The Jesus Delusion: A Theoretical and Phenomenological Look

ALAN GETTIS

ABSTRACT: The delusion of being Jesus Christ is examined theoretically with respect to etiology and purpose. An interview with a person who had this delusion for two years conveys the raw experience of living the Jesus delusion.

A delusion is a false belief that a person clings to despite any and all evidence to the contrary. For example, a middle-aged man once walked into my office and proclaimed, “I'm dead.”

“What do you mean?” I hastily replied, as I was quite taken aback.

“I'm dead,” he matter-of-factly repeated.

I inquired, “Well, tell me, are there any differences between dead people and live people? Because, if there aren’t, it really doesn’t matter whether you are dead or alive. After all, you are here and you are walking and talking.”

After a few moments of thought, he answered, “Dead people don’t bleed. That is the difference.”

I swiftly pulled a sterile needle from my desk and pricked his skin. A drop of blood revealed itself. Very smugly, I asked, “What do you think now?”

Without a moment’s hesitation, he responded, “Son of a gun. Dead people do bleed.”

I cite this frequently-told fictional story as a way of pointing to the tenacity with which people cling to delusional ideas. All environmental happenings are perceived and interpreted in such a way as to support the primary delusion.

Perhaps the most common of all delusions is the Jesus delusion. In any given psychiatric hospital at any given time, there are probably several Jesus Christs. A colleague once told me of a group psychotherapy situation at a state hospital in which there were three Jesuses in the same group. I wondered: (1) Why is this delusion so popular? and (2) What is it like to believe that you are Jesus, or, more accurately, what is it like to be Jesus (phenomenologically speaking)?

Anyone proclaiming to be Jesus will virtually be guaranteed a psychiatric diagnosis of significant pathology. Even the original Jesus did not escape this
fate. In 1910, Charles Binet-Sangle published *La Folie de Jésus (The Madness of Jesus)*, in which he wrote, “In short, the nature of the hallucinations of Jesus, as they are described in the orthodox Gospels, permits us to conclude that the founder of the Christian religion was afflicted with religious paranoia.” In 1913, Albert Schweitzer completed his dissertation, which was devoted to the task of proving wrong his colleagues who diagnosed Jesus as paranoid.

Delusions are the prominent features of paranoid thinking. Frequently, a person’s delusional system will focus on his or her being deliberately interfered with, threatened, followed, plotted against, mistreated, or harassed. These ideas are called delusions of persecution. Delusions of grandeur refer to beliefs in which an individual sees him- or herself as a famous, great, and extraordinary person, such as a noted historical figure, a great politician or inventor, or a religious savior whose mission is to save the world. The Jesus delusion is the most ideal expression of both delusions of persecution and delusions of grandeur.

The person who has delusions of persecution generally believes that many people are conspiring against him or her. Indeed, perceptions and interpretations of events make the deluded one the recipient of virtually constant attention everywhere. Some theorists believe that the messianic grandiosity of the paranoid person naturally follows the delusions of persecution as a way of making sense of the extraordinary interest and attention the world focuses on such persons. The reasoning is, “If all of these people are so concerned with me, I must be a very important person.” Other theorists hypothesize that delusions of persecution develop naturally after delusions of grandeur. The paranoid’s grandiosity, unreality, arrogance, lack of humility, and egocentric boasting alienate and antagonize the environment. Others may ridicule, belittle, or scoff at the grandiose claims, and these environmental rebuffs lead to feelings of being conspired against.

Extreme feelings of inferiority and worthlessness combined with overwhelming anxiety can produce a climate that is ripe for the growth of paranoid delusions. The grandiosity seems to be a last-ditch attempt to deal with extreme feelings of inadequacy through a process of denial and major distortion. Typically, the person feels like an object of ridicule, ashamed and embarrassed, weak and impotent. The person may believe that people are questioning personal sexual identity. The person feels like a failure and feels helpless to do anything about it.

In the face of this impasse, the person may alter his or her experience of self and the world, may form delusional beliefs and lose contact with reality as it manifests itself via consensual validation. This altered delusional way of experiencing the world usually brings with it a sense of relief and possible elation. Now the person who felt worthless and completely inadequate undergoes a transformation and becomes a transcendent cultural hero. In essence, the person with a severe inferiority complex who is under great stress becomes Jesus Christ, Superstar.

Karen Horney has described the human being’s “search for glory” as a way to attain meaningfulness. She states: