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THE HEALING ZONE

RELIGIOUS ISSUES
in PSYCHOTHERAPY

Paul R. Fleischman, M.D.



... the elements ... diseases ... the painful riddle of death ... one would expect a permanent condition of anxious suspense and a severe injury to man's innate narcissism ...” But, Freud elaborated, cultural ideals, particularly art for the intellectuals, and humanized depictions of nature in the form of gods for the masses, provide narcissistic satisfaction in the power of the human collective with which the ephemeral individual can identify. People not only delight in their own ideals and gods, but they get pleasure and narcissistic relief from the right to despise people from other groups who have “wrong” ideals.¹³ Erikson expanded Freud's ideas:

Envisage man, the most naked animal ... he would bind his group together and give to its existence such super-individual significance as inspires loyalty ... in times of threatening change and sudden upheaval the idea of being the foremost species must be reinforced by a fanatic fear and hate of other pseudo-species¹⁴

Freud, Erikson, and Bion are linked in psychoanalytic theory. They understand group aggression to spring from underlying fears of vulnerability and death, and from a consequent need for group coherence, for which aggression is a key tool. Canetti, whom I quoted above, sees the individual as lonely, terrified, and in need of a comforting touch, but he describes the existence of “warring packs” as derived “from earliest times”—that is, a given of existence. He understands this to be a potential form of any sort of human aggregate, and since religious packs have no exemption, he postulates simply that there are religions that exist to be warring packs. He uses Islam as an example.¹⁵

A religious group frequently revels in the belief that it is the favorite child of a tyrannical, brutal, all-powerful father-god. This is the same fantasy that spares and haunts the life of some incest victims. The victims of father-daughter incest may have been saved from more destructive situations by striking

a compromise with a sadistic father. By becoming the pet victim of her father, a daughter may be used but not destroyed. Her position is one of degraded, yet specially chosen, and specially powerful, elect offspring. Children of the same sadistic father, who cannot accept this compromise, may be destroyed outright. In one instance I am aware of, a daughter submitted to her father's sexual demands and grew up to be intensely unhappy, guilt-ridden, and self-despising. She hated herself, and wondered in retrospect why she hadn't been stronger, more defiant. In therapy, she recalled how two of her brothers, who had been rebellious (for her father's needs were polymorphous perverse), were spiritually and mentally broken in front of her eyes by her father's relentless, ruthless cunning and mockery. Both boys ended up insane. The daughter, though unhappy, made it out into the world. Her role in the life of her family of origin had been an adaptive, lesser-of-two-evils, choice. But wherever she went, subsequently, she felt herself at odds, alternatively enraged or submissive, unable to simply or safely join.

Freud thought that the universal presence and power of incest taboos proved the need for a restraining force on the yearning for incest. If the yearning were not so great, why would there be such ubiquitous, stern laws against it?¹⁶ Erich Fromm followed Freud in confirming the importance and pervasiveness of incestuous yearnings and taboos, but he differed with Freud's concept of incest. Fromm pointed to a social dimension of Freud's hypothesis: incest at the societal level constitutes not merely overt sexual behavior with relatives, but it is the feeling state of trust, love, and care tightly enclosed within the boundary of endogamous groups.¹⁷ According to Fromm, the belief that a person should marry only within one human group—a very widespread belief indeed—is simply an expanded form of incest. Fromm implies that when a Hindu Brahmin feels he must only marry a Brahmin, or when a Jew or Catholic feels he should only marry a Jew or Catholic, he

THE HEALING ZONE

Love your enemies, bless them that curse you . . . thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself . . . I was an hungered, and ye gave me meat . . . I was a stranger and ye took me in . . . I was in prison, and ye came unto me. [New Testament]²⁵

And he shall judge among the nations, and he shall rebuke many people: and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. [Isaiah]²⁶

How could a religion survive the test of time if it didn't open membership downward to the scorned and broken, and outward to all other groups? As the need for membership ripens, it becomes the source of ethics, rather than morality; that is, it leads to codes of conduct based on the awareness of the universality of pain and suffering, rather than merely on the fear of retribution for misdeeds. The need for membership ripens in those who, like Gandhi, "seek the divine in every man."²⁷ It may even expand beyond humanity to a sense of membership in the community of living things. This expanded, embracing, empathic ethic is not limited to formally denominational fellows. It represents a culmination of religious psychological development, and because at heart it is at odds with the chant of the horde, it is more often found in individuated souls whose membership is open-ended rather than under one theocratic roof.

