

IN THE IMAGE OF GOD?

By STEPHEN PLATTEN

SPIRITUALITY IS AN ELUSIVE WORD. Few would disdain it. To reject spirituality is on the level of being in favour of sin. In the past ten years it has become more fashionable than ever as a word, but it remains an enigmatic and mercurial term. Chameleon-like it changes its skin depending upon the eyes of the one who views it. Certainly it would be restricting to see it in purely Christian terms, for example. Many would see it as reaching out beyond religion entirely. The blurred edges of Quaker spirituality where, in its more liberal manifestations, agnosticism is not far away, hint at this. Furthermore, talk of the human spirit and human aspirations has its place on the spectrum of spirituality. For the sake of this essay, however, we shall restrict ourselves to the Christian canvas. Upon that canvas we would see spirituality depicting the conjunction of theology, prayer and practical Christianity. Like holiness it is often the spurious who feel they have found it, yet in our own experience we know it when we have experienced it in others. Psychology is an equally elusive word, but for different reasons. Here the difficulty is experienced because of the plethora of different psychological schools. In themselves they may be careful to use sharply defined terms and specific concepts. Overall, however, do these correspond to objective truths about the world? Of course, in spirituality too, different schools abound and not all convince by their objectivity. Here we shall look at the conjunction of four schools of psychology with Christian spirituality. What theological models do these psychologies imply? Is psychology a symptom of post-Enlightenment culture and if so, what should it say to the Church?

I

Christianity and psychology have wooed each other with varying degrees of passion. Perhaps the most torrid relationship has been that with Jungian thought. For some, this has now settled down into a happy marriage, where there is never a cross word. Jung's pattern of thought is attractive to the Christian thinker. It is born of a religious consciousness, and Jung talked of the all-encompassing power of religion. His theory of archetypes has resonances with

some of the great themes of Christian thought. The archetype of the self is virtually identical with God in some areas of Jung's thinking. The process of individuation can be seen as a process of cooperating with God's grace. Jung argues that Jesus's life and its effects give us the clue to the powerful inner force which is urging us to change. For Jung, death is described as a 'transition'. This gives to eternal life an objective significance. It also helps people to live their lives fully to the end, without feeling conscious of there being an incipient sword of Damocles held above their heads. Christ is described as the meeting place for the archetypes and Christ is also 'the symbol of the Self'. Jung speaks too of the archetype of the child and the need to be born again, not of our own strength. In old age, contemplation may consume an increasing proportion of a person's life. The individual learns to depend more upon God and the initiative of God.

Undeniably Jung has much to offer the Christian pilgrim.¹ An uncritical synthesis may be dangerous, however. There is sometimes a strong romantic element in such a synthesis. Psychologists from other schools often attack the unscientific nature of Jung's thought. This may be unfair, when we review his extraordinarily thorough analysis of dreams. Nevertheless, there is a speculative element to Jung's thought which many treat warily. A second cause for caution is common to many psychological theories. There is a tendency to over-individualize. The introspective quality of the Jungian journey has much to teach us, but it needs to be qualified by some reflections from social psychology. The archetypes and the collective unconscious are something of a correction to this, but they can still encourage an unhealthy degree of introspection. Christian theology has always tried to balance the individual with the corporate.

If the marriage of Christianity and Jungian thought has been at times a passionate relationship, then the relationship with Carl Rogers' thought has been rather different. One might describe it as an unspoken, even a clandestine affair. This, however, does nothing to deny its reality. Carl Rogers' 'client-centred therapy' has enjoyed a considerable vogue in Christian circles. It has been the background to much 'non-directive counselling' over the past twenty years. This approach takes the client and his or her personality with the utmost seriousness. The method is non-judgemental. It considers itself neutral in its view of human development. In practice it has often come into close conjunction

with Jungian theory or post-Jungian theorists. Anthony Storr's notion of an 'integrated personality' has been popular.² Considerable merits attach to this approach. Irrational guilt, sometimes induced by Christian teaching, may be avoided. Then too, it may warn counsellors off projecting on to their clients their view of how the client's life ought to be. Increased trust in counselling amongst Christians owes much to the influence of this school.

There are, nevertheless, reasons for caution. The over-enthusiastic embracing of such methods has often led to role confusion amongst laity and clergy alike. Counselling, spiritual direction, reconciliation of the penitent, psychotherapy and pastoral care are not coterminous. Certainly there may be areas of overlap, but identification of these different categories can be confusing, and even dangerous. Careful analysis of roles yields rich dividends.³ A second danger is the assumption of 'non-directivity'. It is hard to see how any counselling relationship can remain totally neutral. Each personality will be different and will bring her or his presuppositions to a relationship. One could indeed argue that it is the unspoken or even unconscious presuppositions that are the most dangerous. This is true not only of 'one-to-one' relationships, but also in 'encounter groups', another technique closely associated with the Rogerian school.

