

Faith and Therapy

William Kilpatrick*

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Seventeen years ago in *Psychological Seduction* I wrote about the dangers of mixing psychology with religious faith. Such a mixing, I cautioned, would result in a dilution of faith. Six years before that, Paul Vitz had made a similar point in *Psychology as Religion*: psychology, he wrote, had become a substitute for faith—a new religion encouraging a cult of self-worship. We both emphasized that this psychological faith, although it bore a surface resemblance to Christianity, was incompatible with, indeed, deeply hostile to, Christian faith.

Psychology as faith has proven to be a sturdy creed—almost all of the criticisms we made then could be made today. The concepts of popular psychology are still being blended with Christian faith, and confusion still abounds. The attraction to psychology is not, of course, confined to the area of religion. The assumptions and techniques of psychology and therapy have found their way into business, schools, families, popular entertainment, and even the courts—so much so that it has become common to speak of our society as a "therapeutic culture." As long ago as 1966, Philip Rieff's book *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* predicted that this psychological mode of understanding society and identity would triumph over all other modes. It would become the frame of reference by which all other beliefs and commitments would be judged.

One would expect Christian churches to resist this rival faith. Instead, they have in differing degrees been seduced by it, unable in many cases to say where the psychological faith ends and the Christian faith begins. The continuing temptation to blend psychology and faith suggests the importance of revisiting the arguments against this ill-advised ecumenism. The arguments fall roughly into two categories: those of the don't-embarrass-yourself variety, and those of the more serious don't-cut-your-own-throat variety.

The first line of criticism is employed in a recent article by Paul Vitz entitled "Support from Psychology for the Fatherhood of God" (*Homiletic and Pastoral Review*, February 1997). He first notes that the Christian concept of God as Father has been under attack—much of the attack coming from Catholics influenced by feminist psychology. But, says Vitz, much of this psychology, based as it is on an androgynous view of the person, is passé. All the latest research, he continues, shows how very different the sexes are, and how fathers and mothers play distinct roles that are not interchangeable. All the statistics, moreover, clearly demonstrate what happens when fathers cease playing their role in family and society. Indeed, fatherlessness correlates with crime, drug addiction, school dropout rates, and out-of-wedlock pregnancies better than any other factor. Moreover, it turns out that boys are much more fragile than girls and suffer much more acutely from the absence of fathers. (See, for example, psychologist Michael Gurian's two books on the subject, *The Wonder of Boys* and *A Fine Young Man*.) Vitz observes that, doctrinal objections aside, it is "bizarre to

* Professor in the School of Education at Boston College. He is the author of *Identity and Intimacy* (1975), *Psychological Seduction* (1985), *The Emperor's New Clothes: the naked truth about the new psychology* (1985), and *Why Johnny can't tell right from wrong (and what we can do about it)* (1992).

the point of pathology at this time in our culture to be trying to remove God the Father from our theology."

We are just now aware of the widespread social pathology, especially the increase in violence, resulting from fatherlessness in families and the data are staggering! (See David Blankenhorn's 1995 book *Fatherless America: Confronting our Most Urgent Social Problem*.) What worse moment could there be to diminish fatherhood in our theology? We have enough absent fathers without trying to send God the Father away too! To remove God the Father is to remove a major support for positive male identity. In a church that is already far more popular with women than with men, this means the removal of one of the few remaining supports for men.

When Christians embrace psychological fads in hopes of keeping up to date, they frequently end up behind the curve when the fads turn out to be just that. The foolishness that can result is illustrated by a recent Christian youth curriculum that includes a cross-dressing activity called the Suitcase Relay. It works like this: "On the word Go, a first couple (boy and girl) from each team must run with their suitcase to the opposite end of the room, open the suitcase, and put on everything in the suitcase . . . the boy putting on the lady's dress and the girl putting on the man's suit."

One can only urge purveyors of such nonsense to stop embarrassing themselves. Psychologists up to date with the literature on adolescent development no longer counsel gender confusion. Sex roles, they have found, are not to be carelessly tampered with.

There are a number of other therapeutic concepts that are now either in dispute or in disrepute with professionals but are nonetheless still tremendously popular with religious educators, parishes, priests, and bishops. Take the concept of self-esteem, now a central element in curricula for Catholic and other Christian youth. In psychological circles serious questions are being raised about the efficacy of high self-esteem, and about whether the trait can even be measured.

