

## QUAESTIO DISPUTATA

### TOWARD A PSYCHOLOGY OF GRACE

#### W. W. MEISSNER'S CONTRIBUTION

The distinguished Jesuit psychiatrist W. W. Meissner has long been intrigued by the psychological underpinnings of divine action in the human person.<sup>1</sup> I would like to offer a theological response to his contribution, which constitutes a major step in the dialogue between psychology and theology. First, my response will offer brief introductory comments on Meissner's project of correlating personal and spiritual identity. Second, it will summarize the various phases of development in which such a correlation is attempted. Third, it will discuss the principles which, according to Meissner, elucidate the interaction between the ego's functioning and divine grace. Fourth, it will endeavor to situate the relation between the personal and the spiritual by having recourse to theological categories. And fifth, it will suggest the relevance of further psychoanalytic research on an aspect of grace that Meissner has left in the shadow.

#### *Correlating Personal and Spiritual Identity*

Reflecting Erik Erikson's influence, Meissner adopts a genetic approach and discusses the stages of human development. The stages are taken from Freud who distinguishes psychosexual stages. Paralleling these stages are psychosocial stages which Erikson spells out. And to those two series of stages Meissner adds a third series consisting of psychospiritual stages. Thus, two distinctions are working here: the first between sexual and social; the second, between social and spiritual.<sup>2</sup>

Like Erikson, Meissner believes that Freud's biologically oriented consideration needs to be broadened. Besides children's reaction to the needs of their own growing organism, there is a concurrent interaction with personal and cultural objects. Hence the distinction between psychosexual and psychosocial which reflects a shift of emphasis from the former to the latter in several psychoanalytic circles during the last 50 years or so. Following Meissner, I accept this first distinction without trying to justify it, since discussing it would take us far afield. However, the second distinction, between psychosocial and psychospiritual, concerns us directly and will be examined here.

<sup>1</sup> From his *Foundations for a Psychology of Grace* (Glen Rock, N.J.: Paulist, 1966), right up to *Thy Kingdom Come: Psychoanalytic Perspectives on the Messiah and the Millennium* (Kansas City, Mo.: Sheed & Ward, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> W. W. Meissner, *Life and Faith: Psychological Perspectives on Religious Experience* (Washington: Georgetown University, 1987) chap. 4; see his chart, 63.

Meissner suggests that, owing to the immense variety of interpersonal and cultural factors, the psychosocial enjoys a more flexible course of development than the psychosexual, and that, owing to the gratuitous supernatural factor, still greater flexibility characterizes psychospiritual development. Accordingly, his order of presentation does not entail a strict chronology, although the succession of the various "ego-strengths" or "virtues" which one finds in the psychosocial level is grounded on the genesis of the psychosexual phases.<sup>3</sup>

### *Comparative Stages of Development*

Meissner begins by considering the psychospiritual attitudes of faith and hope, both linked with the first psychosocial crisis of human life, namely, trust/mistrust. In this crisis, the infant experiences or fails to experience the trustworthiness of the mother. Out of this can emerge a basic trust in oneself as well as a capacity to entrust oneself to others. Depending on the extent to which such a trust is established, it becomes easier or more difficult to respond to the gifts of faith and hope. In faith, a judgment of value regarding the trustworthiness of a caring God leads to the acceptance of propositions concerning the divine plan of salvation. In hope, one holds fast to the divine promises, confident that one's most profound wishes will not be deceived.

Next in the schema comes contrition, which stands in interaction with autonomy. Autonomy is the self-regulation and self-assertion achieved in early childhood. If its opposite, self-doubt, is present, the individual experiences insecurity and irresolution. Whereas shame is negative—trying to hide from other people and from God—contrition is positive. It indicates autonomy as it expresses a repossession of self after assuming responsibility for one's deviation from an internalized hierarchy of values. The virtue of contrition enables one to turn to God in sorrow and to seek forgiveness.

