Toward Mutual Recognition

Relational Psychoanalysis and the Christian Narrative

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Chapter 1

Introduction
Charting a path toward mutual recognition

Mandy first came to see me late in the summer of 1994. I was not at all prepared for her story—a gruesome saga of abuse, murder, and mutilation that made national headlines—though from my present vantage point in her 15-year treatment, I recognize that I was being readied to help her for quite some time.

For me, my husband, Lowell, our 2-year-old son, Bob, and our soon-to-be-born daughter, Karissa, life together in 1978 was holding great promise. Raised in fundamentalist Christian churches and meeting at a conservative Christian college, Lowell and I had moved to eastern Pennsylvania in order for him to pursue seminary training. Little by little, a deep hunger arose for a more relational and authentic experience of Christianity. In an act of faith, we journeyed to Switzerland to study with a theologian/philosopher whose books had given us hope that such an experience was possible. Our fall of 1978 was spent preparing for a sojourn in Switzerland that would be life-altering and culminate in our decision to become psychologists.

Only a few miles from our residence and totally unknown to us, a little girl suffered a very different sort of fall in 1978. In the spring, 6-year-old Mandy watched her mother and almost full-term brother die at the hands of her father. That was the last scene that her right eye would ever document, for her crazed father would attack her face with a screwdriver, leaving lacerations that would necessitate over 150 stitches. Her father would be committed for life to a state mental hospital. Humiliated by her injuries and almost unrecognizable to herself, Mandy returned to school that fall as an orphaned and handicapped survivor of a domestic violence so gruesome that it reverberated across the national media. She would become a custodial minor in her maternal grandparents’ chaotic household. As my husband and I were wrestling with the impact of our fundamentalist upbringing in a distant Swiss alpine village, Mandy would be settling into a fundamentalist church and school that would come to serve as her extended family.

That summer of 1979, the Hoffman family grew to four and returned to Pennsylvania. We embarked on our psychology training, inspired by a revitalized Christian faith, but cognizant of its dangers when it devolves from
the faith of Christianity to the dogma of “Christianism.”
We started our psychology practice in 1988, and in 1994 my heart and mind were ready to embrace Mandy.

In our attempt to reflect an authentic Christianity in our vocation, we have come to believe that relational psychoanalytic psychotherapy closely parallels the Judaic and Christian covenantal call to truth and love. I utilize the nomenclature “relational psychoanalytic psychotherapy” in its broadest sense, encompassing a number of contemporary psychoanalytic approaches that hold to a view of relationship as the epicenter of change. We see the relational emphasis as marked by humility. From initial interactions with a patient to final parting, the relational analyst attunes to the mystery and wonder of each person and each journey. Discovery proceeds through an incarnational or lived interaction with the patient, made possible through the development of a safe and authentic alliance. This is facilitated by a psychoanalytic psychotherapist’s extensive training, supervision, and self-understanding through requisite personal psychotherapy, an echo of the sacred call to self-examination and surrender. Ongoing treatment attends not simply to words, but to relational interactions between therapist and patient that yield meaning and context to the words, and carry the treatment through disruptions, or crucifixions, to an experience of a new beginning, a resurrection. In a relational psychoanalytic psychotherapy, patients and therapists come to deeply know one another, mutual recognition lying at the heart of this orientation. From a Christian perspective, patients are not only recognized in their complexities and struggles, but they are also recognized as bearing God’s indelible image within them (Carter & Narramore, 1979; Jones, 1991; Olthuis, 2001; Sorenson, 2004) and having a meaningful destiny before them, a destiny in which the therapist has a role to play.

As I studied relational psychoanalysis, the concept of mutual recognition captured my attention. Jessica Benjamin had introduced G. W. F. Hegel’s writings into her work, and through study of his theological and philosophical contributions on incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection, a confluence soon emerged for me between Christianity and psychoanalysis. In this book I will share my study of Hegel’s Christian narrative of incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection, and present it as an analogue to themes in relational psychoanalytic theory. Utilizing Hegel’s paradigm as the framework, I will build the central project of this book: to explore the influence of the Christian narrative on the theories, clinical practices, and history of psychoanalysis.

I believe the force that propels movement from incarnation to resurrection facilitated the weaving of the threads of Mandy’s life into a tapestry of redemption. For Mandy, this book is a monument of remembrance, bearing testimony to a resurrection in her life. Thus she offers her story in support of my endeavor to recognize the spiritual force described in the sacred narratives that have become assimilated into psychoanalytic theory.
and practice, and which, I believe, has operated in the very development of psychoanalysis itself.

**PSYCHOANALYSIS AND RELIGION**

God’s defenders are not necessarily closer to God than God’s accusers. … In the Psalms, protest and jubilation ring out in the same voice. Wherever in history the combination ceased to work, the theologians would learn as much about God from atheists as the atheists could perhaps learn from the theologians.

—Moltmann (Bloch, 1971, p. 28)

Many Christians sadly accede to a popular notion that psychoanalysis is as atheistic as its progenitor Sigmund Freud claimed to be. My initial task is to transform this perspective by offering a historical context for the antipathy of psychoanalysis toward religion. I posit that a prophetic and relationally oriented, redemptive Jewish tradition—cloaked in secular garb, and muted by logical positivism—forms an indelible subtext to psychoanalysis, a subtext that drew Christians to the discipline.

In spite of Freud’s directives to the contrary, one cannot think of psychoanalysis apart from its Jewish heritage. By extension one cannot understand the repudiation of religion in psychoanalysis unless it is contextualized in Jewish history. By locating Freud’s repudiation of religion within the broader struggles of European Jewry, I hope to deconstruct the tragic reasons that the Judaic subtext of psychoanalysis became cloaked.

**To Dr. Freud, with deep regret**

Dear Dr. Freud,

It is with a degree of justifiable temerity that we write you: Our correspondence has been far too long delayed. Permit us to explain.

