

Missing Stories: Psychosis, Spirituality and the Development of Western Religious Hermeneutics

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(Published in Isabel Clarke, Ed., Psychosis and Spirituality: Exploring the New Frontier. London: Whurr Publishers. 2001).

This chapter puts the discussion of "spiritual" and "psychotic" in the context of the tension between the way Christianity has developed in the West and the language of Middle Eastern mysticism from which it springs. For the West, this is an alien and misunderstood culture. The history of Western interpretation theory (i.e. hermeneutics) sheds new light on the split between Western "religion" and "science, which underlies questions about the differences or similarities between spiritual and psychotic states. I propose that, beginning with the imperialization of Christianity under the Roman Empire, European culture extracted a limited language concerning these states from an underlying Middle Eastern context, but without fully understanding the language or worldview involved. Due to this, Western culture developed a massive split between "inner" psychic and "outer" normative consciousness, as well as splits between cosmology and psychology, body and soul, and humanity and natural environment. The same split led to the division of religion and science that informs the current discussion. 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. Traditions of mystical hermeneutics in Judaism and Islam preserve these ways of languaging and so allow for a continuum of consciousness(es). I give examples of the application of these interpretive methods to particular texts that reveal so-called spiritual/psychotic states. Finally, I give an example of the way that a living tradition of Middle Eastern mysticism would assess various types of spiritual states, including so-called normal consciousness, and use various practices, including stories, breathing, and body awareness, to prepare for shifts in consciousness in a healthy way.

In this chapter, I am drawing on doctoral and post-doctoral research in the fields of somatic psychology and religious studies (Douglas-Klotz, 1995, 1999). I am also drawing on 23 years of personal experience of spiritual states as a student and later teacher of meditation in the Sufi tradition. The first half of the article uses the language of hermeneutics; the second half uses language reflecting a preliminary comparison of “non-ordinary” states from both a Western somatic psychological viewpoint and Middle Eastern mystical one.

The Domain of Hermes and the Limits of Language

In Greek mythology, the god Hermes held several titles: the messenger of the gods, the inventor of language, healer, the god of science and the protector of boundaries. In the Islamic tradition, Hermes is further identified with Enoch (Idrîs), who walked with God and was taken to heaven without dying (Burckhardt, 1971, p. 18). Hermeneutics, the branch of philosophy, literature, religion and social science dealing with interpretation takes his name. So does the word hermetic, which deals with alchemy and

non-Western versions of the natural sciences. As the alchemist, Hermes transforms material substance (just as he does language) so that it recovers a harmonious relationship with the rest of the natural world. Since, this discussion lies at the common boundary of spirituality, cosmology and somatic psychology, it is implicated in all of Hermes' domains.

As the inventor of language, Hermes was called a trickster, a thief and a bargainer. According to Socrates in Plato's Cratylus, all of these attributes have to do with the fact that Hermes creates through language, and that words have the ability to reveal as well as conceal: "speech can signify all things, but it also turns things this way and that" (408c, in Hoy, 1978, p.1).

In his reading of Plato, Jean-Luc Nancy argues that it is, in fact, the word that mediates the experience of "all things." Language, specifically in the form of dialogue, determines how one understands the ideas and objects one encounters, what one understands about them, and whether understanding is even possible (Nancy, 1990, pp. 230-248).

Throughout the history of both Western and Eastern thought, language, creation, healing and the sacred have been associated. Since Plato, the Western hermeneutical discourse has grappled in various ways with the way we interpret reality, and the nature of the reality that we are capable of interpreting. As Ludwig Wittgenstein (1967) writes in Zettel, "Like everything metaphysical, the harmony between thought and reality is to be found in the grammar of the language" (section 55). Or as he says succinctly elsewhere, "The limits of my language are the limits of my world."

For previous generations in the modern West, primarily philosophers and linguists debated these issues. Today the importance of language and the way that it determines the "limits of our world" have increased dramatically.

