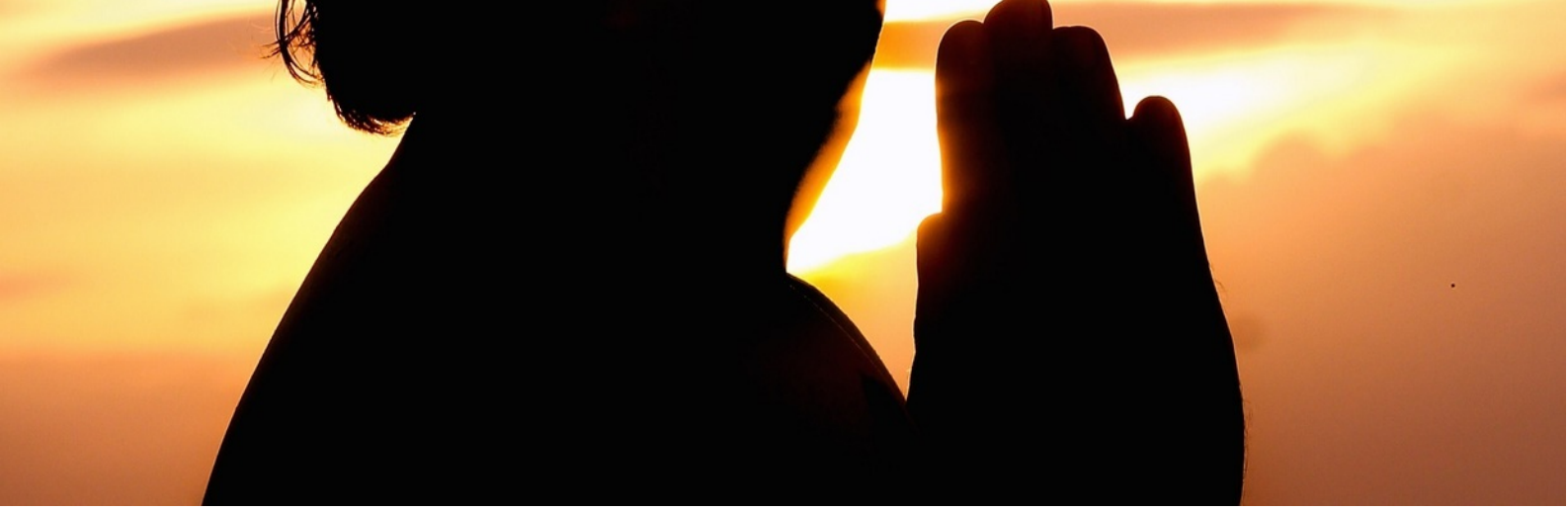

Three Christs of Ypsilanti: The Unholy Trinity

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Abstract:

Dr Milton Rokeach brought together three psychotic patients at Ypsilanti State Hospital in Michigan for a study. The patients had one notable feature: they all believed they were Jesus Christ. Rokeach specialised in belief systems: how people develop and keep (or change) their beliefs. Read the article to find out if the experiment was successful or failed.

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Robert M Kaplan

Abstract

From 1 July 1959 to 15 August 15 1961, Dr Milton Rokeach brought together three psychotic patients at Ypsilanti State Hospital in Michigan for a study. The patients all believed they were Jesus Christ.

Through bringing together individuals with the same delusional belief Rokeach hoped to not only understand their beliefs and – more optimistically – perhaps change their delusions.

The project was based on one indisputable fact: no one could dispute that there is only one Jesus, so anyone who believed himself to be Jesus would confronted by the existence of another like him.

At a series of daily meetings over two years Rokeach tried to confront the men with the impossibility of their shared belief. Despite the most intensive efforts, it was a failure and the patients returned unchanged to their wards.

In years to come Rokeach realised that his attempt to confront the Three Christs of Ypsilanti out of their delusions was as misguided as his patients were. While the experiment did not cure any of the three "it did cure me of my godlike delusion that I could manipulate them out of their beliefs."

