Religion and Psychology
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It is necessary first explicitly to explore the general relationship between religion and psychology—despite the fact that they obviously have much in common and deal with similar kinds of human phenomena—before some of the more particularized aspects of their specific subrelationships can be profitably considered. In fact, at one time, not so long ago, they were very closely allied—in fact, were part of the same discipline rather than alienated and perceived as polar opposites, in much the same way as religion and science.

More importantly, religion and psychology were similar phenomenologically in that both disciplines were primarily concerned with the immaterial content and processes of the human mind (in contrast to the material phenomenology of the physical and biological sciences) which, together with the human spirit, reflect in man the image and likeness of God, his creator. (The German concept Geist combines the meanings of both mind and spirit; there is no comparable word in English.)

The brief historical section that follows below analyzes the relationship between religion and psychology in such formal terms as scientific method, the philosophy of science, and the logic of classification. The remainder of this paper, however, will eschew the comparative, analytical, historical, ideological, and theoretical analysis of this relationship between psychology and religion in favor of a more practical, operational, and functional approach that considers how religion can enhance and contribute to the theory and practice of psychology, and vice versa.

Historical Introduction

As recognized both in the Old and New Testaments, religion and psychology have many immaterial mental functions and concerns in common: cognitive (e.g., perception, learning, memory, thought, problem solving) and non-cognitive (e.g., motivation, drives, emotions, appetites, attitudes, volition.) In addition, both religion and psychology are concerned with moral values, moral conduct, moral responsibility, and accountability; with remorse, shame, guilt, and punishment; and with the uniqueness of personal identity and personality. Thus, for approximately four thousand years psychology was an
integral and significant part of Judeo-Christian religion in the same sense that logic, ethics, ontology, and epistemology are constituent parts of philosophy, although no one had as yet isolated and formally identified and consolidated its scattered component parts and named the whole "psychology." This latter step in its evolution, as an independent discipline in its own right, took place in German universities when psychology emerged as a separate course of doctoral study in the last quarter of the nineteenth century by virtue of its shift from a primarily philosophical, logical, speculative, and introspective investigatory methodology to one that was naively empirical. In this redirection toward the empirically-oriented physical and biological sciences, psychology became further alienated from philosophy and religion, its parent disciplines, especially when the new empirical methodology led to deification of the "white lab coat and retort" caricature of scientific method and to a corresponding pejorative attitude toward non-observable and non-measurable mental content and processes and their evocative stimuli. Ideologically, this approach to psychology was formalized into a characteristic super-empirical American school known as behaviorism and later as neobehaviorism, in which European psychologists never joined wholeheartedly.

The philosophical, non-empirical approach to psychology was so strong, however, that even after psychology's administrative separation from religion and philosophy as an independent discipline it was difficult to distinguish it from moral theology until at least World War II, as the two subjects were taught in American Catholic universities. Special textbooks were used in the latter universities to perpetuate the philosophical orientation to psychology; they dealt almost exclusively with the philosophical psychology, ontology, logic, and ethics of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, and with very little overlap in content with the textbooks used in secular universities.

The alienation between psychology and religion was naturally intensified when the vanguard of psychology took a long step backwards into behaviorism and scientific reductionism--proclaiming the dictum that the only legitimate content of psychology was observable and measurable responses elicited by stimuli satisfying similar criteria. Immaterial mental phenomena, including the mind and its processes, were regarded as epiphenomena completely outside the realm of, and unsusceptible to, scientific investigation.

At the same time that the reductionistic philosophy of science stance of behaviorism was deploring the mentalistic approach of religiousists to the immaterial content and processes of mind and to their non-empirical scientific methodology, the alienation between psychology and religion was increased by psychoanalysis (1920-1965) from the psychopathological side of psychology. This alleged new psychological science emphasized preformed and predetermined instinctual psychosexual drives that were supposedly the motivational mainsprings of human behavior but were repressed into the
unconscious and then expressed later symbolically as psychogenic symptoms of mental illness. With respect to their validity and reality status, these drives, which supposedly unfold in predetermined sequence, more often than not were mythological, dogmatically conceived, and at odds with notions of commonsensical credibility.

