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Regression and Reparation in Religious Experience and Creativity

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This article examines the psychological regression that takes place in religious experience and demonstrates how that regression does not have to be pathological, but instead can be reparative. First, the article investigates the regressive nature of the three stages of religious experience, from the loss of ego strengths (purgation) to the recovery of archaic unconscious processes (illumination) and finally to the restoration of symbiosis (unity). By then comparing these stages of religious experience to the stages of creativity, the role of regression in religious experience is highlighted. Hence, the religious individual's disciplined purgation of self can be similar to the artist's disciplined attempt to pierce the superficial self, with both resulting in the recovery of repressed primary processes that lead to illumination in religious experience and to inspiration in art.

"We live in a world that does its best to make us into everything other than what we are," e. e. cummings asserted.

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The result of living in this alienated world, according to psychology, is that "what we are" has been repressed beneath a narcissistic, superficial, or, in Winnicott's (1975) term, "false" self. According to religion "what we are" has been buried beneath the sinful self, the self estranged from God or blinded by the trappings of maya. To eliminate this self and to experience God is to recover the lost "what we are": the "Christ within" or atman. Psychology, however, suggests that "dying to self" and experiencing God is a regressive renunciation of ego functioning and a return to archaic unconscious processes. However, it further suggests that a regressive diminishment of self and recovery of unconscious processes *can* be healthy, as when it takes place in creativity. This article examines how religious experience *is* regressive, but how that regression can be similar to the reparation that takes place in creativity.

Regression

Psychological development normally proceeds from less complex states to more complex states. Its earliest and least complex state is dominated by primary processes, such as wish fulfillment and instinctual immediacy, which gradually give way to the development of more complex psychological functions, such as tolerating frustration and thinking logically. The progressive development of these ego strengths is reversed when, due to any number of intrapsychic or environmental factors, the demands upon a person elicit sufficient anxiety to cause him to return to less complex psychological structures, where once again choices are simple, anxiety is overcome with wishes, and instincts are not frustrated. Freud (1961) described the process thus: "The libido will finally be compelled to resort to regression, to seek satisfaction in one of the organizations it had already surmounted or in one of the objects it had relinquished earlier" (p. 368).

Religious experience embodies this reversal of ego development and restoration of primitive psychological processes. It

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does so, in general, via its three stages, beginning with purgation of self.¹ A variety of spiritual disciplines—such as obedience, celibacy, and sensory deprivation—are employed to purge or "die to" a prideful and possessive self. "All the mystics agree that the stripping of personal initiative, the I ... is an imperative condition of the attainment of the unitive life" (Underhill, 1911, p. 508). Buddhism's Four Noble Truths, for example, emphasize the role of ego in causing suffering and, hence, the need to eliminate the ego (*annatta*). Christians similarly learn to conquer the prideful and possessive self in order to experience God. "If anyone would come after me, he must deny his very self" (Lk 9:23, RSV).

Although purgative acts might reflect a sincere wish to renounce self-centeredness, they also can be motivated by the unconscious (as well as conscious) wish to escape the responsibilities of adulthood. Renunciation of volition and assertiveness, for example, relieves the person of the anxiety of making choices and of acting on those choices. It induces even greater relief when, in the form of surrendering self to God, earlier modes of functioning are restored (e.g., passivity to and dependence on parents) that gratify needs without involving stressful autonomy or assertiveness, thereby establishing "a regressive revival of the forces which protect his infancy" (Freud, 1961, p. 164). Thus, "monks have neither free will nor free body, but must receive all they need from the abbot" (Rule of Saint Benedict, in Butler, 1924, p. 284).

Surrendering autonomy and control rends the fabric of the self, the internal psychological frame that grew out of, and had been

relatively successful in resisting the regressive pull back to, primitive instinctual processes. In the absence of this

¹ Purgation of self and experience of God or nirvana distinguishes the religious experience that is considered in these pages from a religious belief in which God is not directly apprehended. "Enclose me not in cages of matter or mind; through heavenly vastness my soul does soar, unfenced by the walls of heart or deed, by walls of ethics or logic; I thirst for truth, not concepts of truth" (Kuk, 1951, p. 79).

