

# Theological and Psychiatric Interpretations of Human Nature

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MANY people who have long since found a peaceful settlement for the traditional battle between religion and the physical sciences are now asking how the Christian doctrine of man can be reconciled with the secular sciences of man. This essay will be confined to one important aspect of the general problem, namely, the apparent conflict between theological teachings about sin and psycho-therapeutic teachings about mental health.

The terms "neurosis" and "sin" often refer to the same set of facts, and the difference between the two is at least partly one of context. "Neuroses" arise as a result of biological, psychological and cultural maladjustments. "Sin" signifies, primarily, that alienation from God which results from the abuse of human freedom. Theoretically it should be possible for the theologian to incorporate the psychiatric account of neurosis within his conception of sin, and it should be possible for the psychiatrist to regard theological questions as outside the scope of his task. But this division of labor breaks down in practice. The psychiatrist must enter into the realm of theology at least to the extent of asking whether religious beliefs (in any particular case, or perhaps in every case) are illusory; and the theologian can hardly incorporate the psychiatric way of dealing with neuroses into his religious way of dealing with sin if the two are radically opposed to each other. Although a properly trained Christian minister can use to advantage many psychiatric teachings without accepting those which conflict with his religious beliefs, and a psychiatrist can "use" the religious faith of his patients without personally accepting its content, these helpful modes of provisional co-operation should not be allowed to prevent further inquiry into underlying disagreements.

## 1. *The Doctrine of Original Sin.*

Our first task is to examine the most persuasive contemporary re-interpretations of the idea of original sin. Although they of course have a Biblical basis, they get rid of many of the absurdities that are to be found in older statements of the doctrine. For example, the notion that the consequences of Adam's Fall are transmitted seminally to the entire race, is completely rejected. The story in Genesis is accepted not as a literal account of how sin got started in 4004 B.C., but as a symbolically profound account of the predicament in which every man finds himself. Heretofore Christian theology has oscillated between a bad form of determinism, which re-

gards man as enslaved by factors unrelated to his personal responsibility, and a bad form of indeterminism which overlooks the extent to which personal responsibility is circumscribed by "fateful" factors. Contemporary interpreters of the doctrine have sought to do justice to both the racial and the individual aspects of the problem. They take account of (1) the manner in which malignant social patterns tend to be perpetuated and to influence every individual adversely from birth, and (2) the manner in which evil motives arise within each person as the result of self-centeredness. Moreover, they regard accounts of social and personal maladjustment as inadequate until these symptoms have been traced back to the fundamental cause of human misery, which is spiritual alienation from God.

Advocates of this Christian doctrine of sin claim that it does justice to certain facts concerning "the condition of man" that alternative secular theories minimize or overlook. One example must suffice to illustrate the point. Much recent American thought has explained sin away by attributing it to a temporary discrepancy between the progress of the physical sciences and the progress of the human sciences. It has assumed that once we become as intelligent in our control of economic, political and psychological events as we are in our control of nature, then the worst forms of evil will be eliminated. Recent history has done much to spread the suspicion that this assumption is a utopian dream, inasmuch as civilization has been brought to the brink of complete destruction not by a lack of information and techniques, but by fundamental defects in human motivation. What is needed is not so much an extension of knowledge as a radical transformation of the heart. Therefore the doctrine of original sin has the merit of locating the trouble at its source. There are roots of egotism, will-to-power and mistrust in human nature, collectively and individually; and from these roots sprout the evil blossoms of war, racial prejudice and class hatred, as well as such personal maladjustments as over-weening ambition, cruelty, anxiety and isolation.

This same re-interpretation has had a salutary effect upon thought within the church. It has been a corrective against liberal theology insofar as the latter has reflected the undue optimism of its secular environment. It has also tended to shift the center of attention from "sins" as specific acts, to that underlying disorientation of the whole personality which is the real cause of the trouble. Far too often

the list of "sins" on which conservative branches of the church are apt to expend most of their energy reflects the somewhat narrow standards of personal morality that happen to prevail in a given community; and a spurious sense of self-righteousness is built up through condemning isolated acts, while the searching and revolutionary bearing of the Gospel upon the most serious social and psychological problems of our generation goes almost unheeded.

Perhaps employment of the phrase "original sin" has been a strategic blunder, since it arouses so much irrelevant resistance by its association with outworn notions; but we need some kind of strong language in order to describe the appalling misery and cruelty of the Twentieth Century. Whatever words we use, we must have a view of human nature that is adequate to account for the humiliating facts. It is fruitless to insist upon the "essential goodness" of a race that has produced the events of the last thirty years—not to mention the rest of human history.

In the face of the disastrous moral failures of our age, most men are tempted to shift the blame onto others. For example, at every social sore-point of American life—anti-Semitism, the Negro problem, labor unions, relations with Russia—one finds most people busily justifying their own attitudes and behavior. We tend to live by the formula: "What I do is all right; what my friends do is understandable; what 'outsiders' do is intolerable." Under such circumstances a doctrine of sin which makes a man aware of his own prejudices and rationalizations is sound, no matter how disagreeable it may be.

These are a few of the reasons why theologians feel that we need both a deepening of "the tragic sense of life" and a thorough arousal of conscience. They contend that a contrite recognition of the ultimate cause of selfishness, hatred, pride and mistrust is indispensable if there is to be any hope of finding a sufficient remedy.

## *2. Preliminary Psychiatric Criticism of the Doctrine.*

Why do the teachings of psychiatry seem to be incompatible with this renewed stress upon the doctrine of original sin? Psychiatric evidence indicates that condemnation directed against oneself and others is both futile and harmful. It is an obstacle, instead of a contribution, to an improvement of character. Therefore one of the things that psycho-therapy is designed to provide is a human relationship where the "patient" will not be condemned; within such a relationship he can reduce the intensity of his self-rejection and of his hostility toward others. As he learns to accept himself and others, the way is opened for organizing personal relationships on a healthier and more satisfying basis. In order to fulfil this function, psycho-therapy must undo the emotional harm caused by prevailing cultural patterns. The harm usually begins in infancy when a child is ac-

cepted or rejected in accordance with whether he conforms to parental and other authoritarian demands. He learns to pass judgment on himself in their terms. Insofar as the parents and others who influence him are neurotic, they "use" the child for their own emotional purposes—a need to dominate, or to vindicate their own moral and social attitudes, or to compensate for unsatisfactory marital relations, etc. Thus neuroses are transmitted from one generation to the next mainly by means of *praise and blame*; and in order to make a clean break with them it is necessary for the therapist to make a clean break with the attitudes that have caused them.

From a psychiatric viewpoint, therefore, even a carefully revised doctrine of sin tends to reflect and perpetuate neurotic patterns. It judges human life on the basis of authoritarian (divine) demands; it finds men incapable of fulfilling these demands; it then condemns them for their failure. The result is a deepening of psychological conflict instead of a curing of it. Psychiatry assumes that ideals should be flexibly adapted to the human situation instead of authoritarian; it also assumes that they should be appropriate to the capacities of the individual at any given stage of his development, and that anyone who clings to aims which are intrinsically beyond his reach is courting mental illness. Therefore it conflicts with Christianity insofar as the latter judges all men, irrespective of individual and group differences, by a standard which is admittedly beyond human attainment.

Anyone who believes that there must be a universal and humanly irremediable discrepancy between ideal aims and actual performance carries a heavy burden of despair and guilt. One of the most familiar consequences in the history of religion is a combination of self-righteousness and self-hatred. These are not mutually exclusive, for in the latter case the individual preserves one segment of himself as extremely high-minded, ethically sensitive, contrite and "acceptable to God" by condemning the rest of himself. Hence having a strong sense of sin may not be as humble as it looks. As a matter of fact, the literature of psycho-therapy shows that egotistical pride and self-rejection, instead of characterizing opposite sorts of persons, are found together in functional counter-balance within the same person. (Frequently one factor is predominant in consciousness while its counterpart is predominantly unconscious.) If this is true, then the most effective way to reduce the selfishness of the human race is not to intensify guilt-feelings; on the contrary, it is to find a form of emotional security (self-acceptance) which makes both self-aggrandizement and self-repudiation unnecessary. These psychiatric observations can be documented clinically. Patients who scold themselves for a certain "habit" tend to go right on repeating that "habit." Only when guilt-feelings have

been reduced can the patient gain insight into how this undesirable form of behavior originated and how it has performed important functions in his total life-strategy. Such insight is usually indispensable for any permanent improvement.

