

REVIEWS

Psychotherapy and Possession

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SYBIL

By Flora Rheta Schreiber

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This is a popularly written account of the treatment of a patient suffering from a disorder commonly known as *multiple personality* — a clinical problem that psychiatry considers to be a hysterical neurosis, dissociative type. This disorder is best known to the public through such works as *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (Robert Louis Stevenson) and *The Three Faces of Eve* (C. H. Thigpen and H. M. Cleckley). What is unusual and noteworthy about the case of Sybil is the number of personalities involved — sixteen in all!

That several personalities (separate identities or egos) can exist in one person points up the complexity of the human mind and its extraordinary capacity to organize and fragmentize experience. "Unconscious," or "automatic," activity is known in some degree to nearly everyone, as it is manifested in the carrying out of certain acts with a minimum of attention or even no conscious attention. Normally, however, the ego is "in touch" with all ongoing behavior and, when it becomes necessary, can intervene to make corrections. In contrast, in the person with a multiple personality there are behavior patterns that have been able to achieve their own organizational and motivational system separate from the individual's central personality or ego, and these "alternate" personalities or egos can "take over" and direct behavior unbeknown to the individual's central personality or ego. Hence the term multiple personality.

It seems that the purpose behind the development of alternate personalities is to protect the individual's basic personality or ego from pain and anxiety. As a rule, the central ego is able to do this through a variety of coping devices called ego defenses. But in some individuals who have been subjected to extraordinary conflict in the developmental years, other coping devices may be needed, as seen in multiple personality. It was through her alternate personalities that Sybil dealt with certain deep feelings and needs. In so doing, she herself was unaware of her behavior and thereby avoided the precipitation of conflict and guilt.

The history of Sybil reveals that in childhood she was subjected to extremely painful experiences because of a sadistic and psychotic mother and an indifferent father who failed to protect her from her mother. Such experiences led to the development of alternate personalities that often assumed different names; some of these personalities, representing Sybil at

certain periods of her early life, were personalities that never developed. The author observes:

The selves, the doctor was now convinced, were not conflicting parts of the total self, struggling for identity, but rather defenses against the intolerable environment that had produced the childhood traumas. Sybil's mind and body were possessed by these others — not invading spirits, not dybuks from without, but proliferating parts of the original child [p. 233].

The original defenders, Peggy and Vicky, later produced progeny of their own. It was a very special family "tree," a genealogy of psychological functioning, emotional inheritance. By 1935, she who was known simply as Sybil and was then twelve had become all of the fourteen selves who had so far presented themselves in analysis [p. 256].

The treatment of such dissociative states requires the synthesis and integration of the different personalities into one. To accomplish this, one must "break down" resistances that have been erected by the ego against recognizing and accepting the dissociated personalities. The psychotherapist, Dr. Cornelia B. Wilbur, found it necessary to resort to the use of pentothal narcoanalysis to break through Sybil's ego defenses, for "only Sybil possessed none of the memories of the others" (p. 269). The medication served to make Sybil's ego less resistive and defensive and more responsive to Dr. Wilbur's integrative efforts. Gradually Sybil grew to remember not only what she had done as Sybil, but also what she had done as Mary, Sybil Ann, and all the others.

Through the treatment, Dr. Wilbur metamorphosed what had been fixations in the past into actual parts of the present. The hope was that this process would form the bedrock on which to erect the superstructure of *integration* — the means of restoring the original Sybil. After eleven years of work, Dr. Wilbur was finally able to record in her daily notes on Sybil's case, "All personalities one" (p. 338).

Sybil's attitude toward these selves, moreover, had completely changed, from initial denial to hostility to acceptance — even to love. Having learned to love these parts of herself, she had in effect replaced self-derogation with self-love. This replacement was an important measure of her integration and restoration [p. 337].

Anyone reading this book with a knowledge of Seventh-day Adventists would conclude that Sybil's family were members of the Adventist church. It would be easy to make the assumption that the religion was the cause of Sybil's illness. But this is not true. The real cause lay in the mother, who was an extremely ill person, and in the father, who provided so little support and protection. It is true, however, that the way certain beliefs of the church were presented could have contributed to Sybil's anxiety and could have provided the content of some of her fears. The lesson one should learn is that the church should offer a message of love and compassion, especially to children, and should minimize conflict, persecution, and dire future events. This would be the sign of both a healthy message and healthy parents who interpret it.

As one reads this fascinating but extremely complex story, one is impressed with several things. First, great damage can be done to personality when it is traumatized in childhood. Second, at great cost of time, effort, and devotion is such personality damage corrected (and some damaged personalities are irreparable). Last, Dr. Wilbur's patience, persistence, and unending devotion are deeply moving. The author suggests that Sybil's recovery was due as much to her love of and faith in Dr. Wilbur as to the techniques that were applied. This is probably true in all successful psychotherapy.

One final comment is in order. This case represents a modern-day example of "possession." It helps us better to understand this often misused and misunderstood word and to appreciate the anxiety, pain, conflict, and anguish that lie behind it. After Christ had exorcised the "demons" from the Gadarene, we are given a picture of a person who had become quiet, contented, and at peace. As a consequence of the "miracle" of her cure, Sybil presented a similar picture.

Aspects of Science and Religion

RAY HEFFERLIN

THE HUMAN QUEST

By Richard H. Bube

Waco, Texas: Word Books 1971 262 pp \$5.95

I dragged my feet on reading *The Human Quest*, because I had been turned off by the boisterous style of Richard Bube's frequent contributions to the *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation*, and by the suspicion that this book would prove to be about social problems — which I do not enjoy *reading* about. As it turned out, Bube's style is rather subdued, and the discussion of "social implications" occupies only the tenth (last) chapter of the book.

Actually, the book is on the science-philosophy-religion interface, like *Issues in Science and Religion* by Ian G. Barbour (reviewed in Autumn 1969 SPECTRUM).¹ Both books present a concise history (Bube chapter two), devote several chapters to comparisons of the methods of science and religion (chapters three to five), deal with classical concepts of causation and classical proofs of the existence of God, explore inferences from quantum mechanics and cosmology, defend evolution (chapter nine), and are well organized. Both reject the "immortality of the soul" (pp. 146-149). Both espouse critical realism; both take pains to stress that there are no "uninterpreted facts" (pp. 57, 78, 140). Although Barbour did not conclude his book with a social problems chapter, later he did publish on the subject elsewhere.²

The Human Quest is very well written; it has good footnotes and an adequate index. Provocative questions follow each chapter and would be advantageous if the book were used in a Christian college or a state university classroom. Non-Christians would find only a couple of places objectionable.