

Psychotherapy: Science or Religion? Some Implications for Today's Church¹

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to investigate the true nature of psychotherapy. In particular, an attempt will be made to answer the question: Is psychotherapy a science or a religion? It is a sad fact that today's church has to a large extent given up its call to minister to hurting people, because Christians believe the myth that psychotherapy is a science. The paper argues that psychotherapy, in fact, is not a science, but rather another religion and that today's church needs to return to the biblical counselling of the early church, which is far more effective than psychotherapy.

1. Statement of the problem

The contemporary climate of counselling is therapeutic, and not religious. People today do not hunger for a personal salvation, but for a sense of “feeling good”—that “momentary illusion of personal well-being, health and psychic security” (Lasch 1979:98). The cure of souls, which once was a vital ministry

¹ The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

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of the church, has today been displaced by a cure of minds called "psychotherapy".

For many, traditional religion no longer provides relevant answers for personal problems. More and more people are seeking answers from alternative sources and "in strange, new packages". Millions of people are turning to those parts of psychology, such as psychotherapy, which promise to meet their present need for a quick solution to difficult problems by means of "an effortless, painless ride into the Promised Land" (Cinnamon & Farson 1979, cover).

When educated man lost faith in formal religion, he searched for a substitute belief that would be as reliable in the last half of the twentieth century as Christianity was in the first. He found what he was looking for in psychology—including its various branches, such as psychotherapy and psychiatry—which has now assumed the role of a substitute belief (Gross 1978:9).

Referring to this change from the spiritual to the psychological and from religion to science, Szasz (1978:26) claims that psychotherapy is a modern, scientific-sounding name for what used to be known as the "cure of souls". One of the main reasons why Szasz wrote his book entitled, *The Myth of Psychotherapy* was as follows:

To show how, with the decline of religion and the growth of science in the eighteenth century, the cure of (sinful) soul, which had been an integral part of the Christian religion, was recast as the cure of (sick) minds, and became an integral part of medicine (Szasz 1978:xxiv).

The medicalisation of religion facilitated the rift between religion and psychiatry.

As soon as religious problems were medicalised (made into diseases), they became psychiatric problems. Problems of thought and behaviour—once considered to be the concern of pastors—were transformed into medical and, therefore, supposedly became scientific problems. "They then transferred from church to couch" (Bobgan & Bobgan 1987:20-21).

Within a few decades, the psychotherapy industry and evangelicals settled into a guarded coexistence. On the one hand, Christians seemed intimidated by the world's overwhelming acceptance of psychotherapy as a true science. On the other hand, the psychotherapists believed they were privy to a higher knowledge and more effective therapies than traditional spiritual counsellors could ever offer. They stated in no uncertain terms that spiritual counsellors and pastors should stay off their turf (MacArthur 2005).

The aim of this paper is to investigate the true nature of psychotherapy. In particular, an attempt will be made to answer the question:

- Is psychotherapy (including psychiatry) a science or a religion?

The following secondary issues will also be addressed:

- Is psychotherapy a substitute religion?
- Does psychotherapy infringe on the territory of religion?
- Are today's pastors competent to counsel or should they leave counselling to psychotherapists?

Is psychotherapy a science or a religion? Many critics, who have investigated the "scientific" nature of psychotherapy, have found that psychotherapy, in fact, appears to have more of a religious nature. Psychiatrist Thomas Szasz (1978:28) refers to psychotherapy as a religion when he says, "It is not merely a religion that pretends to be a science; it is actually a fake religion that seeks to destroy true religion." He further warns of "the implacable resolve of psychotherapy to rob religion of as much as it can, and to destroy what it cannot." Lasch (1979:13), the author of the book entitled *The Cult of Narcissism*, supports this view when he states: "Therapy constitutes an anti-religion."

Is psychotherapy a substitute religion? Lee (1980:3) refers to "psychoanalysis as a religion hidden beneath scientific verbiage" and "a substitute religion for both practitioner and patient". Does psychotherapy infringe on the territory of religion? Professor London (1964:160), in his book entitled *The Modes and Morals of Psychotherapy*, points out that psychotherapists constitute a priesthood. Psychiatrist Jerome Frank (1978:251) claims that the psychiatrist "cannot avoid infringing on the territory of religion".

Are today's pastors competent to counsel? It is a sad fact that today's church has to a large extent given up its call to minister to hurting people because Christians believe the myth that psychotherapy is a science. However, it could be argued that psychotherapy is not a science, but rather another religion and another gospel (Gal 1:6). The present problem in today's church can be summarised as follows:

The tragedy is that few in the church recognize that psychotherapy, though attiring itself in the garb of science, is as naked as the emperor in "The Emperor's New Clothes." And sadder yet is the admiration for this pseudo-argument (Bobgan & Bobgan 1987: 23).

