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Is Psychology Seducing Christianity (Chapter 7 from Christians in the Crossfire)

Mark R. McMinn

George Fox University, mmcminn@georgefox.edu

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Is Psychology Seducing Christianity?

Mornings are bleak for Sharon. At the end of a restless night she'll lie in bed staring at the ceiling until her eyes blur, her mind filled with the dread of another day. Routine household chores have become monumental tasks and formerly appetizing foods have lost all appeal. The joy of her new son, now six-months old, has been overshadowed by self-doubt and sorrow that seems almost unbearable. Her sense of aloneness is not lessened by the presence of others. Guilt and self-condemnation are part of her daily routine. She thinks endlessly about her failures as a mother and as a Christian.¹

Sharon is suffering the classic symptoms of depression: sleep changes, loss of appetite, motivational deficits, inaccurate self-image, self-condemnation, and pervasive sadness. Her symptoms began shortly after she gave birth to her first child. Giving up her successful career to shape the life of a newborn seemed a small price to pay at the time. But now she wonders if she has anything to offer her son.

Counseling with her pastor has helped in recent months, but signs of progress have been overshadowed by ominous emotions that remain. Her pastor, concerned that Sharon has not improved more rapidly, recently recommended Sharon get professional help for her depression. With that suggestion, a new emotional dilemma was created for Sharon because she once read several fascinating books about psychology. According to the authors of these books, the mental health professions have seduced Christians and led millions away from scriptural teachings. Could it be that going to a professional psychologist would result in spiritual suicide? Is psychology humanistic, ineffective, and antibiblical as the critics claim?

The confusion that Sharon faces is commonly felt by Christians needing help. Christian criticism of psychology has generated a reverberating confusion about the clinical and scientific methods of psychology and created a fear that prevents many from seeking needed psychological help. Sharon needs critical thinking skills to make a good decision.

The critics of psychology, like the critics of positive thinking, are often respected and well meaning authors whose arguments must be considered carefully. But their writings sometimes omit perspectives that would foster a more balanced understanding of psychotherapy. Sharon's struggle, and that of many Christians in her situation, requires a critical evaluation of some important questions.

Does Psychology Advocate Self-glorification? _____

For the past fifty years psychologists have been interested in the self. "Self" psychologists, such as Carl Jung, Alfred Adler, Erich Fromm, Abraham Maslow, Gordon Allport, and Carl Rogers, have written about self-esteem, self-image, self-realization, and self-actualization. In his book, *Psychological Seduction*, William Kirk Kilpatrick identifies this emphasis as antithetical to Christian thought. Kilpatrick suggests that psychologists see self as the ultimate reality in life, ignoring concern for others and humanitarian compassion, resulting in a striving to be like God and an unhealthy pursuit of happiness. If Sharon does seek help from a psychologist she might, according to Kilpatrick, be led away from a Christian lifestyle and be trained to look out only for her own needs, minimizing her concern for others. In his second book, *The Emperor's New Clothes: The Naked Truth About the New Psychology*, Kilpatrick continues this theme by implying self psychologists have been silent on social issues and uninterested in the welfare of others.

In a similar but more extreme manner, Dave Hunt and T. A. McMahon have criticized psychology's use of self-concept in *The Seduction of Christianity*. They argue psychology's emphasis on self-esteem is contrary to the humility of Moses that God chose to reward (Numbers 12:3) and signifies the coming of the end times.

The concerns of Kilpatrick, Hunt, and McMahon must be taken seriously. Book titles such as *Looking Out for Number One* and *Pulling Your Own Strings* suggest psychologists have sometimes emphasized self to the exclusion of concern for others. Although many such books are less self-centered than the titles imply, in some popular psychological writings self-image and self-glorification, or narcissism, have been confused. Unfortunately, it appears that they may have also been confused by the critics of psychology.

Mainstream psychology's position on self-image can be clarified with the analogy of a marksman shooting at a target. A marksman is more concerned with accuracy than with whether the shot is low or high. Concepts of low or high are only used to improve accuracy. Never would a marksman conclude "the higher the better." Likewise, psychologists have traditionally been interested in accuracy of self-concept. It may be important to observe whether self-image is low or high, but only for the sake of adjusting accuracy. Few psychologists have concluded "the higher the better."