The reach of communications has become virtually global yet increasingly narrowed in both form and content, the former determined by the mass media and the latter by economic and commercial interests. To put the question posed by one modern example bluntly: what is the proper language to use when discussing the possibility of genetic engineering: ethical, religious, political, sociological or economic?

In investigating any two areas that seem to lie in separate domains, such as psychosis and spiritual state, 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. However as Western dominance of mass media increases, these presumptions increasingly colonise the discourse of the rest of the world.

With these issues in mind, both scientists and theologians have noted the current limits of Western language and interpretation. The former question 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. The latter note that new interpretations of old scriptures need to be brought to bear to speak cogently to the problems of the day.

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)

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 Need for a New Language

These voices of both Western science and religion are looking for a language that can describe more nuanced views both of the human relationship to the cosmos and of its psychic life. To find such a view, this discussion looks at the origins of Western science and religion and the way that both are extracted a ground of Middle Eastern language and cosmology. 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 Western science arise from a divided vision of human, nature and cosmos that implicates their entire development to this day. It 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 all of the named 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. The Middle Eastern languages articulate different types of diversity within the life of a being, but not these.

Likewise, these 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 linguistic 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 in an area that cuts across the received mind-body-psyche-spirit boundaries.

We find such a use of language 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, exotic engagement). The way in which most expressions of European Christianity lost their ability to use such language has to do with the history of hermeneutics in this tradition and the way in

which it influenced the development of Western science, including psychology.

Jewish and Islamic Mystical Hermeneutics

In order to get to grips with the limits of current language and conceptualisation when faced with the subject area embraced by both psychosis and spirituality, we need to consider this other, "mystical" use of language in some depth. It may provide a model that could express a non-linear, yet comprehensible and useful, language of "non-ordinary" states. Our source material for this will be sacred texts drawn from Jewish and Islamic traditions.

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 traditions 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), 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 virtually identical hermeneutical approach concerns the rendering and translation of the 99 "Beautiful Names" of Allah as well as the translation/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.”

Islamic scholar Seyyed Hossain 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 midrashic process might look at the way I balance the communal and individual aspects of my 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 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 (1999b) an open translation method that combines traditional midrashic techniques with post-modern poetic language in a “hermeneutic of indeterminacy.” All the meanings in this translation from Proverbs 8 come from the possibilities present in the Hebrew words themselves.

From the primordial, chaotic “within,”
Hokhmah--the breath of nourishing insight--
has created a separate place to live:
By enclosing her unknowable, inner mystery,
Holy Wisdom has created an address for her temple.

She has done this by dividing the Dark,
pushing from outside until the
foundations of her dwelling--the necessary basic “selves”--
join together by their own mutual attraction:
this natural union creates the first conscious “I am.”

We can combine the multivalence of the words spirit, soul, heaven
and earth in Semitic languages to apply midrash 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 often 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, the Aramaic text
presents another picture. The word “bind” in Aramaic can mean to tie oneself
to something, as well as to engage or enmesh oneself in some aspect of
material existence. It can mean to harness one's energies or, symbolically, to
enclose fire in a circle. The Aramaic word for “loose” is related by root and
sound to this. It presents the symbolic image of a circle opening up, of
liberation, or of the umbilical cord being severed after birth (for more exact
linguistic analysis, see Douglas-Klotz, 1999a, pp. 99-113).

Given that the worlds of “heaven” and “earth” 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. For instance, we can invest time and energy to
envision a new vocation, or to change the conditions of the one we have. If we

want something new to happen, we have to be willing to let go, to some extent, of what has already manifested in order to allow the possibility for what could be. If we want to preserve what we already have, we need to invest energy into caring for and nurturing it. So a more open or midrashic reading of the above passage, using the traditional Aramaic Christian text as a basis for a poetic interpretation, could be:

What you hold onto in form
will also be fixed in vision.
The energy you contain in
an individual effect or possession
will also be bound in
the field of vibrating cause.

