

OUR HUMANITY – PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

“As a man thinks... so is he” (Prov.23:70)

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In a previous paper (Potter, 2013) I described three human ontological theories; the primal account, the positivist account and the Judeo-Christian account. In referencing the Judeo-Christian account I moved quite a long way into matters concerning the soul (*psyche*). I did not do this under the primal and positivist accounts because those accounts have little or nothing to say about such matters. Most primal people and positivists have very indistinct ideas about how humans think. The Greeks held that humans have a *psyche* and this agrees with the Judeo-Christian that a human is a rational being intimately joined with the body. By this account, it is the rational being that thinks, even talks to itself, although who it is talking to when it does so remains something of a mystery!

In this paper I want to explore some of the outcomes in human thought life that develop as a result of walking in one or other of the ontological models. But before I do that I take cognizance that we humans have a major psychological problem in that, being disparate, we can only relate to reality via the senses and are essentially cut off from each other in an obtuse way. What you are actually thinking and feeling is something that I can only guess at, and this has important implications for communication, relationships and, above all, learning.

COMMEN CONDEMNATION

Problems of individual isolation are exacerbated by the ‘knowledge of good and evil’. According to the Masoretic text, God instructed the first humans not to eat the fruit of a certain tree (Genesis 2:17), but they did eat it (3:6-7) and as a result lost ‘their first estate’. No-one has described the result better than Sigmund Freud (Freud, 1991). Freud was a product of nineteenth century positivism and, having rejected any notion of the supernatural, he went on to construct a general psychological theory from common sense observations and positivist thinking. First he saw that humans were motivated by two basic instincts, to survive and to possess objects. But these instincts he saw frustrated by others, in the first instance by parents who introduced the child to the idea that some actions are good and others are evil. In time, he saw humans constructing for themselves a set of rules by which they judged their own actions and thoughts, the

super-ego judging the ego. When they were obeying the inner law (conscience) they had a sense of well-being; when they were acting contrary to the inner law they felt guilty. The hero of Victor Hugo’s *Les Miserables* had a maid who ‘never told a lie’, but she did lie to protect the hero from the Inspector and this left her greatly troubled. The hero told her that her lie would grace the doors of heaven but she could not believe it. We have all known condemnation and the redeemed know what grace it is to be delivered from it.

Freud saw un-redeemed humanity escaping condemnation only by distractions: throwing oneself into work, doing good deeds, loving oneself (narcissism) or drinking beer! But humans have constructed much more complex ways of avoiding guilt, viz: (1) aligning actions with traditions; (2) practicing religion; or (3) eliminating God and a troubling conscience altogether. We will look at each of these practices below and the temporary relief they provide. This compares with God’s provision: a one shot deliverance from condemnation for eternity.

LIVING BY TRADITIONAL AUTHORITY

Primal peoples have derived an ingenious way of escaping from condemnation - they live by the precepts of tribal tradition, the ‘way we do things’. It is crucial to a primal person that they be free of blame, for blame opens the door for malevolence and the wrath of the ancestors. The way out is to conform to the norms and *know* your actions are beyond criticism. You feel safe then, free in your mind.

Primal traditions are complex – there is a rule for everything, nothing is left to chance. Traditions are taught systematically. Children learn from their mothers in the early stages of their development then, at age 7, they are committed to practical tasks that bring about positive concrete learning. In Africa, girls undertake domestic tasks and boys look after cattle. At puberty, both girls and boys are introduced to adult practices in highly specialized initiation schools. Here they learn ‘what adults do’; and by having every last ounce of independence and lateral thinking smashed out of them, they become committed to following tribal ways and norms¹. This primal practice of ordered instruction is a far cry from the *laissez-faire* education that has become popular in the West. Educators will find it of interest that the stages of development recognized by primal peoples are congruent with those defined by the Swiss educational psychologist Jean Piaget (Piaget, 1981).

Primal people are not judged to be fully adult until they reach the age of thirty but after initiation there

is much to do helping the tribal elders in the daily tasks of community management. This follows the pattern of old Israel where the Levites were numbered from 30 years and upwards (I Chron.23:3) and King David had to request special permission from Jehovah before he could engage 20-30 year olds 'to assist the priests' (I Chron.23:27-32).