Freud wanted to alleviate humankind from what he felt to be the illusion of religion, and he yearned to do so by means of a futuristic education project that would achieve ". . . the same aims that you expect to be realized by God . . . the brotherhood of man and the reduction of suffering."²⁸ Erich Fromm later pointed out that Freud's aims didn't supplant religion, but were the essence of religion.²⁹ Anthropologist and poet Loren Eiseley could stand beside an archeological dig, and, looking down over scattered artifacts and bones of a

MEMBERSHIP

prehistorical burial site, he could feel his brotherhood with those bones through their "essential human gesture."³⁰

Empathic identification is not only a developmental attainment; it heals, or helps to heal, isolated individuals to whom it is extended. Surely, this is one of the healing elements of most forms of psychotherapy, and it has been widely identified by religious healers in many cultures as a variable they can manipulate to help sick souls. Johns Hopkins psychiatrist Jerome Frank gave a convincing, cross-cultural depiction of this. In his book *Persuasion and Healing*, Frank argued that religious healing by shamans, or in group ceremonies in primitive societies, contains some of the same active ingredients as are found in contemporary Western psychotherapy. One of these ingredients is a healing restoration of the sense of religious membership, which Frank variably describes as reintegration, or closer relationship, with the group. His illustrations capture the way in which healing ceremonies highlight, or emphasize, the refurbishment of membership in the lives of the sick member. Frank also studied religious healing in the Western world, using the pilgrimage to Lourdes as his example, and again found that this religious form of psychological healing contained efficacious ingredients, among them ". . . a climactic union of the patient, his family, and the larger group . . ."³¹ Since the publication of *Persuasion and Healing*, a host of articles in the psychiatric literature have pointed to an apparent curative power for various psychological and psychosomatic forms of distress through the experience of being incorporated and confirmed in membership in a religious group.³²

This principle has been dramatically harnessed by Alcoholics Anonymous, in which a readily available and endlessly reconfirmable sense of membership, coupled to religious beliefs, has been a key element in successful treatment of alcoholism in probably millions of cases. "A.A." provides, in treating the alcoholic, almost continuous social support, in the form

band, her feminism versus her religion, her past views of her husband versus her current views, her religion versus her science, her religion versus therapy, dependency on God's voice versus dependency on me . . .

Patients will talk about their need to relax, to lay their burdens down, to relinquish the effort to control, to be relieved of guilt and anxiety, to be free of tension, and to find inner peace. This is the need for release. It is uniform in process, but it is a composite of contents.

The need for release is related to, overlapping with, and often misunderstood by psychodynamic therapists as *superego-id* conflicts. In the latter, a person is caught in an internal struggle between primitive urges and stern injunctions. The urges, sexual or aggressive feelings and actions, churn and surge inside, ready to break through into destructive behavior. In those instances where the person lacks enough mature, integrating ego-function to contain or rechannel these urges, they are held in check only by the harsh, rigid, punitive superego. The superego conflict is personified by the fundamentalist minister struggling with his own hate and lust. The superego is the simple-minded, authoritarian, moralistic injunction that provides the lawful order of orthodoxy (see Chapter 2). The biochemist felt she could slap or strangle her husband, but she reminded herself that Tolstoy and Jesus were pacifists.

A superego-id conflict may trigger a yearning for release, but release exists as a human yearning before and around the edges of this primitive conflict. Release is not limited to the soothing of internal conflict; it includes the ability to accept reality, the inevitable, and the capacity to extend trust toward the world. A prerequisite to attaining release is the faith to let some control slip away, since in any case there are limits to each individual's sphere of control. Release means relief from one's internal conflicts, but it also includes faith in other people and in the future. Since every individual is limited in time and

space, each must find some analogue to "Thy will be done." The capacity to speak and feel this universal exhalation of release may in turn have developmental antecedents of relaxing in a mother's arms, or of bowing to a benign father's will.

