

The Culture of Narcissism Revisited: Transformations of Narcissism in Contemporary Psychospirituality

Ann Gleig¹

Abstract In this paper, I trace the debate over narcissism in deinstitutionalized and heavily psychologized spiritualities. First, I summarize how Sigmund Freud's discussion with Romain Rolland about the "oceanic feeling" established the classical psychoanalytic view of mysticism as a regression to primary narcissism. Second, I review how Heinz Kohut's radical reconceptualization of narcissism has played a seminal role in socio-cultural interpretations of modern psychologized spirituality. Third, I explore how a contemporary psychospiritual tradition, A.H. Almaas's Diamond Approach, details the relationship between narcissism and mysticism. Finally, I reflect on the benefits of a dialogical approach between psychoanalysis and spirituality arguing that the types of integrative psychospirituality envisioned by Romain and developed more fully by Almaas have the potential to facilitate the mature transformation of narcissism.

Keywords Narcissism Psychospirituality Spirituality Mysticism.

Thirty years after Christopher Lasch's (1979) best-selling *The Culture of Narcissism* caustically dismissed the explosion of psychospiritual therapies and self-realization spiritualities as a product and perpetuation of narcissistic personality disorders, the

¹ Ann Gleig

Department of Religious Studies, Rice University, MS – 15, P.O. Box 1892, Houston, TX 77005-1892
Email: apleig@rice.edu

conversation about narcissism in nontraditional spirituality remains a lively one. While unequivocal condemnations such as Lasch's have been, in the main, rejected, many leading proponents of contemporary spirituality have acknowledged and attempted to address the presence of narcissistic strands within the field. Jorge Ferrer's (2002) groundbreaking participatory revisioning of transpersonal psychology is a recent sophisticated example of this.

In this paper, I will trace the ongoing debate over narcissism in nontraditional and heavily psychologized spiritualities through an examination of three key episodes. First, I will summarize how Sigmund Freud's famous discussion with Romain Rolland about the "oceanic feeling" established the traditional psychoanalytic view of unitive mysticism as a regression to the early developmental stage of primary narcissism. Second, I will review how Heinz Kohut's radical reconceptualization of narcissism has been selectively utilized by thinkers such as Lasch to dismiss contemporary psychospirituality and how it has been more faithfully applied by scholars such as Peter Homans to legitimate the same forms of psychologized religiosity. Third, I will explore how a contemporary spiritual tradition, A.H. Almaas's Diamond Approach, has incorporated and gone beyond Kohut to detail the relationship between narcissism and spiritual awakening. Next, I situate the Diamond Approach within a wider conversation about cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary constructions of subjectivity and I reflect on the benefits of a dialogical approach between psychoanalysis and spirituality. Finally, I argue that the types of integrative psychologized spirituality envisioned by Romain, pointed to by Kohut and developed more fully by Almaas, are legitimate forms of contemporary religiosity that have the potential to facilitate the mature transformation of narcissism.

Tracing the conversation between narcissism and spirituality pays multiple dividends. It provides some useful historic and socio-cultural context and insight into contemporary developments and current themes within an increasingly significant form of modern religiosity, that of psychologized spirituality. It also illustrates limitations and strengths of three key positions in the conversation between psychology and religion. As William Parsons and Diane Jonte-Pace (2001) note in their survey of the terrain between religion and psychology the multiple approaches now utilized within this area have replaced its identity as a single field, traditionally known as the “psychology of religion,” with the more inclusive “religion and psychological studies,” within which reside the subsets of “psychology of religion,” and “psychology in dialogue with religion.” What distinguishes the dialogical approach is that it moves beyond using psychology as a method of analysis to interpret religious phenomena to employ psychology as a tool to extend, through conversation, the aims of religion. An additional subset appearing within, although arguably threatening to undermine, the dialogical enterprise is an approach that seeks less to relate psychology to religion than to offer psychology *as* a religion.

Each episode in the conversation between narcissism and mysticism portrays one of these positions: Freud’s dismissal of mysticism as regressive and narcissistic is a classic example of the traditional psychology of religion approach in which psychoanalysis is used as a lens to interpret and reduce religious phenomena. Kohut’s account of the transformation of primary narcissism into the religio-ethical goal of cosmic narcissism is an illustration of the more controversial psychology as religion perspective in which boundaries between psychological and spiritual development become blurred. Similarly, in places, the Diamond Approach also destabilizes the line

between spiritual and psychological growth and Almaas's specific incorporation of psychoanalytic theory to facilitate the process of self-realization illustrates a dialogical approach in which psychology is utilized to further the aims of spirituality.