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autonomous structure (via self-abnegation), instincts are restored to the archaic state that existed prior to ego control (Rapaport, 1958, p. 18). Their unfettered and rapturous resurgence into consciousness is equated with divine illumination (second stage of religious experience). The illuminative surge of unconscious processes shifts attention away from reality and toward primitive mental processes. It is manifested in several aspects of religious experience: euphoric transcendence of time (restoration of the timeless unconscious state [Freud, 1920, p. 168]); ineffability (return to preverbal cognition—"The Tao that can be spoken/Is not the Tao" [Lao Tzu, 1978, p. 44]); surrender of secondary functions and restoration of prerational primary processes ("What is the sound of one hand clapping?");² vicarious sexual surrender—"He [the angel in Saint Theresa of Avila's vision] held in his hand a long golden dart," and, then, "plunging" it into her heart, he "wounded" her and set her aflame with divine love (Underhill, 1911, p. 392); and on a more dramatic level, supernatural visions.³

Finally, surrender of self and ascendance of unbounded primary processes dissolve the dualistic mentality of inner and outer, knower and known. "The aim of every mystic is union with God" (Underhill, 1911, p. 96). Unity is the third and final goal of religious experience, but it also completes the backward movement from the development of a separate and conscious system of the mind to an undifferentiated and unconscious mental organization. For when ego functions and psychological boundaries that normally define a separate sense of self are dismantled (dying to self), an underlying "wish for reunion

² "The governing rule of logic carries no weight in the unconscious; it might be called the Realm of the Illogical" (Freud, 1940, p. 168).

³ Visions manifest the reversion of mental processes based on perception and cognition back to those based on wish-fulfilling fantasy and hallucinations. The latter are projected onto an external screen where, regardless of whether the percept is based in reality or on the intensity of drives that create need-gratifying images, they are taken literally and redefine what is real.

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with the 'love object'" is awakened (Mahler, 1975, p. 77).⁴ Surrender of self and submersion of a single drop of water into the ocean (the Upanishad metaphor for unitive consciousness) fulfills the unconscious longing to undo separateness and to return to the earliest oceanic state—represented in communion with God or nirvana—out of which the self originally was differentiated.

For the Christian, regression to primitive maternal unity takes place when psychological boundaries that separate self from God are dissolved and the individual merges into divine communion. "If therefore I am changed into God and He makes me one with Himself, then, by the living God, there is no distinction between us" (Meister Eckhart, in Tiernan, 1941, p. 141). The person feels himself to be an intimate and inseparable part of God, and God to be the innermost part of himself: a symbiotic organism within an organism. "No longer I but Christ who lives within me (Gal 2:20).

Nirvana—which literally means extinction, as in the extinguishing of self—dedifferentiates the boundaries that distinguish separateness and restores the anxiety-free state of selflessness. "By the destruction of desires, there is complete disinterest and cessation, Nirvana" (*Udāna* Kidaay, 33, of the Buddhist *Sutras*). Islam's *fan-f'allah* expresses a similar extinguishing of self, though into Allah, while the same can be said of Hinduism's diminishment of individuality and merger into an archaic selfless Unity.

As the bees, my son, make honey by collecting the juices of distant trees, and reduce the juice into one form, and as these juices have no discrimination, so that they might say, I am the juice of this tree or that, in the same manner, my son, all these creatures, when they have become

⁴ Margaret Mahler (1975) concluded that the symbiotic state that occupied so much of her research was the same as that referred to by Freud and Rolland when they "discussed in their dialogue the sense of boundlessness of the oceanic feeling" (p. 44).

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merged in the True, know not that they are merged in the True [Mahdyamaka-karida, 10, 1. 7; quoted in Nakamura, 1964, p. 68].