What you release from form
will be available for vision.
The energy you allow to grow
beyond your own creation,
cutting the cord that keeps
you and it dependent,
will liberate both into the larger
cosmos of unlimited creation.

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 creating and protecting possessions in the “earth” one. On the other hand, the problem of being overly caught up in material existence has also been recognised as the cause of various stress disorders. Again, the degree of the “problem” depends upon the social construction given to word “reality.” From the interpretation expressed here, Jesus is talking about finding a balance between states of awareness that would allow one to find a sense of “kingdom” (reign or empowerment) both within oneself and among all one’s outer relations.

The Development of Western Christian Hermeneutics

If the reader finds such interpretations far-fetched or obscure, it is because dominant Western culture has, for more than 1500 years, steadily excised the ability to see in multivalent, even paradoxical ways from its language and psyche. In the Western Christian tradition, a symbolic hermeneutic that relates humanity, nature and the divine faced a more difficult history and was gradually eliminated from the tradition by a number of factors.

First, when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman empire after the conversion of Constantine, it increasingly lost touch with its roots in the Middle East, and specifically in the Semitic language spoken by Jesus --Aramaic. With the exception of the Aramaic-speaking churches that broke away during the formation of the Nicene and later creeds in the fourth to fifth centuries, Greek became the official religion of European Christianity. Since Jesus did not preach in Greek, the marginalisation of Aramaic as a language of interpretation and commentary closed access to the Middle Eastern worldview embedded in the language and to the multileveled, symbolic system embedded in its letters and roots.

Consequently, Christian theology became progressively more preoccupied with the nature of the divine Christ (Christology) rather than with the wisdom of Jesus, as a native Middle Eastern mystic-prophet. In terms of the view of early Christianity presented in the New Testament, this shift represents the ultimate success of Paul's interpretation of Jesus' mission over that of James. For Paul, Jesus' Jewishness was subsumed in a cosmic vision of Christ as saviour. For James, Jesus' life embodied a revivification and renewal of the Jewish law, a midrash in action. Pauline Christianity

presented the possibility of instant conversion, without the need for one to learn a Middle Eastern language or worldview. With the exception of the Assyrian Aramaic Christian branches, this “extracted” version became the Christianity that has dominated Western culture for the past 1500 years.

According to Assyrian Aramaic Christian scholar George Lamsa (1976, p.1), the emphasis on Greek as the “original” Christian language was prompted by the imperialisation of Christianity after Constantine and by anti-Semitism. Middle Eastern Aramaic-speaking Christians had access to written scriptures from the earliest times, said Lamsa; consequently, he felt that the theological formulations of Christianity after Constantine based solely on Greek texts were flawed from the outset. This ignorance of Christianity’s Middle Eastern cultural roots persisted into the 19th and 20th centuries (pp. 17-18).

Second, when Christianity felt itself called upon to “save the world” rather than simply to maintain its survival in a hostile empire, it organised itself in such a way as to eliminate elements of experiential spirituality related to gnosticism that it felt to be unhealthy. According to biblical scholar Elaine Pagels (1979), these elements included the feminine aspects of the divine, shared authority in ritual and decision-making and the importance of individual spiritual experience as the basis for the interpretation and exegesis of scripture.

Third, the choices that organised Western Christianity after its imperialisation further weakened its cosmology--the world view of humanity in relation to sacred nature--in favour of its theology, the relationship of humanity to God, excluding nature. Comparing Christianity to Islam, Nasr (1968) 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 [Greek] 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).

Nevertheless, the presence of mystical interpretation, if not translation, of Christian scripture survived into the Middle Ages in the work of mystics such as Meister Eckhart as well as in Celtic Christianity. Most European Christians, however, did not even have access to sacred scriptures before the advent of the printing press. So any style of interpretation was limited to those in religious orders or the priesthood, who increasingly became the professional interpreters of the written sacred text. The work of Emmanuel Swedenborg in the 19th century represents one of the last major attempts in Christianity to demonstrate a symbolic, mystical hermeneutic (Corbin, p. 170).

Because Western Christianity tended to restrict inquiry and diversity in favour of the newly developed concept of "orthodoxy," the rise of Western science developed in reaction to it. Yet both the institution of Western Christianity, divorced from the Middle Eastern worldview that was its origin, as well as the reaction against it in the form of the scientific revolution, suffered from the same divided worldview.

With the rupture of the relationships between science, religion, nature and sacred literature, the modern use of the term hermeneutics in the Christian West first became associated with various "regional" hermeneutic approaches; that is, a separate method of interpretation for sacred, literary,

legal and philological texts. Nonetheless, as late as the early 19th century, philologist Friedrich Ast still maintained that every text had a particular Geist (spirit or essence) that an interpreter or translator should seek to uncover. This spirit was a reflection, in a symbolic sense, of the universal spirit or essence that pervaded the cosmos.

Following Ast, Friedrich Schleiermacher sought to unify interpretative science into “general hermeneutics” by examining the nature of understanding itself. Schleiermacher proposes an early version of the “hermeneutic circle”: to gain understanding, an interpreter or translator must circle between the particulars of a passage--its grammar, tone and diction--and its overall meaning and context. One part of the circle continually clarifies the other. In distinction to Ast, however, Schleiermacher emphasizes understanding the mind of the creator of the text, in a psychological sense, rather than understanding the symbolic aspect of the cosmic mind that underlies it (Ormiston, Schrift, 1990. p. 13).

A major shift towards modern hermeneutical theory occurs with the work of Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer. In their work, interpretation no longer becomes a process directed toward understanding one’s place in the natural cosmos or towards uniting with the mind of another, but rather an example of the everyday process by which one makes sense the world. Interpretation is always based on a “fore-knowledge” which predetermines how and what we understand (Heidegger, 1962, pp. 115-139).

This insight nears that of midrash and ta’wil, in that the observer, observed and their relationship can be all considered part of the field of interpretation. However, since the domains of religion and science had already divided from one another, neither field was large enough to include a

language of “non-ordinary” experience. In the case of religion, inquiry was limited by orthodoxy: faith was more important than experience. In the field of science, the non-rational was by definition to be avoided or stigmatised.

The attempt of this volume to use the model of cognitive psychology to unite the consideration of states that had been joined in most traditional cultures is a welcome remedy for this historical split. Not coincidentally, at least to Middle Eastern eyes, the entire subject concerns “splitting” within the psyche.

Despite this history, and even after the influence of various redaction, portions of the Judeo-Christian scriptures point to insights about non-ordinary states of awareness that may still be relevant today. As demonstrated above, if a ground of Middle Eastern cosmology and psychology is used for interpretation, we may gain insights about states of awareness that have developed because of the lack of a proper cognitive ground. As the 20th century Christian writer C.S. Lewis commented in his book about miracles:

[W]hat we now call the “literal and metaphorical” meanings [of the Bible] have both been disengaged by analysis from an ancient unity of meaning which was neither or both.... As long as we are trying to read back into that ancient unity either the one or the other of the two opposites which have since been analysed out of it, we shall misread all early literature and ignore many states of consciousness which we ourselves still from time to time experience. (1969, p. 276)

Breath and Self

In this final section, I bring insights gained from a midrashic approach to Western sacred scripture into dialogue with those of somatic psychology, particularly as they regard “unhealthy” and “healthy” experiences of non-ordinary states of consciousness. I propose that Middle

Eastern mystical psychology, in conjunction with aspects of somatic and cognitive psychology, can provide a context for re-interpreting these states. Although Jewish Kabbalistic mystical practice shares much in common with Islamic Sufism, particularly the way that both use breathing practice, body awareness, sound awareness and poetic language, I primarily use examples from the latter for the sake of continuity.