For example, the measure of self-esteem used in the well-known American Association of University Women (AAUW) study seems highly questionable. According to that study, girls suffer a sharp drop in self-esteem when they enter high school. But look at the items employed on the self-esteem questionnaire: statements such as "I'm happy the way I am," "I like most things about myself," and "I'm an important person." To these statements children can choose one of five responses: "always true," "sort of true," "sometimes true/sometimes false," "sort of false," or "always false." But what sort of person would answer "always true" to "I'm happy the way I am" or "I'm an important person"? Someone with insight or someone who feels a need to be defensive or boastful? It is not surprising that boys, who are less self-reflective than girls of the same age, would score higher on this test.

Moreover, as Christina Hoff Sommers has pointed out, there seems to be no connection between high self-esteem scores and academic success. A little-reported outcome of the AAUW study is that, although boys tested higher than girls on self-esteem, the very highest average scores were obtained by black girls and black boys. When the results were broken down by race, black boys showed the highest level of self-esteem. Yet, as is well-known, black boys do not, on average, do well in school, and they do not go on to college in very large numbers. On the other hand, white girls-the group that scores lowest on self-esteem-is the group that displays the greatest academic success.

These findings should at least raise doubts about the importance of self-esteem. But there's more. Recent studies by Roy Baumeister of Case Western Reserve University suggest that high self-esteem may be related to *anti*-social behavior. In fact, the most dangerous youth seem to have highly inflated opinions of themselves. Efforts to raise self-esteem, suggests Baumeister, may actually increase violent behavior.

Once again, Christian educators seem to be on the wrong track. At just the moment in our history when youth violence and drug use are at near-record highs, at just the moment when adults ought to be talking to youngsters about self-control and self-restraint, their energies are focused instead on teaching children to applaud themselves. We seem bent on giving our children the opposite of what they need.

It's the same with the popular concept of non-judgmentalism. If there ever was a time in which it was important for youngsters to exercise moral judgment, this is it. As psychologist William Coulson has pointed out, "It's precisely the *necessity* of judgment, not its absence, that must be promoted with the young today, given the magnitude of the drug problem." Yet in Christian education the emphasis is still very often on acceptance, trust, and the absence of judgment.

A good example is provided in a curriculum lesson for evangelical children. The lesson presents two children, Amanda, who is fat and unattractive, and Jason, who shows a marijuana joint around school to impress the other boys. The lesson is that students are not to judge either Amanda or Jason, but rather "to accept them as they are." Cathy Mickels and Audrey McKeever, authors of *Spiritual Junk Food: The Dumbing Down of Christian Youth*, pinpoint the problem. They write, "To equate a girl who is quiet and unattractive with a boy showing an illegal drug around is not only confusing, but is an example of distorted and twisted reasoning." As the authors point out, Jason is probably not the kind of boy you would want your child to associate with, yet there is nothing in the curriculum to indicate that he ought to be avoided or corrected. In 1 Corinthians 15:33 we are told, "Do not be deceived: bad company corrupts good morals," but the world of Christian textbooks does not usually encourage this sort of judgment. Rather, it is a world inhabited by basically good and well-intentioned people who seem to have been barely touched by the effects of original sin.

Examples of this sort can be multiplied. Charles Sykes, in his book *A Nation of Victims*, describes a Colorado church that offers thirteen different weekly support groups ranging from "Debtors Anonymous" through "Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous" to "Codependents of Sex Addicts Anonymous." This parish clearly subscribes to the medical model of human behavior. Meanwhile, other churches have bought into the notion that homosexuality is biologically driven and is therefore not a choice. Yet these are issues that are hotly contested by professional psychologists. The evidence that homosexuality is biologically driven, for instance, is quite skimpy and far from convincing. It seems quite ill-advised for Christians to join the chorus of theories suggesting we can't help ourselves, that we are not really responsible for our behavior.

The informal alliance formed between evangelical Christians and clinical psychologists during the day care witch-hunts of the 1980s provides another example that should be embarrassing to psychologizing Christians. The clinicians had come up with a number of interesting theories that soon gained the force of law: one theory asserted that children never lie about sex, another claimed that repressed memories could be reliably recovered. More ominously, the psychologists had discovered a new syndrome called Ritual Satanic Child Abuse. The symptoms of this disease were legion and included forced sex, occult rituals, and animal sacrifice. Unfortunately, many evangelicals in the affected localities were all too ready to believe that Satan was alive and active in the local day care centers. In many instances they joined forces with the psychologists and law enforcers, and even provided incriminating evidence against the defendants.

