

The Problem of Holiness and Wholeness

by

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INTRODUCTION

The problem of how to be both holy and whole is universal. We all experience both the longing for self-fulfillment and the longing for self-transcendence. It is the tension created by these seemingly opposing needs that constitutes the problem of holiness and wholeness. In the life of the professional religious person this problem is often experienced with greater intensity because of the nature of the religious commitment and life style. This paper is my own attempt to come to grips with this problem. Although for the most part I have chosen to write from an objective point of view it seems important to say here that I did not begin dealing with this issue from that place! When I wrote this paper several years ago I did so because of a personal need to understand my own journey and struggles. At its writing I had had the benefit of two years of Jungian analysis with a very gifted and deeply spiritual analyst, had just completed my doctoral studies, and was in private practice as a psychotherapist working primarily with other professional religious men and women. Several years earlier, however, I often found myself in great turmoil and at times despaired of ever finding a way to deal with all the inner conflict I experienced in trying to live out my religious commitment. I knew that I needed help to integrate the psychological and the spiritual and I also knew that God would

points out the relationship between psychological consciousness and growth in holiness.⁴

Rev. Josef Goldbrunner has dealt extensively with the topic of holiness and wholeness. In one of his works, in which he applies the principles of Jung's psychology to Christian spiritual development, he says that

the psychological steps which lead to the discovery of the self also assist the actuating of the person. And since this is a precondition of the Christian relationship to God which is called faith, it is not surprising that individuation can be regarded as a criterion for the realization of the faith. This means that the life of faith is dependent on the general level of maturity which the person has reached. Any help that is given towards the maturing of the personality will also have a fruitful influence on the development of faith. Religious education will have to turn its attention increasingly to these connections between the development of personal maturity and the development of faith.⁵

The "third force" movement in psychology has also addressed the problem of holiness and wholeness, although in secular terms. This branch of psychology has directed its attention to the transcendent side of human nature, warning that "the neglect of this aspect of our existence is as psychologically dangerous as the denial of the biological, sexual, social, intellectual and interpersonal sides of human life."⁶

These insights from the behavioral sciences lend support to the well-known spiritual maxim, "grace builds on nature." Spiritual directors have gradually realized that growth in the spiritual life is intrinsically related to psychological maturity, and that the pursuit of holiness can be destructive when it ignores the natural laws of human growth and development. There is also a growing awareness among professional religious that a number of our traditional ways, particularly our spiritualities, have been detrimental, psychologically, and have fostered false attitudes about holiness.

TRADITIONAL SPIRITUALITIES: FEAR OF HUMANNES

A major point of this paper is that we have outgrown our traditional spiritualities. I say this for two reasons. First, they have not kept pace with our growth in understanding about human nature and healthy psychology and thus are no longer adequate to help us deal with the problem of holiness in today's world. At the risk of oversimplifying the causes of the decline in institutionalized religion and the crisis of vocations in religious orders, I think it fair to say that Western spiritualities have failed to meet the needs of a large number of believers. Secondly, rooted in the dualistic theology of the middle ages, the most influential spirituality in Christianity has alienated the soul from the body and fostered a highly intellectualized, repressive type of spiritual life. Matthew Fox, a contemporary theologian, describes the type of spirituality I am referring to:

eventually lead me to whatever or whoever could provide this help. This deep faith kept me—sometimes barely—from giving up the struggle. Leaving my vocation was a strong temptation because I thought the inner turmoil meant that there was something wrong with me that could be "cured" by leaving the convent as many others were doing at the time. Today I view these same tensions and struggles quite differently. It is my hope that what follows will be of some value to others who are engaged in a similar process.

