

THE CHRISTIAN PARAPSYCHOLOGIST

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CP 15:1 [March 2002]

Editorial : *Keeping religion out of parapsychology*

Keep religion out of parapsychology. That is the fervent plea of Joseph Felser of the City University of New York. He makes it in a 21-page extended review essay on a book by Carl Becker about death and the afterlife in Buddhism, which appears in Volume 93, No. 3 of the *Journal* of the American Society for Psychical Research (dated July 1999, but not released until November 2001).

There are plenty of Buddhist data for parapsychologists to get their teeth into, but as soon as the data become sullied by metaphysical implications, Felser smells trouble. It is not unknown for believers to deny the facts of personal experience if they contradict their religious beliefs. For example, Felser quotes the case of a woman who, in her near-death experience, found herself leaving her body through the top of her head. Not so, said her Buddhist hosts. She was mistaken. Only saints and gurus go that way; the rest of us leave through the feet. It seems that even some Buddhists can be dogmatic fundamentalists.

What is true of Buddhism can be even more true of Christianity. All our interpretative schemes are value-laden, and Felser agrees with Michael Grosso that 'our ideas of what is possible shape - and thus limit - the scope of our empirical inquiries. In all old-fashioned systems of religious ideas, certain questions never even get asked because they tremble on the verge of heresy.'

But what irks Felser even more than dogmatic blindness to the facts of experience are the Buddhist and Christian doctrines of the material world and the human body. 'The dominant religious traditions of both West and East alike are indelibly stained by the darker hues of world rejection.' Nature, and the human body, are either rejected by Christians with disdain or dismissed by Buddhists as illusory. Bodiliness is thought of as inherently wrong, sinful, or unspiritual. That being so, we cannot properly develop theories which help us understand our psychic experience, because they are essentially a part of our being embodied in a material world - and what would be the point of that, if this world is an illusion or our enjoyment of it were sinful?

David Bohm's ideas of the implicate and explicate orders are better able to deal with the phenomena of a world in which 'Mind grows out of matter. And matter contains the essence of mind'. We must be willing to raise fundamental questions, even if they are in danger of imperilling our basic assumptions; but if we are wedded to any particular religion, this will be forbidden to us. In his final paragraph, Felser urges us to 'keep parapsychology free of the taint of all traditional religious systems'.

Where does all that leave Christian parapsychology? We would want to agree with a great deal of Felser's case, and are grateful to him for raising important issues which demand our attention.

The first thing to say is that there is good religion and bad religion, and his knife is - rightly - in the latter. What is sad is to see the whole of religion damned for the faults of one section of religious thought and practice. Too much religious asceticism, and too much Christian teaching, has been world-denying. That is a fault of which it needs to be purged. It is not necessary to denigrate bodily existence in order to be truly spiritual.

And a proper theology needs to listen humbly to *all* empirical evidence. We cannot prescribe what scientists are going to discover, or proscribe any of their discoveries which seem to us to be ungenial to our theological systems. Science must be free to explore truth along any avenue, and its discoveries need to be honoured by anyone who seeks to understand the God who made the world as it is and not as we would have imagined it to be.

Having said which, we must equally recognise that, though experience is sacred, interpretation is free. The number of possible theoretical frameworks within which any body of parapsychological data can be explained is bewildering. It is quite possible to interpret psychic experience within a purely materialistic framework, or within a humanistic one, or even a religious one. To be a Christian parapsychologist is not a contradiction in terms.

Interpretation is free, but, of course, some interpretations of psychic data seem unlikely to all except the people who propound them. Look at the 'super-ESP' theory of mediumistic communications for an example. The point, however, is that it is not an illogical theory; only one that is highly unlikely to prove satisfactory in the long run. Our aim as rational thinkers - whether we be theologians or parapsychologists or both - is to arrive at a way of thinking about the whole world and the phenomena within it which denies no empirical observations, and makes the maximum amount of sense with the minimum of unexamined assumptions.

