

by Philippe Julien, S.J.

What will happen to him if he is psychoanalysed? Will he lose his moral and religious convictions? Will he remain faithful to his previous commitments? Will he still be Paul, Peter or John as we knew him before? These are the questions asked by friends and relatives of the person undergoing an analysis. Whether it is the doctor, the friend, the husband or wife, the parents, the spiritual director or religious superior, everyone has the feeling that from now on the person being analysed will escape them in some way and that he will enter the domain of a secret and mysterious power of which they have not the key . . . and that with a bit of luck he could become a balanced individual!

This desire to know 'what it's all about' is all the more ardent because psychoanalysis does not fall into the usual categories of medicine. With medicine, the moralist and the believer consider that they can keep within their own domain: the doctor is concerned with curing the body and eliminating suffering; the Christian is concerned with judging moral conduct and speaking on the meaning of suffering. But with psychoanalysis, these yardsticks are of no use, so the argument goes, because the whole personality of the individual is radically questioned.

This uncertainty is inevitable. Indeed, psychoanalysis will be dead on the day that it is put to the service of some institution whether it be educational, economic, political or religious. It is concerned with something else: a truth which goes beyond the analyst and the analysed. This truth is found only in the dialogue between these two people. In such a dialogue, the analysed can say 'everything' without having to subject himself either to an institution or to the tyranny of someone else's desire. He can have the chance to be heard on the topic of some difficult truth about himself up to now unknown.

Initial Illusions

As regards the relationship between psychoanalysis and religion, illusions are numerous. But two are very common, be it in a certain kind of literature on the human sciences, or in the very demand made to the analyst by the analysed.

The first type of illusion is exemplified by the man who says he is unhappy in his family life and in his work, suffers from psychosomatic symptoms and is unsettled 'in himself'. He attributes these difficulties to an excessively strict education and to the religious instruction

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received in primary school; and so he asks the psychoanalyst to rid him of this. He thinks that the latter will ask him to replace his moral and religious ideas with amoral and atheistic ones which would be 'scientifically' true: God would *only* be the father who is loved and feared by children, religious practices would *only* be a ridiculous need for order and purity, prayer an escape from reality, and Christian morality would *only* be fear of sexuality, etc. In this way, true knowledge would take the place of an old knowledge which has been shown up as false. The analysis would pave the way to a satisfying type of hedonism, to a fulfilling type of 'genitality' without 'complexes', all of which would be assured by the 'death' of God. Later in this article I hope to show that the real question is: why this appeal to an authority that is permissive, gratifying and comprehensive?

The second type of illusion is the complete opposite. A young girl, for example, complains that she cannot live up to her Christian ideals. She feels weak, lazy, lacking in courage and will-power, incapable of making a decision. Dizziness and headaches paralyse her. She asks the doctor for something to strengthen her and the priest for spiritual advice which would enable her to live up to the standard of her ideals. All in vain. Thus, psychoanalysis seems to her the only means by which she can attain once and for all the goal she has set herself. 'Getting to grips' with herself, she thinks she will be able to free herself from these blockages and master her 'instincts'. Is not the psychoanalyst a perfectly free man, without anguish, transparent to himself and well aware of how his mind works (without any unconscious!); does he not do exactly what he wants?

Thus the analysis is considered as a purifying trial which one must undergo in order to reconcile practice and principle. The analysis is seen as a providential help to strengthen the will to overcome once and for all the past and the 'old Adam'. Analysis at the service of religion.

In this case also the real question is: what is the meaning of this appeal to suppress a lack deep down inside you and of this request to be equipped with a power that someone else (and the Ideal) might possess?

Man's Desire being Questioned

To better situate the position of psychoanalysis in relation to religion, let's ask ourselves a few questions about the function of language in everyday life. Why do people speak?

The first reply that comes to mind is that we speak to convey information. This begins in our childhood and will end only when we die. Indeed, there are a certain number of material things necessary for our existence and since we cannot get them all ourselves, we ask others by telling them *what* we want. But it is necessary to see that in passing from a felt need to a need expressed by a request,

language is not only a vehicle of information concerning the object of need, it is also a call addressed to someone, a desire addressed to another desire, a desire to be recognized, esteemed and loved. Thus the patient, speaking to the doctor, not only gives certain information about his symptoms in order to be cured, but also shows confidence in the doctor and in his desire. Thus the child who wants his mother does not simply tell her that he wants milk; he tells her in this way (and therefore indirectly) that he wants love.

