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The Endangered Self as a Challenge to Religion

Considerations with Special Reference to the Symbol 'God'

Resilience to crisis and catastrophic events are conditioned partially by psychological elements. These elements, in turn, may be enhanced or reduced due to how religious symbols function in the development of the self. Such symbols contribute to stability and orientation, but they are not unaffected themselves by such events. Hence, the interplay between empirical events, psychological conditions, and religious resources is complicated and needs further consideration. The present article is an attempt to address some of the topics related to this area by integrating elements from a psychology of religion approach based on Heinz Kohut with elements of a 'maximalist' theory of religion.

Keywords: Religious symbols, Resilience, Heinz Kohut, Selfobjects, Orientation, Transformation

1. Introduction

The world is not a fixed place. It is open, only partly controllable, with regularities that are interrupted, and thus sometimes destructed or changed beyond our wishes or control.

As selves, we develop and exist in relation to this world. A major premise for the following elaborations is that the structure and stability of the self are dependent on the structure and stability of the world – or the lack of such. The self is dependent on the world but intertwined with it, marked and shaped by what happens in it, and henceforth, also vulnerable.

Religion provides basic and symbolically mediated resources that enable humans to live within and on the conditions of the world. Religions contribute resources for practices of orientation and transformation, as well as for reflection about what happens. These three elements, orientation, transformation, and reflection, are the fundamental pragmatic contributions of religion to human life in the world. They are not mere instruments that human employ, but linked to practices that shape the world of humans as well as

humans themselves in ways that can be identified as human self-articulation (Henriksen 2017).

Theology – as religions’ reflective practice – therefore offers the justifications, explanations, and legitimations of the practices that humans employ in order to orient themselves in the world or transform elements or conditions in it. Theology thus not only provides basic elements for interpreting experience, but can also contribute to the opening up to new experiences of the self in the world, given the right circumstances and depending on the symbols employed.

These are the basic elements from which the following line of reasoning departs. To understand the self as endangered is, against this backdrop, not only a question about and related to what takes place in the world and what affects the self. How the self is affected and able to cope with crisis and catastrophic events is furthermore conditioned by the symbolic resources that the self has at hand when it needs to orient itself in the wake of catastrophes, disasters, and accidents that disrupt the existing or expected order and regularity.

2. What Is the Self?

The notion of the self which is most relevant for my purposes in the following has been developed by Heinz Kohut. I will not present his theory in detail, but focus on elements that illustrate how his theory of the self may contribute to an understanding of what religion can offer in order to supply the needs of the endangered self¹.

According to Kohut, the self’s basic conditions for development are related to two relational poles: The first finds expression in the infant’s need to be *emotionally affirmed and encouraged* in its authentic being and based on its own achievements. This need directs the infant toward the caretaker, who is then also the one upon whom the development of the self becomes dependent. Kohut calls the process of confirmation that takes place ‘mirroring.’ Mirroring affirms and guides the child in discovering what is *possible* and what is *safe*. In the course of being seen for what he or she truly is, a child may then be able not only to realize his or her own potential. Moreover, the process “leads the child to a sense of enjoyment of his or her own capabilities, fuels self-esteem and a sense of worth, and forms a basis for developing ambition and a sense of self-pride” (Bragan 1996, 5). Thus, *when successful*,

1 The material in this section is presented more extensively in Henriksen 2013.

the process allows the self to learn about her capacities as well as her limitations, and thereby it contributes to the development of a self that feels safe and can experience the world as a safe place.

As one can easily imagine, the other side of this coin is when mirroring does not contribute to affirmation. Then, the child's dependence on others increases in an unsound manner: as it becomes *constantly* dependent on others for the necessary sense of self-esteem and self-worth. It develops a persisting need for support to overcome its basic insecurities. Failure to receive an adequate response is, therefore, in effect crucial for the child's ability to cope adequately with the stressful, disturbing, or difficult situation as those facing us in disasters and catastrophes.

