

On Religious Fanaticism A Look at Transpersonal Identity Disorder

by

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Our world today is torn asunder by men and women who claim that God is on their side, and who, secure in the righteousness of their positions, perpetrate acts of violent destruction. Such individuals are driven by the certainty that they are privy to sacred truths and are therefore morally obligated to do everything in their power—no matter how many people may suffer—to act upon these truths. Coupled with their inflated sense of personal rectitude, moral certainty, and ideological purity is a tendency to dehumanize and even demonize those who oppose them.

Although this disorder can be called “religious fanaticism,” those afflicted need not appear wild-eyed or deranged; quite the contrary, they can present themselves as thoughtful and responsible people inspired by the loftiest of ideals. Nevertheless, their absolute confidence in themselves and their cause, their willingness to create massive destruction for a supposed higher good, and their dehumanization of their opponents, all indicate the imbalance of a personality disorder. We need not point out specific examples of this disorder perhaps, except to say that it can afflict anyone, from the person on the street, to the international terrorist, to the leader of the most powerful nation on earth.

The dynamics that underlie religious fanaticism have been recognized by many psychological thinkers. For example, C. G. Jung (1966) wrote of “positive inflation,” Alice Miller (1981) described grandiosity used as a defense against depression, Gary Rosenthal (1987) utilized the phrase “inflated by the spirit,” and Greg Bogart (1995) warned against “the shadow of vocation.” More recently Robert Jay Lifton (2000) has described this type of personality structure in his concept of “functional megalomania” that fuels what he calls “the new global terrorism.”

It is our contention in this paper that at the core of religious fanaticism are actual, valid, transpersonal or spiritual experiences—of universal love, of cosmic consciousness, of being “born again,” of union with God, for example—that serve to form the cornerstone of the religious fanatic personality. We also posit that the problem in this disorder is not with these transpersonal experiences per se, but with the manner in which these become organized within the personality, and that recovery from this disorder involves the harmonious integration of these experiences.¹

Validating Transpersonal Experience

As unbalanced as religious fanaticism can become, it is important that our understanding of it does not involve a devaluation of the transpersonal experiences that inform it. Approaches that fail to recognize the profundity and truth of spiritual experiences may theorize that these experiences constitute a regression to a supposed infantile unitive state (although there is growing evidence that such a state does not in fact exist, see for example, Stern, 1985/2000; Rochat, 2001). Not much better are alternative theories that view the transpersonal experiencing of the disordered personality as somehow inferior or more primitive than the supposed more advanced transpersonal experiencing of the healthy personality.

However, all such theories underestimate the ability of profound transpersonal insights to impact us at all stages of development, in all areas of our lives, and within any personality configuration. It is our belief that the religious fanatic personality is not having a regressive or inferior transpersonal experience; rather, that the disordered personality is failing to integrate transpersonal experiencing in a balanced and effective way.

This latter view is very important clinically because to in any way invalidate or depreciate the transpersonal experiencing of a person seeking help can only lead them to suppress the experience, resist the therapy, or more often perhaps, avoid therapy altogether. In any case, the client is not supported in understanding and integrating these important life experiences.

Thus it seems obvious that only those therapeutic approaches that understand, respect, and value transpersonal experiences—no matter in what type of personality they occur—can facilitate a healthy integration of these into the wholeness of the person. Psychosynthesis, developed by the Italian psychiatrist Roberto Assagioli (1965, 1973a), is one of these approaches.

Assagioli was a colleague of Freud and Jung (cf., McGuire, 1974, 241) who sought not only an analysis of the psyche, but a “synthesis” of the psyche. Such a synthesis would include the trauma of the *lower unconscious* explored by psychoanalysis as well as the transpersonal experiencing of the *higher unconscious* (see below)—the realm studied by humanistic and transpersonal psychology.

A Psychosynthesis Approach

In psychosynthesis terms, religious fanaticism begins healthily enough, with experiencing at the higher unconscious levels of the psyche. At these levels of experience, one can for example sense such things as a connection to something greater than oneself, a transcendence of duality, a profound sense of universal meaning, or a union with Divinity or Spirit. These beneficial “peak,” “unitive,” or “mystical” experiences have been much studied in humanistic and transpersonal psychology, and have been found to be far more common than generally supposed (see for example, Maslow, 1962, 1971).

In encountering these wonderfully enlightening experiences, however, we may begin to treasure them so highly that we are led to identify with them, to consider them as who we most truly are. Such a *transpersonal identification* (Firman & Gila, 2002) can in turn lead to attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors based on this strong valuation and even idealization of the higher, and these may over time develop into a coherent personality.