Coming as they did in the post-Victorian period, when the Christian churches in America rejected any kind of sexuality as legitimate, except perhaps that in the service of procreation, exaltation of these professedly amoral psychosexual drives reduced further drastically the common ground between religion and psychology. But when in the following three decades the Freudian psychosexual hypotheses and emphases were largely discredited, they were replaced not by such mentalistic causes of psychopathology as intrapsychic conflict, catastrophic stress, disengagement from significant interpersonal relationships, and disinvolvement from lifelong commitments, and so on, but rather by such reductionistic neuropsychiatric concepts as spontaneous disequilibrium in neurotransmitter systems, the resulting degree of rapprochement between religion and psychology was not nearly as great as could have been expected with the virtual collapse of Freudian ideology in the United States. The parallel collapse of behavioristic ideology during this same historical epoch led to a similarly disappointingly small increase in the scientific respectability of mentalistic phenomenology and processes.

Historically, the extreme ontological and philosophy of science positions of the physical and biological sciences, generally adopted by psychologists and psychiatrists with respect to scientific method and phenomenology, has been a major cause of the alienation between psychology and religion. This position consists of:

(a) A pejorative denial of the scientific significance and legitimacy of immaterial mental phenomena and processes and (b) a deification of the empirical, experimental, mechanistic, and atheoretical methodological approach to science that was unwarrantedly extrapolated from the physical to the psychological sciences.

The principal outcome of these theoretical and methodological trends in the philosophy of science was psychology's failure to recognize that at an ontological level of primary and still undiscovered causes, the same canons of scientific method and valid inference from data do not necessarily apply as they do at the more proximate level of already ascertained cause-effect sequences.

As a result, the proponents of the above two major ideological positions in psychology developed a rigid Weltanschauung asserting that the only valid and scientific psychological (and related) knowledge available to man is derived from controlled and measurable observation, experiment, and direct inferences therefrom. Therefore, they rejected completely out of hand all
concepts of religious faith, of the supernatural, of a personal God, of divine revelation, of divine creation, of an afterlife, and so forth.

The application of this same Weltanschauung by psychologists and psychiatrists to the cherished belief of religionists in the relevance, legitimacy, and validity of moral values and judgments, particularly in counseling situations, widened further the breach between psychology and religion. Professional counselors, educated in psychology departments of universities, generally viewed moral values and judgments as purely subjective, relativistic, and scientifically unvalidatable, and, therefore, as matters of personal opinion and preference. They regarded them as not only intrinsically irrelevant to the goals of counseling and psychotherapy but also as unprofessional and deleterious to treatment. Additionally, they believed that moral judgment (and the resulting liability to punishment) is unjustifiable because man (according to their belief) does not enjoy free will in his choice of behavioral alternatives in moral dilemma situations.

**How Christianity Can Contribute to the Theory and Practice of the Psychological Sciences**

1. Christianity relates man to an omnipotent and omniscient deity and creator who accepts and loves us unconditionally for ourselves and for our moral qualities rather than for our status, power, achievements, and importance. This divine love and acceptance provides us with *intrinsic* derived status that is dependent only on its continued emanation from God and not on man's successful achievement or competence. It is similar to the derived status that children obtain from intrinsically accepting parents, except that it is more remote in origin and less immediately personal (less involved in familiar daily activities); and the intrinsic self-esteem that it generates does not fluctuate with the vicissitudes of life as, for example, the self-esteem that is achievement-dependent (i.e., a function of earned status) does.

The tremendous psychological significance of this divine love and acceptance inheres in the great prevalence of persons in our culture who lack genuine derived status from more primary sources; that is, children who are rejected or only extrinsically accepted by their parents (i.e., accepted only for their potentiality for vicariously enhancing their parents' self-esteem by means of their future accomplishments.) This intrinsic self-esteem emanating from divine love and acceptance not only counteracts (i.e., compensates for) the low self-esteem of rejected and extrinsically accepted and valued children when it occurs in childhood, but also compensatorily throughout life in relation to failure and frustrated aspirations. Thus, by counteracting and compensating for diminished self-esteem from human sources, divine sources of self-esteem are instrumental in protecting individuals low in this respect from the anxiety, depression, and other complications and defenses against anxiety to which
they are susceptible.