Richardson sees the notion of conforming to traditional practices coming from an underlying holism in primal thought. Unlike Western thinking, which tends to be decidedly dualistic, primal thinking sees the togetherness of things. There is a stress on interdependence and harmony among people and between humans and their environment. 'It is assumed that all things are in a natural balance and that every disruption has a specific cause which can (and must) be detected and put to rights so that harmony and equilibrium may be maintained' (Richardson, 1998). Not that the natural harmony of things is considered by primal peoples to be a neutral or fixed state, but the individual's *seriti* (the life-force' – see Potter, op cit) is seen to be limited by station and individuals see their welfare highly dependent on the *combined* spiritual, physical and economic strength of the family or clan. The idea is strongly inculcated in the young adult mind that 'my well-being' is inevitably bound up with the 'welfare of others'. It's a 'let's all win together' approach in the totality of life's experiences. The possibility of an individual destiny is strongly denied.

Traditional life is filled with rituals (ceremonies) that have the pragmatic aim of maintaining or even increasing the clan's *collective* life-force. Such rituals are sometimes regarded by Western observers as religious, but primal peoples do not see them as such, for they do not distinguish the religious from the secular. The assumption in rituals is an optimistic one that assumes that more of the life-force is available if the clan approaches the forces operating in the *cosmos* in the right way. This has implications for the individual in that the vital force operating in the clan is seen to be the summation of the *seriti* in individuals. Before the birth of each baby and at key points throughout their life, even after their death, certain rituals must be observed if the life-force is to be maximized. The Zulu *imbelego* ceremony in which the name of the newly born is communicated to the ancestors is a case in point. 'The hope is that the ancestors will approve of the name and care for the child throughout its life', (Richardson op cit).

As we have seen, the ancestors are assumed to be located in the heavens, but this does not mean that they are isolated from clan members operating on planet earth. On the contrary, though unable to

physically interfere with affairs on the ground, they are understood to serve the useful function of providing an ever-present authority with regard to tribal traditions. This is important, because, to escape condemnation and keep the clan safe from malevolence, tribal decisions are not made opportunistically but according to what tradition dictates. If a question is raised, the tradition approved by the ancestors is referenced and this provides the tribal elders with authority to decree how things must be done. It is normal for clan members to accept this view without dissent, for obeying the authority of tradition provides a way by which a person may judge that their actions are 'good' as opposed to evil, and thus escape from feelings of condemnation and fear.

But the ancestors serve another important function. They are the channel that the clan uses to seek assistance from the Creator. It is understood that God is far away and cannot be reached by earth's inhabitants, but the ancestors, being in the heavens, are close to God and able to intercede on behalf of their earth-bound relatives. It is upon this understanding that tribal chiefs and village headmen make offerings to the ancestors as a monthly ritual, communicating to the ancestors the particular needs of their communities in the hope that the ancestors will pass on their petitions to the Great One². Every village and tribe has a special place where this occurs; it is often a high place if one is available. The timing is usually the new moon – the Festival of the New Moon (I Samuel 20, etc.). A friend of mine, when working as a missionary in the Congo, happened to reach a large tribe for the first time right on the new moon. He was met by a number of minor dignitaries and asked to wait because the paramount chief was busy celebrating the Moon Festival. Noticing a group of men seated in a circle in the distance, and feeling impressed by the Holy Spirit to approach them, my friend moved forward. On reaching the rise he was greeted by the chief with dignity and asked to sit in a chair until the ritual was concluded. To my friend's astonishment, the chief picked up a piece of bread made of cassava, held it to the heavens and cried out, 'We do this in the name of the Great One whose name we have forgotten'. The bread was then circulated amongst the elders who each ate a portion. The chief then took a cup of maize beer and repeated the statement, 'We do this in the name of the Great One whose name we have forgotten'. The cup was similarly passed to the gathered elders. This Festival of the Moon celebration, including the ceremony of the bread and wine, is ubiquitous amongst primal peoples³. Needless to say, when asked to speak, my friend was happy to announce that he 'knew the name of the Great One!' Primal elders do not pray *to* the ancestors, they pray

through them, in the same way that orthodox Christians pray through departed Saints.

Now, in the primal understanding, a departed ancestor's position in the heavens is dictated by two things: their quality of their life on earth and the singing of their spirit after death. If an ancestor has lived an exemplary life it is understood that it is possible for them to dwell closer to the Creator than a person who has spent their life practicing evil. If the relatives of the dead 'sing the spirit' well, it is likely that their *moya/seriti* will finish up closer to God than if no singing is done at all. So, at funerals in primal communities, people calling themselves Christians sing Christian hymns, not so much to glorify God but to ensure that grandma's spirit finishes up close to the Creator, for this is seen to be crucial for the health of the tribe. Besides, nobody wants the agogo's spirit hanging around the camp!