Such a personality is thus founded on the assumption that this higher level of experience is the most true, real, or ideal, coupled with a tendency to dismiss other, more mundane, levels of experience as inferior or illusory. This type of personality belongs to a category that we can call *transpersonal identify disorder* (TID), to be discussed more fully later in this paper.

Religious fanaticism then is an extreme form of transpersonal identity disorder that, fed by this over-valuation and idealization of transpersonal experiencing, becomes highly inflated and grandiose. Often supported by an idealistic ideology and faithful colleagues, religious fanatics are capable of quite destructive behavior because this strong commitment to supposed higher truths overshadows any seemingly lesser human concerns—and serves to denigrate those people and institutions who manifest these concerns.

This denigration of others can begin with terms like “unevolved” and “unenlightened,” move to “inhuman” and “less than human,” and finally to the most pernicious, “evil” or “satanic.” Terms such as these can of course support the most egregious acts towards fellow human beings. But religious fanatics care less about the suffering of others—or themselves—than they do about their higher purpose, and they see the ills they do as justified by the greater good they seek.

Assagioli refers to this inflated transpersonal identification when he writes, “the inflowing spiritual energies may have the unfortunate effect of feeding and inflating the personal ego” (Assagioli 1965, 44). He goes on to call this a *confusion of levels*:

The fatal error of all who fall victim to these illusions is to attribute to their personal ego or “self” the qualities and powers of the Self. In philosophical terms, it is a case of confusion between an absolute and a relative truth, between the metaphysical and the empirical levels of reality; in religious terms, between God and the “soul.”

...instances of such confusion, more or less pronounced, are not uncommon among people dazzled by contact with truths which are too powerful for their mental capacities to grasp and assimilate. The reader will doubtless be able to record instances of similar self-deception which are found in a number of fanatical followers of various cults. (45)

Note that Assagioli throughout affirms the validity of the transpersonal experiencing: “spiritual energies” that inflate and “truths” too powerful to assimilate. It is the inflation and the failure to assimilate—not the energy and truth of transpersonal experience itself—that are the difficulty here.

In religious fanaticism the powerful energies of transpersonal experiencing feed the personality, allowing one to operate beyond the uncertainties of normal human existence and the norms of consensual morality; here one can attain the utter confidence and certainty of an idealized prophet or messiah. In the words of psychosynthesis psychologist Frank Haronian (1983), religious fanaticism would be an extreme case of “infatuation with the sublime.”

It is then no surprise that according to *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (Little, Fowler, & Coulson, 1933) the word “fanatical” derives from the Latin root *fanum* meaning “temple,” and that one definition is, “possessed by a deity or a devil.” In religious fanaticism, this possession or identification forms a charismatic personality that can attract and enthrall other individuals, groups, and most tragically, even entire nations.²

The Polarization of Higher and Lower

A personality structure fueled by higher unconscious experience attains a seductive certainty and power from the sense of absolute truth found at these higher levels of experience. However, such a personality is thereby at the same time largely dissociated from other levels of the psyche, most notably the lower unconscious, that area in us that is characterized by experiences we have called *primal wounding* (Firman & Gila 1997, 2002).

This wounding is the result of an assault to our sense of self, our I-ness, caused by failures of our nurturing environment; it produces feelings associated with personal annihilation or nonbeing such as shame, abandonment, anxiety, and fragmentation. Primal wounding is akin to the empathic failure, narcissistic wounding, disintegration anxiety, and annihilation recognized by Winnicott (1987) and Kohut (1984) among others.

And here we see the two tremendously potent forces that underpin the fanatical personality—not only are we given an absolute certainty about ourselves and our calling in life, but we are delivered from the anxious uncertainty, the debilitating shame, and the terrible specter of personal annihilation that loom at other levels of our soul.

We are like the proverbial donkey, threatened by the stick of the negative mode while being enticed by the carrot of the positive mode; we are trapped in a powerful energy field created by opposing negative and positive poles. (Firman & Gila 1997, 19)

Religious fanaticism is formed by an attachment to, identification with, possession by, higher unconscious levels of experience, coupled with a powerful dissociation from the primal wounding associated with the lower unconscious. Furthermore, when the fanatical identification falters and these deep wounds thereby threaten to emerge, a powerful defensive rage may arise. Such “narcissistic rage” (Kohut) is the energy that leads to the dehumanization, abuse, and even destruction of other human beings when the fanatical program is challenged. Note, by the way, that such rage need not look “rageful” at all—the arrogance, stubbornness, and violence supported by rage can mask itself as righteous indignation, steadfast commitment to principle, and valiant leadership in a grand and dangerous endeavor.

