

MODERN PSYCHOLOGY AND THE VALIDITY OF CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE

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CHRISTIANS often appear to be afraid of psychology. On the one hand they wonder if, in some unspecified manner, the psychologist will suddenly empty their most treasured experiences of all the ultimate reality. On the other hand they hear unbelievers attempting to explain away conversion as nothing more than emotionalism. Underlying this fear there are several questions which, if made articulate, could probably fairly be summarized as, (1) what answer can I give to the unbeliever who asserts that my experience of Christ's redeeming love is just emotion or feeling without reality? or (2) what does psychology have to say about the origins of the religious life? or (3) what in fact *can* the psychologist, as psychologist, say about the religious experience of conversion?

PSYCHOLOGY TODAY

Psychology emerged as a separate discipline in the mid-nineteenth century. Its principal earlier connections were with philosophy, theology and physiology. For example, the philosopher Descartes had propounded his views on the duality of mind and matter putting forward a mechanistic view of mind.

The methods of investigation employed by the psychologist are many and varied and a brief list will serve to show how we have borrowed from other sciences:

- (1) *Biology* has taught us the importance of environment.
- (2) *Anthropology* has raised the problems of the interplay of heredity and upbringing.
- (3) *Medicine* has shown us that mental illness may have a physical or a psychological basis or both.
- (4) *Mathematics* has provided us with one of our most important tools, namely, statistics.
- (5) *Physics* has helped us in the construction of our recording instruments. More recently developments in electronics have provided us with useful analogical models of the human brain.

Today, then, psychology is laying claim to its rightful place amongst the natural sciences. If it is accepted by them it will have to discipline itself to the acceptance of the scope and limitations of the hypothetico-deductive method of the natural sciences.

THE PSYCHOLOGIST'S TERMS OF REFERENCE

Since the psychologist is concerned with the whole range of human behaviour and experience this, by the very nature of the case, also includes religious experience. Notice, however, that his brief is to explain in detail, and to describe if he can, the underlying mechanisms of the particular behaviour with which he is concerned. This is something quite different, and on a totally different level, from any attempt on his part to pronounce upon the ultimate validity or otherwise of the interpretations given by the

religious man in religious language of his religious experiences. When this stage is reached the opinion of the psychologist has as much and as little claim to be heard and believed as that of any other layman whether he be philosopher, artist, physician, physicist or chemist. Speaking on this subject, Sir Frederic Bartlett,¹ until recently Professor of Psychology at Cambridge, has said: 'It is inevitable that the forms which are taken by feeling, thinking, and action within any religion should be moulded and directed by the character of its own associated culture. The psychologist must accept these forms and attempt to show how they have grown up and what are their principal effects. Should he appear to succeed in doing these things, he is tempted to suppose that this confers upon him some special right to pronounce upon further and deeper issues of ultimate truth and value. These issues, as many people have claimed, seem to be inevitably bound up with the assertion that in some way the truth and worth of religion come from a contact of the natural order with some other order or world, not itself directly accessible to the common human senses. So far as any final decision upon the validity or value of such a claim goes, the psychologist is in exactly the same position as any other human being who cares to consider the matter seriously. Being a psychologist gives him neither superior nor inferior authority.'

FREUD — PSYCHOLOGIST AND PHILOSOPHER

Freud was without a doubt one of the greatest psychologists of the first half of the twentieth century. Although he liked to think of himself as a scientific psychologist his main claim to fame was undoubtedly as a clinician and the author and originator of the method of psychotherapy known as psycho-analysis. There came a time when he decided to turn the torrent of his genius towards a consideration of the origins and function of religion in the history of the human race. Much of the material upon which he based his judgments was collected by him in his consulting room in the course of the psycho-analysis of his patients. That this latter point is important I hope to show more clearly later.

Most people are aware of, if not familiar with, Freud's basic picture of personality structure. Only a summary will be given and this will be slightly over-simplified for the sake of brevity. This personality theory of Freud's is inextricably bound up with his opinion of religion and it is essential to a fair understanding of his views. In daily living each of us, the real 'me' or the real 'you', our 'ego' has to balance the conflicting demands of our 'id', which is the source of all instinctual demands and basic drives, against our 'super-ego' which we usually call our conscience. In the adult the super-ego represents the internalization of our early childhood reactions to our environment and particularly our parents' attitudes and example. Such a view as this makes no provision for any inherent or absolute appreciation of right and wrong and is in this sense independent of fundamental religious or moral significance.

