

## **God Is a Trauma: Vicarious Religion and Soul-Making**

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### **Introduction**

This book, despite its title, is not a theology book. It is not a book about God *as* God. In identifying the two words, God and trauma, I wish to focus attention on the *religious dimension* of the *psychology* of those overwhelming events we describe as traumatic. When a psychologist writes of God he must do so within the confines of his own field of inquiry, the psyche. Like Jung, who in his own way tackled themes related to the one facing us here, our references to "God" will be to the *imago dei*, the God-image or God-complex--not to God in an ontological sense.<sup>1</sup>

Images and fantasies of God abound in psychic life and have a determining effect on its movement, regardless of whether a God 'really exists' or not. From the standpoint of theology, a standpoint that attempts to start with God even as psychology starts with psyche, the contention that "God" is a synonym for trauma will seem grossly reductionistic. After all, to the theologian and the believer, God may be thought of as being in all things even as He is the creator of all things. Again, let me stress: this book is not a theology book. My aim is not to reduce theology's God to a secularized category of psychopathology, but rather, to raise the secularized term, "trauma," to the immensity of the religious categories which, in the form of images, are among its guiding fictions.

Whether a divine being really exists or not, the psychological fact remains that we tend to experience traumatic events *as if* they were in some sense divine. Just as God has been described as transcendent and unknowable, a trauma is an event which transcends our capacity to experience it.<sup>2</sup>

Compared to the finite nature of the traumatized soul, the traumatic event seems infinite, all-powerful, and wholly other. Again, we cannot say that traumatic events literally possess these properties, but only that the traumatized soul propitiates them as if they did.

Human affliction has always been a problem for theology. Indeed, the question--"How do we reconcile suffering and pain with a loving God?"--has proven to be among the richest questions sustaining theological reflection. Theology's approach to the problem, of course, has mainly been in the genre of theodicy. Faithful to a benevolent conception of God, theology has attempted to justify the ways of God to age upon age of men and women who have been shattered by events which have lent the created world a malevolent cast. Barth, Tillich, C.S. Lewis, Hans Kung: theologian after theologian has attempted to minister to the interminable struggle of the soul with pain.

Despite the comparisons drawn between the analyst's couch and the priest's confessional, the difference between the two is perhaps more significant. When he examines the engagement of theology, the psychologist cannot help wondering if theology has placed the needs of the soul secondary to its own need to justify the ways of its root metaphor "God." Even those theologians who fastidiously attempt to keep themselves open to the phenomenon of suffering work from an essentially closed perspective in that their thinking is committed from the outset to the service of what they already believe on instinct. For the theologian the premier psychological question--"What does the soul want?"--takes a backseat to the premier theological question--"What does God demand?" This "God first psyche second" priority is not merely academic; it occurs, as well, in the biblical account of man's relationship with God. When we read the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, we meet a God who demands the submissive obedience of the soul to His awesome

knowledge and power and who is prepared to test this obedience through torture. Like a cat playing with a mouse, the Creator plays with His creature Job.<sup>3</sup> When Job enquires about God's motives in torturing him, the divine terrorist answers him out of a storm:

"Will you really annul My  
judgement?  
Will you condemn Me  
That you may be justified?  
"Or do you have an arm  
like God,  
And can you thunder  
with a voice like His?  
"Adorn yourself with  
eminence and dignity;  
And clothe yourself with  
honor and majesty.  
"Pour out the overflowings  
of your anger  
And look on everyone who  
is proud, and make him low.  
(Job 40:8-11)

The controlling metaphor of theology is an overpowering metaphor, a metaphor that literalizes itself in terms of the God-given goodness of affliction and evil. Like Job terrified before the mightiness of God, the theologian, working from a metaphor which denies its relativity as a metaphor, must suppress the objections of his suffering soul. "Behold, I am insignificant; what can I reply to Thee?" (Job 40: 4).