In the third place, Meissner lists temperance and penance which he connects with initiative and guilt. Children develop initiative at the age of play. The spontaneous exercise of their imagination and intelligence induces them to make intrusions or excursions into the real world. The role of temperance is to maintain a balance between the ego and the impulses pertaining to other psychic structures. Initiative can bring about two kinds of guilt: neurotic guilt, derived from the disparity between the prescriptions of the superego and a person's actual behavior; or realistic guilt, whereby the ego acknowledges it has been defective. Meissner sees penance as a prolongation of contrition. It is a disposition to take effective means and to mobilize one's resources for a better human functioning. Such a regulation or discipline with regard to libidinal attachments is linked to temperance.

In the fourth place, fortitude is paired with industry. The latter is

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 60.

acquired mainly at the stage of elementary school. It consists in the application, diligence, perseverance, and sense of cooperation involved in the accomplishment of tasks. In contrast to this disposition, a sense of inferiority may paralyze a person's activity. Fortitude interacts with industry. In the face of opposition and resistance, it uses aggressive energies discriminately in order to bring its current work to completion.

In the fifth place, humility relates to identity with which adolescents must painfully wrestle. A person's identity is defined as a confident self-awareness, matched by sameness and continuity in the eyes of significant others. Opposed to identity is pride which compensates for failure to achieve genuine self-appreciation or for insecurity from identity diffusion. The psychospiritual virtue of humility affects the psychosocial sense of identity. It consists in accepting one's place in the world as both a contingent creature and an adopted child of God.

Next comes love of neighbor, matched with intimacy. Intimacy is the great discovery made by young adults as they enter into reciprocal self-revealing processes. What is crucial here is acquiring the capacity to relate meaningfully with others in mutually satisfying and productive interactions. It is easy to see that intimacy builds on the sense of identity characteristic of the preceding phase. On the other hand, isolation expresses itself in stiff, strained, purely formal rapports or is maintained thanks to a façade of humor and personal warmth.

The penultimate religious virtue is service which possesses an affinity with generativity. The latter consists principally in begetting and raising children. But it also includes the creativity that flows from a genuine concern for the growth of persons. Such a concern contrasts with self-absorption and self-indulgence. Corresponding with generativity is service and missionary zeal for God's kingdom. It entails self-transcendence and even self-sacrifice for the welfare and development of others.

Finally, at the apex of virtues Meissner places charity. He sees it as congenial to integrity, the disposition characteristic of human maturity. It is a conviction of ultimate meaningfulness, a full acceptance of life and death, a wisdom that encompasses troubles, trials, illnesses, and aging. Charity is a complete surrender to one's Creator, a free giving of oneself to a provident and loving God.

### *Three Operative Principles*

Those are the eight pairs of psychosocial and psychospiritual dispositions. Their systematically detailed content, only partially encapsulated in our short summary, allows a fleshing out of the backbone around which psychosocial and psychospiritual ramifications intertwine. In addition to this contribution, Meissner spells out a few basic assumptions that bear on the interaction between the psychosocial and the psychospiritual. Underlying this interaction are three principles.

First, the principle of reciprocal influence, whereby grace (understood as "the energizing and relational principle on the spiritual level for the proper functions of the ego") yields a positive effect on the defective working of a human function, while the receiving of this effect is itself partially impeded by that defectiveness. "Normally, there is a proportion between the effects of grace and the capacity of the ego to respond to it."<sup>4</sup> The principle implies that only in exceptional cases are extraordinary effects brought about, even in a relatively weak ego. I agree with this principle insofar as it is postulated within the context of healing grace rather than elevating grace. The influence of the latter grace that establishes communion with God is more radical, whereas the influence of healing grace is progressive since it cooperates with human agency in rectifying the mechanisms of psychological development. More will be said about these two kinds of grace in our final section.

Second, the principle of compensatory activation suggests that grace exercises a sanating effect upon the various ego-functions.<sup>5</sup> The action of grace is compensatory in the sense that it makes up for what has been lost in the course of human development. Thanks to the individual's free cooperation, one's personality is assisted in the process of self-reconstruction. Spiritual identity has a definite influence upon personal identity.