According to this picture of the developing personality Freud saw the idea of God and the fact of religious beliefs as no more than the projections, in later life, of the child's relationship to his father. Thus as the child developed and grew up he found that his earthly father was not able to protect him from all the stresses and threats to his existence in his daily environment. Moreover he discovered that a day would come when he, the growing man, must assert his independence of his earthly father and then he must face the problem of how to fill the resulting gap in his life. One

¹ Bartlett, Sir F. C. *Religion as Experience, Belief, Action*, Riddell Memorial Lectures, 1950. O.U.P.

solution would be to attribute to a heavenly Father all those characteristics which the developing child had found so essential in his earthly father and thus, said Freud, primitive man developed his idea of God or gods which were in fact merely the products and projections of his own imagination. In his book *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud accordingly sums up the three-fold task of the gods as being to exorcize, to reconcile, and to make amends. Thus for Freud the idea of God was an illusion created by humanity to comfort them in their helplessness when they had outgrown or been deprived of their earthly parents.

Despite this sudden excursion by Freud into imaginative mythology, he believed and proclaimed that this thesis of the origins of religion provided a rational basis for the abandonment of religion. Nevertheless, at the same time he concluded that mankind at his present stage of development was not yet ready for the challenge to him implied by this liberation from religious belief. For the time being at least it was necessary that this fiction should continue.

It would seem that this myth-making once embarked upon by Freud had for him a strange and compelling fascination. In order to account for evil as the enemy of good, he soon found himself compelled to postulate a death instinct ('thanatos') at war with the life instinct ('eros') in every living creature.

There is, in fact, a striking contrast between the brilliant contribution made by Freud, on the one hand, to our understanding of the unconscious factors influencing thought, feeling and behaviour in the realm of everyday life and, on the other hand, the unfettered speculations concerning religion made in his consideration of some of the philosophical implications of the same basic clinical experience.

What then is to be our answer to Freud's wild speculations as to the origins of the religious life? There are two possible answers. In the first place there are no *a priori* reasons for our accepting his explanation of the origins of a God with the character of a heavenly Father in preference to the account given to us by divine revelation and preserved for us in the Scriptures. Indeed, rather than saying, as Freud does, that a heavenly Father is a projection of our earthly father-figure, we would assert that God in His wisdom has ordained the pattern of human family life in such a way that, as we grow up in it, He teaches us progressively about His character as our heavenly Father. The love, care and consideration of our earthly father is but a faint shadow or reflection of the infinite love and care which the heavenly Father has for all His creatures.

In the second place it is not difficult to demolish Freud's edifice of religious theorizing by using the very same principles by which he built his own. Thus if we permit ourselves the same kind of speculations about Freud as he has permitted himself about Moses, for example, we may justifiably wonder whether his own unresolved conflict and intensely charged feelings about his father were not perhaps as much responsible for his views about conscience and religion as were any of his scientific abilities. Rather than wishing to preserve his own father-figure in adulthood in the form of a heavenly Father, he sought instead to be rid of his unresolved conflict with respect to his earthly father by rejecting any idea of a heavenly Father. On the face of it either explanation is equally likely and equally tenable.

Freud, therefore, could claim no more authority for his conclusions than could be claimed for the subjective speculations of anyone else. His ability to explain how the idea of God and the idea of fatherhood might be linked in the human mind, and how both ideas could be expected to become involved in the developing conscience of the individual, is in no sense an answer to the very much wider and infinitely more important question of why the concept of God should be a part of human mental existence at all.

Moreover the fundamental philosophical fallacy at the foundation of his speculative edifice is clearly summarized in his own words in the closing paragraph of *The Future of an Illusion* when he asserts that science is the *only* way to knowledge and truth. 'Science,' he writes, 'is no illusion. But it would be an illusion to suppose that we could get anywhere else what it cannot give us.'

THE PLACE OF EMOTION IN RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

The validity of Christian experience is sometimes attacked as being nothing more than emotional experience with no objective truth or reality. Before answering this charge a word of warning is necessary, for there are times when we are tempted to defend positions which are obviously untenable. We must ever be on our guard against attempting to justify our own pride or personal prestige in the name of 'soundness'.

In the first place, whether we like it or not, there is emotion in everything that we think or say or do. We are not really concerned to explain why there are emotional accompaniments to religious experience but rather to understand what is their function and when they are unhealthy and pathological. Emotional activity is part of our make-up. To maintain, as some would, that our decisions in spiritual matters must be devoid of all emotive content is to be as mistaken on the one side as are those, on the other, who seek to work up excessive feelings of guilt and conviction. The well-taught Christian must join whole-heartedly with the psychologist and psychotherapist in condemning that kind of evangelism that deliberately works up mass emotion or exercises undue influence over the free choice of an individual. At the same time it is a fact that all schools of dynamic psychology accept as one of their basic principles that intellectual understanding or acceptance of a new outlook is ineffectual unless accompanied by an emotional experience of such a change. This is perhaps shown most clearly in the psychiatrist's consulting room where it is not at all uncommon for intelligent and educated patients to come to him having read all about their case in one of the many readable and easily obtainable books on psychology and yet be no better for it. A correct intellectual understanding is not enough.