The emergence of a secular western psychospirituality

Before proceeding, however, it is necessary to unpack the operative terms of mysticism, spirituality and psychospirituality through providing some historical and socio-cultural context. My aim here is to show how mysticism and spirituality have followed a similar historical trajectory producing a distinct Western secular religiosity, what is commonly becoming dubbed as psychospirituality, in which boundaries between psychological and spiritual growth become blurred. This merging occurs at a variety of intersections as a multitude of cultural strands converge, intertwine and trail off. Such interlacing complicates a tracing of the history of psychospirituality, but one can certainly identify significant junctures and key figures. William Parsons (2008) has teased out one influential strand, which he identifies as the "psychologia perennis." This perennial psychology is an unchurched, psychological form of spirituality whose origins can be seen as early as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with the appearance of mysticism as a subjective "experience" divorced from church and tradition. Prior to this, mysticism was understood and defined by the Church Fathers in a strict religious matrix with respect to three interrelated contexts: biblical, liturgical and spiritual. Mystical experience implied the presence of an objective and transcendent reality and could only be accessed through the mediation of church and tradition.

As Michel de Certeau has catalogued, however, a shift occurred during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. During this period, he finds the emergence of mysticism as a substantive (*la mystique*), the understanding of mysticism in terms of a subjective experience divorced from church and tradition and the investigation and interpretation of such experiences from a scientific/psychological perspective. Concurrent with this was the formulation of a new category of universal religious types, namely, the mystics and a new understanding of the sacred or “absolute” as a universal dimension of human nature, a subjective reality obscured beneath a diversity of religions, institutions and doctrines. Such developments allowed for the psychologization of mystical experiences and made “a nonreligious exegesis of religion possible” (Parsons, 2008, 97).

Extending de Certeau’s work, Leigh Eric Schmidt delineates the influence of numerous factors, notably liberal Protestantism, in securing the widespread use of the substantive “mysticism” and in inventing its modern form, understood as “ahistorical, poetic, essential, intuitive, and universal.” Schmidt also argues that modern constructions of spirituality have paved the way for the popular, contemporary conflation of the terms “mysticism” and “spirituality,” the latter following a psychologized trajectory similar to the former. Classic Christian spirituality endures, adhering to its biblical roots in referring to growth in the spirit of God and the development of virtues, ideals and characteristics in striving towards Christian perfection. Alongside it, however, one now finds a plethora of non-institutional, nontraditional contemporary forms of spirituality. These modern forms of spirituality are concerned with personal religious experience, champion self-development, draw liberally from a variety of religious traditions and often position themselves in opposition to traditional religion, which is seen as dogmatic, authoritarian

and oppressive. Traditional Christian spirituality is premised on the belief in a transcendent God who can only be mediated via religious authority and institution. Modern forms of spirituality are highly individualized, decidedly psychological, and promote a universal model of an innate inner divinity (Parsons, 2008, 98).

According to Parsons, the emergence of a universal, sacred inner dimension of the human and a generic understanding of the absolute allowed for the psychologization of mysticism and spirituality. It links the figures of Romain Rolland, William James, Carl Jung and such humanistic and transpersonal psychologists as Abraham Maslow, Roberto Assagioli and Ken Wilber in a common lineage Parsons designates as “the perennial psychology.” While acknowledging real differences in metapsychology and technique among these thinkers, Parsons sees them united by several themes: First, is their championing of the individual as an unchurched site of religiosity. Second, they support the valorization of personal unchurched mystical experiences. Third, they advocate various permutations of perennialism. Fourth, they identify the innate, intuitive, mystical capacities. Fifth, they develop various psycho-mystical therapeutic regimens. Finally, they share a social vision consisting of the emergence of *homo mysticus*. To this list, I would add a strong interest in and creative borrowing from Asian nondual and monistic mystical traditions.

As Parson acknowledges, such characteristics are similar to those identified as definitive of the New Age. Indeed, Wouter Hanegraaff (1989, 482-513) has described one of the major trends of the New Age as “healing and personal growth,” in which psychological development and religious salvation merge to such an unprecedented extent that it is difficult to distinguish between the two. Setting it within the wider context

of the secularization of traditional esotericism as it adapted to the emerging scientific worldview, he argues that one of the defining marks of the New Age is “the psychologization of religion and the sacralization of psychology.” Hanegraaff delineates two major lineages for this occurrence: American metaphysical movements and Carl Gustav Jung. Regarding the first, drawing heavily on a series of works by Robert Fuller (1982; 1986; 1989) that traces the emergence of a distinctively American religious psychology, Hanegraaff divides the American lineage into two separate but related streams. The first, the metaphysical movements, include Mesmerism, Phineas Parkhurst Quimby’s Mind-Cure, the New Thought movement and positive thinking/self-help popular psychology. The second, functionalist psychology, has its roots in the thought of Ralph Waldo Emerson, embraces William James, Carl Rogers, and humanistic psychology and is best represented by James’s classic *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Common to the American lineage are the following themes: an understanding of the unconscious as a site of harmony, reparation and revitalization; the casting of the unconscious as the locus of or a doorway to the sacred; a concept of a spectrum of consciousness in which different layers of consciousness correspond to different psychic capacities, mystical experiences and metaphysical realms; and the development of a pragmatic attitude and scientific techniques to access the resources of the sacralized unconscious.

