

SOUL ON THE COUCH

Spirituality, Religion, and Morality in Contemporary Psychoanalysis

edited by *Charles Spezzano* and *Gerald J. Gargiulo*
Hillsdale, NJ: The Analytic Press, 1977, xiv + 241 pp., \$45.00

Reviewed by Aisha Abbasi, M.D.

I often think that a good book is one that stimulates self-reflection. Spezzano and Gargiulo's *Soul on the Couch: Spirituality, Religion, and Morality in Contemporary Psychoanalysis* certainly did that for me. While reading the book, I found myself reflecting on my struggles to understand spirituality and religion in my own analytic treatment. I felt that previously disconnected thoughts and experiences related to these issues began to come together slowly and in a more cohesive way as I was reading the book and preparing to write this review. Looking back, I realized that my attitudes toward my religion, religious upbringing, and spirituality had undergone numerous changes during the course of my psychoanalysis. When I began my psychoanalytic treatment I thought that a discussion of my religious beliefs and practices did not belong in my analysis. I was worried that my beliefs would be viewed as pathological and childish by my analyst. I could not appreciate then that these worries also reflected the depth of my own uncertainty and conflict about my religious beliefs. Although I did not talk much about this topic in my analysis, I *was* quietly observing my Jewish analyst's nonobservance of the Jewish religious holidays in the first two or three years of my analysis. In subsequent years I observed that my analyst started canceling sessions on some of the Jewish religious holidays. I wondered whether this change reflected a change in him or had more to do with his remarriage, which had occurred around this time in my analysis (his first wife having died in the second year of my analysis).

Most interesting about all of this was that, in the first phase of my analysis, I could begin to talk to him about religion only after I had actively started questioning my own religious beliefs and, in fact, doubting much of the religious teaching I had received during my childhood. In other words, *it was only when I felt that my religious beliefs, or lack of them, matched my analyst's that I could start talking to him about the inner struggles I had been experiencing in my mind during the previous two to three years of my analysis.* Later I found myself coming back to spirituality and my own religion in a way that now seemed redefined by my understanding of my own inner conflicts; my religion was now serving needs quite different from those it had served before. There was a sense of historic and generational

continuity that my religious traditions seemed to provide at this point, and a sense of wanting to share those with my daughter as part of a lively and important cultural and traditional heritage. It is interesting that this change in me coincided with my observed change in my analyst's attitude toward his religious holidays. What it means is a question with which I am still grappling. The important aspect of all of this, of course, has to do with the question of how often, and to what degree, feelings related to religious beliefs and spirituality are discussed in analysis, what meanings they have for each individual, and what impact the analyst's religious beliefs and practices might have on the unfolding of such material on the part of the analysand.

To read *Soul on the Couch* at this point in my exploration of myself and my spiritual/religious beliefs was a very useful experience. The book, a collection of nine essays edited by Spezzano and Gargiulo, addresses many different aspects of religious beliefs and experiences (as well as their relationship to spirituality and morality). It attempts to look at what psychoanalytic thinking and religious experiences and practices may have to offer each other in trying to understand the human condition. I believe that the contributors and the editors have addressed a complex issue in a meaningful way and have presented us with a much-needed collection of writings on the question of whether psychoanalytic and religious thought can be synthesized and integrated rather than being seen as disparate and unconnected to each other. Feelings of prejudice and religious beliefs are topics that are sometimes addressed only in a limited way in psychoanalytic treatment. This avoidance has to do at times with conflicts in the analysand and at other times with conflicts in the analyst. My personal belief is that the more openly and vigorously these issues are addressed in treatment, the better the chances are for a fuller understanding of all kinds of conflicts within our patients. I have come to appreciate in my own analytic treatment, as well as in my work with my patients, the value of making the effort and taking the time to talk about patients' prejudices and religious beliefs, both of which are topics that patients are often reluctant or afraid to introduce. That said, I think *Soul on the Couch* attempts to fill an important void in the existing psychoanalytic literature. I do think, however, that much more remains to be studied and said about this very complicated subject.

