

# Crucifixion and Psychotherapy

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**Abstract:** A severe Catholic education led to sexual inhibition in the patient's mother resulting in his trauma of conception as a lack of paternal energy. The patient's Catholic education caused a castration complex. The story of Jesus is looked at in order to understand the patient's problems. At the end of therapy a positive father image is constructed.

**Zusammenfassung:** *Kreuzigung und Psychotherapie.* Eine strenge katholische Erziehung führte zu sexuellen Hemmungen der Mutter und zu einem Empfängnisstrauma des Patienten als einem Mangel an väterlicher Energie. Die katholische Erziehung des Patienten resultierte in einem Kastrationskomplex. Die Geschichte von Jesus wird betrachtet, um die Probleme des Patienten zu verstehen. Am Ende der Therapie wird ein positives Vaterbild aufgebaut.

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Erika Gsell was confronted with the question of the incompatibility between Christian Religion and psychotherapy. I want to look at this question from my own experience as a therapist. With my patients damaged by a Christian education the problem was not so much the punishing God, the father figure, as Jesus on the cross who had proclaimed this God. Jesus had caused a trauma in childhood, an "ecclesiogenic neurosis", which is defined by the psychiatrist Uwe Henrik Peters as "a neurosis connected with a religious upbringing and surroundings especially in regard to its moral norms hostile to sexuality".

The roots of these neuroses were in the parents, but early damages, particularly of self-esteem, were projected on the crucified Christ or on his God; this malignant introject led to a "God-Poisoning", as the psychoanalyst Tilmann Moser called the effect Christian religion had had on him. The Catholic theologian and family therapist Lorenz Zellner proposed a "Therapy of God".

I start with a case history. Then I look at the cause of the trauma, Jesus with his father problem, interpreting his life from the perspective of prenatal and perinatal psychology. Then I show the end of the therapy.

### **Effects of the Cross: Trauma of Conception and Castration Complex**

The patient was the result of a marital crisis. Mother was sexually inhibited because of a severe Catholic education, and of attempts of sexual abuse by the priest and by her father. When the father was thinking of divorce, mother wanted to tie him to her by a child. She overcame her inhibitions. She succeeded, probably with the help of alcohol, to induce her husband to have intercourse. This led to a trauma of conception: Fertilisation took place, but on the psychological level the union of ovum and sperm was disturbed, as a result of mother's inhibitions and of father's wish to leave his wife. The consequence of such a situation can be that a part of the male energy does not get into the ovum; it is missing at birth, leading to a difficult birth with a trauma of birth.

The patient's birth was traumatic, the child had to be reanimated. Two years later father again wanted to divorce his wife, mother conceived another child. After the birth of a sister the boy felt superfluous, became depressive, apathetic; his vitality seemed to be extinguished.

A doctor suggested to send the boy into the kindergarden, belonging to a Pietist church. The nurse said to the boy: "You need not be sad. Our Lord Jesus Christ and his father in heaven love you." The boy felt loved, life began again. When he wanted to tell his parents about Jesus they became angry since they disliked this religion. The boy lived in the world of his imagination and became a little mystic; in summer he sat in the garden, happy listening to the birds, smelling bushes and trees. Two years later a furuncle at the anus had to be operated. Probably it had been the result of his attempt to protect his peaceful daydreams from the aggressive impulses of the anal and phallic phase. The treatment had been so painful that it broke his will to live. Then Jesus appeared in his dreams holding him in his arms reanimating him by his breath. The boy recovered.

At school it turned out that he was Catholic. When he was prepared for Holy Communion the priest showed him Jesus on the cross which he had not seen in the friendly world of the Pietists, and said in a menacing voice: "Jesus suffers on the cross because of our sins. You too are guilty. There is sin on your body, unchaste dirty things." The man nailed to the cross, suffering, dying, was a shock to the boy: He was seized by horror, also by overwhelming feelings of guilt. Then the image of the earlier Jesus, the friend who had saved his life, rose in his mind. He felt compassion; now it was he who wanted to save the friend. He did not understand the word unchaste, when he asked the priest for its meaning he was told that to talk about it was a sin punished by everlasting damnation. The boy supposed it had something to do with the penis and the anus, the places of dirt. He came upon the idea to be operated again in order to have all the sinful parts cut off. In fact he had another furuncle, another operation. In narcosis he saw Jesus descending from the cross, a knife in his hand, cutting off all sinful parts.