Classical self psychologists made a distinction between accurate self-image and the excessive self-love of narcissism. Allport wrote that inherent narcissism could not be dominant in the psychologically mature individual. Fromm, Adler, Maslow, Allport, and Rogers all emphasized that an individual with a healthy self-image is rarely selfish. Kilpatrick's perspective that self psychology has obscured a concern for others may be true of some popular psychological writings, but it does not represent mainstream psychology.

In addition to Kilpatrick's mistaken conclusion about what mainstream psychology believes a healthy self-image to be, Hunt and McMahon are also in error. They have confused self-image with narcissism. They note that Paul warned Timothy that in the last days "People will be lovers of themselves" (2 Timothy 3:2), which means selfish. But there is little doubt that Paul himself had a healthy self-image. He wrote frequently of his accomplishments and encouraged his readers to imitate him. But Paul was not narcissistic, focusing on himself to the exclusion of a concern for others. Moses also appeared to develop an accurate self-image as evidenced by his style of leadership. While humility and narcissism are incompatible,

humility and a healthy self-image are not. Humility involves self-acceptance. The person who has never learned to accept him or herself ends up spending large amounts of time thinking about inadequacies or failures. This self-absorption is not healthy and could be avoided with self-acceptance. Humility requires an accurate self-image that, in turn, requires a humble awareness of personal limitations.

Does psychology advocate self-glorification? Perhaps in some popular psychological writings, but the classical notion of self has been misunderstood by the critics of psychology. Narcissism is not the goal of traditional psychological treatment, realism is. Seeking to develop accurate self-image is very different from teaching self-glorification.

The goal of Christian maturity is to focus our attentions more and more upon God's character. This is impossible for the narcissist. It is also impossible for Sharon because her attentions are directed toward herself in self-condemnation. Unless her self-image can be restructured, she will be unable to focus on God's character. The therapeutic goal is not necessarily to raise her self-image, but rather to help her understand her view of herself and to facilitate greater accuracy of self-perception.

Is Psychology Humanism?

Portions of psychology have been influenced significantly by humanistic philosophies, and this has led some Christian critics to conclude that psychology is dangerous. Some even label it a competing religion. Paul Vitz, in his book, *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self Worship*,² argues that the religion of psychology has become a secular humanism. Kilpatrick echoes this in his writings when he states that he was very nearly converted to the faith of humanistic psychology but escaped before it was too late. Similarly, the *Bible-Science Newsletter* of February 1986 contains articles equating traditional psychology with secular humanism. These critics believe psychology is humanistic and a clear and present danger to Christians.

Is humanism really the enemy? Because of the emphasis on concern for the less fortunate, humanism has been viewed by some as having been an integral part of Christianity since

the Renaissance. Humanists traditionally have been passionately involved in issues of social justice, concerns Christians share. Many other emphases of humanistic psychology are very similar to those of Christianity. For example, both emphasize social compassion for others in need, the merit of personal growth and responsibility, the value of suffering, the distinction between animal and human, and the importance of responsible decision making.

Being a Christian in a psychological era is often like walking a tightrope. If we lean too far to the left, we may become spiritually insensitive and begin to look to the human experience as the ultimate reality. Many of the leaders in psychology have done this. Sigmund Freud, Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers (at one time), Albert Ellis, and many others have professed publicly that God is a human invention with psychological implications. In so doing, the power of God is neglected. An atheistic humanism is the result of this neglect, and it has had an influence on psychological thought. But if we lean too far to the right, we may miss much of God's truth revealed in sources other than Scripture. If Sharon concludes psychology is antibiblical, she will not get help for her depression despite the availability of relatively quick, effective psychological treatments that have no implicit atheistic assumptions. It is hasty to assume that all psychology is misguided because some of the leaders have been misguided. Walking on the tightrope requires great balance and constant assessment of one's position. It requires critical thinking.

