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The Psychological Disciplines in Theological Education

By PAUL W. PRUYSER

EDITORIAL NOTE: This article was delivered by Dr. Paul W. Pruyser of the Menninger Foundation, Topeka, Kans., as one of the E. H. Bertermann Lectures on May 7, 1963.

MUCH has been written during the last decade about the relevance of certain aspects of psychology and psychiatry to the professional role and work of ministers. When one surveys the massive literature which has been produced in this area of concern one is impressed at first by its great topical variety, which ranges from theological critiques of psychological concepts and theories to pastoral counseling; from the psychological screening of candidates for the ministry to how pastors might deal with grief; from life situation preaching to techniques of supervision in clinical pastoral training courses. In addition some of the newer journals and magazines which devote themselves especially to providing psychological and psychiatric knowledge to practicing pastors have come out with special issues on such topics as divorce, mental retardation, sex education, family relations, marriage preparation, alcoholism, homosexuality, and similar problem areas.

Taking a closer look, one will be impressed by a good deal of stereotyping also. For easily understandable reasons of felt needs and expediency, the overwhelming interest has been on the pastoral aspects of the ministry, with a concomitant interest in borrowing from psychology and psychiatry certain useful techniques and ad hoc theories. Of the various forms of

knowledge and practice of psychiatry, enormous emphasis has been placed on psychotherapy, particularly the individual kind, although group therapy has not been overlooked.

To the best of my knowledge, little attempt has been made thus far to pull together the many strands I have just noted and to present broadly and systematically the spectrum of psychology, which I believe to be relevant to theological education during the years of seminary training. I shall make an effort to do so after a few preliminary remarks.

Psychology is a discipline with many subspecializations. It maintains complex relations with psychiatry, physiology, the biological sciences, sociology, and anthropology. I myself am a clinical psychologist working in a psychiatric institution devoted to treatment, professional training, and research in mental illness and health. This fact may color the views which I will express, and one of its first consequences is that I will use the terms "psychology," "the psychological disciplines," and "personality sciences" comprehensively to include psychology as well as psychiatry and psychoanalysis, their various subspecialties and borderlands. But I will exclude sociology, with the exception of the disputed realm of the social psychology of small groups which I shall count under psychology.

My excluding sociology from consideration is chiefly dictated by practicality and

by the fact that sociological knowledge and methods, in one form or another, have already been represented in the curricula of theological seminaries for a considerable time. It is also worth noting that the currently fashionable terms "behavioral science" and "social science" are often preempted by representatives of professions with a strong social and cultural orientation but with a bias against the study of individual psychodynamics. Since I am likely to give a prominent place to psychodynamics in the following presentation, I find herein another reason for leaving sociology outside my focal concern, although I am well aware of all kinds of linkages between the psychological, social, and behavioral disciplines.

A few preliminary remarks about theological education are also in order. My own involvement in theological education has only been part-time and consultatory. But I have had many formal and informal discussions with several seminary faculties, both collectively and individually, and I have had access to several professional reports on theological education, including the comprehensive Midcentury studies in three volumes by Niebuhr, Gustafson, and Williams. I wish to make clear that I, as a clinical psychologist, will not be involved in defining the role of the pastor. This is a unique function of seminary faculties themselves and of the churches which support them. But as a citizen and a psychologist I am of course cognizant of the changing definitions of the roles of pastors which are products of the changing cultural scene and I must take these new role expectations into account.

The various propositions I am about to make are stated at the level of educational

policies and goals. The translation of policy into the concrete details of curriculum, course hours, teaching techniques, and manpower distribution is of a different order and must wait until the faculties reach decisions about desirable goals and optimal scope. Similarly I will not attempt to rank and rate priorities for the various aspects of psychology.

The relations between one scientific discipline and another are usually quite complex and one's judgment about them is likely to be affected by the value systems inherent in an assumed hierarchy of sciences. I simply propose that we leave the question of who is handmaiden to whom to the Middle Ages. But in order to preserve the desired complexity of relations I envisage four ways in which the personality sciences might be relevant to theological education: 1. as basic science; 2. as applied science; 3. as participant in an interdisciplinary dialog; 4. as a form of knowledge and skill which might facilitate the personal and professional maturation processes of the future minister.