Far too easy. Yes, it has been far too easy to denounce you for the repudiation of religion that your psychoanalysis at times has blatantly espoused: religion as “universal obsession,” religion as primitive relic, and, in agreement with Feuerbach, religion as projection of the human psyche. For these profane pronouncements, we have facilely declared your guilt, neglecting to recognize our utterly despicable culpability.

Forgive us for forgetting the long history that preceded your choice to hide the intrinsic Judaic character of your craft. It has been advantageous for us to ignore the centuries in which Christianity as empire decimated your Jewish brothers and sisters. We failed to acknowledge
the history texts that attested to the pogroms, the prohibitions, and the ridicule that power structures bearing the convenient imprimatur of religion wielded against the children of Israel.

We, in your terms, projected our own guilt onto you and failed to see the wounds we caused, the shame that was ours to bear, the denial of God in ourselves that we located in you. We have handily dissociated ourselves from those imposters who bore the name of Christian and tormented you and your family. Thus, we read your texts through eyes of arrogance, rather than through mists of tears.

We want to revisit psychoanalysis, approaching it with the veil of atheism lifted, with your Judaic subtext in high relief. We wish to contemplate that perhaps, in the mystery of a Jewish and Christian Providence, your works were yet another prophetic clarion call to truth, yet another redemptive outworking of God’s irrevocable covenant with Jew and Gentile.

With deep regret,
A contrite Christian Church

The Judaic narrative

Prior to a pervasive colonization of Jewish culture by a secular narrative, Jews had maintained, to greater or lesser extents, an ethnic differentiation or transcendence that included a faith in the covenantal God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Being ethnically Jewish meant, de rigueur, that one was observant of Jewish faith. Radiating through the haze of Freud’s atheism are the twin beacons of his ancestral Jewish faith: an emphasis on truth—a that is, the focused interpretation and reinterpretation of sacred texts (mitzvoh/halakhah) that revealed God’s desires for His people, interpretations that presupposed hidden and obscured meanings—and an emphasis on loving relationship. The underlying covenantal relationship with God and therefore with one’s neighbor was the loving reason the divine gift of mitzvah/halakhah was transmitted. “Judaism was not concerned only with obedience to the authority of the halakhah. It above all strove to make the halakhah expressive of the covenantal relationship with God” (Hartman, 1997, p. 200). The extension of the emphasis on loving relationship was the covenantal promise that Israel would influence the world for good through its roles as teacher, model, and co-worker for redemption (Greenberg, 2004; Samuels, 2001).

This emphasis on truth for the purpose of undergirding covenantal relationship with God and neighbor birthed the centuries of prophets who addressed deficiencies either in the understanding or application of God’s laws. Truth and its covenantal application were never to be severed, and when they were, the prophets would rise up. Greed, violence, oppression of the poor, injustice, idolatry, lack of mercy, and immorality were cried
against, a cry that became echoed in Jesus’ later prophetic invectives against hypocrisy and his promoting of loving relationship.

With the secularization of Jewish culture, ethnicity and faith became separated. I wish to chronicle some factors that contributed to this divide, and consider some ways in which an imperial Christianity was complicit in this colonization.

**Anti-Semitism: The Jewish experience in Europe**

Anti-Semitism was pervasive in Europe for centuries prior to Freud’s birth. From at least the fourth century on when Christianity became coupled with the state, the Christian church as empire (LaMothe, 2008) would impinge upon the freedoms of Jews. The list of restrictions against Jews ranged from refusal of employment to sequestering in their homes during Passion Week; from confinement to particular areas of a city or ghettos that served to segregate Jewish people from the larger culture, to mandated dress or wearing of badges.

Jewish populations were targeted for violence as well. The Jewish Talmud and other Jewish writings were burned; expulsions *en masse* occurred repeatedly from countries (England in 1291, France in 1394, Spain in 1492) (Brustein, 2003); and pogroms, or incited riots, would murder thousands of Jews over the course of centuries.

**Assimilation**

Fortuitously, the more humanistic Enlightenment brought about the enactment of laws that emancipated Jews from previous discriminatory treatment. This welcome development led, for some in the Jewish population, to a modification or elimination of participation in Jewish customs such as dress, kosher dietary rules, and even the speaking of Hebrew. In response to a more humanistic cultural shift, leaders of European Jewry such as Moses Mendelssohn would support a movement called *Haskalah*, which intentionally aided Jews in integrating into Gentile society. However, according to Susannah Heschel (1998), Jews not only assimilated but effectively became “colonized” by the prevailing Christian culture of Europe. Thus Jews became divested of the recognition both of their ethnicity and their faith.

**The allure of secularism**

Charles Taylor (2007) poignantly depicts the post-Enlightenment shift to secularism that progressively influenced Jew and Christian alike:

> I have been drawing a portrait of a world we have lost, one in which spiritual forces impinged on porous agents, in which the social was

http://www.psychoanalysisarena.com/toward-mutual-recognition-97804159999144
grounded in the sacred and secular time in higher times, a society moreover in which the play of structure and anti-structure was held in equilibrium; and this human drama unfolded within a cosmos. All this has been dismantled and replaced by something quite different in the transformation we often roughly call disenchantment. (p. 61)

The rise of secularism was a disenchantment of Western civilization, a shift from a belief in the mysterious goodness of the transcendent to an immanent, humanistically based frame that empowered the human subject. This shift was ironically abetted by the Protestant Reformation (Taylor, 2007) that challenged the mysticism of a medieval Catholic Church. But the humanism of the Enlightenment, particularly the Continental Enlightenment, marched forward to sweep away any vestiges of the transcendent that remained, placing the human subject at the center of the universe. In these centering movements toward the human subject, that subject’s rights and privileges became a matter of construction, not religion.

For Jews, the Enlightenment provided more security against religious prejudice than had ever been enjoyed. An imperial Christianity had first driven Jews toward secularism by their “othering” of Judaism, and this perverse Christianity then condemned Jews for being secular. Thus, the “enemy of my enemy,” secularism, became a friend to many Jews.