The problem for the primal position is that, while the life-force may be maintained, even increased, by the rituals, there is no place for innovation and little opportunity for individuals to improve their economic position or social status. For, while the presence of the ancestors may have benefits for the tribe as a whole, they can be a distinct source of frustration for the individual. This begins at an early age. In an African village, holism dictates that 'all the children are our children' and every child may be disciplined by any adult who finds them straying from the tribal norms. Even if you can find a spot where you are totally alone, you know the ancestors are watching!

Primal peoples have a problem relating to the Western economic system. If a primal person finds paid employment it will be taken for granted that their salary will be available to satisfy the needs of the whole clan. This becomes a powerful disincentive to work and many individuals abandon school and paid work in favour of spending days fishing or hunting with clan friends. For, dissociating oneself from the clan is not an option if one believes that an individual's life-force is insufficient to sustain life against the malevolent forces.

In the same way, individual clans see their combined life-force to be limited. In the case that their political leaders are tyrannical, they assume that nothing can be done, for the leader is understood to have even more *seriti* than a clan and even all clans combined. In such circumstances, the only thing that can be done is to wait for the tyrant to die. Political action is not attempted because it is seen to be hopeless. Western politicians fail to understand this because their assumptions are entirely different.

So the life of the ordinary primal tribal person works itself out in an unthinking obedience to traditional prescriptions and duties. No allowance is made for new information. For instance, it is difficult to persuade primal people that disease may be caused by micro-organisms⁴. Death is seen to come by the action of some hostile person, for death is seen to be a diminution of the collective 'life-force' and this could not be caused by God (for He is Good) or the ancestors (for they are benevolent as long as the rituals are maintained). No, death indicates a deliberate action on the part of some human bent on doing the group harm and it is important to turn up at the funeral of a relative, otherwise you may be blamed for the death⁵. This view is not so different from Augustine and Thomas who saw evil as the absence of goodness:

'...if a human fault can be indicated by the metaphors of the contractions of soul and of interests, and its consequences as improper relations of ourselves and all things to God, the correction can be indicated by an enlargement of soul (life-force) ...and by a more appropriate alignment of ourselves and all things in relation to each other and the ultimate power and orderer of life (Gustafson, 1981).

The West always sees education and training as the answer to the lack of development in primal communities but the pattern is set at the mother's knee and the initiation schools make doubly sure that the traditions hold sway when a person moves into adulthood. In Piaget's terms, *formal operations* are bypassed. Change is the farthest thing from a primal person's mind.

PRACTICING RELIGION

As we have seen, there is an ever present predisposition to condemnation in the human psyche. This arises not only from the action of a super-ego but from an inbuilt fear in the unredeemed human soul that it is exposed to God's judgments. In times of good circumstances such thoughts may be buried and forgotten but they are very much inclined to re-surface in times of calamity. After the Sumatran *tsunami* in 2003, people around the world gave extremely generously to the relief work. One suspects that this was not due to an excessive benevolence but because the event was so large (shaking the earth on its axis) that it was taken to be an act of God - although nobody said so. When God is seen to have acted, people have a desperate need to do something to set things right, even if, in good times, they claim not to believe in Him. The same thing happened after the universal Flood of Noah, a *tsunami* of monstrous proportions⁵. Humanity was left in a state of tension. God had taken action against a

disobedient humanity and the question was: would He do it again? The rainbow sign offered comfort, but this was a promise to those who 'walked with God', not to those who walked in disobedience. That Noah and Shem walked with God in the early post-Flood days is evident and the scripture reports that even Pharaohs and pagan Kings had a healthy respect for God at that time (e.g. Genesis 20). But, walking with God or not, it is apparent that condemnation continued to be the common experience and this opened a door of opportunity for some people to set up religious systems that offer ways and means by which people might placate God's wrath. The system developed in Babylon (c. 2200 BC) was the most successful (Potter 1994). It derived its success from two principles: (1) Manichean Philosophy; and (2) Confession.

Manichean Philosophy

As mentioned above, a fundamental problem for unredeemed humanity is that they judge their own actions according to an 'inner law' that they create for themselves (Freud 1991). Once this process takes root in a person's psyche it is a natural tendency for them to carry a load of self-imposed guilt and feelings of inadequacy (sinfulness) because, being 'slaves to the appetites of the flesh' in their thought life they see themselves to be evil. The Manichean view provides an escape from the problem by arguing that it is *the body that is evil*, while *the soul is potentially good*. Pythagoras is attributed with bringing the Manichean philosophy from Babylonia to Greece in the 5th Century BC. As I mentioned (op cit) the Pythagorean School saw sexual organs as 'low and dirty'. They remain so for many 'good' Western people today.

