PSYCHIANA: A 20TH CENTURY REVITALIZATION MOVEMENT?

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During the first half of the 20th century, a new and unusual religion called Psychiana reached millions of people around the world. Its founder claimed to be a prophet who talked with God. With no churches and minimal organization, Psychiana was said to be the world’s seventh largest religion. Unlike any other before or since, this religion was almost entirely conducted through mail order – with a money-back guarantee.

One might well ask why, if this religion was so popular and influential, is there little knowledge of its existence. One also may wonder why and how it found such a widespread audience. Finally, the question must be asked how other religions with similar messages succeeded and still survive while Psychiana virtually vanished less than 25 years after its inception.

From an anthropological perspective, Psychiana and its founder, Frank B. Robinson, bear many of the marks of a revitalization movement and the charismatic personality who leads one. This paper will examine and compare the characteristics of Psychiana, from its inception to its demise, with the typology of revitalization movements provided by Anthony F.C. Wallace. It will include information from Robinson’s personal manuscript collection (now housed at the University of Idaho and compiled by Judith Nielsen), as well as excerpts from a book by Charles S. Braden, professor of History and Literature of Religions at Northwestern University, who personally interviewed Robinson. (It must be noted Braden’s book was published after Robinson’s death, and he does not indicate exactly when the interviews took place). Historical references also will be used to support the argument.

It all began with an advertisement placed in a Spokane, Washington, newspaper in 1929. A pharmacists named Frank B. Robinson placed an ad with the statement “I TALKED WITH GOD” and directions on how to receive more information (Braden 1949:1). According to documents in a collection at the University of Idaho, “within a year the teachings were being sent to 600,000 students in 67 countries” (Nielsen 1980:5). Clearly, Robinson’s intriguing message struck a spiritual chord around the globe.
The Man behind the Message

Robinson’s life was fraught with contradictions and complications. Records show Frank Bruce Robinson was born in England in 1886, though he claimed to have been born in New York City (Nielson 1980:1). His father, as described by Robinson to Braden (1949:7) was an “unworthy (Baptist) minister who frequently engaged in drunken brawls and carried on intrigues with female members of his congregation.” Robinson’s mother died when he was about 8 years old; his father remarried, and his new wife was said to be a cruel and physically abusive woman to Frank and his brothers (Nielson 1980:1). According to Nielson’s records, Robinson joined the British Navy at age 13 or 14, but was discharged soon after. Family documentation then describes how he and a younger brother traveled to Canada in either 1900 or 1902 to work on farms (Nielson 1980:1). As a young adult, Robinson was living in Toronto, where he briefly attended Bible Training College (Nielson: 1980:2, Braden 1949:8). The outcome of this schooling is debatable; Nielsen’s records show he did not complete the studies, but Braden’s article states Robinson was ordained as a Baptist minister.

Nielsen’s records show Robinson held various jobs across Canada, then down the Pacific coastline, before arriving in Moscow, Idaho, in 1928 (Nielson 1980:2). By this time he had married and started a family, and was working as a druggist at the local pharmacy (Nielson 1980:2). Robinson’s early history shows a penchant for alcohol, which caused him to lose jobs and to be discharged from the U.S. Navy; by 1919, however, he was “cured of his drinking problems” (Nielson 1980:2).

Braden (1949:8) states that Robinson spoke of having “a great hunger for God” during this time and even as a child. Both Nielsen and Braden describe Robinson’s dissatisfaction with organized religion, stating he was “disillusioned” (Nielson 1980:2) and “disappointed … they had no answer to given him when he asked them to show him the reality of God” (Braden 1949:8). Robinson decided he had had enough of traditional religion and “had made up his mind that the world needed something very different from ‘the religious hodgepodge that minister handed out …’” (Braden 1949:9). Braden goes on to quote Robinson’s plea to a higher power:

As he stood there in his room, (Robinson) writes, he lifted his eyes to God and said, ‘Oh, God, if I have to go to hell, I will go with the consciousness that I went there earnestly trying to find you.’ Then a remarkable thing happened. Instead of feeling condemned for denying that the church knows anything about God, there came to him a wonderful peace and rest. At last he knew he
was on the right track. ... The experience deepened and a strange power, he says, came into his life. All fear left him and he came to know a deep abiding peace (1949:9).