Adaptive Regression

While a psychological analysis of self-denial and "oceanic" unity offers insights into the regressive nature of religious experience, it does not consider what can take place in this regressive experience beyond a defensive escape from the demands of reality. It relegates the regressive encounter of God or nirvana to a final psychological resting place, a no-return realm of infantile fixation and anxiety-free

fantasy. Such a description does not take into account the experience of those for whom a divine encounter *does* create archaic feelings of security, of selfless nondifferentiated unity, but for whom that experience *does not* result in fixated selflessness or Utopia. It instead results in an unitive state that leads to repairing the unconscious conflicts that motivated the experience and to resuming psychological development from the point at which it first derailed.

One basic form of heroic asceticism, one way of liberating man from his existential delimitations, is to retrace the steps of the development of the I, to forego even object relations in the most primitive sense, to step down and back to the borderline where the I emerged from its matrix [Erikson, 1958, p. 119].

Purgation of self and return to primitive psychological processes is regressive but not necessarily pathological: The loss of self can be the adaptive dismantling of the “false” self we have become, while the return to archaic processes can be the regenerative recovery of the “true” self repressed beneath that false self. The true self is the earliest openness and instinctual freedom of the infant, awaiting the benevolent guidance of parents to direct its development. The false self unfolds when the infant

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learns that instincts are to be feared and repressed rather than creatively expressed. “The infant learns a basic distrust for his own experiences as a guide to his behavior. He learns from others a large number of conceived values, and adopts them as his own, even though he may be distancing himself from what he is experiencing” (Rogers, 1964, p. 162).

The false self⁵ is built upon a shell of a self, not on an integrated core identity. It forms itself upon an autonomy and logic and other secondary ego functions that are critically necessary to “transform freely mobile energy into bound energy” and thereby to expand the area of control in which a person feels confident (Freud, 1937, p. 224). But an overemphasis on control and assertiveness causes those functions to find that energy too tightly and to extend control too rigidly. They sacrifice the spontaneity of primary processes and forfeit the freedom of greater openness.

When society's emphasis on external strengths (agency) causes those strengths to become synonymous with identity and to preclude the development of the true self (communion), the former need to be diminished, if not expunged. Bakan describes such a process: “In order to integrate the agency and communion features within himself, it was necessary for the agentic to be reduced and allow the repression of communion to be overcome” (1966, p. 204). A return to the true self takes place by confronting, and overcoming, the false self that keeps the true self repressed.

Creative processes in the arts begin with a disciplined effort to eliminate the false self in order to recover the true self. The psychoanalyst Ernst Kris called it “regression in the service of the ego” (1952, p. 60). Like Freud, Kris noticed that artistic experiences often involve a regressive diminishment of ego functioning, followed by a return to more primitive areas of

⁵ R. D. Laing (1967) called the false self the “egoic self” (p. 70), while Jung (1953) gave it the more familiar label “persona” and suggested it was “designed on one hand to make a definite impression upon others, and on the other hand to conceal the true nature of the individual” (p. 190).

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the psyche. Whereas Freud abandoned the possibility of understanding how this could be healthy—“Before the problem of the creative artist analysis must, alas, lay down its arms” (1928, p. 177)—Kris examined what took place in creativity to make it healthy. Unlike Freud, he found in the artist's “dip” into the unconscious a potentially creative recovery of untapped inner resources, rather than the pathology of a weakened ego or a defense against repressed unconscious processes. As Proust wrote, “I had to recapture from the shadow that which I had felt, to reconvert it into its psychic equivalent. But the way to do it, the only way I could see, what was it but to create a work of art” (quoted in Shattuck, 1963, p. 149).

Kris's suggestion that art involves an inspirational stage that is both a regressive and a progressive recovery of unconscious processes can be useful to understanding a similar dynamic in religious experience. To make such a comparison we will divide the inspirational stage of creativity into a preparatory stage and the inspirational stage proper. The earliest stage expresses the period of ego regression, which can be an adaptive dismantling of the false self. Normal day-to-day processes and the ego functions that support them are, in spite of apparent strengths, found by the artist to be too rigid, dry, stereotyped, or limiting. He seeks another way to look at life besides that of a superficial vision, another means of expressing what he perceives besides reasonable representations. He wants to recapture the wonderment and openness of primary processes, the unimpeded responsiveness to stimuli lost in the development of bounded ego functions. To do this, he first purposively suspends stereotypical perceptions, frees himself of linear thinking, and eliminates habitual ways in which the brain takes in and processes stimuli. “To make the familiar strange is to distort, invert or transpose the everyday ways of looking and responding which render the world a secure and familiar place” (Gordon, 1961, p. 35).

