

# PAULINE THEOLOGY AND THE RETURN OF THE REPPRESSED: DEPTH PSYCHOLOGY AND EARLY CHRISTIAN THOUGHT

by *Robert L. Moore*

Richard Rubenstein's career as a religious scholar began in the midst of controversy provoked over a decade ago when he rejected traditional Jewish theology and began to formulate his own psychoanalytic hermeneutic of Jewish culture and thought. With the publication in 1972 of his *My Brother Paul*, Rubenstein broadened his inquiry to include the roots of Christianity.<sup>1</sup> To date this book not only has failed to provoke controversy but in fact has received very little attention. My choice of the book as a focus for our attention is based on my belief that Rubenstein has succeeded in raising some of the most basic issues in the psychosocial interpretation of early Christianity. These issues include: (1) What dynamic transformations underlie the birth of Christianity as a religious movement? (2) How are the dynamics of early Christian thought and ritual different from those manifest in the life of competing religious systems? (3) And finally what normative judgments, if any, can be made with regard to the dynamic infrastructures of the new movement?

That a scholar would raise these questions will seem reckless to some—yet Rubenstein has been so bold as to seek to answer them. The thesis underlying the entire book is a radical one: The birth of Christianity embodied no less than a psychological revolution, essentially progressive in nature and facilitated by the religious genius of Paul. In order to retrace the steps of Rubenstein's argument let us begin by sketching his view of the Judaism which nurtured the apostle.

## JUDAISM AS SUPEREGO CULTURE

For Rubenstein the dynamics of first-century Judaism were fundamentally the dynamics of repression. The life of the religious Jew was

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characterized by constant "instinctual discipline" which offered little or no opportunity for the gratification of archaic impulses (p. 36). The authority structure of traditional Judaism, he suggests, was a patriarchal order which cultivated and enforced a psychology dominated by punitive superego functions and relentlessly committed to the reality principle. Primordial infantile yearnings at best were projected into the messianic future and at worst simply denied any sanctioned gratifications. Judaism, he notes, had no institutionalized carnivals which allowed a "periodic infringement" of taboos (p. 36). Jewish culture was fundamentally a "superego culture," basically incapable of providing satisfactory gratification of the impulses of the id (p. 105).

#### PAUL AND THE RETURN OF THE REPRESSED

Characterizing Paul as a "revolutionary Jewish mystic," Rubenstein argues that the genius of the apostle was to find a means for the recovery of what had been repressed in Judaism. Paul's conflict, we read, was between the infantile yearnings for omnipotence, immortality, and union issuing from his unconscious and the stark world of the reality principle enforced by the faith of his fathers (p. 35). In his conversion on the Damascus road Paul indeed lost his normal ego functions, but the regression proved to be a "creative regression" which was to lead to the resolution of his conflict. Paul's resolution, Rubenstein argues, had liberating psychological consequences not only for himself but for subsequent human history. In his vision of the risen Christ Paul had encountered the power of the primary processes of his own mind. Instead of being immobilized by psychosis or other crippling pathology, the apostle was freed for a richer participation in life. For Rubenstein this liberation hinged on the dynamics of identification. Judaism's strictures against the blasphemy of identification with god the father had previously been effective curbs against the gratification of infantile yearnings for omnipotence and immortality. Now another means had been found to "gain the prize" (p. 51). The answer came with the vision: Identify with the older brother. Through this identification Paul—and later his fellow Christians—could participate in a successful revolution against the old authority structure. Becoming one with the risen Christ made possible vicarious participation in both omnipotence and immortality. In Judaism "the closest relationship one could achieve with the Father was obedience and, if one were extremely fortunate, trust, but never identification" (p. 28). The latter would have led to both blasphemy and self-destructive megalomania. The "psychological triumph" of early Christianity, Rubenstein believes, was based on the fact that "Christ,

crucified and resurrected, became the most potent model for identification the western world has ever known, for he experienced the worst that men fear and the most glorious condition for which they hope" (p. 29). Through the conversion experience Paul was able to achieve contact with his own unconscious processes without permanently impairing his normal ego functions. This encounter with the id marked an opening to the realm of the unconscious—an opening which later issued in Paul's brilliant use of the imagery and logic of primary process in his formulations of Christian thought and ritual practice (pp. 52–53). Let us turn now to a sketch of some of Rubenstein's assertions concerning the manner in which Paul was able to facilitate the return of the repressed through his formulations in Christian cult and cognition.

