

Reclaiming Psychology?

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Contemporary psychology owes its success to a mix of factors; its “position of eminence in our society” is due not simply to its ability to foster human flourishing but also the “militancy and persistence over many years ... [of] professors and practitioners.” While “once contemptuously regarded as eccentrics mumbling arcane obscenities at the fringe of medicine,” psychology and psychologists “have advanced ... to chairs of eminence and couches of opulence in the finest universities and neighborhoods in the Western World.” The discipline’s growth has paralleled the increasing cultural and political dominance of “America, with its mixed traditions of hospitality towards all kinds of ideological novelty and of personal self-seeking.” With the globalization of American culture, psychology has been able to find “the kindest hosts” to develop and spread not only in the United States but also to those societies where American culture has come to dominate.¹

Just as globalization has led both to greater economic prosperity and the endangerment of indigenous cultures, psychology’s growing “social respectability” is a two-edged sword. As psychology has come to dominate in all areas of human life,² there has also been an unfortunate loss of the discipline’s “intellectual integrity” as “the surfeit of schools and theories, of practices and practitioners ... compete with each other conceptually and economically.” Given the broad, often

¹See Perry London, *The Modes and Morals of Psychotherapy* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1964), v.

²The American Psychological Association lists 54 separate divisions that encompass a dizzying array of concern for psychologists and psychology. For the complete list see <http://www.apa.org/about/division/index.aspx>.

contradictory, models and approaches of psychology and psychologists to the study and explanation of human thought and behavior, it is “unclear what it is that psychotherapists do, or to whom, or why.” These observations though “critical ... are not meant to be hostile or destructive.” Rather “they are intended to imply that psychotherapy [and psychology] requires more careful analysis and articulation than it sometimes gets.” This deeper examination is critical to psychology and its allied practical and theoretical disciplines “for it can be best used only when it is most understood.”³

Interestingly this is much the same point Pope Pius XII makes in his address to the Fifth International Congress on Psychotherapy and Clinical Psychology (April 13, 1953). After first acknowledging the legitimate autonomy “of scientific psychology” as well “the use of new psychic methods” he argues that “theoretical and practical psychology, the one as much as the other, should bear in mind that they cannot lose sight of the truths established by reason and by faith, nor of the obligatory precepts of ethics.” While an analysis of his argument goes beyond our concern here, it is worth quoting Pius to get a sense of his thinking. “This fundamental attitude can be summed up in the following formula: Psychotherapy and clinical psychology must always consider [the human person] (1) as a psychic unit and totality, (2) as a structured unit in itself, (3) as a social unit, and (4) as a transcendent unit, that is to say, in tending towards God.” Such anthropological and ethical concerns have mostly been overlooked by mainstream psychology; this especially so when they are articulated by the Christian tradition.⁴ At the same time there have been some noticeable attempts by Catholic, Protestant, and Evangelical

³ See London, *Modes and Morals*, v.

⁴ The anti-Christian and pseudo-religious character of psychology is well documented in Christian authors such as P. Vitz and W. Kilpatrick. Likewise see secular thinkers such as T. Szasz, R.D. Laing and E. Erikson have shown how often ideology rather than science drives both psychological theory and clinical practice. Where there is an openness to religion it is usually, as the archetypal James Hillman (*Revisioning Psychology* [New York, 1977]) argues, in the service of what he calls the “fantasy of psychology” as a natural science embodied in an uncritical “reliance upon objectivity, technology, measurement, and progress” (169).

Christian psychologists to take more seriously the theoretical and clinical implications of a more holistic view of the human person. This has largely taken two different approaches that more or less break down along confessional lines.

Protestant and Evangelical scholars have worked to integrate psychology and Christian theology/spirituality. Noteworthy here are two organizations that I have been involved with for the last several years, the Christian Association for Psychological Studies (CAPS)⁵ and the Society for Christian Psychology (SCP).⁶ The former models itself on the American Psychological Association (APA). “Founded in 1956 by a small group of Christian mental health professionals, CAPS has ... more than 2000 members in the U.S., Canada and more than 25 other countries.”⁷ Fundamentally its mission is to further the “[u]nderstanding of the relationship between Christianity and the behavioral sciences at both the clinical/counseling and the theoretical/research levels.”⁸ While CAPS’ sister organization shares many of the same theoretical and practical concerns (and overlaps in membership), SCP is more explicit in encouraging an exploration, development and defense of the theoretical and clinical legitimacy of “a radically Christian vision and practice of psychology” that integrates the “rich treasure of insights, themes, and foundational assumptions” contained with “the history of Christian thought” and practice.⁹

For their part Catholic psychologists have pursued more sacramental lines of inquiry than did their Protestant colleagues though the work of both groups began and grew in American from mid-twentieth century onward.¹⁰ As a doctoral student in the late 80’s and early 90’s I had the opportunity to study with one of these pioneers, the priest-psychologist Adrian van Kaam. It is thanks to his work that my initial infa-

⁵Christian Association of Psychological Studies (CAPS) <http://caps.net/>.

⁶Society for Christian Psychology (SCP) <http://www.christianpsych.org/>.

⁷“CAPS Distinctives,” <http://caps.net/about-us/caps-distinctives>.

⁸ See “Who We Are,” <http://caps.net/who-we-are>.

⁹ SCP, <http://www.christianpsych.org/>.

¹⁰ See C. Kevin Gillespie, S.J., *Psychology and American Catholicism: From Confession to Therapy?* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001).