

Toward Mutual Recognition: Relational Psychoanalysis and the Christian Narrative

MARIE T. HOFFMAN, ROUTLEDGE, NEW YORK, 2011, 278 pp. ISBN 978-0415999137

Theology and psychoanalytic theory have often been framed as living at odds with each other. Psychoanalytic and depth psychological schools have been accused of dismissing God as illusion, or reducing God to an impulse within the psyche, or even a non-determined 'experience' which has no grounding and hence no verification in orthodox faith traditions. On the theological side, the accusations received have ranged from that of God being a projection of infantile omnipotence, carrier of a sadistic super-ego projection as a result of unresolved Oedipal complexes, and famously, as promoting an illusion which gives shelter from the harsh reality with which we must reckon if we are to become fully adult (Freud).

Yet, often quietly and sometimes in the shadows, there have been theorists who have pondered their own clinical experiences and the possibilities for encountering what some might call God, others some kind of reality with a capital 'R,' witnessed therein. While traditional religious language has often been avoided, the presence of some sort of Reality meriting recognition has seeped through, showing up in theories such as Bion's, 'O,' Symington's understanding of conscience, or Rizzuto's considering the possibility of the silent presence of an apophatic God in communion with Winnicott's 'incommunicable' core at the center of the self. This 'God' does not always act in accordance with religious expectations, but seems to have in attendance the fragrance of freedom, creativity, spontaneity, integration, and of the unexpected-even of play. In Marie Hoffman's new book, *Toward Mutual Recognition: Relational Psychoanalysis and the Christian Narrative*, one might posit that God is recognized as One who brings healing through relatedness.

In this work, the relational school of psychoanalysis is brought into direct dialogue with a specifically Christian religious perspective, albeit mediated through a very particular lens. Known for its emphasis on intersubjectivity, an orientation towards the 'third' which appears between analyst and analysand which both experience, this school (which the author describes as using broadly based theories that "hold to a view of relationship as the epicenter of change" (p.2)) seems well aligned for discourse with the Christian narrative, based in a Judeo-Christian understanding of a covenantal, relational God. Hoffman chooses to use a Hegelian interpretation to present the Christian narrative, which is consistent with the previous work done using Hegel in relational psychoanalytical theory. Using Ricoeur to mediate the analogues of clinical experience, she builds the core of her argument for the influence of Judeo-Christian narratives on psychoanalytic theory around a framework of analogues between relational psychoanalytical clinical movements of *identification*, *surrender*, and *gratitude* and Hegel's philosophical working out of the *Incarnation*,

Crucifixion, and *Resurrection*, respectively. Overlaid on this is a collation of Ricoeur's 'gifts' of faith, love, and hope, which she correlates to the three respective movements.

Her use of Hegel focuses on the immanence of God in the *Incarnation* among humanity, seen by analogue in the therapeutic call -- which she describes beautifully as a prophetic call to a ministry of healing and liberation -- and as interpreted in this initial movement as *identification*, to choose freely to identify with the patient and incarnate into what they need. Yet, the second movement of healing will eventually demand that this identification be disrupted, as woundedness comes to light through what is clinically termed 'enactment,' where the analytic couple gets positioned into painful encounters that will show the ruptures suffered by the psyche of the analysand (and the analyst as well in countertransference). This pain, and even loss of control of the process, has to be suffered and endured by both analyst and analysand, in what she terms *surrender*. This second movement she correlates with *Crucifixion*, where God willingly undergoes negation. In the third movement she posits that the experience of *Resurrection* is that of the *gratitude* awakened by recognition of the true subjectivity of the 'other,' on whom we are dependent, and who has survived attempted destruction. Relatedness to this 'other' is made possible by this survival, and an experience ensues of the 'superabundant' goodness of the transformative gift of grace received, which in turn elicits a desire to give forth to others.