Rubenstein begins his commentary on Paul's symbolic formulations with a discussion of baptism. Previous to Paul, he argues, baptism for the most part was used as a rite of penitence and purification through which previous sins could be washed away. Although there were some previous traditions which associated baptism with death (he cites Mark 10:39 and Luke 13:50), it was Paul who first interpreted it as a dying and rising with Christ: "Paul was able to associate the death and Resurrection of Christ with the experience of the newly baptized Christian because he understood intuitively and gave theological expression to the identity of womb and tomb in the subliminal consciousness of mankind. By his association of baptism with Jesus' death and Resurrection, he was able to bring to consciousness some of mankind's oldest and most profound responses to water" (p. 57).

Rubenstein makes a great deal of Freud's suggestion that human beings have a compulsion to return to the undifferentiated state of objectless unity from which they came. At subliminal levels, he notes, water is associated with realities beyond human control and not with acts of mastery such as washing. Paul's interpretation of baptism is "less censored and more archaic than the interpretations of his Jewish and Christian contemporaries" (p. 61). A number of things are achieved through Paul's formulation.

First, by a return to the waters the old existence of the individual is annihilated so that the new life in Christ can begin. Part of what is washed away is the domination of the old patriarchal and authoritarian family structure and many of the status distinctions that went with it. This enabled the idea of rebirth to a second, more nearly perfect parent to surface—an idea which Rubenstein believes facilitated the resolution of fears of the infanticidal parent: "Baptism promises escape from the hostility of the Divine Infanticide; baptis-

mal rebirth thus involves the hope for a noninfanticidal parent" (p. 66).

Second, on the basis of previous research Rubenstein concluded that the primary source of anxiety in the Jewish tradition was grounded not in the fear of the castrating father but rather in deeply rooted fears of the preoedipal mother. Fantasies of drowning and other modes of loss of self through incorporation were discovered to be dominant. On the basis of this research Rubenstein concluded that much of the traditional Jewish emphasis on the masculine character of the divine parent was grounded in a need to repress the much more threatening fear of the mother. In his reformulation of baptism Paul was addressing a much deeper level of conflict and anxiety and providing a means for the resolution through ritual: "If baptism involves the hope for a noninfanticidal Parent, the rite carries with it the assurance that the believer, after his return to the watery womb, has been rescued and need no longer fear his original mother" (p. 67).

Third, Paul's formulation of baptism was a much more adequate response to the severity of intergenerational hostility between fathers and sons than the pre-Christian rite of circumcision had been. The latter had emphasized masculine identity, the tie with the father and through him the old order, and implicitly the rule of the punitive superego: "It is the young Jew's entrance into his biological family rather than his rebirth into a new world, a new family, and a new temporal era" (p. 73). Not a ritual or rebirth, it was rather a reminder—and a powerful one—of the price of disobedience: "The sons were aware of what the fathers, and the omnipotent Father, could have done to them in infancy. This knowledge cemented their resolve to be 'good' sons. Obedience to the Law was partly maintained by the underlying anxiety lest the father finish what he had started on the eighth day" (p. 73).

Baptism for Paul became the true "circumcision of Christ." In contrast to circumcision where a small part of flesh is stripped away, baptism was a "total stripping of the flesh so that the old man may die and be reborn in Christ" (p. 75). Since the father's temptation is in reality to kill the child, the token quality of circumcision must be accompanied with a great deal of repression of the murderous impulse behind it. According to Rubenstein, Paul was capable of allowing the real dimensions of the conflict to emerge into consciousness and of discerning the radical nature of the "cure." The risen Christ had faced the full force of the Father's hostility without perishing forever—and identification with him, with his death and rebirth, could enable others to overcome the threat of the parental hostility.

That which had been repressed or distorted in Judaism had become fully conscious in Paul's understanding of baptism (p. 75). The full impact of the rage of the fathers could be faced with Christ. Although death had to come, participation in Christ's resurrection was a reality for those who were "in him" through identification.

Rubenstein argues that Paul's Christ also offers a way to allow the murderous hostility of the sons to the fathers to emerge into consciousness. Freud had argued that the original sin for which Christ atoned was in fact the primal parricide. Christ the son had displaced the father, and through identification with Christ the participation in the Eucharist became a dramatic repetition of the primordial murder. Though in his interpretation of the meaning of Holy Communion he differs with Freud, it is in his chapter on this topic that his psychoanalytic insight becomes most profoundly provocative. Rubenstein is quite clear that there is a deicidal component implicit in the yearning for omnipotence. By identifying with the omnipotence of the older brother, however, this yearning could be expressed without direct expression of a blasphemous identification with the father. Though more indirectly than Freud had supposed, the deicidal hostility is expressed in the Eucharist. Through this medium Christ "offers himself in place of sinful men to a punitive God and offers himself in place of God to deicidal men" (p. 85).