Dozens of people ended up in prison as a result of the day care scares of the eighties, and many careers and reputations were ruined. We know now that it really was a witch-hunt. The FBI reports that there is no evidence of a single case of ritual satanic child abuse in the United States. We know now that the child witnesses had been subjected to leading questions, threats, and bribes. We know now that most of the testimony was bizarre and fantastic. We know now that, in addition to recovered memories, there are also suggested

memories-memories of events that never happened. Thankfully, most of the convictions in these cases have now been overturned, but many individuals still linger in prison. The day care cases show that child experts can sometimes be extremely naive, and that Christians can sometimes be remarkably gullible. It should not surprise us that when the two join forces the result can sometimes be credulity compounded.

It is embarrassing to be behind the times, and even more embarrassing to be caught up in psychological delusions and hysterias, but embarrassment ought not be the only reason for avoiding ill-considered alliances with the world of psychology. There are reasons of survival, too-reasons of the don't-cut-your-own-throat variety. The mixing of psychology with faith can be destructive to Christianity; this is especially true when questions of doctrine are involved. Indeed, it is often difficult to distinguish between what is merely embarrassing and what approaches the suicidal.

One of the most destructive consequences of carelessly mixing therapy with faith is a diminished sense of sin. The best evidence that this has already happened in the Catholic Church is the tremendous drop-off in the practice of confession over the last thirty years. When we couple this with the nearly 100 percent communion turnout in most parishes, we have to conclude that most parishioners don't have a strong consciousness of sin. They seem to have been so schooled in the gospel of self-acceptance that they can't think of any sins they need to confess.

A colleague at Boston College told me a story that reinforces the point. He once asked members of his philosophy class to write an anonymous essay about a personal struggle over right and wrong, good and evil. Most of the students, however, were unable to complete the assignment. "Why?" he asked. "Well," they said-and apparently this was said without irony-"We haven't done anything wrong." We can see a lot of self-esteem here, but little self-awareness-the absence of a sense of sin seems strange when one considers that most of these students have had years of Catholic schooling.

It is strange as well that this inability to talk about sin, Satan, and the existence of evil comes at a time when the imagination of young people is captivated by performers such as Marilyn Manson who flirt with an aestheticized Satanism. If we want Christian youth to struggle against the temptations of evil in this world, they at least ought to be forewarned that evil exists. They ought to know, also, that Satan is more than just a name dreamed up by a rock band.

A related-if seemingly opposite-problem resulting from freely mixing faith with psychology is a diminished sense of the sacred. I discovered in a survey of religious texts for Catholic students that they are studded with references to "communications breakdowns," "risk-taking," "involvement," "decision-making," "personhood," "I-you relationships," "getting in touch," "self-disclosure," "awareness," and "assertiveness." The pervasive use of such language carries the implication that all the deep mysteries of faith can be encompassed in secular/psychological categories. There is in these texts very little sense that there *are* any deep mysteries-elements of the faith so awesome and unfathomable that they exist far beyond the reach of the social sciences. One of the deep mysteries that has suffered is the mystery of Christ's presence in the Eucharist. There are several indications that faith in the Real Presence has undergone a process of erosion. For example, a poll taken a few years ago suggests that many Catholics either do not understand or do not accept the doctrine of the Real Presence. More telling, perhaps, is the marked decline in the practice of benediction of the Blessed Sacrament and in the practice of eucharistic adoration. If many Catholics have become casual about holy communion, it may well be because they have lost the sense that communion is indeed *holy*-an encounter with the Source of all holiness.

Philip Rieff has written that a therapeutic society is by its very nature a negation of the sacred order. It has no room for the concept of transcendence. Obsessed with self-fulfillment and self-realization, it is uncomfortable with higher claims on our attention. "Religious man was born to be saved," writes Rieff, "psychological man is born to be pleased." One way of

pleasing him is to reduce everything to his size, something at which religious educators have become rather proficient. In religious studies curricula, both Catholic and evangelical, a great deal of energy goes into entertaining the student with games, puzzles, fun activities, and the like. The texts contain happy faces and sad faces, connect-the-dot games, teddy bears, pictures to color, and stickers to paste. One video curriculum for evangelical children is entitled *The Gospel According to St. Bernard*. It features, as you might guess, a cuddly St. Bernard dog. Bernie's theme song introduces each segment:

*The questions of life are tough to figure
But we found a friend, like us, but bigger
He helps when we're caught off guard
Here comes the Gospel According to Saint Bernard.
Bernie loves kids like you and me
His doghouse is Florida by the sea
He helps us follow God's plan
When we listen to Bernie
It's never very hard
To love him, he's Bernie The Saint Bernard.*

The quest for relevance does not abate as students grow older. For junior high and high school students there are blind walks, trust falls, tree hugging exercises, role playing, self-esteem relays, and various touching activities such as the "blush" game and the "lap-sit" game. Besides taking away valuable time that might be spent learning Christian doctrine, the use of such games carries the implication that the Christian faith by itself is insufficient. Students may be forgiven if they gain the impression that the faith must be reinforced by secular concepts and activities, that it must be made attractive by blending it with secular forms of entertainment.

More insidiously, such presentations subtly erode the sense of awe and reverence with which God ought to be approached. In their quest for what is relevant and recognizable, religious educators often reduce God to a comfortable size. He becomes a chummy friend whom we can approach with an easy and casual familiarity, another reason why for many Catholics receiving communion seems not to be an occasion of soul searching or prior purification.

This desacralization process can happen even when materials are free of doctrinal error, and even when sound concepts and accurate Bible narratives are present. A lot depends on the presentation. For example, compare the Faith and Life catechism series published by Ignatius Press with a similar series from Sadlier, *Coming to Faith*. Book One of Sadlier, *Coming to God* covers approximately the same content as Book One of Faith and Life, *Our Heavenly Father*.

In the Sadlier volume, the Creation is there, and so is the Fall, the birth of Christ, the Last Supper, Pentecost, the Mass, the sacrament of Baptism, the Our Father, and the Hail Mary. But it is revealing to see what else is present. In addition to Jesus, Mary, Joseph, and the apostles, there is a poem about a fish named Sharkey and a crab named Charlie, a picture of a T-shirt to be colored in with the signs of Easter joy, a poem about Shelly Turtle and her friends, Gator and Froggie, a connect-the-dots game, a celebration circles game, a puzzle to be cut out and glued together, instructions for making a moon and stars mobile, two pages of stickers, and a paste-your-picture-in-a-sunflower activity.

The average child, of course, is familiar with all this. He has encountered similar activities and games in countless other places. And there's the rub. The continual juxtaposition of the sacred and the secular conveys the (hopefully unintended) message that the two are on the same level. The authors seem afraid to suggest that there is anything outside or beyond the

child's experience. Over and over, the events depicted in the Bible are related to everyday and often trivial activities. The illustrations convey the same message. Most depict boys and girls engaged in everyday activities: drinking milk, feeding a cat, shaking hands, playing ball, playing at the seashore, blowing pinwheels, flying kites, and so forth-exactly the sort of illustrations that children would find in a public school text.

By contrast, the cover of *Our Heavenly Father* is graced by Raphael's "Creation of the Animals." In this painting God the Creator has a kindly countenance, but at the same time He appears immensely powerful, and He dwarfs the lion standing beside Him. The painting evokes a response of awe and humility.

The rest of the text is illustrated with more Raphaels, as well as paintings by Fra Angelico, Barocci, Titian, Velasquez, and Veronese. The sections on the Mass and the sacrament of Baptism are accompanied by photos of a priest reverently saying Mass and administering the sacrament. There are no distracting pictures of boys and girls flying kites, no teddy bears, no fun activities, no stickers to paste. The chapters are short and readable, and present in an understandable sequence the story of Creation, Fall, preparation for the Savior, and the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ. The student encounters the powerful and eternally relevant story that changed the world-and does so undistracted by a supporting cast of stuffed animals and cartoon characters.

The text, though simplified, does not pander to the child's immaturity, nor does it convey the notion that the mysteries of faith are comprehensible from within his own experience. On the contrary, the refusal to compromise with fads, gimmicks, and self-esteem activities allows the drama of redemption to shine through as the unique and central event that it is.

The trivializing of so many religious texts is, again, but one small reflection of the effect of Rieff's therapeutic culture. Such a culture, he observed, is one focused primarily on the self and its material and psychological needs. A therapeutic society is not simply one in which many people go to therapists, but rather one in which the therapeutic mode of analysis becomes the preferred way of explaining what life is all about, and the therapeutic technique is extended to all areas of life. The most obvious examples of this therapeutic expansion are the television talk shows which provide mass therapies of confession, and which attract huge viewing audiences. These lachrymose entertainments should not distract us, however, from noticing that the therapeutic is essentially a religion, a religion in which faith in God is replaced by faith in the self and its possibilities. The therapeutic can tolerate other religions as long as they conform to its own image and likeness, but it is implacably hostile to religions that make a transcendent or supernatural claim.

The message of the therapeutic faith is precisely the reverse of John the Baptist's message, "He must increase and I must decrease." Its central creed is nicely captured in the words of the first Humanist Manifesto issued in 1933 by the American Humanist Association: "Religious humanism considers the complete realization of human personality to be the end of man's life and seeks its development and fulfillment in the here and now." This, as the advertisers might say, is not your father's religion. "The modern individual," writes Rieff, "can only use the community as the necessary stage for his effort to enhance himself."