The second major source for the psychologization of religion is Jung, whom Hanegraaff sees as the link between traditional European esotericism, Naturphilosophie, Romanticism and the New Age. According to Hanegraaff, Jung united science and religion by presenting an esoteric worldview in psychological terms and providing a

scientific alternative to occultism. Not only did Jung psychologize esotericism, he also sacralized psychology by filling it with the contents (e.g. archetypes, the transcendent function, and individuation) of esoteric speculation rather than empirical realities. The result was a theory that allowed people to talk simultaneously about God (the Self) and the psyche. This move collapsed boundaries between religion and psychology, thus anticipating the rise of contemporary psychologized spirituality.

Turning to a more socio cultural perspective, the rise of a western unchurched psychological mysticism can be further illuminated in reference to the emergence of what Max Weber called inner-worldly mysticism. Weber postulated two “ideal types” of radical salvation moments, “mystical contemplation” and “active ascetic conduct.” Each of these movements have a correlative religious experience, socio-economic class and societal impact. To this he added the further distinction of “inner-worldly” and “other-worldly” to produce four possible ideal types of salvation. It is the “inner-worldly mystic,” who cultivates mystical experiences and spiritual development in the midst of everyday society who is relevant here. Ernest Troeltsch has his concerns about the inner-worldly mystic. He is suspicious of such a mystic’s ability to engender community, associating it with the rise of a modern, non-institutional, and individualistic form of spirituality that he dubbed as “the secret religion of the educated classes.” For Troeltsch, this emerging “invisible church” was highly experiential, radically individualistic, tending to the antinomian and notably syncretic, drawing from combination of diverse sources and practices.

Troeltsch’s refinements of inner-worldly mysticism have formed the basis of a number of more recent sociological inquires into new religious movements and current

forms of alternative spirituality (Partridge, 2005). Particularly relevant is Roland Robertson's research (1978). Elaborating on Troeltsch, Robertson argues for the contemporary pervasiveness of inner-worldly mysticism. He contextualizes it within a culture characterized by capitalism, individualism, pluralism, rationalization, a scientific-bureaucratic ethos and the de-contextualization and availability of various introspective techniques geared at the realization of "the self." Parting from Weber and Troeltsch, however, Robertson argues that these new forms of mystical self-cultivation are capable of social engagement in promoting an ethos that expresses the need to work "in the world" while striving for individualization and self-realization (Parsons, 2008).

Freud, Rolland and the "oceanic feeling"

One of the early influential figures in the perennial psychology lineage, as noted earlier, is French author and Nobel Prize winner, Romain Rolland. In his analysis of the Rolland-Freud correspondence, William Parsons convincingly argues that the debate between the two over the nature of the "oceanic feeling"--the unitive mystical experience that Rolland claimed as the source of all religion--is the seminal episode in the psychoanalytic encounter with modern unchurched mysticism (Parsons, 1999). After reading *The Future of an Illusion*, Rolland wrote to Freud, declaring that while he completely agreed with his interpretation of the "common man's" religion as being rooted in an infantile need for protection, Freud had neglected the true source of religion. The latter was a subjective experience that Rolland described as "oceanic," an inner realization of mystical unity that was independent of all dogmas and creeds yet had been utilized and co-opted by the various religious traditions. Rolland requested Freud's help to scientifically prove the

existence of this innate and universal mystical layer of the psyche in order that it might be cultivated and form the basis of a “mystical psychoanalysis”: an integration of healing traditions East and West in service of the renewal of western society.

