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The Theology of Norman Vincent Peale

By WILLIAM LEHMANN, JR.

NORMAN VINCENT PEALE is the teacher of a method which he calls the "Art of Living." This method has had great popular appeal, not only among the laity but also among the clergy. The purpose of this study is not to evaluate the method as such, but rather to consider the question which must be asked and answered before intelligent evaluation can take place: "What is Peale's theology?"

Perhaps the simplest, and at the same time, the clearest manner of examining Peale's theology is to select seven topics which are basic in Christian theology: the soul, God, eternity, sin, faith, Christ, and the Word of God. The order of these topics might be changed. Also the number of topics could be enlarged; but those selected provide an insight into Peale's theology sufficient to indicate that his methods are inadequate for the use of the Christian Church.¹

SOUL

Peale gives three separate descriptions of the soul, which are analogous to the descriptions given by three different philosophers: Aristotle, Philo, and Locke. (1) The soul is an existent being with potentialities which are realized to a degree in experience. This is Aristotelian. Peale says, "Nature endows us with only a nucleus, only the potentials. The soul becomes apparent only as it develops. We are continually building up or breaking down the self with which we are born."² (2) The soul is that which as an existent

¹ The reader will note that only a limited number of Peale's writings are cited. Most of the materials published by Peale are not directly related to the subject treated here or are repetitious of the citations indicated. This article was originally the major part of a paper presented to a pastoral conference. This may explain the relative paucity of direct references to Peale's writings. However, the writer has tried to present Peale's positions fairly as they appear in the books referred to.

² Blanton and Peale, *Faith Is the Answer* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1940), p. 98. Cited after this as *FIA*.

is innately good. This is Philonian. "One element in the adventure of self-discovery is to become aware of our innate goodness" (*FIA*, p. 54). (3) The soul is like a blank tablet (*tabula rasa*) at birth. Experience marks it. On the basis of the marks the soul responds to future experiences which in turn leave their marks. This is Lockean. Instead of experiences Peale talks of thoughts or ideas. Ideas are dynamic. They have attendant potencies. The unconscious portion of the mind stores these ideas with their potencies. If bad thoughts are entertained by the active intellect, evil potencies are activated. If good thoughts are entertained, good potencies are activated. (*Ibid.* pp. 57 f.)

How are these three descriptions to be reconciled with one another? Certainly we have cause to be suspicious that they cannot be related, since the three philosophers to whom Peale must give credit for originating the description have, each in his time, used his particular description to form an autonomous psychology which is not reconcilable with the other two. Several basic questions arise. For instance, if the soul is to be described as pure potency, on what basis is the soul good? Is it the potentiality which is good? If this is the case, is the actualizing of the potential evil? Why is the potentiality good? If it is not the potential nature which is good, what is there about the soul which justifies the assertion that it is good?

If the soul has certain potencies, how can we speak of it as blank? If we speak of it as blank, how can we speak of it as good? These are questions for which Peale offers no answer. At best we can only assume that when he speaks of the soul as potency, he is referring to certain hereditary powers and capabilities of the soul. When he speaks of innate goodness, he refers to the character of the soul. When he speaks of it as empty, he refers to its mental development. We shall have occasion to point out later certain serious problems which face Peale in other areas of his theology because of this doctrine. At this point it is obvious that Peale rejects the Christian doctrine of original sin.

GOD

Peale often speaks of God as a person. He speaks of praying to God, of seeking God's forgiveness, of the fatherhood of God. But

when he is pressed to identify God, he does it in terms of natural, vital, or creative forces, which fact indicates that the notion of a personal God is foreign to his basic thinking. Describing what he felt happened to a parishioner who was "converted" during a church service, Peale says: "What had happened to him was simply that he had made contact with a force so great that it permeated the controlling areas of the mind and made him over. This power, namely, God, created him in the first place, and that power is always present to keep recreating us if the contact is not broken, but is firmly maintained."³

Does Peale's theology require a personal God? No. Using the principle of Occam, one can eliminate the concept of a personal God from Peale's theology by attributing the qualities of his god to nature, as, for instance, Bergson does.

A theology requires a personal God if there is a necessary function for such a divinity to perform as an autonomous personality. Either there is a dialectical God-man function, as in Luther and the Lutheran tradition; or a co-operative function, as in Thomistic theology; or a deterministic function where God alone is free, as in Indian theology. But Peale's theology is none of these. God is for him like a running brook from which one can choose either to drink or not to drink. Whether one drinks or not, the brook continues to run. The brook neither causes nor compels him to drink. It is simply there with its thirst-quenching powers.

