The Apostle: A Psychiatric Appraisal

Carl Greiner

University of Nebraska Medical Center, cgreiner@unmc.edu

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Abstract

Robert Duvall's 1997 film, The Apostle, provides a remarkable portrait of a charismatic minister with problems. The Apostle E.F., first known as "Sonny" (played by Duvall), has charismatic gifts and sometimes an uncontrollable temper. The viewer is challenged to make sense of the conflicting character elements. During the course of the film, the Apostle E.F. kills an adulterous rival and physically assaults some who would stand in his way. Yet this is not a simple moral warning about a preacher’s righteous public façade versus the sordid character of his private life, as in Elmer Gantry. Rather it reveals a troubled in development, one who is both significantly flawed but also becomes committed to a sense of his own calling. How is the viewer to reconcile these apparently discordant characteristics of the Apostle E.F.?

What makes this film so textured and complex is the interplay between psychiatric disorders and religious claims. The interface of psychiatry and religion in this film is displayed in three ways:

1. In the psychiatric disorder the Apostle E.F. displays in his ministry;

2. In questions regarding the legitimacy of his claim to apostleship; and

3. In his being healed by his congregation.

I will provide in this essay an examination of these interfaces and a psychiatric template that will offer a plausible framework for understanding the Apostle E. F.'s actions.
Introduction

Robert Duvall's 1997 film, *The Apostle*, provides a remarkable portrait of a charismatic minister with problems. The Apostle E.F., first known as "Sonny" (played by Duvall), has charismatic gifts and sometimes an uncontrollable temper. The viewer is challenged to make sense of the conflicting character elements. During the course of the film, the Apostle E.F. kills an adulterous rival and physically assaults some who would stand in his way. Yet this is not a simple moral warning about a preacher's righteous public façade versus the sordid character of his private life, as in *Elmer Gantry*. Rather it reveals a troubled in development, one who is both significantly flawed but also becomes committed to a sense of his own calling. How is the viewer to reconcile these apparently discordant characteristics of the Apostle E.F.?

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The psychiatric disorder in the Apostle E. F.'s ministry is not difficult to discern. A shorthand version for Sonny's psychiatric diagnosis would be that he is a narcissistic character who demonstrates grandiosity, arrogance, limited empathy, propensity to violence, and a gift for oratory. In the course of the film, he vacillates between being a captivating minister who evokes the Holy Ghost and a failed man who is filled with narcissistic rage. An understanding of the psycho-dynamics of narcissism provides significant insights into the plot developments in the course of the film.

The second interface between psychology and religion presents a more difficult task. What is the truthfulness of Sonny's claimed call to discipleship and ministry? Numerous recent films are obsessed with supernatural or paranormal realms of reality. Questions in such films range from the science fiction problems of a multi-layered universe (The Thirteenth Floor) to religion's authenticity and reliability (Stigmata, The Rapture). The example most relevant to The Apostle is The Sixth Sense, where the central question is the credibility of an anxious boy's claim that he "sees dead people." Initially the consulting psychiatrist diagnoses the boy as having a severe psycho-pathology with possible childhood schizophrenia.
In fact we learn, however, that the boy does see dead people and is neither psychotic nor delusional, but merely anxious.

In *The Sixth Sense* we see that a psychiatric diagnosis can apply to a character who has special spiritual or supernatural powers. It would be easier for the audience if the two possibilities were mutually exclusive, that a psychiatric illness would cancel any claims to special spiritual or supernatural powers. It is possible that Sonny, or E. F., has been called by God, has a legitimate sense of apostleship, and may remain a flawed character.

Unlike *The Sixth Sense*, where the audience receives clear confirmation of the boy's claim, ambiguity lingers around E. F.'s claim. Even though we have given a diagnosis of Sonny's psycho-pathology with a reasonable level of certainty, the deeper religious questions of his apostleship cannot be settled within the information provided by the film.