Third, there is a developmental principle, the principle of epigenesis. Each phase of the cycle is characterized by the period in which a specific psychological system undergoes maximal development. But each phase does not resolve itself in a definitive outcome, since its typical issue can be reactivated in subsequent phases. Whenever the crucial problem typical of a particular stage is again faced in later stages, one can observe further modifications of the same elements that were provisionally organized. The reemergence of the typical issue or problem always remains possible because, even though a successful resolution implies that a positive disposition predominates, one must always reckon with a negative side that maintains the instability of any resolution.<sup>6</sup>

### *Psychological and Theological Categories*

In light of those observations and principles, we may return to Meissner's distinction between the psychosocial and the psychospiritual. Both refer to the same ego-functions. But, in addition to the psychosocial, the psychospiritual includes religious values that impinge upon the functioning of the ego.<sup>7</sup>

It is important to note that, in this context, Meissner avoids using the words "spiritual" or "supernatural." Speaking as a psychoanalyst, he talks of the "psychospiritual." The reason is his sensitivity to the

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 58.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 59.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 59–60 and 62.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 27.

methodological problems that can easily plague dialogue between psychology and religion. Mindful of "the need to respect and maintain the autonomy of the respective disciplines," he puts forward "the proposition that the respective intelligibilities may not tolerate complete translation from one area to the other without some degree of distortion."<sup>8</sup>

Meissner stresses the limits of his own craft: "psychoanalysis is unavoidably and inherently reductive insofar as its capacity to analyze and understand is limited to the parameters dictated by human experience."<sup>9</sup> Being reductive in this precise sense, psychoanalysis can be epigenetic and hence not reductionistic, whenever it overcomes "the tendency . . . to make explanations in terms of instinctual derivatives."<sup>10</sup> "Its scope does not extend beyond the natural phenomena; it has nothing to say about the supernatural." What he means by the supernatural as lying outside the field of psychoanalysis is spelled out as follows: "The ultimate nature of grace and the nature of the divine relationship and interaction with human souls is not open to psychoanalytic inquiry."<sup>11</sup>

Taking account of this caveat against epistemic confusion between psychology and theology, we can explicate Meissner's thought by contending that the psychospiritual does not amount to but corresponds to what theologians call "the natural" in contradistinction to "the supernatural." Meissner's project of a dialogue between psychoanalysis and theology requires the distinction between these two aspects of religious experience.<sup>12</sup> However, since this distinction has been very controversial in the last 300 years, some clarifications are in order.

The relation between grace and nature has been construed in several ways which have been and still are at loggerheads. Since the 16th century, grace and nature have rarely been seen as complementary. In the Lutheran view, they have been presented as antithetical; in Roman Catholic doctrine, they have been separated. In the secularist tradition initiated by Spinoza, grace was ruled out in order to safeguard the integrity of nature.

Fortunately, our options are not limited to these three avenues. In Thomas Aquinas, we find a fourth avenue which yields much better results for the dialogue between psychology and theology. Grace and nature, or more precisely the supernatural and the natural, are two complementary dimensions of a single human experience. We can assert both dimensions at the same time, provided we see them not as

<sup>8</sup> W. W. Meissner, "Author's Response to Review Symposium on W. W. Meissner's *Psychoanalysis and Religious Experience*," *Horizons* 13 (1986) 405-10, at 406.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 409.

<sup>10</sup> W. W. Meissner, *Psychoanalysis and Religious Experience* (New Haven: Yale University, 1984) 214; see W. W. Meissner, *Ignatius of Loyola: The Psychology of a Saint* (New Haven: Yale University, 1992) xxvi.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 407.

