

Methodical Madness: The "Psychotic" and the "Spiritual" in the Development of Western Religious Hermeneutics

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A paper presented in the Mysticism Group of the American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting, Nashville, TN, USA, November 18-21, 2000.

Abstract:

A discussion of states of "divine madness" can be usefully placed within the context of the evolution of Western sacred hermeneutics. Both Western religion and science lack the cognitive models and language to describe the difference between "psychosis" and "spiritual state" in a nuanced way, just as Western culture fails to support those experiencing these states with a viable cognitive language. The possibility for such a language was left behind when Western Christianity, in abandoning its Middle Eastern roots, emphasized univalence and consistency in the language of faith and exiled language that expressed multivalence and diversity. The framework for multivalence in language still exists in the form of Jewish and Islamic mystical hermeneutical styles, which can be usefully placed in dialogue with the models of post-modern inquiry.

In this paper, I am suggesting that a discussion of states of "divine madness" can be usefully placed within the context of the evolution of Western sacred hermeneutics. The history of Western interpretation theory sheds light on the split between Western religion and science. This split underlies questions about the differences or similarities between spiritual and psychotic states.

In investigating any two areas that seem to lie in separate domains, such as psychotic and spiritual states, or religion and science, a hermeneutical approach looks at the possibility that the grounds for separating the categories

may lie in an unacknowledged language problem. What we call a “limit of language” in discussing such states may in fact be only a limit of modern Western language and the way in which it is used currently by both psychology and theology. Behind the actual words used may lie unstated presumptions about the nature of reality, presumptions that are not held by all cultures.

Recent studies in cognitive psychology suggest that Western psychology still struggles for the language to describe the difference between a "psychotic" and a "spiritual" state in a nuanced way (for instance in the new anthology on psychosis and spirituality edited by Isabel Clarke, 2000). For instance, Claridge (2000) and others have sought to define a new personality type called “schizotypy” which is neutral with respect to illness or pre-disposing to illness and yet describes a person prone to “skinlessness” (or weakened cognitive inhibition), enhanced access to internal and external events, the reduced ability to limit the contents of consciousness and “transliminality.” In this view, the difference between non-pathological “psychoticism” and actual “psychosis” depends on history, circumstances and genetic pre-disposition.

Clarke herself (2000) proposes a “discontinuity” theory, which states that polarization of psychotic states and spiritual ones is a false dichotomy. She combines work by Kelly (the “personal construct theory”) as well as Teasdale and Barnard (“interacting cognitive subsystems,” 1993) to suggest, among other things, that a “transliminal experience” means operating beyond a construct system and that, from an informational processing model point of view, a transliminal experience is created by a breakdown between the implicational and propositional subsystems of the mind. According to Clarke, the advantage of

this model is that it brings psychosis into the realm of universal human experience.

In both of these models, however, the attempt to describe a spiritual or mystical state in terms of modern psychology suffers from the need to begin with the Western language of pathology. In other words, does the mere presence of transliminality, reduced ability to limit the contents of consciousness, and the other definitions offered really describe the diverse experiences of the great mystics of all traditions, many of which also include a very practical ability to handle interpersonal relationships and accomplishment in the world?

The Limits of Current Language

Looking more broadly, and with the hermeneutical questions posed above in mind, both scientists and theologians have noted the current limits of Western language and interpretation. A number of scientists have questioned whether Western language, influenced by Newtonian physics, can express the new findings about either the development of the cosmos or its behaviour at the sub-atomic level. For instance, in considering the new findings of physics about the origin and development of the universe, physicist Brian Swimme and theologian Thomas Berry (1992) doubt whether we even have the language to properly convey what has been discovered so far:

To articulate anew our orientation in the universe requires the use of language which does not yet exist, for each extant language harbours its own attitudes, its own assumptions, its own cosmology.... Any cosmology whose language can be completely understood by using one of the standard dictionaries belongs to a former era. (24)

Swimme and Berry go on to point out that, while in the classical era science formerly repudiated any “anthropomorphic” language in speaking about the universe--that is, any description of the cosmos acting like a human being--it made an equally grievous error in seeking to describe the universe in terms of a machine.