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.”

In the somatic psychology field, we can compare Wilhelm Reich’s analysis of this area. Reich considered the detailed witnessing of small proprioceptive differences essential to his approach with both neurotic and psychotic patients. These differences included feelings of tension (called “armoring”) in the muscles and connective tissue that are arranged in rings around the eyes, throat, chest, solar plexus, genitals and pelvic floor. Reich associated this armoring with a patient’s subconscious attempts to suppress breathing, sensation and feeling.

In other patients, Reich found the reverse of armoring in these areas--an excessive softness (hypotonia) and lack of feeling. In these cases, Reich felt that patients’ awareness of bodily sensations and feelings had become “split” from their sense of identity. In extreme cases, he felt that this splitting of body awareness from identity was the functional definition of schizophrenia. He noted in an extensive case history of a schizophrenic (1949):

[The] degree of clarity and oneness [of consciousness] depends, to judge from observations in schizophrenic processes, not so much on the strength or intensity of self-perception, as on the more or less complete integration of the innumerable elements of self-perception into one single experience of the SELF... (p. 442, emphasis in the original).

Besides the abilities to see, hear, smell, taste, touch, there existed unmistakably in healthy individuals a sense of organ functions, an organotic sense, as it were, which was completely lacking or was disturbed in biopathies. The compulsion neurotic has lost this sixth sense completely. The schizophrenic has displaced this sense and has transformed it into certain patterns of his delusional system, such as "forces," "the devil," "voices," "electrical currents," "worms in the brain or in the intestines," etc. (p. 454).

What the schizophrenic experiences on the level of body awareness, Reich maintained, is not so different from the experience of the inspired poet or mystic:

The functions which appear in the schizophrenic, if only one learns to read them accurately, are COSMIC FUNCTIONS, that is, functions of the cosmic orgone energy in undisguised form.... In schizophrenia, as well as in true religion and in true art and science, the awareness of these deep functions is great and overwhelming. The schizophrenic is distinguished from the great artist, scientist or founder of religions in that his organism is not equipped or is too split up to accept and to carry the experience of this identity of functions inside and outside the organism (1949, pp. 442, 448, emphasis in original).

In Sufism as well as Kaballah, breathing is related to ruh (ruach, Heb.); as we have seen, this is another name for the spiritual or "wave-reality" soul. The splitting of the subconscious personality into multiple fragmented "I's" is also a spiritual problem approached by several branches of Middle Eastern mysticism, including Sufism. Reich's organotic "sixth sense" could be seen in relationship to the witnessing or gathering self in Middle Eastern psychology. In Sufi psychology this is called the awareness of "Reality" (haqiqa, Arabic). In the interpretation of Jewish mystical psychology

mentioned earlier, the same function is served by the “Sacred Sense” or “Holy Wisdom” (Hokhmah, based on the same root as the Arabic), which organises the healthy sense of an “I.”

Without this gathering or witnessing awareness, which is intimately tied up with the body’s proprioceptive awareness, the subconscious self (nafs in Arabic, nephesh in Hebrew) splits into a multiplicity of discordant voices forgetful of the divine Unity (the source of all “I am-ness.”) The personal sense of “I am-ness” is not developed once for all time, but shifts depending upon the degree to which a person is aware of the multiplicity within and yet is still able to integrate it. In Sufism, this has been expressed by the saying, “Whosoever knows him/her self, knows the One Self (a literal translation of the word Allah). This could be seen as a foundational view of the psyche that underlies the entire range of Middle Eastern mysticism. (Douglas-Klotz, 1995).