Such is the greatness of the human person who, due to language, is not only someone who needs things, but also desires the love of other people. An unsuspected greatness, because it is only by the verbalized request that man's desire is born and grows up little by little. He who asks for nothing and wants to 'go it alone' is not only incapable of living materially but even more will never grasp either the truth or the law of exchange which consists of supply and demand. The silent kleptomaniac, for example, ignores this law; when he leaves the shop, he still does not know what he really wanted.

But man's greatness is also tragic, because his desire is *radically* insatiable, not only in the sense that hunger can only be satisfied for a relatively short while, but qualitatively in the sense that man's desire never finds an adequate object. This truth is unbearable and difficult to accept. First of all it is unbearable for the other person: parents, taking the child's request literally concerning some object of need, glut him with presents in order to keep him quiet and in this way misunderstand what he wishes to say to them unconsciously: the result is mental anorexia—as if, so to speak, the child was sounding an alarm in order to tell his parents that his desire is not for what they thought it was.

It is also unbearable for me; indeed the insatiable nature of man's desire forces him to ask other people again and again for various things as signs of love, as tangible proofs that the love and esteem of the other person for him have not grown cold. In this way, an obsessional child calls again and again for a sweet from his mother not because his body has a need for sugar, but because his imagination is trying to assure itself that his mother's interest in him has not lessened (if he could help himself to the sweets, he wouldn't do so!). But it is a vain effort on the part of the imagination, for no proof is conclusive and the interior lack remains.

In fact, the truth of man's desire in a request is that it is sustained by nothing that exists¹ and that despite this its movement cannot be stopped or annihilated by taking refuge in silence (a non-request) and in avoiding social life. How can it be sustained? Here is not the place to reply to that. All that can be done here is to see the position of religion in the adventure of human desire. Indeed, in the manner

¹Language is not an instrument intended to enunciate what is, but to express what does not satisfy man and to formulate what he desires; its content is not made up of what is, but of what is not.' E. Weil, *Logique de la philosophie*, Vrin, 1950, p. 8.

of sustaining well or badly the truth of our desire, religion interferes of necessity and plays a role for better or worse.

The Believer

Psychoanalysis questions the believer and the unbeliever in that that they consider that they know—one that God exists, the other that God does not exist. Both consider themselves informed, stating their knowledge about the Absolute. Yet such a discourse goes astray even in its very aspirations.

The authentic Christian experience is one of a being who is essentially an asking being, who is not afraid either to reveal his permanent distress or to let the incompleteness of his human condition increase by talking about it. But it is not sufficient to say that; the psychoanalytical interrogation concerns the *manner* of living this request: there is a certain manner of living by which the desire (consequence and sustainer of the request) wishes to receive and to give to itself a reply that will be totally satisfying. Now in such a situation, the subject coming into contact with the Church is in danger of making her the privileged place that can satisfy his desire. Does she not appear to him, by virtue of her informative words on the subject of God, as the place where knowledge and action can be welcomed (stories and dogmas), actualized (rites) and lived (ethics)? Correlatively, by a sort of unconscious complicity, does the Church not run the risk in turn of entering such a game, for example by fearing for her authority and influence if she cannot satisfy the plea made to her which she herself has provoked?

In this, is not the Church a bit like a doctor?—he polarizes the demand of the patient by responding with some therapeutic object accompanied by a (learned) word guaranteeing its value. This is fine until a day comes when everything falls asunder: the violence of evil and death is so insistent that the doctor wants to run away from the patient's cry, to place him in the hands of his God . . . or his Destiny!

This alternation of promised presence and unexplained absence (pleasure-displeasure) presents difficulties for every authority (parental or otherwise) in its capacity or incapacity to support another person's request without refusing it or deceiving it about the truth of existence. This truth concerns the journey, which everyone is invited to join, to accomplish all that is possible and to leave aside all false and impossible ideals in order to recognize man's radical and authentic impossibility, namely human finitude. It is only at the end of this journey that human desire can meet its own law.

