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Religious Studies and Internal Family Systems Therapy

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Internal Family Systems (IFS) is a psychotherapy modality that combines elements of systems theory with an experiential approach that rests on distinctions between Self and parts of self. Unlike more cognitive approaches such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and psychodynamic 'talk' therapies, IFS challenges traditional divisions between mind and body that have endured in both the treatment of psychological trauma and in the study of religion. This essay provides a summary of IFS as it is conceptualized by Richard Schwartz, Martha Sweezy, and Frank Anderson, and then critically identifies several significant religious resonances in its approach to mediating between a stable 'Self' and parts of self that are partitioned by traumatic or overwhelming experiences. I conclude with the suggestion that the IFS approach to therapy and the discipline of Religious Studies mutually illuminate and challenge each other in their overlapping approaches to the problems of value-neutrality and normativity.

Introduction

Many psychotherapy modalities are currently available to help counselors and therapists conceptualize their work and plan their treatment of clients. Major western approaches include Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), Emotion Focused Therapy (EFT), Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing Therapy (EMDR), Dialectical Behavioural Therapy (DBT), and various Psychodynamic techniques that continue the legacy of psychoanalysis. However, another approach has become increasingly popular in the field since it was first conceived by Richard C. Schwartz in the 1980s. Described as "integrative" and "nonpathological," early Internal Family Systems therapy brought insights from Family Systems theory into the realm of the self by understanding the self as profoundly multiple (Engler 2013, xvii-xxvii; Minor 2016). One major and recent introduction to IFS therapy describes

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how the approach extends family therapy "by viewing the psyche as a relational milieu that is populated by independent entities" toward which the client and therapist ought to be positively disposed, carrying the assumption that these parts are "altruistic" and "motivated" rather than pathological and random (Schwartz and Sweezy 2020, ix).

Below I outline the basic framework of IFS with attention to how it conceptualizes selfhood, before suggesting several significant connections between IFS, implicit religion, and the discipline of Religious Studies. I conclude with a brief intervention that highlights the mutual challenges that IFS and Religious Studies pose to each other, especially in their overlapping approaches to the problems of value-neutrality and normativity. Before beginning, however, it is important to clarify how the IFS model thinks of the self as multiple. The IFS model considers the self in relation to internal parts of self. It is not that the self has parts. Rather, in IFS the self is a stable and distinct entity (called Self, or "Self-energy"), and parts of self arise after they are partitioned in response to overwhelming or traumatic events (during which Self recedes to a place of safety, and parts come to the fore to deal with crises). A major distinguishing marker of IFS is its non-pathologizing approach to multiplicity in and of the self. Rather than making a unified and singular self normative and attempting to cure conflicting voices within the self by forcing their integration, IFS therapy dignifies and affirms parts of self without subsuming them into a totalizing whole.

Internal family systems therapy: the Self and parts

Frank Anderson, a major voice in the second generation of IFS therapists who collaborate with and build upon the founding work of Richard C. Schwartz, considers IFS to be not only a psychotherapy modality, but also a "paradigm for living" (Anderson 2020). A question that I will explore below is: how does the IFS paradigm encourage an implicit kind of religiosity (in which religion refers not to assent to abstract propositional truth claims, but to a set of ritual practices of self-examination and devotion)? But it is first important to note that not only does IFS challenge the pathologization of multiplicity in the self, but it also seeks a certain kind of value-neutrality by deferring to the client. Rather than projecting onto the client a set of readymade archetypal selves, rather than imposing specific goals for healing, and rather than trying to forcibly or coercively integrate the self into a unified state, the aim of IFS is to allow the client to lead in identifying and naming the different parts of Self that may be in conflict and in deciding what successful remediation of Self looks like. However, to understand how IFS attempts to defer to the client, to be without agenda, and to practice non-coercive therapy, we first need to understand more

about how the model conceptualizes relations between parts and Self.

