Psychology and Catholicism

An Evolving Relationship

Len Sperry M.D., Ph.D.

The recent promulgation of *Guidelines for the Use of Psychology in the Admission and Formation of Candidates for the Priesthood (Guidelines)* has evoked a predictable range of responses, from total support of psychology to abject distrust of it. Psychology's influence on Catholicism in general, and priestly formation in particular, has been controversial for a long time. Over the years the relationship of psychology and Catholicism has evolved, despite suspicion of psychology by some Vatican officials, seminary personnel, Catholic college and university faculty and students, and other lay persons.

I clearly recall my first experience with such distrust. It occurred during my first psychology course. The book used in most introductory courses at Catholic universities then was *Persons and Personalities: An Introduction to Psychology* by Annette Walters, Ph.D., and Kevin O'Hara, Ph.D., both psychologists and religious. In what was otherwise a standard treatment of the subject matter of scientific psychology, the authors interspersed statements and observations reflecting Catholic beliefs and values. For example, in the chapter on personal adjustment, psychological criteria for healthy adjustment were described. Added to those criteria was the beatific vision, described as the ultimate criteria of healthy adjustment. In the last chapters of the book on the future of psychology, the authors reflected on the distrust of psychology among Catholics: "In the past many students have avoided specializing in psychology because every major system of psychology had some objectionable features as viewed by Christians. . . . Catholic scholars have been prolific in their negative criticisms of psychology. Their research has been devoted chiefly to exposing errors in existing systems of thought." Fortunately, they were able to add: "But we note a new trend in Catholic circles today. . . . The time has come, we believe, when Catholic scholars must more and more take the initiative in developing positive views" (p. 641). Many scholars, clergy, religious, and lay persons have helped foster a positive view of psychology over the ensuing years, while others have fostered a negative and distrustful view. What accounts for this phenomenon of ongoing distrust of psychology?

Sister Annette Walters is quoted as saying an organization like ACPA was needed to alleviate the distrust of religious superiors toward psychology and pave the way for it to be "respectable for a religious to be a psychologist."

In order to better understand and appreciate this distrust of psychology in relationship to Catholicism, it is necessary to understand something about the objections themselves, and something about those who continually object and distrust. The first section of this article will describe psychological theories that are compatible or incompatible with Catholicism, particularly the past seventy years of psychology in America. The second section will reflect on the distrust of those who might be characterized as displaying psychological fundamentalism.

COMPATIBLE AND INCOMPATIBLE PSYCHOLOGIES

Distrust among Catholics about psychology often involves objections to a theory, approach or a specific construct that is perceived to be incompatible with the Catholic worldview. Compatible psychological theories and approaches typically include the following key constructs or premises: made in the image and likeness of God, spirit or soul, sin and grace, free will, moral behavior or actions, and a balance between communal and personal needs. Incompatible psychological theories and approaches are ones that exclude one or more of these constructs or premises, or include incompatible ones. Examples of such incompatible premises in psychology include: scientific naturalism (the belief that everything is material but has no spiritual or supernatural dimension), reductionism (explanations of all behavior, including spirituality, that are reduced to biological or biochemical bases), determinism (belief than behavior is caused by natural process and not the result of choice), evolution (conviction that humans evolved from simpler organism and are not created in God's image) and relativism (the assumption that there are no absolute standards of right or moral values to guide human behavior). To date, some would say that only one psychological theory has been fully compatible with Catholicism and that was neo-scholastic psychology (described below). In contrast there have been theories and approaches that are less compatible with a Catholic worldview, such as early behaviorism and behavior therapy, and classical psychoanalysis.

The American Catholic Psychological Association

Understanding the history and influence of the American Catholic Psychological Association (ACPA) is also useful in appreciating the wariness of distrust of Catholics toward psychology. During its existence, from its incorporation in 1948 to its de-incorporation in 1968, this professional organization left an indelible imprint on the face of American psychology, particularly in reducing Catholics' distrust of and suspicion toward psychology.

ACPA was founded during the time psychology underwent a transition from being a branch of philosophy—specifically moral philosophy—to becoming a natural science. For psychology to become a science, it had to formally and decisively divorce itself from philosophy. To accomplish this, psychology had to stop equating personality (in its scientific sense) with character (in its moral sense) and relinquish its claim to being value-based. Accordingly, psychology became a value-free science that studied personality empirically in the 1940s and 1950s.