[During the rise of Newtonian science] the western mind had become completely fascinated with the physical dimensions of the universe.... A univocal language was needed, one whose words were in direct, one-to-one relationship with the particular physical aspects under consideration. In this way, anthropomorphic language was abandoned in favour of mechanomorphic language. (36)

According to some theologians, this machine model for language also infected the translations and study of sacred scriptures in the West for the past several hundred years. It led first to an over-emphasis on “literalism”--the study of what was supposedly present in the original with nothing added or deleted--and second to the extreme relativism of literary criticism which ended up dividing and analysing virtually all meaning and wisdom out of sacred texts.

The Christian theologian Matthew Fox (1990) notes:

A paradigm shift requires a new pair of glasses by which to look anew at our inherited treasures. Just as all translations of our mystics are affected by the ideology or worldview of the translator, so the same is true of our Scriptures. Those who have lost a cosmology and the mysticism that accompanies it hardly recognize that fact when they translate the Bible for us. (ix)

The Search for a Nuanced Language of Spiritual Experience.

These voices of both Western science and religion cite the need for a language that can describe more nuanced views both of the human relationship to the cosmos and to its own psychic life. To find such a view, the present

discussion looks at the origins of Western science and religion. It proposes that, beginning with the imperialization of Christianity under the Roman Empire, European culture extracted and valorized a limited language concerning non-ordinary states from an underlying Middle Eastern context, but without fully understanding the language or worldview involved. The process of extraction was also a refining—what was left behind was greater than what was used—similar to the extraction and refining of oil.

I am proposing here that both Western Christian theology and, consequently, Western science arise from a vision that divides humanity, nature and cosmos. This worldview affects their entire development and consequent ways of knowing. This divided view also impacts the way that both Western science and religion view “non-ordinary” states of awareness, whether labelled “spiritual” or “psychotic.”

For instance, from the standpoint of Middle Eastern Semitic languages like Hebrew, Aramaic or Arabic, which were spoken by the major prophets of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the word that means “spirit” also stands for breath, air, wind or atmosphere. If Jesus said anything about “Holy Spirit,” then from a Middle Eastern interpretative viewpoint, he was also saying something about Sacred Breath, that is, the source from which all breathing—human and non-human comes. This is what might be called today a psychophysical construct. Correspondingly, these languages do not divide the life of a being—human or non-human—into the separate categories of mind, body, psyche or spirit. These categories stem from primarily Greek philosophy.

As Thorlief Boman (1960) notes in his comparison of Hebrew and Greek thought, the Middle Eastern languages articulate different types of diversity

within the life of a being, but not these. Boman's study supports this view of an historical shift from a phenomenological (Middle Eastern) to an objectified (Western) language of experience. He notes, for example, that Greek and Hebrew presume a different way of encountering the world somatically. The Greek language specializes in sight impressions, based on images that can be construed to have objectivity, form and immutability. The Hebrew language bases perception primarily on hearing as well as on other somatic sensations such as light, warmth, odour, flavour and proprioception (p. 206).

Parallel to this, from the standpoint of Greek (and most Western thinking) the Semitic languages maintain a continuum between "inner" and "outer" states, rather than a radical separation. As Boman notes, the separation that European language thinking finds in the notions of being and becoming also do not adhere. Stative verbs in Hebrew express "neither being nor becoming but assert an action of the subject proceeding from within" (33-34).

Supporting this, Semitic languages do not have prepositions that clearly delineate between what Western psychology calls "inner" and "outer" reality. The same preposition (for instance, men in Aramaic) stands simultaneously for "within" and "among." Psycho-linguistically, one simultaneously participates in two communities of entities—one that Western science would call psychological, the other cosmological. For instance, if or when Jesus referred to a "kingdom of heaven," this kingdom was, from a Middle Eastern linguistical point of view, always both "within" and "among" his listeners and himself.

This use of language might be called "multivalent" as opposed to the univalent use that dominates Western scientific or theological categories, where one places a value on exactitude: one word means one thing. However, in

evaluating spiritual/psychotic states that are, by definition, multivalent, and subject to shifts in category, there is value in investigating a use of language that can express subtlety and paradox.

If we consider a use of language that places the fields that Western science calls psychology and cosmology on a continuum rather than in separate compartments, then we can begin to see how the current discussion affects the entire separation between Western science and religion.

Islamic scholar Seyyed Hossain Nasr (1968) has proposed that the choices that organised Western Christianity after its imperialisation further weakened its cosmology--the world view of humanity in relation to nature--in favour of its theology, the relationship of humanity to God, excluding nature. Nasr maintains that this shift was prompted by an over-reaction to Greek naturalism that prevailed in the Roman empire. Unfortunately, Christianity's increased emphasis on the transcendent divorced from the immanent also damaged its subsequent natural theology.

Christianity, therefore, reacted against this naturalism by emphasising the boundary between the supernatural and the natural and by making the distinction between the natural and supernatural so strict as to come near to depriving nature of the inner spirit that breathes through all things (pp. 55-56).

I am suggesting in this paper that, whether by following an orthodox religious interpretation or by reacting against this interpretation in the form of the Enlightenment and the Western scientific revolutions, Western culture evolves without a language or worldview that can conceptualise expanded states of consciousness in a healthy way. Its entire way of conceptualising the subject

under question is neither fully Greek nor fully Semitic, but rather a divided or schizoid mixture of the two.

Jewish and Islamic Mystical Hermeneutics.

We do find such a multivalent language of spiritual experience in the so-called mystical hermeneutics of both Judaism (called midrash) and Islam (called ta'wil). The word “mystical” must again be taken cautiously, since the Semitic languages do not distinguish between the Western sense of mystical (meaning an inner, esoteric way) and the prophetic (an outer, exoteric engagement).

A number of texts and oral traditions from the Jewish and Islamic mystical traditions mention a multileveled, symbolic and interpretative approach to sacred texts. The basis for these traditions lies in qualities of the Semitic languages, which as I touched upon above, can lead to ambiguity in the meaning of a particular text. Both Jewish and Islamic traditions of mystical hermeneutic point to the importance of individual letters and letter-combinations called roots. The Semitic languages depend upon root-and-pattern systems that allow a text to be rendered literally in several different ways.

The root-and-pattern system of Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic, and the interpretative methods that evolved from it, could be compared to the musical system of Indian ragas in which families of notes and scales interlink and “intermarry” to produce other scales. The closest equivalent in Western music is the free-form improvisations on a theme found in jazz. Like jazz--and raga--learning midrashic interpretation, especially in the mystical trends in Judaism and Islam, seemed to depend as much upon feeling as upon technique, as much upon individual contemplative experience as upon scholarship. Particularly in

the Kabbalistic and later Hasidic circles, these techniques were passed on in an oral tradition, that included a community of voices, both present and past, upon which subsequent interpretations were built, using the possibilities in the language as well as traditional stories and folklore.

A number of the earliest texts from the Jewish mystical tradition mention a symbolic, interpretative approach to sacred texts. This approach begins with a study of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet themselves, which come to symbolise cosmic or universal patterns of energy. One of the earliest Jewish mystical texts (first to sixth century, C.E.), the *Sepher Yitzirah* (Book of Creation, see Kaplan 1990), establishes the unique properties of the Hebrew language in an ontological sense--that is, as a language that not only communicates meaning but also can create being. Later Kabbalistic texts, such as the *Sepher ha-Zohar* ("Book of Splendour") promote the ideas that the interpretation of a given text can vary according to the cycle of existence in which the community is currently living, and that every letter, word, sentence and phrase of the scripture may exist simultaneously on several levels of meaning.

Expressing a post-modern Jewish voice, Jewish linguist Shulamith Hareven notes certain unique features of the Hebrew language that make word-for-word translation misleading, if not impossible:

Hebrew, a synchronic language, holds certain precise ethical and philosophical value concepts that belong only to Hebrew and to Judaism and that are really untranslatable. Such words cannot be learned simply as words, without their philosophical context. Some are whole teachings.... As a written language Hebrew is basically a skeletal, shorthand structure, in which the main process takes place in thought (p. 41).

Previously, Martin Buber (1994) had made a similar comment in relation to translations of the Bible itself:

Revelation is accomplished in the human body and the human voice, i.e., in this body and this voice, in the mystery of their uniqueness. The prophet's proclamation consists not only of its symbols and parables, but also of the fundamental sensory concreteness of even the subtlest Hebrew concepts, of the taut stretching in the architecture of the ancient Hebrew sentence, of the Hebrew manner of relating adjacent or even widely separated words through the similarity of verbal root or similarity of sound, of the powerful movement of Hebrew rhythm that goes beyond all meter (p. 74).

In mystical Islam, a similar hermeneutical approach concerns the rendering and translation of the 99 "Beautiful Names" of Allah as well as the translation and interpretation of the Arabic letters and words of the Quran itself (Muzaffreddin, 1978, p. 7). Name of Allah (p.7).

