

Narcissistic Psychopathology and the Clergy

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It is the hypothesis of this author that narcissistic character disorders are prevalent among members of the clergy precisely because the profession provides strong reinforcement for such personality problems. Such an assertion, however valid it may be, presents an exceedingly difficult challenge to both the author and reader; the hypothesis itself will be met by resistance within the laity and emotional defensiveness among certain clergymen. A psychological critique of those who have chosen the religious profession must be objective, circumspect, and fair if it is to be granted any credibility. Such critical dialogue is unusual, and, when expressed, is often ended with the thought, after all, that clergymen are just human like the rest of us. The hope that such a proposition will be considered and discussed at the level of personal experience and introspection by the clergy themselves may be quixotic at best. Those most affected by narcissistic character problems will have the least capacity for personal reflection outside the sanction of their professional identity. They are the least likely to seek individual psychotherapy, and have historically been the most difficult patients to treat; and perhaps, most importantly, will be the readers least likely to finish this article.

Pathological narcissism is to be distinguished from healthy narcissism, that trait which promotes an adaptive and satisfying personal and professional life. Narcissistically balanced individuals experience themselves as the biological and psychological center of their universe. They have the capacity and motivation to care for themselves at least as much as they do others. Loved ones are perceived as whole and separate individuals with their own needs and desires. They easily recognize rather than deny the magical quality of their own transient fantasies of entitlement and grandiosity in a world that is quite forgetful and not very forgiving. Narcissistically balanced clergy will reflect on personal experience and behavior, and allow a nurturant blend of private time alone, intimate time with family, and public time with parishioners.

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Pathological narcissism can be understood both behaviorally and psychodynamically. The American Psychiatric Association, in the 1980 revision of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, describes the narcissistic personality disorder in behavioral terms that facilitate a rapid diagnosis: a grandiose sense of self importance or uniqueness; preoccupation with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love; exhibitionism; cool indifference or marked feelings of rage, inferiority, shame, humiliation, or emptiness in response to criticism, indifference of others, or defeat; and interpersonal difficulties characterized by entitlement, exploitative-ness, feelings of overidealization and devaluation of others, and a lack of empathy.¹

The internal world of the pathological narcissist can be inferentially understood. Psychoanalytic writers generally agree that a grandiose self-concept has been constructed to adapt to severe environmental and experiential distortions in the mother-infant relationship during the toddler stage of development.² More specific etiological theories of narcissism remain diverse and highly theoretical; yet the clinical irony of the narcissistic character disorder is an utter disregard for the thoughts, feelings, and wishes of others while exhibiting a profound dependency on their admiration. Self-sufficiency is a chronic self-illusion.

The clergy profession provides a socio-cultural rampart for this grandiose self. The profession assumes a “calling” by a diety that has communicated to the individual a sacred professional choice. The activity of choosing is at least shared by, if not completely projected onto, a deified object. The object is an internal mental representation that is consciously conceptualized as God and subjectively experienced as separate from the ego, or “I.” The psychological experience of being “called” is sanctioned by the religious community as an eschatological event. Otto Kernberg, a contemporary American psychoanalyst and recognized expert on pathological narcissism, has noted that the grandiose self is a complex mental refusion of the ideal self, idealized object, and actual self representations.³ For the narcissistically disordered individual responding to a “calling” from God, the grandiose self is fortified by the passive acceptance of the ideal self as “chosen” and its psychodynamic fusion with the deified ideal object, consciously valued as a special relationship to God.

Pathological narcissism is perpetuated by the interplay of several primitive defense mechanisms that protect the grandiose self. Among the most predominate is a phenomena called splitting, in which individuals are alternately perceived as either all good or bad, all gratifying or ungratifying. These polarized experiences of others are actually projections of the narcissist’s own dissociated internal representations

of self and others, fixated at a developmental level that is not mature enough to form whole and constant mental representations of self and others.⁴

Splitting is unfortunately a consensually valid and theologically comfortable aspect of preaching. The minister is expected to provide moral and ethical direction to his congregation, and is rewarded for defining, valuing, and separating goodness and badness in human experience. Ambivalence on the part of the minister catalyzes anxiety in his listeners and finds little toleration in a community of believers. The oratorical tradition of preaching may compulsively gratify the regressive need of both the minister and congregation to perceive the world as definitively good and bad.

Narcissistic pathology precludes the emotional capacity to sustain relationships where a wide variety of feelings are experienced. The narcissistically disturbed minister has a history of transient relationships, both intimate and professional, because his or her internal psychological world is a shifting, unstable complex of good and bad mental representations from the past. Splitting is manifested in the inability to evoke pleasant memories in the midst of unpleasant interactions with the same person.

The narcissist in relationship to another idealizes and devalues, rarely reciprocates. An heir to splitting, the idealization may be a cultural symbol, a religious figure, or another person. The devaluation may be a cultural taboo, a demonic figure, or another person. Both are reparative struggles to psychologically take in the goodness and throw out the badness of early deficient childhood experiences. The religious symbols of goodness and evil provide historical and theological archetypes for the minister to idealize and devalue. Christ and the Devil may become delusional identifications for the psychotic; for the narcissist they remain representations to be introjected and projected in the service of pre-Oedipal survival.