The co-opting of faith by therapy culminates in spectacles like that surrounding the death of Princess Diana. Faced with the stark contrast between the lives of Mother Teresa and Princess Di, the masses concluded that both were saints. Mother Teresa's project in life was to do God's work; Diana's project was mainly herself. For years we were treated to open displays of her affairs, her emotions, her sufferings, her illnesses, her charities, her wardrobe, and her confessions. In an earlier age such a life might have elicited responses of pity or contempt, but in a therapeutic culture these are exactly the traits that merit sainthood.

The most obvious current example of the therapeutic co-opting religion is provided for us by Bill Clinton. It is a marvel to see how easily and smoothly he mixes the therapeutic with the religious, and how effortlessly and shamelessly he bends the vocabulary of faith to serve his own designs. He has "sinned," he seeks "forgiveness," he has a "broken spirit."

In a recent issue of the *Wall Street Journal*, Dick Morris, Clinton's former advisor, is quoted as saying, "The people who are going to help [Mr. Clinton] out of this scandal are ministers, clergymen, psychiatrists, and experts on addiction." Shortly afterwards *Newsweek* reported that the President had asked a trio of ministers to be his "personal accountability group." One of them is the Rev. J. Philip Wogaman, who thinks the President should not resign or be impeached. According to *Newsweek*, Wogaman believes that such demands would be judgmental, because all men are sinners. The article is immediately followed by a related boxed article reflecting the opinion of therapists. They endorse the ministerial "accountability group" but say Clinton also needs therapy for his "sex addiction." As one of the therapists puts it, "If he can admit his problem and share it with people, he can leave a very powerful legacy of healing." It is very strange, this spectacle of ministers and therapists joining forces to heal the President. It is difficult to say what will come of it, but there is no doubt that the forces of religion have the most to lose from the alliance.

Some forty years ago, C. S. Lewis wrote, "If Christianity is untrue, no honest man will want to believe it, however helpful it might be; if it is true, every honest man will want to believe it, even if it gives him no help at all." In a psychological society, however, the question of the truth of religion is beside the point. The main question, the only question, really, is whether or not religion furthers the cause of the self.

It is important for people of faith to keep in mind that there can be no real compromise between Christianity and the psychological society. Rieff in a 1991 essay insists that the therapeutic culture is at war with traditional culture and aims to destroy it. This seems overblown at first. If the therapeutic culture is our enemy, it appears rather a tame one. After all, it speaks the language of compassion, sensitivity, and tolerance. But any culture that has no use for truth is ultimately a dangerous culture. If there is no meaning outside the self, there is no meaning. And if there is no meaning, there is no morality. As Dostoevsky famously warned, without God everything is permissible-and the therapeutic culture has no God. It is well on the way to dismantling the moral structure of society through semi-sincere appeals to tolerance, compassion, and diversity. There is no reason to think it will put limits on what is morally permissible. There is, in the end, not a dime's worth of difference between the nihilism of the therapeutic culture and the nihilism of a Nietzsche-except that the therapeutic culture lacks Nietzsche's sense of the tragic nature of life.

The twentieth century has seen many attacks on Christianity, but the frontal attacks of militant atheists, Marxists, and Nazis have not resulted in as much lost ground for Christians as the more insidious attacks of the therapeutic culture. The sense of guilt, the sense of sin, the sense of the sacred, the sense that there is another order of authority by which we are judged-these have not disappeared entirely from Christian culture, but they have been eroded. If this is difficult to see, it is because of the fog that the culture of therapy emits-an empathic fog which surrounds us and confuses us and prevents us from seeing life clearly. We wander around in this fog thinking our enemy is our friend because he is so exquisitely concerned with our health.

The only thing powerful enough to cut through this fog is the light of revelation. Revelation reminds us that physical and emotional health is not the Alpha and Omega of existence. The Gospels tell us that if our hand offends us we should cut it off, it being better to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into Hell. Likewise, it may be better to enter the kingdom of Heaven with a repressed psyche than to enter the other place brimming with self-assertiveness. There is no ultimate consolation to be found in the theories propounded by psychologists. Psychology has very little to say to the majority of suffering people in this world, and absolutely nothing to say to the fact that all of us must one day die. The therapeutic culture's well-adjusted person, for all his serene sense of self, has one overwhelming problem: he is blinded to the beatific vision.

Mar 25, 2020 - Having faith isn't always easy because our lives on earth are never going to be perfect. We just have to commit to the journey until one day when we're in heaven with him. And there, everything will be perfect. See more ideas about Faith, Christian quotes and Bible quotes.