Rubenstein also seeks to emphasize what he believes are the psychological reasons that the Eucharist became for many in the early church an eating *of* Christ rather than an eating *with* him. After some time, he suggests, Christ's absence led to a crisis which centered in the yearning for reunion with him. A way had to be found for regaining the precious "object" which had been lost if the community and its commitment were to be sustained. In the Pauline Eucharist, Rubenstein argues, a way was found for Christ to be present in a different, though satisfactory, way—as both food and feeder:

By construing the bread and wine of their sacred meal as the body and blood of Christ, Christians resorted to the oldest, the most effective, and the most crudely physical way of becoming one with the beloved object, physical incorporation. The Eucharist was a literal acting out of the basic Christian strategy for achieving the right relationship with the Father in Heaven, identification with the elder brother. . . . by finding a way to overcome the gap that separated them from Christ, which was rooted in the most archaic, nonverbal, sensuous strategies of the organism, the primitive Christians preserved both the integrity of their community and its redemptive message. [Pp. 92–93]

Christ had become for Paul and the early Christians who followed him the perfect sacrifice. Since he already had been killed and res-

urrected, he was a sacrificial victim who could not be harmed in spite of his being consumed in the Eucharist. Although the communicant could achieve expression of both his loving and aggressive feelings in the ritual, he neither harmed "the indestructible Christ" nor destroyed the source of his gratification: "The Risen Christ is the only food that nourishes without being destroyed in the process of being consumed. Unlike one's natural mother, our earliest source of nurture, the Risen Christ can neither perish nor run out of milk. For Paul as well as Ignatius, when properly consumed, Christ is truly the "medicine of immortality" (p. 100).

Not only then can the communicant express both his love and aggression through the ritual, but also he can consume his feeder without fear of either future deprivation or retaliation. Not only does Christ provide the bread of immortality, but also through Paul's Eucharist the taboo against the drinking of blood has been lifted and the communicant can partake of the life-giving blood that redeems from death.

If Judaism was a superego culture, Pauline Christianity was, though perhaps not clearly an id culture, at least "a religious community that permitted the resurfacing of the archaic wisdom of the unconscious among its believers to a far greater extent than did Judaism" (p. 105). Further, Rubenstein concludes, it was the very eruption of primary process imagery—previously repressed in Judaism—which made it possible for the young church to integrate into its "new level of consciousness" elements from other traditions in the Hellenistic culture around it. The Eucharist is for Rubenstein perhaps the best example of Paul's genius in fomenting "psychological revolution": "It terminated to some extent the need to handle archaic cravings by sublimation or repression, which had been characteristic of Judaism. It thus permitted the formation of a new community based on an old-new synthesis of the destructive, the loving, and the hopeful in intimate human experience. By his capacity to move backward to the beginning, Paul enabled his followers to move forward toward the End" (p. 113).

Thus by facilitating creative regression the religious innovations of Paul moved the human race toward a fuller and more mature understanding of the depths of its psyche. Though still incomplete, the liberation of the human consciousness had been advanced, and the Christian "return of the repressed" can be understood as "a further stage on the road to psychoanalytic revolution" (p. 86).

Though *My Brother Paul* contains many more provocative interpretations which are deserving of careful attention and reflection, the preceding sketch is sufficient for us to grasp the structure of his

argument and the basic thrust of his conclusion. That Rubenstein should conclude that early Christianity constituted a psychological advance beyond Judaism is particularly striking. While it is unlikely that the author of *After Auschwitz* will be accused either of harboring anti-Semitic biases or of being "soft on anti-Semitism," his highly favorable reading of Paul is, as he admits, certainly an anomaly among Jewish interpretations of the apostle.<sup>2</sup> Of more interest to us, however, is the severe conflict between Rubenstein's psychoanalytic assessment of Paul and early Christianity and those which have been made by practicing psychoanalysts. Let us examine briefly another, quite different evaluation of the dynamics of Paul and early Christianity.

#### CHRISTIANITY AS PATHOLOGICALLY REGRESSIVE

For a sobering, if somewhat hysterical, psychological assessment of the impact of Christianity one should begin with the late Ernest A. Rappaport's *Anti-Judaism: A Psychohistory*.<sup>3</sup> In this angry work Rappaport, both an analyst and a survivor of the death camps, places the roots of anti-Semitism squarely in the psychological impact of Christian dogma. He dismisses Rubenstein's treatment of Paul as "absurd." In his view Rubenstein "fails to recognize that the productivity of Paul in the aftermath of his acute schizophrenic episode was a productivity of delusions of persecutions and together with the obsessive pursuit of his missionary goal only proves the relentless persistence of his paranoid psychosis" (p. 34).