About a year later he began to feel nausea during religious service; after some time he stopped attending it, in spite of his feelings of guilt and of his fear of everlasting damnation. When he was fifteen, the Christian doctrine seemed absurd to him, he thought he was too young to understand it, when grown up he would reflect and decide. In this way he escaped from his nightmare. He forgot the Christian religion, became a complete stranger to it, never again thought of it. Meanwhile father had died, he was forgotten completely as if he had never

existed. The awakening of sexuality was accompanied by fits of anxiety. He did not know where they came from. The imagined scene of castration was hidden in his unconscious. He heard voices telling him he was worthless, just dirt, and ought to kill himself. He did not tell anybody. Lucky incidents made him survive.

He fought with alcohol against his fits of suicidal depression. In his thirties a doctor gave him the advice to begin a psychotherapy. Gradually he remembered the father. To him the boy did not exist; father had seemed never to look at him, he never spoke to him. In a dream father gave him a death sentence, written and signed by father, and the boy had to sign it too. Mother was sexually inhibited but had preserved maternal instincts: The boy was breast-fed, an experience which tied him to life.

I was his third therapist. With the holotropic methods of Stanislav Grof he found his birth and his conception. Only then did the religious material come up, at first the friendly Jesus of the kindergarden, then Christ on the cross, finally the imagined castration. Christ on the cross had been the symbol of his shame, humiliation, despair. The cross had led to a psychological destruction, a kind of suicide. During therapy he felt a second kind of shame: having surrendered so completely to this religion, not trying any resistance, giving up all dignity, ready to regard himself as nothing but dirt.

### **Crucifixion and the Hatred of the Father**

In order to get a better understanding of the structure of the neurosis of my patient I decided to look at its origin, Jesus on the cross. The patient seemed to have imitated him (“*imitatio Jesu Christi*” they said in the Middle Ages). I knew as little about the Christian religion as my colleagues. Now I read the gospels and the letters of Paul. – As a symbolic figure Jesus appears in the writings of Freud, Jung, Rank, Graber, Grof (Wilhelm Reich wrote a whole book “*The Murder of Christ*”), but they did not consider him in the context of his life.

A first result of the study of the sources was that the Catholic priest had given Paul’s interpretation of Crucifixion: Jesus suffers on the cross because of the sins of man. In the gospels Crucifixion has a different meaning. Matthew, Mark, Luke (the three synoptical gospels: seeing things in the same way) tell more or less the same story, and this story is clearly divided in two phases, each of which covers about one half of the text. (The dramatist G. B. Shaw emphasised this division.) One can say the story of Jesus is a drama in two acts; near the beginning of each act we find one of the two visions of God Jesus had. (I mainly use Matthew.)

The first phase (of the adult Jesus) begins with Baptism. Jesus has a hallucination: He hears a voice from heaven, calling him “my beloved Son”. For Jesus it is the voice of God, the God of the Jews, who now is his father. Jesus heals, preaches, accomplishes miracles. At the beginning of the second phase Jesus has the idea, that God, his father, wants him to suffer, die, be resurrected, ascend to heaven in order to sit at the right hand of God and, after the end of the world which is near, come again and hold the Last Judgement. (Michelangelo painted it in the Sistine Chapel.) The second vision of Jesus is Transfiguration: Another hallucination, the voice from heaven calls him again “my beloved Son”. (I mention that most historians think that Baptism and Crucifixion took place during one year.)

The theme of the story is the progress from powerlessness, impotence, to absolute power, omnipotence. In the first phase there is the famous "Sermon on the Mount"; one has to read it critically, perceiving the structure of its meaning: The father in heaven loves the weak, the persecuted ones, the victims: "Whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also." "Love your enemies." (Mt 5,39 and 44) (This would mean for example: The Jew shall love the SS-man putting him into the gas chamber.) A man who indulges illicit erotic or aggressive impulses is thrown by the father into everlasting fire. (Mt 5,28 and 22. 7,19) In the second phase God, the father, wants his son to be tortured to death in order to make him sit at the right hand of God, then holding the Last Judgment, which means he will have God's omnipotence. In order to get it, he has to suffer complete impotence; omnipotence he will have in the beyond, without a body.

