

## When self religion hurts

Excerpt from *Handbook of Meditation in Society 6:*

Sutta Discovery 60.1f: A psychopathology of mindfulness © Piya Tan 2023c (forthcoming).

### 5.4.4 When self religion hurts

**5.4.4.1** Self religion is the 3<sup>rd</sup> and last of the 3 religious types of the Schjelderup brothers [5.4.2.1]. Early Buddhism, as we have stressed, is a self religion in that it emphasizes on self-reliance. However, there are forms of Buddhism (and other religions) that stops at self-training without going on to understand nonself as taught by the Buddha. A case in point is Chan Buddhism (Chinese) and Zen Buddhism (Japan), that are deeply rooted in Confucianism (such as its lineage) and in Daoism (in its basic philosophy). Its Japanese form is “Buddhism” only in name.<sup>1</sup>

As **self religion**, (Japanese) Zen Buddhism and (Indian) yoga tend to be a quest for and fantasies of self-deification, which is a result of narcissistic withdrawal of libido from external objects and a regression to infantile self-grandiosity. The Schjelderup’s analysis anticipates psychoanalytic readings of contemporary forms of self-spirituality, such as the New Age<sup>2</sup> and the human potential movement, which have also been interpreted as *narcissistic*.

**5.4.4.2** Psychologists nearer to our time have noticed how religion, especially the New Religions,<sup>3</sup> tended to be *narcissistic*. **Mel D Faber** (1996), for example, argues that New Age thinking is a regression to primary narcissism [5.3.2.3] in which the adult is returned to an infantile state of omnipotence, magical wish fulfillment and merger with the mother.<sup>4</sup> Other writers, drew on Kohut’s concept of the selfobject [5.3.2.5] to interpret and legitimize religious phenomena. **Robert C Fuller** (1989), for example, claims that New Age healers act as mature selfobject for analysts and clients.<sup>5</sup>

**Christopher Lasch**’s influential *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979) explains the rise of the new psychospiritual therapies and their quest for self-realization as being both a product

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<sup>1</sup> Zen groups outside of Japan, as a rule, are not hostile to early Buddhism, and often include in their teachings and practices. See “When Zen is not Buddhism,” SD 60.1c (19).

<sup>2</sup> “New Age” was orig a buzzword that achieved widespread popularity in Europe and the US during the 1980s. It referred to a wide array of spiritual practices and beliefs perceived as “alternative” from the perspective of mainstream Western society. The immediate roots of New Age philosophy were in the “Hippie” counterculture of the 1960s US (California). New Agers generally claimed a profound transformation of Western society culminating in a vastly superior culture—the “Age of Aquarius.” See “New Age movement,” *Gale Ency of Religion* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, vol 10 2005:6495-6500.

<sup>3</sup> A “New Religion”—in academic lingo, “New Religious Movement” (NRM)—are scholarly euphemisms for “cult,” which orig referred to an organized system of worship (and is still used in that sense in several disciplines). “Cult” began to take on negative connotations in popular discourse in the 1960s-70s, when a variety of unconventional religions appeared in the US. The word “cult” conveys a stereotype that prevents objective research into these religions. Moreover, NRMs are so different from one another that it is difficult to generalize about them. Essentially, a “new religion” claims to be “new,” that is, different from the established religions, and is, as a rule, centred on a living cult-figure. See “New religious movements: An overview,” and related articles: *Gale Ency of Religion* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, vol 10 2005:6513 ff.

<sup>4</sup> M D **Faber**, *New Age Thinking: A psychoanalytic critique*, Ottawa, ON: Univ of Ottawa Press, 1996. On this section, see Ann **Gleig**, “Narcissism,” in (edd) Leeming, Madden & Marlan, *Ency of Psychology and Religion*, Springer, 2020:7-9.

<sup>5</sup> R C Fuller, *Alternative Medicine and American Religious Life*, NY: Oxford Univ Press, 1989. [[Preview](#)]

and perpetuation of a narcissistic personality structure that because of recent socio-cultural changes has become the predominant psychopathology of contemporary life.<sup>6</sup>

To counter this narcissism, Lasch suggests a return to and renewal of Christian commitment and ethics. However this assumes that Christianity is immune from narcissism, an assumption rebutted by **Paul Pruyser's** (1978) targeting of the narcissistic strands within evangelical Christianity. He claims the evagelic practices of witnessing and testifying are often beset by “reflective narcissism” the need to have one’s own self-love mirrored back in the affirmation and admiration of others.