2. Christianity, like most Western and Oriental religions, fosters a contemplative and meditative orientation to life that has a calming, pacific, and comforting effect on such negative emotions as anger, fear, anxiety, resentment, hostility, and so forth. It, thus, has an inherent healing, stabilizing, and prophylactic effect on the somatic and excitatory symptoms of mental illness. Much of these latter effects are mediated by inducing greater acceptance of the inevitable; of frustrating conditions that cannot be changed; and of unavoidable failure or suffering. Indirectly these goals are furthered by placing greater value on the mind and spirit of man than on material things, status, and power; and by fostering moderation in all things it discourages hedonism, self-indulgence, and egocentricity.

3. By relating all of us to God, Christianity simultaneously relates all of us fraternally to each other, thereby making it much easier for us to accept and identify with each other as well as facilitating benevolent and peaceful interpersonal relations. Additionally, this general acceptance of each individual by the group, simply on the basis of his group membership, also confers a type of derived status and self-esteem on him (comparable to that due to divine acceptance) that is more salient in cultures with extended kinship systems than in modern industrial cultures. This self-esteem naturally has the same therapeutic and protective effects as the self-esteem generated by divine acceptance of man.

4. Christianity establishes and strengthens man's conscience by providing an absolute, universal, and pan-cultural source of moral values promulgated by God and then revealed and internalized by man through his appropriate cultural institution, the Church. Implicitly inculcated together with these internalized moral values are feelings of obligation to conform moral conduct to them so that perceived serious discrepancies between conduct and values lead to feelings of culpability, disloyalty, shame, guilt, remorse, and accountability to God for the moral lapse involved, as well as liability to the moral judgment of the culture and to the punishment prescribed therefor.

5. Catholicism puts free will and the moral qualities of conduct back on the center stage of counseling and psychotherapy where they belong, together with the legitimacy of moral responsibility and accountability and of liability to moral judgment and punishment.

Free will according to Catholic moral theology is not an illusion that mistakes mere awareness of the various forces of good and evil impinging on, and entering into, man's decision-making processes in a moral dilemma situation for deliberate differential weighting of these factors of good and evil in making his choice. Nor is it similarly mere awareness of the emergence of the outcome, choice, or decision in this moral dilemma situation as the vectorial resultant of the interaction among the morally contrasting factors in

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question. Free will is rather a genuine and deliberate act of volition that takes into account all relevant moral issues of good and evil that enter into the ultimate decision.

Man commits sin and evil deliberately and freely by an act of will or choice. He is, therefore, morally responsible for his sinful and antisocial actions if he is physically and mentally capable of inhibiting these actions but fails to do so—irrespective of what happened in the past that was beyond his control, for example, rejection or abuse by his parents. The latter factors might help explain why he did what he did but it does not excuse it. In my opinion, explanation and justification are by no means synonymous.

There is no real free will unless man is free to choose evil as well as good in any moral dilemma. There is also no moral virtue in choosing a good alternative unless that choice additionally implies rejection of the evil alternative, that is, unless the chooser were originally free to make the latter choice if he wanted to but rejected it. Free will means exactly what its representational concept words imply: that the will of man in most instances of moral choice is unconstrained and not predetermined or programmed. It is a gift from God to man to make human moral conduct possible: We can’t speak of a moral act unless it is made under conditions of free will.

It is futile, of course, to pretend that free will poses no dangers and that it can be exercised by mankind without paying a price. The danger and the price are that free will can also be exercised by antisocial personalities like Adolf Hitler and Josef Stalin who can implement their antisocial choices with all of the power and destructive impact of a modern state.

Two examples may be given of how advance programming may negate man's free will: First, if God in creating man had programmed him genetically so that in every moral dilemma he would have to choose the good alternative. This man would certainly have no free will. His behavior would be comparable to the instinctual responses of animals. He obviously could commit no sins and would invariably be a good man, but not a morally good man.