ETERNITY

In one of his books Peale expresses a thought which, apparently, he found in Plato or the Neoplatonic tradition: the basic problem of man is that he is living in a world for which he is not fitted. He is a citizen of eternity. The world is finite. Therefore he experiences "cosmic restlessness" (*FIA*, p. 144.) What it means to be a citizen of eternity Peale does not explain. But at any rate he introduces several problems by this Platonizing position.

1. Man, apparently, is the only part of creation which is not fitted for temporal experience. He has been created by God. Therefore it must be God's fault. Because of His unfortunate creation

³ Peale, *A Guide to Confident Living* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1948), p. 16. Abbr. GCL.

man sins. He can blame God, for God made him as he is. But God is good. Therefore God cannot be responsible for his sin.

2. If God is good and if He created man, God did not make a mistake in that creation. Therefore man cannot be created for a world in which he does not fit. He is mistaken if he thinks he is a misfit.

3. If God is good and if He created man, and man is living in a world for which he is not fitted, then there must be some purpose for his being unfit for temporal life. Then God must be a personal being, wisely determining the nature of His creation. If, then, as a result man suffers, it is good for man to suffer, and his suffering is according to God's purpose. Therefore any attempt to eliminate suffering is evil, because it frustrates God's purpose. Therefore Pealism is evil because Peale seeks to eliminate suffering. These are some of the contradictions into which Peale is forced.

Let us compare Peale's concept of the soul with his concept of temporality and eternity. Could such a soul as Peale pictures exist in experience as he has described it? If the soul is a nucleus with certain potentialities, certainly the potentialities are not going to be realized; or if at all, then only in a perverted and warped fashion. If the soul is a blank-tablet sort of thing, it would be contradictory to assert that it is fitted for eternal, not temporal, existence. For the concept of a blank tablet has traditionally been introduced—and Peale also introduces it for this purpose—to support the assertion that the soul is the product of experiences. Whether these are temporal or eternal is unimportant so far as the emergence of personality is concerned.

Peale says that in the world of nature a rhythm is discernible. He suggests that man's problem is to get in step with that rhythm. He also says that the existence of the souls of the dead differs from that of the living in that the dead are on another "frequency." He suggests that sometimes there are "flashovers" from the one existence to the other (*GCL*, p. 226). Once again there are problems and contradictions. If men are citizens of eternity, would they not vibrate on an eternal wave length rather than a temporal wave length? And if they have an eternal nucleus with eternal potentialities, would they not, even if defectively, vibrate on the eternal frequency whenever they vibrated? They would never be

aware of temporality. To use Peale's electronic example, if a radio is tuned to one signal, it does not pick up another signal. There are no flashovers.

To evade this problem and yet to support his frequency theory, Peale would have to appeal to God as a sort of matrix, creating experience, and would have to find somewhere, perhaps in the concept of the good, some sort of transference principle.

Peale seems to insist upon the eternal nature of the soul for two reasons: (1) he believes that all men are going to heaven after death,⁴ and (2) he wants to insist that all men are basically good. Eternity and goodness appear to be equated at times. Peale says nothing of the resurrection of the body.

SIN

"Sin is an infection of the mind which must be healed" (FIA, p. 105). This is Peale's definition. What kind of infection is it? It is a guilt feeling. Here psychiatric theory enters. Because of guilt feelings people do not act up to their full potential or create new ideas for their business (ibid., pp. 85, 131 passim). Therefore they are unsuccessful. In typical American fashion Peale equates successful living with amassing a fortune or becoming famous. It is understandable why he does this. His problems have to do with temporal life. And the value criteria appropriate to the problems are those which deal with living life to the fullest. Sin, then, is any condition induced in the individual which prevents him from getting the maximum enjoyment out of life.

Why there is a problem of good and evil in temporal existence, but not in eternal existence, Peale does not explain.

How is knowledge of the good attained? There are five sources, Peale says. (1) "In any society and under any conditions . . . some moral precepts are basic, growing not out of the ephemeral requirements of society but out of the immemorial experiences of mankind." This is Luther's *lex naturae*. (2) Man has a sense of moral discrimination. This is conscience. (3) Whatever is successful is right. (4) Wisdom. The right is the rational. This has traditionally been called *lex naturalis*. (5) The teachings of Jesus. These are the

⁴ FIA, p. 143. Blanton and Peale, *The Art of Real Happiness* (New York: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1950), pp. 207, 220 ff.

most explicit source. Jesus knew what He was discussing. He, more than any other man, had a grasp of good and evil. This source is not to be confused with what Christian theologians have identified as *lex divina*. (Ibid., pp. 102—109)

How is sin removed? The answer is: by faith.