William Bier, S.J., a pioneer in clinical psychology, the psychology of religion, and the psychological assessment of seminarians, founded ACPA. At one of its first meetings, Sister Annette Walters is quoted as saying an organization like ACPA was needed to alleviate the distrust of religious superiors toward psychology and pave the way for it to be "respectable for a religious to be a psychologist." The organization began with 220 members and at its peak in 1965 had 840 members. ACPA was formed to accomplish two objectives. The first was to increase participation of Catholics in scientific psychology. Achieving this objective required the expansion of undergraduate and graduate psychology programs in Catholic colleges and universities. Equally important was the development and advocacy of psychological assessment in seminary and religious

life. In 1954 there were 195 Catholic colleges and universities, but only 31% had psychology majors while 78% offered coursework in experimental psychology, a good indicator that psychology was considered a science at that institution. In the mid-1960s all Catholic universities and colleges had developed psychology majors and adopted a scientific focus. Achievement of this first objective was ACPA's legacy.

The second objective of ACPA was to bring the Catholic perspective to bear on the emerging field of scientific psychology. For Bier and others, this meant that neo-scholastic psychology had to become dissociated with the emerging Catholic view of scientific psychology. Accordingly, ACPA leadership actively endeavored to "lead Catholics out of a neo-scholastic ghetto into natural scientific psychology." In other words, the goal was assimilation of Catholic psychology into the mainstream of American psychology. This was to be accomplished by distancing itself from neo-scholastic psychology, by having ACPA members present research papers at annual meetings of the American Psychological Association (APA), by advocating for ACPA to become a formal division of APA, and by outlining a scientific theory of psychology compatible with the Catholic worldview. This second objective was partially achieved, except for the scientific theory.

In 1968, ACPA concluded that its objectives had been achieved and that it could now reconfigure itself into an organization that was open to other denominations and other world religions. Accordingly, in 1970 ACPA become known as Psychologists Interested in Religious Issues, which then became the Division of Psychology and Religion of the American Psychological Association in 1975. In hindsight, it may have been somewhat grandiose to expect that any organization could actually develop a scientific theory compatible with the Catholic perspective in just twenty years. This dream has never really died as some Catholic psychologists continue to develop such a theory, primarily by reformulating neo-scholastic psychology.

Neo-scholastic Psychology

Neo-scholastic psychology was derived from neo-scholasticism which was the dominant philosophical basis of Catholicism from 1860 to 1960. Neo-scholastic psychology would become the intellectual substrata for psychology from the Catholic perspective. In 1879 Pope Leo XIII issued the encyclical *Aeternis Patris* that introduced neo-scholasticism and neo-scholastic psychology into seminaries and Catholic universities. Archbishop Désiré-Joseph Mercier, who would soon become a cardinal, was appointed to spearhead this development. Mercier insisted that psychology was no longer a branch of philosophy but was now a science, the science of the soul. It was expected that neo-scholasticism would infuse both experimental and clinical psychology. It is noteworthy that William Wundt opened the first psychology laboratory in Germany that year, after which William James established a similar laboratory at Harvard University.

Presumably, the pope's hope was that the Catholic worldview would emanate from this new focus on neo-scholastic psychology. However, the view that psychology was the science of the soul was poorly received by many non-Catholics, and subsequently by an increasing number of Catholics. Efforts to make the soul the basis for empirical research failed. In fact, ACPA as an organization did not support the introduction of neo-scholastic psychology in newly formed psychology programs at Catholic colleges and universities.

Because ACPA members and other humanistically oriented and spiritually oriented psychologists were sensitive to self-actualization and the spiritual domain, there was support for a broadened view of psychology. Accordingly, in the late 1950s though the 1970s, there was considerable support for humanistic psychology, existentialism, and, later, transpersonal psychology and positive psychology. Instead of using religious constructs like soul, these approaches emphasized constructs like self, person, existence. This strategy seemed to work and as a result neo-scholastic psychology slowly faded

The second objective of ACPA was to bring the Catholic perspective to bear on the emerging field of scientific psychology.

and disappeared around 1960. About the same time, neo-scholasticism ceased to be the official philosophy of Catholicism. These developments were greeted with hopefulness by some Catholics and wariness and distrust by others.