1. *The personality sciences as a basic science in theological education.*

What is emphasized under this heading is "understanding," "knowledge," "points of view," "conceptual framework," etc., rather than "skills" or "know-how." The personality sciences know something about man in general as well as about individuals, and I assume that part of this knowledge may be helpful to theology as a constructive enterprise as well as to the situations and problems which pastors face in their various roles. For theology is just as much a man-science as it is a God-science. All theology, systematic as well as pastoral, has

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an anthropological dimension. I shall single out a few basic special areas here:

a. The dynamics of crisis situations

Though the church deals with man as a whole at any moment of his life, there are nevertheless some "peaks" and "depths" in life which the church has always considered particularly challenging and critical. Such crisis situations as birth, death, illness, bereavement, marriage, vocational choice, disaster, war, conversion, entering into the church's membership, etc., present the individual with a specific problem or opportunity which tends to become highly individualized in terms of that individual's history and psychodynamics. The theological understanding and formulation of such crisis situations might be enriched by the findings of the personality sciences. For instance, the psychodynamics of decision making and problem solving seem relevant. What is traditionally called "abnormal psychology" would seem to have a logical place here. Insights into the manner in which personality functioning might be disturbed and some knowledge of psychiatric syndromes and their dynamics would seem to be helpful; the psychology of dying, hoping, longing, suffering, goal-setting, pride, self-esteem, and their subtle dynamics are known to play a role in producing or giving special meaning to crisis situations. The very concept of illness itself, particularly mental illness, is open to constant revision and is indeed so much in flux that a review of its specifications would seem much needed. Similarly for the concept of destiny, which needs further specification from the theological and the personality sciences angles. The understanding of aging processes and attitudes toward dying and death, upon which

psychiatry and psychology are just now launching a research attack, need specific attention. All these topics are not only important to the pastoral ministry but are relevant to the Biblical understanding of man, to doctrines of man, and to the relation between God and man. The prevailing moralistic distortions of the theological concept of sin exemplify how far the church can go awry when its understanding of man is inadequate.

b. Psychosexual relations and dynamics

Here I want to stress the "psycho" prefix. The churches have expressed much interest in sexological matters. So has psychology, but in the course of study it began to be felt that sexual drives and their derivatives cannot easily be dealt with as a compartmentalized area of life. The modern holistic approach in the personality sciences denotes a broadening of originally sexual interests to general theories of motivation and interpersonal relations. I think this knowledge and these formulations are important to anyone who wants to gain an understanding of persons.

c. Educational psychology and the psychology of learning

The latter is a highly formalized psychological enterprise, but the larger conceptions stemming from laboratory work paired with the traditional body of educational psychology remain relevant to all other psychological understanding of man. It is possible, and some would certainly prefer it, to combine items *b* and *c* into the larger conception of "developmental psychology." I think this is relevant to the body of divinity studies in various ways. The ideas of "growing," "maturing," "becoming"; the notion of life as a journey; the "kairos" concept; the idea of "stages

of life," and the whole role that age factors might play in the appropriation of faith and its successive formulations are all very inviting to interdisciplinary exchange. The whole proposition of Christian education and its aims might benefit from exposure to the insights which the personality sciences have accrued in this special field.

d. The psychology of religion

I think very highly of this special field as a possible basic science to various aspects of divinity studies. Borrowing the title of one of Tillich's books, I like to epitomize my views here by the phrase "Dynamics of Faith." Comparative studies on styles or typologies of faith; of the nature of conversion; of unbelief; of doubting; of the interplay between emotional, cognitive, and volitional processes in faith; and the psychological study of theological systems might well be discussed during theological education in order to deepen the student's understanding of faith, the church, and theology itself. I also think that this area in particular might have some very explicit relation to the field of philosophy of religion, if the curriculum includes this.

e) Social psychology

Since I am speaking of the personality sciences rather than the broader behavioral sciences, I am advertently leaving sociology out of the picture. Its relevance to theological education might be stipulated or specified by sociologists. The cultural anthropologists might do a similar job for their field. The social psychology which I have in mind might be called the psychology of man in small groups, or the psychology of group relations, or if one wishes, the psychology of interpersonal relations. Its relevance to theological education is obvious: The church *is* a group and

has groups; its members interact with each other in various ways; the seminary has many groups within itself. Preaching and teaching are group communications; membership in groups requires a stylized or sacramental "entering into . . ." or initiation process.