The psychological move from theology's soul-transcending God to the God-complex that stirs within the soul amounts to a Copernican revolution in our conceptualization of the traumatized soul. Psychological reflection reverses the "God first psyche second" priority. While the

theologian writing his theodicy does so with his mouth covered, ever on guard, like Job, lest his representation of suffering seem impious to his Maker, the psychologist tries to amplify the voice of the afflicted psyche. Like Jung in his *Answer to Job*, he must write without inhibition if he is "to give expression to the shattering emotion which the unvarnished spectacle of divine savagery and ruthlessness produces in us."<sup>4</sup>

The theologian, of course, is as skeptical about the humanism of psychology as the psychologist is of the traumatized and traumatizing theism of the theologian. If Man were truly the measure of all things then presumably he would be able to be the measure of his sufferings as well. But the world is bigger than Man. We exist in a creation that transcends us in every direction. If today Man's knowledge and power rival the knowledge and power which Yahweh lorded over Job, will we prove any more judicious than Him in our administration of it? The countdown to the Apocalypse has now started and it is Man the humanist whose finger is on the button, not God.

The psychologist, especially the imaginal psychologist, is not so sure. He agrees with the theologian in his criticism of humanism, but wonders if it is not, after all, a God-image that has its finger on the button. For the psychologist, Man is not the measure of soul for precisely the same reason as God is not its measure. For him, both are metaphors which contain within themselves their own characteristic styles of literalizing. In order to stay psychological, psychology must take the metaphor "human" no more literally and, yet, no less seriously than it takes the metaphor "God."

As James Hillman has put it:

...of these notions, psyche and human, psyche is the more embracing, for there is nothing of man that soul does not contain, affect, influence, or define. Soul enters into all of man and is in everything

human. Human existence is psychological before it is anything else—economic, social, religious, physical. In terms of logical priority, all realities (physical, social, religious) are inferred from psychic images or fantasy productions of a psyche. In terms of empirical priority, before we are born into a physical body or a social world, the fantasy of the child-to-come is a psychic reality, influencing the `nature' of the subsequent events. But the statement that soul enters into everything human cannot be reversed. Human does not enter into all soul, nor is everything psychological human. Man exists in the midst of psyche; it is not the other way around. Therefore, soul is not confined by man, and there is much of psyche that extends beyond the nature of man. The soul has inhuman reaches.<sup>5</sup>

Just as psychology must distinguish its engagement from theology in order to remain psychological, it must distinguish itself from humanism as well. Although humanism and theism have recently taken to founding their identity on their prudence in not committing the errors they attribute to each other, refusing the genre of theodicy does not necessarily mean that one has chosen the genre of humanism in its stead. Despite the powerful influence of Christianity and Tertullian's declaration that the soul is naturally Christian, psychology need not crucify itself between the opposites of God and Man. The soul's sufferings cannot be divided into the despair of Christ forsaken to his humanity without remainder any more than its joys can be divided evenly into his reunion with God. The logos of the psyche, as Heraclitus wrote, six centuries before Christ, resides in its own depths. When we take up the term psyche or soul as our root metaphor a *process* of reflection which constantly deepens itself by deliteralizing itself begins. Psychological reflection above all knows itself, even if the reflective moment of that knowing changes it, requiring yet other reflective acts *ad infinitum*. Psychologically speaking, what we see and declare one moment may be re-valued and re-visioned the next as the subjective standpoint backing our perception becomes as well the object of reflection.