PSYCHOLOGICAL FUNDAMENTALISM

The term *fundamentalism* is typically associated with religious fundamentalism which can be defined as strict adherence to basic religious doctrines and principles. Religious fundamentalists tend to be intolerant of other views and oppose secularism. By contrast, psychological fundamentalism does not involve religious doctrines and instead reflects an individual's basic pattern of thinking and evaluating life. Underlying this type of fundamentalism is the assumption that there is only one view of reality and only one way to understand experience. Individuals with such fundamentalist beliefs typically reinforce their way of thinking and evaluating by seeking support and confirmation from those who share the same or similar beliefs, and avoid any information that would contradict their beliefs. Psychological fundamentalism is characterized by thinking in black/white and either/or terms. Basic to either/or thinking is that there can only be this position or that position, since there can be no middle or midway position. This type of fundamentalism also includes feelings of self-righteousness and defensiveness, and it is often accompanied by behavioral responses that are judgmental, domineering, or contemptuous.

Psychological fundamentalism can be an ongoing pattern or a transitory one. That means that some individuals consistently function in this psychological fundamentalism fashion, while others transiently experience it in situations that are highly reactive, stressful or fear producing. The basis for the reactivity and fear may not always be clear in the moment, but what is clear is that quickly taking a position "solves" the problem or concern and reduces fear and distress. When individuals are in this transient state, effective communication seldom occurs.

Basically, religious fundamentalism involves specific religious *content*, while psychological fundamentalism primarily involves a *process*—a rigid way of perceiving, thinking, and evaluating—without content that is specifically religious. Accordingly, all religious fundamentalists are psychological fundamentalists, but not all psychological fundamentalists are religious fundamentalists. Obvious exceptions are atheists, agnostics and other so-called secular fundamentalists. Atheists who rail against religious fundamentalists may consider themselves objective and open-minded, however, staunch atheists and religious fundamentalists share one thing in common, they are both, at their roots, psychological fundamentalists.

The opposite of psychological fundamentalism is differentiation. Differentiation is a term used to describe a personality characteristic of people who are able to hold contradictory viewpoints while maintaining their own beliefs. For example, a person who has a very low level of differentiation may not be able to tolerate much, if any, disagreement. In contrast, a more highly differentiated person is able to see things from both sides, and may even agree with another's criticism, but can still maintain an allegiance to one's own beliefs. They engage in both/and thinking instead of either/or thinking.

A model of cognitive development can be helpful in understanding this phenomenon. Jean Piaget and others have described various stages of cognitive development and thinking styles: pre-operational, concrete operational, formal operational and post-formal operational thinking. Pre-operational is a way of thinking that is ego-centric and emotionally focused. Concrete operational is a way of thinking that is rigid and category-based, e.g., either/or and black/white categories. The statement: "This psychological theory is either compatible with my faith or it is not compatible" is an example of either/or thinking. Similarly, the statement: "If this psychological theory even hints of secularism, it is not to be trusted" is an example of black/white categorical thinking.

Formal operational or logical thinking is a way of thinking that involves the capacity to use inductive and deductive reasoning and abstraction to make decisions and solve problems based on logic. Post-formal operational thinking is the highest level of cognitive development. Also called post-formal thinking, it is more complex than logical thinking and involves making decisions based on situational constraints and circumstances, and integrating emotion with logic. It relies on subjective experience and intuition as well as logic, and is useful in dealing with nuances, ambiguity, contradiction, and compromise (Commons and Richards, 2003).

It is not uncommon for individuals with a limited capacity for post-formal thinking to experience more difficulty with emotionally-charged situations than those with a greater capacity for it. Discussions involving emotional issues often reveal differing responses which reflect the capacity for post-formal thinking. Those with little capacity for it tend to believe that there are absolutely clear right and wrong ways for dealing with complex situations, while those with much more capacity for it are more capable of nuance and dealing with ambiguity. Estimates are that 2% of adults routinely function at post-formal operations, 20% at formal operations, with the remainder at concrete operations or pre-operations. However, it has been observed that individuals can regress back to a prior level of thinking when sufficiently stressed. That means that those who function as concrete, categorical thinkers can become more pre-operational and emotionally focused in their thinking.