Are the Methods Used by Psychologists Spiritually Dangerous?

Looking for a psychologist can be likened to shopping for toothpaste. One is immediately overwhelmed by the plethora of brand labels: psychoanalysis, behaviorism, client-centered therapy, cognitive restructuring, transactional analysis, gestalt therapy, and so on. To ask if psychotherapy is spiritually dangerous is like asking if toothpaste is white: It depends on the brand. Add to this the complication that all psychotherapies are delivered by a person with his or her own distinct spiritual values, which will influence the treatment. The possible combinations of values and therapies are endless! It is fruitless to

attempt to decide whether all psychotherapy is spiritually dangerous. A better question for Sharon might be, Is this particular psychotherapy delivered by this therapist spiritually dangerous to me?

Regrettably, critics of psychology have often evaluated the spirituality of the discipline by investigating only a few of the available psychotherapies. In *The Psychological Way/The Spiritual Way*,³ Martin and Deidre Bobgan describe the danger of psychological methods of treatment. The Bobgans raise some important objections to prevailing psychotherapeutic techniques, but most of their critique involves identifying the fringes of psychology and then condemning all psychology. If Sharon had recently read their book, she might anticipate that a psychologist would almost certainly use methods such as scream therapy, encounter groups, est, arica, and transcendental meditation. Having completed doctoral programs in psychology at major secular universities, it is interesting that neither of us have studied any of these techniques. In fact, we're not sure how to pronounce one of them! These techniques are rarely used by psychologists and referring to them when criticizing psychology is the equivalent of referring to astrology to criticize astronomers or using the *National Enquirer* to criticize journalists.

The Bobgans respond to this criticism by noting that they also criticized mainstream psychotherapeutic techniques. Their response to the material in this chapter was printed as a letter to the editor in the June 17, 1988, issue of *Christianity Today*:

106 The writers of "The Mind Doctors" said of us that "Most of their critique centers on the fringes of psychology—with the fringes thus representing all psychology." Besides the therapies they list, we critique the following in our book *Psychological Way/The Spiritual Way*: psychoanalysts (Freud); client-centered therapy (Rogers); reality therapy (Glasser); and transactional analysis (Harris). According to a survey we did in cooperation with the Christian Association for Psychological Studies, these have been the most influential therapies in the practices of Christian therapists. Our books, including our recent *Psychoheresy*, are criticisms of mainline, not fringe, psychotherapy on the basis that it is not science, is not proven to be effective, and is known to harm. The use of psychotherapy and the

underlying psychologies in the church is not justified from either a scientific or biblical point of view. When used, it is always a slam at the sufficiency of the Word of God.

Their response is correct in a sense. They do attack mainstream psychotherapies in their book. But their examples often come from extreme examples of bizarre therapies rather than the mainstream therapies. We randomly picked three psychotherapy textbooks from our shelves. None had a single paragraph devoted to scream therapy, encounter groups, est, arica, or transcendental meditation, yet a major portion of the Bobgans' book is devoted to these fringe therapies.

Other students of psychology have had similar experiences and feel the objections to psychology are often exaggerated. One letter we received from a graduate student in England read:

I have been a Christian for eight years but until now have not had to work through anything very difficult. I have had quite negative responses from fellow Christians who are both ignorant about and afraid of psychology, and I feel rather at a loss over some of the issues.

Critics of psychology also tend to focus on relaxation and mental imagery, techniques used in some psychotherapies. Hunt and McMahon argue that since Eastern religions use imagery and positive thinking, all forms of these psychological tools are sorcery. Their arguments deserve to be considered carefully by Christian consumers of psychological services. However, an analysis of Hunt and McMahon's logic is also appropriate. They argue by association, concluding since A corresponds with B, and A is evil, then B is evil. Applying this line of thinking to other events shows some weakness in its logical structure. Since murderers drive cars and murder is evil, cars are evil. Since atheists read classical literature and atheism is evil, classical literature is evil. Since thieves wear gloves and stealing is wrong, gloves are wrong. Corresponding with A does not automatically make B evil. However, neither does it mean that B is not evil.

