

**Reflection**

**ADAM: A PSYCHOLOGICAL READING OF THE  
MYTH OF MAN-MAKING**

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We have long been used, in the New Testament and later Christian tradition, to a literalist reading of the myth of Adam as though it were, without doubt, the most reliable pre-history of our common ancestor. This has had disastrous consequences on the spiritual history of generations of literal believers, as Paul Ricoeur points out in his book, *The Symbolism of Evil*.<sup>1</sup> Unaware or unmindful of it, many have held on to the literalist reading of the myth, rather than seeing it as a poetically conceived psychological myth about you and me and every human being here and now and at all times. For a change, I like to explore what meaning the myth makes when looked at from a psychological angle. Depth psychologists have, in fact, interpreted the myth from this perspective, which seems to make a personal sense for everyone, who reflects seriously on the story.<sup>2</sup>

The author therein sees the three created characters in the myth as representing the composite make up of every human being, irrespective of the male-female gender differentiation. Adam represents every Ego or human personality. Eve stands for the instinct, *libido* or the life-and-pleasure principle in every individual. The serpent symbolizes the law of good and evil, or the socializing principle of private and public conscience, which the depth-psychologists name as the Super-Ego.

One must justify such a reading with respectful reference to the text of the hoary myth. Since the myth of Adam is properly contained in Genesis chapters 2 to 4, let us start with that beginning.

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<sup>1</sup>Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, Boston: Bacon Press, 1998.

<sup>2</sup>I may refer the reader, for instance, to R. S. Lee, *Freud and Christianity*, New York: Pelican/Penguin Books, 1948.

Genesis 2:7 says that God formed man out of the dust of the earth. The psychologists read this as symbolizing the conception and formation of the foetus in the mother's womb. Since the child breathes only when it comes out of the mother's body, God breathing into his nostrils the breath of life would suggest that, like conception itself, every birth and life-breath involves a divine intervention. Luke's explicit phraseology of the spirit or the power of God "coming upon and overshadowing" Mary, the would-be mother of Jesus, seems in Genesis 2:7 to be implicitly affirmed as a divine presence and action in every case of human conception.

But the moment a child is born and breathes, it has come into a world, which is already divided and organized into a dualistic and contradiction-marked social space and time. This seems fittingly symbolized in the narrative about God planting a garden eastward in Eden and putting there the man whom he had formed (Gen. 2:8). This dualism, contradiction, or mutual opposition will unfold itself as we analyze the symbolism of the rest of the story.

The individual versus society and *vice versa* is the first contradiction or antagonism of organized or community life. Matter and spirit constitute yet another contradiction, implied in the individual-versus- society antagonism, matter-based life, dependent on material needs for growth and survival, is at once desirous and afraid of that life and the means to it. For it is sub-consciously afraid of being denied or deprived of them. Therefore, it seeks to possess the material life and means exclusively of others, whom it sees as real or potential rivals and competitors over against its own survival. The infantile or the materialist life is essentially selfish, un-social and anti-social. To the extent it transcends materiality, it becomes more social and, by the same token, also more spiritual. This is the human maturation for which God has planted the symbolic garden of human society and places every individual in it.

The duality of our desire and fear is rooted in experiential knowledge, which consists of the duality of pleasure and pain. Experientially whatever pleases us is good, and whatever displeases us is bad. We enjoy and desire what we perceive as good and pleasurable, and we fear or dislike what we perceive as pain and evil. Our basic desire or will is for the pleasure of living, with all that it includes or implies. At the same time our experience is also the knowledge of our fear of pain and death as threatening and limiting our

desire for the pleasure of a life or a world without end. Even as a society, we desire and seek not only to experience the unmixed good without evil as life without end, and to avoid or escape any admixture of pain and death as evil, but also to understand the reality of pleasure and pain, and life and death through the cosmic law, which seemingly regulates it. Society seeks to build or base individual and social or institutional life in accordance with the cosmic order. This is where and how society evolves and affirms the presence of what we call conscience within every individual and consensus within community or social institution. This is what is symbolized in and by the figure of the serpent in the Adamic myth. It represents the rule of conscience in the individual, and the common law within every society or social institution. But the perennial conflict is between individual conscience and social consensus or law. Thus, the serpent represents the inwardly divided conscientious role of both the individual and the society.