Here we do well to remember Hillman's usage of the term "soul":

By *soul* I mean...a perspective rather than a substance, a viewpoint toward things rather than a thing itself. This perspective is reflective; it mediates events and makes differences between ourselves and everything that happens. Between us and events, between the doer and the deed, there is a reflective moment--and soul-making means differentiating this middle ground.<sup>6</sup>

The terms "human" and "divine" take on soul when we see them also as perspectives. Taken "as if" they too can mediate events and make differences. Taken literally, however, they pre-empt the soul's capacity to distinguish itself from events sufficiently to experience them. On the one hand we lose soul to the human-all-too-human and on the other to a God before whom one may have no other "as if" structures. Identification either way produces unconsciousness--totalized vision, white-out. When a perspective is allowed to monopolize awareness it creates the world in its own image while remaining blind to its own stance. Like an Elohim, a Jehovah, or a Yahweh, it is utterly unable to see itself. Psychological awareness requires a context, "a perception of differences,"<sup>7</sup> a variety of perspectives. If we cannot say what a thing is "like," we are held in its thrall and cannot incorporate it as an experience. Jung, who was as much a therapist of Christianity as he was a therapist of the psyche, makes this point with regard to what he saw as theology's unreflective use of the term "God":

...statements made about [transcendent reality] are so boundlessly varied that with the best of intentions we cannot know who is right. The denominational religions recognized this long ago and in consequence each of them claims that it is the only true one and, on top of this, that it is not merely a human truth but the truth directly

inspired and revealed by God. Every theologian speaks simply of "God," by which he intends it to be understood that his "god" is *the* God. But one speaks of the paradoxical God of the Old Testament, another of the incarnate God of Love, a third of the God who has a heavenly bride, and so on, and each criticizes the other but never himself.<sup>8</sup>

A principle theme we shall pursue through the pages of this book is the impact on the soul of monotheistic theology's no-name God. What happens to the soul when it reflects upon its problems in the terms of so absolute and generic a spirit? Does it assist the soul in its soul-making? Does it help the soul to "mediate events" and to make "differences between ourselves and everything that happens"? Or does it galvanize those events with the numinous sheen of the unapproachably holy? Does invoking the name of the Lord preserve the overwhelming quality of overwhelming events, embedding the traumatic?

If "image *is* psyche,"<sup>9</sup> as Jung says in one of his definitions, a God without images is a God without soul.

*Whatever we cannot imagine we reify and deify.* Whatever we cannot inhabit psychologically we propitiate with religious responses. It is not just that God is unknowable and unimaginable; it is that we reach for "God" most earnestly when imagination fails us, that is, when we, like Him, are without soul. To stand before an event for which we have no metaphors is to stand in the tabernacle of the Lord. Like Moses before the bush that burned and yet was not consumed, the soul falls down prostrate before whatever it is unable to relativize into images. Just as the image-less God of Genesis created Man in His own image and likeness, all events which are aversive to the imaginal life of the soul have a determining effect upon it. *A main concern of soul-making is the making of the traumatic contingencies of our incarnational life into soul.*

Soul-making, in other words, is not merely an *opus contra naturam*, a work against the absurd contingencies of nature; it is a work against the myopia of the spirit as well.

Failures of the imagination are not uncommon. After the miscarriage, the break-up, or the tragic car accident we may find ourselves utterly unable to imagine our lives forward. The soul, spellbound by events which have overwhelmed it, cannot lay hold of its other images. Night after night the same dreams, the exact same scenes, return. Wounded by an event, the disabled soul is unable to make distinctions *within* the event. Consciousness atrophies. Vietnam continues as before, regardless of the fact that the boys are home. Is it not at this time, in our times of intolerable affliction, that we are most likely to reflect in terms of God? Is not a trauma of some sort, physical or otherwise, the principle background of religious conversion? When we examine closely the specifics of the events which have overwhelmed us we find them to be the causes--efficient, material, formal and final--of our so-called first cause, God. Yes, the image-less God is an image *for us*, albeit an intolerable image. The jungle fire-fight, the early morning rape, the speeding automobile of the drunk driver: All these images may be God images if, like God, they create us in their image, after their likeness. So long as the overwhelming event is at least slightly larger than the soul's capacity to absorb it, it will be construed as infinite. It is not just that one theologian "speaks of the paradoxical God of the Old Testament, another of the incarnate God of Love, a third of the God who has a heavenly bride," the God-image which possesses the soul can also be a severed spinal cord, an autonomous sex drive, the domineering will of an abusive parent. The AIDS virus is another example. Already a new denomination of converts trembles in its thrall. Like the image-less God, AIDS changes its genetic make-up faster than its medical priesthood can develop a vaccine. The Bible re-constellates. Sodom and Gomorrah falls once more.