The other relational pole towards which the child orients itself in its development is related to the infant's need to gain strength from feeling part of or being identified with someone or something which is experienced as robust and reliable. Hence, this pole may also be called the *idealizing pole*:

Idealization is the process by which the child at first is comforted and reassured by being held in mother's arms and later finds strength by identifying with an idealized other or with idealized values and aims. This pole of the self gives life direction and structure, knowledge of right and wrong, and a sense of self-control. Deficits result in feelings of weakness, aimlessness and not being in charge of one's life (Bragan 1996, 5).

The idealized pole is therefore constituted by the image of the idealized parent (at first, that is). Later on, other idealized persons or entities, including a representation of God, may serve as objects that the self, through a process of identification, can experience as contributing to its own feelings of strength and capability. These ideals may also become de-personalized and transformed into ideals and motivations that guide the self in its various activities and actions where it is presented with specific challenges. This is of course of high relevance for the understanding of the contributions of religion to orientation and transformation, but also for the resources available to the self in times of crisis.

However, these two poles are not sufficient to develop a clearly differentiated self, according to Kohut. What the child learns from engaging with these two poles is related to how he or she comes to see his or her own skills and talents, and thereby, his or her *self*. The development of these skills provides the child with an understanding of his or her self that Kohut calls the '*alter ego*'. This '*alter ego*' consists of 'twinsip' experiences. This is a crucial point in Kohut's understanding of the self, as these experiences of the self, according to Kohut, imply "the sense of being alongside and in intimate contact with a self of similar nature and potentialities" (6). This self-other state is, therefore, the condition for experiencing oneself as a self that can learn

and develop, and this is, accordingly, a condition for the imitation of others. The consequence of such learning is that the self also grows in confidence.

Furthermore, the learning process that contributes to the development of a differentiated self is linked to Kohut's notion of *optimal frustration*. Such frustration is the means by which one can have non-traumatic experiences of whom one may potentially be, and thus be increasingly able to differentiate oneself from the idealized object, as well as to achieve a more nuanced understanding of the limits of one's own grandiosity. The outcome of this process is a mature and integrated self with a solidified psychic structure that, by means of *integrated selfobjects*, is able to provide itself with a sense of cohesion and continuity, and does not need to look outside itself in order to achieve this sense. It is precisely this stable self that is or may become affected by disasters and other disruptive events, because such events may shock and disturb the present configuration of the self. Therein lies one of the main challenges for people affected by trauma.

In order to see which elements structure the actual content of the self, we therefore also need to have a clear understanding of the answer to the question: What is a selfobject? A selfobject is not part of the objective world, but part of the inner world of the human. It belongs to the space of the self. Hence, it is also what makes it possible to experience a 'self-space.' Bragan sums it up thus:

Any person or object experienced as having a self-discovering, self-promoting or self-strengthening function is a selfobject. However, it is the experience of the object that matters, not the external reality, not the actuality, and selfobjects must be clearly distinguished not only from the external objects that are the focus of the experience but also from internal representations of objects and from self-representations. The concept is difficult to grasp because it is purely subjective. Its reality is in the inner world, and it is best to think of it simply as how an object is experienced. Selfobjects are the self-fortifying internal reflection of the outer world, the internal soil in which a cohesive self can grow (6).

We may note that the understanding of selfobjects refers back to the *experience* of these objects just as much as to *what* is experienced. Selfobjects provide the necessary means by which the self is able to experience itself as someone and as distinguished from others. It is important that selfobjects are objects of emotional or libidinal investment. They may exist in rudimentary and undifferentiated forms in the archaic self, or in more mature, differentiated and symbolic forms in more mature versions of the self. The mature version of selfobjects develops when they, by means of optimal frustration, are not taken for granted in their immediate presence, but are broken up into the adequate and relevant features that the mature self needs in

order to uphold itself as calm and safe when confronted with the real world and what takes place there.

