

Catholic Presuppositions for a Christian Psychology: Preliminary Remarks¹

-by Paul C. Vitz

New York University, New York, New York

For some twenty-five or thirty years, many Christian psychologists have been seriously wrestling with the issue of integrating Christianity and psychology. Some of these psychologists think, of course, that these two disciplines cannot be integrated and that any such attempt will subvert the orthodoxy of Christianity.² There is much to be said for these concerns but I will not address them here. Instead, I will focus on problems raised by the rather large number of Christian psychologists who believe that the two fields can and should be integrated.

Before getting to this issue, however, it is useful to discuss a recent development commonly called “biblical counseling.” This technique is perhaps best exemplified by Jay Adams who uses only the scriptures and their associated wisdom to counsel people in interpersonal and emotional distress. His method is known as “nouthetic counseling.”³ Such counseling is not adequate for the seriously disturbed schizophrenic, manic depressive, or similar patient, but these disorders are generally viewed today as mostly medical rather than psychological problems. Biblical counseling represents a new school of psychology and type of counseling. As such it can be placed alongside the secular models but as an alternative to them.⁴

It is interesting that in recent years an Orthodox Jewish biblical approach to counseling has also emerged.⁵ This development implies that there can be as many biblical approaches to counseling as there are scriptures and interpretive theologies associated with them. In any case, these scripturally-based psychologies are not integrations of religion with secular principles; instead they are essentially religiously-based replacements for secular psychology. They can be seen as a recent development in the long line of scriptural counseling that goes back to the early years of Christianity.⁶

In contrast to biblical counseling are other Christian psychologists who believe that many principles of secular psychology—being forms of natural truth—can be integrated into a Christian psychology. Such theorists typically believe that the truths of psychology and of Christianity cannot be in conflict and thus are potentially combinable without harm to either discipline.⁷ I will not discuss this complex issue directly. Rather, I will address a topic that has been, so far as I know, neglected in the controversy over integration, namely the fact that the majority—perhaps all—of these attempts have been launched from an implicitly or explicitly Protestant understanding of Christianity. The writers have typically been seriously committed Protestants of what might be called an “evangelical”

character. Here, I will propose some basic Catholic presuppositions and issues relevant to the integration of psychology and Christianity. These presuppositions also cast light on the difficulties that Protestants have had in developing an adequate, integrated Christian psychology.

Issue 1: The Theological Problem

Perhaps the most important issue is that if one is going to integrate psychology and Christianity, one needs an explicit and broadly conceived theology. Probably most important is a theological anthropology—something that Catholic theologians have been actively working on in the last few decades. This line of inquiry includes an understanding of person, man and woman, sexuality, freedom, sin, guilt, and conscience. That is, one has to know what one is integrating *with* psychology. It is, of course, well-known that Protestant theologies differ from denomination to denomination, and that these differences are often far from trivial. The nature of grace and redemption have been hotly debated, as well as the nature and extent of human sinfulness or “depravity.” Perhaps the most systematic and extensive Protestant theology is that found in the Reformed tradition, but of course there are real differences among the Reformed, Lutheran, Baptist, and Methodist traditions. Even more important is that there is no equivalent to the Catholic Magisterium in Protestant denominations. Thus, it is often officially unclear what their theology is.

There is arguably a core “orthodox” Christian theology, common to all forms of Christianity—the kind of thing that C.S. Lewis called “mere Christianity.” But it is not obvious that this core is a living theological tradition, and I believe that there is a question as to whether this “mere Christianity” actually exists in a form separate from specific theological traditions. In addition “mere Christianity” is a limited theology that will have little to say about many issues, especially moral ones. In any case a serious problem for a Protestant integration of psychology and theology is that the multiplicity and often ambiguity of theological traditions makes integration particularly difficult, or restricted to a particular denomination or perhaps to an oversimplified “mere Christianity.”

By contrasting the multiplicity within Protestantism to Catholicism does not mean, of course, that orthodox Catholic theology is static or without its own internal controversies (such as that between the schools of Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar). Moreover, at least since Cardinal John Henry Newman, the concept of the historical development of Catholic theology has been known and widely accepted. Nevertheless, in spite of its dynamic aspect, Catholic theology has a breadth, consistency, and specificity—especially with regard to basic doctrines that makes it possible to know much more clearly than is the case with Protestant theology, exactly what is being integrated with psychology.

Issue 2: The Moral Problem

There is no doubt that all serious thinkers about psychology agree that psychology is intimately connected with many moral issues. One simply cannot intervene in a person's life—particularly in the context of interpersonal and emotional problems—without bringing in a moral context as well. As one large example, consider the problem of sexual ethics. It is a commonplace that many psychological problems involve sexual values and sexual behavior. And dealing with them of necessity, involves a moral stance by the psychotherapist, as well as by the theoretical psychologist. Most secular psychologists tend to let the patient determine the morality of the relevant sexual behaviors, but even here this stance is not reliable. For example, secular psychologists often advocate pre- and extra-marital sexual behavior as therapeutic responses to certain kinds of problems; other psychologists have a positive attitude toward masturbation and make this position explicit. Many have an equally positive attitude towards abortion, and of course today the official attitude of most psychologists toward homosexuality is also one of acceptance, often of a supportive kind. These are, of course, moral issues, and not part of any kind of scientific knowledge.