Once the Manichean notion is accepted it becomes clear that the good life consists of separating oneself from the appetites of the flesh in order to concentrate on improving the soul. Plato and his associates prided themselves that in pursuing philosophy they were making real progress, not only in escaping from the fallen corporeal world but in determining for themselves a bright future. For, in their view, a soul purified by philosophical edification could aim to be appointed to the exalted office of a god, hence 'higher thought' and 'higher education' survives in academic circles in our day. Academy members rejoiced that they were not like other men, destined to undertake menial chores like washing clothes and preparing food, for they had slaves to wait upon them.

Slaves were justified by the Platonic School by declaring that some humans were inferior beings. Such a view was predicated on the evolutionary notions of Anaximander in the same way that, in

the 19th Century, European colonizers used Darwinian evolutionary propositions to back their argument that dark skinned people were not only inferior but actually sub-human – crosses between humans and animals. I have heard English missionaries state as much and anthropologists in the West are still doing research on the thickness of human skulls in the hope that they may prove that Negroid skulls are thicker than those of Caucasians. How skull thickness equates with intelligence is entirely uncertain but that does not deter the evolutionists from pursuing their project. Plato's Academy pronounced women a cosmic error, forced on the gods by the failure of men to edify themselves. Needless to say they moved into homosexual practices, the flesh not retiring as quickly as might be hoped! They lived in a puffed-up state of *self-righteousness*, seeing themselves as 'good' because they denied the flesh and pursued higher ideals.

Putting down of the flesh is evident wherever the trappings of religion are found, although it is a position that proves hard to maintain. Many who fled to monasteries in mediaeval times resorted to fasting and flagellation when the flesh 'reared its ugly head'. There was even a Flagellant Movement in Europe c.1260 AD (Cohn, 1975). The Inquisition in Europe is another Manichean case in point. People were burnt to death by the Christian Church, not as punishment but as a means of delivering their good soul from their evil flesh (I Cor.5:1-8)⁶. The Puritans proclaimed the ordinary Life (work, marriage and sexuality, child-raising, etc.) to have been ordained by God but the old dualism remains a powerfully influence in Western society. Amongst those who sit in Christian Church pews on Sundays in our time you will find many who persist in the Manichean view. There is one thing about this that appeals. People who believe in putting down the flesh tend to behave better than those who have a complete disregard for disciplining their natural appetites. Perhaps this is a case of the Law being the school master that brings us to Christ (Gal.4:23-26).

Confession

Some people cannot accept the thesis that the soul is essentially good. They persist in feeling that their thought life is offensive and guilt derived from actions perceived to be evil is commonly experienced. Anthropological studies show evidence that most human groups practice religious ordinances aimed at satisfying the gods and delivering the mind from a guilty conscience. And the vast majority of them show a definite pattern: *confession, penance and absolution*.

When the Greeks sought guidance from the oracle

at Delphi or the Oasis of Siwa, they were instructed by the priests that confession was an absolute necessity prior to appearing before a righteous God. Seekers were told to dig deep because the oracle would not be deceived by those who kept back secret indiscretions. In this way the priests at the sacred sites gained enormous power over the populace - they 'knew things'. Of course, discretion was absolutely necessary on the priest's part, otherwise no one would turn up to confess, and this would have serious implications for the livelihood of the priests who lived on the penances prescribed by the oracle. It was a good system. The local population felt better for having confessed and the priests made a good living from a valued service.

It is hardly necessary to state that the Orthodox Church has carried the process forward, continuing to offer a 'way out' of the predicament of condemnation by providing a process of confession and penance leading to forgiveness. However, by this model forgiveness is temporary - to sustain 'salvation' a person is obliged to confess and be forgiven at least once per week. By this means, the local priests are able to build up information banks as to the moral history of every person in their community. Ensuring the priest's silence becomes paramount, and what better way of ensuring that silence than by donating goods and money towards the priest's welfare. Or, if you have the means, build a cathedral! Over time, various acts of penance have been prescribed for different types of 'sin' and there exists today a whole system of religious practices by which a person can atone for sin and work their way to heaven *by their own acts*. Regrettably, many who attend evangelical Christian churches and are critical of the old churches continue to carry with them the same apostate notions. The preacher proclaims grace but the message fails to liberate the flock from the judgments of their super-ego. Perhaps the old church has the right idea after all - provide a means of escape until such time as God reveals His grace to the believer via the New Covenant experience (Jer.31:33-34, Heb.8:10-12).