The third interface between psychology and religion in the film involves the healing potential of a religious group. Can there be an authentic healing derived from being part of a religious group? From the perspective of this reviewer, the Apostle E. F. became a legitimate apostle not simply through a private and previous calling, but through his interaction with his second congregation. He is healed by participating with the more genuine faith of this congregation. The psychiatric
insight would be that the needy Apostle E.F. absorbed and incorporated the sought-after admiration and respect of his parishioners. Kohut describes this form of healing a narcissistic nature as a process of "transmuting internalization." A transformation occurred in which the Apostle E.F. became a minister rather than merely a fast-talking evangelist. His non-violent actions when he left his second church help support this conclusion.

In developing our psychiatric template, let's begin with the diagnosis of E.F.'s puzzling and mercurial character. It is important to note that a psychiatric assessment cannot be done in the absence of a participating individual. For the purpose of literary criticism, an appraisal is an estimation based on material viewed. The evidence for diagnosing his Narcissistic Personality Disorder was based on his presentation of arrogance and grandiosity (a sense of "not being like other people"), his claim of special gifts and powers, his solicitation of excessive admiration, and his impulsiveness.

Based on the Greek myth of Narcissus, the diagnosis focuses on an excessive preoccupation with the self (a depth psychology term referring to the core of the personality), limited empathy for the genuine needs of others, interpersonal exploitation, and fragility in dealing with disappointments. The excessive neediness of the self for love and admiration would be the central psychological issue; the destructiveness and lack of empathy result from the frustration of those needs.
The narcissistic individual would vacillate between a strikingly overvalued and devalued self. All individuals have some elements of narcissistic needs. It is the extent, pervasiveness, and intensity of the Apostle E. F.'s needs that lead to a more formal diagnosis. In his initial circumstance, when he felt more secure, he demonstrated arrogance about his preaching and teaching. When he felt more insecure, he viewed himself as a failed man and abandoned by God. His range of personal self-estimation demonstrated marked extremes. Others view such a character as unpredictable, intense, and puzzling.

Men with this disorder often have complicated relationships with psychologically ill mothers and alternately idealizing and degrading relationships with significant women. These men often seek occupations that allow significant admiration and power, including not only the ministry, but also politics, teaching, and theater.

Let us review six psychological areas that address the Apostle E. F.'s narcissistic functioning:

1) Grandiosity and limited empathy;
2) Impaired relationship with women;
3) Narcissistic rage and destructiveness;
4) The sense of being watched;
5) Charisma; and

6) The healing of a narcissistic character.

**Grandiosity**

A central plot element is Sonny's killing of the youth pastor who is having an adulterous relationship with Sonny's wife. After the unpremeditated killing, he deliberately sinks his car in a lake, throws away the contents of his wallet, and goes from Texas to Louisiana. He renames himself as "the Apostle E.F." and baptizes himself. He performs both actions with significant aspects of grandiosity. Such actions also follow a Biblical tradition of a name change after significant events.

And there is an irony in his chosen name of "the Apostle," which means one who is "sent out. In this Apostle's case, he was driven out in an attempt to escape prosecution for murder.

E. F.'s re-titled identity assists him in his assessment that he is a major interpreter of God's plan rather than being a murderer on the run. Notably, he demonstrates a psychologically primitive attempt to make the past "disappear" through a name change and the disposal of his material goods. At this point in the film, the Apostle E.F. appears predominately as an exploitative man who used being a preacher for personal gain.
Many psychiatric authors identify grandiosity as one of the most significant aspects of early development. Children identify closely with being super-heroes. The deep wish is to be an idealized person with unique power, beauty, knowledge, or abilities. Much of "growing up" is relinquishing such an idealized and powerful sense of oneself and accepting a more realistic assessment of one's gifts and talents.

The surprising appeal of the Apostle E. F.'s character is that he can harness the narcissistic longings in his parishioners, their deep wishes to be powerful, connected, and important. The challenge for the viewer is to discern in this harnessing whether he connects his congregation to God or merely to their own deepest longings for significance. At its worst, his grandiosity can be appropriated by others to shore up their own sense of vulnerability.

