

TOWARDS A SPIRITUAL THEOLOGY WITHOUT A PSYCHOLOGY GAP

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WHAT IS THE TASK of a theology of spirituality as scholarly reflection on Christian life in the Spirit (Galatians 5:25)? Where can and should this thinking be carried on within the different branches of theology in the university: as an interdisciplinary subject within the areas of dogmatic and moral theology—or as an independent theological discipline? Both short discussions and in-depth examinations of this question have recently been published.¹ The following considerations seek to explore only one point: the significance attached to dialogue with *psychology*.

Interdisciplinary Collaboration Instead of Self-Sufficiency?

All the contributions mentioned above have something to say about the need to include the psychological point of view. Most clearly, Simon Peng-Keller writes that a theology of spirituality is—like liturgical scholarship—dependent on ‘dialogue with psychology and sociology’; and Wolfgang Vogl envisages, alongside the fields of systematic and biblical theology of spirituality, history of spirituality and spirituality of Christian states of life, a ‘psychology of spiritual life’. This sounds as if spiritual theology is to be understood in the way the pedagogy of religion has long been understood: as an applied, connective discipline—a view which certainly seems plausible. However, this standpoint also raises questions.

¹ This article originally appeared in the German journal *Geist und Leben*. Two 2011 issues of the same journal contain contributions from the conference Theology of Spirituality as a University Discipline, organized by the Institute for the Theology of Spirituality of the University of Vienna Catholic Theological Faculty in the winter semester of 2010–11. See especially Simon Peng-Keller, ‘Theologie der Spiritualität als Hermeneutik des geistlichen Lebens’, *Geist und Leben*, 84/3 (July–September 2011), 236–249, and Wolfgang Vogl, ‘Spirituelle Theologie ad extra und ad intra’, *Geist und Leben*, 84/4 (October–December 2011), 362–370.

Is apparently scholarly research and literature on questions of spirituality, as practised hitherto, true to this conception, or is not the dominance of systematic theology—spirituality as rewritten dogma—and historical theology within it overwhelming? Not that the significant work done in both fields should be undervalued, or their relevance as foundations brought into question—but both approaches often seem so exclusive and self-sufficient as to give the inevitable impression that a reflective spirituality needs no psychological information, or at least none that is scientifically based, but can manage quite well with a structural ‘psychology gap’.

This compartmentalisation is completely understandable. The thesis upheld by Sigmund Freud, that religion is basically a ‘universal compulsive neurosis’, or the expression of the regressive, illusionary desire for the protection of an almighty Father, has brought discredit on every form of belief, and laid a lasting burden on the relationship of the ‘religious camp’ with psychology, particularly since, for a long time, this understanding has influenced public opinion far beyond psychoanalysis. At the same time, the psychoanalytical attempt to explain all human impulses through sexual and aggressive compulsions has given the impression of a boundless permissiveness, and aroused concerns from moral theology. Carl Gustav Jung’s analytical psychology and humanistic psychology seem more friendly to religion, but have often been taken up uncritically.

And ‘academic’ scientific-empirical psychology, as it is practised in the faculties of German-speaking universities, only accepts those assumptions from depth psychology that can be based on empirical science and therefore excludes a large part of Freud’s psychoanalysis and Jung’s analytical psychology as speculative. (Psychologists teaching in medical faculties and private institutes are less critical of the statements of depth psychology.) It was and remains inaccessible for many people trained in theology, and is scarcely taken up by them.

There are reasons for this, too. First of all, the two academic cultures and ways of thinking are fundamentally different. If theologians ever look beyond the limits of their own discipline they expect a set, more or less normative image of the human person, as offered by the Bible and by dogmatic and moral theology, and find in academic psychology a confusing variety: *cognitive*, *depth* and *behavioural* psychologies, and other explanatory models, each with a limited scope and offering no comprehensive theory. Theology is accustomed to interpreting received texts; psychology, on the other hand, analyses case histories, builds hypotheses and tests them through experiment or examination, and assumes that they will be refined by further research or replaced by assumptions that offer a better

explanation. This leaves the reader who is a stranger to the discipline irritated and at sea.