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Jesus!
You've started to believe
The things they say of you.
You really do believe
This talk of God is true.
—Jesus Christ Superstar

A casual stroll through the lunatic asylum shows that faith does not prove anything.
—Friedrich Nietzsche

Today is the day of great triumph. There is a king of Spain. He has been found at last. That king is me. I only discovered this today. Frankly, it all came to me in a flash.
— Nikolai Gogol, *Diary of a Madman and Other Stories*

We are all born mad. Some remain so.
—Samuel Beckett

From 1 July 1959 to 15 August 15 1961, social psychologist Dr Milton Rokeach brought together three psychotic patients at Ypsilanti State Hospital in Michigan for a study.[1]

The patients had one notable feature: they all believed they were Jesus Christ.

Rokeach specialised in belief systems: how people develop and keep (or change) their beliefs. At a time when psychoanalysis was the dominant paradigm in American psychiatry, he was influenced by Helen Lynd and Erik Erikson who emphasized that one's sense of identity depends on others' recognition of this identity.[2] A basic belief, according to Rokeach, is that we are who we are because we know that by definition there can be only one of us.

Voltaire told a tale in which someone holding the belief that he was Jesus Christ was confronted by another with the same belief.[3] The "unfortunate madman" Simon Morin was committed to a madhouse where he had the encounter. He "was so struck with the folly of his companion that he acknowledged his own, and appeared, for a time, to have recovered his senses." He made known his penitence to the town officials and was released from confinement. This benefaction was

unfortunately not to last, the authorities did not take kindly to his blasphemy and he was burnt at the stake as a heretic in 1663.

The psychiatrist Milton Erickson set two delusional Christs against each other with one gaining insight into his madness after seeing something of himself in his companion. ("I'm saying the same things as that crazy fool is saying," said one of the patients. "That must mean I'm crazy too.")[4]

Robert Lindner's *The Fifty-Minute Hour* gives an account of a middle-age woman with paranoid schizophrenia who had the delusion that she was Mary, Mother of God.[5] A younger patient admitted several months afterward had the same delusion. After a brief argument, they asked who their mother was. At once, she turned to the younger woman, her face glowing and eyes shining, and said, ''If you're Mary, I must be Anne, your mother.'' Lindner adds that the woman who surrendered her Mother of God delusion responded rapidly to treatment and was soon discharged.

Rokeach had been intrigued by stories of Secret Service agents who felt they had lost contact with their own identities, and wondered if a man's sense of self might be challenged in a controlled setting. Through bringing together individuals with the same delusional belief Rokeach hoped to gain understanding of an individual's belief and to perhaps affect a degree of recovery in the participants. The one indisputable fact that no one could dispute is there is only one Jesus, so anyone who believed himself to be Jesus would confronted by the existence of another like him.

He tested it one evening on his two young daughters by calling each of them by the other's name over the dinner table. Within minutes, the girls began crying.[6]

The three patients (with names changed to protect their anonymity) selected for the experiment were Clyde Bensen 70, Joseph Cassel 58, and Leon Gabor, not yet 40. Clyde and Joseph had been incarcerated for decades, Leon for five years.

Rokeach believed that Leon Gabor, the youngest of the three patients, would be the most likely to abandon his delusional beliefs.[7] He presented himself in a manner consistent with this: Tall, lean and earnest, he held his hands in front of him, one hand resting on the other, palms up. He sat upright in his chair, gazing directly ahead, an imposing figure. Unlike the other Christs, he spoke clearly and eloquently.

It is important to understand the circumstances of the three men. There were 25,000 people confined to public mental institutions in Michigan at the time. Ypsilanti State Hospital had over 4,000 patients cared for by five staff psychiatrists and twenty resident psychiatrists. Such was the depressing standard of care in overcrowded American psychiatric hospitals of the time, patients might expect to see a doctor once a year.

The carceral lives of the three subjects changed drastically. They spent the day in their own sitting room interacting with Rokeach and his team. They were given special allowances and the meetings began and ended with a song. The three took turns as chairman, writing up the minutes and choosing their favourite song and book. A control group was provided of three women, each with different beliefs. However, their utility seemed to have waned early and they played no further part in proceedings.

At a series of daily meetings over more than 2 years Rokeach tried to confront the men with the impossibility of their shared belief, in his terms an 'identity confrontation'. They were required to consider their delusions and alter their particular grasp on reality.