It follows from this interpretation that Kohut's notion of selfobjects depicts the function that other persons (or animals, symbols, cultural artifact, or things) may have in a specific person's concrete experience of harmony, strength, firmness, vitality, responsiveness, and creativity. One becomes oneself due to one's relations to others. It is impossible to determine beforehand the outcome of such developments of self, independent of an understanding of the conditions for relationship given for the self in question (cf. Karterud 1995, 36). This underscores the above point about how the world determines the actual content of, and thus the stability of, the self, and its capacity for resilience in the face of severe challenges as well.

In the context of this presentation, the importance of a specific way of understanding God and the creation of the self presents itself: God may be conceived as a symbol that functions in a way that helps the self to develop so that it solidifies the integration of the different elements in its experience into a stable self. In order to enable this function, the God-symbol needs to both affirm the stable elements of the self *as well as* being able to frustrate the self in a way that helps it to orient itself in a truthful and adequate manner in a world that can be experienced as disrupted or threatening. The symbol of God may lead to a *false self* if it is employed in such a way that the individual is unable to affirm his or her own finitude and lack of omnipotence when facing disrupting or threatening events. Therefore, the self's alliance with the infinite God must be configured in such a way that this alliance does not lead to an upheaval of the distinction between God and self, between finite and infinite. God as a symbol of the idealized other still must be able to provide the necessary frustration in self-experience. Such frustration can only work in a positive way, however, when it also provides the self with the required resources for stable self-esteem.

Furthermore, a notion of 'acts of God' that punish or in other ways are responses to negative actions on the side of humans contribute to the instability of the self, who is then left without the possibility to develop an emotional (twinship) self-representation that is separate from the parents' by means of adequate self-symbols. Thus, a well-working God-symbol cannot be based on a conception that represents the oscillating moods of a deity who is dependent upon the conduct of its creatures for its response. Such a notion will only mirror a father whose moods respond to intolerable conduct in his children and may lead to increased insecurity. Consequently, such a symbol may contribute to the continuation of narcissistic traits in the self.

When successful integration of the different poles of the self is achieved, however, and selfobjects serve their purpose, this leads to initiative and creativity. When the grandiose self matures through a process of optimal frustration, creativity is liberated (cf. Karterud 1995, 90). I find it worth noting that true creativity is, according to this way of understanding the self, something that requires that the self no longer is inhibited by the demands of the archaic self and its struggle for success and admiration. Moreover, due to the maturation of the selfobject represented by the idealized self, one also becomes more self-reliant and less dependent on others, a second factor that may increase the flow of creativity. Given that the symbol of 'God' may play a role in relation to the maturation of both poles of the self (grandiose self, idealized other), we can see that it is possible that the symbol of God may not only contribute to the creativity of the self, but also to the creation of (i. e., the development of) a more mature self. This liberation of creativity is crucial for developing creative responses that help to cope adequately and constructively with the disruptive and unexpected, as is needed when the self faces traumatic events.

Hence, the 'God' symbol can, along Kohutian lines, be a supportive selfobject when faced with crisis and catastrophe. In a thorough consideration of Kohut's relevance for Christian theology, Anthony Kill writes:

God is the selfobject par excellence, the unifying, continuous Being in which all others live and move and have their being, the constitutive source of the human self. At the depths of our selves we find the image of God, and in the face of God, we find the depths of our selves. Kohut's matrix of empathically responsive love (the beneficent presence and provident power of another) is presented in Genesis as an original and essential condition of our being in the world. The reliability of this matrix is not only presumed but assured, for it is founded on the power and fidelity of the eternal, omnipotent, all-loving God. God's approval of us as creatures in the divine image is the ultimate source of all human self-esteem, ambition, and confidence. And God's perfection and omnipotence, with which we were merged in blissful union in paradise, are the ultimate source of our highest principles and ideals as well as the model for the human quest for perfection (Kill 1986, 25).