Freud, however, was to dash his hopes, rejecting both Rolland’s understanding of the oceanic feeling and its relationship to religion. His rebuttal, delivered in *Civilization and its Discontents*, begins with an assurance that a purely developmental interpretation of the oceanic feeling is available if one focuses on its central ideation content, namely, “the indissoluble bond of being one with the external world as a whole.” Freud explains this unitive experience with his theory of the early pre-Oedipal stage of development: a state of primary narcissism in which boundaries between self and other are undifferentiated. According to Freud, the infant at the breast does not discriminate her or his ego as a separate entity but rather experiences a state of merger with the external world and a corresponding grandiose omnipotence. This early-ego awareness of unity persists alongside the adult ego which is merely a “shrunken-residue” of the infant ego. Far from revealing an innate religious feature of the psyche, therefore, the oceanic feeling signaled a regression to an early developmental stage. As regards its relationship to religion, Freud declared that the oceanic feeling becomes connected to the latter because it appealed to the religious desire for immortality and omnipotence. Hence, although it was not the source of institutionalized religion it was indeed co-opted by the latter to respond to universal existential needs (Parsons, 1999, 36-41).

Freud’s interpretation of the oceanic feeling established the classic reductive psychoanalytic perspective of mysticism as narcissistic, regressive and pathological as illustrated by early studies such as Theodore Schroeder’s (1922) *Prenatal Psychisms and*

Mystical Pantheism and the more recent work of Jeffrey Masson (1980). The reduction of spirituality to the developmental stage of primary narcissism is also found in the work of the Norwegian brothers Harald and Kristian Schjelderup (1932). They identify three main types of religious experience: father religion, mother religion and self-religion. Each of these forms of religiosity corresponds to a different stage of childhood development. Self-religion, such as Zen Buddhism and yoga, is marked by a fantasy of self-deification that is a result of narcissistic withdrawal of libido from external objects and a regression to infantile self-grandiosity. A similar argument is employed in M.D. Faber's (1996) recent psychoanalytic readings of the New Age movement. He argues that New Age spirituality is a regression to primary narcissism in which the adult is returned to an infantile state of omnipotence, magical wish fulfillment and merger with the mother.

Interpretations of mysticism and spirituality that utilize Freud's theory of narcissism, therefore, are unremittingly negative, focusing on its regressive and defensive nature. However, as I will now discuss, Heinz Kohut's (1971, 1977) highly influential psychoanalytic revisioning of narcissism has opened up a much more positive understanding of the relationship between narcissism and spirituality.

The hopes and hazards of narcissism: Kohut, Lasch and Homans

Heinz Kohut's self psychology with its radical reconceptualization of narcissism has played a seminal role in psychoanalytic and socio-cultural interpretations of modern unchurched psychologized spirituality. In this section, I review how Kohut's major rethinking of narcissism has been selectively utilized by Christopher Lasch to dismiss

contemporary psychospirituality and how it has been more faithfully applied by Peter Homans to legitimate the same forms of psychologized religiosity.

In his influential *The Culture of Narcissism*, Lasch (1979) draws on Kohut to claim that the emergence of the self-realization therapies were a product and perpetuation of the narcissistic personality type. Lasch laments that the quest for self-realization promoted by the new psychospiritual therapies had encouraged the indulgent self-preoccupation of what Tom Wolfe satirized as the “me generation” and created a crisis in personal and social relationships. Moreover, in addition to being narcissistic in the self-absorbed “navel-gazing” colloquial sense, Lasch selectively utilized Kohut to argue that psychologized spirituality reflects and exacerbates an actual clinical disorder, a narcissistic personality structure that because of recent socio-cultural changes had become the predominant psychopathology of contemporary life. Lasch argues that the deification of the self within psychologized religiosity appeals to and feeds narcissistic grandiosity. Accusing the therapies of contributing to a degenerative and amoral society, he calls for the creation of new communities of competence which fostered civil commitment and draw out the moral energies of the Protestant work ethic. In a later article, Lasch extends the same narcissistic charge to the forms of psychologized spirituality found within the New Age.

The problem with Lasch’s critique, however, is that it misrepresents both Kohut’s treatment of narcissism and his understanding of the relationship between narcissism and mysticism. As Peter Homans (1979) points out, for Kohut narcissism was not in itself a pathological condition but rather a normal developmental stage which had the potential to transform into a healthy valuing of the self and empathy for the other. Kohut (1971;

1977) argued that the pejorative Freudian evaluation of narcissism that cast it in an inverse relationship to object love reflected an intrusion of western altruistic cultural values into psychoanalysis. Starting from Freud's stage of primary narcissism, he effected a highly influential revisioning in psychoanalytical theory, by claiming that narcissism followed its own developmental line in which the two primary archaic configurations of narcissism-the grandiose self and the idealized parent imago-had the potential to transform respectively into a cohesive sense of self with healthy self-esteem and a set of mature goals, values and ideals. Fundamental to this transformation was the ability of the primary caretakers to act as selfobjects. Kohut coined the term selfobject to describe how an infant's initial experience of the other is not as a separate object but as part of oneself. Parents are the earliest selfobjects and they perform crucial psychological functions that the child's own psychic structure will later transmute into internal structures. However, if caretakers fail to respond empathetically to the child's experience, or if the child is subject to premature or traumatic separation, the integration of archaic narcissism is disturbed and the repressed strands emerge unresolved in later life in a clinical condition designated as the narcissistic personality disorder. This is characterized by states of emptiness and despair, feelings of unreality, excessive self-consciousness, oscillation between experiences of inferiority and grandiosity, an intense desire to merge with an idealized other, uncontrollable rage and an absence of empathy. It is this narcissistic personality disorder caused by the repression of healthy narcissistic needs that Lasch's analysis exclusively focuses on.