Secularism not only protected Jews but in time evolved into a humanistic belief system that translated some Jewish religious ideals into a nonreligious creed. The vital, relationally based narratives of Jewish faith were first colonized through Jewish assimilation into the Christian European culture. But imperial Christianity, being bankrupt of true faith, augmented the colonization of the Judaic narrative through its own colonization by secularism, ultimately profoundly obscuring all original ties to Abrahamic faith.

**Freud’s experiences**

Many scholarly volumes have been written about Freud’s rejection of religion (Gay, 1987, 1988; Meissner, 1984; Rizzuto, 1998; Vitz, 1988; Yerushalmi, 1993) and provide a more comprehensive exploration of that rejection. I will simply focus on the effects of the anti-Semitism supported by a state Christianity that may have served to ensure Freud’s utter dismissal of religion.

Freud had experienced the effects of virulent anti-Semitism in his native Vienna, which at the turn of that century was ruled by the Hapsburgs, a Catholic Church/State marriage. Etched in his memory was this story of an interaction with his deeply religious father, Jakob. He writes:

I may have been ten or twelve years old, when my father began to take me with him on his walks ... on one such occasion he told me a story
to show me how much better things are now than they had been in his days. “When I was a young man,” he said, “I went for a walk one Saturday in the streets of your birthplace; I was well-dressed, and had a new fur cap on my head. A Christian came up to me and with a single blow knocked off my cap into the mud and shouted: ‘Jew! Get off the pavement!’” “And what did you do?” I asked. “I went into the roadway and picked up my cap,” was his quiet reply. This struck me as unheroic on the part of the big, strong man who was holding the little boy by the hand. (Vitz, 1988, p. 36)

When Freud attended the University of Vienna, he was expected by his Gentile peers to “feel inferior” (Gay, 1988, p. 27) because he was Jewish. Throughout the university, anti-Semitism was encouraged even among faculty. The one exception was the medical faculty, and that was where Freud found a haven in the midst of the scourge of Church-sponsored anti-Semitism.

Beyond the academy, Freud encountered prejudice as well and “reserved a special fury for anti-Semites” (Gay, 1988, p. 28). Gay recounts two further personal instances of anti-Semitic attack against Freud or his family:

In 1883, on a train journey, he encountered several of them [anti-Semites]. Angered by his opening the window for some fresh air, they called him “miserable Jew,” commented scathingly on his un-Christian egotism, and offered to “show” him. Apparently unperturbed, Freud invited his opponents to step up, yelled at them, and triumphed over the “rabble.” (p. 28)

Freud’s son, Martin, recalled that once in the Bavarian resort of Thumsee, his father “routed a gang of about ten men, and some female supporters, who had been shouting anti-Semitic abuse at Martin and his brother Oliver, by charging furiously at them with his walking stick” (Gay, 1988, p. 28). Gay adds, “Freud must have found these moments gratifying contrasts to his father’s passive submission to being bullied” (Gay, 1988, p. 28).

A corollary prong of anti-Semitic attack focused on Jewish males, who were stereotyped as feminine. Jill Salberg (2007), sourcing Daniel Boyarin (1997), links this additional component of prejudice to Freud’s religious father’s unheroic conduct when he was a child. Salberg notes:

The type of man Boyarin was referring to was the “Yeshiva-Bokhur,” a young unmarried man devoting himself to the study of Torah and Talmud. This man was seen as softer, gentler, perhaps even passive, but was very much a cultural ideal. Jakob Freud certainly fit this description. We are told by a few of Jakob’s grandchildren (Anna Freud, Judith Heller, and Martin Freud) that he spent much of his time studying the Talmud in the original (Aramaic) at home. This suggests that Jakob
had an advanced degree of Talmudic knowledge, as Jews rarely studied Talmud without a partner. Clearly Jakob was not out in the world aggressively earning a living. (p. 202)

Freud eschewed his father’s passivity. Instead, he nurtured a version of Jewish manhood that was described by Nordau (1903) as a “Jewry of Muscle.” Freud would not pattern himself after his devout father’s unheroic conduct, but would fight back.

**The role of supersessionism**

The centuries-old doctrine of *supersessionism* has historically been held by many Christians and has in certain cases lent itself to the perpetuation of anti-Semitism. This perspective views God’s covenant with Israel as having been annulled and replaced by a new covenant with the Christian Church, effectively engendering a most destructive dichotomy between Jews and Christians.

Many first-century Christians were also Jewish, the differentiated relationship between them having been the product of centuries of evolution. Susannah Heschel (2006) observes:

> This is not just interfaith boilerplate; it is responsible history. Rather than a “parting of the ways” between Judaism and Christianity with Jesus’ emergence, scholars now call the first three centuries the era in which both faiths came to take on shapes we would recognize—they were, in these years, “the ways that never parted,” as scholar Annette Yoshiko Reed describes it. (p. 59)

According to Boyarin (2004), in order to establish its own identity, Christianity needed to differentiate itself from Judaism. Boyarin goes so far as to say that “Christianity in its constitution as a religion ... needed Judaism to be its other—the religion that is false” (p. 11). Though many Christians would not go so far as to view Judaism as “false,” nonetheless I concur with Boyarin that an ultimately destructive binary was instituted. This binary first served to differentiate Judaism from Christianity, but later rendered Christianity prone to anti-Semitism. In turn, Judaism was rendered susceptible to colonization by secularism. In years to come, in fact, Jewish identity for many Christians became undifferentiated from secularism.

