

## Review: "Psyche and the Sacred" by Lionel Corbett

Contributed by Sean Fitzpatrick  
Friday, 01 February 2008

Can we talk about spirituality without using religious language? In his fine book *Psyche and the Sacred: Spirituality beyond Religion*, psychologist and scholar Lionel Corbett argues that, indeed, we should understand the spiritual as not only separate from religion, but irreducible and enduring.

Corbett, L. *Psyche and the Sacred: Spirituality beyond Religion*. (New Orleans: Spring Journal Books, 2007)

You can click [here](#) to purchase this title.

Can we talk about spirituality without using religious language? Does our experience of our spirituality transcend the religious forms we have used to describe and make sense of it? In his fine book *Psyche and the Sacred: Spirituality beyond Religion*, psychologist and scholar Lionel Corbett argues that, indeed, we should understand the spiritual as not only separate from religion, but irreducible and enduring.

The unease with which psychology has historically regarded religion and the spiritual is both understandable and deeply problematic. Organized religion can be seen as little more than an anxiety-management system for the individual, in which we trade our authority and freedom for an illusory sense of security and certitude. Freud famously critiqued this tendency in *The Future of an Illusion*, where he called religion "the universal obsessional neurosis of humanity."<sup>1</sup> We find ourselves forever children under the protection and control of a divine parent.

But religions deal with unavoidable questions of ultimate meaning that our psychologies fail to address adequately, or avoid entirely. And our private experiences often challenge the assumptions of modern psychology. The religions have provided a context for what the American Psychological Association awkwardly refers to as "anomalous experiences"<sup>2</sup> — the visions, precognitive events, lucid dreams, out-of-body experiences, and other phenomena that cannot find a place in our psychological models. Attempts to explain these phenomena are typically inadequate at best and condescendingly reductionistic at worst.

In contrast to most contemporary theories, Corbett attempts to build a bridge between the metaphors of psychology and those of religion and spirituality. As he admits frankly in its opening pages, the book comes out of his own sense of alienation from the religion of his childhood, an experience he shares with many of us. The answer, for Corbett, lies not in a revitalized tradition but rather in creating a new spiritual language that does not depend on external authority — a language that borrows significantly from depth psychology but is also separate and necessarily provisional.

Over the course of the book, his description of spirituality emerges as a critique of organized religion: "Established religions try to maintain stability and seek to impose it by maintaining a closed system of rituals, whereas true spirituality thrives on instability." By their nature, traditional religions locate the ultimate source of spiritual authority within their own precincts. They maintain their boundaries by fostering fear and creating dependency among their members — because they provide the only answer to that fear. The traditions may either force us to translate personal experiences of

the sacred into a fixed set of terms and forms, or they reject such experiences out of hand.

And it is spiritual experience — not the teachings of a minister or the guidance of a religious text — that speaks with the greatest authority for the individual. Corbett borrows from Jung and Rudolph Otto the notion of the numinous, the “unique feeling of the sacred” that captures us because “it stimulates a kind of spiritual desire within us, a longing for the holy and the promise of love and peace that it holds out.” The numinous appears for us unexpectedly and often outside a religious context — in dreams, creative activity, thresholds (such as the birth of a child), contemplative moments, journeys into the wilderness. Apart from the emotional and physiological effects of numinous experience, it “allows us to discover our authentic spirituality by giving us a personal symbol of the sacred, in contrast to collective symbols such as the cross.”<sup>3</sup>

Of course we must question the source of such an experience. Did we imagine it? Is it simply the product of our intense desire for it? The language of psychopathology may rear its head as well — are these experiences signs of psychosis? Corbett describes the numinosum as “whatever it is that produces the numinous experience,” remaining agnostic as to its ultimate origins. If we feel we have encountered the transcendent, we cannot actually prove it, or even assert it outside of our personal context. The effects of the experience — its transformative power in our lives, and our subjective feeling that it has arisen from outside of us — are the only evidence we have. In a footnote, Corbett acknowledges directly that “in the end it is impossible to prove that there is a spiritual dimension to experience.”