The need for release is not merely related to a superego-id conflict, or is it simply outward turning, or merely trust and faith in other people and in other spheres—it is preeminently tied up with psychosomatic integration, the mixture of the control and dependency we have with our bodies. On the one hand we tell our eyes to open or shut, our arms to swing or be still, our mouths to speak or be quiet. We thus establish control over and express ourselves through our body. On the other hand our body deals out pain, illness, hunger, grey hair, wrinkled skin, and ultimately it will drag us into decay and death. "Thy will be done" also refers to our bodies, and the capacity to assume this attitude is one of the psychosomatic bedrocks of integration with the biological substrate of our lives. Even sleep, coming or eluding us, is a letting go. The biochemist could check her aggressive impulses only through self-conscious commandments; she trusted no one but herself (even psychiatrists were in the business of inducing rather than alleviating dependency), and her rigid body rebelled with migraines.

Affirming acceptance and release are entwined. But the former has more to do with an internal and interpersonal wholeness; while the latter is a synthesis of psychic conflict reduction, interpersonal trust, and psychosomatic integration—all forged into one religious function. Release is one of the jewels of existence, one of the fountains of life, one of the most sought-after treasures of emotional development, athletic health, and spiritual practice. And religions have focused on it, studied it, hoarded it, dispensed it, until the religion and release have become almost inseparable. Erich Fromm expressed it like this:

Self-awareness, reason, and imagination have disrupted the harmony which characterizes animal existence . . . Being aware of himself, man realizes his powerlessness and the limitations of his existence. He visualizes his own end . . . [he] is in a state of constant and unavoidable disequilibrium . . . this results in an imperative drive to restore a unity and equilibrium . . . We must understand every ideal as the expression of the same human need, an answer to man's need for equilibrium and harmony . . . there is no one without this religious need . . .¹

Listen to the way Williams James tied the two, religion and release, with one knot: "The transition from tenseness, self-responsibility, and worry, to equanimity, receptivity, and peace . . . this abandonment of self-responsibility seems to be the fundamental act in specifically religious, as distinguished from moral, practice."²

For James, the abandonment of self-responsibility is the fundamental act of religion. Religions promise respite, sanctuary, security, a covenant with the faithful, which allows for the surrender of strife. Religions all seek to enable their adherents to replace effort and vigilance with a sense of safety, continuity, and confirmation in the presence of the uncontrollable and unknowable processes of self and world. Put your hands in the hand, the Lord is my Shepherd, lay down your sword and shield, be as little children and the lilies of the field, enter the promised land of milk and honey—this is the familiar refrain of hopes and promises of all religions. "In the shadow of thy wings will I make my refuge"—beautiful Psalm 57! For Tolstoy, the essence of Christianity was two words: "resist not."³ At the center of the Buddhist path we find: "Since there is an Unborn, Unoriginated, Uncreated, Unformed, therefore escape is possible from the world of the born, the originated, the created, the formed."⁴ The Koran, which means literally "The Surrender," promises ". . . gardens of Eden underneath which rivers flow."⁵ Religions meet the need for release with the poetry of surcease from responsibility and effort.

Here is Jesus: "Take no thought for your life, what ye shall

eat, or what ye shall drink . . . Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap . . . yet your heavenly Father feedeth them . . . Your heavenly father knoweth that ye have need of all these things . . . But seek ye first the kingdom of God . . . and all these things shall be added unto you . . . take therefore no thought of the morrow . . ."⁶ In his challenge and promise we can hear the speaker's attempt to supplant survival anxiety, the basic biological drive for certainty of food and shelter, with higher values, larger goals. But before that can be done, a release of the grip is necessary.

The mood of yearning for release dominates Black American spirituals, which were composed under conditions of slavery that precluded ease or harmony. Both the heaving, sighing sorrow and the transporting, repetitive, rhythmic excitements seem to capture an emotional locus that could be found, independent of brutal realities, in group, religious, musical release. The words alone without the music, are only outlines, as demonstrated in such universally known songs as, "I'm gonna lay down my sword and shield, / Down by the riverside"; or "Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home." Release is touchingly equated with returning home, or with being rocked in a nurturant, protective bosom of Abraham.