THE PROBLEM DEFINED

Rev. Josef Goldbrunner, a depth psychologist, philosopher, and theologian, defines the problem of holiness as a paradoxical struggle between being "wholly worldly and wholly devoted to God . . . of living a holy and Christlike life while affirming all the energies of one's human nature." He goes on to say that the attitude one takes toward this struggle (which I would call one's "spirituality") is of major importance because the way in which religious and psychological needs are treated effects the vitality of one's life. If one accepts human nature with its conflicting desires and its paradoxes (perhaps this is what it means to "take up one's cross"), the soul seems to thrive, and develops in a uniquely creative way. If, however, one ignores or rejects a part of oneself (often in the name of holiness), the soul suffers and rebels in some form of spiritual illness, either psychological or physical.¹

What does all this mean for the religious person who has been taught that one must deny oneself in order to be saved? Does not the command "Be ye perfect . . ." mean that certain feelings, desires, needs, must be sacrificed? And what about Jesus' saying that one is to hate one's own life? The professional religious person can feel forced into a choice between holiness and wholeness.

"GRACE BUILDS ON NATURE" REDISCOVERED

There was a time (not too long ago) in the Christian tradition when such a choice between holiness and wholeness was taken as a matter of fact. The saints and mystics almost always experienced some form of physical or mental breakdown. And these breakdowns were identified with holiness. Today, however, there is a growing awareness among theologians of the intrinsic relationship between religious maturity (holiness) and psychological and physical integration (wholeness). Psychologists, non-Christian as well as Christian, have stressed the close connection between psychic suffering and the failure to achieve authentic religious values. C. G. Jung, one of the first to suggest the value of religion and psychology cooperating in the pastoral care of souls, views psychological wholeness as a religious problem. In an address he gave to a conference of clergymen, he stated that "psychoneurosis must be understood, ultimately, as the suffering of a soul which has not discovered its meaning."² Guggenbuhl-Craig, a follower of Jung, suggests that the concepts of individuation and salvation are closely related. In fact, he sees the salvation of the soul as the goal of the individuation process.³ Rev. Barry McLaughlin

THE BODY IN TRADITIONAL SPIRITUALITIES: DUALISM

Despite a "pro-body" attitude in both the Old and New Testaments, traditional Christian spirituality has been more influenced by Platonic dualism than by Jesus or the Prophets before him. The theology of the middle ages, dominated by an understanding of human nature that stressed a radical division between matter and spirit, viewed the soul as imprisoned in the body. This dualism led to an increasing asceticism in the life of the medieval church, which resulted in an attitude of indifference or hostility toward the body. The tension between the mind and body remained a constant theme in the lives of the saints and the writings of the church Fathers. Spiritualization became the aim of all religious striving and purity was the key to holiness. Sexuality was repressed and war was waged on the body. Asceticism took the form of constant vigilance against the impulses of the body. To insure that the instinctive "lower life" of the body was controlled, it was common for those pursuing greater holiness to engage in strict bodily fasts, flagellations, and night vigils. Abuse of the body was thought to be good for the spirit (although there is evidence that St. Francis of Assisi and other saints were regretful of their self-abuse at the end of their lives).¹²

Although some of the symptoms of dualism, such as extremes in asceticism and bodily abuse, are no longer common among the spiritual disciplines of our time, much of our thinking about holiness still reflects a deep seated fear of the body and a denial of sexuality. My therapeutic work with professional religious, as well as my own life-long struggle with body problems, makes me think that body abuse is still prevalent but that its forms have changed. I suspect that problems such as obesity, alcohol and drug addiction, workaholism, depression, inability to be intimate, and some forms of physical illness, are symptoms of unconscious self-abuse, which has its roots in negative, rejecting attitudes toward the body.

Rev. Bernard Bush, a psychotherapist who works in an international therapeutic treatment center for professional religious has also observed the negative effects of traditional spiritualities:

There is still among us a strong strain of moralism and idealistic perfectionism which compounds depressive guilt feelings and compulsive self-destructive behavior. We find that many of the neuroses we treat are aggravated by styles of spirituality and community life that encourage religious to be slavishly dependent, to intellectualize and mask so-called negative feelings, and to try to be happy without giving and receiving genuine affection and warm love.¹³

VATICAN II: THE DESTRUCTION OF FALSE IMAGES

God has given us an almost unbearable burden—freedom. And we continually attempt to escape it by finding someone to whom we can hand it over. Perhaps this explains much of what has happened to professional religious

persons. Motivated by an intense desire for union with God, but uncertain and insecure as to how to attain it, we surrendered the responsibility for the whole project to a collective. The fear of being human caused many of us to escape into a life of certainty, a life of unconscious obedience and compulsive "good works." Holiness consisted of conformity to rules and regulations imposed from without. Our very image of sanctity freed us from the responsibility (and burden) of being fully human.