This potent polarization between higher and lower creates the extremely strong cohesion, charismatic attraction, and driven power of the fanatical personality. Here one is caught in what some Eastern traditions call the “aversion and craving” that underlie attachments. In Western traditions, this is the sin of pride—ironically, this type of identification with the heights would have Dante place us in the lower rings of the Inferno!

The Process of Recovery and Integration

The many details of recovery from religious fanaticism are beyond the scope of this brief paper, but we can outline some of the particulars this might entail. As we shall see shortly, the outline of this recovery process is quite the same for the more general category of transpersonal identity disorder as well.

Initially, recovery will most likely involve a *crisis of transformation* (Firman & Gila, 2002) that destabilizes the identification, that is, some outer or inner event that shakes the confidence of the person and reveals the underlying wounding. Here emergent feelings such as anxiety, fragmentation, helplessness, and shame, for example, are beneficial because they indicate the deintegration of the problematic personality structure and contact with the primal wounding beneath it. This deintegration is the necessary prelude to a reintegration, that is, to the formation of a personality that can include the heights and depths of our full experiential range.³

Through such crises can come a deeper engagement with the *stages of psychosynthesis* (cf., Assagioli, 1965; Firman & Gila, 1997, 2002). Here is our version of the stages outlined by Assagioli (we have added stage 0):

- 0) Survival of wounding
- 1) Exploration of the personality
- 2) The emergence of “I”
- 3) Contact with Self
- 4) Response to Self

The imbalance of religious fanaticism (and transpersonal identity disorder) arises in effect from the attempt to engage the last two stages of psychosynthesis—contact with, and response to, Self—while giving little or no attention to the earlier stages. However, stages 0-2 are crucial because we here expand our available experiential range or *middle unconscious* (Assagioli)—those unrepressed levels of potential experience that, while momentarily unconscious, are nevertheless immediately available to our normal daily awareness. Working with the first three stages of psychosynthesis, we explore and include aspects from all levels of the psyche in our experiential range—including both higher and lower unconscious levels (Assagioli, 1965, 22)—and so are less apt to be caught in any polarity between higher and lower as we relate to Self in the latter stages.

It is important to point out that all these stages properly occur more-or-less simultaneously, so the idea here is not so much to move through the stages as to work with them all in an ongoing way. Moreover, it should be noted that these stages are never completed once and for all, but represent categories of healing and growth that occur throughout our lifetime. It is probably fair to say that we each deal to some extent with every stage in every day of our lives.

Having said this, the initial personal exploration and expansion of our experiential range found in the earlier stages support, as Assagioli’s scheme so well indicates, the balanced engagement with subsequent stages. To put it simplistically, if we have a “peak,” “spiritual,” “born again,” or “enlightenment” experience and do not allow the integration of this new awareness to take us into a substantial exploration of ourselves—including the primal wounding associated with the lower unconscious—we are in danger of having this experience co-opted by our unexamined and unredeemed personality or “ego” (or technically, our *survival personality*, cf. Firman & Gila 1997, 2002). Without ongoing self-exploration, the profound beauty, love, and truth of transpersonal experiencing can easily lead to religious fanaticism.

Transpersonal Identity Disorder

Let us say here too that it is our belief, in agreement with Rosenthal (1987) and others, that most people who encounter the heights of transpersonal experience will form some amount of identification with these levels, although without exhibiting the extremes of thought and behavior that characterize religious fanaticism. This more subtle phenomenon has been recognized as polarizing mysticism by Maslow (1971), as *infatuation with the sublime* by Haronian (1983), as *spiritual bypassing* by John Welwood (2000), and as *dualistic denial* by Firman (1991).

As such an identification develops into a relatively stable identity, it seems useful to speak of the general category of transpersonal identity disorder (TID). We can think of TID as a continuum comprising religious fanaticism at one end and these more benign syndromes at the other end. (This classification should not be thought to end the discussion of the matter, but rather to encourage further research into its nature and etiology.)

The less toxic manifestations of TID seem more subtle, more common, and less overtly destructive than religious fanaticism. For example here is Harada Roshi, a Zen master, speaking of this type of transpersonal identification:

An ancient Zen saying has it that to become attached to one's own enlightenment is as much a sickness as to exhibit a maddeningly active ego. Indeed, the profounder the enlightenment, the worse the illness.

...

My own sickness lasted *almost ten years*. (In Zaehner, 1972, 98, emphasis added)

So we are in good company when we realize that the heights of our transpersonal experiencing have unconsciously formed some amount of TID. This might manifest in many different ways: a “spiritual” tendency to minimize physical experience and personal needs; a difficulty in recognizing “lower” or “negative” feelings in oneself and others; a workaholicism in the name of service to a higher good; a habit of taking the higher, “more spiritual” point of view as a defense; an attachment to the beliefs that support the transpersonal identification; a dedication to spiritual practice that becomes addictive; a tendency to rationalize immoral or destructive behavior as transcendence of consensual norms; an enthrallment with secret, esoteric knowledge; an intolerance of those we deem materialistic, less evolved, or unenlightened; or a belief that we have grown completely beyond the reach of our childhood wounding.

