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Has Psychiatry Replaced Religion?

86 It is perhaps hardly necessary for me to stress that Christianity is not just a set of rules about a way of life. It is, for better or worse, very much concerned with creative human relationships between people and between God and ourselves; particularly at the very deepest and most emotional level. Modern psychological knowledge leaves us in no doubt that it is relationships at this sort of level that are most crucial in the formation of human character. Everyone knows that psychiatry is full of oral

87 and sexual language. This is because the primitive and very intense experiences of love and hate in the baby persist in one way or another throughout life as partial determinants in later human relationships, and coping with them, for better or worse, is very closely connected with mental health or ill health. The Christian language is full of similar symbolism. We need only mention the words Holy Communion and the concept of Mother Church, which is also the Bride of Christ. These words have a literal meaning that links them with everyday facts of human nature. This is one reason why the Gospel can be so gladly received and understood even by the most illiterate. It may also help to explain why some reject it, especially those very clever people who are very often not good at these everyday human relationships. Amongst scientists one finds that their apparent passionate concern for objectivity in their research spills over into their lives generally and results from a fear of human involvement rather than any abstract love of truth itself.

89 It is notoriously difficult to describe what goes on in psychotherapy because it is like falling in love -- a state which that is inconceivable unless one has actually experienced it, and if one has experienced it then only poetic language appears able to be able to do it justice. Furthermore, the communication between people at this sort of level depends much more on the emotional rapport developed between them than on any actual words that pass. The relationships of lovers, and of babies and mothers, go far beyond words, and artistic and poetic language is the nearest one can get to them. The real problem of trying to deal with the mentally disturbed is not whether it is illness or sin that worries them, nor whether they need help from a priest or a doctor, but who it is that can give a sufferer these experiences that are needed in order to be helped? Such helpers have always existed in one form or another in all societies, though the quacks always greatly outnumber the genuine healers.

91 The Christian does things not for any selfish egocentric motive, nor from any fear of endangering an immature dependency whether on parents or God, but because 'God first loved us.'

92 It is firstly important to realize that the mature person will not always be a happy one. Freud himself.. said that the effect of psychotherapy was to substitute for neurotic misery human unhappiness

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93 We know, for example, from history that simple and great questions such as 'Are you saved?' really did cause people to change their life. Nowadays we have to wrap it up rather more cumbersomely.

94 Such a guilt sense arises in some way or another from an ingrained psychic conflict, from something going on for the most part unconsciously, in the patient's own mind.

We have to free people of a paralysing and irrelevant sense of guilt that is early inculcated in the human personality, thereby preventing further maturation.

95 Another important point about the mature person concerns the role of faith in his life. We are supposed to be living in a sceptical age with mocking doubts of the value of any faith -- an attitude that seems to satisfy the need for scientific detachment, and at the same time to be smart and sophisticated. This cynicism shows itself in various ways -- in distrust of organization, as well as distrust of deep personal contacts. It is seen in all social classes and at all ~~many~~ levels of intelligence. Yet the need to give oneself and to be wholly accepted is very necessary for psychological growth... Ernest Jones... has remarked how a curious credulity is often one of the signs of the greatest men of genius.

We must not, however, expect the modern psychology to tell us in whom or in what we ought to place our faith. In this sense psychology can never bolster up, prove, disprove, justify or falsify one's religious beliefs. That in which one places one's confidence or credulity has in the end to be a personal affirmation. This carries with it its own dangers of blindness and rigidity and the pain, perhaps, that one has to acknowledge that one has made a mistake. But it is infinitely better to do this than never to dare to gamble one's life in love.

96 We feel ~~that~~ the priest is not only a teacher, nor is he a social worker; but in so far as he wants to alter human nature his role certainly resembles that of a psychotherapist. The trouble is that the Church has hardly become aware of the newer techniques and much of our symbolic language is worn out.

.. No one can doubt the need for a healer or a counsellor today. The Welfare State and the National Health Service have done little or nothing to reduce the need for personal counselling and, in any case, to what extent ought the National Health Service concern itself with those who are merely unhappy or ineffectual? There is a danger that by stressing too much that a man has a mental disease like any other disease, a one-sided view of a problem will occur. Physical symptoms may be treated at the expense of the underlying problem, and the fact that the problem is so often spiritual as well, and concerned with man's relationship to God as well as his relationship to other men may be overlooked.

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97 If the Church is to have an effective function at all, it must as a group have some psychological meaning to the members in it in the sense that creative human relationships take place there. But the local Church group cannot be as intense as the relationships that occur within group psychotherapy. The primitive nature of the emotions and tensions within such a group are too great. A certain anonymity is essential to the therapeutic situation. One of the ways in which people can be helped with their own internal problems is by their seeing them externalized and obliquely, as it were, in the great myths which are particularly effectively portrayed in

98 98 classical plays. The Greek tragedies still hold their own and can be as effective as when Aristotle spoke of their purging the soul. We are now recovering some sense of the sacraments as drama, a re-enacting of the most fundamental human experiences at a universal level.

The most creative human relationships are, in fact, those that can be conveyed only symbolically in the themes of birth and re-birth, crucifixion, redemption, and resurrection. Patients in treatment -- even quite irreligious ones -- often use these words or similar ones to describe the psychological experiences of being changed, made a new man, having to give up what seems to be one's whole life in order to be renewed.

In recent years we have heard a good deal about demythologizing the gospel. It is seen as an effort to strip away from the gospel the accidents of its particular period of history in order to present its essential message. What we perhaps need is to re-mythologize the gospel so as to make out of these great themes new experiences that will again change people. For few, if any, people is it possible to relate creatively purely to an idea, and the action of the sacraments has helped many people to make that special relationship with God which enables them to deal with their own problems. These are essentially whole-person experiences, not just intellectual exercises; but unfortunately institutionalization and intellectualization are the besetting sins of any new movement, so that the original fire gets lost.

98 98 In no real sense, therefore, has psychiatry replaced religion. It is a branch of medicine ~~which~~ which embraces many
99 99 methods for helping people in trouble. In the techniques of psychotherapy there are perhaps some new ideas, or at any rate an exploitation of methods of helping people that were imperfectly understood in the past. But the result of its deepest researches has shown that the themes of the great religions are still the main ones in most people's lives.

99 In psychiatry as such we do not have to follow Freud either in his earlier crude materialism or these later fancies (Civilization and its Discontents) which sound like echoes of his rabbinical family background. After all the centuries of religious bigotry and persecution, we should perhaps have learned that our revelation is something that we have to find out for ourselves in our own experience.