This is a pity, since there would be much to explore—both in contributions to common human, secular questions about life and in the specialised research in the psychology of religion that has developed over the past forty years and is answerable to the scholarly standards of academic psychology and recognised by it. This research is carried out particularly in the United States and is still little known in the German-speaking world, although works giving an overview are available.² A theology of spirituality can only gain if it seeks for any connection at all with academic psychology.

What Role and Position Are Indicated for Psychology?

Effort is required, however, for interdisciplinary collaboration—from basic fact-finding to exchanges with experts. On the theological side, are we really convinced of the need for it and, if so, what task is assigned to psychology? How should we understand its relationship with theology? Wolfgang Vogl rightly observes that spiritual theology ‘cannot be content with a simple description of religious experience, that religious knowledge could basically also offer’. Simon Peng-Keller also asserts that the theology of spirituality does not need to do empirical research into contemporary religious seeking, because the sociology and psychology of religion are already doing this. So far, so good. But then, what is the task of ‘dialogue with psychology and sociology’, and how do the normative outlook of spirituality and the non-judgmental, empirical perspective of psychology get on together? This needs to be made clear.

Academic psychology seeks to describe, explain, predict and—if it is appropriate on clinical, pedagogical or other grounds—also change human experience, cognition and behaviour on the basis of verifiable observation (so not only through introspection). By analogy with the psychology of religious pedagogy and pastoral psychology,³ collaboration with spiritual

² On the history, see D. M. Wulff, *Psychology of Religion: Classic and Contemporary Views*, 2nd edn (New York: Wiley, 1997); Christian Henning, ‘Die Geschichte der Religionspsychologie im deutschsprachigen Raum’, in *Einführung in die Religionspsychologie*, edited by Christian Henning, Sebastian Murken and Erich Nestler (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2003), 9–90 and Constantin Klein and Heinz Streib, ‘Religionspsychologie im deutschsprachigen Raum. Ein Überblick’, *Praktische Theologie*, 46 (2011), 197–203. For an overview of research results, see Ralph W. Hood, Peter C. Hill and Bernard Spilka, *The Psychology of Religion: An Empirical Approach*, 4th edn (New York: Guilford, 2009), and Bernhard Grom, *Religionspsychologie* (Munich: Kösel, 2007).

³ See Bernhard Grom, *Religionspädagogische Psychologie des Kleinkind-, Schul- und Jugendalters*, 5th edn (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 2000), 11–31. At the interface between pastoral theology and psychology, a pastoral psychology has also developed over the decades, whose high standard is reflected in the journal *Wege zum Menschen*; nevertheless, pastoral psychology is primarily directed towards pastoral ministry, not spirituality.

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theology can be described in this way: in interdisciplinary dialogue, the systematic biblical theology of spirituality (or moral theology) addresses the 'objective', normative aspect of the life of faith, in that it works out and determines primary concerns, such as love of God and neighbour, salvation and life from the fruits of the Spirit, or specific objectives derived from them. Psychology, meanwhile, has the task of explaining the subjective and practical psychosocial and intrapsychic conditions that make reaching or failing to reach these objectives probable. In this it should use psychological knowledge and methods, through which the predetermined goals of Christian life can be described and promoted, and false developments recognised and avoided.

Such a purpose, like that of every applied discipline, goes beyond simple description. However, spiritual theology does not need to fear any conflict with academic psychology, since the latter is neutral in outlook. According to its self-understanding it has only to consider people's psychic well-being, but can be used for all purposes that are not contrary to well-being. For the same reason, psychology cannot claim to replace the theology of spirituality.

A fundamental task to be accomplished here is that of translating expressions from the biblical and spiritual tradition—salvation, life in the Spirit, faith, hope, love, conversion, humility—into psychological constructs without falsifying or curtailing the theological content: something like 'socially positive feelings and attitudes' (love of neighbour), 'stress management' (patience in suffering), 'readiness to learn or change attitudes' (conversion). (Certainly, also, psychology must not be overburdened by theology, because its methods can only be used to investigate the psychic aspect of faith.)

But is all this really necessary? Do not the biblical writings—Wisdom literature, for example—and the spiritual tradition also contain rich statements on the psychic aspect of the life and learning of faith, and do not spiritual writers, from the time of the Desert Fathers to the present day, give valuable directions from their personal observation and experience, quite without professional psychological apparatus? This is undoubtedly the case, and there is no reason to undervalue this heritage. However, these Wisdom testimonies need to be complemented because, from a contemporary point of view, they are formulated in a pre-scientific way, are not tested for their suitability for generalisation, and often lag behind new, more nuanced discoveries.