2. A rationale for classifying psychotherapy as a religion rather than as a science

2.1 Psychotherapy belongs to the sphere of religion

Psychiatrist Jerome Frank (1979:404) argues that psychotherapy is not primarily an applied science. In his view, "in some ways it more resembles a religion". According to Von Weizsaecker (1957:72), CG Jung was the first to understand that psychoanalysis belonged to the sphere of religion.

In this regard, Jung himself conceded, "religions are systems of healing of psychic illnesses" (1933:240-241). He gave the following reasons for making this claim:

- That is why patients force the psychotherapist into the role of priest, and expect and demand of him that he shall free them from their distress.
- That is why we as therapists must occupy ourselves with problems, which, strictly speaking, belong to the theologian.

Another argument in favour for concluding that psychotherapy belongs to the sphere of religion is as follows: Psychology and psychotherapy deal with precisely the same areas of concern already dealt with in the Bible. Explanations of "why people behave the way they do and how they change"

have concerned philosophers, theologians, cultists and occultists throughout the ages. These explanations presently form the basis of modern psychology. Yet psychology deals with exactly the same areas of concern already dealt with in the Bible (*Psychology: Science or Religion?* 2005).

It is clear that all ideas about the why's of behaviour and the how's of change should be regarded as religious in nature. However, whereas the Bible claims divine revelation, psychotherapy claims scientific substantiation.

2.2 Psychotherapy was developed as an alternative religion

Szasz argues that psychotherapy, as commonly practiced, is a *surrogate religion*. On the one hand, some elements of religion, such as "contrition, confession, prayer, faith, and inner resolution" have been expropriated and renamed as psychotherapy. On the other hand, other elements of religion, such as certain observances and rituals, have been demeaned and destroyed as "symptoms of neurotic or psychotic illness" (Szasz 1978:188).

From its inception psychotherapy was developed as an alternative means of healing and helping people, not as an addition or complement to Christianity. Each great innovator of psychological theories sought to understand human beings apart from the revealed Word of God. Men like Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) and Carl Jung (1875-1961) eroded confidence in Christianity and established systems in direct opposition to the Bible. It is, therefore, clear that psychotherapy is not just a substitute method for helping troubled souls, but rather a substitute religion.

Szasz contends that Freud was driven by a powerful anti-Christian motive in his life. He claims that the popular image of Freud as "an enlightened, emancipated, irreligious person, who, with the aid of psycho-analysis 'discovered' that religion is mental illness" is pure fiction. He argues that, in fact, one of Freud's most powerful motives in life was "the desire to inflict vengeance on Christianity" for its traditional anti-Semitism stance (1978:139, 146).

Rather than using objective observation and scientific discovery, both Freud and Jung turned their own experiences into a new belief system and called it

psychoanalysis. Repudiating the God of the Bible, both Freud and Jung led their followers in the quest for alternative understandings of mankind and alternative solutions to problems of living. They turned inward to their own limited imaginations and viewed their subjects from their own anti-Christian subjectivity.

- Freud attempted to destroy the spiritual nature of man by reducing religion to illusion and neurosis.
- Jung attempted to debase the spirituality of man by presenting all religion as mythology and fantasy (*Psychology: Science or Religion?* 2005).

Despite their different approaches, the anti-Christian positions of Jung and Freud are quite evident. The similarities and differences between their two approaches can be summarised as follows:

- While Freud viewed religion as the source of mental problems, Jung believed that religion was a solution.
- While Freud argued that religions are a delusion and, therefore, evil, Jung contended that all religions are imaginary but good.
- Both positions are anti-Christian. One denies Christianity and the other mythologises it.

It should be further noted that Carl Rogers renounced Christianity and became one of the most respected leaders in humanistic psychology. Rogers (1961:8) himself confessed, "I could not work in a field where I would be required to believe in some specified religious doctrine."

2.3 Psychotherapy is a pseudo-science

Psychology: Science or Religion? (2005) defines "pseudo-science" as follows: "a system of theories, assumptions, and methods erroneously regarded as scientific." It goes on to state that "pseudoscience, or pseudoscientism, includes the use of the scientific label to protect and promote opinions, which are neither provable nor refutable."

As one moves from the natural sciences to the so-called behavioural sciences, one moves away from refutability, predictability, reproducibility and

controllability. In addition, the cause and effect relationship, so evident in the natural sciences, is ambiguous or absent in the behavioural "sciences" (Bobgan & Bobgan 1987:37). For example, Karl Kraus quoted in Corbett (2004), indicates that, "Psychoanalysis is non-scientific, failing any serious test of testability".