Since his hallucination father wants him to die, he does not deny to the high-priest that he is the son of God, a claim punishable by death. It is a suicide, forced on him by his super-ego, a murderous inner father-image. ("Jesus – the Suicide of the Son of God" is the title of the German translation of a book by Jack Miles, author of the bestseller "God. A Biography". It refers to the Jewish God.)

This suicide can be understood from the biography of Jesus. (Compare Sahlberg 2002a, with more details Sahlberg 2002b.) Not Joseph is the father but God. Seen realistically, Jesus was an illegitimate child. For the contemporaries, the non-Christian Jews, the father was a Roman soldier. – I think he is hidden in the angel Gabriel who announced to Mary the bearing of her child. – In Jewish genealogical registers and in the Talmud Jesus is called "the son of the whore". (Stauffer 1957, p. 23. Stauffer was a Protestant theologian.) According to Jewish law extra-marital intercourse had to be punished by stoning. (Leviticus 10,20) Probably Mary had fallen in love with a Roman, she knew the law and conceived the child in great love and fear of death. The result was a trauma of conception as David Wasdell has shown.

The law, then believed to be given by God, the heavenly Father, was a death sentence on the child and on his mother, from the moment of the child's origin. Joseph took the responsibility saving both lives. From the circumstances of birth I conclude that stoning was still menacing, or that Mary just had fear. This must have led to a difficult birth with a trauma of birth. – From the apocryphical Protogospel of James (in Schindler 1993) one can infer that already Mary was the child of an angel, and abandoned when she was three. This points to a repetition compulsion.

Since the contemporaries knew the illegitimate origin of Jesus (also mentioned in the apocryphical gospel of Nicodemus (in Schindler 1993)) they will have called the boy "son of a whore", the greatest possible humiliation. The episode with the twelve year old Jesus in the temple shows that the humiliated boy, the son of a whore, had reacted creatively: He imagined himself to be the son of God participating in his omnipotence. He probably was inspired by Psalm 2 where God says to the new king, the Anointed One, in Hebrew Messiah, in Greek Christ: "Thou art my beloved Son, today I have begotten thee." The sentences of the voice from heaven which Jesus will hear later are variations of this verse of Psalm 2.

When Jesus at the age of twelve makes himself known to be the son of God, this meant to the listeners that Joseph was not his father and that Mary was a whore.

Such a tremendous offense to the parents had to be punished by stoning or at least by the rod. (Deuteronomy 21,18–21. Proverbs 13,24) The episode ends by saying that Jesus was “subject” unto his parents. (Luke 2,51) For the next twenty years he was Joseph’s obedient assistant. I suppose that Joseph’s death was the reason for his going to John the Baptist. John announced the imminent end of the world and God’s wrath. Salvation could be obtained by penitence and baptism.

At Baptism Jesus had his wish to be the son of God confirmed, but in the first phase he does not proclaim himself the Messiah, only in the second phase he takes this role. It had a political significance in the imaginary world of the Jewish civil wars between the party of the Highpriest and the party of the king. These wars had begun about 160 B.C. The party of the king had developed the Apocalyptic vision: God will bring about the end of the world, annihilate his enemies and send the heavenly Messiah (described by the Prophet Daniel). Jesus is going to play the part of this Messiah; if we look at this psychologically it means: The son of the whore will take revenge for the humiliations he suffered. At the Last Judgment he will say to the people who let him suffer: “Ye cursed, into everlasting fire”. (Mt 26,41) To be able to do this he has to die, ascend to heaven, getting the power of the father.

The psychohistorian Lloyd deMause writes about Crucifixion: The “Son, who has accepted his death and homosexual surrender in an ecstatic identification with God, could be equal to God”. Christ “could sit at God’s right hand as an equal, because he accepted God’s sacrifice of himself in a triumphant masochistic surrender.” (deMause 1982, p. 293)

The only time Jesus mentioned sex seems to show how he prepared himself for this homosexual act: “there be eunuchs which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven’s sake. He that is able to receive it, let him receive it.” (Mt 19,12) Psychiatrists have spoken of “self castration”. (Lange-Eichbaum and Kurth 1967, p. 423ff.)

