

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Encounter with Erikson: Historical Interpretation and Religious Biography* by Donald Capps, Walter H. Capps and M. Gerald Bradford

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REVIEWS

Donald Capps, Walter H. Capps and M. Gerald Bradford (editors). *Encounter with Erikson: Historical Interpretation and Religious Biography*. Pp. xvi + 429. (The American Academy of Religion and The Institute of Religious Studies Joint Series on Formative Contemporary Thinkers, No. 2. Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1978.) \$9.00.

This anthology is the latest in a series of paeans to the psychoanalyst Erik Erikson. The fifteen essays contained here vary in nature. Five – by Lindbeck, Bellah, Spitz, Geertz, and Donald Capps – are assessments of Erikson's studies of Martin Luther and Mahatma Gandhi. Two – by Hay and Newhall – are extensions of his study of Gandhi. Four – by Strout, Bushman, Capps (again), and Michaelsen – are applications of his approach to the lives of various American religious figures – among them, Jonathan Edwards, the Beecher and James families, and even Abraham Lincoln. The last four essays – by Dittes, Reynolds, Kaplan, and Walter Capps – are theoretical: they either defend or extend Erikson's brand of psychology.

Of the fifteen essayists, only Lindbeck and Spitz are critical of Erikson, and even they offer as much praise as criticism. What all of the essayists admire most is, first, Erikson's concept of 'identity' and, second, his positive view of religion. To understand why students of religion in particular value his work it is necessary to contrast his views with those of his mentor, Freud.

The significance of Freud for the psychology of religion exceeds his significance for psychology generally. With him begins the animosity between psychology and religion. Freud objects to religion as both fallacious and harmful. It is fallacious because it explains the world in supernatural, pre-scientific terms and, more important, because it purports to be about the world at all. It is really about man, who projects himself onto the world in the form of god.

In *Totem and Taboo* and *Civilization and Its Discontents* Freud deems religion harmful because it demands the excessive repression of man's sexual and aggressive instincts. The survival of society requires the repression of man's Oedipal desire to commit incest and murder, but religion, by which Freud means the Christianity of his day, unnecessarily and vainly prohibits not just incest but all sex outside of marriage, and not just murder but plain ill will: one must 'love' his neighbour. It thereby exacerbates the inevitable tension between man and society.

In *The Future of an Illusion* and again in *Civilization and Its Discontents* Freud deems religion harmful because it exacerbates the inevitable tension between

man and nature. Here the tension involves not man's reluctant acceptance of repression but his reluctance to accept the cruelty and impersonality of the physical world. By attributing the vicissitudes of life to a just and merciful god, religion creates the illusion of a fair, kind world and thereby discourages man from accepting the world as it really is.

Where Freud finds religion entirely harmful, Erikson ordinarily finds it most helpful. Where Freud declares religion fallacious, Erikson declares its veracity a theological rather than psychological matter. In both respects he is like Carl Jung, but unlike Jung he strives to supplement, not reject, Freud.

Erikson retains Freud's final division of the psyche into ego, id, and superego, but he views the ego much more positively than does Freud. It is, for him, naturally strong, not weak, and is substantially independent of the id. It represents an ideological side of man, one separate from his sexual side. The two sides must develop together, and develop both internally and externally.

Internally, according to Erikson, man seeks more than a Freudian compromise among his parts: ego, id, and superego. He seeks the full, positive integration of them. Externally, he similarly seeks full, positive acceptance into society rather than merely a Freudian truce between himself and society.

Internally and externally alike, man, for Erikson, seeks an 'identity' above all. That identity represents not, as for Freud, a child's unconscious identification with his father or mother but an adolescent's largely conscious definition of himself as a distinct, unified person – the master not only of his instincts, as for Freud, but also of his place in society. One's identity expresses itself concretely in the form of a career.

Religion abets the attainment of identity by providing an ideology: it explains and justifies one's place in both society and the world. It thereby facilitates, not hinders, man's adjustment to both. Religion neither furthers repression nor furnishes escape but enables man to 'cope'. Its utility, not its veracity, alone counts.

Virtually all of the essayists in the anthology consider Erikson's concept of identity his chief contribution to both psychology in general and the psychology of religion in particular. Surely, however, Erikson was not the first to suggest that every person seeks an identity or that religion provides one. His contribution surely lies far more in his systematization of the notion – in his link of it with a whole ideological side of man and, more, in his link of that side with man's physical, Freudian side. Yet most of the essayists treat the concept of identity in isolation, not only from man's general ideological needs but also from his physical ones. From most of the essays one would assume that Erikson had broken altogether with Freud, despite his belaboured efforts at reconciling himself with Freud.

More important here than Erikson's vaunted reconciliation of himself with Freud is his vaunted reconciliation of his psychology with religion. If

most of the essayists ignore his reconciliation with Freud, they take for granted his reconciliation with believers. Only Lindbeck questions his success. He is certainly right to do so, for Erikson in fact skirts the issue.

In *Young Man Luther*, for example, Erikson ascribes to the adolescent Martin a nonreligious conflict with his father which Martin's subsequent theology at once reflects, parallels, and partly resolves. Erikson conspicuously fails to explain, however, whether 'reflects' means 'is caused by', whether 'parallels' means 'stands for', and whether 'resolves' means 'arises to resolve'. Erikson maintains that Luther's conflict with his father is not merely a sexual, Oedipal struggle but also a struggle over Luther's career and so over his identity. He never says, however, whether the religious identity Luther forges is an irreducibly religious phenomenon or only the happenstance solution to a psychological need.

The essayists praise Erikson for what are in fact contradictory achievements: explaining religion psychologically on the one hand but not reducing it to psychology on the other. If Erikson merits praise for explaining the choice of a religion as the solution to a desire for an identity, he has necessarily reduced that choice to a psychological activity – to the extent, that is, that he *has* explained it. If, conversely, Erikson deserves praise for not reducing religion to psychology, he can only have not explained religion psychologically and so not explained it at all. The reduction of religion to psychology would not, to be sure, deny the truth of religion – to say otherwise would be to commit the genetic fallacy – but it would deny the supernatural origin and perhaps function of religion – a consequence ignored by the essayists.

Finally, the essayists presuppose rather than justify the impropriety of reducing religion to psychology in the first place. The only legitimate objection to the reduction is that, in origin and function, religion is really more than psychological, but the proper proof of its irreducibility can only be the failure of attempts to reduce it to psychology. The proper objection to Freud's reduction should not, then, be that he tries to reduce religion to psychology but that he fails. In short, not only may Erikson, despite his disavowal, prove to be reductionistic in practice, but even if he were not, he would warrant praise only if the impropriety of reductionism could be established.

The point of these criticisms is scarcely to question the insightfulness, the imaginativeness, and even the power of the essays. The point is only to caution against the assumption that Erikson provides a panacea for the ills of psychology of religion.

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