Arguing by association is falling prey to the correlation error. Of course it is exaggeration, but reasoning by association has been used to explain why fire engines are red: Fire

engines have eight firefighters and four wheels, eight and four is twelve, twelve inches is a foot, a foot is a ruler, Queen Elizabeth was a ruler, Queen Elizabeth was a ship, ships sail the seas, seas have fish, fish have fins, the Fins fought the Russians, Russians are red, so fire engines are red. Imagery and positive thinking techniques need to be carefully evaluated independent of their association with Eastern religions.

Asking the broad question, "Are psychotherapies spiritually dangerous?" will be of little value to Sharon since it fails to distinguish among the therapies. A more productive approach is to determine which psychotherapies are spiritually compatible with her beliefs and to discuss these perceptions with her pastor and her psychologist. After getting the pastor's and psychologist's perspectives on the technique to be used, additional information can be obtained by visiting the local library or perusing a general psychology textbook. Psychologists are bound by professional ethics to respect clients' wishes in terminating undesired techniques.

Is Psychotherapy Effective? _____

For many years, psychologists believed that the personal values of a professionally trained psychologist would not affect psychotherapy. We now realize this is unrealistic; the personal values of therapists may indeed have an effect on the outcome of some treatments. Sometimes we hear of unscrupulous therapists who advise clients to have an affair to spice up their lives. From these appalling anecdotes, some resort to hasty generalization and assume all psychology is ineffective or immoral.

Kilpatrick and the Bobgans have questioned the effectiveness of psychotherapy and both cite a fascinating study of the outcome of psychotherapy conducted and reported by Hans Eysenck in 1952. Eysenck found those receiving psychotherapy had improved less after the treatment period than a group of subjects receiving no psychotherapy. It is not surprising that Eysenck's study caused a commotion in psychology.

Kilpatrick and the Bobgans fail, however, to also report that Eysenck's data have subsequently been analyzed by psychologist Allen Bergin. Bergin reported that Eysenck's analysis was contaminated by using different standards of improvement

for the two groups of subjects. Also, Bergin objected to counting those who dropped out of treatment as treatment failures. From the same data that Eysenck concluded 39 percent improved with therapy, Bergin found 91 percent improved with therapy. It is a stunning discrepancy showing how both the practice and reporting of research can be guided by personal values and prior beliefs. Thirty-four years after the publication of Eysenck's report, we still conclude psychotherapy is not as effective as we would like, but numerous subsequent studies have been more hopeful. A 1980 review of 475 research studies on the results of psychotherapy suggests that psychotherapy is at least modestly effective.

Practicing psychologist Bernie Zilbergeld has correctly noted that counseling is not equally effective for all problems. But after the first few sessions, most experienced therapists will have a good estimate of potential treatment success. Of course, these estimates are hunches and cannot be considered completely accurate. In Sharon's case the possibilities are varied. If this is her first serious depression and if there are no physiological causes, she would be expected to improve rapidly with some forms of cognitive therapy. A recent study showed that fifteen of nineteen depressed clients recovered completely within twelve weeks after beginning cognitive psychotherapy. If, however, Sharon has been seriously depressed before or if there appears to be physiological imbalances, treatment might involve medication in conjunction with psychotherapy and could be prolonged.

As research has accumulated, it has become clear that there is little value in asking if psychotherapy works. Using the previous illustration, this is much like asking if toothpaste works. It depends on the brand and how it is applied. The more relevant question should be, "Is there a particular psychotherapy that will be effective for this client with this therapist?"

Can Psychology Tell Us Anything the Bible Can't? _____

In an article on Christian psychology, Jimmy Swaggart argues that the Bible is the only casebook for the cure of souls, and that psychology has its roots in atheism, evolution, and humanism.⁴ Most Christian critics of psychology, like

Swaggart, take the position that theology is to be given authority over psychology, that psychology must be filtered through Scripture, and information inconsistent with Scripture must be rejected. Although there is an appealing simplicity in this approach, there are also several problems that limit its usefulness.

