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## **The Religious Dimension in Psychological Counseling**

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# The Religious Dimension in Psychological Counseling

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RUBEN M. TANSECO, S.J.

## I. INTRODUCTION

SIGMUND Freud was openly hostile to religion. His two works, *Totem and Taboo* and *The Future of an Illusion*, were adamantly dedicated to the proposition that all religions of humanity were a collective delirium. For all his invaluable contributions to modern psychology, Freud has nevertheless done great harm by espousing such a negative and myopic view of religious values in personality development, psychotherapy, and psychology in general. And in varying degrees, he has had a paralyzing influence in this regard on many contemporary psychologists and psychotherapists.

Moreover, science and scientism invaded the field of psychology, and consequently, psychotherapy too. Science had little or nothing to do with religion; religion, to say the least, was suspicious of science.

But a few strong voices opposed this split and had a more cosmic, integrative vision of reality, both among psychologists, psychotherapists and theologians. These voices have become stronger and more numerous, so that in the last decade or so, there has been a growing body of literature concerning the interconnections between psychology, psychotherapy, and religion.

Among the psychologists-psychotherapists, Carl Jung stands out as a leader and inspiration in the attempt to re-

late religion to psychotherapy. The psychotherapies of Victor Frankl, Gordon Allport, O. Hobart Mowrer, among others, have taken a similar direction.

The contemporary theologies of secularity—as propounded by Catholic-Jewish-Protestant theologians such as Teilhard de Chardin, Martin Buber, Paul Tillich, Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, among others—have profoundly affected the current efforts in integrating psychotherapy and religion.

This article will explore, though briefly, the religious dimension in psychological counseling, as proposed by present-day authors and illuminated by some of the above-mentioned psychologists and theologians.

## II. THE PSYCHOLOGICAL VIEWPOINT

The concept of psychological counseling as *healing* is a growing one. As David Bakan points out, the psychotherapist has two main role postures open to him: repairman and healer.

In the psychotherapeutic role of repairman, “technical competence dominates all other aspects of personality.”<sup>1</sup>

In the psychotherapeutic role of healer (by which he does not mean the “hocus-pocus” or “faith-healer” type), Bakan unites technical competence with the following characteristics: (a) The healer manages, in one way or another, to inform the client that his suffering is not necessarily tied to his sins. (b) The healer makes the assumption that the forces for the healing are inherent in the sufferer. The healer’s role is simply that of encouraging these forces to become effective. (c) The healer cognizes and indicates the cosmological and existential entailment in the suffering. He points out the meaning of the individual’s life in regions which extend far beyond the limited circumscribed world of the client’s everyday consciousness; and he thereby enhances and gives moment to the individual’s existence. (d) The major device the healer uses is communi-

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<sup>1</sup> David Bakan, *On Method: Toward A Reconstruction of Psychological Investigation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., 1967), p. 123.

cation—among regions of existence, whether this be between the holy and the mundane, between one person and another, between consciousness or unconsciousness, or between the scientist and the layman.<sup>2</sup>

In a recent dialogue between psychologists and theologians, Bakan further attempts to trace the historical roots, or more accurately, the historical connections between psychotherapy and the Judeo-Christian tradition. Psychoanalysis, he asserts, can be understood as a part of, and a contemporary fulfilment of the style of religiosity that starts with Abraham. There is more than just a semantic similarity between religious redemption and the psychological redemption of the individual in Freud's psychoanalysis.<sup>3</sup>

In that same dialogue, psychologist Joseph Havens of the University of Massachusetts concurs with Bakan in these terms:

Paradoxically, psychotherapists, beginning with Freud, have tended to be indifferent or antagonistic to organized religion. This attitude has led them to avoid terms associated with the Judeo-Christian tradition (e.g. love, forgiveness); thus the historical connection—about which we all agreed—has been obscured. Some reasons for this, as is widely known, lie in the anti-scientific and moralistic attitudes of the Church. Nonetheless modern psychotherapy is to some extent an actualization of the Judeo-Christian ethic.<sup>4</sup>

Other psychologists-psychotherapists like O. Hobart Mowrer<sup>5</sup> have consistently pursued the concept of psychological redemption in the context of sin and guilt. And the personhood achieved by a successful psychotherapy is equated by some authors like Erich Fromm<sup>6</sup> to the personhood of healthy reli-

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 125-26.