What then should be the relationship between parapsychology and religion? Parapsychology needs to examine the data thrown up by religious experience, and a religion which neglects the data of parapsychology is an incomplete religion. But religion cannot settle empirical questions, and parapsychology needs to carry out its investigations, and formulate its explanatory theories, as the Society for Psychical Research has always claimed, 'without prejudice or prepossession', whether scientific or religious. Only if it is free to do so can Christian thinkers begin to integrate the findings of parapsychology within a total theology.

That has been the philosophy behind THE CHRISTIAN PARAPSYCHOLOGIST ever since its first issue. Anything less would be religious and intellectual suicide.

[For Dr Felser's response to this Editorial, please see his letter to the Editor on page 18 below.]

Letters to the Editor

Dear Editor,

Thank you for inviting me to respond to your editorial in this issue of CP. Without question you have done an excellent job in summarising my position. Also, I agree with your contention that my argument has implications for *all* religious approaches to parapsychology, including that of Christianity. And there are many points in your editorial that I applaud. Where we disagree, however, is on the critical core issue, which you succinctly formulate thus: 'To be a Christian parapsychologist is not a contradiction in terms.' I would argue that this is a *contradictio ad adjecto*.

You state that, '[i]t is not necessary to denigrate bodily existence in order to be spiritual [i.e., religious].' But I contend that religion is essentially antagonistic to the body. Religion as we know it, that is, as a special and separate department of human life, was born approximately 10,000 years ago during the dawn of the agricultural revolution and its hierarchically stratified division of social and cultural labour.¹ Our culture decided that we humans are special, that we are separate from something 'out there' called 'nature' (including our own bodily nature) over which we have dominion and control. The Christian idea of the Fall and nature's corruption is only a later variation on this primary theme, namely, that we can and must rise above the physical world and its natural spontaneity. Thus, if religion pays homage to the body, it is as the average insurance company pays out claims made against the policies it writes - grudgingly, and only as a last resort. Too many claims paid and the whole enterprise goes bankrupt.

That is why I suspect that your contrast between 'good religion' and 'bad religion' is a distinction without a meaningful difference. However, what if Christianity were to follow the urgings of some of its most radical reformers² and abandon its doctrine of Original Sin and its traditional concept of salvation? No doubt this 'reformed' religion would retain the character of a self-defensive system of thought and practice in Bohm and Whitehead's sense. All systems claim to know everything, which inevitably leads to playing false and self-deception. Given the new first principles of the system, *psi* experience would ultimately have to be interpreted in their terms, rather than vice-versa, thus setting a predetermined limit to empirical inquiry. This robust commitment to the canonical is reflected in your statement that the job of Christian thinkers is to 'integrate the findings of parapsychology *within a total theology*' [italics mine]. Theology inevitably comes first; it is the more inclusive term within which the field of experience must be situated. Religion always carries the keys to the kingdom, if only quietly and unobtrusively, in its back pocket. How indeed could it be otherwise?

You suggest that researchers may treat Christianity merely as one of a 'number of possible theoretical frameworks' within which parapsychological data might be interpreted. Then the question arises, under what circumstances would the theory

be viewed as having been falsified by the data? I agree that 'religion cannot settle empirical questions'. But is this division of epistemological labour a fig leaf for an absolute dichotomy between fact and its interpretation? If no finding of parapsychological inquiry could ever be regarded as having decisively refuted Christian 'theory', then Christianity is being treated as a bulwark to be defended, not as a hypothesis to be tested. Hence we remain within the protective bubble of invulnerability to rational criticism that is the hallmark of all traditional religious systems.