2. *The personality sciences as applied science, serving the functional roles of the pastor*

The emphasis is here not on understanding for its own sake, but in the service of "helping," and pastoral care in the broadest sense. There is a concomitant emphasis on skills and the way in which these might be used by the practicing pastor. But there is, of course, also a feedback from practice to theory, which in turn deepens or alters the understanding. In recent decades the fields of "pastoral work" or "pastoral theology" have seen the relevance of the insights and skills of the personality sciences and have already appropriated much formerly alien knowledge in this regard. A relatively new term such as "pastoral psychology," or even "pastoral psychiatry," pinpoints this relevance. I am not endorsing these new terms, but they do serve purposes of exposition. I see at this moment three distinct areas which have already found their representation in various seminaries:

a. Psychology of group relations

These are variously called "group dynamics" or "group therapy." Some people feel there is also a "group psychotherapy" which has to be distinguished from the other two areas. Many churches and their pastors have found some knowledge of group processes and some skill in the organizing and running of groups an important asset to their function. It is an important aspect of leadership develop-

ment, which is a perennial problem in all churches. Much of the modern pastor's work is with or in small groups; the vestry, boards, educational groups, etc. The pastor is also asked to participate in, or lead, groups outside his own church such as ministerial alliances, councils of churches and their departments, etc. It is helpful here to know how groups are formed and become solidified, how groups tackle problems or dodge them, how groups stall in action, how prejudices and personal feuds or misperceptions affect their efficiency, how groups foster or impede the individual's learning process.

b. Individual and group counseling

This is an area of enormous popularity among present-day pastors; it also ranks high on the list of many a pastor's preferences for certain roles or functions. This is also the area from which much feedback from practice to theory has led to interesting reflections. Many a pastor cherishes private, face-to-face contacts with parishioners, and deeply appreciates the atmosphere of intimacy in which he may relate himself to problem-laden persons. The pastor who is learning to preach must also learn to listen (which may well be more difficult); he must learn to relate himself to others directly and with sensitivity to the others' needs. And he must also learn not to become overinvolved! There is an immense literature on the subject, and many now unsolved problems are being articulated day by day. One need not declare oneself in favor of any particular school of thought in counseling (and schools there are!) to see the focal importance of skill in face-to-face contacts with problem-laden people as an important asset to the minister.

c. Clinical-pastoral training

Many pastors have found it helpful to have spent some time of their training or career in agencies designed for the care or treatment of special groups: the mentally ill, the mentally retarded, prisoners, people with physical illness or handicaps, the underprivileged, outcasts, underdogs, etc. Many of these agencies are themselves the products of the churches' own historical initiative. The special situations encountered in these agencies provide an opportunity for the minister to be close to certain "depths of life," in whatever sense. They provide a firsthand observation of, and involvement in, suffering. In many such situations the usual verbal armamentarium and even the use of sacraments may need careful alteration in order to have meaning. But whether one engages in clinical training for a special ministry (e.g., a chaplaincy in state hospitals) or for the sake of being a more effective (a better communicating) parish minister, one of the most important aspects of such training is that it brings the minister into close contact with other professional people in the helping professions. This has both practical and theoretical significance. It opens up ways for the minister to use all the resources of the community in which he works; he learns to decide what persons to accept and what persons to refer to others for help. He also acquires an understanding, *in vivo*, of gross and subtle forms of pathology, including possibly his own. It may help him become aware of his own strength and weakness, his special knowledge and skills, as well as his limitations. But he also has an opportunity to learn something about his nonpastoral colleagues in the helping professions: psy-

chiatrists, psychologists, social workers, lawyers, etc. He can learn about their perspectives, their strengths, their weaknesses, their shortcomings, their special views and skills, their theories, etc. I see this as providing an interesting form of learning, a perspectival learning—a learning by comparing, so to speak, which may in an oblique but powerful way help the minister in formulating his own aims, roles, functions, and loyalties through personal participation in a subtle team process.