<sup>3</sup> David Bakan, as quoted in *Psychology and Religion: A Contemporary Dialogue*, Joseph Havens, ed. (New Jersey: D. Van Nostrand Company, 1968), p. 96.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Havens, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. O. Hobart Mowrer, *Crisis in Psychiatry and Religion* (New Jersey: D. Van Nostrand Company, 1961), *passim*.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Erich Fromm, *The Sane Society* (New York: Rinehart and Company, 1955), *passim*.

gion. The "peak experiences" that Abraham Maslow<sup>7</sup> speaks of in his self-actualizing patients are actually an experience of transcendence.

Andras Angyal, in his excellent book, *Neurosis and Treatment*, looks at it this way: "Parting with neurosis feels like parting with life. And indeed one could say, paraphrasing the Gospel, that the patient can gain a new life only by losing his life as a neurotic."<sup>8</sup>

Victor Frankl's logotherapy<sup>9</sup> as a search for meaning is still another form of therapy that could bridge the gap between psychological counseling and religion. Robert Leslie has attempted to do just this, in his penetrating book, *Jesus and Logotherapy: The Ministry of Jesus as Interpreted Through the Psychotherapy of Victor Frankl* (1965). A similar attempt had been previously made by Donald Tweedie in his work, *Logotherapy and the Christian Faith*.

But it was Carl Jung most of all who has exerted the greatest influence on psychologists concerning the relationship between psychotherapy and religion. He had always been concerned in building a bridge between psychotherapy and religion, between theology and clinical psychology. In spite of their different points of departure, he said, these two disciplines meet each other in the empirical soul of the human person. He always recognized the religious dimension of the psychotherapeutic enterprise.

Healing may be called a religious problem. In the sphere of social or national relations, the state of suffering may be civil war, and this state is to be cured by the Christian virtue of forgiveness for those who hate us. That which we try with the conviction of good Christians to apply to external situations, we must also apply to the inner state in the treatment of neurosis. This is why modern man has heard enough about guilt and sin. He is sorely enough beset by his own bad conscience, and wants rather to learn how he is to reconcile him-

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Abraham Maslow, *Toward a Psychology of Being*, Second Edition (New Jersey: D. Van Nostrand Company, 1968), *passim*.

<sup>8</sup> Andras Angyal, *Neurosis and Treatment: A Holistic Theory* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1965), p. 240.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Victor Frankl, *The Doctor and the Soul*, 1955; *Psychotherapy and Existentialism*, 1967.

self with his own nature—how he is to love the enemy in his own heart and call the wolf his brother.<sup>10</sup>

Jung believed that a man suffering from neurosis is ultimately helped only by revelations of a wisdom greater than himself or his own. The opening up of the unconscious always means the outbreak of intense spiritual suffering. Man has been aware of this, even in the most primitive stages of culture. This was the reason why in those cultures the medicine-man and the priest were one and the same person. He was the savior of both body and soul. And in a very real sense, all other religions before or since are systems of healing for psychic illness.<sup>11</sup>

As a practising psychotherapist, Jung was convinced that the religious dimension was often a crucial factor in successful psychotherapy.

During the past thirty years, people from all the civilized countries of the earth have consulted me. I have treated many hundreds of patients, the larger number being Protestants, a smaller number Jews, and not more than five or six believing Catholics. Among all my patients in the second half of life—that is to say, over thirty-five—there has not been one whose problem in the last resort was not that of finding religious outlook on life. It is safe to say that every one of them fell ill because he had lost that which the living religions of every age have given to their followers, and none of them has really been healed who did not regain his religious outlook. This of course has nothing whatever to do with a particular creed or membership of a Church.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, we must mention one other aspect of practically every good psychotherapy today which, as we shall see more fully in the next section, is of a deeply religious dimension. And this is the relational aspect of psychotherapy, psychotherapy as an interpersonal relationship between client and therapist, but focused of course, on the client and his problem. In a climate of emphatic acceptance, the client is able to accept himself, and to redirect his forces towards self-actualiza-

<sup>10</sup> Carl Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc., 1933), p. 237.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 240-41.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 229.

tion. This has a profound religious bearing, as we shall soon attempt to show.

Carl Rogers is mostly responsible for this aspect and development in modern psychotherapy.<sup>13</sup>

### III. THE RELIGIOUS VIEWPOINT

Through the writings and practices of some leading contemporary psychologists and psychotherapists, we have treated briefly the aspects of psychotherapy that connote a strong religious dimension. And these were: psychotherapy as a healing, as a search for selfhood and self-actualization, for a meaning of life, for an experience of transcendence and cosmic vision, for self-acceptance in a climate of acceptability.

We shall now trace briefly a contemporary development in religious thought—mainly Christian, since the present author is not versed in Jewish or other schools of theology—to show that this development supports and confirms the aspects of psychotherapy already discussed as deeply human as well as profoundly religious and spiritual.