Hoffman's book allows the reader various points of access into the plenitude of material it offers. As she writes in the introduction, it is a work that is a product of years of thought, and her thinking feels informed, weighty, complex, nuanced and, at times, determined. This is a dense work that explores charged possibilities in short formats. She takes the time to sketch contextual and historical backdrops to many of the various ideas she puts forth, but many sections merit—and hopefully will elicit—greater consideration than would be possible in one work, the additional cultivation of which would enrich both the theological and psychoanalytical fields. In addition to working through her core proposal concerning the analogues between clinical work and the Christian narrative, her digging turns up an overview of a number of famous theorists and their linkages to religious thought. She gives particular attention to Ronald Fairbairn and Donald Winnicott, linking them to Calvinist and Wesleyan thought respectively, with ramifications for their understandings of 'original sin' and 'original goodness' as well. She offers clinical vignettes compiled with the latest findings of neuroscience and epigenetics, while interweaving trauma theory into her overall clinical orientation. For anyone interested in a discussion of the covenantal and relational God of Jewish and Christian tradition and how this understanding of God has impacted the evolution of psychoanalytic theory from Freud's earliest impulse imperatives to later theorists' emphasis on the ego as relationship-seeking, her section on Ferenczi will be important.

Undergirding the theory, she also presents a clinical case study of absolutely devastating trauma, and of deeply moving courage, devotion, and dedication to the analytic process. She shows the movements of both analyst and analysand in and out of the stages of identification, surrender, and gratitude as they navigate their way as an analytic couple through the stormy and often frightening 'third' which beckons them on, eventually to inspiring vistas of life in abundance, and the experiencing of which

she also—in keeping with her main argument—correlates in terms of Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Resurrection.

Early in the book, Hoffman states that her central project is to ‘explore the influence of the Christian narrative on the theories, clinical practices and history of psychoanalysis’. (p.2) In effect, she does this on three simultaneous tracks: the first being her project of building a framework of analogues, the second her exploration of the historical roots of influence on psychoanalysis by Jewish and Christian narratives, and the third being the case study of clinical work done in the context of not only clinical theory but an open sharing of the Christian faith. Thus, she succeeds greatly in bringing to the fore many areas for consideration for those who are interested in how Christianity and psychoanalytic theory have been in dialogue in the past century, even when not officially speaking to each other.

Hoffman is clear that this is not primarily a theological treatise. Yet, because it so clearly in dialogue with a theological narrative, it cannot help but garner theological attention. The use of analogues gives credence to a resonance between the two disciplines, though this argument is just as compellingly made by her examination of historical influences, but I find myself wondering whether the complexity and structure of the analogues leaves enough breathing room for the mystery of the crucible of transformation and healing. At times it feels that the healing movement is rooted in a kind of *imitatio Christi* on the part of the analyst, with a correspondingly heightened notion of inequality between analyst and analysand, at least theoretically, putting the ‘third’ subject to the circumstantial disparities between physician and patient, but not speaking as much to the ‘third’ in light of God. The linear flavor of the progression in the analogues, in particular in the correlation of Ricoeur’s ‘gifts’ of faith, love, and hope to the three clinical movements and three ‘salvific movements’ respectively, sometimes feels a bit tight. I think equally compelling arguments could be made that each gift is present in each movement, just as some theologians, for example in the patristic tradition, would argue that the Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Resurrection form a whole movement of God’s economy and can therefore not be understood separately. Such a theological exploration might also question the tenability of the aforementioned intimated parallels concerning the inequality between God and humanity, in Hegel, and between the analyst and analysand, clinically, as the intersubjective clinical ‘third’ could be seen as held by yet a greater Other in relationship to Whom they are both equal and Who births life in the clinical setting in mysterious and unexpected ways.

Yet, even for those working specifically with a theological orientation and who may wish to approach more cautiously the theological assumptions gestured towards in this work, this book extends a hand from another discipline with an invitation to consider the practical impact that particular theological narratives have and can continue to have in the search for deep healing and human flourishing. With its plenitude of stimulating research, densely packed theory, and heartfelt convictions, it

is a weighty dialogue partner in the discourse between theology and psychoanalysis, and a moving testament to the dedication to healing shown by analyst and analysand.

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