How is this reading justified within the textual plain of the biblical myth? The myth locates the serpent's role in the story as one of inciting the individual libido's appetite for the taste of the symbolically forbidden fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This prohibition is put into the mouth of God, when He brought the individual He had made to, and placed him in the symbolic garden, which He had planted in Eden. The Garden is just the symbol of a well-ordered and civilized society, governed by laws of common good, which the individual is not to take into his own hands and interpret and apply as it pleases his whim or appetite. This is the textually plausible socio-psychological meaning of the prohibition to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

The conscience is symbolized in the myth by the serpent, described as the subtlest of all the beasts of the field, which the Lord God had made (Genesis 3: 1). No wonder that it raises all kinds of doubt in the instinctive heart of the libido represented by the character of Eve. This is how subtle a turncoat the individual conscience is, when it suits the satisfaction of its libido. It is fittingly metamorphosed in the metaphor of the serpent with its regular sloughing off of its skin. It is able to hide itself from detection and assault, and revive even after being beaten up or bruised in the head. If God confronts it, it would take cover under its society and its cultural laws and usages. If the society confronts it, it would take cover under God as the witness and guarantor of its individual conscience and consciousness.

Society trains each individual member by allowing certain things at certain times or stages, and denying or forbidding the same things or even other things at other times and places or stages. Society is made up by means of such rules of Dos and Don'ts. "Do good and avoid evil." It is society, which defines for every individual what is good and what is evil, and the individual is not supposed to define good and evil for oneself. This, in fact, is what society traditionally accepts and treats as human maturity and maturation.

But experientially, the social sense or definition of good and evil does not tally with the individual sense and definition of good and evil. The individual feels alienated from society and its norms, and society feels threatened for its order by the dissenting and disobeying individual member. It warns the potential dissenter with threats of the consequences of any contemplated or potential challenging pose and action. This is the symbolism of the permission to eat of all the trees in the garden, and of the prohibition to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Except for setting or changing the ground values of society, the individual is free in all other things. This is what society teaches and dictates to the individual.

The individual, however, feels a division within oneself: How can it be integrated with society and its norms? It senses within its own members a law, which is at war with the laws of the cosmos and of its society. The bodily instinct defies the social norms, which the conscience approves at one time and disapproves at another. Genesis 2:21-22 figures out this division within the individual in terms of two characters, namely Eve and the serpent. As made up by God, from a rib He had drawn from Adam's own body in his sleep, Eve represents the dream-substance and character, which is the element or object of desire for wholeness, within every human being. The rest of the story more than justifies the interpretation of Eve as the libido or pleasure-in-life principle within every one of us.

As pandering to and approving or disapproving of individual instinct at one time, and the social norms at another, the divided conscience is fittingly represented in the myth by the symbolic figure of the serpent, described as more subtle than any other beast the Lord God had made. The conscience is at one and the same time accomplice, approver, and judge, divided by and between the social good and evil, and the individual good and evil. Should it

be true and identical to itself or to its society? By what norm should it judge or be judged? Which is the true and correct norm? Judged by the social norm, for acting on the individual norm, individual sin and condemnation for it would abound. Judging society and its norms and conduct by the individual norms of good and evil, social structural sins and rebellion against it would abound. Can the individual not judge society and its norms at all? Is moral judgment wholly unilateral? Is there no respite of true rest and grace period between the two opposing laws of society and of conscience?

In the myth, the individual is judged according to the social norm. Social norms do make individually deviant behaviour both shameful and punishable. This is the moment of the recognition of nakedness at the social exposure or judgment and ridicule, described as the footsteps of God, walking in the cool of the evening (after the heat excitement and passion of the temptation and the succumbing is lowered), and unveiling in the shame of nakedness the loss of rational-legal justice and innocence and of the social esteem and approval associated with it. Fig leaves to cover the nakedness are symbolic of the socially unaccepted or disbelieved explanation, which the individual offers out of his conscience.