In chapter 1, "Inner Mind/Outer Mind and the Quest for the 'I,'" Gerald J. Gargiulo talks about the emphasis in psychoanalytic thinking on viewing each person as an autonomous "I" rather than as an "I" in the context of others. He notes, "To experience our interdependence, familial and cultural, is not only realistic, it resolves the illusion that one has an 'I' that is definable *in itself*" (p. 7). He feels that

traditional psychoanalysis and its model of the unconscious have focused on the importance of one's environment and others, but on the development of one's self only in a very limited way. He sees the contributions of the English object relational theorists in this regard, and the emphasis on the interaction between the child and its caretaker, as particularly important contributions to our field. His thinking seems to be that a psychoanalysis that takes interdependence into account "offers the possibility for a spirituality that is humanly possible rather than religiously necessary...by experiencing the interconnection of self and other, of past, present and, if necessary future, provides the possibility for the nonconflictual 'now'" (p. 8).

Kevin Sauteux, in "Self Reparation in Religious Experience and Creativity," looks at "the psychological regression that takes place in religious experience" (p. 11) and suggests that such regressive states are similar to certain transference experiences in therapy. He presents the idea that during the course of such regression, creative process and repair of "unresolved conflicts" (p. 28) can and does occur. In "The Patient Who Was Touched By and Knew Nothing About God," Steven H. Knoblauch describes the case of M. L, who saw him at a time when her breast cancer had recurred and she was close to dying. He discusses Ms. L's immersion in trying to "know God" (p. 51) during this time of her life, and feels that her belief in God at this point served a self-object function for her that helped her deal with her oncoming death. In chapter 4, "Formulation, Psychic Space, and Time," Daniel J. Rothenberg talks about certain aspects of Jewish thought and draws parallels between contemporary psychoanalytic thinking and certain beliefs in Judaism.

In his chapter, "Psychoanalysis is Self-Centered," Jeffrey B. Rubin focuses on the neglect of spirituality by psychoanalysts and presents his views on why this may have occurred. Presenting in detail the case of a man who was immersed in Buddhism during his psychoanalysis, Rubin talks about what he and the patient came to understand about how this religious immersion was helpful to the patient, as well as the defensive purpose that it served for him. Joseph Bobrow, in "Coming to Life," suggests that "Two dimensions of human experience...are common to both psychoanalysis and Zen, though each is privileged differently in their respective disciplines" (p. 110). He goes on to illustrate these common dimensions in detail. In chapter 7, "The Confluence of Psychoanalysis and Religion," Stephen Friedlander talks about his personal experience of having a bar mitzvah at the age of 44 and the meanings that this event had for him on both a personal and a professional level. Randall Lehmann Sorenson, in "Transcendence and Intersubjectivity," presents data illustrating that "God concepts that arose during

or subsequent to therapy not only shaped how therapists worked with religious issues in others, but also were themselves a function of how the therapist's analyst addressed issues of transcendence in the training analyses" (p. 186).

In the last chapter of the book, "On the Horizon of Authenticity," Joel Greifinger raises questions "within the budding tradition of social constructivist psychoanalysis" (p. 205), in which psychoanalytic dialogue is seen as occurring between two participants interacting on all levels. He goes on to illustrate with case material how he came to recognize that his own beliefs and ways of thinking made it difficult for him at times to understand what his patients were trying to convey to him about their moral beliefs and ways of being.

I found *Soul on the Couch* an interesting and useful book for the most part. I clearly enjoyed the chapters that had clinical material much more than those that did not. Thus the chapters by Rubin, Knoblauch, Friedlander, and Greifinger came more alive for me since I could connect their theoretical viewpoint to material either from their work with their patients or their self-observations. The book would have had more meaning for me if theoretical viewpoints were more closely tied to clinical material in most, if not all, chapters. Even with this limitation, however, I would recommend this book without reservation to all therapists and psychoanalysts interested in understanding their own spirituality and that of their patients.

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