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2. Charisma (Mental Illness?) as the Foundation of Religions

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Introduction and Circumspections

[1] It is the interdisciplinary spirit of the Kripke Center that caused me to consider what I, as a psychiatrist, might most uniquely contribute to the topic of this volume, and so, my curious theme. Curious, but not meant to be either impertinent or impolite, even as I fully anticipate and appreciate that some will have intuitive reservations – even as I do. Still, I am not presently concerned with religion. It is not my field and others study it more effectively. Moreover, as a psychiatrist, I am interested in the pathological.

[2] There seems nothing pathological in human beings having basic moral grammar or beliefs in a benevolent intelligent designer who created souls with an afterlife. Indeed, since the very origin of Western thought religion and morality were deemed kith and kin, as is evident in Greek philosophy, the Judaic tradition, and Christian theology and ethics (Hare).

[3] What is most deeply worrisome and the cause of considerable strife, is the exclusivity between religions, particularly as these so often pass into shadows cast by founding figures – not to mention that they continue to feed all manner of mayhem and violence as old prophets and their prophesies are recast in the current era by all too many malefactors. Certainly from an anthropological perspective, religion is universal even as any particular religion is peculiar. Universal religious instinct is fragmented by means of the idiosyncrasies of the varied founders of diverse religiosity as well as by the even more anomalous interpretations of later followers.

[4] I do not mean to indulge in retrospective diagnosis – with or without reference to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association (APA). Retrospective diagnosis is a dubious enterprise even with recent historical figures and far more so with persons of millennia past. Thus, I am NOT suggesting any religious figure obliquely referenced herein was “mentally ill,” for to do so would be to indulge in an egregious bias of ahistoricism suffused with an ethnocentrism of time, not to mention speculation that is especially to be avoided in an area of such significance and sensitivity.

Methodological Approach

[5] Hermeneutics is a term that subsumes both first order artistry and second order theory – particularly since it deals with understanding and interpretation of expression, whether linguistic or non-linguistic. By way of interpretive theory, hermeneutics is a tradition that harkens back to the ancient Greeks and their philosophy. Amid the Middle Ages and Renaissance, hermeneutics later emerged as an essential branch of Biblical exegesis – most notably in Christendom. Thereafter, it came to include broader studies of ancient and classical cultures; later it was propaedeutic to a syncretic understanding of humanity in myriad forms and processes.

[6] With the rise of German romanticism and idealism hermeneutics turned to the philosophical. It was no longer construed simply as a method or didactic for other disciplines, but emerged as the channel for symbolic communication writ large. Indeed, the question “How to read?” was replaced by the question, “Can we communicate?” This shift as initiated by Schleiermacher and Dilthey among others, allowed an ontological turn in hermeneutics, which was triggered in the mid-1920s by Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit* and thereafter carried on by his student Hans-Georg Gadamer. Now hermeneutics not only attends to symbolic communication; it is an area even more fundamental insofar as it takes up issues to do with human life and existence as such.

[7] In this form of interrogation into the deepest conditions for symbolic interaction and culture in general, hermeneutics provides critical vistas for the most engaging dialogues in contemporary philosophic discourse, whether in Anglo-American (Rorty, McDowell, and Davidson) or more Continental contexts (Habermas, Apel, Ricoeur, and Derrida). But of course, individual hermeneutic phenomenology exists in a complex social calculus where forms of order and process naturally arise. One key aspect of this social calculus in which individuals exist is the emergence of social rank meant for (but not always attaining) purposes of tribal leadership and harmony.

[8] For his critical part, Max Weber defined three classes of authority – traditional, charismatic, and legal. He noted that charismatic authority rested “on devotion to the exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person, and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him” (Weber: 215). Indeed, charisma (Greek “*keharisma*” - “gift” “of/from/favored by God/the divine”) is a trait of humans whose temperaments have a profound personal charm, magnetism, attractiveness, and/or dominance coupled with a powerful talent for interpersonal persuasion.

[9] Weber thought charisma could derive from mental illness and he spoke of an “emotional seizure” springing from the unconscious mind of the leader as “extraordinary” emotions. These highly affective emotions arouse similar feelings in others, many of who become followers. The greater the leader’s affective zeal, the greater is his appeal and the more intense is his following.

[10] There is, then, a likely link between charismatic religious leaders and symptoms of mental illness. Charismatic leaders such as Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, and Gautama, have established many if not most religions. Yet as Dryden poeticized in *Absalom and Achitophel* (1681), “Great wits are to madness near allied/And thin partitions do their bounds divide” (Part I, lines 163-64). The foundational aspects of charisma in religions are not well studied, but when studied, their relation to madness introduces possible problematic elements in the bases of religious inspiration.