The Obsession with Proof

The psychoanalytical interrogation is just as concerned about the person who, thinking he knows that God does not exist,

establishes a militant and doctrinaire anti-theism. His concern to persuade and convince others shows an incessant and contradictory request that God should give signs which would prove that He does not exist. Such a person wears himself out fighting against a God who is always reborn in this obsessive request: may He live a little while longer in order that I might perpetuate my revolt and affirm my knowledge against Him. This is nothing less than a technique for keeping alive a real or imaginary father for the sole purpose of challenging him.¹

Indifference

So much for the questions psychoanalysis asks anti-theism (which is only an inverted theology). But it questions unbelief properly so-called even more profoundly, yet *only* to the extent that unbelief takes the form of a quiet resignation, a 'sage' indifference, or a scepticism with an artificial smile, justifying the extinction of all desire to live, struggle and love. Such a person turns a blind eye on human suffering and tenderness, he stifles every request; for example, the person who takes refuge in a so-called scientific or 'medical' objectivity so that his language is *purely* informative. In an extreme case, there would be no longer any language strictly speaking—as in schizophrenia, if that illness can be defined as the absence of a necessary connection between the subject's words and normal usage.

Is the Faith Possible?

After this detour in which I described certain ways of living belief and unbelief and the culs-de-sac to which they lead, I must now come back more positively to the primordial question: what is the impact of psychoanalysis on the believer concerning his desire and his religious request?

Psychoanalysis draws our attention to two points.

First of all, a request made to God is strictly correlative to the manner in which it is articulated *vis-à-vis* the men and women who are around us. If such an articulation is absent, what is the value of a request made to God? On the other hand, if such an articulation is present, but asked in an infantile way, either by alienating oneself in the desire to satisfy the imagined desire of the other person or by wishing to reduce the other person to the apparent satisfaction of his own request, then in the two cases one can honestly ask oneself: will the religious request made to God not of necessity be the same type of relationship?

Secondly—and this is the more difficult point to clarify—the discovery that one's desire leads to 'nothing' and has to be sustained as pure desire, surely renders superfluous every discourse, rite and authority of a religious nature; are such things not traps in that they

¹Such a technique orders works like *Les Séquestrés d'Altona* and even *La Chute*, magnificent pleadings before an imaginary tribunal.

are organized and easily referred-to elements in a solid body of doctrine? Can man's request be anything other than a cry to the Unknowable, a call which springs up from the incompleteness of every system, at the very moment when religious knowledge vacillates and falls apart and when everyone should conceive and give utterance to his truest self? Can a spontaneous request reflect on itself and form itself into a coherent language and constitute itself as an authority where a community might be recognized?

These questions are too new to be articulated clearly in a few lines in the cultural and social context upon which we still depend. However, a few orientations can be indicated: a stress put first of all on the experience of the Absolute in the loss and effacement of one's own subjectivity in, for example, Claudel's sense when he says: 'Nothing seems to me more false than the Socratic maxim: know thyself. It's absurd, you don't know yourself because the deepest part of you is nothing.'¹ But this nothing experienced in finitude is called by another nothing (*Abyssus abyssum invocat!*), the 'uncreated nothing' to use the phrase of Jean Tauler of Strasbourg for describing the Absolute: something or someone who is both our night and our one thing necessary, who springs up as a disconcerting and devouring strangeness and, at the same time, as a *sine qua non* if our life and language between men and women is to have a *raison d'être*. Unnameable in Himself certainly, but sustaining every human word about Him, to the extent that such words accomplish their truth which is to create both a silence by means of the words and a 'nothing' between the words; for in itself the desire for the Absolute cannot be articulated and yet neither can it reveal itself except in request and invocation, that is, by coming within the network and law of language.

This tragic ambiguity is good and positive: we cannot remove it by ourselves but simply *respect* it, that is, allow the 'Other' to remove it 'like a thief' on the day of our death. In waiting, what does it mean to live in the Church, unless it be to practise this principle at every moment by clearing the ground so that a word can be exchanged and shared in a brotherly manner?

The 'Peasant Priesthood'

by M. Singleton, W.F.

Once again the expatriate pundits are out in force penning their solutions to the African Church's problems. Having successfully surveyed the catechists and being shortly to publish the results of marriage enquiries, they are now turning their not inconsiderable,

¹'*Mémoires improvisées.*' Gallimard, 1954, p. 198.