Unlike Freud, however, Kohut believed that narcissistic disturbances could be rectified through the establishment of empathetic communication in the analytic

relationship which enabled the working through of early traumatic failures and a more conscious and healthier negotiation of legitimate narcissistic needs. In addition to the analytic transformation of narcissism, Kohut claimed that a mature ego had the capacity to tame and employ narcissistic cathexes for its highest developmental aims, namely, creativity, empathy, contemplation of one's own impermanence, a sense of humor and wisdom.

Moreover, Kohut saw mysticism as engaging the developmental line of narcissism and affecting a transformation of the narcissistic elements of one's personality into the higher religio-ethical goal of what he termed, "cosmic narcissism." This is the transformation of narcissism into a type of mature, state-like mysticism in which the subject participates in a "supraindividual and timeless existence." Although rooted in the mother-child symbiosis, this differs from the transient oceanic feeling of unitive mysticism which Kohut reads as the preservation of the early mother-child unity. Neither transient nor unitive, cosmic narcissism is an ethical and existential developmental achievement of an autonomous ego. It signals the gradual decathexis of the individual self and the shift to participation in, and constant communion with, a contentless and supraordinate Self. Furthermore, Kohut's hope, like Rolland before him, was that the transformation of narcissism into a mature, personal and contentless mysticism--seen, he suggested, in such figures as Dag Hammarskjöld the former secretary-general of the U. N.--would herald the arising of a new unchurched lineage of rational mysticism which would replace traditional religions and rejuvenate the West (Parsons 1989, 163-164).

The issue, therefore, is not narcissism per se but whether narcissistic needs are repressed and acted out, or positively transformed. Reading Kohut more faithfully, Peter

Homans (1979) has claimed that unchurched psychologized spirituality, such as that of Carl Jung, displays an authentic engagement with narcissism. Homans argues that due to secularization traditional religion lost its ability to organize personal and social life and this has resulted in the emergence of a diffuse and heightened form of self-consciousness in which legitimate narcissistic needs are now satisfied primarily in the context of personal and psychological experience. Hence, while psychologized spirituality, with its themes of unity, wholeness, self-actualization and individuation, is indeed reflective of the contemporary emergence of narcissistic disorders it is also an authentic attempt to heal them and expresses a desire for a more complete and satisfying subjectivity. Other scholars have followed Homans in reclaiming Kohut as a resource to defend nontraditional psychospirituality. Robert Fuller (1989), for example, utilizes Kohut's concept of selfobject to legitimate New Age healing traditions by arguing that healers act as mature selfobjects that fulfill clients' healthy narcissistic needs.

Transformations of narcissism in A.H. Almaas's Diamond Approach

While the recovery of Kohut to validate psychologized spirituality is important, many proponents of psychospirituality, such as leading transpersonalist theorist, Jorge Ferrer, have recognized that certain accusations of narcissism are legitimate and have embarked on self-critiques to correct the elements that threaten its status as an authentic form of religiosity. Ferrer (2002) has recently deconstructed the modernist values at the core of transpersonal psychology, conceding that its humanistic foundations have led to an over-emphasis on the intrinsic ontological and epistemological value of the individual. He exposes the transpersonal project as being based upon an intra-subjective framework,

geared to a subject-object model of cognition and moored in a Cartesian dualism. Having the Cartesian ego as its subject reduces potentially transformative spiritual phenomena to individual experiences and produces “spiritual narcissism,” the misuse of spiritual practices, energies, or experiences to bolster self-centered ways of being” (p.35). Ferrer sees all manifestations of narcissism as having their roots in a subtle Cartesianism which sets subject against object and precludes any possibility of genuine relationality.

I propose that a particularly useful response from the psychospiritual field comes from A.H. Almaas’s Diamond Approach. While Kohut is to be applauded for his acknowledgement of the potentially transformative relationship between mysticism and narcissism and its healing effects on the individual and society, his concept of mysticism is generic, his formulations on cosmic narcissism remained cursory and his theory on the relationship between mysticism and narcissism lacks conceptual sophistication. (Parsons 1999, 165) I argue that a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between the two is offered by Almaas (2001) who incorporates yet goes beyond Kohut’s understanding of narcissism.