When, for example, a Thomas Aquinas considers what can be done against *tristitia*—sadness—and lists various means, including a hot bath, other experiences should be introduced that go beyond this lay psychology: what clinical psychology knows about depressive moods, and how the ‘Dark Night of the Soul’ differs from them.⁴ (This does not mean that spiritual directors should take on the role of psychotherapists.) Similarly, it should no longer be enough for the development of a contemporary spirituality of Christian marriage to point, with the Bible, to its indissolubility, interpret the great canticle of love (1 Corinthians 13), and develop a theological ethic of relationships, without including the knowledge that social psychologists and marriage counsellors have collected about problems and ways to successful partnership. Romano Guardini’s reflections on the different phases of life are certainly still worth reading,⁵ but that is no reason to ignore what more recent research into ageing has gathered, which is for the most part also relevant to spirituality.⁶

But do not the key themes of prayer, meditation and mysticism, at least, form a sovereign territory of spiritual theology with which psychology has nothing to do? Karl Rahner was not of this opinion. If it comes to the difference between everyday experiences of grace and mystical experience, he wrote once, ‘the mystic and the empirical psychologist are responsible, not the dogmatic theologian’, because the latter can only present basic considerations, but not describe the particularity of mystical experience.⁷ In fact no theory of meditative and mystical experiences can be derived from biblical testimonies; and Christian theology, in contrast to Eastern wisdom teaching, has been more interested in the objective source and confirmation of spiritual experience than in its subjective psychic process. This limitation comes from theology’s understanding of itself, and has not changed as a result of the field of ‘pneumatology’ created in the 1980s. How, then, can the subjective side of experience of the Spirit and its psychic conditions be grasped from the theological point of view?⁸ Historical studies of mysticism alone are hardly sufficient for this.

⁴ See Glòria Durà-Vilà and Simon Dein, ‘The Dark Night of the Soul: Spiritual Distress and Its Psychiatric Implications’, *Mental Health, Religion and Culture*, 12 (2009), 543–559.

⁵ See Romano Guardini, *Die Lebens alter. Ihre ethische und pädagogische Bedeutung*, 9th edn (Ostfildern: Topos, 2008 [1953]).

⁶ Bernhard Grom, ‘Zur Spiritualität des Alterns’, *Geist und Leben*, 82/4 (October–December 2009), 454–466.

⁷ See Karl Rahner, Foreword, in Carl Albrecht, *Das mystische Wort: Erleben und Sprechen in Versunkenheit* (Mainz: Grünewald, 1984).

⁸ See Bernhard Grom, ‘Der Heilige Geist und der menschliche Psyche. Ein Gespräch zwischen Psychologie und Theologie’, *Stimmen der Zeit*, 228 (2010).

Which Psychology Should We Consult?

If spiritual theology wants to be more positively open to psychology in future, it will also need to be clear as to which psychology it should call on for advice. The variety and complexity of religious experience cannot be illuminated from one single approach in psychological theory, because the explanatory ability of each is limited to a particular field. Theory of learning and depth psychology, motivational, emotional and cognitive psychology are needed, as well as phenomenological-psychiatric approaches.⁹

If these findings are to be taken into account, the current dominance of depth-psychological considerations, in publications by Eugen Drewermann and others, seems not unproblematic. It is about time, I think, to take account of the many kinds of questioning and development undergone by the assumptions of depth psychology in recent decades, and not to accept them as holy writ but to discern.

What psychoanalytical authors have developed, for example, on defence mechanisms such as repression, reaction formation or projection, or on the work of mourning, can claim plausibility even when viewed critically, and offers useful suggestions; at all events the underlying theory of the drives is not tenable and the Ego, Superego and Id model is an oversimplification. If Freud presents Francis of Assisi's sense of happiness

as a completely successful sublimation of genital love, and if spiritual authors want to understand mystical experiences as sublimations of sexuality, it should be remembered that contemporary motivational and emotional psychology assumes not that sexual impulses can be sublimated, but rather that emotions can be transformed—a quite different approach.¹⁰

And what is to be retained from the analytical psychology



⁹ See Grom, *Religionspsychologie*, 17 following.