The problem that faced them initially was: how can there be another one of me?

At the first meeting Rokeach asked the men their names. Joseph said: 'My name is Joseph Cassel.'

Was there anything else he had to tell the meeting?

'Yes, I'm God.'

Clyde introduced himself: 'My name is Clyde Benson. That's my name straight.'

Did he have any other names?

'Well, I have other names, but that's my vital side and I made God five and Jesus six.'

Did that mean he was God?

'I made God, yes. I made it 70 years old a year ago. Hell! I passed 70 years old.'

Leon, demanding that everyone call him Rex, as Leon was his 'dupe' name, replied:

Sir, it so happens that my birth certificate says that I am Dr Domino Dominorum et Rex Rexarum, Simplis Christianus Pueris Mentalis Doktor.

(Translation: Lord of Lords, King of Kings, Simple Christian Boy Psychiatrist.)

His birth certificate stated that he was ''the reincarnation of Jesus Christ of Nazareth'' so he saluted ''the manliness in Jesus Christ'' because ''the vine is Jesus and the rock is Christ, pertaining to the penis and testicles; and it so happens that I was railroaded into this place because of prejudice and jealousy and duping that started before I was born, and that is the main issue why I am here''.

He pointedly added, ''I do not consent to the misuse of the frequencies of my life.''

The three patients all agreed with Rokeach that there could only be one Jesus Christ.

Joseph responded first: 'He says he's the reincarnation of Jesus Christ. I can't get it. I know who I am. I'm God, Christ, the Holy Ghost, and if I wasn't, by gosh, I wouldn't lay claim to anything of the sort … I know this is an insane house and you have to be very careful.' Clyde and Leon, the other two, were insane, the proof being that they were in a mental hospital and could be laughed off.

Clyde: "The other two are 'rerises', lower beings, and anyway dead. As if he was the Son of God: 'I am him. See? Now understand that!"

Leon, having heard this, responded that the other two were 'hollowed-out instrumental gods'. Pushed to say that Joseph wasn't God, he replied: 'He's an instrumental god, now please don't try to antagonise him. My salute to you, sir, is as many times as you are a hollowed-out instrumental god … My belief is my belief and I don't want your belief, and I'm just stating what I believe.'

'I know who I am,' Joseph said.

'I don't want to take it away from you,' Leon said. 'You can have it. I don't want it.'

Leon's standard response to any claim from the others that went against his delusions was 'That's your belief, sir,' and then to change the subject.

As to explaining why they had been brought together, Clyde remained silent, while Joseph was clear that they were there 'to iron out that I'm the one and only God' and for Rokeach to convince the other two that they were crazy, so that Joseph could do his work 'with greater tranquillity'.

Leon, to his credit, understood the agenda from the start and expressed his views in no uncertain terms:

> I understand that you would like us three gentlemen to be a melting pot pertaining to our morals, but as far as I'm concerned I am myself, he is him, and he is him. Using one patient against another, trying to brainwash and also through the backseat driving of electronic voodooism. That has an implication of two against one or one against two … I know what's going on here. *You're using one patient against another, and this is warped psychology*.[8]

He met the challenge posed by the confrontations by the adoption of a new name that suggested abandonment of his Christ identity but in fact reiterated other

aspects of the real Jesus Christ's identity. Rokeach saw this more as an attempt to avoid conflict than a reflection of any genuine identity change.

The early meetings were stormy. "You oughta worship me, I'll tell you that!" one of the Christs yelled. "I will not worship you! You're a creature! You better live your own life and wake up to the facts!" another snapped back. "No two men are Jesus Christs. … I am the Good Lord!" the third interjected, barely concealing his anger.

Joseph often wore three pairs of socks—yellow, then pink, then yellow. He wore a pair of women's horn--rimmed glasses without lenses to which he managed to attach a lorgnette.... he also threw towels and loaves of bread into the toilet and tossed magazines and books out of the window.

Asked why he did this, Joseph replied: 'Everything's all right—the world is saved.'

The three Christs quarrelled bitterly over who was holier and came close to blows. Then they explained away the other two as being patients with a mental disability in a hospital, or dead and being operated by machines. Clyde declared that his companions were, in fact, dead, and that the "machines" inside them produced their false claims; the other two described their companions as "crazy" or "duped" or they didn't really mean what they said.