Before examining Almaas’s approach, a few words on the background and metaphysics of the Diamond Approach are necessary. A.H. Almaas is the pen name of A. Hameed Ali who founded the Ridhwan School, in 1977, in Boulder, Colorado, and one in California in 1978, in order to disseminate a teaching manifesting through him, named as the Diamond Approach. The Diamond Approach draws considerably on Asian and Western mystical traditions, particularly Sufism, the Gurdjieff work and Tibetan Buddhism, and extensively utilizes classic and contemporary psychoanalytic theory. Ali

stresses, however, that it is not a theoretical integration of pre-existing systems but rather a new teaching primarily experientially based.

Metaphysically, the Diamond Approach describes ultimate reality, named as “Being” or “true nature” as having both an unmanifest and manifest aspect. From the unmanifest, an undifferentiated nondual impersonal absolute, unfold a number of differentiated dimensions. These include the “essential aspects,” differentiated perfections or qualities of true nature such as truth, clarity, intelligence, will, strength, love, compassion and value. Correspondingly, it promotes a dual telos: *self-realization*, the recognition of the unmanifest as the ultimate nature of reality and self and *self-development*, the personal individual embodiment of true nature in its differentiated aspects.

Presenting the Diamond Approach as a metapsychology which sets psychological experience within a phenomenology of Being, Almaas claims it exceeds both psychoanalysis in elucidating and treating the fundamental roots of narcissism and traditional spirituality in detailing a new psychologically sophisticated method of attaining self realization. In *The Point of Existence*, he extensively utilizes psychoanalytic theory to illuminate how narcissistic issues are related to and activated during the process of self-realization.

According to Almaas, all manifestations of narcissism including clinical or pathological narcissism originate in, and are exaggerations of, a condition of “fundamental narcissism,” the estrangement of the self from its ontological ground. Whereas Freud saw the experience of wholeness and perfection in primary narcissism as delusional, Almaas claims this as an authentic state of “primary self-realization” in which

the infant is nondually immersed in its essential nature. Due to both natural developmental factors and environmental failures, however, there is a rupture in identity: the infant begins to identify with self-representations derived from the retained impressions from early object relations and becomes progressively alienated from true nature. Tracing this process, Almaas utilizes ego psychology, object-relations and, particularly, self-psychology, to delineate four major forms of narcissism: oral, central, oedipal, and individuation, each of which corresponds to a particular developmental stage and arises due to the loss of the specific essential aspect associated with that stage.

Being a radical shift in subjectivity, the process of self-realization inevitably activates and exacerbates each form of narcissism. However, Almaas claims that the traditional mystical approach--seen, for example, in Dzogchen Buddhism--of transcending self-representations through establishing non-conceptual awareness fails to appreciate the tenacity of narcissism and is rarely able to affect its lasting transformation. He argues that monistic and nondual mystical experiences do not in and of themselves fully dissolve ego structures or resolve connected psychodynamic issues. The unconscious underpinnings of the ego structures can only be dismantled by bringing them to conscious awareness and working through their content. Citing the now well-documented guru-scandals, the series of sexual and financial scandals that rocked a number of North American Asian spiritual communities in the 1980's, as clear evidence that one may be deeply spirituality realized but psychologically unhealthy, Almaas claims that whilst neuroses have traditionally been attended to through moral purification, contemporary psychological understanding shows that ethical practice is unable to effectively deal with deep-seated neurosis or structural weaknesses in the ego.

This demonstrates, therefore, the importance of incorporating contemporary psychological developmental knowledge into spirituality. As such, the Diamond Approach works directly with narcissistic disturbances engaged through a sustained and detailed exploration of one's personal psychodynamic history. Central to this process is the incorporation, theoretically and experientially, of Kohut's revisioning of narcissism. This includes the tackling of the narcissistic transferences particularly the idealizing and mirroring transferences that function to shore up self-identity. These transferences are worked with both in terms of students' individual psychodynamic histories and in regards to current relationships between students, and students and teachers.

Whereas, though, Kohut's goal was the replacement of archaic forms of object relations with more mature ones and the exchange of distorted self-images with realistic ones, the Diamond work aims at the dissolution of all psychic structures. This is because it views all conventional subjectivity, being based in mediated self-representations rather than the immediacy of essential nature, as inherently unstable and narcissistic. Hence, while acknowledging varying degrees of narcissistic infliction, Almaas affects a radical reversal of the traditional Freudian perspective by claiming that narcissism can only be fully resolved when all aspects of Being are recovered and nondually realized.