<sup>12</sup> *Psychoanalysis* 216.

antithetical or as separate, but as distinct aspects of what takes place in a person with religious concerns. "Since grace does not destroy nature but perfects it, natural reason should minister to faith as the natural bent of the will submits to charity."<sup>13</sup> The voice of God is seen to be echoed in the stirrings of human intentionality, in the twin faculties of reason and will, as Aquinas mentions. The supernatural is not something extrinsic, cut off from the rest of human thinking or of human behavior. Nor is the experience of grace, so to speak, "chemically pure."

Thus Meissner's first two principles, reciprocal influence and compensatory activation, can be accounted for in terms of religious motivation. Grounded in the living relationship between God and believers, the eight psychospiritual dispositions draw their spiritual character from motivation intrinsic to that relationship. Such motivation stems from the undeserved gift of a transcendent presence. But although it surpasses the human capacity, that motivation is phenomenologically very close to psychosocial dispositions. The goal of the distinction and of the harmony between the natural and supernatural is to help us see the intelligibility of the phenomenological data, as we find them in the testimonies of people who describe their religious experience.

There is no strict proof that supernatural activity affects human life. However, faith's assertion of such a divine influence is not divorced from experience which to a certain extent confirms this assertion. Contemporary theologians, especially those who accept the Thomist distinction between the natural and supernatural, can fully accept Meissner's statement that grace energizes a person's natural endowments. Since these endowments are no longer intact or integral, grace exercises a healing effect on the ego-functions highlighted and differentiated by psychology. Thus the Thomistic insight into the distinction between the natural and supernatural can provide the theological framework in which psychological input makes sense to those with an ultimate or religious concern.

If this is the case, it is possible for psychologists and phenomenologists to analyze the various forms of human adherence to values, and to observe in them a transvaluation of values characteristic of divine action. In other words, given the human potential for psychic and moral development, a person experiences a fundamental pull, which asserts itself unremittingly, albeit quietly, despite its being partially or totally checked by the counterpull of existence in untruth which can thwart growth and even produce ethical disintegration.<sup>14</sup> The concept of healing grace utilized by Meissner helps identify certain modalities of this basic dialectic felt in terms of pull and counterpull.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1, q. 1, ad 8, 2.

<sup>14</sup> See Eric Voegelin, "The Gospel and Culture," in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 12, *Published Essays 1966-1985* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1990) 172-212, esp. 182-87.

*Further Psychoanalytic Research on Grace*

In this final section, I adumbrate one aspect of the human experience of grace which, in my view, is missing in Meissner's writings. I also offer a suggestion regarding its expressibility in psychoanalytic terms.

Religious literature often conveys people's surprise at having been capable of feeling and acting in a way that seemed to exceed their personal ability. They are convinced that they have tapped a source of dynamism that does not belong to their ego. Guided by their specific religious tradition, several theologians have assumed and tried to understand the believers' sense that a more than human dynamism is active in their lives.

Augustine, for instance, reflects on the transition from a human will set on cupidity and domination to one filled with the joy of being loved by God and spontaneously reciprocating. Inspired by Ezekiel 11:19 and 36:26, he envisions the replacement of a heart of stone by a heart of flesh, not as due to a person's potential but as a sheer gift. Grace is first and foremost not a collaboration between the divine and the human but a reorientation that only God is capable of accomplishing. To account for the difference between pure gift and subsequent collaboration, Augustine coins the categories of operative and cooperative grace.<sup>15</sup>

Aquinas takes up Augustine's distinction and situates it in a broader framework. He sees an analogy between creation and the two sides of grace—operative and cooperative. Creation is not primarily an event, but a gift of being which is constantly renewed. The prior granting of being in which no finite agency is at work makes possible a collaboration between a primary (divine) and a secondary (worldly) cause. Throughout many sacred writings of world religions, we find a philosophical mysticism based on a sense of this amazing gift in light of which human efforts are, if not abolished, at least radically relativized. Aquinas finds this insight in Aristotle, who emphasized the fact that the sources of the human spirit's operations are preactive, that is, receptive.<sup>16</sup>

In contemporary theology, no one has better understood this aspect of Augustine's and Thomas's thought than Bernard Lonergan.<sup>17</sup> He indicates that operative grace is a state of being in love in an unrestricted fashion, which is "not the product of our knowing and choosing," and which amounts to "St. Ignatius Loyola's consolation that has no cause, as expounded by Karl Rahner."<sup>18</sup> Harvey Egan has expounded

<sup>15</sup> Augustine, "Grace and Free Will," in *The Teacher, The Free Choice of the Will, and Grace and Free Will* (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1968) 243–308, esp. 280–92.

<sup>16</sup> *Summa theologiae* I–II, qq. 9–10.

<sup>17</sup> Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Grace and Freedom: Operative Grace in the Thought of St. Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Herder, 1971) chaps. 3 and 6.

<sup>18</sup> Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1992) 106; see 107 and 241. See Karl Rahner, "The Logic of Concrete Individual Knowledge

the nuances of this consolation in a masterly way.<sup>19</sup> The concrete indications he presents about Ignatius allow us to see in consolation without a previous cause as well as in the first time of "election" an experience in which the results of operative grace are more vividly felt and for a longer time than in consolation with a previous cause, the second time of "election."<sup>20</sup> Egan gives examples of such God-given consolation from other spiritual traditions.<sup>21</sup>

So far as I know, Meissner does not mention this operative grace which precedes cooperative grace. Why has he left out this side of divine activity in the human soul? The explanation has to do with methodology. Meissner restricts the scope of his endeavor: "I am concerned here only with actual grace as healing."<sup>22</sup> He excludes from his consideration grace as elevating, grace understood as a participation in transcendent life. It is perfectly legitimate for scholars to make decisions about limiting their method and field of data. Such honesty is very helpful, especially in Meissner's case, since he successfully accomplished what he purported to achieve.

It should be noted, however, that the psychoanalytic resources from which he draws are focused on the ego, as he himself often remarks. What he utilizes is a "body of knowledge dealing specifically with the psychology of the ego."<sup>23</sup> He adopts the following starting point: "The basic principle is that grace works in and through the resources of the ego." The ego-functions that he examines "lie within the range of the ego's natural capacity." The healing effect of grace enables "the ego to mobilize its own latent resources."<sup>24</sup> Or, again: "The effects of grace . . . are subject to the laws of ego-functioning."<sup>25</sup>

Given the cross-cultural evidence to which I have alluded, a question must be raised: Has psychoanalysis ignored what in religious experience cannot be encompassed within the confines of the ego (or, for that matter, of the id and the superego)? As Meissner suggests elsewhere,<sup>26</sup> the beginning of an answer might be found in the reductionist outlook of Sigmund Freud. But even today, more than 55 years after Freud, the limitations of psychoanalysis (as well as of contemporary theology) are noticeable in the following avowal by Meissner: "There is no consen-

in Ignatius Loyola," in *The Dynamic Element in the Church* (New York: Herder, 1964) 84-169, esp. 106-8, 117-70.

<sup>19</sup> Harvey D. Egan, *The Spiritual Exercises and the Ignatian Mystical Horizon* (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1976) 31-65, 132-56. I wish to thank Father Egan for his help in revising this article.

<sup>20</sup> Harvey D. Egan, *Ignatius Loyola the Mystic* (Wilmington, Del.: Glazier, 1987) 150-65.

<sup>21</sup> Harvey D. Egan, *Christian Mysticism: The Future of a Tradition* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1990) 389 n. 22.

<sup>22</sup> *Life and Faith* 20.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 23.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 54.

<sup>26</sup> *Psychoanalysis* pt. 2.



sus regarding specifically psychological effects that can be attributed directly to sanctifying grace as such."<sup>27</sup>

Despite this apparent agnosticism, I wonder whether it would not be extremely fruitful if a psychiatrist of Meissner's calibre were to suggest psychoanalytic categories susceptible of clarifying the kind of religious experience to which I have alluded. In regard to such religious phenomena, is he not in an ideal position to implement his own rule, "The psychologist who sets out to study religious experience must possess an empathic openness to and a respect for the meaning and relevance of the phenomena he studies"?<sup>28</sup>

It might be argued that Meissner has already done so in his book on St. Ignatius where he shows the psychoanalytic mechanisms at play in Ignatius' transcendental experiences.<sup>29</sup> But it is doubtful whether those experiences, with their imaginary and interpretive content, more than partially overlap the quite distinct affective state of consolation without a previous cause. The difference is implicitly asserted by the fact that Meissner discusses consolation without previous cause in a subsequent passage.<sup>30</sup> At any rate, he approaches both transcendent experiences and consolation from the viewpoint of the mystic's free response to God's action, namely, from the viewpoint of *cooperative* grace.

It could be objected that Meissner has expressly told his readers that methodologically it does not make sense for psychoanalysis to deal with divine action as such. There is no question here of asking the psychoanalyst to pronounce on what only religious literature can evoke and theology can modestly try to elucidate. I agree entirely with his method as "an approach to the psychology of grace based on an understanding of the effects of grace as working in and through man's psychic potentialities." The problem is that Meissner equates these effects of grace with the "free psychic response."<sup>31</sup> This restricts psychoanalytic consideration to cooperative grace. But why should psychoanalysis not study the entry of *operative* grace, prior to any decision made by the ego, into the psychic capacities and functions? Could not such an examination be made not from the perspective of divine action itself but of the psychic consequences of that action and without this approach being "excessively spiritualizing"?<sup>32</sup>

In fact, Meissner provides clues in this direction. For example, he mentions "the interpersonal dimension, the gratuitous self-communication and presence of the triune God within the soul elevated by grace."<sup>33</sup> This fact entails an experience along such lines as: like the Son of God, with whom they are united, Christian believers receive the totality of their being and life from the Father.

<sup>27</sup> *Life and Faith* 20.

<sup>29</sup> *Ignatius of Loyola* chap. 19.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* 347.

<sup>33</sup> *Life and Faith* 21.

<sup>28</sup> *Psychoanalysis* 7.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* chap. 20.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* 348.

In another passage about mature love relationships, Meissner mentions "receptivity to the effects of grace."<sup>34</sup> Could this receptivity to transcendent love go beyond the receptivity that we observe in human relationships? Again, treating of "fragmentary identifications with admired or loved persons," he applies this phenomenon to the mystical identification with the person of Christ.<sup>35</sup> In this regard, could psychoanalysis account for St. Paul's saying, "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2:20)?

A twofold conclusion can be drawn. On the one hand, by having methodically clarified the intermediary and properly psychoanalytical concept of the psychospiritual, Meissner has been successful in correlating healing grace and the ego-strengths. On the other hand, a further task remains, that is, to establish, after the model of his own psychoanalytic approach, a correlation between elevating grace and another aspect of human experience which I have described as real in the lives of credible witnesses, as theologically accounted for, but still absent in Meissner's psychology of religion.

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#### RESPONSE TO LOUIS ROY

I would begin by expressing my gratitude to Father Roy for his diligence in assimilating and synthesizing this material and for his effort to advance the dialogue another step along the path, thus presenting a further stimulus to this evolving reflection. I will offer my comments in the spirit of collaborative exploration and the mutual effort to probe the frontiers of this dialogue in the hope of advancing the discussion and bringing the issues into clearer focus. I will try to do justice to Roy's penetrating critique by commenting on the respective sections of his essay.

#### *Correlating Personal and Spiritual Identity*

The levels of integration—psychosexual, psychosocial, and psychospiritual—are based on the work of Erik Erikson, and thus are both derivative from and at the same time develop beyond original Freudian categories. Erikson himself, however genial and illuminating his views, must be seen at this juncture as a transitional figure, transitional in the sense that he was able to broaden the Freudian perspective, which was primarily if not exclusively intrapsychic in dimension, to include the wider range of interpersonal, social, and cultural dimensions of human experience that allowed it to become more open and flexible as an instrument for exploring aspects of human religious experience

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* 52.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* 55.