Again, these seem common and expected reactions to visiting the heady heights of the higher unconscious. These more benign types of TID simply invite us to work with the stages of psychosynthesis in order to integrate our higher awareness as but one aspect of our full experiential range.

Integrating the Higher and Lower Unconscious

Note that this understanding of religious fanaticism and TID is greatly assisted by the notion that the higher unconscious is only one level of our experiential range and is to be included with other levels within us. Assagioli wrote, “The superconscious [higher unconscious] is only a section of the general unconscious” (1965, 198). Thus it seems that the higher unconscious can be seen as only one particular bandwidth of our full spectrum of possible experience.

Although the higher unconscious is often felt as “synthetic” and “unitive,” it does not in fact include our entire range of experiencing because it leaves out (at least) the lower unconscious. To the extent that we fail to recognize this limitation of the higher unconscious, we are susceptible to TID.

It seems important then not to view the higher unconscious as higher levels of consciousness into which we are evolving, while viewing the lower unconscious as levels we have moved beyond. Nor should we assume that the higher levels somehow include the lower levels. Rather, the higher unconscious can be seen as higher levels of consciousness that need to be included—in the middle unconscious—along with the levels of the lower unconscious. To put it another way, as we heal and grow, our experiential range expands such that we can engage both the heights and depths of our lives. This is precisely how recovery from TID proceeds.⁴

In Conclusion

It seems helpful then, in addressing religious fanaticism and other, more benign, transpersonal identify disorders, that we understand the higher unconscious and lower unconscious as valid perceptual modes, valid bandwidths, that can be included in our experiential range. Over the normal course of healing and growth these two bandwidths can become a part of the middle unconscious, that is, they can become part of the full spectrum of experience to which we are available on a daily basis. As this integration proceeds, we can avoid becoming possessed by the powerful duality that is so easily set up between the higher and lower.

In this expansion of the middle unconscious—a synthesis of higher and lower unconscious—we can be more moved by the love and pain in the world, more aware of our perfection and our brokenness, more able to draw upon the heights and the depths of our humanness. The higher and lower are twin lenses that together allow us to see and act within the full range of human experience, and above all, allow us to hear and respond to the invitations of Self at all levels of our experience.

NOTES

¹ Note that transpersonal experiencing need not be emotionally ecstatic or euphoric but may be a quiet intellectual or intuitive knowing of one's connection to something greater than oneself (or, in more apophatic language, a seeing through the dualistic illusion that one was ever separate in the first place). As we shall see, religious fanaticism arises when religious or spiritual experiencing, in whatever form, functions to create a dissociation within the personality.

² We agree with Lifton (2000) that the complicity of others is a crucial element in sustaining religious fanaticism. Psychosynthesis can take this insight further, holding that religious fanaticism, as all personality structures, depends on the function of *unifying centers* (Assagioli, 1965; Firman & Gila, 1997, 2002), akin to Kohut's (1984) *selfobjects*. Religious fanaticism is sustained by a relationship to what we have called *positive unifying centers*, that is, inner and outer "others" that support the inflation of the idealized positive personality that becomes the religious fanatic personality. The *positive personality* and positive unifying center together form the structure of religious fanaticism specifically and transpersonal identity disorder in general. Recovery would involve developing an *authentic personality* via the establishment of *authentic unifying centers*. See our earlier work for more about this relational personality theory (Firman & Gila, 1997).

³ Clearly it is important that there be no unreflective precipitous rush to immediately eliminate these symptoms associated with the deintegration of the problematic personality—they are in fact the doorways to healing. It is only by working through these difficult feelings that the client can move towards the reintegration. This does not, of course, preclude therapeutic measures that can provide symptom relief and support in this working through.

⁴ It may be useful to note here that in outlining his model of higher, middle, and lower unconscious—the well-known oval diagram—Assagioli wrote that it "can give only a structural, static, almost 'anatomical' representation of our inner constitution, while it leaves out its dynamic aspect" (1965, 16). In other words, according to Assagioli, this model is less than effective in representing the changes involved in human growth and development. We accordingly do not consider the oval diagram so much a part of developmental theory in psychosynthesis as a part of personality theory. This is one reason that we have elaborated Assagioli's (1973b) *psychosynthesis of the ages* as a developmental model within psychosynthesis. (We recognize a triad of personality, developmental, and clinical theory as three pillars of psychosynthesis theory.)

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