Accordingly, when a psychiatrist encounters severe feelings of guilt, he assumes that the patient's ideals are not entirely appropriate to his special abilities and limitations, and that they are being followed compulsively instead of whole-heartedly; hence he works for a revision of ideals as well as impulses so that both can be integrated within the person. Because he knows that when a man's inward condition is unsound his ideal aims are bound to reflect that fact, the psychiatrist cannot accept any theological position which maintains that despite their universal sinfulness men can and should acknowledge an absolute standard which calls for no criticism or revision.

Now that both sides of the debate have been presented, at least in a sketchy form, let us select a few of the major issues for further investigation.

### 3. *Concerning the Deepening of Conflict.*

It is misleading to assume that theologians merely want to deepen the sense of guilt while psychiatrists merely want to ignore it. Actually, the two positions can be brought much more closely together. The theologian stresses sin because he believes that recognition of its disastrous consequences may give rise to repentance and that repentance is the first step toward a transformation of character. His guiding motive is, or ought to be, constructive instead of sadistic. Psychiatrists who reject belief in God regard the doctrine of sin as harmful because it leaves men in a hopeless predicament; but what they reject is the very factor which means, from a Christian standpoint, that the predicament is not hopeless. Hence the theologian has a right to contend that so long as the doctrine is not sadistically abused, it is indispensable to his task of describing and interpreting those feelings of guilt, anxiety and estrangement that are undeniably operative in the human race. When so regarded, it includes human evils which a person does not directly will at all, but in which he finds himself caught; as such it is similar to concepts which the psychiatrist regards as illuminating and unobjectionable.

Furthermore, a widening of awareness of bondage to neurotic patterns is usually unavoidable in the initial stages of psycho-therapy itself, and this increased insight temporarily intensifies conflict. Therefore the analogy between religious conversion and psycho-therapy may be fairly close, so long as the motive for allowing awareness of problems to arise is the ultimate relief and transformation of the troubled person.

It must be admitted, however, that this analogy is often concealed because preaching techniques differ

radically from good counselling techniques. In the nature of the case, the preacher cannot control what effect his words will have upon each hearer. What he says may be salutary if the listener is strong enough to use a pricking of his conscience as a stimulus to the practical amendment of his life. But the same words may be futile or harmful in their effect upon others. A counselor, on the other hand, can adjust his responses to the peculiarities of each patient's personality. On the basis of diagnostic information and thorough familiarity with the "case," he can learn when to exert pressure and when to relax it. The patient has a chance to reply, as he never has in church. There is no suggestion that the counselor is occupying a vantage point of moral superiority, as there too often is with preachers. The patient's readiness to absorb and to make constructive use of new insights determines the rate and the depth at which his patterns of guilt and anxiety are explored.

These observations suggest that a theoretical reconciliation between theology and psychiatry, if it can be achieved at all, will issue from a practical fusion of religious belief and psycho-therapeutic techniques in the work of pastoral counselling. At present instances of this fusion are so rare that one can do no more than call attention to such analogies as may provide a common ground for further investigation.

### 4. *Concerning Dependence and Self-Sufficiency.*

The theologian has a remedy for sin and the psychiatrist has a remedy for neurosis, but the remedies seem to be utterly different, if not incompatible. On the one hand, salvation comes from outside the self as a gift of God's forgiving grace. (The "faith" by which man receives this gift is a trustful response of the whole personality in a restoration of fellowship, not intellectual acceptance of something absurd.) On the other hand, integration comes about through an internal development which enables the individual to become more self-sufficient. Let us examine these two alternatives.

When the fetters of the narrowly organized *ego* are broken through and emancipating power floods in from "beyond the self," the theologian speaks of the operation of grace. Christianity associates this experience primarily with Christ, through whom God has done for man something that man, in his bondage to sin, cannot do for himself. There are of course various interpretations of this event in Christian theology. For our purposes the most noteworthy feature is that the releasing effects of divine forgiveness stand in sharp contrast with legalistic moral effort.

The psychiatric approach concentrates on the fact that most neurotic people need to develop a larger capacity for taking responsibility, instead of blaming their failures on others or expecting life to con-

form to their personal whims. It assumes that a large proportion of those human beings who are maladjusted possess undeveloped mental and physical resources which, when released, can go far toward solving their problems.

