Ecology of Mind: The Sacred

Gregory Bateson

In the last few days, people have asked me, "What do you mean, ecology of mind?" Approximately what I mean is the various kinds of stuff that goes on in one's head and in one's behavior and in dealing with other people, and walking up and down mountains, and getting sick, and getting well. All that stuff interlocks, and in fact, constitutes a network which, in the local language, is called mandala. I'm more comfortable with the word "ecology", but they're very closely overlapping ideas. At the root, it is the notion that ideas are interdependent, interacting, that ideas live and die. The ideas that die do so because they don't fit with the others. You've got the sort of complicated, living, struggling, cooperating tangle like what you'll find on any mountainside with the trees, various plants and animals that live there — in fact, an ecology. Within that ecology, there are all sorts of main themes that one can dissect out and think about separately. There is always, of course, violence to the whole system if you think about the parts separately; but we're going to do that if we want to think at all, because it's too difficult to think about everything at once. So I thought I would try to unravel for you some of the ecology, something of the position and nature of the sacred in the ecological system.

It's very difficult, as you probably know, to talk about those living systems that are healthy and doing well; it's much easier to talk about living matters when they are sick, when they're disturbed, when things are going wrong. Pathology is a relatively easy thing to discuss, health is very difficult. This, of course, is one of the reasons why there is such a thing as the sacred, and why the sacred is difficult to talk about, because the sacred is peculiarly related to the healthy. One does not like to disturb the sacred, for in general, to talk about something changes it, and perhaps will turn it into a pathology. So rather than talking about the healthy ecology of the sacred, let me try to get over to you what I am talking about with a couple of examples where the ecology seems to have gone off the tracks.

In the fifteenth century in Europe, many Catholics and Protestants were burning each other at the stake, or were willing to be burned at the stake rather than compromise about questions of the nature of the bread and the wine used in the mass. The traditional position, which at the time was the Roman Catholic, was that the bread is the body of Christ and the wine is the blood. What does that mean? The Protestants said, we know what that means — the bread stands for the body, and the wine stands for the blood. The proposition for which they were burning each other was, on one hand, "the bread is the body," and on the other, "the bread stands for the body." I do not want to suggest to you that one of these sides is perhaps better than the other, but I do intend that this whole argument is one of fundamental importance when related to the whole of the nature of the sacred and to human nature.

The point is this — that in the various layerings of your mind, or at least in the computer part of your mind (the part in your head), there are various layers of operation. There is ordinary "prose" consciousness — present indicative-type consciousness. That is what you perceive to be true in the sense that you perceive it, i.e., the cat is on the mat if you see the cat on the mat. That's the sort of normal waking state that most of us have. In that normal waking state, you are quite able to say that this thing that you perceive can also be a symbol — for ex-
ample, a stop sign does not actually stop an automobile, but it is a symbol or message that tells people to stop the automobile. You can draw all sorts of distinctions in that normal everyday “prose” space in your mind.

On the other hand, in that part of your mind that dreams, you cannot draw these distinctions. The dream comes to you with no label which says that it’s a symbol, a metaphor, a parable. It is an experience that you really have as you dream it; and except in those funny marginal half-asleep states, it’s not even something labeled as a dream. That sort of a label is not something which that part of the mind can deal with, or accept.

So now if we go back to the proposition about the bread and wine, we find that to the left hemisphere of the brain, it is perfectly sensible to say that the bread “stands for” the body or is a symbol for the body. To the right hemisphere, the side that dreams, this means nothing at all. To the right hemisphere, the bread is the body, or it’s irrelevant. In the right side of the brain, there are no “as if’s,” metaphors are not labelled “metaphors.” They’re not turned into similes. This is a good part of the problem with schizophrenic people with whom I dealt for a long time. They are more Catholic than the Catholics, so to speak. They feel rather strongly that the metaphoric is the absolute. All right, so there was a religious war — a struggle — between these two sides in the fifteenth century, about the interrelationship of ideas.