Deuteronomy re-writes itself in the lineage of our hematological love histories. New moralities are passed down. An Apocalypse is prophesied.

The traumatized soul, the soul that has stopped "mediating events" and "mak[ing] differences between [itself] and everything else," is a soul in need of therapy. Psychotherapy, at least as I shall be presenting the practice, consists of precisely what the roots of the word imply. First and foremost, psychotherapy is a *caring* for the *soul*. The Greek root "*therapeutae*" suggests "an attendant, servant, physician."<sup>10</sup> A therapist of the psyche is one who attends, serves, and doctors the images of the psyche, the images of the soul.

Again, the contrast between the analyst's couch and the priest's confessional stands out markedly. Unlike the priest, the psychotherapist is not in the business of *saving* souls. Indeed, from his perspective, conversion is a main symptom of traumatic disturbance. The soul, unable to mediate or differentiate events, conforms to the ordinances of an event as if it were the spirit.

Nowhere is this background to conversion more evident than in the ministries of the television evangelists. Every morning of the week evangelical preachers invite the drug addict and the prostitute, the single mother and the sex addict to give their souls to Jesus. Pain, misery, and the wages of sin dominate these programs as if religion were unthinkable except as a balm to suffering. By the end of the show--and these programs can be showy--telephones ring off their hooks and large numbers from the studio audience, running "more like a man flying from something that he dreads than one who sought the thing he loved,"<sup>11</sup> hasten down to the altar in response to the preacher's call.

Watching these antics the theologian and the sophisticated theist will quickly agree with the psychologist's critical view-point and hasten to mark themselves different. But still the

phenomenon remains: the traumatized soul, seeking solace through conversion, gives itself over to the spirit *and ceases to be psychological*. Out of the frying pan of the event that it could not assimilate, the soul enters into the fire of a transcending spirituality that it is even less able to absorb. Like the stillness after the storm, or the tranquility after the electro-convulsive therapy, a state of grace ensues. The totalized metaphor of God suffering with and for man through His crucified Son brings salvation to the soul. Like Paul, the traumatized soul now rejoices in its sufferings and does its share "on behalf of His Body (which is the church) in filling up that which is lacking in Christ's afflictions" (Col. 1:24). But--and here is the rub, at least as the psychologist sees it--*any metaphor which offers itself as the ultimate metaphor is no metaphor at all*. The soul's mediating function, knocked around by events it can not relativize into images, is completely knocked out when "saved" by the metaphor that ends all metaphors: Christ as vicarious atonement.

In pointing out the grass-roots popularity of conversion I do not intend to imply that the soul is naturally Christian. Nor do I wish to imply, following Jung, that religions are "psychotherapeutic systems."<sup>12</sup> My point is simply that trauma is naturally religious. The soul's functioning can be as held in thrall by the monolithic perspectives of the spirit which would save it as by the monolithic brutalities of matter which afflict it.

Where the priest would minister to the salvation of soul, the psychotherapist would seek to restore the soul to its own activity. Therapy of the psyche involves a doctoring of the soul's capacity to make differences between itself and matter on the one hand, and between itself and spirit on the other. For soul, as the Platonic psychologists have described it, is the realm between matter and spirit. Rarer than the world of matter and more embodied than the world of spirit, it is a world of images which reflect, mirror, and mediate the ways in which matter and spirit are related.

What is the matter with spirit and what is the spirit of matter?--these are the questions to which the soul makes its metaphorical replies.