There is another commonsense notion that supports confession: the assumption that *ordinary* people cannot communicate with God, that this duty is reserved for special people whom God has elected to be His associates. The book of Genesis seems to suggest that Shem was one of these (Gen.9:26) and it has followed that every religion under heaven has a priest caste. The old churches practice priest craft from the top down and the evangelical churches are not immune from it. I commonly meet pastors who see themselves as God's mouthpiece, 'the anointed one'; if you miss the sermon on Sunday, you miss hearing what God wishes you to know for the

week! What happened to the priesthood of all believers?

Respect and recognition of the clergy may easily move to priests using their position to impose their will on people and gain status in society. The German sociologist Max Weber called this process 'charismatic domination' - 'if you follow me your life will be blessed'. This proposition is commonly found amongst Evangelical and Pentecostal Churches in our time.

Upholding the priests is a position especially favoured by people who feel the need of a strong person to hold on to in the midst of life's difficulties. The result can be an unhealthy co-dependence in which the weak person; (1) never learns 'to stand on his/her own two feet' and (2) becomes active in defending their champion tenaciously and viciously against any perceived opposition. I know - I have suffered at their hands.

ELIMINATING GOD

Doing away with the supernatural is the hallmark of positivism. I have dealt with positivism thoroughly in my previous paper (op cit) so there is no need to go into it further here. Suffice to say, the foundational presupposition behind all evolutionary thought is that God does not exist. And it follows that if there is no God, there is no condemnation. Strangely, many atheists are ethicists, arguing for principles of justice, mercy, good behaviour and human rights. Where do such concepts come from if God does not exist? This is symptomatic of the positivist world, it is filled with contradictions.

GRACE - GOD'S WAY

In contrast with the temporary measures described above, the Christian finds deliverance from condemnation through *experiencing* God's grace. I say experiencing because no amount of preaching or teaching on grace will cause a human to *know* God's grace. Grace needs to be internalized and that only comes about via a dramatic encounter with the *Logos* within. Each person needs to be led of the Holy Spirit through a process before grace can be comprehended. In my own case, it took quite a few years for the Lord to bring me to that place. I will refrain from giving my testimony here because it is something that the Lord set up for my specific edification. If I tell you about it you may try to replicate my experience or at least look into it to try to construct a principle. A principle has no value - that is why Jesus instructed his disciples to tell nobody that He was the Christ (Matt.16:20) and the New Covenant (Heb.8:10-12) makes it clear that nobody shall teach his neighbour to 'know' the Lord. It is experience that carries you through to

liberty and on-going experience that keeps you free. 'As many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God' (Rom.8:14). Ask the Lord to lead you to grace and start walking with Him. You will not be disappointed.

NOTES

¹ In Africa, circumcision of both males and females is the focal point of the initiation process. When I asked one young man what he learned in the initiation school he said: 'we learned how to manage women but later we discovered that it is not as easy as they told us!'

² All tribal groups have a pantheon of gods and one of these is designated the 'creator god'. The name used amongst the Achewa in Central Africa is *Mulungu*.

³ Colonel Hal Oxley tells the story of his encounter with a Bedouin Sheikh during the Second World War. When his troops were camped close to a Bedouin tent town, Hal was invited to meet the sheikh. When he entered the sheikh's tent he was led to a place where the sheikh offered him bread and wine in the communion manner. Neither of the participants could speak the other's language so the ceremony was conducted without conversation. The matter concluded, the sheikh left and Hal was conducted back to the outside world. The interpreter asked him if he knew what had happened. "The sheikh has shared the bread and wine with you; you and your men are now under his protection".

⁴ I have seen African women collect water for domestic use from puddles in which are floating dog faeces. We have also heard an educated South African President advising his constituency that Acquired Immunity Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) is due to poverty and a Minister of Health suggesting beetroot juice as a cure. South African *sangomas* (witch-doctors) regularly advise that AIDS can be controlled by raping a baby or a white woman.

⁵ Halle calculated that the seismic wave must have been a mile high and traveling at 1600kph when it hit the land plates.

⁶ For information on the Mediaeval Manichee, see Runciman, 1983.

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