Contemporary Christian theology appears more at times to be an anthropology and a cosmology rather than a strict “science of God.” There is a sense in which this trend can be taken as areligious, atheistic, a “death-of-God” theology. But when this happens, it is a misinterpretation, a distortion of what sound contemporary theology is really about. The man-focus and world-focus of modern theology is there, but as a development of man’s historical consciousness—hence a step towards the perfection of creation—not as a faithlessness and a godlessness.

In enhancing creation one does not detract from its creator. On the contrary. To enhance creation is to enhance its creator. To strive to perfect man and his world according to their deep inherent values is to strive to bring them closer and closer to the divine design. Consequently, the more we strive to perfect man in his humanity, and the world towards its

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Carl Rogers, *Client-Centered Therapy*, 1951.

"worldliness" and real progress, the more we assert our faith and belief in their creator. To believe in man and the world is—at the very least—implicitly to believe in God.

It may be noted here that these insights, this re-thinking and re-conceptualizing of old theological and Gospel ideas (for they are not really new), have been incorporated into the documents of the Second Vatican Council.

This, in a nutshell, is what modern religious thought is about. Its developments, refinements, and sophistication come with the different schools of theologians and their various institutional affiliations and denominations. Let us briefly touch on the thought of some of these theologians.

The figure of the late Teilhard de Chardin, the Jesuit-priest paleontologist and theologian, stands out as a crucial landmark in the attempt to integrate modern science and religion. A world-renowned scientist and a deeply-religious man, he loved the world with as much passion as he loved God. And in this he saw and experienced a congruity rather than an incongruity, a unity rather than a dichotomy. He saw Christ as the focal point of cosmic reality, and his enfleshment, incarnation, coming-and-becoming-man as a healing and redemption of creation, a divinization of matter. Consequently, all of creation with man as focus is moving towards this Omega Point, this cosmic Christ. And this movement in the evolutionary process involves the progress of man and his world according to their inherent values and perfectibility. Consequently, any and all efforts towards this earthly and human progress are by that very fact a religious and Christ-bound enterprise.<sup>14</sup>

Teilhard de Chardin did not make any direct statements about psychotherapy and religion, but one can readily make the link and integration between his theological insights and their relevance to the psychotherapeutic process. The psychological aspects and goals of therapy that we treated in the previous section fit in beautifully with Teilhard's theology. Hence, if one follows his theological reasoning, one cannot but

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<sup>14</sup> Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu*, 1960; *Hymn to the Universe*, 1961.



conclude that psychological counseling—if it is to be effective—is inevitably a deeply religious experience. Psychotherapy as a healing, as a search for selfhood, self-actualization, all these Teilhard would clearly see as so many points of progress and evolution towards the Omega-Point, the Cosmic Christ.

He once said: "I wish from now on, because I am a priest, to deepen my awareness of what the world loves, seeks, suffers. I wish to be first in seeking men out, in sympathy, in suffering—the first to open myself up to others, and to sacrifice myself—to be more broadly human, to belong to earth in a nobler fashion than any of those who serve the world."

Another leading Catholic theologian who bears a relevance to psychotherapy is the German Karl Rahner. His concept of the "supernatural existential" in every man is significant in pursuing the religious dimension of psychotherapy.

According to Rahner, there is present in every man an obscure aspiration towards the God of salvation. This "supernatural existential" is an a priori constituent of our historical and concrete presence, a fundamental orientation from birth. Still, man retains his double-liberty as a person. Consequently, he can either accept or reject this supernatural orientation by means of his essential liberty of totalizing option. If one freely lets himself be urged by this supernatural impulse and accepts by a fundamental option this interior vocation of divine grace, then what was initially only an obscure urge, an implicit tendency, a fundamental orientation, "offered grace," now becomes under divine influence "grace accepted existentially." He thereafter acts under the impulse of a fundamental option of supernatural grace. He is really in a state of grace, really justified and sanctified.<sup>15</sup>

In psychological terms, this would be what Jung would describe as the end-product or result of a successful psycho-

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol. I (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1963), pp. 297-317.

therapy, a psychic healing—as we saw in the exposition of his thought in the previous section.

