necessary for transformation to happen within religious walls.

By detailing the components of the psychoanalytic environment, I have suggested psychoanalysis has something to enhance human transformation within the Church environment. What this looks like in the praxis of the Church, I am not sure and not the intention of this paper. Can the psychoanalytic frame be implemented in the church? Are the two disciplines best kept separate in their own right? At best, this paper proposes an introductory thought of what psychoanalysis has to offer theology. The purpose of this paper is not to answer the aforementioned questions, but to say there are ways the church has been unsuccessful at providing enough space for human transformation and basic tenets of the psychoanalytic environment might remedy this problem.

⁴ It would be important to acknowledge the success the Church has had at conveying the constancy of God.

References

- Bollas, C. (1999). *The Mystery of Things*. London: Routledge.
- Caper, R. (1999). *Immaterial Facts: Freud's Discovery of Psychic Reality and Klein's Development of his work*. New York: Routedledge.
- Griffith, J.L. & Griffith, M.E. (2002). *Encountering the Sacred in Psychotherapy: How to talk with people about their spiritual lives*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Johnson, E.L., & Jones, S.L. (2000). *Psychology & Christianity: Four Views*. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press.
- Langs, R. (1979). *The Therapeutic Environment*. New York: Jason Aronson, Inc.
- Ott, M. (2001). *First Steps in the Clinical Practice of Psychotherapy: A Practice-Oriented Psychodynamic Approach*. New Jersey: Jason Aronson, Inc.
- Richards, P.S. & Bergin, A.E. (Eds.). (2000). *Handbook of Psychotherapy and Religious Diversity*. Washington D.C: American Psychological Association.
- Rollins, W.G. (1999). *Soul and Psyche: The Bible in Psychological Perspective*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Symington, N. (1998). *Emotion & Spirit*. London: Karnac Books.
- Ulanov, A.B. (2001). *Finding Space: Winnicott, God and Psychic Reality*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Zilboorg, G. (1962). *Psychoanalysis and Religion*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy.