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Humanistic Psychology and Christian Thought: A Comparative Analysis

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The relationship between psychological humanism and Christian thought is explored and critically evaluated. Three tenets of humanistic psychology are considered from a Christian perspective. Areas of compatibility include emphases on human experience, social justice, personal responsibility, and dignity of humankind. Areas with less compatibility include different assumptions about supernaturalism, and a qualified view of the goodness of human nature from a Christian perspective.

Several decades ago traditional psychology, with its strong emphasis on science and objectivism, began to frustrate some of its students. Psychologists, disillusioned by the seeming lack of individuality in what should be a personalized science, began to emphasize humanistic perspectives. Humanistic psychology is often viewed with skepticism by Christians because of its nominal connection with atheistic humanism (see Hammes, 1975, for a discussion of atheistic humanism), and because of the shallow critiques of humanistic thought that have become widely available to Christian readers.

This is exemplified by well-meaning writers who dogmatically equate humanistic thought with religion and then view all of secular psychology as an attempt to displace theism.

And now in the 1980s, psychology has attained the status

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of a guru whose "scientific standards of behavior" are relieving consciences of obedience to God's moral laws. In this way, as well as through its introduction of sorcery as science, psychology is the major change agent in transforming society (Hunt & McMahon, 1986, p. 29).

Kilpatrick (1983) writes that he was nearly "converted to the faith of humanistic psychology" (p. 177) when describing the impact of Carl Rogers. Vitz (1977) titled his book, *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship*, and argues that the religion of psychology has become a secular humanism that focuses on self-worship.

The effect of such writings has been that humanism and Christian thought are often viewed as antithetical. Sociologist Tony Campolo was recently canceled from an evangelical program because his faith was perceived as prostituted to secularism, including secular humanism ("Cancellation of a Christian speaker," 1985; Moberg, 1986). A cartoon shows Campolo holding a white vial labeled "bible truth" in one hand and a black vial labeled "humanism" (beneath a skull and crossbone) in the other ("Cancellation of a Christian speaker," 1985).

While Christian and secular humanisms have received much attention in critiques of

psychology (Pearcey, 1986; Adeney, 1981-82; Kilpatrick, 1985) and in religious writings (cf. Aubrey, 1953-54; Greene, 1953-54), thoughtful evaluations of the *integration* of humanistic psychology and Christian thought are noticeably absent in the psychological literature. The perspectives presented here are designed to stimulate students, educators, and mental health professionals to consider humanistic psychology from a Christian perspective. An adequate analysis will involve an appreciation for areas of compatibility as well as recognition of the limits of compatibility.

Fundamental to humanism is the assumption that a person is a free agent, capable of choosing whatever line of conduct he or she wills. Bearing the complementary banners of freedom and responsibility, theorists such as Eric Fromm, Gordon Allport, Carl Rogers, and Abraham Maslow pioneered new ways of studying and understanding the human being.

The humanistic emphases on freedom and responsibility can be seen in three perspectives that are distinct from the traditional perspectives of nomothetic psychology. Following a brief historical overview, these "third force" perspectives, from both psychological and theological viewpoints, will be the focus of this analysis.

Historical Overview

The emergence of European humanistic thought can be traced to the early Greeks (Hergenhahn, 1986). Its tie to Greek culture resulted in pagan features such as the glorification of humankind (Graumann, 1981), but at the same time it has been an integral part of Christianity since the Renaissance because of the emphasis on concern for those less fortunate (Lundin, 1985). After the French revolution Johan Gottlieb Fichte emphasized that freedom is not given to humankind, but rather produced by humankind in recognizing the freedom of others (Eicher, 1982). The socialist humanism of Karl Marx represented an extreme emphasis on the experience of all humans. After World War II, a more pessimistic humanism emerged that incorporated the existential perspectives of Jean-Paul

Sartre (Marx & Hillux, 1979).

The development of humanistic philosophy has included ideas that are fundamentally incompatible with Christian thought. The anti-supernatural assumptions of many humanists is an example. Sartre (1956) suggested that there is no God and that there is no intrinsic meaning to existence. A related concern has been the extent to which humanistic thought exalts the human condition to a position of preeminence (LaHaye, 1980).

