

Borut ŠKODLAR

## *The Soul and the Psyche:*

### *Religious Experience and Psychopathology*

*To certain people there comes a day  
when they must say the great Yes or  
the great No.*

*He who has the Yes ready within him  
immediately reveals himself,  
and saying it he goes*

*against his honour and his own conviction.*

*He who refuses does not repent.*

*Should he be asked again,  
he would say no again. And yet no –  
the right no – crushes him for the rest of his life.*

(Constantine P. CAVAFY, 1901)

#### INTRODUCTION

The Viennese neuropsychiatrist Viktor E. FRANKL (1905-1997), the founder of logotherapy, says that there is not only an instinctual unconscious but a spiritual unconscious in all of us as well. Unlike the former, the latter does not have an automatic and energetic tendency to manifest itself, but “calls” us silently to the responsibility for it. It will not get manifested unless we choose it among many other tempting alternatives and foster it carefully.

There are four aspects of the spiritual unconscious: ethical, erotic, aesthetic and religious. They have their manifestations in our lives as conscience, love, artistic inspiration and religious experience, respectively. We can neither get closer to them by thinking about them obsessively nor get rid of them by ignoring them.

Both processes, obsession and ignorance, can be dangerous in one way or another. How do we get in touch with the spiritual unconscious? How can a spiritual path be initiated through this contact? What are the stages on the spiritual path and what changes do they bring? What are the dangers and traps of these changes?

Spiritual unconscious finds its

way to our consciousness in different forms: seeing a land in front of us while standing at the top of a mountain, listening to our favourite musical passages, falling in love, catching a special moment in the conversation with a good friend, getting a sudden insight, withdrawing deep inside ourselves while sitting in silence, or just being somewhere and losing the feeling of space and time. These small glimpses can occur anytime, anywhere and to any of us. Most of the time they look coincidental. And they are – in a way.

Over time we begin to feel repetition, a certain presence that gives us a sense of following along a path. The path indicates that leave behind some modes and patterns and adopt others. It is a perspective of moving from more to less limitations and no longer perceiving the problems we encounter as coincidental. Along this path we can imagine fostering any aspect of the spiritual unconscious (e.g. ethical growth, growth through the relationship with a person we love, creative artistic process etc.), or a combination of these aspects in our lives as a psychotherapeutic process or even our life as a whole.

#### RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

The religious aspect of the spiritual unconscious can invoke the same feeling of moving along a path. Descriptions of the inner, mystic path derived by mystics, theologians and philosophers, arise out of this feeling. Evelyn UNDERHILL (1875-1941), a famous pioneering writer on mysticism, described the prototypical mystic way in four stages:

1. “Awakening of the self” or “conversion experience”



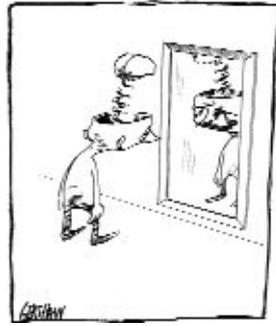
(JAMES) (to recognise within oneself another sphere of perception);

2. "Purgation" or cleansing (simplifying life, freeing from constraints of social and conditioned existence);

3. "Illumination of the self" (happiness, ecstasy, personal relatedness to ultimate reality);

4. "The dark night of the soul" (despairing recognition of the emptiness of ecstasy, the relinquishment of the ordinary attachments to the world);

5. "*Unio mystica*" (goal of the mystic quest, new levels of understanding and compassion for others, dissolving the boundaries between subject and object).



#### RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND PSYCHOPATHOLOGY

The first four stages each involve some danger and some degree of risk of entrapment. "Awakening of the self" is usually a strong emotional experience. There are some people that report their conversion experience only *a posteriori*, after they already considerably changed their lives ("purgation stage"). Orienting themselves with respect to the spiritual goals, they thus entered the second stage without really noticing the first. However, a majority do experience the period of awakening as a powerful shift in their lives. It is a shift that undermines many of their basic attitudes and tenets, which raises a feeling of losing control. Such a feeling can trigger strong anxiety that can manifest itself in a panic attack(s) or can induce a fear of insanity or even of death. Both can lead to the avoidance of practices and conditions that brought them to such a state of anxiety and as a result they stop pursuing spiritual goals.