In the Greek myth Narcissus falls in love with his own reflection, yet does not recognize it as himself. Heinz Kohut, a major figure in current psychoanalytic thought, identified this normal childhood developmental process as mirroring.⁵ The narcissistically disturbed adult, however, has not relinquished mirroring for more subtle modes of identification such as empathy. Admiration by others remains a placebo to quiet the fear of losing the grandiose self. As a child the narcissistically disordered individual may have colluded with mother and together formed a venerable shield against the beginning recognition of the child's separate life, i.e., a life without continuous mirroring.

The congregation in worship mirrors for the minister. Each Sunday the clergyman mounts a platform above them, and from the pulpit his or her narcissistic disturbance will evoke an unconscious fantasy con-

taining grandiose elements of omniscience and omnipotence. The minister will project the wish for the faithful to listen onto the deified object, God, and deny the intensely gratifying self experience of mirroring provided by the absorbing and reflecting parishioners.

Grandiosity has several manifestations in narcissistic disturbance. Omniscience and omnipotence are dimensions of a belief in one's grandiose importance to others. It is most insidious when the minister denies and projects personal grandiosity by attributing the power to a force or Word such as God, yet remains strongly identified as the arbiter and purveyor of meaning. In this way, denial, another primitive defense, becomes the handmaiden of the narcissistically disturbed minister: personal self-interest and gratification of quite primitive psychological needs can be denied by intellectualizing the importance of interpreting the omnipotent message, the Word of God.

Entitlement is most apparent in the belief that the individual is owed a certain amount of admiration and attention regardless of his or her behavior. This is most accepted in religious cults where the collective capacity to judge reasonable leadership behavior is impaired, and the ability of the congregation to test reality, (i.e., distinguish between their own wish-fulfilling fantasies and the leader's actual behavior) is inadequate.⁶ There is no room for conditional positive regard for the pathological narcissist in others' experience of him; he demands unconditional positive regard from others. Perhaps in a more benign form this explains the immense popularity of Rogerian client-centered counseling techniques among pastoral counselors and seminary students. The counselor accepts the grandiose belief that he or she can provide unconditional positive regard and projects this narcissistic wish for the same onto the counselee.

The affective or emotional life of the narcissist is dynamically related to a fear of dependency, and is felt by others as an oscillation between intense hurt or anger and detached indifference. There is often the peculiar sense of emotional absence, even though the person is physically present. The narcissistically disordered individual conceives other people as a psychological extension of the grandiose self, not as separate individuals.

Narcissistic detachment will intermittently give way to a torrent of narcissistic rage that thinly masks the wounded, fragile, yet grandiosely conceived self. The anger will leave others hurt and dumbfounded by the sudden "out of character" display of feeling.⁷ In the clergy profession the arrival of primitive rage will see the rapid mobilization of other defenses to rationalize or apologize for the behavior. In case of severe pathological denial, the cause of the "affective storm" will be projected onto an external or demonic force whose power is diluted through prayer or worship.

Narcissistic pathology is also an autosexual phenomenon. Autoerotic preference will usually be consciously denied, but will be seen in a pattern of transient and multiple sexual partners. Paradoxically the search for the perfect human body to mirror the narcissist's sexual desires may be accompanied by impotence; without a physiological cause, the inability to achieve an erection may be a product of merging and fusion anxieties arising from the narcissist's fear of dependency.

Celibacy may support the autoerotic preference of the narcissistically disturbed clergyman. Having relinquished the wide variety of actual sexual contact with another person, variations that are rarely ideal and perfectly gratifying, and may at times be awkward, messy, and even embarrassing, the narcissist is allowed the freedom of sexual fantasy that has no scatological reference point outside of the mind. Sexual images can be perfectly gratifying and unaccompanied by ambivalence, boredom, or fatigue. Sacerdotal authority may require celibacy and thus sanction the narcissistically disturbed priest's preference for fantasy and masturbation. The mental representations of others may be heterosexual or homosexual, but the act is autoerotic.

No psychopathology exists in an unchangeable or pure form. Although narcissistic disturbance has been described in categorical terms, its structural elements in the personality of the minister will be affected by a variety of factors: first, narcissistic psychodynamics will vary in degree, from the momentary grandiose and magical thinking that every person experiences to the severely disabling psychopathology that interferes with daily functioning. Second, narcissistic disturbances are often accompanied by other character problems such as schizoid behaviors and compulsive rituals. Under severe stress narcissistic traits may regress to more paranoid and grandiose levels of interaction. Third, the willingness of significant persons in the narcissist's life to confront such behavior and the ability of the congregation to separate their own wishful fantasies for the minister from actual performance are important variables for instigating psychological growth. And fourth, the narcissist's toleration of interpersonal confrontation, albeit low, may be supported by other characterological strengths such as self-observation and an intellectual understanding of emotional defenses.

The tragedy of the narcissistically disordered minister is that life is missed and human experience is avoided for fear of dependency, mortality, and fallibility. The emotional recognition of these essential aspects of the human condition, however, means that the experience of separateness and profound sadness must finally be traversed. The grandiose illusion of self may remain a more comforting and familiar refuge.

References

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4. J. Grotstein, *Splitting and Projective Identification* (New York, Jason Aronson, Inc., 1981).
5. H. Kohut, *Analysis of the Self* (New York, International Universities Press, 1971).
6. F. Conway and J. Siegelman, *Snapping* (New York, Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1978).
7. An extreme and murderous example of narcissistic rage, precipitated by amphetamine abuse, is portrayed in J. McGinnis, *Fatal Vision* (New York, J.P. Putnam's Sons, 1983).