It is important to note, however, that while humanistic psychology has been influenced by its philosophical roots (Mos & Royce, 1981; Weckowicz, 1981), it is not merely a derivative of humanistic philosophy (Giorgi, 1981).¹ Graumann (1981) implies that the development of humanistic psychology has been quite distinct from European humanistic philosophy and that the two have had little impact on one another.

The modern historical movement toward humanistic psychology began as a reaction to Wilhelm Wundt's structuralism. Franz Brentano (1874/1973), a phenomenologist, wrote that experience cannot be reduced to its basic elements. Similarly, Edmund Husserl advocated reporting the conscious experience independent of a model or theory (Hergenhahn, 1986). In America, "William James argued against the mechanistic approach to psychology and urged a focus on consciousness and the whole individual" (Schultz, 1981, p. 381). Later, the gestalt psychologists emphasized that consciousness and experience are profitable for study. Indeed, Wertheimer (1978) suggested that gestalt psychology and humanistic psychology are so similar that there is no need for distinct labels. Neo-Freudian perspectives have also been important in the development of humanistic psychology (Burton, 1967).

¹ The term "humanistic psychology" is not easily defined due to its heterogeneous nature (Berlyne, 1981; Matson, 1981). Indeed, many of the terms and concepts that are used in the context of humanistic psychology are "so nebulous that they defy definition and verification" (Hergenhahn, 1986, p. 392). Thus, many of the terms in this article are difficult to define in precise ways and some amount of interpretation will be necessary in reading the article.

HUMANISTIC PSYCHOLOGY AND CHRISTIAN THOUGHT

Thus, it appears to be inaccurate to view the philosophy of humanism and humanistic psychology as synonymous. Rather, humanistic psychology appears to be an aggregate of the uniquely human aspects of a variety of psychological and philosophical perspectives. Graumann (1981) summarizes, "what psychologists with a sincere concern for practical humanity should work at and need is less a humanistic movement than a theoretically and conceptually restructured human psychology" (p. 16).

A Focus on the Human Experience

The Humanistic Psychological Perspective

Abraham Maslow, a proponent of humanistic psychology, suggested that psychologists should spend more time studying the uniqueness of persons to balance their preoccupation with nomotheticism (Maslow, 1954). This position, representative of humanistic thought, illustrates an idiographic and phenomenological stance placing emphasis on individual experience and freedom rather than on scientific laws.

Humanistic psychologists believe that traditional psychology lacks both a clear perspective of human autonomy and independence and support for the uniqueness of humanity (Severin, 1971). They believe psychologists should be increasingly interested in those problems relevant to day-to-day living (Giorgi, 1981). The American Association of Humanistic Psychology (AAHP) addressed this issue in its statement of aims. According to the Association, humanistic psychology includes:

- 1) A centering of attention on the experiencing *person* and thus a focus on experience as the primary phenomenon in the study of man.
- 2) An allegiance to meaningfulness in the selection of problems for study and of research procedures, and an opposition to a primary emphasis on objectivity at the expense of significance. (see Misiak & Sexton, 1973, p. 116)

This emphasis of humanistic psychology can also be found in Gordon Allport's (1955) development of the case-study approach to psychology. Allport (1942) placed emphasis

on studying an individual's private letters, documents, and diaries in gathering observable facts with which to interpret both pertinent past and present situations and predict future events.

Also supporting the de-emphasis of "sterile" scientific evaluation, as seen in traditional psychology, is Carl Rogers. Rogers has promoted client-centered therapy in which the therapist, through the use of empathy, enters into the phenomenological world of the client (Evans, 1975). This presents a sharp contrast to deterministic and nomothetic models where the individual's world is perceived to be almost exclusively the result of universal laws of biology and/or past learning.

Integration: Christianity's Emphasis on Humanity

From a theological perspective, there is a similar emphasis on human experience. As Vergote (1982) has stated, "it has never been the intention of Christianity to deny the human" (p. 16). Yet, the most fundamental of Christian beliefs have been used to place the inhuman above the human.