If this encounter of psychology with Christian spirituality has been clandestine, we might see the next encounter as a 'marriage of convenience'. We are thinking now of 'psycho-developmental theories' of the human personality. Probably the most famous of these theories is that of the Swiss educationist, Jean Piaget. Piaget's work has been highly influential in the world of educational theory. Children's thought processes, he argued, develop through relatively distinct stages. There is not space for detailed analysis of Piaget's five stages here. Suffice to say that Piaget sees the individual progressing from unconditioned reflexes through to highly sophisticated conceptual thoughts. Pre-conceptual thought yields to an intuitive stage which in turn is replaced by concrete thinking. Still this falls short of generalized conceptual thought. Piaget argues that not all human beings will progress to the final phase of 'formal operations'. The ideal personality achieves this between the ages of eleven and fifteen years.⁴ Lawrence Kohlberg proposed a similar theory for moral development. He distinguishes three distinct stages. These are the pre-moral stage, then the stages of heteronomous and autonomous morality. Kohlberg has revised his theory on

a number of occasions but the basic thrust remains. At the pre-moral stage, moral concepts cannot be distinguished. In the heteronomous stage, morals are set up by the peer group or wider society. It is a stage of moral conformity. The final stage is where the individual relies on his/her own sense of moral responsibility. Both Piaget and Kohlberg argue that one cannot educate a child in certain concepts until they are in the appropriately receptive stage. Here we arrive at the marriage of convenience. Building upon these foundations, James Fowler generates a similar theory for the appropriation of religious faith.⁵

Developmental theories of learning have taught us much in our understanding of religious education. Other scholars have built upon such theories to show how the traditional liturgies of the Church can be used at specific stages of development.⁶ We have learnt how not to teach the Christian faith at inappropriate stages of development, or at least we are beginning so to learn. Still, however, there are grounds for caution in uncritically embracing developmental theories. Piaget himself issued the first caution. The stages, he argued, are not absolute and human beings vary considerably. Even so, the better understanding of personality and development is undoubtedly a fruitful discovery. A second area of reservation here is the problem of determinism. The danger is of identifying moral or religious growth with an instrumental analysis of the personality. Autonomy is interpreted as a final good. For the Christian, autonomy will only ever be a good when it stands within the broader context of the grace of God.

Our final subject for review in this rapid panorama of psychological theories is an unlikely one. In this case there has rarely been marriage, not even a clandestine affair. Instead it has often been open hostility. I refer to Christianity and its relationship with the work of Sigmund Freud. Freud's attack on religion in *The future of an illusion*, coupled with his determinism, do not make for immediate and friendly relations between Christianity and Freudian thought. This may have driven many Christians into a torrid and perhaps premature love-affair with Jungian thought. There are, however, at least two areas of mutual enrichment between Freudian thought and Christianity. First there is Freud's analysis of human personality development and his stress on the importance of the conditions of nurture, particularly with regard to early relationships. Few Christians now would pin a doctrine of original sin to a literal understanding of the story of Adam and Eve, or of Cain and Abel.

Nevertheless few would deny that we are born into a compromised world that almost certainly will lead to some degree of alienation.⁷ Freudian theory offers plausible explanations and reasons for this. As a modern myth it clothes earlier truths and clarifies them in the light of modern knowledge. Similarly in the area of conscience. Freud's use of the term 'super-ego' does not explain conscience away, nor need it undermine moral and religious objectivity and seriousness. Instead it helps us to understand how we perceive and reflect upon objective truth, or upon the presence of the divine. The lesson that this abhorrence of Freud and infatuation with Jung can teach us is a more profound analysis of the relationship between Christian thought and the various psychological models available to us. We can begin to see how the two disciplines complement or contradict each other in particular cases.