CONVERSION

Perhaps this is the most controversial of all religious experiences and the one most often attacked by unbelievers; it is worth considering in some detail.

There are certain forms of conversion which we should not support before our critical unbelieving friends. Three of them are especially common among adolescents.

1. Some conversions result in an unhealthy submission to authority. They often occur under the social pressures of a family or church group. A young person surrenders to his parents' or pastor's wishes and becomes converted. It usually represents a regression to infantile attitudes. True conversion is submission to the Lord Jesus Christ Himself and not to any earthly substitute. A similar kind of experience may occur in the conversions which follow closely on sorrow, or failure in examinations, and again in this case they may be only 'consolations' and 'compensations'.

2. Conversion may result from an insistence by religious groups upon a standardized type of experience. The model may be Paul or Augustine or Wesley or the group-leader's own experience. It follows that, in some circles, unless there has been a particular kind of emotional crisis, doubt is cast upon the reality and validity of the individual's religious life. It is these people who in later life may become the most cynical and the most likely to proclaim that all Christian experience is nothing but a psychological myth.

3. Conversion may be associated with an acute and almost pathological sense of guilt, and it often occurs in adolescence, at the time of the emergence of the sex-life into consciousness. Many adolescents tend to equate sex-impulses with guilt and they seek relief in conversion, only to find afterwards that they are more tormented with doubts and fears than ever. To accept sexuality as a form of guilt and then to try to banish it from life is to reject what is an essential part of human nature; in this way the seeds of neurotic illness, developing later in life, may be sown. This process proves to be the repression of guilt through conversion rather than the removal of it in forgiveness.

It will now be seen that there *is* an element of truth in the accusation that the kind of 'Christian experience', which is not the true form described in the New Testament, is a 'psychological myth'. The critic is right when he is, by his accusation, indicating the lack of agreement between the conduct of the believer and his doctrinal claims. Where the fruits of the Spirit are to be expected there is perhaps a regression to infantile behaviour. The spirit of adventure and self-forgetfulness which filled the early Christians are lacking. There may be an energetic effort to ape a stereotyped kind of post-conversion life, instead of the wonderful flowering of hitherto stunted dimensions of personality which normally accompany our growth in grace. Our critic may be disturbed too when in the new convert he sees not freedom from guilt and the bondage of sin but the beginnings of neurotic illness resulting from repressed pathological guilt.

These are the grounds which give credence to the assertion that 'Christian experience' is a 'psychological myth'. We should not attempt to defend spurious conversions but admit readily that there are immature, self-gratifying examples or counterfeits which claim to be Christian but, for the reasons given above, are, in fact, distortions of the true experience.

We do not stand to make excuses for the fact that there are deep emotional accompaniments when we first acknowledge that we are guilty sinners in need of forgiveness. When we first learn some new and searching truth about ourselves it does, of course, stir our emotions. We may become very angry the first time that we are told that in God's sight we are all sinners and have fallen short. We may go on to feel deep contrition as we recognize that it was *our* sin which sent Jesus to Calvary. We should not be surprised to find ourselves deeply moved as we realize that as we trust Him we are forgiven for time and for eternity. To maintain that such great truths about ourselves and the Creator of the universe should not stir us suggests that we have a very meagre understanding of ourselves. Those very same people who would want to empty religious experience of its emotional content would be the first to label as absurd any similar attempt to empty of all emotion their relationships with their loved ones.

THE CHRISTIAN'S ATTITUDE TO MENTAL ILLNESS

The question is sometimes asked, 'If Christian experience is true why is it that so many people who claim to be Christians seem to be mentally ill?' 'Surely', the questioner asks, 'if you're a Christian you should not be neurotic or psychotic.' At the outset it must be emphasized that conversion, and what follows it, should be a truly healing process. William James' definition of conversion is a good one. 'Conversion', he wrote, 'is a process, gradual or sudden, by which a self, hitherto divided and consciously wrong, inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right, superior and happy, through an establishment of a right relationship with the object of the religious sentiment.' The last phrase might, perhaps, read better, 'through the establishment of a new relationship with God the Father through the Lord Jesus Christ.'