The two psychoanalytic exemplary cases of a psychosis and a neurosis show two men who in childhood identified with the crucified Jesus. (Freud 1911, 1918) Schreber thought God wanted to turn him into a woman in order to have sex with him. At first he resisted God’s will, then he surrendered: He suffered a “soul murder” which made him a woman, “God’s wife”. God had intercourse with him, begetting a baby, “the new man”. Freud’s patient he called the Wolfman had a similar experience. (“Miß Miller”, whose fantasies Jung described in 1912, felt to be God’s beloved, she ended up in schizophrenia.) After a short period of improvement Schreber and the Wolfman became ill again. They remained in the passive position; they did not become like God: They did not integrate the aggression, the hatred.

In Jesus aggression and hatred come out in the second phase as is shown by his curses or by his action in the temple, but the real aim of his hatred remains veiled. Freud unveiled it; he wrote about the “Christian myth”: “If the sacrifice of one’s own life leads to the reconciliation with God the father, the crime which had to be atoned for can only be the assassination of the father.” “By the same action which offers the greatest possible atonement to the father, the son reaches the aim of his wishes against the father. He himself becomes God, next to the father, in truth in place of the father.” (Totem and Taboo, IV,6; also quoted by Vinnai p.

110) This means that Jesus wanted to kill the father. In the “triumphant masochistic surrender” deMause speaks of there was an identification with the aggressor; Jesus wanted to turn the aggression against the aggressor in a ‘triumphant sadistic victory’.

Freud thinks in the frame of his theory of the primal horde with the killing of the father by the sons. I understand the killing of the father by Jesus from his life story: God’s death sentence on illegitimate intercourse created in Jesus a trauma of conception – and the wish to kill the aggressor, a wish later strengthened by the humiliations the boy suffered. Through the conflict at the age of twelve this hatred also seized Joseph who once had saved his life; at the same time the desire arose to find the early Joseph, the good father again, accompanied by the attempt to win his love by an attitude of surrender.

When Joseph died, both impulses rise in Jesus. He flees to John the Baptist finding in him a father who is forgiving as well as menacing, demanding absolute obedience. Apparently Jesus becomes his “favourite disciple”. (Stauffer 1957, p. 57) When the king imprisons John the Baptist Jesus becomes his successor preaching peace. When John is killed, Jesus wants to play the role of the heavenly Messiah for the end of the world and the Last Judgment.

In the “Sermon on the Mount” Jesus had tried to make the punishing God a forgiving one, by complete surrender and adoration, in this way also suppressing his own hatred. This is, for Jesus, the meaning of “Love your enemies”. He surrendered to the aggressor, assimilating the aggression. An identification with the aggressor was built up.

The catastrophe he ran into was prepared by his charisma, his gifts as a healer, the hypnotic power he had over people. People believed in him as they believed in God. By all this he became convinced that he was equal to God – and not insane, “beside himself”, as his family said. (Mark 3,21) His megalomania was fed permanently; in Heinz Kohut’s terms: His “grandiose self” grew until it wanted to merge with “the omnipotent self object”. (Kohut 1975, p. 209)

A short time after the death of John the Baptist Peter says to Jesus: “Thou art the Christ” (Mt 16,16), the Messiah, meaning the new king. Jesus thought of the heavenly Messiah. Now the bomb was kindled, all the destructiveness arose: The vision of the end of the world is a hallucination, that is: a wishfulfilment: He will destroy the creation of his heavenly father and then this father himself. He will have become like the God who said: “To me belongeth vengeance, and recompense”. (Deuteronomy 32,35) He will abolish a world in which unmarried mothers are stoned and illegitimate sons are humiliated.

He did not want to found a religion: There would be no future on earth. But his dream did not come true, so he remained hanging on the cross. What came about was the religion of the cross, crusades, persecution of heretics, burning of witches, extermination of Jews, the “theology of the hangman” with “the slaughter of the son”, as the theologian Uta Ranke-Heinemann critically wrote. (1992, p. 250ff.) The Enlightenment, the French Revolution, the proclamation of the Rights of Man broke the external power of the church, but by religious lessons at school its effects continued in the unconscious as Freud and Jung discovered.