In majority opinion the cross is not only considered as inhuman; it is also accused of justifying the inhuman, of blessing suffering, being an obstacle on the road to human freedom, encouraging unhealthy asceticism and crushing all joy in living. (Duquoc, 1982, pp. 65-73)

Another look at the crucifixion suggests that Christ's death was in response to respect for the human condition and liberation of the weak (Duquoc, 1982). Indeed, humanity was honored by a sign of divine glory in the incarnation of Jesus Christ (Vergote, 1982), and his death manifested the most positive of human characteristics. He valued humanity highly enough to be exploited rather than exercising dominance over creation (Duquoc, 1982).

Yet a thorough evaluation of the emphasis on human experience involves a caution of the exclusive emphasis on humanity. While God can be truly God without excluding humanity (Eicher, 1982), he is not fundamentally humanistic. Eicher (1982) writes, "The gospel of the Old and New Testaments recognizes

neither a humanism nor a theism: the contrast between these two is something quite unknown to it" (p. 7). That is, God is existence-centered, having fully created the reality of the spiritual and the reality of humanity. Thus, a Christian humanistic position emphasizes that a full understanding of humanity can only be known through a personal understanding of theism, through Jesus Christ (Franklin, 1984). In this way, Christianity can be considered humanism with foundational truth, but is inconsistent with the anti-supernatural assumptions of some humanistic writers.

An Aim of Self-Realization

The Humanistic Psychological Perspective

Traditional psychology, in the eyes of many early humanistic psychologists, lacked an emphasis on the importance of human goals and values (Severin, 1971). In response, the AAHP stated that humanistic psychology should include, "an emphasis on such distinctively human qualities as choice, creativity, valuation, and self-realization . . ." (see Misiak & Sexton, 1973, p. 116). This AAHP aim suggests a proactive orientation, stressing both personal responsibility and growth. Humanistic psychology has been defined as a "system of psychology that focuses not only on what a person is, but also on what a person has the potential to become" (Feshbach & Weiner, 1982, p. 514).

Consistent with this emphasis, humanistic psychologists have stressed proactivity in their writings. Maslow (1954) wrote that "human beings seem to be far more autonomous and self-governed than modern psychology theory makes allowance for" (p. 326). Allport suggested that having a unifying purpose for life gives a framework and reference point upon which maturity is based. A mark of personal maturity, according to Allport (1961), is setting and striving to reach goals (proprium striving). Clearly, Allport emphasized human potential rather than human limitations. Similarly, Carl Rogers (1961) described the fully-functioning person as one who can cope with vicissitudes of life while maintaining self-direction, autonomy and

independence, and a true acceptance of others.

Integration: Self-Realization through Compassion and Suffering

It is interesting to note that the religious quest for transcendence, through salvation, has similar goals to the non-religious quest for transcendence through self-realization (Schillebeeckx, 1982). This may not be readily apparent because of the tendency to misinterpret self-realization in humanistic thought.

There may be a tendency to misinterpret "self-realization" as involving an egocentricity characterized by an overemphasis of one's rights or self-fulfillment. This is evidenced in many religious groups by the frequent equating of current psychology with the popularized phrase, "look out for number one." But the concept of "self" in humanistic psychological writings does not imply a preoccupation with selfish goals as has been suggested by some critics (cf. Pearcey, 1986; Kilpatrick, 1985). Rather, "self" refers to the capacity of the being for integrating and coordinating person-ality with the demands of life (cf. Rogers, 1959). Many humanistic psychologists including Adler (1964), Allport (1961), Fromm (1956), Maslow (1970), and Rogers (1959) have emphasized that self-realization involves reaching beyond oneself and becoming invested in the concerns of others. Indeed, the self-realized person is antithetical to the selfish person. Allport (1955) concluded that inherent narcissism is not dominant in the mature individual. "Humanists . . . are passionately humanitarian in their concern for the good life and for social justice" (Cunningham, 1984, p. 277). Even personal suffering can be consistent with the process of transcendence (see Frankl, 1962). Comblin (1982) has described a humanism of tomorrow that emphasizes pursuing the welfare of the poor and oppressed.