FAITH

To be healed of the sickness of sin, man must be converted. Conversion is the surrender of the self to God, a wholehearted readiness to follow the will of God. Faith is trust, trust that God forgives. "You are bigger than your sin," Peale says, "no matter how big it may be or seem. God has forgiven you if you have sincerely besought him to do so. He sees you and your possibilities rather than the sin" (ibid., p. 120). Have faith!

Peale appears to equate the condition of sin with an inferiority complex. At times faith appears to be simply self-confidence. "The chief thing about us is not the wrong we have done, but the greatness in us which responds to the greatness in nature" (ibid., p. 119). What is meant by this greatness in nature Peale does not explain.

How is faith obtained? By thinking beautiful thoughts. Clear out the unhappy thoughts, Peale says, and substitute happy thoughts. (Peale does not explain the relation of the pleasant and the unpleasant to the good and the evil.) "Religion teaches us to allow only good and beautiful thoughts to enter the unconscious because of the obvious fact, often demonstrated, that the unconscious can only send back what was first sent down" (ibid., p. 57). What is the best source of beautiful thoughts? The Bible. Peale's therapy is to read the Bible, memorize the beautiful thoughts, and repeat them in time of need. Has Peale never read the Minor Prophets?

Peale approves of churchgoing. The atmosphere is superb for thinking beautiful thoughts. Soft music played with a big tremolo on an electric organ, choirs, stained-glass windows, the reverent hush, the soft whispering of the officiant over the public address system, all combine to bring peace to the heart. It is not necessary to listen to the sermon.⁵ (Faith is emotive without cognitive

⁵ *The Art of Living* (Garden City, N. Y.: Garden City Publ. Co., 1937), p. 4. Abbr. AL.

admixture.) The atmosphere is the important thing. And there is a bonus for attending church services. Some of the most outstanding business ideas have come to people while they were at a church service. An hour in church isn't wasted. It might mean money in the pocket.

We contact God best through silence, through meditation (*AL*, p. 7). No word of God is necessary, only reverence. There are few cognitive aspects to Peale's concept of faith. It is dealt with purely as a kind of feeling. Feeling bad is an indication of lack of faith. Feeling good, feeling relieved, is an indication of faith. This conception of faith, the heart of theology, renders ridiculous the pompous statement Peale often makes: "I believe in always being truly and completely scientific and rational in religious faith and practice" (*AL*, p. 11). If there is any power of the soul which is neither scientific nor rational, it is the emotions.

CHRIST

By now it must be obvious that Christ plays a very inferior role in Peale's theology. Christ is the great Teacher and the great Exemplar of the art of living. He had great faith in God, and His mind was completely open to divine energies (*FIA*, pp. 126 f.). He practiced the art of living, and His disciples copied it in the books of the New Testament. It is the goal of all Christians, Peale says, to be in Christ. This means: to live according to the highest idealism as taught by Christ. "A healthy mind is Christ's contribution to men. Faith in him eliminates that sense of guilt which interferes with a healthy mind." (*Ibid.*, pp. 100 f.)

Peale denies the deity of Christ. The concept of the vicarious atonement is meaningless and unnecessary. It is easy, therefore, for him to maintain that all religious men worship the same God and to insist that only sincerity, confidence, and trust are necessary for true religion. He makes no mention of the Holy Spirit.

WORD OF GOD

"Why does the Bible retain its hold on humanity after hundreds of years? The answer, of course, is that the Bible contains, more than any book ever written, the most astute insight into, and knowledge of, human beings" (*ibid.*, p. 53). Its ideas have curative power to heal the mind of sin.

Peale has a very interesting theory of how the Word of God heals. Sin infects certain areas of the mind. When the Word of God is read, the words make an impression on the retina of the eye. This impression sets up certain nerve impulses which carry a mental image to the brain. In the brain the mental images are converted to ideas, potent with creative, healing energy. These ideas circulate in the mind until they encounter infection centers. They surround these centers and wipe them out. The Bible, thus, works like penicillin.

This is the theology of a man who proposes to demonstrate scientifically a method which will achieve for anyone his most cherished desires, whatever they may be (*GCL*, p. viii). His books, he says, "contain a simple, workable technique of living which will lead to success and happiness" (*ibid.*, *Introd.*). It might be more accurate to say that they are a curious assemblage of Coue-ism, autohypnosis, superficial medical theory, naive psychiatry, literal biblicism (the torn-out-of-context variety), American materialism, Horatio Algerism, conventional middle-class morality, and Masonic natural theology. Peale's books exhibit an amazingly shallow understanding of the subjects treated. By no stretch of the imagination can his theology be called Christian.

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