If it is true that the healing power of the love of Christ is a reality in the lives of countless Christians we are bound to go on to admit that there are also not a few Christians who have what are usually called 'nervous breakdowns'. As we learn more about the origin and basis of mental disorders we become aware of their close linkage with physical disorder. In one sense, therefore, it is almost as foolish to expect to find less serious mental disorders amongst Christians as it is to expect to find, say, less cases of acute appendicitis. We must, moreover, realize that people who are neurotic or psychotic are driven or drawn to Christianity because of the hope of reaching a solution to their mental problems — and many succeed. Some who call themselves Christian and who are members of religious communities are in fact religious neurotics. They may be 'escapists' who seek the shelter of Christianity whenever trouble arises and are only interested in it for what they can get out of it. It is of course also possible that a Christian may use meetings simply as a means of escaping from himself. These people somehow manage to ignore Christ's injunction 'If any man will come after me let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me'. Lastly there are those who persist in breaking even the most obvious rules of mental and physical health. It is a great temptation to Christian workers, for example, to ignore the command to rest one day in seven.

From the psychological point of view there are some definite and indisputable claims which can be made in commendation of the Christian way. In the first place there is little doubt that the fellowship afforded by a live and loving Christian Church can be one of the strongest forms of therapy available to those who are cast down by fears and anxieties, by lack of love from their family and by a general sense of frustration and pointlessness in life.

Secondly, it is becoming more and more clear as our knowledge of mental health increases that a man's beliefs do influence his mental and physical health. What he believes about his business, his associates, his wife, and his immediate future is important — even more so, what he believes about life in general, its purposes and design. Christian belief, simply because it deals with fundamentals, often turns out to be the most important belief of all. Many psychiatrists, including non-Christian ones, recognize this fact and are careful not to tamper with a man's religious beliefs since in the long run they may turn out to be the leading factor in his cure.

Thirdly, there is one particular aspect of Christian teaching which is the very opposite of the root cause of the major mental disorders known as the psychoses. I am referring to the fact that the common characteristic of all psychoses is that the patient is to a greater or less degree out of touch with reality. On the other hand the mature Christian is, or at least should be, the realist *par excellence*. He has looked hard at himself and he has faced up to and acknowledged all those unpleasant facets of his personality which he would like to hide. He has realized that before God all is open and yet he still knows that God loves with a love so great that even the worst sinner may find forgiveness. Such self-knowledge cannot but lead to a growth and integration of personality as he forgets those things which are behind and presses forward.

CONCLUSION

We must not try to defend forms of religious experience (i.e. other than those which are truly Christian and normative) which are at the very best immature and at the worst scarcely worthy of the name of Christian. At the same time there are many solid claims to be made in favour of the view that true Christian fellowship and love is the greatest therapeutic agent the world has ever known.

Finally let it be reiterated that in the last analysis the validity of Christian experience must derive from the validity of our Lord's own words and experience. It is mistaken to argue that human experience proves the truth of Christian revelation. By its very nature it cannot. The final centre of authority is Christ's authority and it is in the interpretation of experience by this authority that we see the full development of human personality and the satisfactory adjustment of such personality to the total environment. And for the Christian it is in Christ that we live and move and have our being.

UNDERSTANDING THE UNGODLY

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HUGH EVAN HOPKINS' article under this title in the March issue touched a most responsive chord in the heart of this reader. Whilst I cannot hope to contribute anything very original to the discussion of the subject, I would like to underline and amplify one or two points.

My own convictions in the matter have been built up during twenty years of pastoral ministry, first in the East End of London, then in an Essex suburb, and more lately in two rural but semi-suburban areas on the fringe of London. In the latter two cases my pastorate has been a 'spare-time' arrangement, as my days are spent in editorial service in London. I have never paused to survey the subject and make formal plans; it is simply that experience and conviction have together led me to a point where I find myself in almost unqualified agreement with all the points which Mr. Hopkins makes.

Naturally I have been concerned about the failure of the formal services of the church to become effective means whereby the Word of God may be made known to the 'outsider'. Evangelistic 'campaigns' and similar special efforts suggest that this failure is to be accepted, and that we cannot hope for steady growth and expansion in the week-by-week routine of church life. And the widespread reliance on what is called 'Youth Work' hides an even greater fallacy — the assumption that the church cannot make any impression on *adults*.

There is a further weakness about the 'special campaign' method of dealing with the problem. It so often means that evangelism is a 'one-shot' business; the person is brought to the special meeting, the gospel is preached, and the Christian friend waits prayerfully and hopefully for some sort of response. If none comes, then that person is liable to be written off as 'one who has heard the gospel, but rejected it'. This is an utterly misleading and mechanical view of the matter; as Mr. Hopkins suggested, we must take account of the difference in environment and past history of those we seek to win. There may have been little or nothing on the particular evangelistic occasion in question which really touched their vital need, their personal points of concern.

What is needed is some method of evangelism which makes possible sustained teaching and witness, over a period of years if necessary, and which, when it leads to 'decisions', produces solidly-founded and deeply-convinced Christians, and not mere text-jugglers. This is possible if it is done in a context of genuine love and friendship extended by Christians who are not in a hurry to see 'results'. The 'Young Wives' Fellowship' is an invaluable