Similarly, God's interest in the human experience seems to focus largely on the rejected (Comblin, 1982; Schillebeeckx, 1982), and there is biblical support for the notion of growth through suffering (cf. Gospel of Mark, I Peter, Hebrews). For example, Jesus spoke of comfort for the poor, the

hungry, and those who mourn (Matthew 5:3-12). As Greinacher (1982) has suggested, the emphasis on justice and human rights is essential to the credibility of the church. This perspective on humanity is quite consistent with the social interest described by many humanistic psychologists but is obviously inconsistent with the popularized notion of "looking out for number one." Some have suggested that the humanitarian morality of humanists can be viewed as paramount to the efforts of the many theists (see Hammes, 1971). For example, Gorsuch and Aleshire (1974) reported greater racial prejudice among those with traditional Christian beliefs than among those with less traditional beliefs. Similarly, among individuals with high religious salience (i.e., those to whom religion is very important) there exists a negative relationship between doctrinal orthodoxy and attitudes toward social activism (Bahr, Bartel, & Chadwick, 1971).

Integration: Proactivity in Self-Realization

There is much variation among different Christian perspectives on the role of human responsibility in personal growth. On one hand, many Christians believe that personal growth is only possible in direct response to God's specific leading. Luther suggested that all human struggles for freedom lead to enslavement and selfishness (Eicher, 1982). Greene (1953-54) has argued that the accepted Christian role is one of responsiveness and not exploration. This view of Christian responsibility appears to be incompatible with humanistic psychological assumptions. Fromm described this emphasis in religion as authoritarian because it produces submission rather than autonomy (Curtis, 1973; Fromm, 1950).

On the other hand, other Christian scholars have suggested that a more open acknowledgement of human responsibility is appropriate. Vergote (1982) describes a tendency to overemphasize supernaturalism by attributing, "to a perceptible divine initiative what is also an initiative of man" (p. 19). Indeed, Friesen and Maxson (1981) present a cogent biblical argument supporting the role of personal

responsibility and autonomy for decisions traditionally dependent upon God's "call." Friesen and Maxson's perspective argues for a proactive stance in decision making and personal responsibility that is very consistent with the emphasis in growth and transcendence seen in humanistic and existential psychological writings (see Strunk, 1965). Moreover, some writers in psychology have suggested that religious values can be of substantial benefit in personal growth. Allport (1950) viewed intrinsic religion as one of six major value-orientations that give meaning and purpose to life. Wilson and Amundson (1975) have grouped Christianity and humanistic psychology as distinct from behavioral and psychodynamic psychology in that the former postulate a proactive volitional component to change rather than viewing change as a reaction to environment or heredity.²

An Emphasis on Human Worth

The Humanistic Psychological Perspective

The Ethical Principles of Psychologists (1981) state that "psychologists respect the dignity and worth of the individual and strive for the preservation and protection of fundamental human rights" (p. 633). At the very heart of all humanism is its emphasis on the dignity and worth of human beings (Cunningham, 1984). A basic aim of the AAHP states that humanistic psychology has, "an ultimate concern with and valuing of the dignity and worth of man and an interest in the development of the potential inherent in every person" (see Misiak & Sexton, 1973, p. 116). This arose out of a perceived lack of sufficient emphasis on the unity and worth of the person in traditional psychology (Severin, 1971).

Carl Rogers (1961) perhaps has taken the most extreme position on the goodness of human nature. Not only does he propose that human motivations and tendencies are positive, he adds a dynamic component by suggesting that individuals will spontaneously get better and better if conditions of worth are removed.

²This may be an overstatement since many psychodynamic theorists conceptualize volition and proactivity as critical dynamics in personality.

Gordon Allport (1955), was not as positive about human nature but suggested that every individual has something unique to offer. Eric Fromm (1976) represented humans as fundamentally and basically good and noted that the failure to attain fullness is a capital sin. Maslow's (1971) self-actualizing person is one who recognizes the importance and worth of the individual.