Integrating East and West: the benefits of a dialogical approach

Almaas's ontological diagnosis of narcissism while far exceeding psychoanalytic concepts resonates with a recent conversation between Buddhism and psychoanalysis. This conversation, occurring mainly although not exclusively between thinkers who are both practicing psychoanalysts and Buddhists, has explored points of contact and tension

between constructions of subjectivity within the two discourses. As Jeffrey Rubin (1996) points out, Buddhism conceives of narcissism as ultimately rooted in the mistaken perception of the self as a separate and independent entity. He notes Mark Epstein's claim that Buddhist meditation "is a means of indefatigably exposing this narcissism, of highlighting every permutation of the self-experience so that no aspect remains available for narcissistic recruitment" (p.179). Epstein's optimism is tempered, however, by studies that have raised concerns about the possible limitations and dangers for western students unreflectively adopting spiritual practices that were developed in a premodern Asian culture. Jack Engler (2003), for example, has maturely reflects on the misuse of Buddhist practice by westerners seeking to circumvent developmental issues. Comparing Theravadin Buddhism with object relations theory, Engler argues that Buddhist practice presupposes a stable ego that has reached a certain level of personality organization in which object relations are sufficiently developed and a cohesive and integrated sense of self is complete (1993, pp.118). While theoretically untangling ontological and psychological concepts of self in the Buddhist/psychoanalytic encounter, he warns that those westerners suffering from a weak and fragile sense of self risk psychological injury in dismantling the ontological self through Buddhist meditation.

Moreover, as this "weak and fragile sense of self" is a symptom of narcissism, a personality structure that is prevalent in contemporary times, it would seem unwise to injudiciously promote Buddhist practices in service of transforming narcissism risking as they do inflicting further psychic fragmentation. One of the limitations of traditional Buddhism is that it does not address the modern psychological subject, whose appearance was influentially documented by Philip Rieff, or the understanding of the self as personal

narrative that is so important in the modern West. Anne Klein (1995) recognizes that Buddhism's lack of interest in the unique individual and the corresponding absence of a significant space for personal story—exacerbated by Asian and Western cultural differences in constructions of selfhood—is a cause of significant tension between Western and traditional Buddhist sensibilities. This is further supported by the number of testimonies of contemporary western practitioners and teachers of Asian traditions still struggling with psychodynamic issues despite extensive spiritual practice and the reports of Asian teachers, such as the current Dalai Lama, who confess to being bewildered at the psychological problems they encounter in their western students (Engler, 2003, pp. 45). The same shortcoming is also more troublingly revealed, as discussed above, in the guru scandals.

All of this suggests that western practitioners might benefit more from a spiritual approach that directly addresses the personal psychological self and is able to mitigate rather than exacerbate its narcissistic strands. This makes Almaas's dialogical approach particularly appealing because its nuanced incorporation of psychoanalytic theory recognizes and works with the complex interplay between psychological and ontological manifestations of narcissism.

Moreover, this illuminates the wider benefits of a dialogical approach between psychology and spirituality. Attempts by contemporary western psychospiritual traditions to integrate psychological discourse with Asian impersonal mysticisms have been attacked from a number of quarters. For example, Jeremy Carrette and Richard King (2005) argue that the new psychospiritual traditions are to be rejected as the corruption of Asian religious ideals by western individualistic and psychological values. According to

Carrette and King, the slow assimilation of the religious into the psychological has distilled the social and political aspects of religion to form a privatized religion amenable to the demands of neoliberal ideology. They claim that psychologized spirituality privatizes and commodifies Asian wisdom traditions, reducing them to techniques aimed solely at the production of individual enlightenment. Asian religious perspectives are repackaged to suit and enhance the modern psychological subject. Rather than pursuing the transcendence of the ego, they reify it in a form of divine individualism. Carrette and King locate this psychological dilution within the long and shameful history of the European colonialist appropriation of Asian culture (2005, pp. 54-122).

