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UNIVERSITY OF DELHI



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RELATIONAL PERCEPTIONS OF THE PSYCHE
PSYCHOLOGY-HISTORY-ANTHROPOLOGY

BY

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Report
on

RELATIONAL PERCEPTIONS OF THE PSYCHE: PSYCHOLOGY-HISTORY-ANTHROPOLOGY

by

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A special lecture was organised by the Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi, as a part of their “eminent lecture series”, on Relational Perceptions of the Psyche: Psychology-History-Anthropology which was delivered by Prof. Youval Rotman who is an Associate Professor of History at Tel Aviv University. Prof. Rotman is a distinguished scholar specialising in the Mediterranean world of the Roman and Byzantine eras. His books *Byzantine Slavery and the Mediterranean World* (2009) and *Insanity and Sanctity in Byzantium* (2016) are quite well known. This lecture on the aforementioned topic is a product of his lifetime research work on religion and psychology with newer insights via the help of anthropological research.

The event began with Prof. P. C. Joshi, Head of the Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi, welcoming Prof. Rotman to the department and expressing the honour he has bestowed upon the department by his presence. He then asked Prof. Rotman to take the stage and elaborate on his lecture. Prof. Rotman thanked Prof. Joshi for the warm welcome and also expressed his sincere gratitude towards Dr. Avitoli G. Zhimo, an Assistant Professor of Anthropology in the same department, who had organised this event and was instrumental in bringing Prof. Rotman to the University of Delhi. He stated how privileged he was to have gotten the opportunity of speaking at a department of anthropology which was a new experience for him since he was a historian. Prof. Rotman said that his lecture shall consist of an introduction along with three parts where he shall disseminate his work and his understanding of the psyche and eventually arrive at the conclusion.



Introduction

Prof. Rotman explained to us that the topic for the lecture brings together three disciplines: psychology, history and anthropology in the understanding of the Psyche, i.e. the “soul”. As disciplines, psychology and history share features with the human condition. Yet historically, the relationship between the two fields has been uneasy, marked by a long-standing climate of mutual doubt. Though they are not sister subjects but they are linked with each other.

To understand the relationship between history and psychology, psyche is the essential aspect as it produces human’s behaviour, thought and action. That is why psychoanalysis becomes pivotal to the understanding of the evolution of religion and to the study of religion.

Part I - Historical Changes in the Early Perception of Human Psyche and Early Christian Movement

Prof. Rotman stated that the period of time between the age of Roman Antiquity to the Middle Ages was of great perceptual change about everything socio-culturally, even psyche. In Ancient Greece, physicians discovered the nervous system and the brain and thought that the brain was the seat of the psyche and thus the study of the psyche became important. This gave new meaning to the term psyche. In early Christian era, the term “psyche” was used as an equivalent to “soul”. Galen, a Greek philosopher and physician from the Roman Period circa 2nd century AD, believed that brain was the seat of the rational soul or psyche and that the mind and body were one, a perception which at that time was in contrast with the Stoics, whose beliefs Galen had referred to as unscientific. This psyche in the brain was said to be responsible for reasoning, judgement and sanity.

This gave rise to the question in Prof. Rotman’s mind that how the changes regarding the psyche affect the historic development of the religious movement of early Christianity? And also, how did monotheism help in changing society? Here Prof. Rotman cites a few of the early Christian philosophers and writers. John of Ephesus, a Syriac Christian leader from the 6th century AD wrote about a woman named Mary in Jerusalem. Mary sat in front of a place called the Golgotha for about three years when people from all around the area came to the area and saw her and slowly recognised her as a pious or religious woman. She was said to have reached her spiritual state of being, disconnected from the earthly plane. Mary may be considered to be an early example of a Christian nun. Prof. Rotman thinks that this may have been where psychology comes in. Maybe the belief in a single God, as in Christianity, probably gave the common people a belief of connecting to God closely and in a better way. An early Christian belief was that “the soul is the mechanism of vessel to connect to God personally”. Similarly, Tertullian, an early Christian theologian from Carthage from around the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD spoke elaborately on the soul. He believed that the soul can achieve a lot without the body and the soul can have a separate presence without the body, for example when people sleep. During sleeping, the soul can wander and do things the mortal corpus cannot do essentially granting the soul a supernatural status. This can be corroborated to the feeling of “ecstasy” which etymologically is derived from the Latin “*ekstasis*” meaning outside (*ek*), state of being (*stasis*) which in turn comes from the Ancient Greek “*ekstasis*” meaning outside (*ek*), one’s place/body (*histanai*). And this