When the perspective of the soul is lost, we are given over to the compulsions of matter and the fanaticisms of the spirit. Fundamentalism and ideology, as if conditioned by the most primitive stimulus/response causality, replace the valuing, imagining process through which events become experiences. Like the molested child who later becomes a child molester, the traumatized soul devoutly repeats the events which have proven so transfixing for it, as if trying to recover its capacity to experience and feel.

The psychotherapist's goal is not to spirit suffering away through some secular intervention or to turn suffering into spirit as the priest would prefer as he shepherds the afflicted soul along the Way of the Cross. The psychotherapist is on the side of *experience*. His task is to restore to the soul its capacity for experiencing events. As Hillman has written, "*Whenever treatment directly neglects the experience as such and hastens to reduce or overcome it, something is being done against the soul. For experience is the soul's one and only nourishment.*"<sup>13</sup>

Psychotherapy heals the soul by insisting that it experience its afflictions within the discrete proportions of the images in which those afflictions reside. Neurotic suffering, as Jung said, is inauthentic suffering,<sup>14</sup> a suffering estranged from the images of the soul's actual life. It is in connection with this issue that religious conversion and the theology of vicarious atonement become matters of clinical concern. After two thousand years of Christian salvation, the story of Christ crucified is too often substituted for the authenticity of one's own images, despite the fact that not every wound is a crucifixion.<sup>15</sup> It does not even matter whether we are Christian or not. The dramaturgy of the Passion can still upstage the soul's relationship to its own images and cause

it to suffer against the wrong background. Ironically, a large part of the job of psychotherapy (and a main concern of this book) is releasing the soul from the collective neurosis, which in the guise of religion, sanctifies estrangement of the soul from its own images and experiences.

To conclude these introductory remarks a few words about the format of the book are in order. Although organized into chapters, the book consists essentially of a long series of short essays, each more or less independent of the others. When one considers that a main feature of traumatic disturbances is the tendency to repeat the traumatic event again and again in diverse situations, my reason for writing a series of variations on a theme will become apparent. By writing in a style that parallels the traumatized soul's compulsion to repeat what it is unable to remember, my aim is to accentuate a therapeutic possibility within repetition compulsion itself. When a trauma has varied its theme in a sufficient number of situations, a context may coagulate around it in terms of which the event at its core can be relativized, particularized, and experienced. But in order for a trauma to break free from the spell in which it is transfixed, the imaginative process which it has unconsciously literalized into compulsive behavior must be mirrored back to it in imaginative ways.

Here, though with a contemporary twist, we are following the classical Freudian account of the utilization of compulsive repetitions in analysis. In Freud's view, a tactic of analytic technique is to interpret the patient's behavior inside and outside the therapy hour as "his way of remembering"<sup>16</sup> repressed material. What the patient refuses to remember in the analysis or to retrieve through free association he will behave. "The greater the resistance," writes Freud, "the more extensively will expressing in action (repetition) be substituted for recollecting."<sup>17</sup> By "curbing the patient's compulsion to repeat...and turning it into a motive for remembering,"<sup>18</sup> the analyst "struggles with the patient to keep all the impulses which he would like to carry into action within the boundaries

of the mind...."<sup>19</sup>

The contemporary twist we shall be giving to this account is that where Freud spoke of "remembering" or "recollecting" we shall speak of *imagining*. The psychoanalytic motto--"we act out what we can't remember"--becomes for us--"we are determined by the literalness of events (physical, emotional, intellectual, social, etc.) which we can't imagine." Memory, or *memoria* as it was once called, is a form of imagination.<sup>20</sup> What it recalls into the present is always, in part, a function of the perspective currently dominating the present. Though we tend to reify history, thinking of it as what "really happened" in the past, history is not static. Inasmuch as it touches us experientially it must enter into the imaginative modes of recollection, thereby becoming psycho-history, a history of soul. The very substance of what we remember or fail to remember changes as we, its historians, change. Even traumatic events, events which once possessed the mind and galvanized the memory, can be re-written by "keep[ing] all the impulses which [we] would like to carry into action within the boundaries" of imaginative reflection.