Now, it is my suspicion that the richest use of the word “sacred” is that use which will say that what matters is the combination of the two, getting the two together. And that any fracturing of the two is, shall we say, anti-sacred. In which case, the Roman Catholics and the Protestants of the fifteenth century were equally anti-sacred in their battles. The bread both is and stands for the body.

Now, one of the very curious things about the sacred is that it usually does not make sense to the left hemisphere, prose type of thinking. This then can be disastrously exploited in two different ways. It’s a double exploitation problem. Because it doesn’t make any prose sense, the material of dream and poetry has to be more or less secret from the prose part of the mind. It’s this secrecy, this obscurity, that the Protestant thinks is wrong, and a psychoanalyst, I suppose, wouldn’t approve of it either. But that secrecy, you see, is a protecting of parts of the whole process or mechanism, to see that the parts don’t neutralize each other. But because there is this partial screen between the two parts — the prose and the poetical or dream — because there is this barrier, it is possible to use one side to play with people’s emotions, to influence them — for political purposes, for commercial purposes, and so on.

What are you going to do about the use of the sacred? There is a very strong tendency in occidental cultures, and increasingly, in oriental cultures, to misuse the sacred. You see, you’ve got something nice, central to your civilization, which bonds together all sorts of values connected with love, hate, pain, joy, and the rest, a fantastic bridging synthesis, a way to make life make a certain sort of sense. And the next thing is that people use that sacred bridge in order to sell things. Now at the simplest level this is funny, but at another level, it begins to be a very serious sort of business. We can be influenced, it seems, by any confident trickster, who by his appeals makes cheap that which should not be made cheap.

And there’s this other strange business with the sacred, and that is that it’s always a coin with two sides. The original Latin word “sacer,” from which we get our word, means both “so holy and pure” as to be sacred, and “so unholy and impure” as to be sacred. It’s as if there’s a scale — on the extreme pure end we have sacredness, then it swings down in the middle to the secular, the normal, the everyday, and then at the other end we again find the word “sacer” applied to the most impure. the most horrible. So you get a notion of magical power implied at either end of the scale, while the middle is prose, the normal, the uninteresting, and the secular. Now there is the question of what happens in social processes, in human relations, in internal psychology, in getting it all together in one’s mind. What happens when the pure end is violated by sacrilege? Of course at once you get various sorts of disaster, so that the pure end confers not only blessing, but also when it is violated, becomes a curse. As all the Polynesian cultures know very well — every promise carries a curse on its tail. So in a sense the double endedness of the sacred is logically expectable.

There’s a whole lot which is not understood about this whole species of damage that goes with attack on the sacred. And still less is known about how to repair such damage. This is roughly what we were working on back in the 50’s and 60’s with schizophrenia — the notion of the relation between the right side, the more abstract, more unconscious parts of the mind, and the left side, the more prose parts of the
mind. We found that the relation was the vulnerable spot. And that the relation, when damaged, required insight into the nature of the damage on the part of the therapist. So if the therapist is trying to take a patient, give him exercises, play various propagandas on him, try to make him come over to our world for the wrong reasons, to manipulate him — then there arises a problem, a temptation to confuse the idea of manipulation with the idea of a cure. Now, I can’t tell you the right answers — in fact, I’m not sure I would if I could, because you see, to tell you the real answers, to know the real answers, is always to switch them over to that left brain, to the manipulative side. And once they’re switched over, no matter how right they were poetically and aesthetically, they go dead, and become manipulative techniques.

This is, I think, really what all these disciplines of meditation are about. They’re about the problem of how to get there without getting there by the manipulative path, because the manipulative path can never get there. So, in a way one can never know quite what one is doing.