In IFS therapy the goal is to "embody the Self and heal our injured parts so that we can live with confidence, guided by curiosity and compassion" (Anderson et al. 2017, 1). The use of the words 'our' and 'we' in the training manual that this quotation is drawn from accord with the aim of IFS to help therapists work from their "Self" rather than their "parts." Seeking to change the perspectives of both therapist and client, IFS seeks to educate therapists about their own inner relations of Self and parts so that they can approach their clients from a position of Self rather than from reactive parts that respond to unresolved wounds residing in the therapist. Although in IFS the relationship between therapist and client itself is considered to have curative and reparative benefits, what is more important is for the therapist to help the client facilitate healthy internal relationships between their own Self and parts (Schwartz 2013, Schwartz and Sweezy 2020). Again, rather than considering the therapist to be the bearer of truth or insight, a foundational assumption in IFS is that the client already possesses the resources necessary for healing. The most central of these resources is Self, a specialized term that does not refer to the singular stable self of modernity that would consider itself to be an undivided individual, but to an inner an undamaged resource for healing.

In IFS, Self (which I now capitalize and de-singularize by removing the definite article 'the,' following some IFS conventions) is often called "Self-energy" (Anderson et al. 2017, 3–5). The markers of Self are summarized in the *Internal Family Systems Skills Training Manual* in eight C's: "curiosity, calm, clarity, connectedness, confidence, courage, creativity, and compassion" (Anderson et al. 2017, 3, Schwartz and Sweezy 2020, Ch. 6). The 2017 IFS manual describes someone who embodies Self as feeling "safer, lighter, freer, more open, more playful" (Anderson et al. 2017, 1). The more recent second edition of Schwartz and Sweezy's *Internal Family Systems Therapy* describes self in explicitly religious terms that tell us something more of the mystical concept of Self in IFS:

> looking, observing, listening, heeding, understanding, feeling with, communicating, loving – we can do all this with our parts. But who is doing the looking? The listening? The loving? Esoteric spiritual traditions have various names for the seat of consciousness. Quakers call it the *Inner Light*; Buddhists call it *rigpa*, meaning Buddha mind or Buddha nature; Hindus call it *Atman* of the Self; 13th century German theologian, philosopher, and mystic Meister Eckhart called it the Godseed; and Sufis call it the *Beloved* or the *God within* […]. In IFS terms, the key to mental balance and harmony is to access our seat of consciousness, which we call the *Self*. (Schwartz and Sweezy 2020, 43)

Although this syncretistic reduction of religious and spiritual traditions may initially cause scholars of religion to suspect that IFS has a very limited connection with the study of religion, below I argue that the way IFS configures relationships between Self and parts brings the approach much closer to certain methodological approaches to the study of religion than it may first appear. Before showing these connections, however, we need to understand the connection between Self – as described above – and what IFS names "parts."

Unlike the mystically inflected Self which has many positive attributes but no typical form, parts tend to fall into three categories. Early names for the three major kinds of parts were: Exiles (who are vulnerable parts that are shamed or abused, often from childhood), Managers (who proactively protect against the return of exiles and vigilantly attempt to maintain functioning), and Firefighters (who reactively protect against the return of exiles and go to extreme lengths to cover over emotional pain) (Anderson et al. 2017, 4, Schwartz 2001, 89–119). These three terms – each of which have theopolitical resonances – were developed by Schwartz and have been revised by Anderson who prefers to name them, respectively: injured parts, protector parts, and reactive parts (Anderson et al. 2017, 4). While this renaming is ostensibly more neutral and open to the wide experiences of clients, it also represents a movement away from the figural imagery called to mind by the terms Exile, Manager, and Firefighter. This movement toward more neutral terminology contributes to the way that IFS appears to be value-neutral, but as we will see, IFS proceeds from a very specific set of values which include the prioritization of consent and the critique of dominating forms of epistemic power that project categories and names onto clients in therapy.