II

Part of this analysis focuses upon the relationship between the two disciplines and their relationship to so called post-Enlightenment culture. What exactly does this term mean? No one would deny that in the past century the Christian religion has found itself in a changing relationship with its surrounding culture. The growth of critical biblical study has undermined a literalistic use of the bible despite fundamentalist protests. This critical approach is itself a product of cultural change. At the same time, the use of such tools has helped marginalize religion in the eyes of some. Once they can look behind the scenes, the magic falls away, the lustre becomes tarnished. Then too the progressive absorption of so many of the services pioneered by Christianity further feeds the process of 'secularization'. Health care, education and welfare are now the responsibility of the state. The Churches cannot compete in these areas any longer. Other forces too have fed secularization. The influence of sociological theory and the growth of modern science are but two. Nevertheless, over against this two questions remain. The first is: has this revolution all taken place in the past two hundred years, with the onset of eighteenth-century scepticism? Secondly, does empirical method necessarily undermine religious truth and thus act as a negative force? Is the 'tide of faith' fast ebbing away, to use Matthew Arnold's celebrated image?

The first question is exceedingly complex. It is not clear that the eighteenth century set in motion an entirely different mode of thought. Ferment in western thought can be traced back to the

thirteenth century. Even the Dark Ages are now rarely referred to using those traditional terms. Changes in thought patterns are now seen to be more continuous than was previously argued. The growth of the empirical sciences can certainly be traced back to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Astronomers Copernicus, Kepler and Galileo established the parameters of experimental science and accurate observation. The Reformation humanists began to search for a reliable edition of the received text of the bible. The fragmentation of Christendom also contributed to movement in western thought. Given this background, the eighteenth-century Enlightenment becomes part of a longer movement in thought. This movement has brought with it an experimental, empirical mode of analysis and expression. Evidence is now a crucial factor, and observation is the means of amassing that evidence.

In contrast to this stands the Christian tradition. Over the centuries this tradition has grown from a mixture of revelation, religious experience, institutional formularies and theological speculation. The means of expression have varied. Roman Catholicism talks of the Church and the magisterium. Anglicans prize scripture, tradition and reason. The richest modes of expression in all traditions have always kept together theology and spirituality. New methods of critical study have affected this. The first rumblings of discontent from the Church were there in the sixteenth century with a response to Galileo and his popularization of Copernican theory. As the new critical disciplines developed, so the Church's response gained in momentum. The earliest German biblical critics did not have an easy time. The Huxley-Wilberforce encounter on evolution was an unhappy experience. The Roman Catholic hierarchy showed its disapproval of critical trends in its handling of the Modernists early this century. Other examples abound.

A substantial element within twentieth-century theology has been the attempt to re-negotiate the terms of engagement with developing currents of thought. In an oft quoted remark, Dean Inge noted that 'he who marries the spirit of the age soon finds himself a widower'. Equally to stand outside the wider intellectual community looking on with disdain soon maroons us on an island of intellectual obscurantism. Christianity has thus sought to continue to testify to eternal verities, but at the same time to take full account of new discoveries and new critical methods. Thus the models of human

personality and development represented by the insights of psychology are just one manifestation of this more general phenomenon. What are the theological implications of these models and how should Christian thinkers respond?

III

Our preliminary descriptions of different psychological schools have already raised some issues. Starting from there we should explore further questions raised by psychology for theology and spirituality.

As we discussed the work of Sigmund Freud, so we raised the question of the fall and original sin. This century has seen some polarization within the Christian community on these issues. An optimistic theology rooted in the theory of progress was never entirely crushed by the agonies of the Great War. So two Christian contrasting emphases still stand alongside each other. One invests more in original goodness and the other in original sin. Theological optimists have tended to be keenest on embracing psychological insights. As we have seen, an uncritical enthusiasm here may be misplaced. Nevertheless Freudian insights do not ignore the alienation into which frail human offspring are born. Instead they clothe this phenomenon with a new myth. Theological pessimists may also have their guns spiked. Psychology often points forward to human potential. Developmental theories have run in tandem with theories which speak of the integration of the personality. This reminds us of the noble tradition of Christian humanism, well represented in western Catholicism. The well-spring of this tradition is encapsulated in Irenaeus's famous epigram: 'The glory of God is a living human person (a human person fully alive); and the life of humankind is the vision of God'. Ascetic and moral theology unite and contribute to the richness of a total Christian understanding of humanity. On this first issue, then, the penetrating analysis offered by psychology can invigorate our theology and our contemplation and remind us of our own Christian treasure store which is too easily buried or lost.