The antinomy between dependence on God and growth of human self-sufficiency is seemingly complete. Yet it can be partially resolved. On the theological side it is necessary to emphasize that belief in God is being abused when it is made into a substitute for fulfilling natural and human conditions that are within man's scope. On the psychiatric side it is necessary to recognize that an increasing capacity for responsibility is quite compatible with continued dependence upon forces beyond one's control. Then the way is clear for theology and psychiatry to agree that significant personal growth involves an interaction between factors within the *ego* and factors beyond it; indeed, the most "healing" insights often come more despite one's will than by means of it. Both can also agree that a wise kind of love fosters independence instead of enslavement, and that the lack of it is a major cause of emotional maladjustment.

In other respects, however, the antinomy may remain irresolvable. Christianity ultimately attributes the creative and redemptive forces of life to God, whether they arise from within or from beyond the *ego*; and it assumes that human beatitude involves right relationships with God, as well as good social and personal adjustments. The psychiatrist may of course reject such beliefs, although he can hardly avoid having some sort of confidence in "healing powers" outside consciousness and voluntary effort, however he may interpret them.

##### 5. Concerning Absolute and Relative Criteria.

The theologian defines both sin and salvation in terms of an absolute criterion, while the psychiatrist assumes that criteria should be relative to the individual and cultural situation.

The psychiatrist's case against Christianity is likely to run somewhat as follows: Most men today look mainly or wholly to secular means for such personal or social betterment as they are likely to achieve. They are up against pressing, concrete problems where they need the guidance of criteria that are directly relevant to the situations they confront. The Christian goal for humanity seems irrelevant because it transcends historical conditions. It fails to give an adequate outlet for those natural and potentially constructive energies without which a man can hardly maintain existence in this competitive and often ruthless world. It places such severe restrictions upon self-assertiveness, sexual desire and the expression of resentment that it is plainly unsuited to meet the actualities of life.

A Christian theologian might well reply that his religion has been ethically dynamic precisely insofar

as it has retained allegiance to a criterion which transcends historical relativities while remaining relevant to them. Only so has it been able to resist the pervasive human tendency to convert individual or cultural preferences, illegitimately, into universal principles. The psychiatrist's stress upon "feasibility," while acceptable so far as it goes, does not meet the case; for "feasibility" includes all actual and possible goods and evils, and therefore fails to provide a decisive basis for discrimination. The most important problems of life arise in connection with competing interests and goals all of which may be feasible. Psychiatry must itself presuppose an ideal of the good for man which is neither myopic nor provincial, if it is to work significantly for the improvement of individual patients and their surrounding culture.

The question remains as to whether the ultimate criterion which lies at the basis of one's value system should be anthropocentric or theocentric. Christianity, in adopting the latter alternative, assumes that men reach beatitude only insofar as their lives conform to principles of love and justice which are valid, whether they acknowledge them or not. So far as Protestantism is concerned, the way is open to admit that these principles, which are grounded in God, will be understood and fulfilled imperfectly so long as men remain fallible and sinful. Attempts to evade this admission by means of an infallible Pope or an infallible Scripture lead to static dogmatism. Consequently the transcendent-yet-relevant criterion of Christianity may be regarded as its most valuable asset in carrying on the never ending task of revising and criticizing proximate goals, and in safeguarding against the perennial temptation to deify the prejudices and predilections of a particular individual, culture or church.

From the theologian's standpoint, an anthropocentric ethic is always subject to the peril of rationalizing itself into accepting the prevailing rules of the game—political, social and ethical—on the ground that one must not expect too much of human nature. Admittedly those prophets and reformers who have steadfastly resisted the evils of their day on the basis of their belief in God have been in a sense maladjusted, and their conflict with "the world" has often involved suffering as the inevitable accompaniment of their loyalty and love. But their maladjustment has made them ethical and spiritual pioneers, as contrasted with those well-integrated contemporaries who were not subject to such severe pangs of conscience.

Finally the theologian may contend that the psychiatrist, with his intimate knowledge of the explosive forces which lie below the surface of human consciousness, ought to be among the first to recognize that an anthropocentric ethic plays directly into the hands of contemporary totalitarianism and nihil-

ism; for the basic assumption underlying these phenomena is that since all value-systems are human constructs, they should be organized in terms of desire and expediency.