Because release means the relinquishment of personal control and power, the acceptance of limitations to one's abilities and even one's life, and acceptance of the body that will decay and die, it shades into acceptance of meaningful death (Chapter 10). It is said that Nehru, throughout his lengthy premiership of India, kept on his desk a poem of Robert Frost. While he struggled with poverty, underdevelopment, the bloody partition between India and Pakistan, the war over Kashmir, border wars with China—while his beloved wife was dead, and his mentor, Gandhi, assassinated—he kept a copy of Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." On the surface, this poem is about a man and his horse stopping by someone else's woodlot on the night of the winter solstice, to watch snow

ment of Reformation Catholicism, St. John absolutely refuted dogmatic anthropomorphism:

I entered in not knowing where
And there remained uncomprehending,
All knowledge transcending.

Sufi poetry from medieval Islam,³² Zen poetry of China and Japan,³³ and Bhakti poetry from India³⁴ provide a worldwide, cross-cultural historical record of what the explorers of religious love found. Largely, but not exclusively arising from nonsexual lives, these documents continue to emanate the light of a dawn where the heart is turned inside out and beats in an eternally contemporary yet still unborn world. They give words to the feeling that is held in common, to the place where every piece simultaneously clicks into the center of the puzzle. "Love," said Martin Buber, "is a cosmic force."³⁵

At the pinnacle of the tradition of poetry of religious love is Rabindranath Tagore, an Indian whose life spanned the latter half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries, and whose poetry gathered up the rich streams of classical Sanskrit learning with folk verse. He knew married love, fathered children, suffered the death of his wife and all but one of his children and lived the ascetic life that was imposed on him in his later years. A torrent of writing, filled with worldly, political, libertarian concerns, gushed from him all his long life, all suffused with a vision of divine, creative love:

You and I have floated here on the stream that brings
from the fount
At the heart of time love for one another.³⁶

But can these religious-literary Himalayas, these masters of poetry and suffering, these heroic survivors I have been quoting teach us anything useful, applicable, relevant to our

work as psychotherapists in the foothills? I think the scientific task of comprehending human love can best move forward guided by an analysis of its central function in the human personality. Religious love can be understood in a useful way by observing it dissolve isolation and ambivalence. At the moment we observe love functioning, we can establish meaningful generalizations about a sublime function in its pedestrian ubiquitousness. The following descriptions are meant to suggest principles about psychological tasks accomplished by love.

Love resolves isolation. Love springs up from the hard seed of the human religious problem the way wildflowers materialize on the apparently dead forest floor in reply to the spring sun. Each person experiences him or herself isolated in the shell of mind and body. Love is the activity of transcending the isolation of self. Love functions as the bridge. Erich Fromm described the essence of human love as giving, a correct giving that doesn't create indebtedness, but creates others who feel they now also have enough extra to give.³⁷ In Buddhism, generosity is the first and most important virtue.³⁸ The same attitude uncorked exquisite poetry from the prosaic lawgiver, St. Paul:

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.
And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.
Charity . . . Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.
For now we see through a glass darkly; but then face to face . . .
And now abideth faith, hope, and charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.³⁹

When physical and human giving combine in intimacy, "mutual regulation" of two people results,⁴⁰ providing the ma-

trix for childrearing and, from there, the entire fabric of life. In the religious sphere, the growth of love is not merely the flourishing of good works—St. Paul warns against that—but the organization of personality around charitable identity. In this view, human love means a deep resolution of the isolation within oneself. Human love blossoms as the movement of identity across the lines of self. This sounds similar to membership, but it differs entirely. Membership is about equality and participation and love is about identity and creation. Membership is the warmth of the barn, but love is the heat of the sun. Membership is about existence; love is about origins. So love is portrayed as madness, a divine madness, a dissolution of profane bodily identity, and, instead, an extension of determination and imagination in service of the other, the future, the next. Love is truth calling beyond understanding. For this reason, it is always linked to faith, the capacity to move forward beyond certainty and guaranteed success into the compelling, generous unknown. Rumi, the great Sufi poet, wrote: “the fledgling pigeon essayed the air and flew off when he heard a whistle and a call from the unseen.”⁴¹

The function of love, to transcend mind and body isolation, requires faith as its end-organ, as volition requires the hand. I have avoided using the word “faith” among the ten psychological building blocks of religious psychology as seen from the clinical perspective, because it is both so elusive and so variously intended. Few words more quickly invoke private, undefinable, fluctuant, innuendos of meaning, and public proclamations, declarations, and rabid convictions. A remarkable psychological study of faith is already available in Paul Tillich’s work.⁴² In the context of my ten building blocks, faith can be understood as the capacity to follow the directives of ripening human love. It is the ability to open the lines that delineate the self to the widening world of love and to sustain in abeyance the need for closure, for triumph or success, like a bird forever renewing the experience of its first flight—that is faith. As St.