Society, like the legal machinery it is, might indeed ride roughshod on individual conscience. God probably would not do so? He would be more compassionate and would lift it up with His right hand? How does He fit in with and into this whole psychological reading of the myth? Is He extrinsically brought in and thrust into the story as a *deus ex machina*? Is He perhaps nothing more than just the symbolic representation of society to justify its laws, or a mystery used and invoked by society and its rulers to legitimize their own will as the will of God?

The threat of death held out in the myth from the mouth of God could not really be from God, but from a society that plays the God game or wearing the God-mask. Even expulsion from the Garden is not an act of God, but an act of society itself excommunicating its disobedient member, by its refusal to forgive or be reconciled to his individual weakness or even defiance. Even the death meant by the God-masking society, as eventually unveiled in the story, is not the literal death of the individual in his/her body, but the death of socio-psychological separation from the native-natural or voluntary society, unless and until the individual undergoes the stipulated penalty or procedure symbolized by the cherub angel with the flaming sword

guarding the access to the tree of life in the centre of the social garden. This might mean that the society accepts its recalcitrant member and is reconciled with him/her only if he/she submits his/her life to it and, thus, metaphorically dies at its hands and bosom. In other words, society as a whole claims the undivided status as the Son or representative of God. It would not allow any individual to claim it individually to his or her own self. Jesus, in the New Testament, seems to upset this claim and stakes his individual claim to the status of the Son of God. As involving controversy, the issue is not quite settled, but only asserted and preventively ruled out in the Old, and negated in the New Testament in symbolic favour and on behalf of Jesus of Nazareth.

What then is the integral sense or role of God in the myth in relation to Adam, Eve, the serpent, the Garden, and expulsion from or readmission to it? The integral sense is that God is the creator of every individual human and of all other lives, which He has designed to be also social for their growth, multiplication, and self-defence. The individual human being is not a simple unity, but a complex unity of body with its needs, powers, and passions; the mind, soul, or consciousness which experiences and judges every act and passion as good or bad with or over against the society of which it is a part; and the overall person who is the free agent or subject, responsible for whatever it makes of its life – answerable to both society and to God.

If God willed humans in particular to be social in essence, what is the relation of God to societal laws? Does He legitimize every law? Can He be said to be the author or maker of the laws of the lands: of the Jewish laws, in particular? The author of Genesis 2 and 3 could be said to see it so. Then, again, perhaps not, because he presents the conscientious stand in a more nuanced and ambiguous way in the figure of the more subtle serpent. Societies and persons in positions of social authority could impose and assert their own will as the divine, which is as much as to make themselves divine, which, again, is blasphemous. God, then, is neither the social law nor the legitimizing principle of any and every particular law. He is transcendent to both the individual, with its instinct and its conscience, and to society with its laws and ordinances. He is to be confused neither with the individual conscience nor with the social consensus or organization. He is in and with everything that is, but is also distinct from one and all of it.

By reason of the confusion of God with cosmic and social order, the God in the myth of man-making is also divided between himself and society, on the one hand, and between himself and the individual, on the other. When he condemns Adam, Eve, and the serpent, and expels them from the garden and places a cherub angel to guard the access to the tree of life with a flaming sword in his hand, he is a reflection of the society, with which he is identified. When He clothes Adam and Eve with garments of skin, He is compassionate to the individual person with one's instinct, but still hard on the conscience, symbolized by the last-cursed serpent.

The curses, undoing or diminishing the original blessings of God, weigh heavily on the individual human person, its instinct, and its conscience, pointing to a society and a God who are both divided from within, and stand no less in need of healing and 'at-one-ment' than the individual human being. The Jesus myth or Christology was an attempt to undo or respond to and correct the unsatisfactoriness and disappointment of the tragic myth of Adam. But it was methodologically destined to prove as unsatisfying as the Adamic myth. Adam of the Genesis myth had left his stamp too strongly on Jesus, and rendered him the tragic hero that he became. He had bequeathed the load of his sin to his mythical son, Jesus. Conversely, historical Jesus had taken on himself the original sin of his mythical father, Adam.