[11] Charismatic authority rests “on devotion to the exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person, and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him” (Weber: 215). Indeed, charisma is a trait of humans whose temperaments have a profound personal charm, magnetism, attractiveness, and/or dominance coupled with a powerful talent for interpersonal persuasion.

[12] What follows is an initial consideration of possible co-mingling of mental illness, religion, and many major spiritual leaders. Indeed, here is warranted some attention to how ahistorical bias (as arises with epistemological constraints) may adversely affect interpretation. In a quest for pure history that is void of bias, there are three main types to be overcome: personal, cultural, and historical. Yet all humans are fallible so it is not possible to fully expunge idiosyncratic or cultural errors from our analyses. Likewise, each person, culture and generation “uses history” as it reinterprets matters from its own, then-current ideology (thus the frequency of retrospectively ahistorical bias).

[13] *Personal bias* can be minimized if not overcome with application of “reasoning” strategies that focus on “detachment,” “fairness,” and “honesty.” Indeed, this is akin to Freud in his formulation of transference and counter-transference (Freud). *Transference* is a psychoanalytic phenomenon characterized by the unconscious redirection of feelings from one person to another; *Counter-transference* is the redirection of a psychotherapist’s feelings for a patient – or, more generally, a therapist’s emotional engagement with a patient. Hence these sentiments resonate between the therapist and patient and, importantly, such resonances are largely unconscious but nevertheless feed substantial complications. Such psychoanalytic constructs are useful as further social science perspectives that inform myriad human biases, which too often blur boundaries between mental illness and religious charisma.

[14] *Ethnocentrism* is the tendency that William G. Sumner identified upon observing how people are acculturated to differentiate between their in-group and extrinsic “others.” Sumner described ethnocentrism as often inculcating beliefs of one’s own group’s superiority, while also conferring an instinctive contempt of outsiders.

[15] *Ahistoricism* is a mode of thinking in which the basic significance of specific social context – e.g., time, place, and local conditions – is ignored. Elements of historicism appear in the work of Vico and de Montaigne, but became fully developed with the dialectic of Hegel (1821). The term is also associated with both Marxism – via Marx’s *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* (Marx), as well as the empirical social sciences (at least since Franz Boas). Ahistoricism is a view unreconstructed by such historical perspectives and procedures. It is surprisingly epidemic in contemporary culture and politics, largely driven by phenotypic reactions as the ethos and world view of hominoid hunter-gatherers clashes with the novel sociodevelopmental environments of ontogenic adaptation that have – with quite distinct and novel phenotypic expression – arisen in the Holocene Epoch.

Charisma (Mental Illness?) as the Foundation of Religions

[16] With these prefatory cautions made clear, it is useful to note that current thinking in psychiatric anthropology includes an active area to do with religiosity and psychiatric traits (Foulks; Perez; Littlewood; Greenberg; Kottek; Crow; Price and Stevens; Sanderson, Vandenberg, and Paese; Harland, Morgan, and Hutchinson; Price 2005; Vishne and Harary; Doerr and Velásquez; Bhavsar and Bhugra; Price 2010).

[17] Much as Max Weber defined three classes of authority – traditional, charismatic, and legal – Goodman and colleagues returned attention to the phenomenon of the culturally relevant code of shamanism. Their attention revived interest in the commonly noted but rarely studied overlap between shamanism and psychopathology: “Not infrequently in primitive societies the code, or the core of it, is formulated by one individual in the course of a hallucinatory revelation: such prophetic experiences are apt to launch religious movements, since the source of the revelation is apt to be regarded as a supernatural being” (Goodman, Henney, and Pressel: 132).

[18] In contemporary clinical science, hallucinations are misperceptions absent stimulus. In a more restricted sense, they are perceptions in a consciously awake state that arise without extrinsic stimuli, yet have qualities of real perception – they are vivid, substantial, and situated in the external objective. These are phenomena of the type herein to which I refer parenthetically as charismatic or mentally ill. This has been well explicated in the April 2010 volume of *Politics & Culture* – specifically six papers from the symposium “How Is Culture Biological?” Most specifically, this present contribution is directly influenced by the themes taken up by Dr. John S. Price (Price 2010).

[19] Price emphasizes how religious innovations as engendered by overly inspired persons frequently confer utility via group splitting with the establishment of new socially ordered communities. It bears mention that Professor Price is not only my good friend but also an eminent British psychiatrist and evolutionary scientist who, as it happens, lectured on the evolutionarily origins of depression as the Distinguished Visiting Professor at Creighton in 2009.