**Impaired Relationships with Women**

The Apostle E. F.'s significant interactions are predominantly with women during this film. Although he has male friends who play supporting roles, it is the women who provide the circumstances for revealing his character. The viewer does not witness significant men in the Apostle E. F.'s life, such as his father or brothers. A black woman took him to a Pentecostal Church when he was a child. The film suggested that these early impressions were foundational for him as he developed a deep sense for the cadence and language of the ministry. I would argue that in its
early presentation, he absorbed the style but not necessarily the content of the church message. The point is that a woman introduced him to his life's work.

His mother accompanied him to his church in Texas. Significantly, she "passed out" when it is time for him to leave for a trip. He reacted to her as if she feigned her illness by talking to her and placing a blanket on her before he left on his trip. As portrayed, the mother appeared to have difficulty in detaching from her son. In narcissistic dynamics, the difficulty in detachment from the needy mother can play a central, pathogenic role.

Rejection by women initiates intense responses. His wife, Jessie (Farrah Fawcett), had an adulterous relationship with the youth pastor. In a rage, the Apostle E.F. threw a ball through the bedroom window of the youth pastor's home. Later, he killed the youth pastor with the swing of a baseball bat.

Having departed Texas, when he arrived in Louisiana he developed an intense relationship with Toosie (Miranda Richardson), the secretary at a local radio station. He demanded a passionate and committed response from her. She tells him "you are too much." He wanted more from her than she was comfortable to give.

His liability was that he could better connect with a group than with an individual. In a one-to-one relationship, he was rushed, hurried and intense. He was not easily tolerated. Unlike the "exploitation films," where the pastor is simply a
predator on others' emotions and finances, we have here a portrait of a pastor who is limited and pained by the nature of his character. Rejection brought him intense suffering and loneliness.

His relationship with his wife had a rigidly choreographed quality. He regarded her as an indispensable part of his life and their children as his "beauties." Although the viewers are not given a history of their marriage, his wife stated she "cannot do this anymore" and wants a divorce.

We can easily imagine a personal relationship with the Apostle E.F. as being emotionally exhausting. With a psychologically primitive individual, other people can be considered as mere extensions of the self rather than as separate entities. It was psychologically threatening to Apostle E.F. to acknowledge that another person might be an independent source of needs and decisions.

For a narcissistic man, a woman may be the source of admiration and acknowledgment that are difficult to garner from other men. Unconscious expectations might include that one be "the apple of the mother's eye" in subsequent relationships with women. The desire for such idealizing regard can significantly impair an adult relationship, with frequent consequences of divorce or bitter separations. One should note that the Apostle E. F. abruptly quit his restaurant job when he saw his former girlfriend, Toosie, reunited with her husband and children.
He saw his own significance diminished in her eyes. As occurred in the plot, for an excessively narcissistic person the rejection by wife or girlfriend can quickly escalate to murder or suicide.

**Narcissistic Rage**

Narcissistic rage describes a potentially violent aggression that attempts to destroy the offending self-object. Since the Apostle E.F. experienced himself as the conduit of the Ultimate, he expected that he would have the intense loyalty of his wife and friends. His response to his wife's infidelity was brutally to murder his rival; likewise, when the Troublemaker (Billy Bob Thornton) threatened his church, Apostle E.F. took him into a field by the church and initiated a bare-knuckle fight. What we witness is not a sentimental gloved fight in the ring in the tradition of the-priest-connecting-with-hard-luck kids. The Apostle's intent was to save his church and drive off the Troublemaker.

The narcissist has significant difficulty in finding a "detached distance" from which to observe his/her own behavior and modulate an emotional response. The Apostle E. F.'s lethality reflected and encouraged his underlying vulnerability. Most often this type of rage is portrayed in battlefield situations where one's friends have been killed. The resulting rampage involves the slaughter of the enemy group.
and of the prisoners (Thin Red Line). However, domestic battlefields can be as lethal as wars between nations.

The Sense of Being Watched

After coming to Louisiana, Apostle E.F. wanted to reestablish a church and sought out another minister, Brother Blackwell (John Beasley). Blackwell did not know what to make of him. Who was the white stranger seeking out a black minister? Blackwell wondered out loud if he could trust the Apostle E.F. It was a question that the viewer could clearly understand. Brother Blackwell tried to differentiate whether the Apostle E.F. was sent by God or by Satan. Blackwell noted that he would keep an eye on him and God could keep an eye on both of them. Through this process, the truth might be determined.