Rokeach tried to manipulate the delusions with messages from imaginary characters, for example from Leon's 'wife'("Madame Yeti Woman") professing her love. Then Joseph got letters from the hospital boss advising changes in routine that might benefit his recovery. Both the delusional spouse and the illusory boss begin to challenge the Christs' beliefs excessively and contact was broken off.

Rokeach hoped that when confronted with evidence relating to the impossibility of their beliefs, the men would recover – at least to some extent. Two and a half years later the failure of *his* delusion was unavoidable: the beliefs of the three Christs were

unchanged. They had argued, even come to blows, but there was no sign their beliefs were changing.

Rokeach concluded his experiment and left the hospital. In a poignant acknowledgement of the failure of the experiment, the three Christs returned to their desolate life in the backwards.

> Joseph:
>
> When I invented the world there was no paganism—just people who were helpers. Eventually when the world is on a firm basis there won't be any need for religion…I'm God and I don't want anybody to worship me. The world was created by work and doing good, not by worshipping me and kissing me. I don't want to go to church…. What the hell is a cross for? It is simply a symbol of Christianity to hurt you….
>
> Leon:
>
> "To me, peace means ideology in the heart."
>
> "There is only one God, and nobody seems to know where He is."
>
> Clyde:
>
> "Santa Claus represents God on assistance."

Rokeach did not discover anything new about the psychology of identity and belief. Reflecting the influence of psychoanalysis which still dominated American psychiatry, he wondered whether the delusions arose from confusion over sexual identity, an untestable and, in all likelihood incorrect belief.

His conclusions were mixed. A deeply humanistic finding was that ''if we are patient long enough, the apparent incoherence of psychotic utterance and behaviour becomes more understandable … psychosis is a far cry from the happy state some make it out to be … it may sometimes represent the best terms a person

can come to with life … psychotics, having good reason to flee human companionship, nevertheless crave it''.

He also learned that ''when a summit of three is composed of paranoid men, deadlocked over the ultimate in human contradiction, they prefer to seek ways to live with one another in peace rather than destroy one another''

More realistically, he concluded that while the experiment did not cure any of the three Christs, "It did cure me of my godlike delusion that I could manipulate them out of their beliefs." Adding, in the 1984 edition of his book, "I really had no right, even in the name of science, to play God and interfere round the clock with their daily lives." There may have been four, not three individuals with delusion involved in the project – the fourth being his own unshakeable belief in his ability to change their fixed beliefs.

What is to be made of the Three Christs? Firstly, it is necessary to put their disorder into context and, then, decide what can be made of Rokeach's project. His three Christs all had a vanishing condition. Grandiose delusions (previously known by the felicitous name of grandiose monomania) started to diminish in frequency from the start of the twentieth century.[9] A Napoleon, Jesus or Tsar of Russia is extremely rare, if non-existent in psychiatric wards today; other forms of paranoia however run rampant – not forgetting the stalker's condition, erotomania.

To follow this, look back two centuries. Modern psychiatry started in explosive times – the French Revolution to be exact – which institutionalised two aspects of the profession. The guillotine, a medical device, was intended to 'humanise' the process of judicial execution and, indeed, was something of an advance on the more barbaric means of execution that preceded it. The second step was to legitimise the role of medical profession in the process of psychiatric admission, something that had been random, punitive and in the hands of the monarchy or patient's family. Psychiatry and the state were now bound together in a relationship that to this day causes controversy.

It also threw up the man for the hour: Philippe Pinel.[10] He established the discipline as we know it today. His enlightenment views eschewed punitive approaches, focussing instead on humane treatment. He had no doubt that the cause of psychosis was environmental. The Revolution, he believed, led to an improvement in mental health. This idea was somewhat offset (to put it mildly) by the large number of patients who, during the Terror had fears, in some cases literally, of losing their heads.

Political events produced turmoil; turmoil caused mental instability and admissions escalated. What changed was the nature of psychosis. After 1840, when Napoleon's remains were brought back from St Helena, there was an increase in patients (including one inspired woman) who insisted that they were the late Emperor.[11] While there were other competitors (Louis V111, Jesus, Mohammed), Napoleon remained on top for decades. Perhaps this was because Napoleon had succeeded through his own efforts, rather than an accident of birth; alternately, perhaps he had to be more than a little mad to achieve what he did?