According to Braden (1949:9), Robinson was impressed by a book, The Secret of the Ages, by Robert Collier, that contained elements of the relatively new New Thought religious movement. Braden then shares Robinson’s description of a visionary experience:

Then God opened the veil which is supposed to separate us mortals from God, and though God and I are very close now, I shall never forget that day. The future opened up like a rose. I cannot describe it – such moments are not described by any words in any language; they are spiritual moments and are spiritually discerned. ... Let me just try to describe it by saying that the Spirit of the Infinite God spoke to me. ... God had at last revealed Himself to me, and had done it through methods entirely removed from any theological organization on the face of the earth (1949:9, 10).

Neither Nielsen nor Braden indicate when this revelation occurred, but Nielsen (1980:4) states that Robinson began preparing lessons and giving lectures in 1928 at the Moscow Hotel about “the powers of God” and that 60 attended the first lecture. Psychiana was chartered in 1929 and very quickly advertisements were appearing in hundreds of newspapers, dozens of magazines and several radio stations (Nielsen 1980:4). The response was impressive; by the end of its first year, Psychiana was reaching 600,000 students in 67 countries (Nielsen 1980:5).

Robinson initially seems to have considered operating Psychiana as if it were a traditionally organized religion; however, as Braden (1949:1) points out, the movement has “few local organizations, but seven ordained ministers” and that Robinson did “start to organize local ‘Psychiana’ groups but gave it up and ... deliberately refused to sanction the formation of such bodies.” Psychiana differed from mainstream churches in others ways, such as owning little property other than its headquarters, and states Braden (1949:1), “recognizes but one source for its teaching, the founder himself.” Robinson began using the title of Archbishop of Psychiana and using the designations D.D. and Ph.D. after his name which, according to Nielsen (1980:3), were conferred in 1918 by a correspondence school in Indianapolis called the College of Divine Metaphysics and by Reed College in San Francisco.
As Psychiana grew to find followers around the world, Robinson began to speak to them on radio programs and in lecture halls (Nielsen 1980:5) and by 1937 had organized national conventions. Just a year earlier, Robinson hired assistants – also involved in ministry – to handle the enormous volume of correspondence from readers (Nielsen 1980:5). Nielsen (1980:5) goes on to state that both assistants were forced by their own churches – Methodist and Church of God, respectively -- to discontinue their involvement with Psychiana. During Braden’s visit to Psychiana headquarters (at an unspecified date or year, but presumably in the mid-1940s), he noted an average of 1,300 pieces of correspondence were received per day (Braden 1949:2). Nielsen (1980:5) notes “at its peak, Psychiana was reported to be the seventh largest religious organization, and that approximately 100 employees “handled up to 50,000 pieces of mail per day.” Nielsen does not clarify if this number included both incoming correspondence and outgoing lessons. She also does not give a date for Psychiana’s “peak.”

Robinson had a severe heart attack in 1940, but remained at the helm of Psychiana until his death on Oct. 19, 1948 (Nielsen 1980:3). Robinson’s son, Alfred, took over the mail-order business but was unable to maintain its success (Nielsen 1980:6). The last lessons were mailed in 1952 and Psychiana’s short but impressive existence ended in January 1953 (Nielsen 1980:6).

“A Prophet of God”

Psychiana’s appeal may be attributed largely to Robinson’s claims to have had personal communication with a God who desired happiness, good health and prosperity for all people. He spoke of “no limitations to the power of God” and the ability to “materially and physically bring from the creative Realm of the Spirit of God anything you need for your complete and material happiness” (Braden 1949:14). In fact, Braden recalls his discussions with Robinson perpetually revolved around God:

It is doubtful any religious group places greater emphasis upon God than does Frank B. Robinson. The writer was impressed in his personal contacts with the founder at the almost continuous reference in their conversation to God. … (H)e was constantly insisting upon the power of God in its relation to human problems and the necessity of making this power known to man. He seemed utterly obsessed with the idea (1949:14).

Braden (1949:14) points out similarities between Psychiana and the New Thought movement (which emerged in the mid-1800s and continues to exist in present day) that emphasizes the ability to control one’s “health, happiness, pros-
perity” through positive thinking; however, Robinson himself denied any such comparison, despite his interactions with New Thought leaders, such as Dr. Ernest Holmes and Emily Cady, and “attending a Truth Center, which is a New Thought branch, years before he had thought of starting a movement” (Braden 1949:13, 14). Interestingly, Braden notes, Robinson and Holmes had discussed forming an alliance and “did collaborate in certain public meetings” (Braden 1949:13). Robinson also had considered creating what might be considered churches, or as Braden writes “local groups of followers,” but this was never accomplished (Braden 1949:13).

A few examples given by Braden (1949:14-19) of Psychiana’s tenets deviate from traditional Christianity of its day and focuses on the individual’s ability to tap into God’s power by accepting that “within you is the only place you can find God,” that “all the power that was available to Jesus is equally available to men here and now,” and “Unbelief or doubt of God is the only sin there is in the universe.” Robinson also was not one to suppress his disdain for churches or the Christian beliefs in the crucifixion and salvation (Braden 1949:16). Concerning churches, Robinson believed they were misleading people about the true relationship they have with God. He told Braden, “If the churches would only make God real to men, I (meaning Psychiana) wouldn’t last over night” (Braden 1949:20). Robinson rejected the Christian belief in the crucifixion, stating “as though God could be crucified” (Braden 1949:16), and was equally intolerant of the traditional teachings about salvation. Braden (1949:17) describes Robinson’s interpretation of salvation as “the achievement of a relationship to, or an understanding of, the nature of God.” These, and other statements made by Robinson, were met with mixed emotions with his subscribers, as will be discussed shortly.

Robinson reported having numerous visions and dreams, including one that revealed the name of his new religion. The dream involved a man, standing near a male corpse and making gestures, who told Robinson, “This is Psychiana, the Power which will bring new life to a spiritually dead world” (Nielsen 1980:4). Those who took the Psychiana lessons to heart, Robinson claimed, would see a dramatic transformation, one of perhaps Utopian proportions. In what he calls his “most explicit statement involving moral teaching,” Braden quotes Robinson:

(W)hen America awakens to the fact that the power of the spirit of God is available with all its mighty power to all, here and now, believe me, this world will change completely. Wars will cease, illness and death will be no more … there will be no more tears, no more sorrow, no more suspicion of the other fellow, no more crime, no more immorality … for the sham of the present day religion will be cast off, and in its place will come the power of Almighty God (1949:18).
Interestingly, Braden (1949:12) notes that Robinson’s rejection of traditional church doctrines was due to “their promise of something to come hereafter, in another life, but not available now.” This would seem to conflict with the Utopian scenario Robinson espoused.

Braden (1949:10) notes that Robinson referred to himself repeatedly as “a prophet of God” and as an Adept, defined as someone “who by reason of an unusual achievement of spiritual quality come to have wisdom and powers not vouchsafed to ordinary individuals” (1949:12). Robinson also believed he possessed special powers, describing how a flat tire on his vehicle was miraculously restored after a brief prayer (Braden 1949:10), how he commanded his pet goldfish in a different room to materialize in his hands then return to their aquarium (Braden 1949:11), and how his dog was able to transport itself through closed doors when he beckoned it (Braden 1949:11). Those unfamiliar with Robinson’s claims or his Psychiana teachings would surely view them skeptically; however, as Braden notes:

Such experiences … put a heavy strain on one’s credulity, but it is interesting to discover that many people accept implicitly the truth of Dr. Robinson’s statements and believe that these things happened as exactly as he told them (1949:11).

Who were these “many people” who subscribed to the lessons of Psychiana? Why would so many accept Robinson’s stories as true? To answer these questions, Braden offers a demographical breakdown of those requesting lessons advertised in magazines and through direct mail.

Subscribers to a New Faith

Fortunately, for research purposes, Robinson kept a detailed record of respondents to Psychiana advertisements in various print sources, mostly magazines and newspapers, but also direct mailings. Braden (1949:3) reports that of ads placed in 25 magazines, those responding for either more information or to subscribe to lessons, the highest number – 21 percent – came from “readers of a magazine dealing with the future.” According to Braden (1949:3), the next highest were from readers of two astrology magazines (18 percent and 14 percent), and two detective magazines (16 percent and 14 percent). The two lowest numbers of respondents – 3 percent and 4 percent – were readers of newspapers circulated in sparsely populated areas (Braden 1949:3). Braden (1949:3) speculates that subscription rates among rural dwellers were low because “they may be on the whole less insecure, better adjusted than their urban brothers, and hence feel less need for what Psychiana has to offer.”
Robinson also kept track of those responding to his direct-mail advertising. One list shows the largest number came from “persons who had responded to some sort of lonely hearts appeal” and the second largest – 20 percent – from “a group dealing with the power of thought” (Braden 1949:4). A direct mailing to “several thousand” individuals, whose names were obtained through “group lists” results in the following percentages of respondents: Theosophical, 15 percent; Yogi, 14 percent; New Thought, 13 percent; and two astrology groups, 12 and 11 percent (Braden 1949:5). Thus, he concludes, “persons who have been interested in the occult or the mysterious, or the future seem to respond more readily” (Braden 1949:5).

Braden later notes that Robinson’s records showed “an equal number of men and women” subscribers and that the average age was “from forty to sixty years” (Braden 1949:26). Interestingly, Robinson told Braden that 79 percent “are ‘white collar’ people in the $3,000 a year class. Not the lunatics as one monthly publication called them” (Braden 1949:26).

The lesson requirements themselves were relatively straightforward. Subscribers were instructed to practice relaxation and breathing techniques and to repeat positive affirmations “as many as thirty or a hundred times” each day (Braden 1949:22). Readers also were told to recognize a “white spot” or “bright spot” when they closed their eyes. Robinson described this as “the very thin veil between you and the God-Law of the Universe” (Braden 1949:22).

Many subscribers wrote to Robinson sharing stories of healing, increased prosperity and overall improvement in the quality of life (Braden 1949:30). Others were less satisfied, claiming the teachings conflicted too much with their own religious views or had no noticeable effect on their lives (Braden 1949:29). Braden points out an important aspect of the glowing testimonials of those who reported being healed:

The writers may not have known what was the matter with them. They may have been mistaken, in health cases, in the diagnosis of their ills, but that they believe they have been helped, there can be no doubt. And when people believe they have been helped, they have been helped, at least temporarily (1949:30).

Even those who didn’t reap the promised rewards promised in the Psychiana lessons found them to be beneficial. One woman admitted that Robinson’s anti-church approach was off-putting to her but “I don’t pay any attention to that. He helps me just the same. I just take what helps me. I don’t bother about the rest” (Braden 1949:27).
It appears that Psychiana was, for the most part, satisfying a psychological need for its followers. Clearly, thousands of people were seeking a supplement or even an alternative to the religions being offered in the U.S. at that time. The Psychiana phenomenon falls neatly into what is called a revitalization movement, albeit a failed one. Given the historical time frame, which will be discussed later in this paper, and the religion’s particular shortcomings, Psychiana’s demise is understandable.

**Defining a Revitalization Movement**

Anthropologist Anthony F.C. Wallace has conducted extensive research into the field of religion and, most notably, the process he calls a “revitalization movement.” Briefly, Wallace defines this process as occurring in stages. According to Wallace (1966:158), the first is the steady state, in which a culture is experiencing a modicum of stress at the individual level but is maintaining its overall balance. The second stage, the period of increased individual stress, occurs when the culture experiences a definitive blow to its stability, or as Wallace explains, the society is “being ‘pushed’ out of equilibrium by various forces” and “individuals are placed under what is to them intolerable stress by the failure of the system to accommodate their needs” (Wallace 1966:159). The third stage is what Wallace calls the period of revitalization. Without revitalization, he states, the society will collapse or become part of a different society that has maintained equilibrium (Wallace 1966:160).

This process, according to Wallace, (1966:160), usually includes the institution of the following: formulation of a code, communication, organization, adaptation, cultural transformation, and routinization (Wallace 1966:162, 163). If these steps are successful, the result will be what Wallace calls the new steady state, in which the movement is accepted and the culture is again in balance (Wallace 1966:163).

Wallace describes several subcategories of revitalization movements, but this paper most specifically refers to what he calls a Utopian movement (1966:65). Psychiana appears to contain an element that “aims to achieve a golden age believed to lie in the future but to be implicit in the evolving patterns of the present” (Wallace 1966:165). Again, Robinson’s concerns with other religions’ lack of focus on “here and now” and Psychiana’s promises of a transformed world (described earlier) seem to contradict each other.

One characteristic of the revitalization movement is that the founder is typically a charismatic person who claims to have had a vision or prophetic experience (Wallace 2003:21). Believing a calamity will befall the culture if it doesn’t
change its course, this person then begins to put into place the revitalization process, beginning with formulation of the code. As Wallace states:

This model is a blueprint of an ideal society or goal culture. Contrasted with the goal culture is the existing culture, which is presented as inadequate or evil in certain respects. Connecting the existing culture and the goal culture is a transfer culture – a system of operations which, if faithfully carried out, will transform the existing culture into the goal culture (1966:160).

Wallace explains how those who experience prophetic visions tend to form religious movements in which ritual is a major component toward a transfer culture (Wallace 1966:160). This is important to note, as it may have played a part in the failure of Psychiana. Although other aspects of revitalization are clearly present in the movement, emphasis on ritual is a missing key ingredient. Other than urging readers to meditate and recite positive affirmations, there appears to have been no other form of ritual involved. This explains to a significant degree why no transfer culture took place.

