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A Third Mode of Human Experiencing? Imagination from a Psychological Perspective

Outline of main concepts/issues

An act of imagining is a challenging moment for the individual human person. By virtue of their imagination and its ally, creativity, humans create images through which they express and communicate their self-constructed meaning and share it with others. Through their imagination, they envision and participate in a different world than their actual one and are able to gain insights into how they understand themselves and the world. Imagination demands an openness to a constant modification of one's own self-identity and worldview.

A psychological approach to imagination enriches the understanding of its dynamics as well as of the processes involved in creating, dealing with and appropriating of images.

In his work, *The Play of the Imagination: Toward a Psychoanalysis of Culture*, Paul W. Pruyser, a clinical psychologist and a psychologist of religion, locates imagination and its operations in the “illusionistic world” which is the creation of “illusion processing.” The latter refers to a new third mode of human experiencing facilitating the establishment and maintenance of dynamic relationships between the person's subjective inner world and objective external reality. Pruyser relies on the work of D.W. Winnicott on “potential space” and “transitional objects and phenomena” to discuss his notion of imagination and its processes.

Winnicott, a psychoanalyst, holds that it is through these two interrelated psychological abilities that humans achieve a healthy emotional life, establish and maintain interpersonal relationships and participate in their society and culture. While these two interdependent psychological processes are distinct, they are inseparable and necessitate one another. “Potential space” exhibits itself through “transitional objects and phenomena,” and the latter are only possible because of “potential space.”

Operating in “potential space” or the “illusionistic world,” imagination shares many of the characteristics of this psychological process. As an intermediary area and a third mode of human experiencing, imagination is a singular and incomparable private area peculiar to each individual being. It is an unchallenged “resting-place,” where one can withdraw to in order to create meaning in one's life and find ways to express and share this meaning. The products of one's imagination, similar to “transitional objects and phenomena,” are symbolic in nature and one can share them with others. It is an area where symbolic activities occur and where one deals with and eventually appropriate images created by others. Appropriating the images and symbols of others by virtue of the imagination leads to the creation of interpersonal relationships and communities.

Such a psychological understanding of imagination enables a better understanding of the dynamics operative in imagination as a means of creating continuity, of transformation, and in

some cases of disruption. It discloses the fragile nature of religious symbols and images and the significance of respecting, honoring and safeguarding the “sacredness” of these entities. It leads one to become aware of the import and role of imagination in religious education.

Methodology

This paper employs a conceptual analysis of Pruyser’s notions of “illusionistic world” and “illusion processing” in light of Winnicott’s concepts of “potential space” and “transitional objects and phenomena” to discuss the dynamics of imagination and the processes involved in it.

Primary Sources

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