If the relative self or “I am” has no ultimate existence outside of the ultimate Oneness, it is nonetheless not separate from that Oneness, according to the Sufi view. Nasr notes this in commenting upon a Sufi practitioner’s progressive relationship to body awareness:

Although at the beginning of man’s [sic] awareness of the spiritual life he must separate himself from the body considered in its negative and passionate aspect, in the more advanced stages of the Path the aim is to keep oneself within the body and centred in the heart, that is within the body considered in its positive aspect as the ‘temple’ (haykal) of the spirit.... When Rumi writes in his Mathnawi that the adept must invoke in the spiritual retreat until his toes begin to say “Allâh,” he means precisely this final integration which includes the body as well as the mind and the soul (1991, p. 50).

In order to help distinguish the progress of a student of the inner school, Sufism distinguishes between states of expanded awareness (called

hal) and the ability to integrate the states in everyday life (the so-called “station” or makam). While many Sufi practices (like breathing, chanting or, in certain traditions, whirling) engender expanded or ecstatic states, the practitioner is directed to disregard so-called psychic effects like voices, colours or out-of-body experiences and to focus on the integration or “perfection” of hal in makam. As I pointed out in a earlier study, various stages of makam can be related to degrees of awareness and flexibility in body awareness. This includes not only the muscular rings posited by Reich but also proprioceptive awareness of ligaments, bones, blood pulsation and skin contact (Douglas-Klotz, 1984).

One way that the Sufi teacher prepares the student for these (often sudden) shifts of consciousness is through the use of paradoxical stories and poetic language. 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. The following is one example:

Once upon a time....

It is late at night. The legendary wise fool, Mulla Nasruddin, is crawling on his hands and knees under a corner street light. A close friend discovers him and, thinking that Mulla may be a little drunk, tries to help:

“Mulla, let me help you up! Do you need help to find your way home?”

“No... no, my friend.... I’ve lost the key to my house. Here...get down on your hands and knees and help me look.”

Groaning, Mulla’s friend lowers himself onto the hard pavement and begins to crawl around. He makes a thorough search, peering into all the crevices in the cobblestones, gradually and laboriously widening his search. After what seems like hours, his knees are aching. No luck.

"Mulla, I've looked everywhere within thirty feet. Are you sure you lost your keys here?"
"Noo....actually, I think I lost them about a block away, over there."
"Mulla, Mulla-- you idiot! Why are we wasting our time here then?"
"Well, the light was better here...." (author's rendition).

While some obvious metaphors appear—the “dark” being the student’s subconscious (or nafs) where the answers are to be found—such stories operate on several levels. For instance, Mulla’s search in the light results from a perceived lack or loss. From the standpoint of cognitive psychology, it is a problem-solving approach, even if the means of solving the problem is conditioned by a previous experience (“look where you can see”) that does not apply to the present situation. Another traditional Mulla story deals with the issue of diversity (which could be seen as within the psyche or outside of it):

Mulla Nasruddin was scheduled to give a talk at the end of Friday’s communal prayers in a small village in Turkey that was known for its stubborn and hardheaded ways. Many people talked there and were well appreciated, but after the speaker left, there was no change in behaviour, no improvement in the way people treated each other.

When Mulla arrived, he strode to the front of the mosque and addressed the audience: "Does anyone here know what I'm about to say?" No one said a word. Was he crazy? "No!" someone shouted. "Then you're all too stupid to tell," said Mulla and walked out. The next day, a delegation from the village begged Mulla to give them another chance. He agreed to come again the following Friday.

Next week he returned and again asked, "Does anyone here know what I'm about to say?" This time, everyone raised their hands. "If you all know," said Mulla, "there's no need for me to tell you" and left again. The following day, the delegation again visited Mulla, on hands and knees begging for one more chance. Mulla promised to come once more next Friday.

The third week Mulla again arrived and asked his question: "Does anyone here know what I'm about to say?" In the meantime, the villagers had conferred and decided upon a plan. The one

designated as spokesman answered, "Some of us know and some of us don't."

"So," said Mulla, "let those who know tell those who don't!" and walked out again (author's rendition).