The creative person sets upon a particular discipline—dance, music, art—that helps free him from a constricted perception of life. This is the preparatory stage of

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inspiration. Its rigorous discipline forms a resistance to laziness (i.e., living according to preconceived notions rather than innovative

and lack of inhibition that make a child receptive to new experiences. “The drive to seek out and to explore the new is the strongest in childhood of animals and men, in the period of exploratory play” (Schachtel, 1959, p. 184).

The child's instinctual freedom and openness to experience gradually faded, as discussed earlier, and was relegated to an unconscious realm of unfulfilled longings, as he learned the exclusive importance of autonomy and control. The artist's

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experience represents a piercing of this false self and the recovery of primary processes. Once free of the niters through which he learned to perceive reality, the creative person refocuses perception according to an inner inspirational gaze: a less controllable realm of unfettered energy through which life is perceived more intuitively, spontaneously, directly, imaginatively, and uninhibitedly. Hence the artistic renunciation of the normative might be “a going backward, but a going back to look for something which could have real value for adult life if only it could be reached” (Milner, quoted in Fuller, 1980, p. 234). Ernst Kris (1952) labeled the irruption of primary processes into consciousness the inspirational stage of creativity (p. 61). Previously repressed instincts and tightly bound primary processes are let loose. They make the artist feel moved, as if overtaken by an unknown force or hit by a sudden flash of insight: the “a-ha” experience. They inspire him with a novel perspective that comes from within, rather than one that had been made lifeless or colorless due to the routine of external perceptions.¹⁰

God guard me from those thoughts men think
In the mind alone,
He that sings a lasting song
Thinks in marrow bone

[William Butler Yeats, *The Tower*, in Rosenthal, 1962].

Inspiration that arises in religious experience is called illumination. The artist's sudden flash of insight is analogous to the religious person being grasped by God or having truth unveiled. By cracking the crust of the false self that had kept hidden beneath it the true self and its vital openness to experience, the religious person “dies” to the old and becomes receptive to the new.¹¹

¹⁰ Milner (1950) wrote of how she intentionally forfeited linear styles of painting in order to expose herself to this less ordered and more open inner psychological realm.

¹¹ Jesus' familiar exhortation that heaven was available only to those who “become like little children” warned adults that their authority and control often inhibited unbridled experiences, an exhortation similar to Jung's (1937) suggestion that early repressed drives and affect are a potential source of wisdom to the adult and “[c]an only be found if the conscious mind will suffer itself to be led back to the ‘children's land,’ there to receive guidance from the unconscious as before” (p. 337). From a different perspective, Freud (1917a) recognized that loss of ego control and resulting greater “flexibility of repression” (p. 89) can be therapeutically reparative, while Hartmann (1964) wrote that the ego needs at times “to be able to abandon itself to the id” (p. 177).

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If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is, infinite. For man has closed himself up, til he sees all things through the narrow dinks of his cavern [William Blake, 1789, p. 5].

Once the “doors of perception” are cleansed, the inner psychological processes that were kept in the dark are illuminated. Whereas, formerly, instinctual freedom was repressed, there now exists an experience of God that represents the ecstatic reactivation of this instinctual freedom. Whereas ego functioning previously had based its perceptions and interpretations on the accumulation of previously stored input (automatization), there now exists a direct experience of God that represents the illuminative restoration of primary processes' immediacy.

Dharmakya, for example, is the Buddhist term for the state of a person who, by having “emptied himself,” has pierced normative perception and has experienced life directly. The koan about one hand clapping, discussed earlier, similarly helps dismantle ineffective logical reasoning and restore intuitive primary processes.¹² Christians who “die to self” subsequently are inspired by the Holy Spirit, while yoga aims to

¹² Intuitive apprehension of an experience often involves the previously discussed regressive absorption of self into the timelessness of that experience. But this loss of self and of the sense of time evokes the immediacy of unconscious processes, which can be creative, just as can be the artist's descent into the primary process timelessness of his inspirational absorption (Neumann, 1959, p. 150).