3. *Interdisciplinary dialog between the personality sciences and the body of divinity studies*

The premise to this special heading is that it is intellectually worthwhile and perhaps morally incumbent upon the members of the various academic disciplines dealing with man to enter into dialog with each other. Very deep problems need an interdisciplinary approach. Methodologies are usually studied best by interdisciplinary comparison. Relations between sciences are multiple and subtle. Most scientists assume that there is a hierarchy of disciplines, but the place of each science in the hierarchy is highly controversial. Academic specialization often comes about by taking an interest in someone else's discipline from a different perspective; it often takes place via a "borderland science." But interest in another discipline is often defensive, or produced by noncognitive motivations, as in some special types of "Christian apologetics" or in some sort of "psychologism." A fruitful dialog is based on mutual receptivity, expert listening, and a willingness to be "cross-fertilized." Joyful, generous, and wholehearted edification is or should be the mark of any professional man. In this sense almost any discipline

might enter into dialog with almost any other discipline. But I think that a dialog between theology and the personality sciences has special merit.

The immense concern on the part of many professions with what are variously called "images of man" or "doctrines of man" (and one might add "theories," "models," etc., as well) is a case in point. We have partial images or sketches only and we are all eagerly waiting for a more comprehensive image. I think this can come about only by interdisciplinary effort. I also want to call attention to what is sometimes called *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*, i.e., the interdisciplinary study of ideologies, utopias, thought patterns, metaphysical systems, etc. I think that methodologies and their possible effect on the subject matter studied are also an area of special interdisciplinary concern. Finally, I need hardly say that philosophical, especially logical, studies of the premises, a prioris, and hidden assumptions of all disciplines are always in order.

4. *The role of the personality sciences in fostering the personal and professional maturation process of the future minister*

Vocational choices are deeply rooted in the personality structure and highly affected by social dynamics. The "call to the ministry," though presumably affected by a transcendent arrangement as well, is no exception. Each type of professional education has its special glory and hardship. Again, ministerial training is no exception. Problems of intellectual grasp, emotional affirmation, ethics and professional stance, and the many functional demands which the congregation and the world place on the minister, plus the minister's own con-

science and ideals and motivations—they are all potential hazards and hardships. If there is some truth in the popular belief that “ministers crack up” (many people in other professions do too!) this could warrant the validity of a search for all the special factors that play a role in experienced hardship. But even if the popular assumption is not true, the educational process will be better when the faculties have a clear knowledge of all the potential pitfalls, problems, threats, and challenges that come before the minister-to-be.

I would hold on common sense grounds that the appropriation of the theological curriculum demands much more than cognitive grasp; it demands emotional affirmation, convictions, and existential decisions which seem to go well beyond the adoption of analogous attitudes demanded in other disciplines. In all helping professions learning involves some degree of attitudinal change. Thus the students need more than courses and seminars, and most seminaries indeed give much more. Advice, counsel, and personal example given by the faculty are very important. To have a sensitive Dean of Students is very important. Yet it may be that more is needed, if not for most, then at least for a sizable portion of the students. Many students might need a more clearly therapeutic relation, even when by common standards their problem is not to be defined as “illness.” The practical answer to this problem area will be determined by many considerations, but I believe that a visiting psychiatrist or psychologist, working in cooperation with the Dean of Students, might be an important link in the chain.

At the end of this overview, which could

have been made with greater differentiation but which carried already in each of its sections a special rationale for doing what was recommended, one may with new vigor inquire about the basic reason for the relevance of the psychological disciplines to theological education. Why should seminaries engage in all these non-theological activities and subjects? Isn't there already enough to teach and to learn within the very limited time span of three years? Are not the proposed items sheer luxury, indulgence in liberal arts, or merely optional enrichments such as are available in some divinity schools which are part of a large university in which all the arts and sciences are represented?

My answer is an emphatic no. The psychological disciplines are not to be introduced into the seminaries as luxuries or as optional selections from the liberal arts. Without denying the importance of a liberal arts education anywhere and at all times, I believe that the psychological disciplines have a very special relevance to theologians and pastors because of their particular contents, methods, and skills. And I also believe that psychology is a discipline of enormous potency to anyone who deals with man at the level of depth and with the persistence of concern that has always been characteristic of theology. I even believe that it is in a unique position to vie with theology for supremacy in the hierarchy of sciences. It can be a powerful ally, a keen competitor, an invaluable critic, a bitter enemy, or a wise friend. In any case it is a neighbor with whom one should be well acquainted, even if one wants to maintain distance from him.

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