**From supersessionism to shared vision**

Supersessionism has in recent years received considerable critical rebuttal from Christian theologians (Hauwerwas, 2001; Moltmann, 1990; Yoder, 2008) who recognize that this doctrine contradicts the immutable nature of
God’s covenants. Seen through this transcendent, covenantal perspective, it was God’s design to develop Christianity as a complementary redemptive vehicle for Gentiles (Greenberg, 2004; Moltmann, 1977, 1990). Moltmann observes: “The mission of Christianity is to be seen as the way in which Israel pervades the world of the Gentile nations with a messianic hope for the coming God. Christianity loses nothing by recognizing that its hope springs from this enduring Jewish root” (p. 2–3). Martin Buber, philosopher and Hassidic theologian, concurred that Christianity provided for the “mysterious’ spread of the name, commandments and kingdom of its [Judaism’s] God” (Moltmann, 1990, p. 3). Thus, through the lens of eschatology and a shared hope of redemption, Rabbi Irving Greenberg (2004) can say:

Both Judaism and Christianity share the totality of their dreams and the flawed finiteness of their methods. ... From the perspective of a divine strategy of redemption rather than from within the communities embedded in historical experience and needs—both religions have more in common than they have been able to admit to themselves. Both Jews and Christians have a revolutionary dream of total transformation. ... For what often seems an eternity, both have hoped and waited, and both have transmitted the message and worked for the final redemption. Both need each other’s work (and that of others) to realize their deepest hopes. (p. 233)

Sharing this eschatological vision, Christian theologian Jurgen Moltmann (1985) echoes Greenberg’s hope that:

The great theological dualities will be free from their position as mere antitheses. They will be revitalized. ... They will no longer be defined over against one another, by way of mutual negation; they will be determined in all their complex interconnections in relation to a third, common to them both. (p. 8)

The Christian narrative

Christians, like Oskar Pfister, seeking truth and human love in their quest to heal the broken-hearted and be transformative agents in this world, found themselves drawn to psychoanalysis, in spite of Freud’s decided rejection of religion (Browning 1987; Rieff, 1979). Pfister recognized the prophetic subtext underlying Freud’s militant stand against religion, though he felt Freud’s universal disparaging of religion was misguided. He writes:

And he who through the creation of psychoanalysis has provided the instrument which freed suffering souls from their chains and opened
the gates of their prisons, so that they could hasten into the sunny land of a life-giving faith, is not far from the kingdom of God. ... Will you be angry with me if I see you, who have intercepted such glorious rays of the eternal light and exhausted yourself in the struggle for truth and human love, as closer, figuratively, to the throne of God, despite your alleged lack of belief, than many a churchman, mumbling prayers and carrying out ceremonies, but whose heart has never burned with knowledge and good will? (Roazen, 1993, p. 557)

Freud, though heavily influenced by the Enlightenment with its optimistic posture toward humanity, retained even more than the Christian church a hermeneutic of suspicion, one that apprehended the remarkable capacity for human self-deception. Many Christians who were drawn to psychoanalysis had become disappointed with the hypocrisy of the church and yearned for understandings that recognized the complexities of the human heart. For them, Freud’s call to the pursuit of truth in the therapeutic enterprise was a necessary return to honesty and humility.

Psychoanalysts influenced by the Christian narrative not only held in common a zeal for honesty that decried hypocrisy, but also tilted toward a relational perspective. For Christians this relational tilt originates in the Judaic belief in a multifaceted, personal God in whose image humans were created and by whom life is sustained. That Judaic narrative speaks of human failure and God’s design to ultimately redeem creation (Starr, 2008). This redemptive hope was reconstituted in the New Testament through a particular extension of Judaism—one that renders it uniquely Christian—the doctrine of the Trinity. God exists as one, but also, specifically, as three in one: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Christianity’s model for the negotiation of God’s “otherness” and “oneness” with creation—that is, His transcendence and immanence, which are held in tension. It is this doctrine of the Trinity that gives a berth in Christianity for its redemptive narrative of incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection.

INCARNATION, CRUCIFIXION, AND RESURRECTION:
THE CHRISTIAN NARRATIVE AND PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORY

The asymmetry of divine-human relations is similar in certain respects to the asymmetry that is present in interhuman relations. In the latter relationship, asymmetry is an essential aspect of reciprocal recognition for Hegel: Asymmetry and reciprocity do not cancel each other out. ... Divine love that divests itself for the sake of reconciliation with its other—a reconciliation that has an element of the tragic because of the
necessity of sacrifice—is at the core of Hegel’s theology and his account of the ethical life ... The divine sacrifice is primary; the human follows from and images it.

—Hodgson (2005, p. 255)

The Christian narrative of incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection, from which Hegel’s intersubjectivity theory emerges, forms the framework on which this book takes shape. As psychoanalysis developed, the mutual influence of Judaic and Christian narratives subliminally became registered in the emergent dynamic theories. Relationality, a corrective to Freud’s valid but Enlightenment-hobbled emphasis on truth, was propounded by many analysts influenced by the Christian narrative and became the dominant theme in evolving psychoanalytic thinking (Aron & Mitchell, 1999). With this augmented focus on human relationship, intersubjectivity and “mutual recognition” as defining constructs of human community became centerpieces of what came to be known as relational psychoanalysis. Mutual recognition validates the subjectivity of each individual, yet also validates the intersubjective relational matrix that bonds one person to another. This seminal philosophical and psychoanalytic concept becomes a basis for individual rights, for ethics, and ultimately for love.

Through Jessica Benjamin⁵ and her writings on mutual recognition, Hegel becomes woven into the fabric of relational psychoanalytic thought. Benjamin lifts an integral part of Hegel’s thinking, his chapter on lordship and bondage, master and slave, and makes it central to understanding the problem of recognition. This chapter has often been used as a self-contained trope, separated from many of his other premises. Indeed this chapter could be seen as the midpoint of Hegel’s thinking.

Benjamin also opens the door to my present study of what precedes and what follows Hegel’s midpoint, which I believe can extend the present understanding of recognition and its application to the treatment process. For Hegel, the midpoint of destruction—crucifixion—was preceded by the first movement toward recognition, that of incarnation. The midpoint was followed by yet another important movement in the process of recognition, which is resurrection. Hegel’s mutual recognition can be traced along the path described in sacred Christian narrative as incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection. I will offer a juxtaposition of these three movements of Hegel’s system with Benjamin’s intersubjectivity theory and augment my focus with the work of the philosopher Paul Ricoeur.

In my decision to utilize Hegel, I am aware of submitting my ideas to the fascinating debates that surround his work. My choice naturally emerged from psychoanalytic theory that had already been developed by Jessica Benjamin. In my further research of Hegel’s system, I found sufficient basis
for the development of my ideas in the works of Peter Hodgson, Hans Kung, Laura Werner, and Robert Williams, who do not view Hegel as presenting “a panlogism in which God or Absolute Spirit has no real relations outside itself ... a pantheism that can easily convert into an atheism or a humanism, and reason [that] is reduced to a bloodless abstraction” (Peter Hodgson, personal communication). Through consultation with Hegel scholars such as Peter Hodgson, I have borrowed major themes from Hegel for the purpose of demonstrating generative correlations between psychoanalysis and the Christian narrative. Thus, I present my study with the caveat that it is not principally a philosophical or theological treatise. I approach Hegel not with a modernist search for the objective truth of his ideas, but with a postmodern sensibility that studies his works for resonance, for a renewed understanding of the narrative symbols they depict—the incarnate infant, the cross, the empty tomb—that have given rise to the thoughts relational psychoanalysts are thinking (Ricoeur, 1967).

I will now briefly summarize Benjamin’s contributions on mutual recognition that will be crucial to an understanding of this book. Following that, I will present biographical material about Hegel. To extend our understanding of recognition, I will introduce the readers to the work of Paul Ricoeur, whose phenomenological, hermeneutic method will be deployed at both the beginning and the end of the study.

**Jessica Benjamin and intersubjectivity theory**

Drawing primarily on Winnicott and infancy research in psychoanalysis and on Hegel in philosophy, Benjamin (1988, 1990, 1995) developed a nuanced, relational rendering of intersubjectivity theory and one of its core components, mutual recognition. Benjamin depicts mutual recognition as the capacity to see others as equal subjects with needs, desires, and perspectives that can differ from one’s own, and the reciprocating experience of the other’s acknowledgment of oneself. This capacity allows each person to give and receive that kind of acknowledging response. It is the developmental achievement of this capacity that is Benjamin’s initial focus and which then forms the basis for her elaboration of intersubjectivity theory.

Benjamin traces a developmental trajectory of recognition beginning with early face-to-face interaction and shared affect but followed by a phase of conflict between the aspiration for autonomy and control of the other and the realization of dependency on an other who has her own will and different desires. The infant’s *omnipotence* as Winnicott called it (1959) clashes with the perceived reality of the other’s separate subjectivity. Benjamin, following Winnicott, shows how the infant’s denial of the other’s separate subjectivity through “ruthless” attacks on the object in fantasy or reality...
(Winnicott 1968) is transformed into acceptance of the outside other as less controllable but safer, more real and enjoyable.

Winnicott proposed, and Benjamin affirmed, that if the mother survives the destructive attack without retaliation, the infant (having destroyed the projected mother in fantasy) regains her in reality, though beyond its narcissistic, omnipotent control. Thus, the infant acquires the formative experience of that parent as a separate subject (Benjamin, 1990; Winnicott, 1968), as a (transcendent) “other” with needs, wishes, and will of her own. Benjamin (1990) concludes: “The denial of the mother’s subjectivity, in theory and in practice, profoundly impedes our ability to see the world as inhabited by equal subjects” (p. 186). Principally constructing her theory from Hegel’s idea of the master/slave relationship and the struggle for recognition, and bringing this idea into conjunction with Winnicott, Benjamin views recognition of separate subjectivity as both the necessary predisposition for ethical behavior and “love, the sense of discovering the other [Eigen, 1981; Ghent, 1990]” (p. 192). However, Benjamin does not simply accept Hegel’s views. Rather, mediated by feminist thought, Benjamin challenges what she interprets as Hegel’s position, that struggle ends in domination. For Benjamin, struggle ends in mutuality, an achievement of holding the tensions of difference rather than ever reaching a zero-tension equilibrium.

G. W. F. Hegel: From Christian theology to intersubjectivity

“These days it is hardly possible for a theoretical idea of any scope to do justice to the experience of consciousness, and in fact not only the experience of consciousness but the embodied experience of human beings, without having incorporated something of Hegel’s philosophy,” mused Theodor Adorno (1993, p. 2), social philosopher and member of the Frankfurt School. Hegel’s significance for Western thought remains unparalleled.

Most of the well-known expositions of Hegel have approached his work from an atheist perspective, the so-called Left Hegelians, led by French philosopher Alexander Kojève. Kojève’s highly secularized interpretation of Hegel’s works radically colonized the sacred aspects of Hegel’s writings. In Chapter 5 I will comment in a footnote on Kojève’s perspective, but here, I will attempt to recontextualize Hegel’s work both with respect to his personal life and his cultural surround.

Georg W. F. Hegel was born in 1770 into a thoroughly Protestant German family. The firstborn of a civil servant father whose clergy kin had baptized Schiller, he excelled in his studies and seemed destined to be a theologian. Yet in spite of Hegel’s interest in the study of religion and his subsequent degree from the seminary at Tubingen, for most of Hegel’s earlier works,
we see the icy gloss of the Enlightenment encasing the substance about which he is writing.

Christianity following the Enlightenment took on a cast of arid intellectualism, reflecting even in its Reformation break with religious scholasticism a tilt toward reason. That tilt would shift in time, the ultimate merits of the Enlightenment becoming questioned, as skepticism and materialism became the heirs apparent of “our God reason.” Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) stands at the forefront of major German works that attempted to address these cultural dilemmas that arose from an Enlightenment privileging of reason.