On one level, this story is about parts of the psyche that "know" or "don't know." On another, it presents a community of voices that are inflated in denial or some variation thereof. On a third, it presents a "treatment" involving voices communicating with each other. There are other levels as well.

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 (1974) 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!

Specific aspects of Sufi spiritual practice work with different aspects of the psyche (nafs) called the "animal soul" and even the "plant soul." The arrogance of considering only humanity worthy of an interior life is renounced.

All of this happens in an ideal development, as the student learns to balance states (hal) with station (makam), and as a sense of the nafs (the "particle" self) enlarges to meet and merge with the ruh (the "wave" self). A Sufi teacher might analyse the tendency toward what Western psychology calls borderline states by pointing to the lack of development of a "gathering self" (Hokhmah) from earlier in life. The sense of love and compassion that would embrace the opposites within a child was not present in sufficiently healthy a form to allow the child's own "I am" to form. In a native Middle Eastern view, as we gather our inner selves, we create a soul. As they scatter, we lose our souls.

Not only do individuals experience this alienation of a fragmented self, so does society as a whole. Those who experience the breakdown of a unified "I" in our society, mostly from early traumatic abuse, point to the way in which our entire cultural self has become fragmented and alienated from each other and nature.

In such a case, both Sufism and Kaballah point to the difficulty of engendering enough love to overcome the splits that have occurred. This is expressed in another early Jewish Wisdom text (discovered as part of the Nag Hammadi Library in 1945) called "Thunder, Perfect Mind." In this text, Hokhmah speaks as the aspect of "I" that can appear in many forms and voices:

I am she who shudders in all your fears and
who shakes in your moments of power.
I am the one in you who becomes sick and
I am the one who is completely healthy.
I am no sensation and I am the Sense,
the Wisdom of all....

Embrace me from the place in you
that understands and that grieves,
from the place that seems ugly and in ruin,
from the self that steals from its neighbours
though they are really no better off.

From the self that feels shame,
embrace me shamelessly.
From the middle of shame and shamelessness,
the place where grandiosity and depression merge,
find a centre that brings sense and order
to all my dismembered members in you.

Advance together to me:
you who know my unity and disunity,
the One Self or my separate selves.
Bring the "great," the spiritual Self
to live among the small, the animal selves.

Advance together to childhood:
the small, the simple, the poor
living with
the great, the complex, the rich.
Don't isolate "great" from "small,"
"rich" from "poor" within you.
By one you know the other
and none can live in health divided (author's translation, 1995, p.)

As a therapeutic treatment program, this may seem idealistic.

However, a Sufi would regard this as an attitude with which to approach any

person who seems different or who expresses “non-ordinary” states of awareness, no matter what action might need to be taken. In recognising that the person before one represents an isolated or exiled portion of one’s own psyche, as well as the psyche of Western society, one brings compassion to bear, not on a category of diagnosis, but on an unique voice in search of its own “I am.”

Summary

This chapter places the discussion of models of psychosis and spiritual states of consciousness within the context of the evolution of Western sacred hermeneutics. Both Western religion and science lack the cognitive models and language to describe such states in a nuanced way, just as Western culture fails to support those experiencing these states with a viable cultural language. The possibility for such a language was left behind when Western Christianity, in abandoning its Middle Eastern roots, emphasised 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, methods that can also be applied to the words of Jesus when using an Aramaic version of the Gospels. These interpretative methods describe a unity of altered states of awareness in a “wave-heaven” reality that distinguishes itself from a “particle-earth” reality. From a Middle Eastern mystical viewpoint, differences between states (“healthy”) or (“unhealthy”) can be framed as more or less complete contact with a healthy “I am” that can integrate both wave and particle views of life. Methods historically used in Middle Eastern mysticism to build a dynamic “I am,” capable of fluid changes

of consciousness, include story, poetic language, breathing and body awareness.

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