Karl Popper, considered by many to be the greatest twentieth-century philosopher of science, examined various psychological theories relating to the why of human behaviour and what to do about it. He found that although these theories contain most interesting psychological suggestions, they are not in a testable form. According to Popper, these theories, although posing as sciences, have in fact, "more in common with primitive myths than with science" and resemble "astrology rather than astronomy" (1975:343, 346).

It is further argued that one could devise a system of explaining all human behaviour and then interpret all behaviour in the light of that explanation (a common approach in psychology). This circular argument, which defies the rules of logic, is true of graphology, astrology and other "ologies". In this regard, Carol Tavris (1980:28) compares astrology and psychological determinism as follows: "Now the irony is that many people who are not fooled by astrology for one minute, subject themselves to therapy for years, where the same errors of logic and interpretation occur."

Research psychiatrist E Fuller Torrey (1972:8) is even more blunt when he contends that the techniques used by Western psychiatrists are, with few exceptions, virtually equivalent to the techniques used by witchdoctors.

Koch, in his book entitled *Psychology: A Study of Science*, refers to the delusion in thinking of psychology as a science. According to Koch, the *hope* of a psychological science has become indistinguishable from the *fact* of a psychological science. He argues that the entire history of psychology could be regarded as "a ritualistic endeavor to emulate the forms of science in order to sustain the delusion that it already is a science" (*Psychology: Science or Religion?* 2005).

2.4 Transpersonal psychologies/psychotherapies involve faith in the supernatural

John Davis (2006) defines the field of psychology known as *transpersonal psychology* as follows:

- It stands at the interface of psychology and spiritual experience.
- It integrates psychological concepts, theories and methods with subject matter and practices of the spiritual disciplines.
- Its interests include spiritual experiences, mystical states of consciousness, mindfulness and meditative practices, shamanic states, ritual, the overlap of spiritual experiences and disturbed states, such as psychosis and depression, and the transpersonal dimensions of relationships, service, and encounters with the natural world.

Transpersonal psychotherapy, like transpersonal psychology, is highly eclectic. It draws techniques and understandings "from a wide variety of psychological and spiritual sources". In psychotherapy, *transpersonal content* refers to "experiences related to peak experiences, mystical experiences, transcendence, and so on". For example, the woman who reported a near-death experience, in which she saw "the nature of reality" and she felt "unconditional love" was dealing with transpersonal content. If she was feeling confused and alone, she might want to contact a transpersonal psychotherapist to help her understand her transpersonal experiences. Other examples of *transpersonal content* in psychotherapy include experiences such as "an unusual and striking openness while praying or meditating and dreams with deeply transpersonal themes" (Davis 1997).

Through transpersonal psychotherapies various forms of Eastern religions are creeping into Western life. Psychologist Daniel Goleman quotes Chogyam Trunpa as saying, "Buddhism will come to the West as psychology." Goleman also points out how Oriental religions "seem to be making gradual headway as psychologies, not as religions" (Goleman 1981:84).

A growing number of psychotherapists are now convinced that the Eastern religions offer an understanding of the mind far more complete than anything yet envisaged by Western science. At the same time, the leaders of the new

religions themselves—the numerous gurus and spiritual teachers now in the West—are adapting the traditional systems according to the language and atmosphere of modern psychology. With all these greatly different movements, it is no wonder that thousands of troubled people throughout America no longer know whether they need psychological or spiritual help. Clearly, the line that divides the therapist from the spiritual guide has become blurred (Needleman 1979:209-210).

In this paper, it is argued that all forms of psychotherapy are, in fact, religious. However, it is clear from the above that the branch of psychotherapy relating to transpersonal psychology is more blatantly religious than any of the other branches, since it involves faith in the supernatural. For example, transpersonal psychology includes belief that there is something beyond the physical world. The type of spirituality offered by transpersonal psychology includes mystical experiences derived from both the occult and Eastern religions. However, any religion claiming to be the only way, such as the Christian Faith, is regarded as anathema to transpersonal psychology.

2.5 Psychotherapy/psychiatry is based on erroneous scientific and assumptions

The following false assumptions made in psychiatry and psychotherapy that pervade today's church have *no biblical or scientific basis* (*The End of "Christian Psychology"* 2006):

- Present behaviour is determined by unresolved conflicts from childhood.
- Parents are to blame for most people's problems.
- Most problems are because of low self-esteem.
- God's main purpose is to meet people's felt needs.
- Christians can learn much about themselves through studying psychological theorists, such as Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Alfred Adler, Carl Rogers and Albert Ellis.
- Christians need to be trained in psychology to really help people.