[20] With this lengthy but, I think, quite necessary cautionary and contextual prolegomena, let us turn to briefly consider a number of religious charismatics. This consideration of a case series is to see if there are phenomena that – by today’s lights – would be deemed psychiatric but that – in historical terms – were almost certainly not. Again, this is not to retrospectively diagnose. Instead, I merely suppose one might speculate on how doctors and nurses in a busy Emergency Room might deal with certain events were they to occur today, particularly the behavior of certain persons (who, though they comprise what the medical literature terms a “case series,” shall remain anonymous lest we run afoul of The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) of 1996 (P.L.104-191) as enacted by the U.S. Congress in 1996).

Case Series Vignettes

[21] *Case 1.* Sometime after the birth of his son, an executive was commanded by God to offer his son up as a sacrifice. The man traveled three days until he came to the mountain to which he said God had directed him. He sent away a companion to proceed up the mountainside with only his son. He found a suitable spot, lay down his son, raised a knife, and prepared to strike. Just as the man was about to plunge the knife in sacrifice of his son, he was prevented by “an Angel” who presented him with a sacrificial beast. Convinced he was so directed by God, he sacrificed the beast and spared his son.

[22] *Case 2.* Another man who owned a shipping concern reportedly stayed alone on a mountain for 40 days and nights, during which time he claimed to have received from God a tablet inscribed with ten divine laws. He then descended the mountain to share this with his extended family, but upon his arrival he saw that the people engaged in illicit behavior. As a result, he became terribly angry and smashed the tablet, then ordered some loyalists to decimate those gathered. The clinical record also reports that the man had been speaking to a bush, drew water from a rock, and commanded a battle with his cane, among other quite remarkable claims.

[23] *Case 3.* A rich young man from the Orient of the upper class whose family had shielded him from any depressing or sad experiences finally left home for college. But once out in the world he quickly saw all manner of suffering, poverty, sickness, and death. He became quite depressed and his syndrome only abated once he achieved the substantial insight that he needed to refrain from desire and seek detached acceptance. He thereafter somehow survived as a simple ascetic who wandered about “living in the moment . . . the eternal now.”

[24] *Case 4.* A young working class man from the Middle East took up with a pious religious group and was eventually baptized. Shortly thereafter, God reportedly led him into the desert. During this time he fasted for forty days and forty nights, and also struggled with the Devil who tempted him with all manner of worldly riches and power until the Devil finally departed and persons he called “angels” rescued him. On examination in the emergency room it was noted that he spoke in pithy parables, striking imagery, and hyperbole with unusual twists of phrase even as he warned God was near and an apocalypse was at hand.

[25] *Case 5.* Another young Middle Eastern man survived the death first of his father a few days after he was born, then his mother when he was six, then his grandfather three years

later. Eventually he was taken into his uncle's home. His was a hard childhood. Moreover, a possible history of epilepsy could not be ruled out. As a man, he was able to take up humble work for a wealthy widow with whom he became attached and, in due course, married. At a later point, he frequented a cave. One particular night when he was lying in the cave a voice commanded him to cry. He resisted twice, but when the voice commanded "Cry!" for the third time, he asked what he should cry. He was given a few sentences, and as he aroused from his trance, the words had been deeply impressed upon him. He ran home terrified. He told his wife that he had become either a prophet or "one possessed or mad." She was incredulous, but after she heard the full story, she became his first convert. He had many doubts about whether the voice was really God's or whether it was of demonic origin, but his wife encouraged him. The voice returned frequently, and it eventually commanded him to preach.

[26] Here it is worth emphasis that these tales tell of deontology as they relate the direct connection between bizarre behavior and the origins of religious species. Though a fuller exegesis is beyond the scope of this paper, it is fascinating that the societies in which such religiously charismatic figures arose (eventually) interpreted their behavior as divine revelation rather than madness.

[27] In toto, it appears that a democratic or even a market force prevails in that a new religious theme derives if people listen and believe. If people reject the prophecy or cast aside the perorations of divinity then madness devolves. Earlier I mentioned the April volume of *Politics & Culture* symposium series "Is Culture Biological?", notably the third essay, "The Culture of Religious Belief Systems and Changes of Belief System." Dr. Price elaborates how fundamental it is that all human societies and their beings have sets of beliefs about themselves and the world (Price 2010). Anthropologist Anthony Wallace called this set and system a "mazeway" (Wallace). Thus, the mazeway points out that ideational adherence is key and that non-adherence is at best idiosyncratic and, generally, deviant or heretical, or insane credulousness.