¹⁰ 'Affect enjoys considerable freedom in the substitutability of consummatory objects. It is the transformability of the affects, not of the drives, that accounts for the Freudian concept of sublimation.' Carroll E. Izard, *Human Emotions* (New York: Plenum, 1977).

of C. G. Jung, which many spiritual authors, having recognised the need for psychological expertise, have chosen as their first and only dialogue partner? Jung's ideas have undoubtedly helped many people to pay closer attention to the psychological side of belief—that should be explicitly recognised. Still, do they meet scholarly requirements? Christian Roesler, who teaches at both the Jung Institute in Zürich and the Catholic College in Freiburg, and pleads in a well-grounded way for the Jungian school to be open to academic psychology, maintains that analytical psychology 'has as good as fallen out of scientific discourse', because Jung, after his early experiments on association, scarcely did any further empirical research.¹¹ According to Roesler's view of the state of research, which is orientated towards rehabilitation but thoroughly critical, Jung's teaching on types—which distinguishes extrovert and introvert styles of thinking, feeling, intuition and sensation—has been developed most by later testing; however, it remains unclear to what extent this still reflects Jung's theory. So for spiritual practice it may be acceptable to distinguish between thinking types, feeling types and so on, but it should be recognised that personal characteristics can also be considered from other points of view—such as skills, temperament, motives, coping strategies and value systems,¹² which are not burdened with Jung's assumption that every development of consciousness is bound up with splitting original wholeness into polarities.

How helpful and reliable is it to pay attention to the workings of archetypes—the Shadow, Animus and Anima, Mother and Child, the Old Man, the Self, and so on—which is often done superficially, disregarding their function in Jung's individuation theory? According to Roesler, analytical psychology lacks an empirically based method of categorization, and also a theoretical systematisation of the archetypes, which are characterized in a thoroughly contradictory way by Jung. For him there remain only 'archetypal patterns', in the sense of similarities between different cultures, whose universality (and genetic basis) is, however, placed in question by the influences of socialisation; he says nothing of the archetype of the self, religiously significant for Jung. In popular psychology, talk of Shadows and Animus/Anima may perfectly well have a point, but the way these expressions lump things together and their

¹¹ See Christian Roesler, *Analytische psychologie heute. Die aktuelle Stand der Forschung zur Psychologie C. G. Jungs* (Basel: Karger, 2010), 6.

¹² See Bernhard Grom, *Wer bin ich? Reichweite und Grenzen von Charaktertypen in Psychologie und Esoterik* (Cologne: Taschen, 2000).

susceptibility to clichéd thinking should be borne in mind. So, what benefit for diagnostic insight can still be expected from the doctrine of archetypes, which will also be understood differently by Jungians?

Without going into more detail about the problem of Jung's statements on the human image of God, let us note that he understands genuine religious experience one-sidedly, as an involuntary seizure by the numinous in which there remains little place for cognitive components, for personally responsible control of emotion or for a historical revelation or tradition; and the influences of socialisation are far too little considered.¹³ In contrast, what academic psychology offers is more complex, and also better grounded.

What of the Enneagram, which has gained entry into Christian circles since the 1980s? Its popular psychological typology can, in my view, give useful suggestions, when it is relativised and only used as a source of headings for an open, non-prescriptive personal reflection. For the accepted nine types cannot be clearly separated from each other; the attempts to rank them in psychological models and theories are not convincing; the assumption of a central basic tendency with a set disintegration point and integration point is problematic; and the danger of perceiving ourselves only according to this schema and making false connections to certain other qualities is not to be dismissed. Granted, there is a need for such aids, which the personality tests of scientific psychology cannot meet. For they record—and this should be a warning, in the face of the parascientific over-evaluation of the self—only a few important qualities, but not the complete portrait of a personality, and are, furthermore, not intended for personal self-diagnosis.