In addition to the revolt against Enlightenment thinking ignited by Kant, a sociopolitical revolution was afoot in France. France, whose Enlightenment proceeded with an excision of all things religious, was beginning to experience the ramifications of this Enlightenment in its social structure. Louis XVI had been put to death, and mass executions under Robespierre had occurred; nonetheless, the fundamental principles of the French Revolution continued to be deeply held by Hegel and his colleagues Schelling, Hölderlin, Herder, Schiller, and others.

These colleagues, whose passions continued to be theology and philosophy, hoped for a full revolution of spirit. It was their hope that not only politics but art, philosophy, and especially religion would be revitalized. So much was this their passion, that as Hegel and his colleagues would take leave of each other, it was their practice to say, “Kingdom of God” (Kung, 1987, p. 43). The coming of the kingdom of God was the hope that infused all that they did, and was the lens through which they interpreted historical events. For Hegel, this movement toward the climax of history was mediated by the manifestation and diffusion of the Holy Spirit in the world. Nothing restorative happens in the world without this mediation: Mediation by the Spirit, *Geist*, becomes the central idea for Hegel.

The Trinitarian God who vitalizes human progress was for Hegel the *dunamos*, or empowering dynamic of his philosophical system and the template for his work on intersubjectivity. The God of the past had been a God of the celestial; the Enlightenment God was concerned with things terrestrial; thus the point of contact between theology and philosophy was becoming humankind. This shift from transcendence to immanence focused Hegel on the relevance of the incarnation of God—God as human—not only for theology but for philosophy and for anthropology. Hegel’s organizing principle became “in worldly thought, the world does not become godless, and that, in religious thought, God does not become unworldly” (Kung, 1987, p. 2). Hegel did not merely want an intellectual understanding of God; he wanted to combine a “positive religion of revelation with a natural religion of reason” quickened by *Geist* or the Holy Spirit, that included both heart and mind (p. 58).
This conviction worked on the soul of Hegel over the course of his life, moving his thinking from an earlier arid exposition of academic theology and philosophy to a proclamation that begins the Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion (Hegel, 2006) with the passion of a prophet:

God is the beginning of all things and the end of all things; [everything] starts from God and returns to God. God is the one and only object of philosophy. [Its concern is] to occupy itself with God, to apprehend everything in God, to lead everything back to God, as well as to derive everything particular from God and to justify everything only in so far as it stems from God, is sustained through its relationship with God, lives by God’s radiance and has [within itself] the mind of God. Thus philosophy is theology, and [one’s] occupation with philosophy—or rather in philosophy—is of itself the service of God [Gottessdienst, “worship”] [1:84]. (Hodgson, 2005, p. 14)

The world continued to be jolted by revolutions spreading into Belgium and Poland, and Hegel would have his own world shaken by the cholera epidemic in Germany of 1831. He and his family fled to the countryside, where he celebrated his 61st birthday. He delivered the first of his new semester lectures, but on the 13th of November, 1831, he took ill with a virulent case of cholera. At five in the afternoon he died in his sleep. “In the words of his wife, he died like a ‘saint’: ‘it was the slumber crossing of a transfigured person.’ The last work on his desk, which was intended for publication, remained a torso: it was the Proofs for the Existence of God” (Kung, 1987, p. 412).

**Paul Ricoeur: Hermeneutics and the movements of recognition**

In similar fashion to Benjamin, whose interpolation of Winnicott with Hegel addressed the absolutizing6 elements of Hegel, I have chosen for the same reason to incorporate the work of Paul Ricoeur. In that I am approaching Hegel with a postmodern sensibility, I will formulate my movements of recognition first through Ricoeur’s phenomenological/hermeneutic method, and then correlate the movements with Hegel’s incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection. In this fashion, a dialogue of present and past narratives may provide creative material. By utilizing Ricoeur I can explore resurrection and, as Benjamin, seek to present an alternative to the popular reading of Hegel which consummates in domination.

Unlike Benjamin, who focuses on one aspect of Hegel’s work (i.e., recognition and survival of the “other”), the work of Paul Ricoeur (The Course of Recognition, 2005) provides a basis for elaborating on the moments
or movements of recognition that precede and follow Benjamin's focus on survival of destruction. In *The Course of Recognition*, Ricoeur proposes that the progressive development of variations in meaning in the lexicon anticipates the actual trajectory of the experience of recognition. Ricoeur lends amplification to “recognition” through his study of the lexicographic development and usage of the word in a manner that augments Jessica Benjamin’s theory of “recognition.” The achievement of intersubjectivity parsed by Benjamin substantially follows the path of development charted by the lexicon. These evolving lexicographic definitions form a “course,” according to Ricoeur, and reflect the progressive movement of the process of mutual recognition. With regard to psychological development, we can outline the trajectory of recognition according to the course of the lexicon.7,8

The first movement in the lexicon (Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary of English Usage, 1994) implies an awareness of reality (i.e., “to recognize”). This awareness is based on prior knowledge because it is reknown (from Latin *recognescere*); i.e., what is being recognized had previously been identified. This movement toward mutual recognition declares, “I feel like you, you feel like me—we feel alike,” i.e., “I *identify* with you.”

The second movement in the lexicon reveals an awareness of the differentiated status of the other, that is, the “particular” or “independent” status. This second movement declares, “You are separate from me; you have a center from which you see things differently from me—I can’t control you,” i.e., “I *surrender* to your rights.”

The third movement in the lexicon signifies acknowledgment of a differentiated status by a show of appreciation. This third movement toward mutual recognition declares, “You and I perceive things differently, we struggle to offer our views of what is significant to each other—We appreciate each other’s views in our dialogue,” i.e., “I have *gratitude* for you.”

Extrapolating from Ricoeur and Benjamin, I suggest three movements of recognition that course along the following trajectory:

1. acknowledging the existence of someone, i.e., *identification*, leading to
2. acknowledging the differentiated, independent status of that someone who has rights, i.e., *surrender*, culminating in
3. acknowledging the differentiated, independent status of that someone who has rights and whom I appreciate, i.e., *gratitude*.