One area in which Robinson was highly successful was communication. According to Wallace, the movement’s founder will make the code known to as many people possible in order to gather converts (1966:160). “The code is offered as the means of spiritual salvation for the individual and of cultural salvation for the society” (Wallace 1966:160). Without question, Robinson was a master of marketing his code to the masses and indeed had hundreds of thousands of “converts” to his religion.

At the end of the day, Psychiana could not fulfill the remaining processes of revitalization: organization, adaptation, cultural transformation, and routinization. Again, this is likely due to Robinson’s reluctance to form churches where members could meet and be instructed by an official Psychiana leader. Psychiana was loosely organized, at least well enough to sustain a mail-order congregation for 23 years; however, without an established set of rituals and routines -- without what Wallace (1966:161) terms a “tricornered relationship” involving the founder, a group of “disciples” and the congregation -- it is remarkable that Psychiana endured as long as it did.

**Historical factors**

Robinson introduced Psychiana in 1929, the same year that the Great Depression struck the United States. While there is no mention whether Robinson himself suffered any great financial loss at this time, it is reasonable to conclude that his readers were among many who did. According to Cantor, the Depression:
(D)did not make itself felt everywhere at the same time, and it pro-
duced unprecedented economic disasters in the Western world, par-
ticularly deflation, decline in productivity, and massive unemploy-
ment. … The level of unemployment reached twenty-five percent
by the time Franklin Roosevelt become president in 1932

The 1930s were a time of extraordinar y hardship, a time of financial ruin
for many and, one must agree, of spiritual distress as well. After all, Americans
were imbued with the Protestant work ethic, described by Max Weber as
“advocating hard work and delayed satisfaction” (Cantor 1988:105). Cantor goes
on to explain how Weber’s theory (that the Protestant work ethic would “foster
capital accumulation”) was an example of “ideas that shape social forces” and not
the opposite (1988:105).

The United States had seen capitalism in full swing during the “Roaring
Twenties,” and it seemed the “work hard and you can achieve great riches” mind-
set was in full accord with the economy. This came to a sudden halt when the
stock market crashed in 1929. Over the next few years, the country was indeed
sunk into a depression. Despite Roosevelt’s New Deal program to put people back
to work, it was “the coming of the Second World War, not the New Deal, that
ended the depression in America” (Cantor 1988:213).

This historical period also was one of great change in religion, most nota-
bly Catholicism (Cantor 1988:118). As Cantor explains, in the early 1900s, there
was an attempt to bring the Catholic church into the 20th century through a move-
ment known as Modernism (1988:118). This move was “suppressed by the Papacy
as being dangerous to the faith” (Cantor 1988:118). Still, despite the Pope’s ad-
monishment, people saw the need for change, as Cantor writes:

It was therefore the task, during the 1920’s and 30’s, of Catholic
thinkers who wished to modernize Catholic theology, to try and
find a way around the disaster that had taken place in the early
years of the century, a way around the papal condemnation. These
thinkers were engaged in an activity which the overwhelming ma-
ajority of the hierarchy, particularly of the Vatican, did not welcome.
They were obliged to sneak, as it were, the modern world into Ca-

Certainly, other forces were in play historically but, upon reflection, one
might see how traditional mainstream religions might not have garnered the same
loyalty from its members or offered the reassurance its congregants needed during this time of national – and personal – crisis. Perhaps not only Catholics were struggling to worship in a way that more closely reflected their view of the world. Perhaps others were disenchanted with their current belief systems and sought something that provided a sense of security. Psychiana promised happiness, prosperity, wellbeing – qualities that were sorely lacking during the Great Depression.

**A Return to Prosperity**

As Cantor (1988:213) stated, the U.S. economy was boosted by World War II. By the 1950s, people were again living the “American dream,” and the future looked more promising than ever before. It does not appear to be a coincidence that Psychiana’s popularity peaked in the 1940s; the U.S. was recovering from the Depression while engaged in battles around the world, which continued to provide tremendous stress on an already traumatized nation. Nor is it unreasonable to conclude that Psychiana’s demise was not only the result of Robinson’s death but of the economic upswing in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

Finally, one must wonder if Psychiana would exist today had Robinson organized it in such a way to ensure it would carry on after his death. Would it have joined other New Thought churches and offered worshippers a place to meet on a regular basis? It’s difficult to say, but what does seem likely is that those who were loyal subscribers to this mail-order religion, those who took it seriously as a new way to interact with a higher power, found and joined similar religions – such as Divine Science, Religious Science and Unity -- that have succeeded into the 21st century.

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