Closely allied to original sin and original goodness lie questions of culpability, determinism and responsibility. This is an area where a facile absorption of psychological insights will atrophy our theology. One school of thought believes in original goodness as an overriding factor. It couples with this a stress on the factors which condition people to act as they do. The danger here is that

all human culpability is removed. Theologically such an approach abhors talk of guilt. Without a doubt the Christian tradition has tended to overload people with guilt. Both Catholic and Protestant evangelists have fallen into this trap. One may stress the confessional to an unhealthy degree. The other talks of vicarious suffering atoning for our utter depravity. To such people Freud is the Anti-Christ, he assuages all guilt. This is, of course, a travesty of Freudian thought. He aimed to expose irrational guilt and through analysis to help people come to terms with their own past and with some of the negative experiences which have helped shape them. This provides a basis for psychology and theology to work together. It shows graphically how essential it is for role confusion to be prescinded from at all costs. The psychologist's analysis is essential. Rational guilt is the corollary of a culpable act. Here sacramental reconciliation may be the one path to wholeness and healing. Psychology need not be deterministic in a nihilistic sense. It can be the partner to moral responsibility.

With this discovery of a positive partnership in the process of wholeness and healing, what does this say of sin and salvation? One problem facing the Christian teacher or preacher here is the problem of interpretation. What is sin, and from what are people to be saved? This is not meant to suggest that the world has suddenly become sinless. It is to suggest that these terms are now opaque to many. Psychology may contribute in the process of interpretation. This returns us to the psychological category of 'integration'. Integration is the bringing together of the disparate parts of one's personality. This includes those elements of one's past life with which one has not come to terms. With the addition of insights from social psychology, other terms such as alienation and liberation become significant. These categories describe the individual, or group, coming to terms with wider society. Once again at this point the theologian and spiritual director may wish to sound a warning note. Not always will it be for the health of an individual to conform to the mores of society, to all prevailing trends. So, for example, consumerism has brought its benefits, but it is inadequate as a total philosophy of life. Even within the individual, balance and integration are not simply the equivalent of redemption through the divine will. All of us will know of moments when we have felt at one with the world, but know that we remain selfish in our overall attitudes. Jung's analysis of this process is rich and sophisticated. His own religious awareness

allowed him to see the process of individuation, which begins in mid-life (from the age of approximately forty onwards), as religious as well as personally integrating. He talks of the archetype of the 'child' and the possibility, through the process of individuation, for us to be 'born again' not of our own strength. With this comes the ability to embrace greater passivity, and thus contemplation may be more significant in old age.

Even with this rich pattern described by Jung, we need to keep open a critical eye. This is particularly important with regard to the balance between individualism and human solidarity. The very introspection implied by much psychological thought requires of us a certain caution. Christian theology and spirituality have always held in tension the individual and the corporate. Paul, whom some would describe as Christianity's earliest dogmatic theologian, was keen to emphasize the solidarity of the human race and the corporate nature of our salvation in Christ. Both Catholicism and Protestantism can move down an individualistic path in certain circumstances. For Protestants the danger is greatest, and arises from the emphasis on recognizing Jesus Christ as one's personal saviour, at the expense of *corporate* salvation. In Catholic spirituality, the danger point lies in the realm of sacramental confession. Sins can too easily be seen as relating *only* to the individual's personal relationship with God. A strong theology of the Church combined with a clear statement of incarnational redemption will avoid these imbalances. Any interrelationship between psychological theory and Christian spirituality needs to be aware of these dangers. Psychology should be seen against the broad canvas of human experience and human solidarity.

This brings us to one final reflection in this brief survey of the interaction of psychology and Christian thought. Again this final concern springs from psychology's tendency to focus upon the individual. Developmental theories, for example, put much store on the quest for individual autonomy. Jungians stress the movement towards integrity of the personality. Freud emphasizes the significance of arriving at a balanced self-concept. In themselves all of these emphases are laudable enough. Nevertheless the danger of excess concentration upon the self is always there. Jokes about Americans and their teams of personal psychological consultants are legion. For the Christian, such excesses press us beyond the dangers of self-indulgence. Kenneth Kirk pointed out⁸ that self-denial may be as dangerous as selfishness. Self-denial still has the

effect of turning each of us back in upon ourselves. Kirk argues that instead it is 'the vision of God' upon which our sights must be set. This will lead us down the path towards contemplation and a true reliance upon the prevenient grace of God. Psychological insights, then, need to be balanced by the theological/spiritual emphases of grace and the divine initiative.

IV

We have so far seen a fairly complex set of interrelationships between psychology and Christian thought. This complexity is due to the immense variety both in psychological theory and also in Christian theology and spirituality. Complexity also issues from the fact that at certain points the two different disciplines complement each other, whereas on other occasions they criticize each other. There is, however, one underlying and consistent strand. This is the common ground of models, archetypes and images. Each of these three words has its own individual significance, but each may contribute to a wider 'myth'. By myth we mean simply an all-embracing set of images which can assist us in describing and understanding human existence. The term myth is easily misunderstood. It does not imply fantasy or untruth. Indeed the myth can be a means of better appreciating ultimate truths. How can the images of Christianity inform the wider myths of psychology? Conversely how can psychology reinvigorate some of the moribund images and models of the Christian tradition?

Jung contributed richly to our understanding of the human psyche in his discovery of archetypes, and in his insistence upon taking seriously our experience. Nowhere was this more important than in what he had to say of religion. His insistence on religious experience over against dogma is, however, less healthy. Again individualism and religious extravagance are the danger. Dogma is not to be seen as a rigid, formalized and sterile monolith. Rather it is the provisional summary of the corporate Christian religious experience upon a certain doctrinal issue, or upon an archetype. It might relate to salvation/liberation. It might relate to grace and free will. There is an immense variety of ways into dogma and archetypes. A healthy relationship between psychology and Christian thought will cherish religious experience but will also be concerned to do justice to the sum of Christian experience both now and down the centuries. Contradictory psychological and theological images will assist in this.

As we have already seen, psychology may also help us better to understand our own religious experience and the experience of the tradition. So, we looked at Freud's contribution to conscience and the significance of human influences upon our early development. Much may be gleaned here for a contemporary understanding of the 'fall'. The myths of Adam and Eve, of Cain and Abel remain as useful and vivid pictures, windows on the truth. We no longer see these myths as tied to one historical moment, however; the fall is a continuous experience for humanity throughout history.⁹ Freudian psychology provides us with an additional myth which allows Christian theologians to understand better what we believe to be an eternal truth. Austin Farrer called this process 'the rebirth of images'.¹⁰ Farrer maintained that Christian truth is transmitted to us not through a series of theorems or propositions, but rather through a number of controlling and subsidiary images. This he argued with regard to scripture as well as with regard to natural theology.¹¹ If this is so, then it is important to treat these images with care. They should not be locked away in a dusty cupboard. Instead they should be on display, ready to be viewed again and again from new aspects, and ready to teach us more about our humanity and also about divine activity in our world. Psychology in all its variety may help us in this process.

Perhaps, in this brief set of reflections, theology should have the last word. The relationship between psychology and theology is two-way. An analogy may help us to see how theology may contribute to psychology. Earlier this century, Marxist thought was felt by many to undermine Christian truth. It relativized its significance. In the late 1920s Reinhold Niebuhr, the American Protestant theologian, became a Marxist for a brief period. His faith was not eroded. When he ceased to be a Marxist, he allowed his Christian thought to be informed by what he had learnt.¹² At the same time, he warned politicians that they ignored Christian theology, and especially the doctrine of the fall, at their peril. Utopianism is naive. Economics and politics must learn from theology. Similar lessons may be there for the learning from psychology. Grace and the divine initiative may be the most important starting point from which to uncover these lessons. They may be a significant counter to human hubris.

NOTES

¹ See Christopher Bryant's excellent and wholly uncritical analysis: *Jung and the Christian way* (London, 1988).

² Storr, Anthony: *The integrity of the personality* (Harmondsworth, 1970).

³ Cf the perceptive analysis in Kenneth Leech, *Soul friend* (London, 1977) especially chapter 3, and also the interesting article by Christopher Moody, 'Pastors or Counsellors?' *Theology*, vol XCI, no 743 (September 1988), pp 387-392.

⁴ For a succinct account see Stones, Eileen: *An introduction to educational psychology* (London, 1966), pp 133ff.

⁵ Fowler, James: *Stages of faith* (New York, 1981). See also the earlier book by Ronald Goldman, *Readiness for religion* (London, 1965).

⁶ See, for example, Westerhoff III, John H. and Willimon, William H.: *Liturgy and learning through the life cycle* (New York, 1986). See also some of the imaginative work issuing from the Catechetical Movement. For an introduction see: Ball, Peter: *Journey into faith* (London, 1984).

⁷ Cf Louis McNiece's powerful poem, 'Prayer before birth': 'I am not yet born. . .'

⁸ Kirk, Kenneth: *The vision of God* (London, 1934; [abridged edition 1977]).

⁹ Cf Wiles, Maurice: 'Does Christology rest upon a mistake?', *Working papers in doctrine* (London, 1976), pp 122ff.

¹⁰ Farrer, Austin: *A rebirth of images* (London, 1949).

¹¹ See his Bampton Lectures, *The glass of vision* (London, 1948).

¹² See his classic, *Moral man and immoral society* (New York, 1932).