The "watching eye" became one of the most elusive but interesting aspects of this film. The "watching eye" can be misunderstood as a paranoid concern of being viewed. However, it can also contain elements of "the apple of mother's eye." Almost all children have the wish for the parent to "watch me" while some new skill is being demonstrated, like bike riding or playing the piano. Being viewed by Brother Blackwell had the risk of his being found to be a false man. However, it was possible for the Apostle E.F. to be acknowledged and given assistance in building a new congregation. Being watched had both positive possibilities for
being discovered as a genuine minister and negative possibilities for being found wanting, being a false prophet.

Charisma

One of the ironies of narcissism is that an expansive and grandiose sense of self can be quite engaging if it contains sufficient charm. For those parishioners who were feeling weak, depressed, or disconnected, the narcissist's grandiosity can be very attractive and supportive. There was a common interlocking pathology between those who are grandiose and those who are discouraged. For the discouraged, the intense response to the narcissist can be as "the moth to the flame". Unfortunately, both the narcissist and the discouraged can be injured by the encounter.

Did the initial congregation have a pathological relationship with the Apostle E. F.? The litmus test would be whether worship or a tempestuous dance of self-aggrandizement was occurring. If there were a pathologic relationship between minister and congregation, the previously idealized minister can quickly be cast off if he ceases to provide the narcissistic supplies the needy congregation demands.
The second congregation had a different feel. The emotional context was more of sharing than of demanded giving. Gifts being appreciated rather than talents exploited set the stage for the possibility of healing.

**Emotional Healing**

This reviewer proposes that the Apostle E.F. experienced emotional growth and healing with his second congregation, although this does not answer the question regarding the authenticity of his claim to apostleship. With the first congregation his gifts for oratory were both used and abused. He made uncommon demands on his wife and congregation. They exploited him in return. However, in his care and regard for his second congregation he redirected his gifts for the good of the community.

How did that change come about? In his process of becoming the pastor of the new church in Louisiana, he engaged others in a shared labor: the refurbishing the old church, painting the exterior and interior walls, playing music, and participating in service. Children and old people brought their musical instruments; unschooled individuals described their experience of the Spirit.

Importantly, E. F. stopped running. That is most obvious when the state police arrive at the church. Although E. F. was powerfully connected with his new congregation, he did not expect them to keep him from being arrested for murder.
He finished his sermon and peacefully walked to the awaiting patrol car. He could have asked his congregation to form a human shield to protect him from the law. He accepted his crime. At the end of the film, he was seen singing hymns with other prisoners in the chain gang.

The Apostle's primitive narcissism had matured into a more adult version that allowed him to value his congregation as separate from himself. Activity shared with an admiring but discerning congregation allowed him an ongoing, substantial narcissistic gratification. The extended process of building his church provided the long-sought admiration. He was able to incorporate and use the admiration to stabilize himself. In these terms, the Apostle E.F. grew up in his second church. There he was able to create a "good enough" sense of self that did not require others to function as intensely as "life support systems" to manage the daily disappointments of his life.

Summary

The term "apostle" is ambiguous even in its biblical usage. Likewise the film has ambiguous elements open it to multiple, legitimate interpretations. The journey of a narcissistic character with both his destructive elements and redemptive possibilities were successfully portrayed in this film. Apostle E. F's
actions become more coherent in contrast to the template of narcissistic psychodynamics.

From the perspective of religion, one is left with a broad range of interpretative options. One view would be to see the Apostle's second ministry as simply the effort of an exploitative individual to find a safe haven. However, the film suggests the healing potential of a mutual relationship between congregation and minister.

Fine films, like great writing, offer surprise. At its best, we encounter not just peculiar plot turns for the sake of novelty but an enriching sense of the unusual aspects of life and character. A stock character-type is given humanity and individuality. The unexpected demonstration of a healing, dynamic interaction between minister and congregation is the heart of the film.

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1 Online plot and character review of The Apostle (http://us.imdb.com).