There is another meaning in the story of Jesus with its two phases if we look at it from the perspective of prenatal and perinatal psychology: On the unconscious level Jesus repeats pregnancy and birth. He goes through the four basic matrices or birth matrices described by Grof. I summarize them: 1. matrix: Life in the womb. 2. matrix: Beginning of labour. 3. matrix: Birth struggle. 4. matrix: Annihilation, "ego-death": Consciousness leaves the body, rises to a being of light, to God, unites with him. At separation from mother consciousness returns into the body. (Grof 1976, p. 95ff.)

By diving at baptism Jesus awoke in the womb. He felt in God's compassion, in Hebrew *rahamim*: uterine, womblike. It was at the beginning of gestation, at implantation, hinted at by Jesus in his parables with their plant symbolism. The embryo repeats evolution, at first the plant phase, then the animal phase. (Sahlberg 1999)

In the second phase of his story Jesus goes through the 2., 3., 4. matrix. The 4. matrix is Crucifixion with ascension and union with God. (Jesus is mentioned by Grof 1976, p. 242) Chapter 24 and 25 of Matthew contain a sermon given by Jesus two days before Crucifixion. Luther called it "Rede über die Endzeit", "Speech about the End of the World". The titles he gave to the first five paragraphs point to Grof's four matrices: 1. "The End of the Temple". 2. "Beginning of Labour". (labour, Greek *odinon*: birth labour) 3. "The Great Tribulation". (tribulation, latin: pressure) 4. "The Coming of the Son of Man". 5. "Exhortation to be Attentive".

The function of ascension is explained by Otto Rank; he called it a "sperm dream", that is a fantasy of the sperm's returning into the "father's body", as Rank said, into the testicles. (Rank 1988, p. 98) This fantasy arises in the crisis of birth: The child gets stuck, experiences near death, his consciousness goes back to the source of active energy, into the testicles, to become recharged with father's power, then being able to renew the fight against mother and win it. Ascension is a mechanism of survival; seen with "Psychotraumatology": "The psychological system preserves itself" by a hallucinated "self duplication of the subject" which is "an attempt to save itself". (Fischer and Riedesser 1998, p. 79ff.)

The story of Jesus is the case of a disease with an attempt of therapy which failed.

### **The Reconstruction of the Father**

In this way it is a lesson for the therapist. The problem is the transformation of hatred. Before I come back to my patient, I have a look at Oedipus. Laios, his father, had received the prophecy that a son would kill him. Now Laios wanted to reject his wife Jokaste; she made him drunk and had intercourse with him. The father abandoned the baby, but it was found and saved. When Oedipus had grown up he killed his father and married his mother without knowing that they were his parents. When the truth appeared Jokaste hanged herself, Oedipus blinded himself, then he disappeared in a crevice which has to be seen as a suicide.

Just as with Jesus hatred led into self destruction. The problem is the inner father, one half of one's own origin, of one's energy. Father's hatred produced hatred in the child. Hatred is energy, it can be transformed. It is possible to change

the bad father into a good one. To do this the hatred against the father has to become conscious, and felt completely; neither Oedipus nor Jesus did this.

In the course of therapy my patient had confronted his father with all his negative aspects, and all the pain, anger, hatred resulting from them. Compared with Jesus he had two advantages: He was just an ordinary person, and he was not castrated, had only a castration complex. From the second operation occasionally phantom pains arose, but in general he had become able to enjoy sex. He had regained good health; he practiced jogging (which I had recommended at the beginning of therapy).

In holotropic sessions he also found implantation and the third month, period of "the good womb", with the origin of the "self" as defined by Graber, "the prenatal love relationship" (1977, p. 565), which can be reexperienced at "the good breast". He came across mystic ecstasies, enlightenments, visions of God in the way described by Grof; he found the healthy parts of his system, but he still suffered from fits of depression, from a certain inner emptiness; something was lacking, there was a wound, "a hole in the ego", as Günter Ammon (1979, p. 100) says: The father was missing. So we began his reconstruction. I describe only the last two steps.