There is another reason for writing in the variations on a theme format. In order for psychological writing to stay psychological it must eschew the monolithic tendencies of the positivistic spirit of scientism and theology. Psychological life, like a dream series or a conversation that meanders amongst the soul's complexes, is radically discontinuous--even with itself. One theory can never encompass the soul's bounty. Soul-making is an endless process and the events that we make into soul one day may have to be re-made the next. Writing a series of vignettes reflects that psychological writing must be as endless as the depths of the soul itself. Indeed, were we to become monolithic, were we to stop the soul's ongoing imagining activity with a final truth, we would simply be replacing the traumatic content with an equally unabsorbable

didactic content. In the name of soul-making we would then actually be contributing to vicarious religion. We would be writing doctrinal theology. Events would not be turned into experiences which lend the soul substance while at the same time allowing it to imagine on. They would be turned into dogmas, fixed meanings and psychoanalytic cult reactions. But selling out the soul to the viewpoint of something more literal is not the answer to the problem of alleviating the soul's distress. There is a relief that comes not from simple answers and the courage of conviction, but from increased ambivalence, complexity and, as Nietzsche taught, the courage to criticize one's own convictions. This is the soul's way. It heals by differentiating problems, by mediating and making differences within them. As Poul Anderson has said, "I have yet to see any problem, however complicated, which when looked at in the right way did not become still more complicated."<sup>21</sup> The psyche's way is not a way of simplicity, but of complexity; not a way of truth, but of imagination. In the writing that follows we shall be attempting to follow this way with soul.

## Notes

1. This holds true even when our references are to God-images drawn from biblical sources. While the believer may read the bible to gain knowledge of the ontological God, the psychologist reads the bible to gain knowledge of the soul. For him the bible is a psychological document.
2. This sentence is not a logical deduction. I am *not* saying that since God is transcending and since trauma is transcending *therefore* God is a trauma. With the same reasoning one could argue that since Africans and umbrellas are both black, African's are umbrellas. My sentence is intended as a *description* of a *psychological identification* which exists between overwhelming events and the categories theology would reserve for deity. The psyche is irrational. It constantly makes deductions and ellipses which philosophy and theology would judge to be mistaken. But these identifications are the *facts* of the psyche, regardless of their value to other disciplines. The psychologist's concern is with the brute fact that the traumatized soul is a theologizing soul--not with the merits of that resultant "theology" as theology.
3. This reading of Job presupposes Jung's reading in his book, *Answer to Job*. The cat and mouse metaphor is his as well.
4. C.G. Jung, *Psychology and Religion: East and West*, Vol. 11, *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung* par.561
5. James Hillman, *Re-Visioning Psychology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), p. 173.
6. James Hillman, *Re-Visioning Psychology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), p. x.
7. C.G. Jung, *CW 14*, par. 603.
8. C.G. Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, *CW 14*. par.781.
9. C.G. Jung, *CW 13*, par. 75.
10. Gary V. Hartman, "Psychotherapy: An Attempt At Definition," in *Spring 1980* (Dallas: Spring Publications, 1980), p. 91.
11. William Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey," lines 70-72.
12. C.G. Jung, *CW 16*, par. 390.
13. James Hillman, *Suicide and the Soul* (Dallas: Spring Publication, 1976), p. 23.
14. C.G. Jung, *CW11*, par. 129.

15. Cf. James Hillman, *Re-Visioning Psychology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), pp. 95-99.
16. Sigmund Freud, "Further Recommendations In the Technique Of Psycho-Analysis: Recollection, Repetition and Working Through," *Collected Papers* Vol. 2. (London, The Hogarth Press, 1950), p. 370.
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*, p. 374.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 373.
20. Cf. James Hillman, *Re-Visioning Psychology*, p. 18.
21. Cited by K.D. Newman in "Counter-Transference And Consciousness," *Spring 1980* (Dallas: Spring Publications, 1980), p. 117.