Integration: A Balanced View of Human Nature

It is the positive view of human nature that many Christians find most objectionable about the humanistic position. The depravity of humankind is a theological position that is supported biblically (see I Peter 3:4; Matthew 15:17-20; Jeremiah 17:9; Ephesians 2:1-3; Romans 3:10-23). But a parallel biblical position (see McMinn & McMinn, 1983) is the dignity of humanity as created in the image of God (cf. Genesis 1:27; 5:1-2; 1 Corinthians 11:7; James 3:9). This apparent contradiction in the biblical presentation of the nature of humankind is partially relieved by considering the functional goodness of the human experience (Pramann, 1985). Accordingly, "Christians agree with humanists that human beings have an inviolable dignity and worth and are the central value within the natural process" (Cunningham, 1984, p. 281).

Because Christians recognize this intrinsic contradiction between the essential goodness and the fallenness of humankind, there is a system for understanding the drive toward evil as well as the potential for good. This understanding balances the classical humanistic notion that humankind is getting better and better, as represented by Rogers and others, with the realization of a human propensity toward sin and evil. Moreover, the hope for life beyond provides a fuller perspective of the ultimate balance between good and evil (Cunningham, 1984).

Summary

Frank Severin (1971) summarizes the AAHP's goals well by saying that humanistic psychology is not a new school of thought but rather

an *orientation* to psychology—a way of thinking about man and the whole scientific enterprise that modifies our image of human beings and frees psychology from several artificial restrictions placed upon it by theories that now appear outmoded. (p. 11)

Just as humanistic psychology provides a grid by which to measure and observe the human experience without the constraints of scientific rigor, so does Christianity. While these frameworks are distinct, they are perhaps not as incompatible as might be inferred while perusing the current Christian literature on humanism. The areas of compatibility suggested here have included the several comparisons.

Areas of Compatibility

First, both systems place importance on the centrality of the human experience. Humanistic psychology is phenomenological and idiographic. A central theme of Christianity is the response of Jesus Christ to humanity.

Second, both are concerned for social justice and the rights of the oppressed. Humanistic psychologists emphasize social interest as a product of self-realization. The teachings of Jesus were frequently related and directed to those with hardships and misfortunes, and social interest was a function of one's involvement in the body of Christ (cf. Matthew 25:35-40).

Third, the humanists' emphasis on proactivity and personal responsibility is compatible with selected Christian writings. A biblical argument has been constructed (Friesen & Maxson, 1981) that would support the role of personal responsibility in decision making.

Fourth, both humanists and Christians believe in the dignity of humankind. There are, however, some distinctions in the origin and the limitations to this belief.

Areas of Incompatibility

While there are areas of compatibility with psychological humanism and Christian thought, there also are areas of incompatibility. First, although God is concerned with the human condition, he is neither God-centered or human-centered, but existence centered.

Theistic humanists differ from secular humanists in that the former deny the exclusiveness of the human condition whereas many secular humanists are anti-supernatural (Cunningham, 1984).

Second, while many Christians endorse the importance of personal responsibility and proactivity in decision making, many prefer to emphasize the importance of waiting for a divine call. The latter perspective is incompatible with the humanistic psychological perspective while the former is compatible.

Third, the positive view of human nature is balanced with a view of the fallenness of humankind in Christian thought. This precludes the notion of progressive improvement, but is balanced by a belief in an ultimate good that will characterize an afterlife.

Conclusion

In 180 A.D., the philosopher Celsus wrote of Christians:

Their injunctions are like this. "Let no one educated, no one wise, no one sensible draw near. For these abilities are thought by us to be evils. But as for anyone ignorant, anyone stupid, anyone uneducated, anyone who is a child, let him come boldly." (Duquoc, 1982, p. 65)

Yet, at the same time as Christians have protested surrounding scholarship, such as the secular humanisms, they have developed theologies that are conformed to the very basis of the humanisms of the moment (Eicher, 1982). For example, our current Christian emphasis on self-esteem and worth as a result of having God's image is almost certainly a consequence of the human potential movement that spawned humanistic psychology. Conversely, ideas originally religious eventually enter the secular sphere (Schillebeeckx, 1982).

In the midst of the dynamic interplay between the secular and the religious, the humanistic and the theistic, it would seem that the most useful response is to search for truth in whatever form it may come. In Christian psychology, this search requires critical evaluation without wholesale rejection of humanistic psychological thought.

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