Proceeding in a noncoercive way that attempts to "get out of the way" the IFS therapist tries to facilitate internally the kinds of compassionate dialogue between family members that Family Systems theory works toward externally. By asking questions of parts and teaching clients to have healthy internal dialogues with parts of themselves that they often desire to repress, rather than interpreting parts for the client by deciding what they should be named or suggesting what wounds they are protecting, IFS attempts to be without agenda. The wager at the base of IFS therapy is that once recognized and appreciated, parts of self will accept an offer of relief from their constant tasks of bearing wounds ("exiles," "or injured parts"), protecting against the triggering of disturbing emotions ("managers," or "proactive protectors"), and reacting in extreme ways to intolerable vulnerability and emotional pain ("firefighters," or "reactive protectors").

In general, IFS is a therapy modality that seeks to focus attention internally on thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations, so that bodily held emo-

tions can reveal parts to Self. By attempting to help clients remain in Self and unblend parts from Self by facilitating internal dialogue, IFS therapists take up a nonjudgmental approach that avoids making truth or value judgments about the client (for example, deciding which parts are 'real' or which parts are 'good'). This nonjudgmental approach, although it rests on another kind of judgment, assumes that parts are not in need of removal or forcible reintegration, but instead are helpful aspects of Self that have taken on extreme roles and over-function in the pursuit of legitimate goals such as the protection of vulnerabilities and wounds. For IFS, symptoms are manifestations of parts, and with their permission and consent, parts can be brought up to date with Self and gently retired from their protective, anxious, and traumatized roles (Anderson et al. 2017, 94).

Internal family systems and religion

With this basic introduction to IFS therapy before us, we can now return to the central questions of this study: How does the IFS paradigm encourage an implicit kind of religiosity? How do IFS and Religious Studies mutually illuminate one another? Implied in the phrasing of these questions is already a positive answer that asserts a kinship between IFS, religion, and the study of religion, but these questions can still be answered in meaningful ways if we are as specific about religion as we have been about IFS. If we understand religion to refer to cognitive and intellectual assent to propositional truth claims and doctrines, then we will not get very far with a comparison between religion and IFS, given the fact that IFS is not concerned with maintaining distinctions between religious and spiritual traditions or policing boundaries between concepts like the Quaker Inner Light, the Buddhist rigpa, and Eckhart's Godseed. However, if we understand religion to be expressed, for example, in implicit ritual practices of self-examination and devotion, then the connection between religion and IFS may be more open to inquiry and development.[1]

IFS therapy exhibits implicit religious values in the way that it encourages ritualized acts of devotion and spiritual practice. Online training sessions in IFS – one of which I attended while preparing this study – tend to begin and end with "parts meditations" focused on "love and gratitude" (Anderson 2020). With reference to "Self-energy," Frank Anderson's meditations resemble prayers, both in their intonation and their invocation of spiritual

1. Consider the suggestion that in the genealogy of the modern subject one technology of the self is the practice of confession in which "one needs for his own salvation to know exactly as possible who he is and also, which is something rather different, that he needs to tell it as explicitly as possible to some other people" (Foucault 1997, 181).

language. In keeping with the way that IFS configures the relationship between client and therapist, Michelle Glass's *Daily Parts Meditation Practice: A Journey of Embodied Integration for Clients and Therapists* takes on a devotional tone in its encouragement to make the psychotherapy modality a part of one's daily routine (Glass 2017).

IFS therapy has already made initial connections between its approach and the major religious and spiritual traditions of the world. For Schwartz, "Psychotherapy and spirituality alike describe the 'essence' that we call the Self with terms like soul, the divine, Buddha nature, or the core seat of our consciousness" (Anderson et al. 2017, 1). More recently in training sessions on IFS Anderson has described Self in more mystical and spiritual terms as an "internal wisdom" from a "larger source" with an "inherent healing capacity" (Anderson 2020). In his introduction to IFS in a volume of essays on the topic, Jack Engler writes that the eight C's of Self come from "the same group of qualities that Buddhist teaching has long called *paramis*, or 'perfections,' qualities of mind considered essential to awakening" (2013, xx). Interestingly, later in the same introduction Engler reflects personally on how IFS has helped him in his daily life, saying "in daily living I use IFS all the time" (2013, xxv).

