

Book Review in Conservative Judaism

Vol; 60 No 4 Summer 2008

***The Psychological Roots of Religious Belief:
Searching for Angels and the Parent God, by***

C.J. Faber (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2004).

Faber challenges us with a *fundamentalist* Freudian view of a *fundamentalist* Christian world outlook, deeply as to the way things are and how they got to be that way.

He takes *Psychological* to mean (a Freudian) *Psychodynamic* understanding of how our upbringing led to a specific (Judeo-Christian) *Religious Belief*, where humankind exists in a dependent relationship with an omnipotent God, who responds to properly offered and performed prayer.

From the book jacket's blurb;

A key point of Faber's analysis is the connection between the onset of infantile amnesia during childhood's later years and the evocative power of religious mythology...religious narratives can and do jog these implicit emotional memories in an uncanny way...namely that we are in the care of an omnipotent parental provider who watches over us and ministers to our needs.

He poses some crucial questions;

**“Why do millions upon millions of people require a Parent-God to feel centered in themselves, to feel secure, attached, happy, joyous?...Why must a Parent-Deity be there at all?ⁱ
“And Why does successful prayer hinge...upon the assumption of...a state of helplessness, dependence and submission...?ⁱⁱ**

Faber posits;

“the ground, from which religious experience arises, is the early period of our existence in the world, the period during which the child and the parent are locked in elemental care-giving care-receiving interactionsⁱⁱⁱ ...we are physiologically, genetically, normally endowed with both a capacity and a predisposition to process current information along neural pathways that harbor ... our experience of being a helpless, dependent little one in the care and protection of an all-powerful parent...^{iv}

When the helpless little one cries out (protoprayer) the omnipotent, caring big one (protodeity) arrives to succor and to reassure... during life’s first years this happens over and over again, thousands of times, and establishes for the child through simple conditioning the essential nature of reality. Accordingly, religious faith is the adult’s wishful, willful insistence (based on experience) that the attentive caregiver of the early period is still there watching over one, that one’s cry (prayer) can still beget the wished-for, loving, interventional response...One is not alone, and one has nothing to fear from a just and merciful God^v...a loving, care-giving Parent-God Who devotes Himself, among other things, to watching over His vulnerable dependent children, the human flock He has engendered ...^{vi}

He confidently concludes that; ***“Although one can grow religiously, there is no growing out of the infantile stage”^{vii}***

The Judeo-Christian deity is traditionally engendered as male despite early childhood’s responders to “protoprayer “being overwhelmingly female, Yet Faber generally employs gender-neutral expressions such as Parent/Caregiver. Big One, or

Provider. Faber resolves that with some dexterous psychodynamic sleight of hand,

...”I find the maternal figure...at the relational core from which the symbols of religion arise and flourish. By the time the father emerges as Deity in consciousness and ritual, He harbors within the complexity of His image the structural, formative pre-Oedipal years during the course of which the person’s primary internalizations develop. The projective Father-God inherits the longings, the conflicts, the anxieties, the joys and exaltations—in a word the goodness and the badness—of life’s initial stages. Accordingly, the maternal object resides in the figure of the paternal Almighty and is always perceived there unconsciously by the worshiper.”^{viii}

This sleight of hand is complex, often obtuse, offering little hard evidence for what Faber describes. The presuppositions piled on one another become hypnotic /trance-like inductions, circling around themselves, perhaps clear to those who affirm a Freudian psychodynamic position but obfuscating gobbledygook for those who don’t.

To accept Faber’s understandings, one must accept the psychodynamic and religious presuppositions that under gird them. This reviewer, a non-fundamentalist Jew and a non-fundamentalist Freudian, does not accept Faber’s presuppositions as fact.

What if the arc of our “being” is towards mature relationship rather than the inevitable repeating of implied childhood experience? The relationally adept adult, cared for in childhood, can grow into a loving relationship with one’s own sometimes difficult inner “selves”; with external others, whether parents, love partners, children, friends, co-workers, and even a mature relationship with God. An eminently more useful model than Faber’s, mature relationship implies knowing that much of what happens has very little to do with you, and yet you will respond, choosing useful

response(s), some of which will be neither visible nor audible. Life need not be just the repeat of neural patterns, laid down long ago.

We are modeled after and molded by divinity^{ix}- yet as non-fundamentalists we affirm that our texts were written, recorded and shaped by humans. Any author invariably projects their own thoughts and opinions onto their creation. So God and our understanding of divinity is also modeled after and molded by us. It cannot be otherwise.

That we experience God as a parent is not surprising. Parents are in an especially important position in the economy of human "becoming" and "being". Their union brought us forth from "nothing". They provided nurturance, sustenance and love during crucial years. We want their blessing and love now as always. Yet as we mature, we discover that our parents like us (Surprise! Surprise!) are flawed. That does not mean that they no longer exist relationally for us.

And it's true, no matter how mature we are, when illness, tragedy or bad things happen we often revert to child-like thinking; "Why me?" "I've been good." "How could God do this to me? Or we justify God. "God is good" -or "it's all meant for the best,"

We need *not* remain in that place. We are adults- not little children.

Relationally mature, we need believe and say to those who parented us.

"Mom and Dad, I'm grown up! I bear your genetic and behavioral imprint. I am modeled in many ways by you and after you. I have my own wounds to deal with, many of which have little to do with you. I love you for who you are. You did the best you knew how to do. Now we're in a more equal relationship. I'm proud that you're my parents. I hope you're proud of me. I hope you can learn from

me as I have learned from you.”

And indeed our God is also flawed. And that does not mean that God no longer exists relationally for us. To be in a meaningful adult covenantal loving relationship with God requires full awareness of our divine partner's "wounded" places and "neglected selves". God's flaws do not mean that God does not exist. It may mean that the omnipotent omni-benevolent God Faber refers to and we have often turned to in times of trouble does not reflect an accurate reading of the reality of God.

Old theologies and psychologies do not sink silently into the night, anymore than do our childhood perceptions. If we fail to grow out of our pediatric view of divinity, we are stuck with a religious/relational system inadequate for our lives.

ⁱ P.108

ⁱⁱ P.142

ⁱⁱⁱ P.17

^{iv} P.20

^v P. 84

^{vi} P.92

^{vii} P.42

^{viii} P.30

^{ix} viz; Jewish Relational Care A-Z; We Are Our Other's Keeper; Premises of Jewish Relational Care pp 7-16. The Haworth Press, Binghamton.NY 2006