It was not just patients who were affected by the revolutionary and counter-revolutionary events, but psychiatrists. Laurent-Antoine-Jessé Bayle, for example, was a Royalist and the relentless criticism from Esquirol and colleagues destroyed his career, despite the fact that he was the first person to show an organic cause for a psychiatric disorder (chronic lepto-meningitis in GPI).[12] By the time of the 1848 revolution, conservative psychiatrists were grimly describing the revolutionaries themselves as mad – a tendency which has lasted up the present if the sorry story of psychohistory is any indication.

All illness is ultimately social and what changes is not form, but content. A delusion is a mistaken belief held with unshakeable conviction even when presented with superior evidence to the contrary; it is not, by definition, amenable to being reshaped by reality. The fading of grandiose monomania after the start of the twentieth century may be a reflection perhaps of the rise of the working class in

psychiatric populations – to be replaced by more mundane, but equally debilitating conditions.[13]

Rokeach's project has been more criticised than praised.[14] But is this fair? Up till that time, the psychological treatment of schizophrenia can only be described as a sorry story. Freud was adamant that psychoanalysis could not be used to treat psychosis. His followers did not always accept this; Otto Rank and John Rickman felt there was a place for it.[15] It came to a head with the work of Frieda Fromm-Reichman at Chestnut Lodge in the forties. Despite the enthusiasm of her followers, she was responsible for a whole generation of parents being subjected to unjustified blame: the concept of the *schizophrenogenic mother* - for which there is no evidence whatsoever.[16] Her patients were seen at a private hospital and it is questionable how many were actually schizophrenic.

Psychological treatment took a turn for the worse with John Rosen's 'direct analytic therapy'. An appalling charlatan, Rosen received great praise at the time from colleagues but his methods were discredited, he was eventually struck off and would probably be jailed today for the brutal abuse of his patients.[17]

At the time, no other effective management was available. The new drug treatments had just arrived and would take much longer to reach the massed patients in the psychiatric hospitals. Add to that the debilitating effects of chronic institutionalisation. Leon Gabor, regarded as the best prospect of the three Christs, had only been hospitalised for five years[18] - but what would that do to any of us?

Rokeach's experiment was a worthy effort at the time. While his theory, derived from psychoanalytic principles, was shown to be incorrect, it unwittingly preceded a modern development: the use of cognitive behavioural therapy (known as CBT) to treat delusions. This is the first (and only) psychological treatment to work with schizophrenia. [19]

Where the ethics of the experiment are concerned, applying the smug periscope of current sanctimony (in the era of Orwellian ethics committees filled with do-gooders obsessed with social control) is less than helpful. No one had anything better to offer these men. It is doubtful, if not unlikely, they suffered from any great harm (Rokeach's pessimism notwithstanding) and the conditions they experienced over the two and half years were vastly better than their wretched life in the back wards. Of course, it may have raised their expectations unfairly but one could hardly expect the project to singlehandedly overturn the vast gulag of mental hospitals. That was to come later.

Rokeach deserves more credit than he is given. The experiment failed, but would we have known that if he had not tried? That we still read his book with such interest is proof that it was.

Times change but it is remarkable how the same factors recur. Political issues and social turmoil abound; how psychiatrists deal with them is contentious, if not deeply controversial. If we do not learn from the past, there is no lodestone to deal with the present, let alone the future.

And there is one further thing, not considered at the time. As an means of demonstrating the theatre of the absurd, the three Christs excelled; Samuel Beckett would have approved:

> *Joseph goes to the Social Service Department.*
>
> *"Can I help you?" the secretary inquires.*
>
> *Joseph answers: "Yes, I am God. I've come to see about a release from the hospital."*

The story of the Three Christs is also discussed Robert M Kaplan's latest book *The King Who Strangled his Psychiatrist: Dark Tales of Illness, Medicine and Madness* (in press).

[1] Details of treatment and quotes of the Three Christs are taken from Rokeach's book: *The Three Christs of Ypsilanti*. Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1964.
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