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# CHRISTIANITY AS PSYCHOLOGY

*The Healing Power  
of the  
Christian  
Message*

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## — WHAT CHRISTIANITY — CAN OFFER PSYCHOLOGY

There are many professions that offer help to struggling, hurting, and psychologically disabled human beings. A great gulf has developed, however, between those with a basic religious orientation and those whose basic emphasis has been "scientific." I see this as a false dichotomy. Of course, there are psychological problems that fall primarily within the medical and physiological province. Psyche, mind, and body are certainly interrelated. Likewise some human misery relates primarily to the "religious" realm. However, if that misery is intense enough, it will have psychological and even physiological repercussions. Physical illness or physically caused mental distress can also trigger reactions of fear and meaninglessness.

The gulf between the religious and scientific communities in the Western world was caused to a large extent by a church on the defensive. Its world view and its authority were under attack, and it responded with rigidity and inflexible dogma. In

reaction, the scientific community cut itself off from the church and all religious attitudes, and most of it gradually developed in their place a rational, mechanistic materialism with no place for meaning or values. The battle lines were drawn, and the conflict continued for centuries.

The situation has changed, however, and most religious institutions are now much more open and less authoritarian. Indeed, Dr. James Lynch suggests that the church has so much accepted the attitude of the scientific world that it has lost much of its mission and direction in caring for people. On the other hand, the growing edge of the scientific community is quite uncertain about the ultimate nature of reality or how it came to be. The time has come for rapprochement and dialog between these former opponents. The religious community needs to integrate the knowledge of depth psychology into its view of human beings so that the understanding of the depth and complexity of our psyches and how we develop by stages into mature human beings is available to ministers and lay people. The church would also do well to put into practice the discoveries of the humanistic psychologists who point out the creative and healing power of love. We can learn from these professionals what love looks like in action. The best of Christians have expressed the love humanistic psychology describes. The great spiritual guides, often as directors of conscience, have instinctively known about the depth of the human soul, but neither mature Christians nor spiritual guides have clearly written much about the nature of the psyche or the nature of love and how it manifests itself. There is no doubt that the religious institutions can learn much from the psychological one, but what can psychology learn from Christianity? Before we answer that question, let us take a quick glance at the various religious and secular helping professions.

In *Companions on the Inner Way* (Crossroad, 1983), I have discussed at length the relationships between the several help-

ing professions. Psychiatry offers help to the emotionally distressed or disabled by physicians trained in medicine as well as psychology, although some rely primarily on "psychological" methods and treatment. Psychologists, marriage, family, and child counselors, social workers, and pastoral counselors offer "psychological" help without the use of drugs or medical intervention. They often work in conjunction with psychiatrists, who provide medical assistance. Clergy and lay people (often in religious orders) may offer pastoral care to sustain people in sorrow or crisis. Ordained clergy offer sacramental ministrations, Eucharist, reconciliation, and the laying on of hands, are sometimes quite effective. Spiritual guides or spiritual directors offer two quite different kinds of companionship on the inner journey. The following charts from *Companions on the Inner Way* describe the different reasons for these relationships, and the various goals, methods, and personal relationships that are found in each of these encounters.

### *The Goals and Direction of Therapy*

What is the task of the "helper," the psychological healer, the therapist? Is it to "fix" others, alleviate their pain, enable them to manage their outer lives, and adjust them to our sometimes crazy society? Or is it to accompany people on the way to maturity, wholeness, and human fulfillment? John Sanford, a professional analyst and counselor, reported that many of the people who come to him professionally for help stop their therapy when they are no longer suffering. Yet this may be the very moment when real steps toward integration, wholeness, and religious meaning might be achieved. Indeed, what is human fulfillment? In Chapter 2 we suggested that Richard Coan's description of the optimal personality was the best that we had encountered. He concluded that truly whole people are characterized by efficiency (are disciplined and effective), are

	Psychiatry	Pastoral Counseling Psychotherapy Social Case Work	Pastoral Care
<b>Reason for Encounter</b>	Person in pain, with inner conflicts, psychosomatic disease, or unable to fit in social group.	Person with same symptoms, but needing neither drugs nor a controlled environment. Can work with psychiatrist.	Reaching out to people in psychic pain, loneliness, grief. Initial contact may come from pastor.
<b>Goal</b>	To remove pain and enable person to function adequately within himself or herself and within the more intimate and larger social group. Except in case of disoriented persons, the patient decides termination of relationship.	Same goal as psychiatry, but limited to those who do not need drugs and custodial care. To provide insight and self-determination.	To bring comfort, renewal, relief of pain and sorrow and confusion, but without necessarily bringing insight.
<b>Method</b>	Any method necessary to bring healing, even understanding of world view and spiritual discipline, but usually relying on custodial care and psychotherapy. Should be aware of existential roots of some problems and have a place for religion to avoid a limited point of view. Often uses chemical intervention. Sometimes utilizes dream analysis.	With the exception of use of drugs and custodial care, uses the same methods as psychiatrist. One works within a religious framework; the other has no necessary religious connection, but should be aware of religious and existential dimension of psychosomatic and psychic distress. Stops process at limits set by patient.	Concerned caring in one-to-one calling or in arranged social gatherings and fellowship, in study or prayer or sociality. Within Christian tradition usually connected with priesthood, but not necessarily with pastoral counseling or spiritual direction A or B. Takes seeker no further than he or she asks.
<b>Personal Relationship to Seeker</b>	Healing seldom occurs unless there is genuine care and humility. Not necessary for use of medical model, but still helpful.	The therapist's only scalpel is his or her personality. Caring, humility, and knowledge are all necessary.	Concerned caring with enough awareness not to encourage dependency.

	Priesthood	Spiritual Direction A: Apophatic-Nonmediational	Spiritual Direction B: Kataphatic-Mediational Shamanistic
<b>Reason for Encounter</b>	Providing sacrament, assistance in experiencing God, or healing of body or mind. In most cases initiated by seeker.	A soul searching for God without any obvious disorder or acute need. Always initiated by seeker.	A psyche in pain seeking for integration of body, mind, and soul and release from pain. Usually initiated by seeker.
<b>Goal</b>	To achieve whatever goal is desired by individual.	Being and becoming in God without essential consideration of personal psychological problems. Particularly useful for once-born type as described by James. Never goes beyond individual's goals.	To alleviate the pain so person can function, to bring insight into how pain is related to inner journey, and to facilitate that journey. To continue with person as long as needed to bring individual to sustaining fellowship with God. Can offer goals.
<b>Method</b>	Providing individual and group sacraments, arranging worship, mediating of the Holy. Within Christian tradition this role is traditionally connected with pastoral care and even with spiritual directions A and B. Providing confession, absolution, Eucharist, anointing, etc.	Allowing self and relationship to be a vehicle of grace, of the will of God. Primary method: surrender, letting go whatever is in God's way. Abiding with the person making the journey. Referral of any significant problem to psychiatrist or therapist-counselor.	Whatever is needed to facilitate the individual through pains on the way. Usually will not deal with psychotics and will be equipped with knowledge of pastoral care and pastoral counseling. Will be particularly equipped to deal with existential problems. Will use psychiatrists as consultants and will be so used by enlightened psychiatrists or therapists. Can use sacramental actions.
<b>Personal Relationship to Seeker</b>	Need be none, but in Christian framework it is a necessary ingredient if priest is a mediator of Christ.	Only God is responsible for whatever healing/growth occurs. "Thy will be done."	God gives transformation, but shaman/guide is mediator of experience, knowledge, critical understanding, and divine love.

creative, possess inner harmony, relate well and in depth to other human beings, and are in touch with that reality which transcends the ordinary world.

At least four of these qualities have specifically religious overtones. In creativity something new emerges in the individual, and that person shares in the nature of the creating divine. One of the most frequent goals of Eastern religion is the achieving of some inner harmony. We have seen how central relatedness is when God's nature is ultimately perceived as love. Most religions are trying to open us human beings to transcendence. Even in regard to efficiency or effectiveness—few people possess this quality more than those seized with a religious mission. At this point it is wise to remember Coan's statement that secular psychology, when it is consistent, cannot offer goals and establish values about the optimal life.

On the other hand, we have already noted the fact that few psychological professionals are comfortable with religious issues and data, and few initiate questions about it. If religion is a natural part of life, it should no more be avoided than questions dealing with sexuality and hostility. We have already described in some detail the importance that Jung and most of his followers attribute to a vital religious connection in healthy humans. Dr. Robert McCully, a professor of psychiatry at the Medical University of South Carolina, takes his profession to task for ignoring the important religious dimension of life and draws heavily upon Jung and the sociologist Emile Durkheim.<sup>1</sup> Roger Walsh has both a medical degree and a Ph.D. in psychology and is a professor in Psychiatry at the Medical School at Irvine, California. He has written several books on the importance of the religious factors in human wholeness. His views have been summarized in the *American Journal of Psychiatry* (137 [1980]: 663-673). He maintains that we must take the transpersonal experiences seriously if we are to deal with the whole person and aid that whole person to come to fruition.<sup>2</sup>

Dr. Harry M. Tiebout has written extensively on the importance of religious commitment and experience in overcoming alcoholism, one of the most serious and disabling diseases on the American scene.<sup>3</sup>

What specifically does the Christian religion have to offer to the health and wholeness of human beings and to those who would bring human beings to wholeness? The Christianity I am referring to I have described as the Christian cosmic drama. I am all too well aware that few people have really lived the full implications of this kind of Christianity. The statement is trite, but true, that Christianity has not so much failed as it has seldom been seriously tried. We see Christians who are that in name only and who have never seriously decided to follow the Christian directive of love; some of these are found in high places within religious institutions. And there are those who feel that since salvation is so freely available, they don't have to do anything to receive it. On the other hand, there are those so convinced that the Holy Spirit is moving within them that they don't have to make any conscious decisions or actions; they abrogate all personal responsibility. The failure of the church to reach out to the poor, the imprisoned, the broken, the mentally disturbed, all those who are different from the average, is a scandal. We have done little to change the social systems which create this havoc. As a Christian church and society we have not lived out Jesus' message.

What can we do as Christians and as a church? We can face our brokenness and failures as Christians, bear the tension of our imperfect faith and action and of our imperfect institutions, and try to live more fully within the divine drama. We need to work at our Christian vocation as if our entire salvation depended upon it. At the same time we have the paradoxical faith that we are loved and saved purely by grace. When the cosmic drama of Christ is truly understood, we are placed in

this creative tension, and miracles occur in us and in those around us.

This kind of living has produced saints throughout the ages, and most saints were healing people. What are the characteristics of this kind of healing life? What are the psychological implications of Christianity?

### *The Psychological Implications of Christianity*

Writing about the implications of Christianity for psychology is an awesome task, because it suggests that the writer knows something about the essential nature of both of these disciplines. It requires particular temerity on my part, as I am neither a shining example of psychological maturity, on the one side, or of Christian perfection, on the other. However, I undertake the task because I was asked to do so and because I have been much involved in both areas, and I am continually striving to grow to greater wholeness in both.

First of all, Christianity presents a view of the universe, a world view, a view of the ultimate nature of things that has touched the lives of many people and gives meaning to all human beings in the world and to the world itself. Although most modern psychologists reject that world view, they have certainly not come up with any satisfactory alternatives. Neither rational materialism nor humanism gives any ultimate meaning to life. If I were to adopt a world view other than that of Christianity, it would be neither of these, but rather that of Eastern religion.

We have outlined our view of the essential nature of Christianity in the last two chapters. The Christian cosmic drama tells of a creator God who is the ultimate source of all reality, both physical and spiritual. This God is characterized by the love expressed by the father in Jesus' story of the prodigal son and the elder brother. It was expressed by Jesus' outreach to the poor and dispossessed, his compassion toward and healing

of the sick and demon-possessed, his courage and honesty, his sacrificial death and resurrection, and his sending of the Holy Spirit. God created with love that love might be born, and so the Divine Lover of necessity gave freedom; real love is possible only in the context of freedom. One part of God's created universe rebelled like an adolescent and dragged others away from love and God. The result was evil in the world that God had created good, and so God reentered the world to defeat evil and free us from its power. Then the resurrected Lord poured out his Spirit in a new way upon humankind.

Our human Christian task is to know the reality of that love, to respond to that love, to receive it, and then share it with other people—each in our own unique way. Each of us has an eternal destiny with a life that extends beyond this physical time-bound world. We are amazing creatures, amphibious creatures, who bridge the physical and spiritual worlds and have the ability to perceive in ways beyond the five physical senses. We are also growing creatures who go through many stages of development before we come to our ultimate maturity and destiny.

If this is an accurate picture of reality (and it is the most complete picture of which I am aware), then the task of the psychologist is to help the individual (or group) be free from those things that inhibit growth and development—mental illness, drug abuse, immaturity, neuroses, compulsions, and unrealistic fears—and help them adjust to the full measure of reality and possible creative experience that surrounds us. If human beings have an eternal destiny, part of the task of human helpers is to facilitate their journey toward that destiny. Dr. Riklin wrote that just because a person was dying was no reason to stop analysis.

What would we look for in a psychologist who was operating from this basic view of reality? What abilities, qualities of

personality, what knowledge, what kind of vision and understanding would we expect to find?

First of all, we would expect that person to be fully equipped with a good background of how human beings grow and develop psychosexually and in relationships; how they can function efficiently and adequately; how they can be freed from crippling problems created by poverty, neglect, or childhood trauma; how they can come to intimacy; how they can learn to listen and communicate; how they can come to genuine satisfaction with life; how they can get along in the world; and how they can find a meaningful goal for themselves. They will recognize that human beings are very different and have different ways to follow. *In addition the psychologist who is dealing with the whole person will know that there is a transcendental realm and a Divine Lover to be found there and how this saving, guiding reality and Spirit can be encountered.* Many people are turning to psychologists for this last kind of knowledge because they have found more understanding and help and love in psychologists' offices than they have found in the churches, and they want to enter upon the spiritual journey in the same kind of framework.

To ask psychologists to know this other dimension and how to deal with it may sound like an impossible request. When I was with Jung and asked him why he got involved in religious matters, he replied that people came to him suffering from sicknesses caused by a loss of meaning. He sent them back to their pastors, who did not know how to help them. When they returned still suffering, he concluded that if he were to facilitate healing, he had to deal with matters of religion. Psychologists need to know all they can about the purely physical and psychological causes of illness. They also need to know the range and depth of human experience and to use the same critical and open attitude toward these nonphysical experiences that they use toward sense data. The only way that they can do this

is by trying to follow some religious tradition fully and listening to and trying to understand their own paranormal and religious experiences. At the same time, theologians and pastors need to be widely acquainted with the findings of clinical psychology and be available when psychologists find areas in which they are not competent.

Not only can the blind not lead the blind, but none of us can lead a person farther on the path toward maturity or spiritual fulfillment than we have gone ourselves. Yet since no one who understands the nature of the ideal Christian life would claim to be very far upon that path, we will reach out in humility to those who come to us. We are part of a broken world and carry within us a large measure of the world's corruption. We are in no position to judge or condemn any other human being. We look down on no one. We believe that the compassionate love expressed by Christ is our best instrument for enabling the Spirit dwelling in each person to blaze into a living flame.

As facilitators of wholeness, we will try to live on the growing edge of life led by the Spirit. We shall try to bring our lives into harmony with the love expressed in Christ. This requires discipline; we will try to restrain our sensuality, our self-seeking and arrogance, our hostility, which is so often a reaction to fear. We will try to be angry and sin not. We will at the same time try to extend to ourselves the same compassion and love that we extend to others. We will fail in both of these endeavors many times and pick ourselves up and try again. Paul Clasper says it well: "We need to be firm with ourselves, knowing how easily we can be diverted from our quest; but we need, equally, to be gentle with ourselves. We know that we cannot roughly coerce others; this only provokes resistance. Why do we treat ourselves in ways we know we cannot treat others? We would do better to do unto ourselves as we would, at our best, do unto others. We give them place and time. We should treat ourselves with the same courtesy."<sup>4</sup> Jung has said

that a psychiatrist is a surgeon whose only scalpel is his or her own personality. If we continue to hate ourselves, we are likely to project upon others what we cannot stand in ourselves.