Now this is a very Taoist sort of statement that I’ve been giving you all the way through. That is, while it may be fairly easy to recognize moments at which everything goes wrong, it is a great deal more difficult to recognize the magic of the moments that come right; and to contrive those moments is always more or less impossible. You can contrive a situation in which the moment might happen, or rig the situation so that it cannot happen. You can see to it that the telephone won’t interrupt, or that human relations won’t prosper — but to make human relations prosper is exceedingly difficult.

There are typological questions here, both in Jungian typology, and in Buddhist typology. There are people for whom a Taoist view of the world is more congenial, others for whom an action-oriented view of the world is more congenial. And perhaps the action-oriented people can do a little more towards contriving what is to happen to others. I don’t know. I always find that if I try to contrive it, it always goes wrong.

There are things, you know, that give people like me the shivers. Some people will put potted plants on the radiator — and this is just bad biology. And I guess that, in the end, bad biology is bad Buddhism, bad Zen, and an assault on the sacred. What we are trying to do is to defend the sacred from being put on the radiator, misused in this sort of way. I think this can be done without violence. For example, I remember as a small boy of eight or nine in England, the first occasion I had to tie a bow tie. For some reason I couldn’t get any help, and so I tied a bow, and it stood up vertically. I don’t know how many of you have ever tried to tie a bow tie. I tried again, and it stood up on end. I then did a piece of thinking which I still think of as one of the great intellectual feats of my life. I decided to put this little twist in it in the first bow, so it would not stand up vertical, but would stand up horizontal — and I did it, and it did! I’ve never quite been able to think it through since, but I can still produce the little monstrosity when I have to wear one! Now, what have I learned? I learned how to tie a bow tie, yes, but I also learned that it is possible to think through such problems as how to tie a tie, make a pretzel, and other such things. Also, I learned that, having discovered how to do it, I can now do it without all the rigamarole in my head — I’ve got a trick for doing it. But spiritually, aesthetically, it will never be the same again as that first time, when my whole mind and soul was in the business of thinking how to do it. There was a moment of integration when I achieved it.

All these different sorts of learning, these multiple mandalas, are what we are talking about. It’s a matter of how to keep those different levels, rings, whatever, not separate, because they can never be separate, and not confused, because if they get confused, then you begin to take the metaphoric as absolute, as the schizophrenic does. For example, say I’m learning something less solitary than how to tie a bow tie, say I’m learning to act as a host or a guest, in an interpersonal relationship. Now, the host-guest relationship is more or less sacred all over the world. And, of course, one of the reasons why, to go back to where we started, is that bread and wine are sacred objects. Now bread and wine are sacred, not because they represent the body and blood of Christ, but because they are the staff of life. the staff of hospitality, so we secondarily relate them with Christ, with sacrifice, and the rest of it. The sacredness is real, whatever the mythology. The mythology is only the poetical way of asserting the sacredness, and a very good way, maybe, but bread is sacred, whether or not you accept the Christian myth. And so is wine. These levels, these modes of learning, and their going along together, are the keys to certain sorts of mental health, and joy.

And before I close, I should say a word about being a scientist. You see, I’ve been talking to you, not as a priest, or a member of the congregation, but as an anthropologist. And we anthropologists have our values rather differently con-
structured from those of non-scientists. If you’re seriously dedicated to anything, be it art, science, or whatever, that which you are dedicated to is going to be a pretty big component in what is sacred to you. But we scientists are, or should be, pretty humble about what we know. We don’t think we really know any of the answers. And this has some very curious effects. On the whole, most people feel that a great deal is known, and what is not immediately knowable they throw into the supernatural, into guess-work, or into folklore. But the scientist won’t allow himself to do that. We really believe that someday we shall know what these things are all about, and that they can be known. This is our sacred. We are all sort of Don Quixote characters who are willing to believe that it is worthwhile to go out and tilt at the windmills of the nature of beauty, and the nature of the sacred, and all the rest of it. We are arrogant about what we might know tomorrow, but humble because we know so little today.

Drawing after the woodcut by Andreas Vesalius in *De Humani Corporis Fabrica*.