I put the patient in a lightly hypnoid state in which he was still awake, telling me what he experienced, understanding my commentaries. Together we went back to conception: He sees his parents lying side by side, their arms around each other, big statues in the sleep of eternity. He is a spirit hovering above them, putting his hands on the head of his father who becomes filled with power and warmth. Now father loves his wife, she loses her fear and loves him too. Father feels desire, which enters mother, she accepts it: Both want to continue creation. A new being is created, full of well-being, surrounded by the love of his parents. The patient has lost all fear. He flies up to the sky, dissolves in the Great Spirit: he had been full of him. – The patient created a positive primal scene, making himself a wanted child, healing his trauma of conception.

In the next session we again go back to the parents. The patient is filled with light; he says to his father: "Wake up. I am your son, I have to talk to you." Father stands up, the patient says: "Why did you not want me?" Inside of the father a figure appears, his father; he beats his son, breaks his will, destroys his wish to continue life. Now the patient embraces his father, reanimates him by his breath and heartbeat, looks into his eyes and says: "Remember your conception." Now the grandfather appears again, this time as a young man – who had wanted a child; later in life some catastrophe had broken the grandfather. Now father is filled by a light which connects with the light in the patient, they feel a mutual, a shared joy. The patient becomes aware that he has this new father and also the grandfather as a young man in himself. He has become the father of his father. He feels connected with life, a life which feels like eternal life. I congratulate him. – This took place four years ago. Recently I rang him up asking him how he felt. He said, he has preserved the feeling of being connected with the good father, and that he was able to conjure up this feeling in its full intensity by just saying the sentence: "Father, you are here."

The energy of transference effected the healing. In his book "The Psychology of Transference" C. G. Jung writes, that therapy aims at experiencing the "Self".



The “Self” appears in symbols “transmitting a feeling of eternity or immortality”. (Jung 1946, p. 240) – Freud attributed “the sensation of eternity” to primary narcissism. (Freud 1930, chap. I) – Jung calls the “Self” an archetype which is identical with the archetype of the image of God.

Saint-Augustin derived the word religion from religare: connect, reconnect, and wrote, true religion is the one, “by which the soul in reconciliation reconnects itself with the one God from whom, so to speak, it has torn itself away.” (Lanczkowski 1991, p. 21) This idea becomes psychologically meaningful if we see that this one God to be reconnected with is twofold: containing the one mother and the one father a human being has. In the case of my patient we had to construct the father, to create him, to re-create him: Creative therapy. In the individual father we can find the collective one. – The Great Spirit which filled the patient makes me think of the Holy Spirit found by Erika Gsell’s patient at the end of her therapy.

What my patient experienced was described by the Jungian Erich Neumann: “The man reborn is son of the divine father, father of himself and, as creator of the rebirth of his father in himself, father of his father.” (Neumann 1949, p. 270) The same process can be observed in Goethe and Picasso who also had a Christ-Complex; they managed to overcome a trauma which had led to an identification with Christ on the cross. (Sahlberg 2001a, 2002c, 2002d)

Should the grandfather have been damaged from his very beginning one goes further back until one finds a wanted child, who transmitted the power of the ancestral lineage (otherwise the family would have died out). A similar reconnection with the ancestors is practiced in Bert Hellinger’s family therapy. The largest people on earth, the Chinese, did not develop Gods, instead they have the veneration of the ancestors. The Christian idea that man is sinful and has to be redeemed is completely unknown to them, “because in social life there is nothing from which one has to be redeemed, in consequence there is nobody who has to be redeemed.” (Eliade and Culianu 1995, p. 308)

The Chinese symbol corresponding to the idea of God is the Tao consisting of Yin and Yang. Similarly in archaic religions we have Mother Earth and Father Sky, or Shakti and Shiva, Padma and Brahma, the latter ones echoed in Buddha’s symbol “the Jewel in the Lotus”, O mani padma hum: The Spirit in the ovary of the Lotus-Goddess. (Sahlberg 1999) Grof discovered this Goddess and Brahma in his unconscious (Grof 1987, p. 57f.); he found the symbols of the natural religion contained in our brain.

Freud thought that the origin of neurosis is “the cultural sexual morality” – I think the sentence means: the Christian sexual morality. Seen in this way all neuroses in the Christian occident are ecclesiogenic neuroses, and Crucifixion is their ultimate cause – and so the cause for which Freud went in search of therapy.

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