Embedded within the word *recognition* is a commentary on the theme of recurrence in the experience of recognition. The trajectory repeats itself in a cyclical pattern: re-cognition, a return to something that was already known and yet became unrecognized. Recognition is repeatedly lost and rediscovered. In this distinction Hegel is differentiated from Benjamin and Ricoeur, who understand that mutual recognition is never fully and

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finally achieved but is striven for, gained, lost, and recaptured, as domination of other gives way to the ongoing pursuit of dialogue.

**IDENTIFICATION, SURRENDER, AND GRATITUDE: PSYCHOANALYTIC PROCESS AND THE CHRISTIAN NARRATIVE**

In this book I hope to show how the process of psychotherapeutic transformation is an analogue to ancient redemptive narratives. Psychoanalysis has already benefitted from interdisciplinary studies with Buddhist thought (Cantor, 2008; Epstein, 1995; Magid, 2000; Rubin, 1996; Young-Eisendrath & Muramoto, 2002), those studies having generatively opened the door to explorations of other spiritual narratives. In this study, I will suggest that relational psychoanalysis has been influenced by numerous theorists who were shaped by an embedded Christian narrative. As a result, the redemptive Christian narrative of incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection may be traced in its theories, emerging as an analogue of a relational psychoanalytic transformational process of identification, surrender, and gratitude. The transcendent God of the Christian narrative chooses to identify with humans in the incarnate form of Jesus, chooses to surrender to crucifixion though he is not guilty, and chooses in His resurrection to offer the gift of renewed life, which can be transmitted redemptively to others in a spirit of gratitude. This transcendent God was not coerced to love; He did so freely. His move to redeem humans and instantiate the model of incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection as the means of transformation was a function of His grace. Religion scholar Martin Marty poignantly describes grace, an attribute of God’s love:

> God had the freedom to remain unrelated; instead God was moved to create a universe, to situate humans in it, and to move towards them. ... God is love ... this reality suggests that God is moved by nothing other than that love to visit humans, bring them back to God, and restore them. This love, unmotivated and spontaneous—which means that it does not need to find redeeming qualities in its object—finds expression in grace. Grace ... exemplifies the revelation of the divine character in action and the relation of the divine to human beings. Consequently, grace is conceived as personal, a movement from the being of God to the drama of human existence. (Marty, 1992, p. 210)

In similar fashion, the relational therapist/analyst, not out of coercion but out of love, allows him- or herself to deeply know, identify with and be transformed, or incarnate, into characters in the patient’s enacted life drama, even
as the patient begins to mutually identify with the therapist/analyst (Terrell, 2007). The analyst surrenders to this process, which will lead to his/her enduring repetitive destructive assaults or crucifixion during the therapeutic process—assaults endured as the analyst either partly becomes or is misperceived as a harmful character from the patient’s past. Through a nascent faith in a new relationship, the patient also surrenders to a process muddled with the mist of the past in the realities of the present. In the course of the therapeutic relationship, the projections recede as both patient and analyst survive mutual destruction and resurrect into a new experience of intersubjectivity, one marked by the experience of mutual gratitude.

ORGANIZATION OF THIS BOOK

The book is divided into three parts: Part I: “Identification/Incarnation”; Part II: “Surrender/Crucifixion”; Part III: “Gratitude/Resurrection.” Each of Hegel’s movements is located in psychoanalytic theory, practice, and history, aided by the hermeneutic investigatory process employed in the work of Paul Ricoeur. Hegel’s incarnation is linked with the psychoanalytic concept of identification, his crucifixion is linked to psychoanalytic surrender, his resurrection is linked to psychoanalytic gratitude. In an effort to transcend what some feel are the absolutizing aspects of Hegel’s narrative, I will resource Paul Ricoeur’s hermeneutic method, and seek to offer a new perspective on “gratitude” and its analogue in resurrection.

Part I

Chapter 2 will offer theoretical perspectives on psychoanalysis and the Christian narrative. The chapter will be devoted to establishing parallels between the first movement of mutual recognition—identification—and its analogue in Christian incarnation: the voluntary taking on by God of human finiteness and pain. This will be accomplished through exploration of identification in infancy, in the therapeutic relationship, and as it is extrapolated in Hegel’s writings on incarnation.

Chapter 3 will begin with a description of the distinctives of a clinical practice that is both psychoanalytic and acknowledging of a Christian worldview. I will then begin to present a clinical case in which identification and incarnation are demonstrated in the case notes, narrative, and clinical theory in the long-term treatment of my patient, “Mandy.”

Chapter 4 will introduce the first of three segments appearing in Parts I–III, which traces the process of recognition in the development of psychoanalysis. In this chapter I will introduce the reader to early-20th-century psychoanalysts who were identified both with the Christian narrative and with psychoanalysis. In their adaptations and reactions to
Christianity, they introduced an incarnation of the Christian narrative to psychoanalytic thought.

**Part II**

Chapter 5 returns to theoretical perspectives, exploring the correspondences between the psychoanalytic concept of *surrender* and Hegel’s portrayal of crucifixion—the surrender of God to his own negation in his death. I will examine the psychoanalytic concept of *surrender* as it appears in infancy, in the therapeutic relationship, and in Hegel’s system informed by the Christian narrative.

Chapter 6 rejoins my ongoing clinical case in which surrender and crucifixion are both experienced by Mandy and me, and I offer my clinical perspectives informed by the Christian narrative.

Chapter 7 revisits the work of Ronald Fairbairn and D. W. Winnicott in greater depth than in Chapter 4, using them as exemplars of “destruction and survival” of both the Christian and psychoanalytic narratives in their work. Their theories, significantly influenced by their Christian narratives, led the way to the mutual influence of psychoanalysis and Christianity which contributed to a paradigmatic transformation in psychoanalytic thought.