soul is what that can connect to God. So to know God is to have a meeting of one's soul with God. On the other hand, Plotinus, the Egyptian philosopher from the 3rd century AD, gives his own interpretation of ecstasy. His perception is different from that of Tertullian. The term "mysticism" can be used for his experience. Plotinus' belief brings out a new understanding of the "psyche", a point where theology, religion and philosophy come together, as Prof. Rotman claims. This not only conceptualises the psyche and its relation with God but also the phenomenon of conversion. The concept of dynamism of the psyche by connecting to God is built on the conception that the psyche is immortal and it comes from God itself. Justin Martyr, another early Roman apologist from the 2nd century AD discussed about his experience, in his *Dialogue with Trypho*, that "Straightway a flame was kindled in my soul; and a love of the prophets, and of those men who are friends of Christ, possessed me; and whilst revolving his words in my mind, I found this philosophy alone to be safe and profitable." Prof. Rotman stated that conversion as a ritual and emotional process can only be the outcome of the psyche of the being in a relationship with God. The belief of the connection with God caused a mental transformation.

In conclusion, Dr. Rotman said that Christianity gained momentum because it bridged the gap between humans and God by building a relation between the soul, i.e. psyche, and God directly. In such a scenario God speaks directly to the soul and this builds an inter-personal relation between the individual and God. God, as someone who seemed far away from the reach of a common person, now seemed closer to that common person. The psyche, here, is open to a relational dimension in which an individual can meet God, interact with God and thus be "transformed". This transformation of the soul is in terms of a social as well as personal recognition of the soul's power and so individual's recognition of having the power of reaching God. This realisation could have had remarkable implications.

Part II - Relational Psychoanalysis: The Perception of the Human Mind as a Relational Entity

Relational psychological understands the human mind in terms of a relational structural model instead of a Freudian driven structural model. The Freudian model is much dependent upon the factors of people's wants and instincts whereas the relational structural model embraces other aspects as well. Stephen Mitchell makes the point that people are not portrayed as a conglomerate of physically based urges, as Freud says, but rather as a being shaped and inevitably being embedded within a matrix of relationships with other persons. Prof. Rotman thinks that desire is experienced always in the context of relatedness and it is this context that defines the meaning of the respective desire to the individual. A person becomes comprehensible only within the tapestry of such relationships- both relationships of the past and present, which means through the people and relationships they had and have now.

Relations and interpersonal theories focus on the psychic capacities that emerge from the interaction between the self and the other. An example was put forward by Donald Winnicott in the 1960s. He said that a baby's perception of self begins from a tender age, right when it is an infant. The mother plays the key role here. This is the most crucial stage of psychological

development and a baby's psychological development is catalysed by the mother and her behaviour towards her baby. This in turn leaves a lifetime of impression on the baby that the baby carries, unknowingly, for the rest of its life. If this relationship between the mother and a baby is hampered, then we may see some sort of abnormality in the baby's psychological state later on. Prof. Rotman says that this person, by whose influence the baby's psychological development begins, may not necessarily be a mother but can be any parent or a grandparent or a caregiver. This space between the mother and the baby is what can be termed as a "potential space", a term coined by Donald Winnicott himself to show the space where the psychic reality (in this case the baby's mind) and the actual or actual reality (in this case the mother) come together and interact. This potential space can be technically considered to be a therapeutic space, a space where the baby feels safe and taken care of. A similar situation arises in a therapy session between a therapist (a caregiver) and a patient (like the baby) who seeks the therapy. Such a patient wants to feel safe and taken care of as well. The development of this shared therapeutic space potentially opens up a bridge allowing the interaction between self (patient) and the other (therapist) to happen. So in a way the therapist not only connects with the person but with their soul as well.

Part III - Anthropology and Relational Language of Animism

Anthropology offers new ways of explaining the psychoanalytic theory and its application to religious studies. The system of belief in spirits can be divided into two different facets: the natural spirits and the community that believes in these spirits. This can be explained by the cultural phenomenon of the Nats present in the religious beliefs of Theravada Buddhism in modern day Myanmar. Prof. Rotman conducted elaborate ethnographic studies on the Nats of Myanmar which he shared with us in order to explain how Animism and Anthropology come in when relating with religion and psychology.