However, unlike self-spirituality, Pruyser argues that Christianity contains abundant resources to counter such narcissistic trends. For example, the story of Paradise in the book of Genesis rejects the desire to become omnipotent and omniscient like God—which Pruyser interprets as a mythic expression of primary narcissism—as the root of “original sin.”<sup>7</sup>

In other words, for Pruyser—and for many trained in the object relations tradition—the decisive step in religious and spiritual development is choosing between alternative imaginings. For Pruyser, the truth or value of imagining lies not so much in its structure as in its content, and in the value of its content for supporting healthy psychological development. The gentler, nurturing imagery promoted in Pruyser’s warm mother’s “tender-and-firm hand” home life seemed healthier to Pruyser than the strict, sombre and punitive imagery promoted in his school life.

Once again we are reminded of the “mother metaphor” in **the Karaṇīya Metta Sutta** (Sn 1.8), where the Buddha inspires us to evoke unconditional love to all beings: “Just as a mother would guard her own child—her one and only child, with her own life—even so, towards all beings let one cultivate a boundless heart!” (Sn 149)<sup>8</sup> [5.4.1.5]. This is the very basis of spiritual friendship, the ground in which spiritual training roots itself.

**5.4.4.3** The concern among informed practitioners is not whether their faith is a “**self religion**” or not—“self religion” is after a technical term useful perhaps only to the academics and psychologists. Self religion, however, may include in its useful definition the private views and misinterpretations of the wholesome teachings of their faith. Informed Buddhists, for example, will find such a term useful to identify misconceptions and malpractices in our community or social media. We can then initiate discussions, investigations and rectifications of those misconceptions and malpractices.

The matter is more serious when we look deeper into any religion. It is well known that religion doesn’t always have a positive effect on its followers’ **mental health** or social well-being [5.4.4.4]. How negative the impact is depends on a person’s beliefs and commitment, how widely the religion is generally accepted by the larger community.

For example, if instead of promoting love and compassion, a religion advocates hate of non-believers, such negative beliefs and attitudes would also become part of the way their brains work. This would turn on areas of the brain involved in thinking about hate, and will

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<sup>6</sup> C Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, NY: W W Norton, 1979.

<sup>7</sup> P Pruyser, “Narcissism in contemporary religion,” *J of Pastoral Care* 32 1978:219-231.

<sup>8</sup> Sn 1.8/\*149/26 = Khp 9,7/8 (SD 38.3).

stimulate the release of stress hormones, increase stress and encourage violence. Furthermore, when people believe that a health condition—such as addiction—is a punishment from God or simply “one’s karma”—they may be less likely to seek treatment, with adverse consequences on their health and their social network.<sup>9</sup>

**5.4.4.4** Contemporary clinical psychologist **Ken Pargament** of Bowling Green State University (Ohio, US), coined the term “sacred moments” for numinous experiences that occur in clinical contexts. Pargament argued that these experiences are already occurring in therapy rooms, and that they can actually enhance the therapeutic process when explicitly acknowledged. In a 2014 article, Pargament and his coauthors described several of these sacred moments.<sup>10</sup>

Here is one from a patient (a God-believer):

I also felt safe because I knew my therapist was/is there for me and that she has my best interests at heart. She was very supportive and loving. She extended my session by another hour and made sure I was safe to go home. This moment brought us closer and deepened my trust in her. [This moment] was sacred to me because I knew, all the way to my spirit that I was not alone in this anymore and that I had not only my therapist on my side but it brought home that God was pained by what I went thru. (Pargament et al, 2014:256)

In **Buddhist counselling** (where both counsellor and client are Buddhist or open to Buddhism)—which has more spiritual latitude than clinical counselling—the counsellor, where needed, would try to define or clarify difficult aspects of the session with a suitable Buddhist teaching or even use short moments of meditation-sitting to help the client collect themselves. In fact, Pargament also made the point that it’s not only the clients, but also the clinicians who can experience such sacred moments. Here is one therapist describing an experience that occurred while the patient was expressing gratitude about the therapeutic process:

He said I was different than all other providers in the sense that I was genuinely caring about him and paying attention to what he was saying and also to what he was not saying. It was like time had stopped and we were two vulnerable human beings connected at a very deep level. A “sacred” moment. (Pargament et al, 2014:252)

Pargament and his colleagues also addressed the mental health benefits of spiritual experiences outside of the clinical office. They found that spiritual experiences (the “sacred moments”) are associated with less caregiving burden but with greater relationship

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<sup>9</sup> See D B Yaden & A B Newberg, *The Varieties of Spiritual Experience*, Oxford, 2022:Ch 5.