Engler's presentation of IFS takes on a mystical and spiritual tone that resonates with New Age syncretism and 'self-help' language that tend to transgress boundaries that are important to scholars of religion – not least of which is the methodological approach within Religious Studies that begins with acknowledgement of the deep and irreducible differences between religions. This approach that emphasizes difference and irreducibility, which followed and critiqued approaches to "World Religions" that began from simplistic doctrinal comparisons, is wary of comparisons between traditions because looking for likeness and similarity tends to either impose the language and names of one tradition onto another or attempt to study religions from a neutral position of objectivity – neither of which show adequate respect for the real differences between religions.

My point here is not that when IFS manuals refer to religion they violate a disciplinary norm in Religious Studies, but instead, I suggest that both IFS and Religious Studies share similar values when they challenge the practice of imposing categories and names onto realities that do not admit to them – whether that reality is the inner life of the client in the therapy office which resists the therapists desire to impose curative or reparative solutions, or the religious group studied by the anthropologist of religion that has practices and beliefs that do not fit into the scholar's categories. If we understand religiosity to be expressed not only in explicit beliefs and ideas, but also in

implicit activities and commitments, then the religious element in IFS is obvious. But more than this simple identification of IFS as a practice of religious devotion, the key similarity that I want to draw out is that both IFS and Religious Studies – when they are at their best, when 'best' is measured by their doing what they aspire to do – have a similar approach to the problems of value-neutrality and normativity.

What I mean by value-neutrality and normativity is expressed well by critical theorist Rahel Jaeggi, who begins her *Critique of Forms of Life* with the observation that in liberal societies we misunderstand ourselves as ethically abstinent, saying "who am I to judge?" while making deeply normative and value-laden judgments. Jaeggi's project is based on the notion that critiquing others' forms of life is still possible if we first admit that we are always already engaged in value-judgments, and then evaluate forms of life based on their ability to solve the problems they purport to address. Many voices in critical theory and the scholarly study of religion now argue that it is better to admit that we cannot achieve objectivity and neutrality, and that we are always engaged in different valuations of some things over others. To the casual observer, IFS therapy falls into this problem by presenting itself as being without agenda, by asking the therapist to 'get out of the way,' and by claiming that 'all parts are welcome.' However, beneath the appearance of neutrality, IFS therapy proceeds from deeply held normative values that hold a fundamentally positive regard toward parts and Self (on the level of intent rather than behaviour), and claim that it is better to defer to the client than to impose names and categories onto their experience.

The discipline of Religious Studies, when it lives up to its current ideals, rejects the practice of projecting external names and categories onto those religious ideas and traditions it studies. One major value in the scholarly study of religion is that it is better to engage in Geertzian 'thick description' that turns toward the ways that religious systems address deep existential problems, rather than trying to fit what one observes into abstract and pre-decided theoretical categorizations, classifications, or types (Geertz 1973). Since J. Z. Smith's foundational text "Religion, Religions, Religious" the field of Religious Studies has had to reckon with the fact that its central category ("religion") is not native to those cultures and traditions it calls "religious," and with the fact that much of the history of the use of the term "religion" has been defined by the imposition of the term through entanglements with colonial violence. A recent anthology in the field begins by considering "the academic study of religion not as the study of a preexisting and established object but rather as a discursive field that produces its object of study in the very process of engaging in the language game of 'religion'"

(King 2017, xxi). More recently still, scholars in Religious Studies have been attending to the ways that western and European ideas have exerted a dominant force upon the discipline (Fitzgerald 2020).