However, Kill also points out that it is not possible to achieve a union with God that allows the self to identify fully with God as an idealized other. Nevertheless, the relationship with this God-symbol can contribute significantly to the capacity for resilience when one faces traumatic events – be it in a positive or a negative way. The self's development and actual employment of religious self-symbols may then, e. g., contribute positively to increase the capacity for responses to tragic events. These symbolic resources can then contribute to a situation that calls for and requires adequate acknowledgment of different elements in the situation, such as care and compassion,

capacity for action, as well as the realization of the personal limitations one needs to be aware of.

3. What Does Religion Do²?

One main element in human evolution is how to adapt to and make the most out of the relation to the environment. In order to do so, humans were, and are still, in need of *orientation*. Orientation is based on the need to become aware of what is important and not, what is to be considered as more worthy of attention than something else is, and so on. Religions provide significant, symbolically mediated resources for this task. By mediating knowledge and values important for such orientation, religions become part of human culture in interaction with the biological elements that shape human life (cf. Mühling 2014; Wilson 2002).

The need for orientation is a basic feature of human life. In order to live in the world, humans must interpret what happens to them and the situation in which they find themselves³. Only based on such orientation are humans able to act. In order to achieve orientation, humans must order reality and place themselves in it by means of an interpretation of the situation in which they find themselves. This calls for defining scopes and for imagining possibilities. It also requires that one establishes limitations of the potential infinity of perspectives on the world (Dalferth 2003, 34–35). Furthermore, orientation always has a personal element, as it is not everyone, but always someone specific, who is in need of and makes use of orientation. Consequently, orientation is an unending task for us as long as we live (38). It opens up to the dynamics of constant orientation and re-orientation, due to changes in circumstances, concerns, interests, and the life-situation of the individual in need of it.

Orientation is about more than to register what is the case. It has to do with what we do and how we relate to that which is, and what use we make of what we know or think we know about the world. This approach has two significant consequences. Firstly, it allows us to see religion primarily as specific types of human practices. As clusters of practices, religions are mediated

2 This section builds on Henriksen 2017. The more extensive argument for this approach to and interpretation of religion can be found there.

3 Ulf Zackariasson is among those who underscore that it is a necessary condition for human experience to have orientational structure, and that it is the experience of embodied agents. As embodied, we are in a specific place, a specific time, etc. Cf. Zackariasson 2002, 51.

through different types of *signs*: story-telling, symbols, rituals, reflection, and communicative cooperation. Religions contribute significance that transcends the immediately given to the everyday, but without leaving the everyday behind. To become religious is to learn how to process and act on the signs that open up the world to more than what is immediately at hand. It is to relate to and to interpret the present in light of that which transcends the immediate.

Among those who have suggested that religion can be understood as orientation is the late Harvard systematic theologian Gordon Kaufman. His take on the issue helps us develop in detail some of the main elements in what I want to point to here with the notion of orientation. In his *opus magnum*, *In Face of Mystery*, he situates humans within a broad cultural and evolutionary context. He also takes into account how humans exist in different realms of experience, and how the complexity of human life itself engenders the need for orientation. Kaufman writes:

Human evolution from a largely animal mode of existence to a cultural and historical mode required the development of complex forms of symbolization, differentiated social and institutional arrangements, and patterns of concept, value, and ritual which could provide orientation, guidance, and motivation as the decisions and actions of women and men became increasingly deliberate and complex (Kaufman 1995, 70).

There is no reason to disagree with Kaufman about the fact that religions function in this way. However, he indicates himself that they also do *more*. What more they do is linked not only to practices, but also to the basic attitude of faith that religions require their believers to have in order to engage with the world. The following quote describes well the relationship between orientation and practice on the one hand, and belief and social compliance on the other.