Islamic scholar Annemarie Schimmel (1992) comments on the profundity of Quranic interpretation attempted by Islamic mystics and served by the Arabic language itself:

[T]he mystics of Islam ... knew that a deeper meaning lies behind the words of the text and that one has to penetrate to the true core. It may be an exaggeration that an early mystic supposedly knew 7,000 interpretations for each verse of the Koran, but the search for the never-ending meanings of the Koran has continued through the ages. The Arabic language has been very helpful in this respect with its almost infinite possibilities of developing the roots of words and forming cross-relations between expressions (p. 48).

In this regard, the most profound and complex mystical hermeneutic, called ta'wîl, has been preserved primarily by mystics in the Shi'ite branches of Islam. Similar to the Kabbalistic approaches to midrash, ta'wîl uses the sacred text or word as a symbolic means to contact a greater cosmic reality. As French Islamist Henry Corbin points out (1986, p. 134), the word ta'wîl itself indicates

“an exegesis which is at the same time an exodus, a going out of the soul toward the Soul.”

Nasr relates the practice of ta'wîl to Islam's unified cosmology of human, nature and divine. Nature is considered the ultimate sacred text (al-Qur'an al takwini), of which the Quran revealed to Muhammad is a reflection (al- Qur'an al-tadwini). The approach to nature as the ultimate sacred text is interdependent with a living, symbolic relationship to the written or spoken revelation (1968, p. 95).

The main Middle Eastern languages spoken by the prophets of Judaism, Christianity and Islam lend themselves to these symbolic, poetic, multileveled and open-ended interpretations. One word can literally have many different meanings. Word play in the form of assonance, alliteration and parallelism abounds. The words of a prophet or mystic in this tradition-- stories, prayers and visionary statements-- seem virtually guaranteed to challenge listeners to understand them according to their own life experience.

Other Stories, Other States of Consciousness.

For instance, the Hebrew words that Genesis uses for “heaven” and “earth” can be understood, from a cosmological standpoint, as the two major ways our universe has developed. From a psychological perspective, they can be seen as the two major ways that we can encounter our universe. “Heaven” can refer to the way in which everything is united in community as though by one sound, ray of light or vibrating wave. “Earth” can refer to the individuality of every being--the way that the universe has mysteriously produced such abundant diversity that no two clouds, blades of grass or human beings are

exactly the same. The Hebrew word for “heaven” refers to the psychological sense of “we,” a shared sense of connectedness with other beings or the entire cosmos. The word for “earth” refers to our sense of “I,” one’s own individual sense of purpose.

A contemporary midrash might compare Genesis 1:1 to the way physicists talk about seeing light as wave and particle simultaneously. Another layer of the midrash might look at the way one balances the communal and individual aspects of one’s personal life. Or the way in which one handles visionary (wave-based, vibratory) life in relation to everyday (particle-based, material) life.

The concept of heaven as a reward in the future, for some definition of the well-lived life or for believing a particular set of principles, is a latter innovation of Western Christian theology, as is the notion of “earth” as a place flawed by “original sin.” Neither concept would have been known to the Hebrew prophets or Jesus.

So one completely accurate way to translate the first verse of Genesis in a midrashic sense would be:

In the time before time,
in principle and archetype,
in beginningness,
the One and the Many,
the unnameable Force behind the universe
that was, is and will be,
established two fundamental ways the universe works:
the particle and the wave,
the “I” and “we” of existence.

Likewise, the Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic words usually translated “self” or “soul” (nephesh, naphsha or nafs) present the image of a community of voices that can be experienced either inside or outside (within or among). I do

not have a soul, I am a soul. That is, one does not possess a “self” or “soul” in this sense, nor is the self or soul housed within an un-souled “body” or “mind.” Instead, one experiences life as a self-soul in various ways. One way, expressed by the words above, reflects the “earth” or particle reality of the self, the “I-ness,” as it were. The other way (expressed by the words ruach, Heb.; ruha, Aramaic, or ruh, Arabic) reflects the “heaven” or wave reality of the self, the “we-ness.” These are also the words mentioned above that can be translated as breath or spirit. In this “we” dimension occur various sorts of “non-ordinary” (from a Western viewpoint) states of awareness

A similar midrashic approach can be applied to words of Jesus in the Gospels. For example, if or when Jesus gave the advice, “Love your neighbour as yourself,” the phrase in Aramaic (or in any Semitic language) would need to express to our ears something like, “Love your neighbour the same way that you love your limited community of voices, the subconscious ones as well as those with whom you live outwardly.”