Paul pointed out, the faith to move mountains, unguided by the charitable heart, is nothing. (Faith also interdigitates with release, and worldview, and will be mentioned again in Chapter 9.)

Where human love is compromised or neurotic, we can still see it operate at least partly to overcome isolation. The sociologist lived without salient human involvement, except for his goddess wives, with whom he yearned to merge. This substitute for charity, like any neurotic compromise, kept him trapped, by having given him enough fulfillment that he had looked no further. Yet at the same time it gave him a shallow, strange love, in which he felt he was constantly giving, while his wives felt he was selfishly smothering. Similarly, the linguist cavorted in harlequin romances, showering gifts on her skiing instructor, yearning to give, but alone. In my last glimpse of her, however, she seemed to have attained true charity.

We have discussed what human love is, how it can be defined by its ability to reveal the realm of life that transcends castration anxiety, how it is expressed in religious poetry, and how it functions to overcome isolation, and in so doing, is linked to faith.

Love is the maturing of the seed of life. The seed sprouts into a relatedness that bears. Love is the unborn calling to the present from within. The fruit of human love is generative, differentiated, overlapping, androgynous, mutual fertilization of bodies and souls. Love is this form of knowledge: that our growth reaches out beyond our bodies, beyond what we can see and touch and know. There is no knowing the finality of our path. We are guided by a compass set by creation, that makes us overleaping, like salmon. As Erich Fromm wrote: “Love is a power which produces love.”⁴³

In order to clarify the relationship between exalted and exemplary states of religious love and daily life and psychotherapy, we look at the functions of love in personality. Love

- Baba (cult leader), 129-30
 Baba, Meher, 129
 Baker, Richard, 131
 Baptist Church, 6
 Basho, 108
 Becker, E., 175
 Bhagavad Gita, 8, 61, 64, 65, 72, 73, 157, 159, 209; death and, 156, 157; worldview of the, 154, 155-56
 Bhakti, 207-209; poetry, 196, 208
 Bion, Wilfred, 96-97, 98, 103
 Bipolar mood disorder, 20
 Black American spirituals, 119
 Black Death, 243
 Blind devotion, 131-32
 Bodhidharma, 91
 Brahmacharya, 216-20
 Bremer-Kamp, Cherie, 250-52
 Buber, Martin, 26, 44, 93-94, 123, 196, 249; on calling, 69-70, 71, 72
 Buddhism, 22, 93, 107, 122, 135, 189, 222; affirming acceptance in, 45; death in, 239-40, 241, 252; generosity in, 197; history and, 91; lawful order and, 25; love in, 190; Mahayana, 122, 128, 129, 131, 242, 253; oneness of man and nature in, 107-108; release and, 118; Rinzai Zen, 122-23; sorrow in, 156-57; Theravada, 253; Tibetan, 180
 Calling, 57-85, 89, 132, 163, 202, 259; Buber on, 69-70, 71, 72; career versus, 74-75; case studies, 73-74, 77-85; dharma, 61-64, 65, 66, 72; Erikson on, 60-61; free will and, 69-70, 85; of Gandhi, 61, 64-66; Jung on his, 57, 58-59; sacrifice and, 228; among tribal people, 66-67, two faces of, 72-73, 94; visions and, 67-68, 158, 159-60, 162, 163
 Cambodia, 191
 Canetti, Elias, 92, 98, 103
 Career versus calling, 74-75
 Carson, Rachel, 155
 Case studies: affirming acceptance, 39-41, 50-56; calling, 73-74, 77-85; human love, 177-79, 180-87, 193, 203-207, 209; lawful order, 22-24, 31-38; meaningful death, 237-39, 246, 254-55; membership, 87-89, 108-11; release, 113-16, 136-41, 142-46; sacrifice, 212-15, 226-27, 231-35; sources of, 3-4; witnessed significance, 5-7, 15-20; worldview, 148-49, 158-64, 165-66, 169
 Castes, 62, 63, 64, 223
 Castration anxiety, 190-94
 Catholicism, 160, 189, 252
 Causal thinking, 254
 Celibacy, 189
 Chandler, Dr. Chris, 250-51
 Chaos, 24
 Charismatic religious movements, 10
 Charity, 198, 199
 Chile, 191
 Christ, 118-19, 190, 221, 224
 Christianity, 90-91, 102; release and, 118-19; sacrifice in, 221, 224; salvation in, 242, 244
 Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints, 68, 69, 91, 101
 Cicero, 239
 Community provided by religion, 91-93
 Confession, 48, 55
Confessions (St. Augustine), 13, 167-68
 Cosmos, *see* Worldview
 Countertransference, 36
 Courage, 200
Crime and Punishment (Dostoyevsky), 72
Crowds and Power (Canetti), 92
 Cults, 128-32; Goddess, 180