Though more scholarly and less vehement, the treatment by Sidney Tarachow offers a more formidable counterpoint to Rubenstein's interpretation of Paul and early Christianity. Compare Tarachow's interpretation of Paul's conversion with Rubenstein's: "The conversion robbed Paul of his compulsive character defense. He gave up both his old aggression and also his religiously displaced obedience to the Law. He was now at the mercy of his aggressions and his homosexuality. Both these tendencies underwent a degree of sublimation in the new religious process taking place in Paul. The son attained equality with the father, but at the same time there was an identification, now, not with the aggressive father, but with the crucified son, an identification carrying many masochistic and homosexual overtones."<sup>4</sup>

The judgment of homosexuality is based at least in part on what Tarachow believes to be Paul's difficulty with both his aggression and his passivity: "Paul's conversion was not a stable solution of his problems. He never resolved his ambivalence. He could tolerate neither his aggressions nor his passivity, and when the tension of either im-

pulse became too strong he had to resort to denial or projection via his behavior or various hallucinatory experiences" (p. 274). Tarachow is referring here to Paul's tendency to deny all initiative to the individual in his relationship to both God and Christ. Not only are his own active decisions turned into passively experienced hallucinatory commands, but all interaction with Christ must be passive, not active: "So long as the attitude of receptivity, of openness, self-emptiness is maintained, Christ dwells in the man, living in him and through him the Christian free life over which the law has no dominion. But if a man fail to keep the attitude of receptivity, Christ will depart and he will come again under the control of the flesh and will fall under the dominion of the Law" (p. 248).

Paul's "free life" in Tarachow's view was a liberty to be passive and masochistic (p. 249). Capable only of a "paranoid, reactive kind of aggression," Paul spiritualized his latent homosexuality into his religious ideals (pp. 274-75). His ethics, his life, and his theology each, according to Tarachow, reflect this denial of initiative and agency (p. 270). This personality structure, he argues, is "the classic soil for the genesis of paranoid characteristics" (p. 274). The Eucharist, rather than resolving the guilt of oral-aggressive impulses, actually exacerbates the need to find a scapegoat that can be made to pay the price for one's own guilt. Paul's solution, and that of Christians after him, has been paranoid projection of the guilt upon the Jews: "The primitive pre-Pauline Christians were not anti-Semitic: they were loyal and observant Jews. The persecutory system was started by Paul, by his perpetual conflict between his aggressions and need for surrender to father" (p. 274).

In addition to an alternate reading of Paul, Tarachow offers another assessment of the difference between Jewish and Christian cultures. He characterizes the dynamics of Jewish culture:

God became progressively more monotheistic, less magical, more spiritualized, more ethical and apparently completely masculine. The monotheistic-masculine tendency is the most important. Polytheistic tendencies were suppressed, the most important suppression being of Mother Goddess worship. . . . The tie to father was emphasized. The submissive token initiation rite of circumcision permitted identification and masculine aggressiveness. The primacy of the single God, the father, was never questioned. No hostility to father was permitted by the Jews. All rival gods were eliminated. All traces of magic and idolatry were suppressed. The submission to this god required the greatest degree of spiritualization and psychic internalization. [P. 225]

Clearly Tarachow's reading of Jewish culture at the time of the birth of Christianity parallels that of Rubenstein quite closely.



Foremost among their self-imposed renunciations were the resolution of the oedipal conflict via the renunciation of mother (goddess) worship and the rejection of "totemistic, aggressive and all magical practice in connection with father worship" (p. 265).

Christianity, on the other hand, is interpreted quite differently by Tarachow. With Pauline Christianity there is indeed a "return of the repressed," but it is a pathological regression rather than a creative one. What has returned in Christianity is "failure of resolution of mother as an object, failure of resolution of hostility to father, failure of masculine identification and a great impetus to magic and art" (p. 267). Paul was certainly the vehicle of a psychological transformation—but it was to a "latent passive homosexual Catholic Christian solution" to the problem of psychosexual development (p. 269). This "solution" carries with it magical and artistic attempts to possess the mother periodically, the reinstatement of the totem feast (both in ritual and in reality), and the projection of guilt onto scapegoats.

Arguing from a similar point of view, Rappaport suggests that Paul is a forerunner not of Freud but of Adolf Hitler, with the Jews of the Holocaust providing the ultimate re-creation of the primitive totem animal in history.