Implied in the turn that Religious Studies has taken toward solutions to these problems is a normative and value-laden critique of epistemic power that makes moral distinctions between the imposition of external names and categories and the deferral to the self-understanding and self-description of those who are called religious. Like IFS, contemporary work in Religious Studies may initially seem to be attempting to achieve a value-neutral orientation, but when we attend to the critical turn in the discipline, we find few voices who advocate for objectivity and neutrality. Instead, scholars of religion are also confronting the paradoxes and problems of value-neutrality and normativity, often in ways that realize the fundamentally normative basis of all languages, cultures, and academic disciplines.

Beyond the similar ways that IFS and Religious Studies normatively aspire toward noncoercive and nonpaternalistic approaches in their work, I contend that both the IFS framework and some voices in Religious Studies have come to a vital realization about the ways that protective, reactive, and possessive approaches to naming and categorization are ultimately self-defeating. Both IFS therapy and certain methods in Religious Studies implicitly distinguish between dominating power arrangements of coercion and imposition, and best practices of deferral to clients and sources (respectively). Both IFS therapy and many scholars of religion also recognize that when we become possessive about our work or our discipline and seek to protect or preserve the terms we use and the practices we undertake from criticism or historical transformation, we damage the integrity of our work.

In the therapy office, a trained IFS therapist will attempt to avoid the projections onto the client that occur when the therapists' parts become activated (for example, if a part of the therapist feels threatened by the clients' addicted or suicidal part and responds in reactive or protective ways). In the field of Religious Studies, a trained scholar will attempt to avoid projecting onto the texts or traditions they study in such a way that would understand different religions than their own (if any) as threats or dangers. Unlike some theologians who come from particular religious traditions and work within them to advance, preserve, or defend their positions, many scholars of Religious Studies are trained to work with the traditions and ideas they study by tracing their historical and genealogical uses, rather than trying to conserve their existence or preserve their integrity.

This same critique of possessive desire can be brought to bear on disciplines and therapy modalities themselves. Surely scholars of religion and therapists will continue to preserve and defend the integrity of their modalities and

disciplinary approaches, but there is a key difference between defending an approach by making aspirational distinctions and being defensive in ways that ignore the key distinction between how terms like IFS or Religious Studies are aspirational and how they are actually used. Protective, possessive, and reactive ways of thinking have a blinding effect that both IFS therapy and Religious Studies address from deeply held normative values that reject coercion, domination, and imposition.

Beyond their value-neutral appearance as a therapy modality and academic discipline, IFS therapy and Religious Studies both seem to understand the self-defeating nature of the desires to possess, control, preserve, and conserve. These desires often create what they fear by fixing upon their object with such a rage for order that they cause the relations of anxiety that they initially attempted to prevent. In IFS this problem is expressed in the phrase "parts create what they fear" (Anderson 2020), and the accompanying explanation that a protective part of self may be so intent on protecting a wound that it reinjures itself (for example, a part may fear abandonment so much that it clings to others in an attempt to allay that fear but ends up pushing others away because of its over-attachment). In Religious Studies this problem of possessive desire is sometimes expressed in the tension with confessional theologies, such as Christian Theology, in which many (but certainly not all) theologians possessively seek to preserve major doctrinal terms against criticism by distinguishing between their 'right version' and an inferior 'wrong version' of a concept (for example, the Christian theologian who argues that those who use a theological term differently than they do are simply using it incorrectly, or the Religious Studies scholar who polices the so-called 'right version' of Religious Studies as a secular social scientific discipline against perceived contamination by theology).