- Dashef, Dr. Stephen, 256-59
 David-Neel, Alexandra, 92-93
 Death, 164, 170, denial of, 243-44; ecstasy and, 154-55, 192; mass, 242-43; near-, experiences, 247, scientific mastery over, 244; transcendence of, 250-52; *see also* Meaningful death
 Deikman, Dr. Arthur, 228
 Dependence: pathological, 11; release through, 127
 Depression, 126; in cases, 15, 22, 23, 37, 87, 102, 111, 114, 162-63, 237
 de Tocqueville, Alexis, 175
 Deutsch, Dr. Alexander, 129-30
 "Development of Personality, The," 59-60, 65, 71
 Dhammapada, 239-40, 241
 Dharma, 61-64, 65, 66, 72, 175-76
 Diamond Sutra, 240
 Dogen, 241
Doors of Perception, The (Huxley), 93
 Dostoyevsky, Feodor, 72
 Doubt and faith, 157-58
 Dreams, 152, 169-70, 171, 258-59
 Drugs, 132; addiction to, 148, 149, 158-59, 162
 Dubovsky, Dr. Steven, 126
 Ecclesiastes, 157
 Ecology, 106-107
 Ecstasy, 154-55, 158, 192, 193
 Einstein, Albert, 155, 252
 Eiseley, Loren, 104-105
 Elhade, Mircea, 1, 67, 161
 Empathetic identification, 103-108
 Empiricism, 30
 Episcopal Church, 6
 Erikson, Erik, 76, 97, 98, 176, 201; on fidelity, 165; on Gandhi, 158, 216-21, on Luther, 60, 61; on religion and death, 240-41; on vision quest, 67-68
 Ethics, 30, 104
 Evangelism, 202
 Evangelists, 131
 Faith, 25, 43, 129, 167, 199, 200, doubt and, 157-58; love and, 198-99; release and, 116-17, 135, 199; sacrifice and, 224, 229
 Faith healers, 130-31
 Familial love, 190
 Fanaticism, 10, 46, 202
 Fascism, 10, 174
Fate of the Earth, The (Schell), 242-43
 Father: incestuous relationships and, 98-100; longing for omnipotent, *see* Lawful order (need for)
 Father-in-Heaven, 21, 25
Fear and Trembling (Kierkegaard), 224
 Fidelity, 165, 166
 Fight-or-flight stage of groups, 97, 100
 FitzGerald, Frances, 130
 Francis of Assisi, St., 106, 107
 Frank, Jerome, 105
 Frankl, Viktor, 123-24, 191, 249
 Free will, 150-51, 235
 Freud, Sigmund, 14, 50, 97-98, 104, 141, 243; on castration anxiety, 190; on incest taboos, 99, Jung and, 57-58; on omnipotent father and religion, 21-22, 243
 Friends of the Earth, 227
 Fromm, Erich, 99, 104, 117-18, 197, 199
 Frost, Robert, 119-20
 Fundamentalism, 127; perversion of need for lawful order by, 27-28
 Gandhi, 13-14, 61, 64-66, 73, 104, 107, 201, 230, Erikson on, 158, 216-21
Gandhi's Truth (Erikson), 216-20

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5: MEMBERSHIP

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