To see the world in a grain of sand
And heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
And eternity in an hour

[William Blake, 1789, “Auguries of the Innocence”]

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overcome rational cognitive processes (*vighana*) in order to reactivate *prana* (an energy that seems to be the stuff of primary processes). Even Freud (1917b) stated that while he “safely doubted” the meditative practices of mystics could “put one in the possession of ultimate truth, from which all good flows,” he acknowledged its deautomatizing ability to break through rigid cognitive structures and recover unconscious processes:

Certain practises of the mystics may succeed in upsetting the normal relations between the different regions of the mind, so that, for example, the perceptual system becomes able to grasp relations in the deeper layers of the ego and in the id which would otherwise be inaccessible to it ... we must admit that the therapeutic efforts of psychoanalysis have chosen much the same method of approach [p. 141].

Unity and Reparation

The mystic, like the artist, becomes comfortable with and learns to trust this illuminated unconscious realm. He does not try, as he did before, to dominate it, to turn its craziness into logic or its chaos into control. He experiences what the poet Keats called “negative capability”: the capacity to risk “being in uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (quoted in Bion, 1973, p. 115). Comfort with this inner unconscious realm marks the return of the true self. Unitive experience, for the mystic or artist, is the feeling of oneness, of connection or belonging to the instinctual spontaneity and imagination of this previously unacknowledged self. The religious individual experiences this unity in the form of communion with God or nirvana. The artist experiences it in the dismantling of dualistic distinctions between seer and seen, beauty perceived and perceiver of beauty.¹³ For both mystic and artist, “[t]here occurred, at least

¹³ Underhill suggested that the mystic's experience of the oneness of “seer and seen” is “the essential action of the artist” (1919, p. 26).

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sometimes, a fusion into a never-before known wholeness; not only were the object and oneself no longer felt to be separate but neither were thoughts and sensations and feelings and actions” (Milner, 1950, p. 142).

What, however, makes the artist or mystic comfortable with the unconscious processes with which he now feels united when previously these unconscious processes were deemed dangerous and, hence, were repressed? The artist feels comfortable because he experiences the reactivation of these hidden conflicts or needs in a secure place. The psychoanalyst and art critic Ehrenzweig called it a type of “‘womb’ in which repressed and dedifferentiated images are safely contained, melted down, and reshaped for reentry into consciousness” (1967, p. 121). This womb-like experience is the “incubation” stage of creativity. The *Oxford English Dictionary* describes incubation as the “practise of sleeping in a temple or sacred place for oracular purposes.” It is the “fallow period” that occurs after the person gives up the struggle to solve a problem and allows that problem to gestate in the unconscious until a creative solution is found therein (Rhodes, 1961, p. 308).

The artist then finds in his artwork—his canvas, acting music, and so forth—another type of safe environment, an “aesthetic illusion,” in which to express these processes incubating in his unconscious. Aesthetic illusion is the sense of unity that exists between the artist and his work. This bond turns art into a safe environment for expressing the unconscious feelings that otherwise could not be expressed. Instead of acting directly on hostile impulses or being overwhelmed by the repressed trauma that arises in the inspirational dip into the unconscious, the artist is able to “play” with it and work it out. He accomplishes this by bringing it safely to life on his canvas. By displacing repressed feelings or drives on a canvas where they do not cause destruction, and where they simultaneously are experienced as “out there” but also as an extension or a part of himself (aesthetic illusion), the artist is able safely to lift hidden feelings

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and impulses out of his unconscious. Yeats's poem expresses this unitive experience:

O swaying music
O brightening glance,
Who can tell
The dancer from the dance [William Butler Yeats, The
Tower, in Rosenthal, 1962].