Both in the office of the IFS therapist and the field of Religious Studies, much is damaged and many positive purposes are defeated when we seek to protect favourite terms against criticism. This is an insight afforded by both fields of study, and also within the adjacent field called "Political Theology" – a disciplinary orientation that straddles the divide between Religious Studies and Theology in its attempt to theorize underappreciated connections between ostensibly secular modern concepts and religious ideas. Like IFS and Religious Studies and their respective debts to Freudian ideas and colonial projects, Political Theology also struggles to exceed the traumas of its history.[2] But, like IFS and Religious Studies, the field of Political Theology

2. While IFS, like most therapy modalities, inherits some of its orientation from the problematic work of Freudian psychoanalysis, and while Religious Studies inherits its central concept from colonial encounters, Political Theology partly originates in the work of the Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt (Meier 2006, 1-35).

has advanced a critique of possessive desire in ways that attempt to move apart from it without being caught in its snare.[3] Resonating with the orientation of the present study, Political Theology searches out hidden religious and theological influences in discourses that have the appearance of secularity or areligiosity. Political Theology is a very diverse discourse that includes secular and religious scholars, and many who are uncategorizable by that distinction precisely because the problematization of that distinction is their core aim.[4] One exemplary and recent contribution to the broad discourse on Political Theology that expresses a similar critique to the one described above is Agata Bielik-Robson's *Another Finitude: Messianic Vitalism and Philosophy*. In her book, Bielik-Robson undertakes a grand revision of messianism and vitalism, within which she argues that a life reduced to the struggle for survival is not a full life because it constantly defers its fulfilment in its effort to stave off death (2019, 21). According with this point within Bielik-Robson's much more complex revision of finitude, is the insight afforded by IFS that strong reactions and protective gestures often reflect inner existential anxieties about vulnerability, wounds, helplessness, and belonging.

The way IFS addresses these protective, controlling, reactive, and possessive parts is not by opposing them and seeking to refute them – as some within the academy are also inclined to do – but to ask the protective and reactive parts open questions about their worries and the wounds they attempt to protect. This inquisitive, nonviolent, noncoercive, and nonimposing approach constitutes an enormous challenge to academic practices of immunization. If part of the question of this study is 'how can IFS and Religious Studies mutually challenge one another?' then one answer might be that IFS challenges the way that academic disciplines like Religious Studies reproduce anxiety and defensiveness, for example in the paranoid genre of the dissertation or the post-conference-paper discussion.

In conclusion I will provide a clarification that I believe gets at the heart of the parallels I have drawn between IFS therapy and Religious Studies. It is important to read the connections made above as connective resources, affinities, and resonances rather than a 'gotcha!' argument that would suggest that "IFS is really religious" or any variation of "*x* is really *y*" because these kinds of arguments reproduce relations of competition and enmity between discourses and concepts. Rather than treating fields of study or paradigms as

3. My language of "possessive desire" is indebted to Travis Kroeker, *Messianic Political Theology and Diaspora Ethics* (2017, 8–11).

4. Consider the diverse contributions collected in the *Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Political Theology* and the *T&T Clark Handbook of Political Theology*. See also the "Points of Unity Document" of the Political Theology Network: https://politicaltheology.com/political-theology-network-points-of-unity/

zero-sum perspectives that must vie for supremacy or displace each other, at their best both IFS therapy and Religious Studies ought to ask questions of themselves and each other. IFS therapists may wonder about how academic writing and publication practices like peer review might seek to satisfy parts of Self that are anxious about validation and recognition. Religious Studies scholars may, in turn, question whether the neutralizing of part types in IFS is helpful, given that part of the power of its approach is a set of rich images like that of the firefighter (a salvific figure that conjures images of rescue and public order), manager (an almost neoliberal figure that conjures images of corporate alienation), and exile (a very theological figure with deep resonance within the Abrahamic traditions). Given the connections between Religious Studies and IFS therapy outlined above – not least of which is that both often implicitly rely upon deeply literary and figural images rather than neutral classifications – perhaps a provocative closing question can be: what difference is made by doing scholarship from Self rather than protective and reactive parts that desire to avoid vulnerability?

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