It is significant that all of these secular moral positions are also commonly advocated within the major Protestant denominations. The official acceptance by many Protestants of premarital sex, contraception, abortion, divorce, and homosexuality is well known. The acceptance of this “new” morality goes against their own tradition which for hundreds of years was essentially the same for all Christians. The major substantive problem from a Catholic position is that in making these changes many Protestants have accepted views which go against the message of Scripture and are also contrary to the nature of the human person. One should add that there is also increasing evidence to show that breaking the moral law with respect to these issues often leads to psychological harm which the Christian psychologist should seek to alleviate—for example, post-abortion trauma and the harm done to children by divorce.

The point is that without an agreed upon and broadly relevant and comprehensive basic moral framework, no integration of psychology and theology, of any real substance, seems possible. On all of the above moral issues, the Catholic position, in contrast, is officially clear and systematically articulated and defended. Of course, there are many Catholic dissidents who challenge these positions, but they have no official status, and like other such historical challenges, they have rarely led to any significant changes within Catholicism. In addition recent challenges have begun to recede as the strength of the orthodox support has become stronger and more articulate. In any case, although changes in Catholic moral positions are possible, in general these are rare, and if made, are made clearly and explicitly. The result is that Catholic moral theology has a specific and internally consistent quality that enables it to be integrated, at least potentially, into psychology. In con-

trast, the moral ambiguity and the moral disagreements found in so much of Protestantism make integration equally ambiguous or contradictory.

Issue 3: The Philosophical Problem

The Catholic theological tradition has long appreciated the importance of philosophy for its defense and support. Catholics have known since the early Patristic period that rational and philosophical support for the faith was both necessary and possible. As a result the Catholic tradition has always been able to defend itself at least in part in the language of philosophical and rational discourse—a language much more open to the non-Christian than is pure theology with its *a priori* acceptance of Christian beliefs. One major aspect of this is Catholic humanism with its openness to all that is genuinely human.

There have, of course, been different philosophical contributions to Catholic theology. For example, there are both Platonic and Aristotelian traditions in Catholic theology, which have fed Augustinian and Thomistic strains. In my own judgement, it is simply not possible to develop an integration of psychology and theology in the absence of significant philosophical support.

In principle philosophical support could be brought in by Protestant integrationists, but this seems unlikely, in part because the Evangelical movement tends to be quite unphilosophical and in part because much of the Reformation, from the beginning, represented a repudiation of the relevance of philosophy—of Athens—to an understanding of theology. Today, however, a Protestant might reply that recent developments within Evangelical intellectual circles have begun to show a serious appreciation of the relevance of philosophical reasoning as a support for theology. And, to the extent that this new appreciation represents a serious change, I would have to qualify the above argument accordingly.

Of course, it may not be possible to integrate any form of Christianity (including Catholicism) with psychology, perhaps this is because psychology is intrinsically a secular enterprise. Perhaps it is because psychology itself is too incoherent a discipline to be integrated with anything as systematic as Christian theology—Protestant or Catholic. But if it is possible, then I think that the above three factors make clear that it is within Catholicism that such an integration seems especially feasible.

Notes

1. I would like to thank the following for their useful comments on an earlier draft: John Crosby, Richard Gallagher, and William May.

2. M. Bobgan and D. Bobgan, *The Psychological Way, The Spiritual Way*, (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House, 1978), and *How to Counsel from*

Scripture (Chicago: Moody, 1985).

3. Jay E. Adams, *Competent to Counsel* (Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1970) and *The Christian Counselor's Handbook* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1973).

4. For a Christian critique of biblical counseling, see W.F. English, "An Integrationist's Critique and Challenge to the Bobgans' View of Counseling and Psychotherapy," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 18 (1990): 228-236.

5. M. Adahan, *Emett: a Step-by Step Guide to Emotional Maturity Established Through Torah* (Jerusalem: Feldheim, 1987).

6. T.C. Oden, *Pastoral Counsel* (New York: Crossroad, 1989).

7. For recent theoretical discussions of the integration issue, see S.M. Clinton, "A Critique of Integration Models," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 18 (1990): 13-20, and "The Foundational Integration Models," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 18(1990): 115-122; E.L. Worthington Jr., "A Blueprint for Interdisciplinary Integration," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 22 (1994): 79-86; J.A. Ingram, "Contemporary Issues and Christian Models of Integration: Into the Modern/Postmodern Age," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 23 (1995): 3-14.