In bemoaning the invasion of western psychology within Asian religions, Carrette and King join a long chorus of dissent at what is claimed as the corruption of authentic Asian religious practice by western Romantic, humanistic and individualistic values (Prothero, 1996 & Versluis 1993). Similarly, the new western psychospiritual traditions that draw liberally on Asian mystical traditions have been consistently accused of narcissism, individualism and superficial appropriation (Vitz, 1977; Bellah et al, 1985). It is undisputable that modern western concerns with the individual personal self have been a constant feature of the western encounter with and appropriation of Asian mysticisms. However, while having clear historic precedents, contemporary attempts to incorporate the personal self differ from their predecessors. To begin with, the wider dialogical context between western psychology and Asian religions has markedly improved. Early encounters were hindered by limited access to the traditions, poor and incomplete translations of Asian religious texts, naïve perennialism, liberal protestant agendas and orientalism. As William Parsons notes, however, from 1970 to the present, there have

been a number of impactful socio-cultural shifts and intellectual developments. These include the continuing waves of Asian immigration, unprecedented access to a plurality of Asian religious communities and an increased awareness of cultural differences and their impact on healing enterprises. Alongside this is the growth of departments of religious and comparative studies, significant improvements in translations and increased scholarly specialization (2001 pp.229-253).

Most significant, perhaps, is that over the last forty years many westerners have been participating not just as serious students but as teachers across the Asian traditions. Parsons labels them “cultural insiders.” They constitute a new cadre of participants, a significant number of whom are familiar personally and professionally with depth psychology and have first-hand experiential knowledge of the different maps of subjectivity the Asian traditions have produced. I view one of the results of this western immersion in the Asian traditions as a maturing of early idealistic and romantic approaches to Asian mysticism. The increasing plethora of contemporary narratives to which such social actors give voice share several related themes (Kornfield, 2000; Tarrant, 1998; Welwood, 2002; Preece, 2006). First, they articulate a more pragmatic evaluation of the scope of Asian contemplative practice. Central to this evaluation is their acknowledgement that psychodynamic issues are not necessarily addressed and, in fact, might even be accentuated, by Asian practices. That acknowledgement comes with the coining of a new term “spiritual bypassing” to denote how spiritual experiences or philosophy are misused to circumvent personal developmental issues. Second, such narratives evince more nuanced understanding of how cultural differences, particularly in subjectivity, affect practice. Third, they recognize a common need for western

practitioners to supplement spiritual work with psychotherapy. Finally, they call for a mature, integrative, psychologically-sophisticated and embodied approach to spirituality.

Granted, there are traditions within the encounter between western depth psychology and Asian religions that problematically reduce the latter to psychological narratives (Clarke, 1995). The alternative, more dialogical traditions that I am highlighting here, however, attempt rather to integrate psychological and spiritual perspectives within an overarching spiritual framework. Moreover, given the particular socio-historical construction and concerns of western contemporary subjectivities, addressing both psychological and ontological dimensions of self is for many a necessary move.

Contemporary psychospirituality: narcissism accentuated or alleviated?

While the tackling of narcissism in the Diamond Approach offers a more optimistic diagnosis of contemporary psychospirituality than Lasch's mistrustful lament, the cultural emergence of narcissism calls for attention. In his influential *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, Philip Rieff (1966) traced the socio-historic shift from religious "positive communities" governed by a cultural symbolic which encouraged control and restraint of behavior and an ethic which favored the group over the individual, to therapeutically-orientated "negative communities" which promote a direct engagement with the unconscious and foster a therapeutic mode of self-awareness. This produces a new personality type, what Rieff calls "psychological man." Correlating psychological man with the emergence of narcissism, Homans claims that the loss of power by traditional Christianity to organize personal and social life has resulted in the emergence of a diffuse

and heightened form of self-consciousness in which legitimate narcissistic needs are now satisfied primarily in the context of personal, private, and psychological experience. He links this cultural shift to the therapeutic to Peter Berger's concept of "demodernization" which rejects modernity's rationalistic individualism and the conservative community of the past in favor of the recovery of an authentic self that exists beyond institutions and roles. Central to this process are the themes of idealization, self-esteem and grandiosity all of which mark it as a struggle with narcissism. For Homans, as we have seen, the problem with critiques such as Lasch is that they focus only on the hazards of narcissism and ignore its hopes. While different strands of deinstitutionalized psychospirituality need to be considered separately, I argue that, even bracketing Almaas's ontological claims, the commitment shown by the Diamond Approach in its detailed tracking and tackling of the multifarious narcissistic manifestations marks it as a mature and admirable attempt at its transformation.

Psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar has observed that not only does the socio-cultural regulation of developmental processes and family configurations produce certain personality types and forms of neurosis it also produces the necessary techniques to heal them. Following Kakar, I conclude that while the types of integrative psychologized spirituality envisioned by Romain and developed more fully by Almaas are indeed reflective of the contemporary emergence of narcissism, they do not accentuate but rather alleviate narcissistic disorders. Furthermore, given the western cultural shift to the therapeutic and the limitations of traditional religion to address narcissistic needs, it appears that for many an authentic transformation of narcissism not only legitimates but also necessitates the establishment of such forms of psychospirituality.

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