I fear that we will not burst this bubble until and unless we forsake the comforting arms of religion. You rightly insist that 'a proper theology needs to listen humbly to *all* empirical evidence'. But is this humility the real McCoy or merely a red herring? Antony Flew³ once wryly remarked that whereas claims to revealed knowledge may be made in a humble fashion by humble individuals, the claims themselves can scarcely be regarded as humble claims. All traditional religions claim a special revelation of cosmic truth not otherwise available. This foundation justifies each religion's existence and preserves its identity. Why else would the religions deem themselves 'higher' if not to distinguish their possession of the (total) Truth from the 'lower' (partial, at best) forms of 'merely' natural metaphysical knowledge?

To be sure, there are differences among the traditions. The East holds that one must work very, very hard for Enlightenment, and that, one day, either in this life or somewhere down the long and winding karmic road, the adept will reap the ultimate reward for all those assiduous efforts. The West, on the other hand, believes that Truth can only be given to us as a free gift of God's supernatural grace.

But, regardless of the specific formulation (and despite the best and most honourable intentions of the formulators), the general, if unspoken, implication remains the same: We possess the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help us god. For religion to relinquish this posture of superiority and make itself fully vulnerable to both the findings of parapsychological inquiry and the data of *psi* experience would spell its end. Parapsychology or religion still seems to me to represent the ultimate choice.

Yours sincerely,

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Notes

¹See Joseph Campbell, 'The symbol without meaning' (1939), in *The Flight of the Wild Gander* (Regency Gateway 1969), pp. 120-192; and also Daniel Quinn, *Beyond Civilization: Humanity's Next Great Adventure* (Three Rivers Press 1999).

²For example, Bishop John S. Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die: A Bishop Speaks to Believers in Exile* (Harper-San Francisco 1998).
³Anthony Flew, *God: A Critical Enquiry*, 2nd edition (Open Court 1984), p. 172.

Dear Michael :

Geoffrey West's article 'Jung and his cousins' (CP 14:7, September 2001, pp. 210-219) deals with the seemingly less than total academic integrity of one of the most illustrious founders of psychoanalytical thought when faced with parapsychological phenomena. It raises important issues which merit attention — provided, always, that one feels able to trust the validity and motivation of Stefanie Zumbstein-Preiswerk's book *C.G. Jung's Medium* from which much of the material is taken and of which Geoffrey has himself provided the translation in the absence of any yet available English version.

The account given, in the article, of the family relationships and the paranormal perceptions and experiences of the youthful Carl Gustav provides considerable food for thought, and one wonders why the original source book remains unavailable to non-German readers. For the past decade or two it has become fashionable in some quarters to cite Carl Jung in confirmation of Christian doctrine and morality — an assertion which seems to me to be not entirely justified. His Lutheran relatives found his views unacceptable (his concept of 'God' was certainly not theirs) and his association with Antonia Wolf can hardly be cited as the conduct of a faithful Christian husband, quite apart from the implied failure to cope with the 'transference' situation which, on psycho-analytical theory, his therapeutic endeavours had themselves created. I pass no judgement on any of this but neither do I expect others to ignore the facts. As Geoffrey himself notes, Emma Rauschenbach, Carl's wife and mother of his five children, probably did qualify for minor saint-hood.

Likewise, in no way whatsoever do I wish to belittle or decry the extensive contributions made by Carl Jung to our understanding of a wide range of psychological and psychiatric phenomena. It does, however, seem to me that he must bear some responsibility for diverting the attention of his followers away from the *significance* of the parapsychological element in the matters he observed and attempted to deal with.

I myself am far less inclined than is Geoffrey to implicate unresolved karmic factors from previous incarnations as an explanation of difficulties in our present ones; and I am far from being convinced that the experiences of Carl Gustav and his cousins are to be explained by invoking 'Archetypical' figures from some 'Collective Unconscious'. One imagines that any sensible Spiritualist would recognise 'Grandfather Preiswerk' (who talks of a passage over the frozen heights of the North Pole as being the shortest route for his entranced grand-daughter, Helly, to take as she journeys from Switzerland to Brazil to assist, albeit