



Book Reviews

Damian Janus: *Psychopathology and Religion: Structural Convergences Between Mental Disorders and Religion*. London: Lexington Books, 2019, 248 pp.

In *Psychopathology and Religion*, the author, who is a clinical psychologist and a practising psychotherapist in Kraków, Poland, navigates the reader through the complex field of religion and mental disorders, a subject that has long been a field of enquiry by both academics and practitioners in religion, psychology, medicine, and anthropology. Scholars from these disciplines have attempted to establish the nexus between these two fields, as well as where they intersect or conflict. The author admits from the outset that the book is ‘more about psychopathology than religion’ (p. 1). In his approach the author adopts a ‘hermeneutics of disorders’ to unpack the blurring conceptualizations of mental disorders that have given rise to different interpretations and meanings of mental illnesses. This approach, which is phenomenological in nature, the author believes, will help in providing a ‘non-reductionist’ view of mental disorders instead of the reductively centred approach of the biomedical model of the disease. He seeks to achieve this through the lived experiences of patients he encounters directly or indirectly. By ‘empathizing’ with patients and their stories, the author aims to intuitively extract information from them,

which he believes ‘makes it possible to synthesize the information and reach a conclusion that would not be available in a purely rational way of thinking’ (p. 14). The author is of the view that such an approach ‘changes the understanding of mental illnesses, and consequently affects the style of the physician’s or therapist’s contact with patients’ (p. 13). He argues further that this ‘has serious consequences in the preferred treatment method, ways of informing and cooperating with patients’ families... perhaps most importantly dealing with patients’ (p. 7).

In Chapter 1 the author examines the ‘non-reductionist approach’ to psychopathology and religion, and teases out three nexuses between religion and mental disorders: the first approach sees religion as a form of mental disorder; the second explicates psychological disorders in the light of Christian theology; and the third disengages psychopathology from religion and examines their issues discretely. This is followed by a discussion of the reductionist approach to mental disorders of biomedicine that draws out the weakness of this approach in diagnosing mental disorders. Among other factors, the author cites the exclusion of social, behavioural, and spiritual factors in the treatment of mental disorders by biomedicine. To address this therapeutic challenge, he proposes ‘objectivism and constructivism’, an approach to knowledge the author believes when

applied will help offer a holistic understanding of the diagnosis and treatment of mental disorders. He briefly surveys the view of religion as neurosis as espoused by Freud in his work, *Future of an Illusion*, and popularized in the works of Feuerbach, Nietzsche, and Marx.

Chapter 2 problematizes the relationship between religiosity and neuroticism. The author challenges Freud's argument that neurosis could be the basis for explicating any religious act or behaviour. Citing other authors such as Erich Fromm, who made similar arguments to those of Freud, the author questions the basis of Freud's arguments of religion as neuroses if such an argument is examined in the light of the reductionist approach to mental disorders. He states that 'if we compare neurosis and religion, expecting that they will relate to each other in some unambiguous way (e.g., religion will prove to be "simply a neurosis"), we will fail' (p. 24). The author argues that mental disorders are multidimensional, and we can only search for 'common structures that concern the "symptomatology" of neurosis and religious phenomena' (p. 25) especially because, since the problem concerns the individual, the application of knowledge of both psychopathology and religion, with a focus on the individual and not on the game of the two abstractions, 'religion and neurosis' will provide a holistic understanding (p. 25).

The debate on the complexity of the relationship between religion and neurosis is further examined

in Chapter 3, which examines the allegory of the parent-child relationship in the light of the heavenly relationship that exists between the Christian and God. The author argues that when one considers Freud's concept of the neurotic, which views the human person as a purely dependent being without personal autonomy over his or her life, the individual falls into a state of despair that does not rid the person of a childlike mental attitude, as it were – culminating in an immature attitude even in adulthood. He examines the linkage between childhood trauma – for example, sexual abuse – and pathological views of and projections onto God. The author advances an argument that a positive or healthy relationship during childhood development tends to incline a child towards a more positive relationship with God, resulting in less neurotic images of God. Chapter 4 focuses on how the withdrawal from food to maintain one's physique and self-image has mental health implications. The author argues that the self-perception of the anorexic depends on the view of the people around them, which sometimes affects their personal relationship with others.

In Chapter 5 the author deals with the subject of schizophrenia as a form of psychotic disorder but cautions attempts to overgeneralize the clinical diagnosis of psychotic disorders, because it can be culturally relative and at the same time subjective. The author argues that a delusion of grandeur may awaken

in people a sense of power and authority akin to God. Individuals with such conditions tend to express moods that equate to maniacal and schizophrenic disorders. Chapter 6 turns the discussion to 'demon possession' and mental disorders. In this chapter the author argues that despite the complexity surrounding the act of possession, and differences in how the disease is manifested in people, psychiatrists mostly associate or recognize possession with or as a mental disorder. He argues that although there are psychopathological phenomena that are expressive of or similar to possession, they are not always the case. Chapter 7 focuses on the role of the spirit after death. He argues that the internal image of a deceased person 'can have an extremely strong, sometimes destructive impact' resulting in mental disorders (p. 191). He also emphasizes that the psychological background that conditions a belief in spirits may be akin to that which leads to "'psychopathological" contact with the dead' (p. 192).

Overall, this is an important contribution to the discourses on religion and mental disorders, as the author succeeds in illuminating some of the enduring problems involving religion and mental disorders. However, the book has several weaknesses. First, the author fails to engage instructively and extensively with the case studies, which are mostly presented at the end of each chapter. Indeed, the author's failure to properly integrate the case studies with the discussion weakens the

hermeneutical or phenomenological approach he seeks to employ. This makes it difficult to follow the arguments the author wants to make by indirectly or directly drawing on the experiences of patients. Second, there seems to be no logical connection between the book's chapters and/or sections. Each chapter ends abruptly, with no summary or conclusion, and without setting out the background or stage for the next chapter. A summary of the major arguments at the end of each chapter would have greatly helped readers follow the arguments' consistency. Third, the case studies are somewhat poorly translated and are not easily comprehensible (e.g. 70, 72, and 76). Finally, the author quotes extensively from earlier Christian writers and philosophers with very little or no explanation of or contextual relevance given to such quotations. This makes the text itself difficult to read, and the argument's logic difficult to follow. In sum, although the author admits that the book is more about psychopathology than religion, the continuous interspersions of philosophical debates (sometimes quoted extensively from earlier writers) seems to have overshadowed the religious convergences he seeks to explore between psychopathology and religion.

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