Another important issue concerns attributions to the changes within us. Out of our narcissistic needs we can attribute a great deal of our fantasies and expectations to inner changes. We can build upon them a system that might attract or frighten others, bringing us to problematic symbioses or to isolation, respectively. At the same time we start to develop a split within our identity. We start to imitate expected self, ignoring and neglecting the given self. This neglect can show up in outbursts of suppressed emotions (i.e. aggression, sexual excesses, psychosomatic disorders etc).

These same mechanisms play a role in the third stage (i.e. "illumination of the self"), where many small ecstasies and illuminative experiences replace a single, large, powerful experience. Since they are included into established and lengthy processes, these mechanisms can cause more damaging consequences. For example, narcissistic-fusing symbioses can be developed into broad-ranging religious movements, which call to the existence further complications.

We must not forget, of course, that "awakening" or "illumination" experiences with or without attributions can (in some people *de facto*) be a part of a psychotic state. They can be a first attack or a relapse of a psychosis. There are two basic criteria for discerning between a mystic experience and a psychotic state:

- (a) within and after a mystic experience one does not lose a sense of reality, meanwhile in psychotic state one does (*per definitionem*);
- (b) a mystic experience has the capacity and a natural tendency to change one's life in a constructive way; a psychosis does not.



We are rarely aware of the possibility of co-existence of both mystic experience and psychotic state. This is beautifully described in a diary of an honoured German judge Daniel Paul SCHREBER (1842-1911) *Memoirs of my Nervous Illness (Denkwürdigkeiten eines Nerven-kranken)*.

When trying to reshape her/his life-style in order to suit more to the spiritual quest in the second "purgative" stage, a person can enter obsessive and compulsive patterns. On the fertile ground of personality traits, this person might build a system of thoughts and rites that must be obeyed and executed. If not, anxiety, tension, and dissatisfaction may result. In order to release or avoid these tensions, rites are performed even more consequently. The vicious neurotic circle is closed: the religious experience, the real source and the only reason to proceed no longer has any influence on the person's thoughts and behaviour. The relationship to transcendence is weakened and, by the same force, the changing power of the religious experience.

Another negative consequence of obsessive and compulsive behaviour may emerge out of a tendency to teach and to 'preach' to others. It may cause grave complications on the interpersonal level.

The fourth, "dark" stage of the mystic path brings us to another important problem area. The dark states of the soul: depression, loneliness and feelings of abandonment, hopelessness and despair, doubt. These feelings push a person to the edge of existence. It is one of the greatest and the most difficult tasks to give meaning to such states of mind, to bridge them and to let them clarify our existence (*Existenzerhellung*), as Karl JASPERS (1883-1969), a great philosopher of existence, might assert. Such "on the edge" states (*Grenzsituationen*) were synonymous with existence. The writings of Søren KIERKEGAARD (1813-1855) bring tremendous insight into the nature of human existence!

There are limits in our capacities within the greatest and most human of the shifts. We've seen depression, collapse, and breakdown. We know suicide (perhaps all too well). So how do we know how



far we can go? Where to stop? How do we avoid the bereft of this big opportunity, not crossing our limits and not entering the range of destruction?

We need to observe our reactions, feelings, emotions and thoughts very carefully. We need to talk with others about our pain and suffering. We need to learn from the pain and suffering of others. And we need to consult the appropriate professionals when needed.

In the fifth stage, *unio mystica*, the person reaches beyond the influence of psychopathological phenomena. These phenomena can appear, but the person does not get involved and is not influenced by them.

## CONCLUSION

Glimpses of the spiritual unconscious appear in the consciousness of every one of us. They urge us along the path. In a religious life it can have a form of a mystic path. In all but the last stage of the mystic path there are some specific traps and dangers. With a careful observation, communication with others, and a willingness to learn from them, we can turn this path into the safest and the most beautiful path of all.

### Suggested Reading

FRANKL Viktor E., *The Unconscious God*. New York, 1985. (Der unbewusste Gott. München, 1994.)

UNDERHILL Evelyn, *Mysticism*. New York, 1961.

YALOM Irvin D., *Existential Psychotherapy*. New York, 1980.

JASPERS Karl, *Philosophie*. München, 1994.



Borut ŠKODLAR is Roman Catholic, a psychiatrist at the Crisis Intervention Unit of the University Psychiatric Hospital of Ljubljana (Slovenia). He is a lecturer at the Chair of Psychiatry, Medical School, University of Ljubljana. He specialised logotherapy and existential analysis at the *Süddeutsches Institut für Logotherapie* in the class of Elisabeth LUKAS. His email address is [borut.skodlar@s5.net](mailto:borut.skodlar@s5.net).