Religious rituals and symbol-systems ... orient, energize, and furnish guidance for human life by providing men and women with meaningful pictures or conceptions of the world, and of the place of human life within that world; and by offering ways to participate actively in that meaning. ... They can function effectively in this way, of course, only if they are believed 'true,' that is, only if they are taken to represent (more or less adequately) – and thus to present – 'how things really are' with humanity, the world roundabout and God (or the gods or other resources of life and meaning). It is hardly surprising, then, that most historical communities and societies have taken their religious symbolizations and rituals very seriously, protecting them (as much as possible) from attack from without and from the corrosion of doubt, disinterest, and unbelief within (432).

When he interprets faith as a “frame of orientation,” Kaufman emphasizes, “Such a new frame is never simply spun out of thin air” (51–52). He also sees such frames as a combination of the given and the new, as “product of

rebuilding, transforming, reshaping the old categories” and the pragmatics that are behind to what extent humans see the resources in these frames (or traditions) as “something that still, to some extent, provide a way of grasping our situation” (52). It is also worth noting what he adds to this reflection: We use such situations as humans find them “enabling them better to interpret life as we now experience it” (52). Such interpretation is in turn crucial for an adequate response to tragic and disruptive events.

If Kaufman is right when he suggests that “it is necessary for humans to have some concept of world, in order to attain a degree of orientation in life,” and that “without our pictures or conceptions of the world we would have no way to orient ourselves in face of this mystery” (114), a basic precondition for religion is that it must build on the recognition of life as something that is basically a mystery. Religions contribute to the awareness of that mystery and hold forth that we need something in addition to the knowledge we have about the world as it presently is. It opens up the present to a different future – an essential element for transformative orientation, but also for recognizing that there is something in reality that is beyond human control – a point that in itself may prove crucial for developing resilience when one is confronted with the unknown and unexpected.

The outcome of this interpretation is that *religions do something*: They offer resources that orient, transform, and legitimize specific types of human practices that are symbolically mediated, such as care and compassion, reconciliation and reconstruction – all elements that may be called for in the face of catastrophic events. It is imperative to see these three dimensions in religion as closely connected, and they can only be distinguished from each other analytically. Taken together, they form the basic functions from which we can understand the different features and clusters of phenomena that we call religious or religions. A claim about what is primary (practices of orientation [O] and transformation [T]) and what is secondary (reflective practices of justification and legitimation [L]) in this formal, and, therefore, maximalist approach to ‘religion’ is implied here. In other words: Not only does religion consist of practices O, T, and L, but such elements stand in a specific relation to each other in what we call religion.

Furthermore, the approach suggested here integrates religion into the wider system of orientation that humans employ in order to change the chaos of the world into order. Religions as contributors to resources of orientation and reorientation make humans feel more at home in the world and contribute to the interpretation of experiences (cf. Zachariasson 2002; Riesebrodt 2012, 124–25). Thereby, religions also shape the horizons of significance from where one again can engage in the world in ways perceived as

meaningful and promising. As a point of departure, religions help people to experience belonging, and to differentiate between what is familiar and not, what is well known and what is strange, alien, destructive, and disruptive. Thus, it also shapes and contributes to having a specific focus when engaging the world. It becomes a resource for coping with the tragic and challenging dimensions of human life.

When religions prescribe how to act, they may therefore also offer different resources for social and personal transformation. This point is most evident in how many religions focus on salvation, which means a transformation from one assumed state to another. The transformative element is a component that enhances religious engagement and contributes important motivational force (cf. Riesebrodt 2012, 127–29). Furthermore, to acknowledge this dimension suggests that it is hardly appropriate to describe religions simply as world-views. There is more implied in religion than simply how one understands the world. Because the transformative element has both social and personal relevance, we can find it in many different forms, both on the personal and the social level.

The intimate link between the resources for orientation and transformation is strongly underscored by Stanley Hauerwas when he articulates a Christian awareness of this dimension in an apt formulation that also makes visible how the symbol ‘God’ is employed in order to address transformation. Hauerwas writes, “God is the constant possibility of transformation pressing on *every* occasion, even those that are lost for the lack of human response” (Hauerwas 2010, 195). I think this is a basic strategy of orientation/transformation that many religious people immediately employ when facing catastrophic events.