We also find the notion of the self as a collection of voices stated poetically in Jewish Wisdom literature. Viewed in the original language, using a midrashic interpretative style, the Hebrew book of Proverbs speaks of an psychic process or archetype in all beings that gathers the various, seemingly separate, voices into a harmonious and healthy “I.” This gathering, relating voice in the self is called in Hebrew Hokhmah, which can be translated as the “nurturing breath from underneath and within,” or as Sacred Sense or Holy Wisdom. This archetype or psychic organising force is better known by her later Greek name, Sophia.

In order to deal with such texts, I have proposed (in an article published last year in Sheffield’s Currents in Research series, 1999b) an open translation

method that combines traditional midrashic techniques with the post-modern social science paradigm of inquiry in a “hermeneutic of indeterminacy.”

We can combine the multivalence of the words spirit, soul, heaven and earth in Semitic languages to apply a midrashic method to another reported saying of Jesus:

Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. (Matthew 18:18-19, KJV)

This passage has sometimes been interpreted to mean that Jesus gave particular followers of his (later identified in various ways with church hierarchies) a special ability to forgive sins. However, if we take a Semitic language view, the worlds of “heaven” and “earth” can be seen to interpenetrate at all times. A person then has a choice about how to use his or her energies: some of them invested in the world of vision and vibration, some in the world of form and manifestation.

Generally, Western psychology views those who spend too much time in the visionary or “heaven” world as more in need of help than those who invest too much time creating and protecting possessions in the “earth” one. Again, the degree of the “problem” depends upon the social construction given to word “reality.” Using a midrashic method with the implied psychology of the Semitic languages, the passage in question may simply be dealing with the challenge of finding a balance between what Clarke calls everyday and transliminal experience.

In another article published this year (in Clarke’s above-mentioned anthology, Douglas-Klotz, 2000), I have placed the midrashic approach to

Western scriptures in dialogue with the insights of somatic psychology, particularly as they both regard “unhealthy” and “healthy” experiences of non-ordinary (from a Western viewpoint) states of awareness. For instance, both somatic psychology and Middle Eastern mystical practice emphasise the importance of breathing awareness in determining answers to the questions: Who or what is doing the feeling and perceiving? Does the awareness of breathing help to build a healthy “self,” however defined, or does it lead to the dissolution of the “self.”

Other methods historically used in Middle Eastern mysticism to build a dynamic “I am,” capable of fluid changes of consciousness, include poetic language, and storytelling. For instance, one way that many Sufi teachers prepare the student for shifts of consciousness is through the use of paradoxical stories. These so-called teaching stories express a multivalent reality that mimics the non-linear logic of spiritual states. They also model a cognitive system or subsystem that allows for paradox, fluidity and diversity and which the student can internalise in order to deal with shifts of awareness. For instance, many Sufi teaching stories focus on the “wise fool” Mulla Nasruddin. In most of the Mulla stories, one is never certain whether Mulla is crazy or enlightened or both.

Like the multivalent language used in mystical hermeneutics and the consideration of sacred texts, most Sufi stories aim to help students “unlearn,” that is, to go beyond the emotional boundaries and mental concepts that enclose the sense of who they think they are. What one sees is dependant not only upon who is doing the seeing, but upon which aspects of the self (which state of consciousness) is involved.

As students gradually go beyond these boundaries, they become acclimatised to the province of what one may call “wild mind.” This wild mind is like an inner landscape that is both richer and less controlled than the safety of fixed ideas and rules. It is a fluid and changing reality that one must constantly relate to the sense of “I am” in the way that a potter centres a lump of clay on the wheel. By comparison, Gregory Bateson (for instance, 1990, p. 265ff) called a similar approach to epistemology and psychology the “ecology of mind,” recognising that consciousness operates much more like an ecosystem than anything else, and that “mind” is embedded in an ecological reality, within and without.

Seven hundred years earlier, the Persian Sufi Mevlana Jelaluddin Rumi said something similar (Barks translation, 1990, p. 113):

The inner being of a human being
is a jungle. Sometimes wolves dominate.,
sometimes wild hogs. Be wary when you breathe!

At one moment gentle, generous qualities,
like Joseph's pass from one nature to another.
The next moment vicious qualities
move in hidden ways.

A bear begins to dance.
A goat kneels!

Together, I believe that the methods of both interpretation and spiritual practice can supply a verbal and somatic language that can begin to describe nuances in non-ordinary states of awareness otherwise characterized by the terms spiritual and psychotic.

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