The experience of communion with God can be similar to an aesthetic illusion. Communion with God begins when the mystic, like the artist seeking inspiration, ceases trying to make the experience happen and instead waits for God to take over.¹⁴ “In this state of contemplation which the soul enters when it forsakes meditation for the state of the proficient, it is God who is now working in the soul” (Saint John of the Cross, 1889, p. 120). God “working in the soul” is the mystic having given up trying to create God in his own image and instead letting God gestate in the unconscious. Repressed desires and fears safely incubate in this secure environment until the individual feels comfortable with them.¹⁵ Kernberg suggested that experiences of this sort “reactivate past internal object relations as a

¹⁴ The experience of passively waiting might be a defense against aggression, as previously described, but it is where Kris (1952, p. 317) found the roots of inspiration, and William James (1961, p. 389) suggested that it contains the illumination that “[o]ften comes about not by doing, but by simply relaxing and throwing the burden down.”

¹⁵ The length of waiting before incubational unconscious processes become comfortable enough to the person for inspiration or illumination to occur varies from person to person. For the unconscious to reveal its "truths," to illuminate its or God's mysteries, certain depths that are relative to each individual have to be plumbed. These depths are relative to the tenacity with which a person resists illuminating them. For instance, Coleridge claimed that his "Kubla Khan" came to him in a short reverie, while many of Yeats's inspirations came to him in a "flash." Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, on the other hand, took eighteen months of gestation. Waiting for divine illumination similarly can be of a relatively short duration, as the three days Saint Paul was blinded by his Damascus encounter, or can require a "long" time, as signified by the usage of the number forty to describe Jesus' days in the desert or Moses' sojourn in the wilderness.

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source of internal support in times of crisis, loss of external support, or of loneliness" (1970, p. 270).

The aesthetic illusion of self in unity with God restores the idealized libidinal object that makes the person feel so unequivocally loved and secure that even when frustrations and conflicts arise out of the unconscious, as they inevitably do, he continues to trust in the perfect God as he did in the maternal image that God represents. Without this aesthetic illusion of communion, the person would feel starkly alone with these fears and forbidden impulses. But he no longer experiences them on his own, when he safely confronts previously feared feelings and instincts within the experience of unity. In this encounter with a God who loves him no less when he expresses anger or fear, he learns a more tolerable way of managing that which before he could not manage.¹⁶ Winnicott (1975) coined the term "optimal frustration" to describe an essentially similar process (p. 238). Religious experience's return to archaic unconscious processes might have regressively "frozen" fears, to adopt Winnicott's way of describing how regressive experiences temporarily help a person escape anxiety, but it also allows for the possible reparation of the underlying conflicts and hidden needs that unconsciously motivated the regression.

Along with this goes an unconscious assumption (which can become a conscious one) that opportunities will occur at a later date for a renewed experience in which the failure situation will be able to be unfrozen and re-experienced, with the individual in a regressed state, in an environment that is making adequate adaptation possible [Winnicott, 1955, p. 18].

¹⁶ And because the person does not aim those potentially destructive or bewildering feelings directly at himself, but instead expresses them at God, communion with whom makes him experience those feelings as not being entirely his own, he, like the artist, can play with and express them in the safety of his divine aesthetic illusion. In this way he learns more about these repressed feelings and is able to test them—to see in his relationship with God if they are acceptable or manageable—without having to act directly on what could be their overwhelming intensity.

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Conclusion

Although religious experience regressively dissolves a person's autonomy and reactivates his psychological past, it does not entail a flight from the present, but, instead, makes the psychological past more meaningful to the present. Like creativity, religious experience can be a detour toward maturation of self via a temporary retreat from reality and a return to early unconscious structures, thereby providing the opportunity to repair unresolved conflicts and to redirect the development of a personal identity away from its fixated past and toward a new maturity.

Must we call it regression if man thus seeks again the earliest encounters of his trustful past in his efforts to reach a hoped-for eternal future? Or do religions partake of man's ability, even as he regresses, to recover creatively? At their creative best, religions retrace our earliest inner experiences, giving tangible form to vague evils and reaching back to the earliest individual sources of trust: at the same time, they keep alive the common symbols of integrity distilled by generations. If this is partial regression, it is a regression which, in retracing firmly established pathways, returns to the present amplified and clarified [Erikson, 1963, p. 264].

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