There Are Enough Good Suggestions

All the same, anyone who asks questions of academic psychology, without expecting a comprehensive, self-contained system, finds numerous hints, like bullet points, on spiritually significant themes. In the last twenty years various specialised disciplines—from investigations into subjective well-being (contentment with life, happiness, sense of meaning) to research into psychological health and resource-orientated clinical psychology—have taken up multiple questions about successful ways of living which were formerly the object of Wisdom-like rules of prudence. As introductory

¹³ See Grom, *Religionspsychologie*, 290–295, and Henryk Machon, *Religiose Erfahrung zwischen emotion und Kognition* (Munich: Herbert Utz, 2005), 142–195.

reading in a broad trend, which has taken up many suggestions from humanistic psychology and today often trades as Positive Psychology, two works can serve, which give a general, comprehensible overview of fruitful approaches. Both are carried along by an optimism typical of counselling, which should not be accepted uncritically.

Jochen Brandstädter's *Positive Entwicklung* ('Positive Development') discusses observations about spiritually relevant issues such as resources for lifelong development, the significance of the stubborn pursuit of goals or more flexible adaptation to them, life planning, the search for meaning, controlling emotions and, more specifically, regret or remorse, longing, calm, virtues and character strengths, as well as the wisdom of being aware of our own mortality.¹⁴

Still closer to a spirituality orientated towards help with everyday life are the examples of resource activation in psychotherapy that Renate Frank presents in her collection *Therapieziel Wohlbefinden* ('The Therapeutic Goal of Well-being'), which also contains numerous suggestions for counselling and accompaniment that are not professionally therapeutic.¹⁵ This is partly about quite simple goals and steps, such as enjoyment and pleasure, imparting mindfulness, promoting physical well-being, developing meaningful values and goals in life, self-acceptance, fulfilling the desire for relationships, fostering partnership and forgiveness as a source of well-being. Along with 'forgiveness' the meaning of 'gratitude' and corresponding instruction are also an important theme in more recent clinical psychology.¹⁶ Meanwhile discoveries about the causes of burn-out in committed and idealistic individuals can sharpen awareness of many problems in spiritual vocations.

It should not be hard to see to what extent Christian faith can, and aims to, become significant in such efforts for a fulfilled life or, likewise, why it is often not fruitful enough, because it remains enclosed in an abstract creed or ideal, remote from life. These considerations must not lead to a shallow, feel-good spirituality.

While in the specialist literature on the approaches that have been mentioned, religion is mostly referred to only on the margins, research

¹⁴ Jochen Brandstädter, *Positive Entwicklung. Zur Psychologie gelingender Lebensführung* (Heidelberg 2011).

¹⁵ *Therapieziel Wohlbefinden. Ressourcen aktivieren in der Psychotherapie*, edited by Renate Frank, 2nd edn (Berlin: Springer, 2011).

¹⁶ See Robert A. Emmons and Joanna Hill, *Words of Gratitude: For Mind, Body and Soul* (Philadelphia: Templeton, 2001); Robert A. Emmons and Charles M. Shelton, 'Gratitude and the Science of Positive Psychology', in *Handbook of Positive Psychology*, edited by C. R. Snyder and Shane J. Lopez (New York: Oxford UP, 2002), 459–471.

in religious psychology offers important specific observations on religious experience and the requirements for its development. It is worthwhile for spiritual reflection to take a look at the social and individual learning processes that encourage or hinder the development of the life of faith, in accordance with Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory of learning. An analysis of the motives of religious life need not explain it away, as theologians readily fear, as the product of emotional needs, but can demonstrate how belief addresses fundamental human aspirations and is marked by them—'incarnates' them: willingness to practise moral self-control ('conscientiousness'); the struggle for outward and inward (emotional) control when coping with sickness, anxiety or sorrow ('suffering'); the struggle for a sense of self-worth ('dignity'); openness to socially positive sensitivities and attitudes ('love of neighbour') and many more.¹⁷ Meanwhile, light will also be thrown on false developments such as scrupulosity, magical expectations, fanaticism or lack of social sensibility.

Religious psychology can also make a contribution to the understanding of extraordinary experiences such as ecstasies, visions and other revelatory occurrences, glossolalia and experiences of mystic union, and shed light on their significance for the whole life of a believer. A comprehensive and guaranteed psychological theory of meditative experiences is still to come, but many observations are available that merit attention. In sum, the psychology of religion is far from knowing everything about all of this, but certainly it knows so much that a systematic interdisciplinary discussion would be worthwhile.

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¹⁷ See Grom, *Religionspsychologie*, 60–162