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The loss of religious commitment among young people in modern society and its impact on psychotherapeutic treatment

A central developmental task of adolescence is the development and consolidation of identity. Continuity, i.e. the question 'who have I been, who am I now and who will I be in the future' is of great importance here. Interest in the past is as old as humanity itself. The questions posed by religions of creation and salvation – 'Where do I come from and where am I going?' – have given rise to various branches of science such as historical philosophy, cosmology and religion, which attempt to answer these questions from their own perspective and to reach an understanding of our origins and future.

For centuries, the interpretation of the meaning of life and the world was the monopoly of the churches. Today, everyone has the freedom – and thus also the agony – to decide for themselves what the meaning of life is for them. This increases personal responsibility for making the 'right', i.e. "optimised", decision, and if you make the 'wrong' decision, you only have yourself to blame. One's own answer is therefore serious and can have intrapsychic consequences, because if one makes the wrong decision about the meaning of life, one has to deal with feelings of guilt. Self-determination can lead people, especially young people whose personalities are not yet fully formed, into 'option paralysis', as many adolescents – and adults too – are completely overwhelmed by too many choices. They then prefer not to decide anything at all, because the decision could be wrong or the 'right' option might still come along.

In therapeutic practice, this is a constant problem for young people. They start things and then give up because 'maybe the other decision would have been better after all'. In my experience and that of other psychotherapists, however, this does not lead to a stronger personality, but to increasing dissatisfaction. In this context, the second aspect of identity, namely coherence, plays a decisive role: am I the person I would like to be, or am I just pretending, am I in a permanent role that constantly has to adapt to the person opposite me, like a chameleon to its surroundings, or do I know how and whether I differ from others?

For adolescents without spirituality, without values that apply and provide direction, without a greater whole for which it makes sense to live, this can lead to an existential crisis with a lack of direction and arbitrariness, e.g. in relationships with other people, whether friendships or romantic relationships.

The question of one's own significance – ‘is it important that I exist, can I make a difference’ – and of belonging to people, to a religion, to nature plays a decisive role in whether one has found one's place in the world.

The new UNICEF report on the mental health of young people in Germany and Switzerland and their life satisfaction (survey data from 2022) shows a significant deterioration since the last survey in 2018. How can this be? Our children and young people have free access to very good medical care, good schools and excellent universities without their parents having to pay for it, and they have access to healthy food and clean water. So what makes them so dissatisfied and mentally unstable? Many will now think, ‘It's because of Corona.’ However, more detailed analyses show that this correlation only applies to young people who were already suffering from mental health problems BEFORE the pandemic.

Social psychiatrist Klaus Dörner, co-founder of the social psychiatric movement in Germany, said in a lecture to psychotherapists a few years ago that every person needs a ‘daily dose of meaning for others’ in order to have a fulfilled and mentally healthy life and, in his opinion, half of the people who seek psychotherapeutic help would not need it if they had this meaning for others. This provoked a reaction, especially from this audience. But could this not be true for some people? These ideas are not entirely new and can also be found in academic constructs.

The concept of self-transcendence according to Robert Cloninger

An unusual example of the integration of spirituality into a scientific theory is provided by the American psychiatrist Robert Cloninger with his seven-dimensional personality system, in which personality is divided into the two areas of temperament and character. Cloninger calls one of the three character dimensions ‘self-transcendence,’ which is divided into two sub-dimensions, one of which is intended to capture ‘spirituality.’ This refers to the question of how strongly someone experiences themselves as part of a larger spiritual whole, whereby they feel responsible not only to themselves or their social environment in their actions, but also to higher values, thereby giving meaning to their life.

My experience as a psychotherapist has shown me that there is no need to conceal one's own religious feelings and orientations. As they are a personal resource, a vital force for shaping one's own life and for social engagement, I can pass this on to my patients as a stance and not as missionary work.

Through my work with unaccompanied minor refugees from Afghanistan, all of whom are deeply religious, I have learned to address the question of faith with my other young patients as well. With my Afghan teenage patients, I did this by often asking them in the first therapy session whether they had brought their prayer rugs with them when they fled. This question was always met with great astonishment, because these young people had very quickly learned that in Germany – and certainly in other Western European countries – you have to ‘buy’ your entry into the Western world through irreligiousness. They couldn't believe that a Western ‘scholar,’ as they called me as a doctor, could be religious. They asked me if I believed in God, and when I said yes, we had opened up an important space for conversation. I gradually gained the confidence to ask young people from Germany and other countries (Frankfurt is a very international city and my patients come from around 40 countries) whether they believed in anything, and was often met with surprise and then frequently with answers such as ‘I wish I did, I feel like something is missing’ or ‘yes, but you don't talk about that nowadays, it's embarrassing’. Contact with the church is often still

strongly influenced by grandparents, which leads to a deep familiarity with the subject. They then began to talk about their confirmation, often saying that they had decided to do so in contrast to their non-religious parents or that they were simply doing it because others in their class were also being confirmed. Questions about the meaning of life, who to turn to in times of need, or what opportunities there are to get involved in society were often answered in this way.

Thinking from the perspective of others. The ability to change perspectives

The humanist and French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995) sought to explore what it means to think from the perspective of others.

Born in Lithuania, Levinas studied in Germany and France in the 1920s, where he lived and taught from the 1930s onwards. Soon after the German invasion of France, he was captured and interned in a special camp for Jewish prisoners of war. As a survivor of the Holocaust, he never set foot on German soil again. His biographer describes his marriage as 'happy and stable'. After the war, Levinas taught as a professor of philosophy in Paris, wrote numerous books and gave lectures on the Talmud. It was not until the early 1980s that his work began to be recognised in Germany, both philosophically and theologically. Throughout his life, he strove for a way of thinking that was committed to the concrete individual and not to a system or a mere idea.

The origin of humanity, he said, is the immediate encounter with another person. In this encounter, we experience their vulnerability and neediness. It is the concrete suffering of others that gives rise to our ethical responsibility. For Levinas, it is not a matter of general moral principles that can be justified or contradicted. At its core, responsibility arises from a fundamental experience that cannot be avoided. It is the naked face of the other, the gaze of the other that strikes and demands attention. He goes even further, saying that it is only in such an encounter that the self emerges at all. Humanity is not based on self-determined freedom. It is based on our receptiveness, on our ability to be moved and addressed. 'To be,' writes Levinas, 'means therefore to be unable to escape responsibility.'

Psychotherapy is nothing else: I allow myself to be touched by the suffering of others, creating a space for resonance, as Hartmut Rosa, a German sociologist, philosopher and political scientist, calls it, which is central to the idea of a successful life. Resonance as a longing for echo. What does Rosa mean by this? We must allow ourselves to be called and reached, to be touched, and that always means being vulnerable, which is of course risky in a society of competition and escalation.

In his lecture at the Würzburg Diocesan Reception in 2022, Hartmut Rosa asks what a society loses when religion no longer plays a role in it and comes to the conclusion that 'democracy needs religion' in order to have a successful individual life and successful coexistence in society. When a society is forced to constantly improve, accelerate and push itself forward, but loses its sense of purpose in moving forward, it is in a crisis. And here Rosa asks the question: does such a society actually need the institution of a church? And he answers this question with YES, because it has something to offer society. Especially a society that is in a breathless, frenzied standstill and desperately searching for an alternative form of being in the world. And here we are back to the concept of identity: 'What value does my existence in the world have?'

Religion is a relationship of response, and this is where it derives its great power. For Rosa, this is the core of religious thinking in monotheistic religions – the basic idea that at the root

of my existence is not the silent universe, a cold mechanism, naked chance or even a hostile counterpart, but rather a relationship of response: ‘I have called you by your name, you are mine’.

Other philosophers have also asked themselves about the meaning of religion and what happens to a world from which God has disappeared.

Nietzsche, the great sceptic of God, writes in his work ‘The Joyful Science’ (1882, supplemented in 1887): "Where is God? (...) I will tell you: we have killed him – you and I. We are all his murderers (...). Where are we going? (...) Is there still an above and a below? Are we not wandering as if through an infinite nothingness? Does not empty space breathe upon us?"

The Hungarian philosopher Agnes Heller also refers to this empty space when she says that a society without God is like an empty room without a chair. But if you leave the chair in the centre of the room, you have to at least acknowledge its presence, even if you don't sit on it. If there were no chair, however, the room would be empty.

One of the central themes in therapy with mentally unstable young people is inner emptiness. Our task should be to help them find meaning in a materialistic world. ‘Give me a listening heart’ (King Solomon) is what we need to understand young people in need, and it is through this responsive relationship that they can mature and heal.

A speaking God. In the beginning was the word.

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