Second, if God always intervened in man's decision-making processes, or in the implications or consequences of his choices, or planned the lives of men in detail, man too would be programmed by definition; and this would self-evidently preclude the exercise of his free will. Practically this situation arises when some usually more devout and well-intentioned parishioners claim to be seeking God's will in choosing or rejecting an especially critical course of action that might have significant implications for themselves and others in the future. Unfortunately, however, this quest for discovering God's will in this situation can be little more than an exercise in futility since these misguided persons are obviously "kidding" themselves if they truly believe that God's will is ascertainable in these circumstances.

In the first place, even if God had made a choice between alternatives for
them, how would they ascertain what this choice was when it is well known that He very rarely reveals His intentions and preferences to anyone, and then only to certain people and under very special circumstances. But even if it were possible for a person to ascertain God's will as embodied in a predetermined and detailed plan for that person's critical life events and choices, it would still be God's plan, not his. All of the significant choices would be programmed in advance. Thus, God's will is never a specific course of action in a moral dilemma because this would preclude man's exercise both of free will and of moral conduct; and for this reason God does not have a master plan for each man's life. He made man a gift of free will; and since He is not "an Indian giver," He has no intention of taking it back. God's only concern, therefore, in situations where man seeks to know His will, is general, not specific: that whatever choices man makes freely by his own will also lie within the guidelines of His commandments. One of the Holy Spirit's many functions is to inspire man and strengthen his resolve to do just this rather than vainly to seek God's non-existent more specific will in this situation.

One of the most significant aspects of the free will controversy insofar as it affects the religion-psychology alienation is Christianity's attribution of culpability and liability to punishment of those persons guilty of antisocial conduct on the grounds that it is a product of free will, and the opposite set of attributions by secular social scientists generally on the grounds that free will is largely an illusion. The denial of culpability has also spread downwards to include responsibility for all misdeeds of any degree of seriousness, even venial sins. Thus, very many people in our culture today, as a matter of course, tend to attribute the blame for their own sins--mortal as well as venial--to everyone and everything except their own immoral behavior trends and self-indulgence. In the light of this highly permissive and extropunitive moral and social science climate, the Penitential Rite of the Catholic Mass is very refreshing indeed, especially since the permissive social science position is generally considered to be highly liberal and enlightened in this case:

I confess to almighty God and to you my brothers and sisters
That I have sinned through my own fault
In my thoughts and in my words in what I have done and
In what I have failed to do.

This in a nutshell is Catholic moral doctrine regarding free will and culpability (moral responsibility) for antisocial conduct, and liability to punishment. It stands at one pole of social science opinion opposite to the majority view of secular social scientists and is still revolutionary moral doctrine in the light of today's psychological and social science ethical climate.
How Psychology Can Contribute to and Enhance the Doctrine and Practice of Religion

Turning now to the other side of the coin, there are at least as many ways in which psychology can make significant contributions to the content and practice of Catholicism as vice versa:

1. The moral theology of a religion cannot reasonably expect more of man ethically than what he is inherently capable of both genetically and in terms of his culture and subculture. The average man is neither saint nor angel and we cannot expect him to act consistently like one. Of course, we should still encourage him to aspire higher morally, but we should not be too disappointed if he doesn't reach this higher level; and we should also provide opportunities for redemption in the event that he falters. In any case psychology can and should help moral theology ascertain the limits and average level of ethical conduct that could be reasonably expected in a given culture and subculture. This would be very helpful knowledge for confessors in judging the seriousness of parishioners' sins.

2. Psychology can help religion understand why man is prone to sin (that he is prone to sin is in itself not regarded as an arguable proposition.) His proneness to sin is implicit in such Christian concepts as expiation, forgiveness, justification, redemption, and salvation. If a confessor understands why man generally, and also why a particular sinner, is prone to sin, he can help the latter avoid sinning in the future.