It is interesting to note that many believe—insistently—that the church has roundly condemned psychology, or at least a particular psychological approach. The fact is that there has been no such condemnation. Although the Vatican, and even a pope, has expressed misgivings about certain tenets of psychoanalysis, the church has not condemned it. It is noteworthy that in his foreword to the book, *Psychoanalysis and Catholicism*, Cardinal Suenens concludes: "Contrary to the

widely held opinion amidst the Catholic Church as well as by others, the church hierarchy never condemned Freud or psychoanalysis." He quotes Pius XII, who, while disapproving of the element of pan-sexualism (belief that all behavior is motivated by the sexual drive) in psychoanalysis, also declared that any psychoanalytic approach which he described as the "psychology of the depths must not be condemned if it discovers the contents of religious psychism and strives to analyze and to reduce it to a scientific system, even if this research is new and even if its terminology cannot be found in the past" (Discourse at the Congress of Psychotherapy and Clinical Psychology, 1953). Despite the church's statements to the contrary, what explains why some continue to believe that psychoanalysis was condemned? Such a belief reflects either/or, categorical thinking that does not comprehend nor appreciate subtle and nuanced distinctions.

More recently, Vatican II recognized the value of scientific psychology. *The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)* states: "In pastoral care sufficient use should be made, not only of theological principles, but also of secular scientific discoveries, especially psychology and sociology: in this way the faithful will be brought to a purer and more mature living of the faith" (no. 62). That this Vatican II document concludes that psychology can foster psychological and spiritual maturity is a clear and ringing endorsement of psychology.

More specifically, the *Guidelines*—approved by Pope Benedict XVI—also affirm the value and need for psychology in both the admission and formation process of seminarians. In fact, Section III, the longest section of the document, is entitled: "Contributions of Psychology to Vocational Discernment and Formation."

CONCLUSION

The relationship of psychology and Catholicism has evolved over the past century such that psychology shifted from having a perceived peripheral role to a more central role in daily life. The distrust and wariness of psychology that reached its peak in the 1940s and early 1950s among the Catholic hierarchy, scholars, and laity was largely resolved thereafter. Papal pronouncements, Vatican II documents, and the recent *Guidelines* have essentially affirmed psychology's role in fostering psychological and spiritual maturity in both laity and priests, even though some psychological theories and approaches may not be fully compatible with the Catholic worldview. Such incompatibilities usually involve elements of humanistic psychologies which emphasize self-fulfillment and foster individualism and a narcissistic-focused spirituality.

It is reasonable and understandable for Catholics to be wary or distrustful of such specific incompatible elements. However, it is less reasonable to roundly dismiss and be distrustful of all or most elements of such theories and approaches on the grounds that they represent secular humanism, socialism, psychoanalysis or similar explanations common among psychological fundamentalists, whether they are religious or secular fundamentalists.

It is noteworthy that while the Church's stance—as depicted in papal statements and Vatican documents—toward psychology is generally quite positive, some continue to believe that the Church has roundly condemned psychology. Perhaps this reflects less differentiated thinking patterns, i.e., either/or and black/white thinking, than malice. The reality is that the Catholic Church has not roundly condemned any psychological approach in its totality, including classical psychoanalysis. Instead, the Vatican appears to have wisely offered differentiated and nuanced criticisms of specific approaches, while generally recognizing the value and utility of psychology. As the role of psychology in the church continues to evolve, perhaps the Vatican's stance can serve as a positive role model for those who are disposed to be fearful and distrustful of the science of psychology.

RECOMMENDED READING

Suenens, Cardinal J. L. Foreword in B. Wolman (ed.), *Psychoanalysis and Catholicism.* New York: Jason Aronson, 1995.

Commons, M. and F. Richards. "Four Post-formal Stages" in J. Demick and C. Andreoletti (eds.), *Handbook of Adult Development* (pp. 199–219). New York: Kluwer Academic/ Plenum, (2003).

"Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)." *The Basic Sixteen Documents of Vatican II: Constitutions, Decrees, Declaration.* (Austin Flannery, General Editor). Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Co., 1996.

Vatican Congregation for Catholic Education. *Guidelines for the Use of Psychology in the Admission and Formation of Candidates for the Priesthood.* 2008. http: www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc.

Walters, A. and K. O'Hara. *Persons and Personalities: An Introduction to Psychology.* New York: Appleton-Century-Croft, 1953.

Len Sperry, M.D., Ph.D., is Professor and Director of the Doctoral Program in Counseling at Florida Atlantic University and Clinical Professor of Psychiatry and Behavioral Medicine at the Medical College of Wisconsin.