What are we to make of this conflict of interpretations? First, neither Rubenstein nor Tarachow is grounded sufficiently in early Christian studies for us to take their interpretations as more than preliminary inquiries, suggestive of further fruitful collaboration between psychologists and historians. Second, we must look very carefully at what they agree upon. Both agree that Christian thought and practice are characterized by a lesser degree of repression of the products of the primary process. If further research supports them in this contention, then the next step is to ask to what extent classical Christian dogma and ritual mirror the archaic, deep structures of the human unconscious. For if Christian dogma is not merely the child of Hellenistic syncretism but rather a product of the primordial language of the self, then both Christian ideation and ritual may be more potent—and more dangerous—than either Rubenstein or Tarachow has suggested.

#### THE DYNAMICS OF FAITH: INSPIRATION OR INFLATION

In order to gain some needed perspective on the heavily Freudian discussion outlined above it will be helpful at this point to translate some of the underlying issues into the language of analytical psychology. If the origins and structures of Christian dogma are in some significant sense archetypal patterns and energies, then it would be

quite easy to see why the psychological impact of Christianity is so very difficult to assess. Contact with the depths of the human psyche is always fraught with both the promise of new creation and the danger that monsters will come forth. "When the gates of heaven are open, the gates of hell are open as well." Contact with the archetypes can eventuate in the facilitation of creativity and/or in demonic inflation.<sup>5</sup> What makes the difference between benign and malignant creativity and how is this related to the perspectives of Rubenstein and Tarachow? Let me comment briefly on the shift between secondary- and primary-process modes of cognition in the course of "creative regression."

From my studies in the psychology of creativity—particularly in regard to the use of religious ideation and ritual—I have come to focus on the technologies which are commonly used to facilitate the relaxation of ego controls. The cultivation of receptivity is the common denominator among the various methods. Whether the particular technology is verbal or nonverbal, it must be fundamentally *kenotic* in its intent and effect—providing a "sacred space" ritually empty of any trace of agency or initiative. Only under such conditions will the "spirit" (or the products of the primary-process mode of cognition) appear. It is here that we should recall Tarachow's characterization of Paul's symbolic forms (and later Christian formulations) as "homosexual." He is referring here, I believe, to Paul's use of what elsewhere I have called a "theology of passivity" to facilitate creative regression.<sup>6</sup> It is interesting that Rubenstein did not discuss this aspect of Paul's theology as a central means of escaping the tyranny of the reality principle.

Of course, when conscious agency and initiative is set aside to facilitate intercourse with the realm of the spirit, there is always the danger that the potencies encountered will be so overwhelming that ego controls and normal object relations cannot be reinstated. Here then we face again the primary disagreement between Rubenstein and Tarachow. Rubenstein believes that Paul and early Christianity had found a way to negotiate the dangerous passage between the two worlds. Tarachow suggests that the denial of aggression/initiative rendered both Paul and later Christians incapable of facing their own aggression, thus locking them into a sadomasochistic and paranoid character structure.

As already noted, the contemporary state of research on this topic does not enable us to resolve the issue in a satisfactory manner as yet. What is clear, however, is that Rubenstein has presented both historians and psychologists with an interpretation of early Christian

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thought which should generate further serious inquiry along the same lines. Following his lead, we may be entering a new and exciting era in the investigation of the dynamics of doctrinal development.

### NOTES

1. Richard Rubenstein, *My Brother Paul* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).
2. Richard Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz: Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1966).
3. Ernest A. Rappaport, *Anti-Judaism: A Psychohistory* (Chicago: Perspective Press, 1975). Characterizing anti-Semitism as being grounded in paranoid schizophrenia, the author traces the history of anti-Semitism from Paul through Luther to Adolf Hitler.
4. Sidney Tarachow, "St. Paul and Early Christianity: A Psychoanalytic and Historical Study," in *Psychoanalysis and the Social Sciences*, ed. G. Roheim, W. Muensterberger, and S. Axelrad, vols. 1-5 (New York: International Universities Press, 1947-58), 4:276.
5. See the excellent discussion of the dangers of inflation which are involved in an encounter with the archetype of Christ in Edward F. Edinger's *Ego and Archetype* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1972). Edinger's treatment of Christian dogma should be read as a Jungian parallel to the previous Freudian discussion.
6. See my "From Resignation to Exaltation: A Psychological Study of Authority and Initiative in the Life and Thought of John Wesley" (PhD. diss., University of Chicago, 1975), esp. the chap. entitled "Wesley's Theology and the Problem of Initiative."