If we are operating from a Christian model, we will want to know our model well. We will try to know the teachings and life of Jesus and the religious background of which he was a part. Carl Schurz has said: "Ideals are like stars; you will not succeed in touching them with your hands, but like the seafaring person on the desert of waters, you choose them as your guides, and, following them, you reach your destiny." We must know the nature of our star if we are to follow it.

The redwood tree grows from the tiniest seed and becomes one of the largest living things by exposing itself to the light of the sun. Daily it spreads out its branches and takes in the light and turns it into a living, material tree. We need to expose ourselves to the presence of the loving God daily and receive the love that can lift us up out of darkness and can build our lives with the same enduring reality as the redwood. Whenever those of us who are trying to operate from this model are with another, we will try to be aware that this loving Spirit is present within and between both of us. We will also realize that the transformations that sometimes take place are often as much in spite of us as because of us, and that the Spirit has to use imperfect instruments, because God has no other instruments to use.

Christianity offers not only a hopeful map of reality, but also gives us a way to move towards the treasure the map reveals: love. Love is a great mystery.<sup>5</sup> Few are the people who can love humanity until they have allowed themselves to be captured by the love of one other human being. Paul has written an excellent anatomy of love in 1 Corinthians 13. In his first letter John tells us that we cannot love God if we do not love our brothers and sisters.

Modern psychology has added to our understanding of love.

Love is not just what we feel, but what we do. Also we cannot love another to whom we do not listen. Our first sign of acceptance is our willingness to listen. Then we can begin to communicate ourselves, our brokenness, our hopes, our caring, our experiences of the Divine Lover. Communication is impossible without honesty and truthful encounter, but honesty must always be subject to love and given only at the right time and in love. In its emphasis on the importance of love, psychology has drawn more deeply on Christian thought than it sometimes acknowledges.

None of us can go this way alone. We would not even be human except for our experience of being nurtured as children in some family and culture. We cannot go far on the spiritual journey alone. If we are to grow, we need one another. Only as I have someone with whom I do share *all* of myself, am I a fit and safe person for others to share with. Then I also need a wider fellowship of which I can feel a part. I need to be part of a religious community. All this roots me firmly in the human family and the human condition.

Human beings cannot live by bread alone. If we are to be fully alive, we need our symbols and our rituals. Few people come to their potential destiny who do not have living symbols that enliven them and guide them. I have found that the most living symbol and ritual for me is that of Eucharist, in which I listen to the wisdom of the tradition and then participate in the reenactment of Christ rising out of death into resurrection and sharing that life with me. For some people the Christian symbols have been defaced by Christians they have known (usually in childhood), and they need to find others to replace those that have been destroyed. If one is not alienated from the Christian symbols, they are worth considering.

Paul wrote that love never ceases, never fails, never comes to an end. How can the psychologist who thinks that life ends

with the grave truly comfort the person who is dying, cut off in the midst of life? Or indeed anyone who faces death? If our lives do continue—and there is good evidence for that possibility—then the psychologists who do not prepare us for continual growth in this crisis through which we all pass are not dealing honestly with their patients. They simply cannot give the final encouragement that often enables us to bear the tension and pain of our imperfections, our ugliness, and the tragedies that occur in nearly every life.<sup>6</sup> If we believe that the loving and redeeming risen Christ is working in and through us and the world, then we can never know until the end of time what have been the effects of our actions and our intentions. Everything may be redeemed, and all may be well at last.

The prospect of an eternal destiny has a fearful aspect as well as being a source of hope. We come to know the murky depth of ourselves as we pause and reflect. I wonder if we can reflect as deeply as we need to unless we keep some kind of written reflection, some kind of journal. There we can record our reflections on how we have treated those around us. We can listen to our dreams that tell us of the often-forgotten depths of ourselves. We can reflect upon the complaints and words of appreciation of those whose lives are intermeshed with ours. Then we can also consider how little we do in a world full of poverty, hatred, strife, and warfare. We are a part of this world, and all suffering human beings are our neighbors. What courage it takes for us to face this! However, as we do, and still seek to follow our star, we can be companions with others who seek to be free of their impediments toward growth and to work toward full human lives, toward an eternal destiny.

The task set before anyone who would deal with the whole human being—body, mind, and soul—is a gigantic one. But the incredible beauty and value of the human being is worth all that we can give—and much more.