In his recent book, *Psychotherapy and Religion*, psychologist-theologian Joseph Rudin again quotes Jung as emphasizing that “on the ground of every human soul the natural God-image, the archetype of God, lies dormant and that from the middle of life on it should no longer be ignored.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, Rudin explains further, neurosis is here no longer merely the product of repression but one of underdevelopment, of an underdevelopment of the authentic image of man and its deepest developmental tendency.<sup>17</sup>

Among the Protestant theologians, the works of Paul Tillich, Karl Barth, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer have great relevance to our subject of psychotherapy and religion. In two recent works, *Kerygma and Counseling* and *Contemporary Theology and Psychotherapy*, author Thomas Oden has done a magnificent job in integrating the thought of these theologians (and a few others) into the field of pastoral care and psychotherapy.

In *Kerygma and Counseling* Oden explores his thesis that “there is an implicit assumption hidden in all effective psychotherapy which is made explicit in the Christian proclamation.”<sup>18</sup> His focus is on the relation between a psychotherapy of human self-disclosure (mostly the humanistic psychotherapy of Carl Rogers) and a theology of God’s self-disclosure.

According to Oden, the tacit ontological assumption of all effective therapy is this: it is not merely the counselor who accepts the client but that the client is acceptable as a human being by the ground of being itself, and that the final reality that we confront in life is for us—Deus pro nobis.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Joseph Rudin, *Psychotherapy and Religion* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), pp. 187-88.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Oden, *Kerygma and Counseling* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1966), p. 9 and *passim*.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

. . . The counselor is not the source of acceptance; he only points to an acceptance that has its source beyond himself. He assumes an acceptance that is already there, despite all human rejection . . . He sees neurotic behavior as meaningful behavior but without ontological grounding. He assumes that man does not know himself properly when he is neurotically guilty, frightened, and depressed. He assumes that it is written in the universe that the individual is acceptable.<sup>20</sup>

The implicit assumption is precisely what is made explicit by God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ (revelation.) He, Christ, is the one who accepts unconditionally. So when the psychotherapist accepts the client as he is, he is not merely expressing his own private opinion that the individual is acceptable to him. He is performing a representative ministry—by implicitly communicating to the client (through the therapeutic relationship) that he is acceptable in the midst of his guilt, accepted by creation itself or some principle in creation. He can then make all his feelings available to awareness. This, then, says Oden, is a theological assumption that underlies all effective therapy.<sup>21</sup>

The "preaching", then, of divine acceptance is not mediated through verbal preaching and moralizing, but through an interpersonal relationship with the client. This is a theme that recurs in the writings of other contemporary psychologist-theologians. Andre Godin, in his book *The Priest as Counselor*, develops the mediative function of the priest-therapist.<sup>22</sup>

Oden offers us a table of categories that visualizes the relationship between a theology of revelation (God's self-disclosure) and the therapeutic process of self-disclosure.

Oden further develops this integrative approach in his more recent work, *Contemporary Theology and Psychotherapy*. Here he combines the theological insights of Teilhard de Chardin and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, concentrating on the theme of Christ's presence in the world, and interpreting this theme in terms of psychotherapy. He proceeds to show that

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Andre Godin, *The Priest as Counselor* (Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1965), *passim*, particularly 22. 66-111.

GOD'S ACTIVITY (Revelation)	THERAPIST'S ACTIONS (Clarification)	INDIVIDUAL'S RESPONSE (Growth toward Authenticity)
1. Incarnation	Emphatic understanding	Increased self- undersanding
2. Divine congruence	Therapeutic congruence	Increased self- identity
3. Forgiveness	Acceptance	Increased self- acceptance
4. Grace	Permissiveness	Increased self- direction
5. Divine love	Unconditional positive regard	Increased love Increased love of others

effective psychotherapy is an incognito embodiment of Christ's formation in the secularizing world.<sup>24</sup>

#### IV. CONCLUSION

A growing number of contemporary psychologists and theologians are becoming increasingly aware of the religious dimension in effective, humanistic psychological counseling. This article has attempted to show that the psychotherapeutic process, if it is a deeply human experience, is by that very fact alone already a religious and spiritual experience. And even a religion of revelation can become an implicit assumption in humanistic psychotherapy.

I perceive psychotherapy as being at the service of religion—rather than religion at the service of psychotherapy. For after all, psychotherapy is a tool—a healing tool. Religion

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Oden, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Oden, *Contemporary Theology and Psychotherapy* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1967), pp. 28-51 and *passim*.

is a way of life—of existence. And psychotherapy helps to restore a distorted or disoriented way of life or existence.

Effective psychotherapy always involves a conversion, a metanoia, from disintegration to reintegration. And in some real sense, wholeness is holiness.

“For you have stripped off your old self with its ways and have put on that new self newly made in the likeness of its Creator.” (St. Paul’s Letter to the Colossians, Ch. 3, v. 8)