The Second Vatican Council challenged, perhaps unwittingly, the traditional image of holiness. It strongly encouraged religious groups to renew themselves. In the process of doing this, our eyes were opened to the fact that our structures were somewhat oppressive, and that our rules prevented human growth toward holiness and wholeness.

Since Vatican II, many of those structures and rules have disappeared. Most religious institutes have experienced a period of upheaval and a loss of members as they have attempted to create new, more life-giving structures. More recently, the focus has shifted. As religious groups have come through the turmoil of change and have achieved a new sense of stability, the crisis has shifted to the individual who, suddenly, has been confronted with the need to develop a more authentic personal identity, and assume greater responsibility for his/her life. The need for psychological wholeness, long buried under false attitudes about holiness, has become conscious. The focus has changed from how to be holy, to how to be whole.

But our efforts in this direction have not brought the fulfillment many of us expected and desired. We find ourselves still wondering what went wrong. We tried to be "holy" and that did not satisfy us. We tried becoming more psychologically educated, and that, too, has failed.

When I began to explore this dilemma in myself, I realized that I was "possessed" by the traditional image of holiness which I described earlier. And I began to discover the same was true for others who shared their struggles with me. What I have found is that many of us are still unconsciously dualistic and perfectionistic. Where once our desire for "perfect" self-transcendence was the focus of all our conscious striving, and the need for self-fulfillment was repressed, now it is just the opposite. But the problem remains.

At the root of this problem, I think, is an image of holiness that we thought we were rid of. But, as is true with any rejected psychic image, this one is still alive and active in our unconscious, and continues to make us feel that we must "be perfect." Either perfectly holy, or perfectly whole.

Is there a way to overcome our either-or mentality and to transform this perfectionistic image so that we can achieve both religious and psychological wholeness? I would like to propose that there is, and to suggest a type of spirituality, based on Jung's concept of the individuation process, which might promote integrated growth in both holiness and wholeness.

TOWARD AN INTEGRATED SPIRITUALITY

It seems important to re-define "holiness" as a process of development, rather than as an end product. Or, as Matthew Fox defines it, "a decision, a choice, a movement, a living symbol, a process of becoming alive."¹⁴ It means finding what Jung called "the Self," what the church Fathers called "the heart," what St. Paul called "the inner man," what some call the "center," or "true self," and what Jesus called "the child." It is a search for the Divine within. This process of becoming one's self is frequently likened to a journey. It is experienced by many as a "going deeper" in order to discover and explore one's inner world.

Having re-defined what we mean by holiness, we can see that Jung's concept of individuation is an expression of this same process, but in psychological rather than religious terminology. Many of his insights are helpful in understanding the intrinsic relationship between holiness and wholeness, and in illuminating the difficulties which the religiously committed person often faces in dealing with this problem.

Inherent in Jung's individuation process is the necessity of sorting out the sources of one's identity and self-esteem. For the professional religious person, this frequently means differentiating who one is from what one does (ego-persona differentiation). It also requires coming to terms with the "shadow," or the dark forces in one's personality (unconscious).¹⁵ Such self-confrontation is a necessary part of spiritual as well as psychological growth. Referring to the fact that religious persons have been notorious for their lack of consciousness, William Johnston states that

Most of us live in illusion about ourselves and other people. We project upon ourselves and others the archetypes from our collective unconscious. And to escape from ignorance and illusion we must discover the real self hidden below the stream of hate, fear, aggression, anger, lust, arrogance, and so on, passing across the mind.¹⁶

Traditionally, religious life has strongly supported such illusions and self-ignorance. Coming to terms with one's shadow side is particularly painful for the professional religious who is identified with the "perfection" image of holiness and suppresses negative feelings and individuality.