**Part III**

Chapter 8 shifts my theoretical focus away from exclusive reliance on Hegel’s system. After sharing biographical material about Paul Ricoeur, I resource his perspectives on resurrection, gratitude, and gift. Resurrection heralds the point in Hegel’s narrative in which new creation begins, when the third movement of recognition—a validation of separate subjectivity that can be appreciated, or gratitude—consummates the path to mutual recognition. The gift can now be received, used, and appreciated. With Hegel’s system as background, I defer to the mystery and complexity of Ricoeur’s post-Hegelian, Kantian orientation. There is hope of resurrection, of a fulfilled eschatology, but the continued presence of evil modulates any impulse toward triumphalism and reorients a love based in integrity to the reality of suffering and the necessity of mourning, even as we wait in hope.

Chapter 9 chronicles a final aspect of my work with Mandy insofar as this book is concerned. Our continuing encounters with evil and mourning lace the wonder of resurrection and gratitude, which permeates our relationship.

Chapter 10 focuses attention on the resurrection of Sándor Ferenczi as the final theorist that I will examine in the historical development of psychoanalysis. Ferenczi is an exemplar of a theorist whose ideas were in part influenced by the Christian narrative and who suffered destruction. I investigate evidence pointing to the influence of Jewish and Christian relational narratives in the work of Ferenczi, linking his *resurrection* to
the process of recognition in which gratitude for the gift of his work became possible.

Chapter 11 is the conclusion. In this chapter I extend the findings of Chapter 10 as I review the pervasive utopian hopes of early-20th-century European culture and the messianic strivings that these hopes represented. I suggest that the resonance of Ferenczi’s thinking with Jewish and Christian narratives appealed to theorists who had been influenced by those narratives. These 20th-century theorists transformed Ferenczi’s resurrected perspectives into their particular, divergent psychoanalytic streams, which reunited in the confluence we know as relational psychoanalysis. Thus, the path of recognition reaches its high watermark in the emergence of relational psychoanalysis whose spirit embodies a resurrected Jewish and Christian emphasis on truth, loving relationship, and redemption.

ENDNOTES

1. I wish to distinguish Christianity, that narrative which reflects the teachings of Jesus of the Gospels, from Christianism. Andrew Sullivan (2006) elaborates, “Christianity, in this view, is simply a faith. ‘Christianism’ is an ideology, politics, an ‘ism’” (p. 2).


Nancy McWilliams represents the best of contemporary psychoanalysis and, though not specifically identified with the “school” of relational psychoanalysis, subscribes to a deeply relational theory and methodology. Her books Psychoanalytic Diagnosis: Understanding Personality Structure in the Clinical Process (1994); Psychoanalytic Case Formulation (1999); Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy: A Practitioner’s Guide (2004); and Psychoanalytic Diagnostic Manual (2006) are some of the most clearly written texts on psychoanalytic psychotherapy.

This book wishes to support an ethic of relationality that is practiced by psychoanalysts of divergent technique and theory, whether or not they belong to a distinct relational school. The danger is that though relationality is a valid and powerful lens through which to understand human nature, by dint of accretion to political forces it risks becoming relationalism.

3. “The Jewish method of interpretation of multiple meaning, which worked by means of association, [and] by which the objects of interpretation, the holy texts, were seen as given once and for all and time to a large extent as circular, that is to say, the realities of the soul were relatively unchangeable, was pushed back by the victorious progressive, Greco-Christian, Aristotelian theology demanding one-dimensionality, and eventually ghettoized. However, the main principles of the Jewish method of interpretation—the theses about the relative unchangeableness of the fundamental psychic structures
and the endless variability of meaning adjacent to the multitude of relevant interpretations—survived in the so strongly Jewish-influenced [discipline of] psychoanalysis” (Enckell, 2001, p. 168).

4. For purposes of uniformity, God will be referred to in the masculine gender, though it is immediately acknowledged that such categories are entirely arbitrary in referring to deity.

5. Jessica Benjamin is a faculty member and supervisor at the NYU postdoctoral psychology program in psychotherapy and psychoanalysis. She is the author of three books: Bonds of Love, Like Subjects Love Objects, and Shadow of the Other, which have been translated into many languages. She has written about intersubjectivity and recognition as well as gender and sexuality. More recently, she has directed a project on acknowledgment in the Middle East for Palestinian and Israeli mental health professionals and written about collective trauma and witnessing. She is co-founder of the IARPP and the Mitchell Center for Relational Studies in New York City.

6. By the term absolutizing, philosophers allege that Hegel’s system ultimately reduces everything to one (i.e., domination).

7. Since Benjamin derives her constructs through a study of Phenomenology of Spirit, originally written in German, a lexicographical study of the German word yields this information: The word for recognition in German is Anerkennung, first used by Hegel as a philosophical concept in his early Jena writings (Werner, 2007). In German, recognition or Anerkennung carries three meanings: to recognize something as something (e.g., an approaching figure as a friend); giving recognition to something or acknowledging that it is something (the performative act of, e.g., recognizing the new government of some country or waving a greeting to an approaching friend); and positive recognition, or the confirmation of something’s value (p. 99).

8. Merriam-Webster identifies these current usages: 2a: to recall knowledge of: make out as or perceive to be something previously known; b: to perceive clearly: be fully aware of: realize; 3: to acknowledge formally: as (a) to admit as being of a particular status; (b) to admit as being one entitled to be heard (as in a meeting); give the floor to; (c) (1): to acknowledge the de facto existence of (as a government in a state); (2): to acknowledge the independence of (as a community or body that has thrown off the sovereignty of a state to which it was subject) and treat as independent or as otherwise effective; 4: to acknowledge in some definite way: take notice of; (a) to acknowledge with a show of approval or appreciation; (b) to acknowledge acquaintance with; (c) to admit the fact or existence of.