Some reasons why man is prone to sin

a. The occurrence of sin becomes possible only because man enjoys free will; if he didn't enjoy free will he would not be able to commit sins because he could not freely choose the sinful alternative in a moral dilemma.

b. The availability of many highly attractive, pervasive, need-fulfilling, and illicit temptations: status, power, fame, recognition, material gain, wealth, self-aggrandizement, hedonism, sex, and so forth. Many people want some or all of these fruits of sinning and are willing to succumb to temptation to get them.

c. Some persons, especially those who are narcissistic or egocentric, are sufficiently arrogant to believe that they are specially entitled to be above the law that applies to, and constrains, all other men from committing immoral and criminal acts. (This mechanism is similar to the use of double or multiple standards of judgment.) Frequently they are members of elite and secret hate groups.

d. Because man is uniquely endowed with reason, he can also twist, abuse, and pervert reason sophistically in pursuing his own illicit self-interest, and even perceive this as virtue. (This mechanism is usually regarded as a form of rationalization.)
e. Stubborn and irrational denial of culpability with resulting inability to experience shame, guilt, remorse.

f. Various psychological mechanisms that permit man to deny, evade, and violate the dictates of his conscience while experiencing as a result greatly reduced levels of shame, guilt, remorse, and lowered self-esteem. These mechanisms include minimization, euphemization, rationalization, denial, and reaction formation.

g. Man's considerable tolerance for bearing guilt with equanimity and little psychic discomfort.

It is widespread myth in our culture that man is unbearably uncomfortable emotionally unless he has a blemish-free conscience; and that once he acknowledges to himself the existence of a blemish he can enjoy no peace and cannot eat or sleep normally until he confesses to a priest or psychiatrist, or turns himself in to the police. Actually, as anyone with clinical psychiatric experience knows, the reverse is actually true: he can live very comfortably with his high guilt level even if the situation causing the guilt (e.g., an extra-marital affair) continues indefinitely. In any case the guilt does not disturb him enough to make him want to terminate the affair.

h. High tolerance for guilt must be distinguished from antisocial personality disorder in which there is a total absence of both conscience and guilt feelings in relation to committing heinous crimes. The conduct of persons with this disorder is not governed or constrained at all by conscience and they never internalize any moral values or experience any shame, guilt, or remorse. They also manifest serious antisocial behavior from a very early age.

Antisocial personalities have probably been with us from the very beginning of human cultures. Biblically, they are represented by Cain, by Noah's contemporaries, and by many residents of Sodom and Gomorrah.

3. The long experience and high expertise of psychologists with all forms of counseling enable them to be extremely helpful to pastors in the theoretical and practical aspects of pastoral counseling. Additionally, pastors by virtue of their religious background are less likely than psychologists to be permissive, non-directive, non-judgmental, and amoral in their approach to clients. The bright future of pastoral counseling, however, was foreshortened by the vocational crisis in the priesthood.

4. Another significant way in which psychology can contribute to Catholic doctrine and practice is to help upgrade the quality of Catholic education at all educational levels. Three general problems are perceived in this context: (a) Not enough of Catholic doctrine learned in elementary school, high school, and college seems to rub off on students in terms of how they order their lives as adolescents and adults, their values, and their priorities; (b) Rote learning is greatly overemphasized and meaningful learning is accordingly underemphasized to the detriment of acquiring and retaining hierarchically
organized and stable bodies of knowledge; and (c) The level of discourse (vocabulary and syntax) and the abstract level of concepts and propositions used in Catholic elementary schools impress me as qualitatively much above the students' existing cognitive developmental level. As a result, material that is not really understood is not adequately learned and retained and, therefore, does not become a functional part of an organized body of knowledge.

If there is one overriding general conclusion that results from examining the relationship between religion and psychology, it is this: As Catholic moral theology insists, there is a significant moral aspect to most categories and instances of human behavior. To ignore it in the counseling situation is to sanction and encourage unethical conduct through tacit approval of same. This is similar to evaluating a diamond ring by confining one's attention to the setting and ignoring the quality of the diamond. The client is thereby encouraged to persist in his immorality because the counselor or psychiatrist, who is perceived as an authority figure with respect to the cultural moral code, showed no overt or explicit disapproval of previous instances of similar unethical conduct. On the more positive side, the client can be cautiously encouraged to aspire to a higher ethical plane than the one he currently espouses.

Note

1. The following examples of the ways in which religion can contribute to psychology (and vice versa) are illustrative rather than exhaustive. Because of limitations of space, however, only the more significant examples of such interaction could be considered.