In a paper on Jungian psychology and Christian spirituality, Robert Doran raises another major problem that the professional religious must come to terms with, that of self vs. group needs:

The problem of ego-persona differentiation can be very acute in religious life, and in fact wherever community living is pursued as a desirable goal. True community is based on shared meanings and values. But in religious life it involves also living and working together for the same apostolic ends. The complexities of common life and of corporate apostolic work are such that the temptation is

ever present to identify too exclusively with one's job or function or with the opinion held of oneself by others. . . . there is a fine line to be drawn between the self-alienation that can develop from such identification and the kind of self-assertion or individualism that is clearly contrary to the union of hearts and minds to which one commits oneself by religious vows. Only . . . discernment . . . can resolve such difficulties.¹⁷

This points up what, to me, is a central problem in religious life today, the problem of how to live in accord with the dictates of one's own individual nature (or freely discover that nature) and, at the same time, maintain one's relationship to a valued collective. Is it possible for an individual to live a holy and whole (individuated) life within a religious community?

Dorn would say "yes," suggesting that "discernment of spirits" can resolve individual/group issues. And I think he is correct in the sense that discernment is a process that respects the individuality of the person *and* the needs of the collective. The problem is that discernment is not possible unless the discerning parties are truly individuated. As a process of decision-making, discernment flows from one's way of being and can only take place when one is open to the possibility of God speaking through all the experiences of one's life, including one's inner world of feelings, fantasies, and images.

But herein lies the problem. Most religious have been trained to repress their inner experiences. Reason and blind obedience have dictated what we allowed ourselves to experience. Our spirituality has fostered false thinking about creation, about God and about sin.

We are gradually realizing the need to replace such attitudes with new ones which are more consistent with our growth in human consciousness. Our belief in an incarnate God, who is continually creating, "making all things new," urges us to search for a new type of spirituality, one which puts a primary value on openness to experience and discerning God's call in all the existential events of our lives. Dreams seem particularly relevant in this type of spirituality. The precedence for such use of dreams in discerning God's call can be found in Scripture; particularly in the lives of the prophets.

I believe that we need a spirituality that is deeply Christian and deeply psychological. Such a spirituality would be radical, because it would go beyond the old Law of obedience to an outer authority, and would recognize the inner authority of the individual as the higher moral principle.

Such a spirituality would bring the body back into the spiritual life, honoring the role of eros and sexuality in sensitizing us to ourselves and others. No longer could we, in the name of holiness, separate our feelings, desires, and emotions from our conscious discernment and communication. Such an acceptance of our body-selves would make us not only more human, but also more vulnerable and compassionate.

In contrast to the old way of certainty and security, this newer way would feel insecure. It would require that we give up the pursuit of certainty and

security, and pursue instead, self-understanding and insight. John Dunne refers to this as the way of "trial and error" or "finding one's own balance." His insights are pertinent to the type of spirituality I am describing:

One must find [one's] own mean between the extremes. Only one who has [personally] tried the extremes can find this personal mean . . . on the other hand, trying the extremes will not necessarily lead to finding the mean. Only the [person] who perceives the short-comings of the extremes will find it . . .¹⁸

The path of individuation is quite different from the traditional way of suppressing one's nature in obedience to the Law. Often such obedience has protected us from facing powerful emotions and painful feelings which play an important role in the development of one's identity and the formation of personal values. In the passage above, Dunne is referring to the need for personal involvement and experience in order to arrive at one's own individual morality. Many professional religious, because of insufficient experience and self-knowledge, have not internalized authentic religious values. The way of individuation, for these religious, may require the breaking of Tradition or religious rules, so the wisdom contained in these abstract laws may be concretely and personally experienced and integrated. In any case, the individuation process will involve all who choose it in the painful and holy task of transforming and assimilating into one's conscious personality those darker forces which have been buried in the unconscious. This is the process we have traditionally called "conversion of heart."

In the life of Jesus, the path of individuation was a "Way of the Cross." And so it is for us. Our way of the cross, if we choose it, (or if it chooses us) lies in the abandonment of the way of security and perfectionism, and the embracing of a spirituality which plunges us more deeply into the quest for holiness and wholeness.

Becoming whole does not mean being perfect, but being completed.

It does not necessarily mean happiness, but growth. It is often painful, but never boring. It is not getting out of life what we think we want, but it is the development and purification of the soul.¹⁹

Wholeness is, in this sense, holiness.

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