And yet, the nature of numinous experience leads us to the strong conviction that we have encountered something wholly Other. Religions grow out of these experiences, as the energy overflows the boundaries of the individual and affects the wider community. When religions function in psychologically beneficial ways, they provide a way for us to communicate our experiences in a common language, and they help us contain and direct the unknown energies emerging within us. Corbett acknowledges this value in his discussion of ritual:

Following a ritual procedure ensures that the archetype will enter consciousness in a contained manner, without overwhelming it. Ritual then acts as a kind of valve that regulates how much of the unconscious is allowed to enter consciousness. This regulation is necessary for the protection for the ego, which might otherwise feel swept away by the power of the unconscious.

But Corbett is wary of the ways that rituals can become rote, and religions are human inventions that, over time, lose their capacity to channel the flow of energy. The spirit moves elsewhere. And we are left with the accrued cultural and linguistic structures, which continue to serve a complex range of political, economic, and social purposes — without performing what to Corbett is their primary function, mediating the flow of unconscious energy.

Using the language of conscious and unconscious, ego and Self, gives us the feeling of moving onto more firmly empirical ground. Loosed from the obligations to fit experience into established containers and to defend the truth claims of one’s tradition, one can begin to deal with the experiences as they appear. Corbett argues that depth psychology has particular value in exploring the reality of evil. He includes a vivid reading of the Book of Job that demonstrates the power of depth psychology to address traditional religious ideas and to plumb the mystery of human suffering. The language of depth psychology, however, presents its own traps and claims of authority. Corbett works to keep these in his awareness. He does encounter trouble at times, with occasional lapses into jargon and sketchily defined neologisms (“Witness Consciousness,” “That Which Is”). Indeed, language itself is the ultimate trap; the symbols of spirituality function by directing our attention to that which cannot be captured in words, but we consistently fail to leave their seductive security for the wilderness beyond.

Corbett takes a seemingly contradictory position regarding spiritual practice. He suggests that the effects of spiritual practice fade with time, as "no method created by the ego and practiced by an ego can take us to the Reality that is beyond the ego." And yet he approvingly refers to the insights of "the mystics" of various traditions, and he recommends a practice of his own — a simple coming to awareness, which he feels falls outside the ego's control and does not serve the ego's tendency to inflation:

If we constantly return to the felt sense within the body, we stay aware, and we are less likely to be gripped by a complex. This practice is made easier if we learn to breathe into the uncomfortable body sensations that accompany painful emotions.

But do we not learn this practice through the agency of the ego? Perhaps the ego learns the value of letting go of its unfulfillable quest for hegemony. Or perhaps something akin to grace is involved.

Corbett writes for a general audience without watering down or oversimplifying the complex Jungian understanding of the spiritual. But his is not simply or uncritically Jungian, incorporating Freud and a range of other voices, including William James and Jiddu Krishnamurti. Krishnamurti is a fascinating choice for Corbett to cite — in a way, he symbolizes the paradoxical relationship to authority that Corbett's text implies. Identified in childhood as the next great World Teacher by the Theosophists, as a young man Krishnamurti dissolved the international religious organization that had been painstakingly built for him, proclaiming that "truth is a pathless land." He spent his remaining days teaching throughout the world, and the more he implored his audiences to abandon external religious authorities and depend on themselves, the greater his influence as an authority grew.

If we take Krishnamurti seriously, texts such as Corbett's can themselves be seductive and dangerous — we can just as easily fall under the spell of "Self" and "the numinous" as we do "God." Corbett is aware of this; in addition to Krishnamurti, he cites John Dourley's insight that Jungian models of the religious are themselves myths that are in the process of replacing the mythologies from which they seek to collect meaning.

What Corbett seems to be drawing us toward is a profound stillness, an awareness of a deeper reality that transcends language. We must find our own way to that stillness, and Psyche and the Sacred suggests that, at this historical moment, depth psychology has a singular capacity to serve us in our search — to awaken us to the infinite, the inexpressible, within each of us.

Sean Fitzpatrick, MA, is director of community services for The Jung Center of Houston and editor of The Jung Page. He can be contacted at [sfitz@cgjungpage.org](mailto:sfitz@cgjungpage.org).

1. Freud, S. The Future of an Illusion. p. 55

2. For more reading, see *The Varieties of Anomalous Experience: Examining the Scientific Evidence* (2004), ed. by Etzel Cardena, Steven Jay Lynn, and Stanley C. Krippner.

3. Original emphasis.