Conclusion

[28] All such ethnohistorical phenomena entail interesting appositions in that they generally denote how spirit possessions (i.e., a paranormal event in which a god, animus, or other supernatural entity takes control of a human) follow culturally accepted patterns whereas madness is an uncontrolled state. Such sociocultural aspects does not merely facilitate but confirms any distinction between they who are simply mad from others who are truly, nay, divinely, inspired. As Stevens and Price emphasize, the practical distinction is between they who engender and sustain loyal followers and others who do not. The former are prophets and heroes whereas the latter are losers and hobos.

[29] Following Dr. Price's clear path through Wallace's mazeway, we appreciate how the mazeway mediates beliefs about the individual in relation to the group, ancestry, Gods, life purpose, and moral code. These elements are learned in childhood via language; therefore the development of mazeways began when humans developed symbolic vocal language after our hominid ancestors split off from the chimpanzee line (it is duly noted that chimps have at least proto-cultural capacities if not more fully formed aspects).

[30] Thereafter, each group could adopt unique symbols to define it – a name, a myth of its origins, a unique dialect, and maybe a totem. Such group symbols enhanced in-group cohesiveness and encouraged out-group competition. Most writers on religion agree that such groups with religious and moral mazeways should out-compete any group lacking such beliefs. Thus any reference to “mazeway” is – ultimately – a factor of adaptive syncretism, insofar as that syncretism tries to blend contrary beliefs and meld diverse theological practices. Mazeway syncretism attempts to merge and analogize discrete traditions, especially to do with the theology and mythology of religions. Thereby the mazeway syncretism asserts underlying unity that fosters inclusive approaches among faith traditions.

[31] Quite significantly, the elements of a mazeway are neither false nor true but are – in some cases – adaptive at the lineage or group level. Still, mazeways – like any syncretism – are unverifiable. They consist of what Roy Rappaport deems sacred knowledge, to distinguish it from ordinary practical (profane) knowledge. So it is that everyone has a belief system, which they share with members of their group. Yet a small percentage of people experience a change of belief system.

[32] They who can persuade others to share it are prophets. They who fail to persuade others, were ruined for apostasy or, are now in the modern era, labeled psychotic (by psychiatrists and their like who share a mazeway of their own, it seems!). Charisma here seems decisive insofar as that they who can – by way of vitalistic force – affect others generally carry the day.

[34] The new belief system is incompatible with the old and results in the prophet and followers to seek a “promised land” (or, in terms of biologic evolution, achieve a new environment of adaptation). This accelerates the process of colonizing vacant territory and, therefore, advances both the capacity to develop a new belief system and the capacity to be persuaded to switch to the belief system of the prophet. As such, either or both may have been selected for at both the individual and group level. Here we enter into the arena of Darwinian selection of advantageous traits or de-selection of disadvantageous traits.

[35] With this mazeway concept in mind it is interesting to note that some – even many – contemporaries of Buddha, Christ, and Muhammad (likely, too, Abraham or Moses were the observations of such collateral sources available to us even indirectly) expressed concerns as to their sanity. As that redoubtable Christian C. S. Lewis pointed out, Jesus was either a lunatic or a liar or Lord when He made His claims (Lewis). Indeed, even charismatic leaders expressed some such worries quite directly in the case of Muhammad and with clear suggestions in the cases of Buddha and Jesus.

[36] Thus in all, it does seem plausible that charisma and, possibly, mental illness, has some role in the foundation of religions. Here a key issue arises insofar as how did the contemporaries of charismatic religious leaders ascertain their state of revelation from their possible mental illness? Or, put differently, how did such leaders persuade others of their charisma as opposed to their possible mental illness? There the mazeway concept helps elucidate new symbolic interactions (at least those that attain substantive societal traction and, possibly, foster new adaptation).

[37] This being so, one wonders how the world and its range of religions would appear had there been in antiquity a system of psychiatric intervention and treatment that might have “ameliorated” the “psychoses” of divine inspiration and interaction. In all one wonders, were humanity rid of its mentally ill and the genome rid of traits epigenetically linked to expressions of mental illness, there likely would be considerably less color and ferment in the religious arena of human affairs and, for that matter, in the domains of politics, sciences, and the arts. This is, or should not be, surprising; for after all, the proper yeasts are essential in the making of bread and wine. Here I end with this politely offered protothesis that is, if somewhat unorthodox, still a valid Christian – and, I believe – universal consideration that is, quite possibly, persuasive.

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