The issues thus raised have far-reaching implications which cannot be pursued in this essay. Our discussion has indicated, however, certain respects in which theology and psychiatry can seek to learn from each other. Theology, in its concern to avoid compromising its absolute standard, is always in danger of minimizing secular, temporal, humanistic values and the role that man can play in achieving and maintaining them; for the same reason it may cause

moral confusion by blaming men for things that they literally cannot help, or, conversely, for things that they have a right to do. Psychiatry, on the other hand, having started as an "a-moral" scientific enterprise, can no longer afford to remain such. Their task of releasing men from the injurious effects of moral conflict imposes upon psychiatrists a responsibility for developing a more unequivocal philosophy of the ends of life and culture than they have yet produced. At least they should collaborate, as many are eager to do, in the attempt to formulate such a philosophy. One indispensable qualification for this collaboration, on their part, is a sympathetic understanding of religious needs and resources.

## The World Church: News and Notes

### Theologians Report European Church Attitude Changing

The war has caused Lutheran churches in Europe, which historically have been considered "other-worldly," to recognize the role of Christianity in all phases of life, according to leading Protestant theologians meeting in Geneva under the auspices of the World Council of Churches.

Attended by twenty-five Biblical scholars from eleven countries, the meeting was called by the World Council's Study Department in preparation for the Council's general assembly which will take place at Amsterdam next year. Theme of the meeting, which lasted five days, was "The Authority and Relevance of the Social and Political Message of the Bible Today."

The Rev. Nils Ehrenstrom, director of the Study Department and himself a Lutheran, declared the war has forced many Lutherans to reconsider their beliefs and rediscover that the Church is concerned with life as a whole. "As a result," he said, "they have returned to the original position of Martin Luther and taken a new view of the relation between the church and the state."

Ehrenstrom said the conference had rejected both fundamentalism and modernism as perverting the true meaning of Christianity. He declared that "in contrast to a generation which has long ignored the Bible, the major idea emerging here is that the Bible message as a whole is vital for the development of sound attitudes on social and political questions."

Professor Anders Nygren, an outstanding Scandinavian Lutheran theologian, told the sessions that "the Church not only has a right, but a duty, to make demands upon the state concerning what it should do."

Dr. Carl E. Schneider, an American representative in the World Council's reconstruction department, said he was "very much impressed" by the manner in which Europeans, after arguing about what American churchmen would consider abstractions remote from life, had come to a broad agreement of practical importance.

He announced that a follow-up meeting will take place late in June for discussion of the Church's attitude toward the state, nationalism, capital, labor, and war.

(RNS)

### Plea for Justice Toward Minority Groups

America's "unfair and un-Christian treatment" of non-white minority groups is a major deterrent to the spread of Christianity throughout the world, Dr. Ralph E. Diefendorfer, executive secretary of the board of missions and church extension of the Methodist Church, declared recently in an address before the annual meeting of the Home Missions Council of North America. The Council represents 23 major Protestant denominations.

"Treat the Mexican fairly and Christianity will be proclaimed in Latin America," he said. "Clear our American Indian record and East Indians will take notice of democracy and Christianity. Abolish lynching, not by law, but by effectively acknowledging the Negro's right to respect and decent citizenship and not only Africa but all the non-white world will rise up and call the church blessed."

"The expenditure of an estimated \$650,000,000 on new church buildings in the United States will not cause a ripple of comment in the non-Christian world of Asia, Africa, the islands of the sea and elsewhere, nor will the adding of thousands of new members to the rosters of the traditionally programmed churches of our country. Nor, will new church buildings, settlement houses, educational institutions or hospitals among the minority groups—Negros, Mexicans or other Latins, Chinese, Philipinos, or American Indians be commented on by the billion non-white people of Asia, as a favorable witness for Jesus Christ. These signs of possible progress may have been evidences of Christian vitality in the days before world wide communication, international travel and global war—but not now."

### Puerto Rico Work Planned By Missions Council

Dr. Mark A. Dawber, executive secretary of the Home Missions Council of North America, has announced a rural reconstruction and rehabilitation project, designed to train native Protestant Puerto Rican ministers in modern agricultural methods and community social work. The missions group represents 23 major Protestant denominations. The project is under the di-