There are thirty-seven the chief spirits or Nats in Burmese folklore. There are other minor folk spirits also. The Burmese agree that all of these thirty-seven Nats were originally humans who later met violent deaths and thus later became a part of the cultural folklore. The ethnographic account that Prof. Rotman spoke about here mainly concerned tree spirits. In the Nat folklore, there are two kinds of spirits associated with trees. YokkhaSoe and BoboGyi. YokkhaSoe is not exactly a tree spirit but rather a tree dwelling spirit and identified as a male. On the other hand, BoboGyi is also male but a true tree spirit which is more often considered to be like a grandfatherly figure. YokkhaSoe mainly lives in a tree in a village or within a household compound. The same YokkhaSoe may be related to some villagers but not everyone, and in a household to some members to a household and not everyone. To each related villager or household member, it may behave differently and these respective villagers can give varied accounts as to the YokkhaSoe's personality. While referring to their own YokkhaSoe, such respective person's refer to him as "my YokkhaSoe" emphasizing on an inter-personal relation with the spirit. The case is similar for a BoboGyi as well.

Prof. Rotman conducted an interview of a Buddhist monk in the KhunTaungGyi village, in the Shwebo district of northern Myanmar. Here initially he talked to a senior Buddhist monk, who was in his eighties, named U. Zantharimi from whom Prof. Rotman sought to know about BoboGyis and the relations they have with the people. Zantharimi explained to him that BoboGyis are an integral part of their religion, i.e. Buddhism. Buddha is the paramount image of God, someone they look up to but they cannot interact with the Buddha or go near him, even spiritually. However this is where the spirits or Nats come in. The BoboGyis interact with people and can help people, i.e. the individual related to that BoboGyi. This is strikingly similar to the early Christian concept of linking to God personally via the soul. Here the connection was being to the powerful spirit of BoboGyi who possessed powers to make the life easier for the individual. Zantharimi further referred Prof. Rotman to meet Mr. U. Kway Aung, a local villager in his sixties who had a BoboGyi living at the end of the village on a huge tamarind tree. Prof. Rotman had a lengthy discussion with Mr. Aung who explained to him that the BoboGyi had appeared to him in a dream when he was young. The BoboGyi had claimed that he was an ancestral grandfather to Mr. Aung and had been looking after Mr. Aung and his sister since when they were children after their parents were killed. It was as if the BoboGyi had adopted them. Mr. Aung had since been in a spiritual and personal relation with his BoboGyi and would pray to his BoboGyi on a regular basis. He claimed that BoboGyi did not ask for anything in return from him. His BoboGyi always solved his problems and cared for him. When Prof. Rotman enquired why he was still poor since he could probably ask for more money from his BoboGyi, Mr. Aung replied that his BoboGyi or any other does not fulfil wants or desires but only needs. Needs that are necessary to sustain life. When Mr. Aung does not have money for food, he will pray to his BoboGyi and somehow he will be able to earn as much as needed for the food. Similarly if he wanted to buy flowers for the local shrine/temple as an offering, he will somehow earn money to buy those flowers. This is quite similar to the Buddhist beliefs of living a very simple life only based on needs and not on wants or desires. Prof. Rotman believes that there is an underlying social framework at the base of the belief of tree spirits. It can also have ecological implications as such trees (and other natural bodies in case of other spirits) will be forbidden from being cut down and thus preserve nature.

Prof. Rotman came across such trees which had tree spirits or tree-dwelling spirits in many areas, even in urban settlements. He was curious to know if these spirits interacted with each other. His curiosity was met with astonished rebuke as to why would the spirits need to interact with each other! For the locals the idea of a Nat interacting with another Nat was quite absurd and it they found it very weird that someone could have such a “preposterous” idea.

Relational psychological dynamics can be enacted internally, culturally and independently within a spiritual configuration as long as a relation between two entities and is a two-way relation, i.e. inter-subjectivity. This depends on the social recognition of the relational setting that the individual i.e. other people recognise and affirm the presence of the tree-spirits in these cases. Here, the potential space lies with the person and the “other”.

Conclusion

A monotheistic religion like Christianity achieved something unprecedented- bringing people close to a single God. Previously existing polytheistic religions of Antiquity in the Mediterranean failed to form that link between humans and Gods and having multiple Gods made it an impossible feat. Also the emergence of the concept of the soul and its incorporation into religious theology helped people gain a new means of achieving God, a remarkable idea a staunchly theistic world. This was probably the main reason behind the success of Christianity and the decline of polytheism. Therefore it can be safely said that the concept of the soul played a key role in the emergence of Christianity. A similar form of this bridging-the-gap phenomenon is seen in case of Nats in Myanmar. People’s relations to their respective BoboGyi or YokkhoSoe highlights that these Burmese people seek to achieve something similar by forming a bond with a powerful supernatural entity.

Thus Prof. Rotman drew close his lecture citing that several scopes of research in the horizon of history-psychology-anthropology. More studies can be done using comparative studies between different religious practices correlating them with psychological studies. This can be used to understand how religion influences psychology. Anthropological inputs can help unlock deeper insights into understanding people.



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