Furthermore, psychiatry rests on two theologically false assumptions: belief in *evolution* and belief in *secular humanism*, both of which are unbiblical. These

principles are fundamental in all the current psychological theories about the mind and how it functions. However, Genesis 1 clearly indicates that God created man in His own image. Hence, man did not evolve from some lower form of life. Humanism teaches that man (not God) is the highest reality and determines himself what is good or evil (*Psychiatry, the fifth column inside the church* 2006).

It could be further argued that psychotherapy cannot be classified as a science or scientific theory because it based on the erroneous assumption that problems of thinking and living constitute illnesses or pathologies that require cures by psychologically trained professionals. In fact, the foundation of psychotherapy is not science at all. It is based on various philosophical worldviews, especially those of determinism, secular humanism, behaviourism, existentialism and even evolutionism (Bobgan & Bobgan 1987:35, 39). As such, it resembles a religion more than a science.

2.6 Psychotherapy utilises deceptive teachings and terminology

In his book, *The Cult Explosion*, Hunt (1980:70) warns the Church against 'Christian psychology.' He states that today's Church is being destroyed by 'Christian psychology' that interprets Scripture on the basis of "a bankrupt, atheistic philosophy, which at best turns Christ into a heavenly psychiatrist." He contends that months and even years of 'Christian psychiatry' are now attempting to do "what was once accomplished in a moment by coming to the cross."

Jay Adams (1979:xi-xii) also cautions the Christian community against deceptive psychiatric dogmas entering the Church. He argues that advocating, allowing and practising psychiatric and psycho-analytical dogmas within the Church itself, is just as pagan and heretical, and hence as dangerous, as "propagating the teachings of some of the most bizarre cults." The only difference is that the cults are less of a danger, because their errors are more identifiable.

The apostle Paul warns Christians against the deceptive philosophies, such as psychotherapy:

See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ (Colossians 2:8, NIV).

It is clear that the Christian Church has not escaped the all-pervading influence of psychotherapy. The Christian community has unconsciously and eagerly embraced the pseudoscientisms of psychotherapy and incorporated it into all aspects of Church life.

3. Conclusion: some implications for the today's church

After examining the nature of psychotherapy, including the views of some of its major critics, we can draw the following conclusions, which have some serious implications for today's church:

3.1 Psychotherapy is not a science but a religion

The above evidence clearly shows that psychotherapy belongs to the sphere of religion, since it deals with matters relating to values, human nature and how people change. The actual foundations of psychotherapy are not science, but rather various philosophical worldviews, such as secular humanism and evolution. It is unfortunate that Christians have followed the psychological way and its pseudo-solutions to real problems.

In addition, it is evident that psychotherapy falls far short of the objectivity and testability of science. Because of psychotherapy's non-status as a science, people who choose psychotherapy, do so by faith—believing the claims of psychotherapy rather than the evidence of research (Bobgan & Bobgan 1987:35).

3.2 Psychotherapy utilises unbiblical theories and practices

A close examination of the innovators of psychological theories reveals that they have tried to understand man apart from the Bible and hence created unbiblical systems to explain the nature of man and equally unbiblical therapies to change him. Unfortunately, these unbiblical theories and therapies

have infiltrated today's church like a Trojan horse and have succeeded, to a large extent, in downplaying the power of the gospel to change people's lives, and in robbing the church of its vital counselling ministry.

People like Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung have undermined confidence in Christianity and established therapeutic systems directly opposed to God's Word. Their bias towards atheism, occultism and their acute antagonism towards Christianity have been cleverly masked with "high-toned scientific sounding psychological jargon" (Mitchell 2005).

3.3 Today's church needs to return to the biblical counselling

The fact that psychotherapy is not a science but a (substitute) religion has serious implications for the church. Despite "modern developments" in psychotherapy, and the ongoing bid to oust Christianity from the field of counselling, biblical cures by the Early Church are just as potent for us today. In the midst of persecution, poverty and various afflictions, the Early Church ministered effectively to people with emotional and behavioural problems.

The contemporary church needs to return to the biblical counselling of the Early Church, which is far more effective than psychotherapy. Both the Word of God and the work of the Holy Spirit are available to Christian counsellors for all of today's problems and, therefore, do not need to be superseded by modern psychotherapy.

Jay Adams (1975:15) makes this point clear when he asserts the following regarding the vital role of the Christian counsellor in today's Church:

The truth of the matter is that the Christian counselor who determines by the grace of God to know and use the Scriptures in his counseling is the only one who can ever have a solid basis for what he says and does.

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