<sup>10</sup> K **Pargament**, J Lomax, J Mcgee & Q Fang, “Sacred moments in psychotherapy from the perspectives of mental health providers and patients: Prevalence, predictors, and consequences,” *Spirituality in Clinical Practice* 1,4 2014:248-262. K I **Pargament** & A Mahoney, “Sacred matters: Sanctification as a vital topic for the psychology of religion,” *International J of the Psychology of Religion* 15,3 2005:179-198, [https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327582ijpr1503\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327582ijpr1503_1).

satisfaction among family caregivers of adults with dementia,<sup>11</sup> and with greater growth in the aftermath of spiritual struggles in an adult situation.<sup>12</sup>

**5.4.4.5** The Buddhist term for this healing engagement is **spiritual friendship** (*kalyāṇa-mittatā*), a wholesome interbeing characterized by *love, ruth (compassion), joy and equanimity*, that is, the 4 divine abodes [5.1.7.4]. Love (*mettā*, usually “lovingkindness”) is unconditional acceptance of others, which means “deep listening” to others even when they are not in any difficulty, and with our wisdom, we help to *prevent* problems and pain from arising by skillfully explaining to others how this will happen or work with others so that do not suffer through lack of mindfulness [5.2.1.2].

Ruth<sup>13</sup> (*karuṇā*, compassion) is when someone actually fall into some difficulty (losing a job or a loved one) or commits an unwholesome act (such as breaking a precept), we act to be a support for such a grieving or suffering person. This is not an easy task, but one that is a valuable learning link with others. Ruth also means we help others even when, especially when, they do not deserve it, but without putting them in any greater disadvantage.

Joy (*muditā*) is an altruistic exultation when our counsellee heals or someone well earns their gain, success or happiness. We express our altruistic joy by smiling, congratulating the person, or simply reflecting: “This good person deserves this benefit, sadhu!” Such words empower both others and self in mutual joy. We are happy at another’s happiness.

Equanimity (*upekkha*) is a calm and clear mindfulness at the true state of things, whether they turn out well or otherwise. No one is to be blamed. Things do *not* happen for a reason (we reasoned it out ourselves); things happen because of related conditions (the present), or because of karma (how our past affects us now). Having shown our *love, ruth and joy* to others, the wheel of samsara still rolls on relentlessly, and we move along gingerly with it, until we awaken to true freedom.

In the meantime, still unawakened, we have to relate to others: we notice how alike we are to others in some ways, and yet we are so different from them in other ways. There are certain things we like, or fear, or don’t know about: this is universal. Yet what we like, or fear, or are ignorant may differ from person to person. Looking deeper, we will notice that there are two kinds of people: those who merely look for immediate and pragmatic solutions to these issues, and those who seek to understand more deeply the way things are, even to the roots of the way things: we seek a more radical solution, or at least explanation, for the way things are. Either way, we *struggle* with such issues. This is what we will now turn to: our struggle to understand these things.

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha’s Example and Teachings]

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<sup>11</sup> S Wong, K I Pargament & C A Faigin, “Sustained by the sacred: Religious and spiritual factors for resilience in adulthood and aging: Concepts, research, and outcomes,” in (edd) B Resnick, L P Gwyther & K A Roberto, *Resilience in Aging*, 2018:207.

<sup>12</sup> J A Wilt, K I Pargament, J J Exline, T L Barrera & E J Teng, “Spiritual transformation among veterans in response to a religious/spiritual struggle,” *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 11,3 2019:266-277. <https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000208>.

<sup>13</sup> On usage of “ruth” here, see SD 38.5 (2.3.2.1); SD 48.1 (5.2.1.3).