I suggest that we see the different religious affirmations of *transcendence* as related to the transformative dimension articulated in religions. Even if one thinks that it is God, and not humans, who are behind the transformative processes that affect the world, religions need to affirm a dimension of something still to come into being; something that transcends the present, in order to provide visions and motivation for transformation. Unless we are able to imagine something different than what is in front of us, we are handed over to blind fate and passive acceptance. Part of coping with the tragic and of not letting oneself be endangered as a self in the face of the terrible is to be able to uphold such imagination.

To name this feature of religion transformative has to do with the fact that the practices involved in them always have some kind of personal dimension: It has to do with enduring changes in attitudes, practices, status, insight, knowledge, order, etc. When it is articulated in reflective practices,

the orientational frame directs such transformative elements, but these elements cannot simply be reduced to what constitutes the basic orientation. Furthermore, transformation mostly has some kind of material or embodied element, a fact that in turn often makes it necessary for humans to relate transformation closely and internally to specifically embodied modes of being in the world.

4. Conclusion: Religious Wisdom in the Wake of Catastrophic Events

When religions offer resources for the self in terms of orientation and transformation, they do so in terms of specific practices and values, as mentioned. These are not something that humans develop out of thin air (Kaufman 1995), but are the result of long-term considerations and concrete experiences with what works – and does not work – as good points of orientation or suitable practices for change, development, and transformation. It is therefore also impossible to review and assess the contents of religions with regard to coping without making some kind of normative judgment. The aim of all contents of religious practice is – most likely – to help people come to terms with the basic conditions of life and to cope with the challenges life presents in such a way that its potential for development and for the good can be realized in the best way possible.

From a philosophical point of view, to assess religions with regard to their ability to engage in ways that make life worth living and cope with disruptive challenges is therefore to a large extent a question about whether one is able to discern *wisdom* in religious traditions. The considerations I have made about orientation and transformation now lead me to a closing argument claiming that a *wise* way for religious traditions to approach disasters and catastrophes will be to consider the followings aspects:

Expect the good and hope for it, but be prepared for the unexpected. God is, as selfobject, one who can provide the self with a sense of safety and be related to experiences of regularity, but God is also the one whom one can count on as being present, compassionate, and caring in the wake of the unexpected. God as a symbol enables hope and expectancy of something better when something terrible happens.

Furthermore, an understanding of God may also provide the self with a basis for letting go of the struggle to control that which cannot be controlled, for accepting that she cannot control everything – and still feel safe or taken

care of. Thus, the notion of God allows for the acknowledgment of one's own vulnerability and finitude, as well as one's dependence on something else than oneself. It is wiser to live as one who admits that she cannot control everything than to only be referred to one's own capacity for action in the wake of traumatic circumstances – also because this opens up to an attitude that relates stronger to others.

God as a selfobject that provides means for orientation and transformation is also a symbol that inspires love, compassion, and care. Thus, this symbol can open up to another reality than the one conditioned by the present, and different from the presence of catastrophe or disaster. The opposite would be to see such events as manifestations of God's will – a strategy that actually only keeps the wounded and afflicted bound to the present circumstances – as happened in Norway when some interpreted the terrorist attack in 2011 as expressing God's warning. Such a use of the symbol does not promote resources for coping, but may only contribute to engendering aggression towards religion and lack of compassion in situations where compassion perhaps is more called for than anything else.

Accordingly, the use of religious symbols may prove important for how the world can be reopened and recovered in new ways in the wake of destructive events. The presence of or lack of religious resources may be crucial to how the self's world can be reshaped, recovered, or re-created. In what ways these resources may contribute to such recreation requires wisdom that goes beyond the repetition of religious formulas of explanation or theodicy. It can be identified by a specific criterion, namely: to ask how such symbols enable and open up to expectations of and actions for the good, the just, and the beautiful, or not.

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