First, using the Bible to filter an academic discipline presumes that the Bible has something to say about all the questions asked in that particular discipline. This was the assumption that caused the church to discredit Galileo's belief in a sun-centered solar system, ranking special revelation above general revelation. As discussed in Chapter 2, all truth is God's truth but not all truth is in the Bible. There are ways of learning about God and His creation in addition to studying Scripture.

Few Christians would apply a scriptural filter to chemists, physicists, physiologists, or astronomers. Some justify this special treatment of psychology by stating that there are numerous inconsistencies between psychology and Christianity. But spending a few minutes leafing through a general psychology text will quickly dispel this idea. Conflicts with Scripture do not occur when discussing neuron function, brain hemisphere differences, sensory processes, psychophysics, perceptual development, memory systems, language development, problem solving, creativity, classical conditioning, and so on. The existing conflicts are limited to a narrow range of issues.

110 Second, Christians who want to check psychological findings against Scripture are creating a one-way street that is not healthy for either discipline. Giving theology authority over psychology, or any other science, prevents reciprocal feedback and integration that may benefit both disciplines. Using Scripture to filter astronomy led the church in 1615 to reject the unorthodox theory that the earth revolves around the sun and endorse the supposed scriptural position of an earth-centered universe.

In like manner, some critics argue for theological orthodoxy and dogma in opposition to psychological concepts. Kilpatrick and philosopher Robert Roberts authored *Christianity Today* articles examining the psychology of Carl

Rogers. Kilpatrick refers to Rogers' ideas as "radical," asserting that they "...run strongly counter to the orthodoxies and dogmas of the major Western religions." Likewise, Roberts writes, "Rogers is an optimist about human nature but a pessimist about culture, systems of morality, dogmas, and traditions. In this he is just the opposite of Christians..."⁵ Can we really equate Christianity with traditions, orthodoxies, and dogmas? Remember, the message of Christ was rejected by many because it wasn't orthodox. Consistency with established belief does not necessarily make something true. Automatically rejecting psychological concepts because they fail to fit existing church theologies is dangerous. Psychological concepts that oppose Christian tradition and dogma can be useful if they cause us to examine our faith more closely.

Finally, many Christians fail to integrate theology and psychology simply because they do not accept psychology as a science. Many critics of psychology continue to treat psychology as theology or philosophy. In the domain of science, theories come, compete with each other, are empirically tested, and go as the field edges toward truth. Psychology is best viewed as a set of proposed theories rather than a set of established facts. When it touches on truth, it touches on God's truth, because all truth is God's truth.

In dealing with Sharon's depression, the techniques used by a Christian psychologist may or may not involve the application of Scripture. But the methods used may reflect God's truth as discovered by human science.

A Valuable Controversy

111 One goal of Christian life is to know God and His creation better, and the debate about the place of psychology in Christianity can cause us to better understand God's creation of human emotion and how He intended us to help those in need. Unfortunately, the Christian in need of psychological help often hears only one side of the debate. Thinking Christians need to carefully evaluate evidence on *both* sides of the debate in order to make informed decisions. It would be inappropriate for us to dogmatically defend all psychology because our critics have raised some valid concerns about modern psychology. Equally inappropriate is the rejection of all psychology

because of incompatibilities between Christianity and a small part of the discipline. Only an openness on both sides and a frank exchange over all the issues will ultimately lead to a refined integration we can call Christian psychology.

There are some dangers intrinsic to psychological methods and practices, and Sharon would do well to maintain a healthy skepticism if she decides to seek psychotherapy. She might explore the psychologist's credentials, values, and treatment preferences prior to beginning any kind of therapy. Such an exploration is neither impolite nor unexpected. Critical thinkers ask questions.

If Sharon decides to seek professional counseling, there is potential for her to learn to view herself and her situation more accurately and, as a result, alleviate her depression. She might also be challenged in her faith as she confronts the dangers our critics have identified. Such challenges are part of natural Christian growth. In either case, under the care of a competent Christian psychologist, Sharon can benefit from the process, grow emotionally, and move ahead in her spiritual pilgrimage.