

## PATTERNS OF CONVERSATIONS BETWEEN CATHOLICISM AND PSYCHOLOGY IN THE UNTIED STATES

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*This article addresses the relationship between Catholicism and psychology through the lens of the Catholic Church's tradition of the relationship between faith and reason. The essay draws upon the statements of Pope Pius XII, Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI. Patterns of conversation in the past, including ones involving conflict are examined. A cellular template explaining some of the patterns is presented from the analysis developed by John Haught namely: Conflict, Contrast, Contact and Confirmation. The contemporary phenomenon of positive psychology serves as an illustration.*

The questions are as old as Tertullian's, "What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem?" and as contemporary as those found on the front pages of today's newspapers pertaining to Church and state, the sacred versus the secular. And these questions suggest other perennial concerns that humanity proposes for an integrative understanding of existence. I am speaking, of course, of the question, of the relationship between faith and reason.

In his 1998 encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, Pope John Paul II spoke to the traditional and contemporary significance of this relationship and reminded us that a balanced relationship between faith and reason moves us more closely toward truths about ourselves that are of God. The Holy Father wrote:

Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth; and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth—in a word, to know himself—so that, by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves (Pope John Paul II, 1998, p. 4).

More recently, Pope Benedict XVI argued that a balanced relationship between faith and reason is vitally necessary when he asserted that faith without reason may lead to violence, while a narrow approach to reason weakens destroys the human spirit. In his widely publicized address at the University of Regensburg, where he once served as a theology

professor, the Holy Father saw theology's and hence the Church's dialogue with culture as succeeding only if there is an expanded view of reason. He stated:

We will succeed ... only if reason and faith come together in a new way, if we overcome the self-imposed limitation of reason to the empirically verifiable, and if we once more disclose its vast horizons. In this sense theology rightly belongs in the university and within the wide-ranging dialogue of sciences, not merely as a historical discipline and one of the human sciences, but precisely as theology, as inquiry into the rationality of faith.

The various efforts of the Society of Catholic Social Scientists may be viewed as an effort to name some of the ways in which the horizons of Catholicism's various disciplines and our respective social sciences, which are indeed perspectives of faith and reason, seek common paths toward truths that serve to reveal God's Presence in the world.

In this article I aim to offer some of the common pathways whereby Catholicism and some of the disciplines of psychology have found common and not so common pathways over the past century. I will describe these pathways by means of a template offered by the philosopher of science, John Haught. I will then highlight one emerging force in the field of psychology and how its use of scientific methods allow it to engage Catholicism's theological standards, successfully or unsuccessfully.

### **Pathways from the Recent Past**

The pathways between Catholicism and psychology imply, of course, relationships between psychology and religion in general. In this regard, the psychologist of religion Stanton Jones (1996) finds that there have been three classic ways by which psychology and religion have interacted with one another:

- 1) The psychology of religion mode, whereby, in an effort to study religion scientifically, psychologists have made systematic and scientific studies;

2) The informing of pastoral care, whereby psychology has informed pastoral care and its various modalities such as spiritual direction;

3) The redefinition of religion, whereby psychological writings have often, especially in the past, been used to redefine and even dismissed religious beliefs and practices.

Another psychologist of religion, Donald Browning (1992), meanwhile finds that there are several avenues of communication between psychology and religion. On the one hand, religion contributes to psychology by acting as a “carrier” of morality and religious views, upon which psychology’s cultural tradition is based. That is, psychology’s own development as a discipline has been dependent upon classic works of understanding human character, many of which may be deemed as religious classics as well. These include segments of the Hebrew Scriptures, such as the book of Proverbs, the Psalms, Lamentations and Job, and of the Christian New Testament, particularly the Gospels as inspiring Pauline passages on love (1 Cor 13) and on hope (Rm 8:25ff). Psychological wisdom is further present in Aristotle’s *De Anima*, Augustine’s *Confessions*, and the writings of Maimonides, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Teresa of Avila, Ignatius of Loyola, and many others.

Browning contends that psychology has served religious beliefs and practices in four ways: diagnosis, development, therapy, and ethics. Browning sees psychological diagnosis first as enabling religion to distinguish and understand healthy and unhealthy religious practice. Second, in his schema, the psychology of development enables religion to understand human growth so as to provide age-appropriate education about religious practices. Third, Browning sees therapy as promoting healing and health as part of the journey toward holiness. Finally, Browning believes contemporary ethics, when in dialogue with some forms of psychology, enhances its disciplines by incorporating psychological insights into moral principles.

John McDargh (1985), another psychologist of religion, describes ways in which Catholic and mainstream theologians have appropriated psychology. In addition, James Gustafson (1989) and Mark Poorman (1993) have indicated some of the ways by which moral theology have incorporated some findings of behavioral empirical science. Finally, we may point to the fact that some of the leading popular Catholic spiritual writers of our day such as Henri Nouwen, Benedict Groeschel, Joyce Rupp, and Robert Wicks have had extensive psychological training.

When pathways between psychology and Catholicism are perceived historically, we arrive at an appreciation of the seriousness and consequences of the issues involved. Robert Kugelmann (2005), in an enlightening article, traces the efforts of early twentieth century Catholic psychologists, many of whom may be grouped under the umbrella of neoscholastic Psychology. Kugelmann describes in detail the late nineteenth century efforts of Frs. Desire Mercier at Louvain, and the work of Fr. Edward Pace and Thomas Verner Moore at The Catholic University of America, the latter of whom we have just learned more about. From Mercier's efforts at Louvain, Catholic thinkers became engaged in a conversation with modern psychology through the neoscholastic paradigm. In explaining aspects of such a conversation, Kugelmann finds useful John Brooke's three conceptions of relating science and religion, namely: Conflict, Complementarity and Mutual advantage. Kugelmann sees Neoscholastic psychologists as tending toward the latter way of relating, but he also suggests a fourth way of relating, namely engagement with the modern world.

### **Respectful or Rival Siblings**

Given the plethora of conversations and relationships between and among psychological and religious writers, we might find Richard Coleman's (2001) image of religion and science as belonging to the same family of truth seekers. In this respect might psychology and spirituality be seen as siblings, who at times occasionally exhibit rivalry in their common search? In the spiritual journal, *The Way*, theologian Phyllis Zagano and I have written of how psychology and American Catholics may be described as relating like siblings, at times respectful but also at times as rivals. (Gillespie & Zagano 2006) These relationships may be seen in the ways that some Church figures viewed certain movements in psychology's emergence in the late nineteenth century.

In his book, *Science and Religion: From Conflict to Conversation*, John Haught considers four ways by which science and religion relate. They are:

- 1) *Conflict*—religion is utterly opposed to science or science invalidates religion;
- 2). *Contrast*—conflict is impossible since religion and science are clearly different from one another;

3) *Contact*—while distinct science and religion always can have implications and consonance for one another;

4) *Confirmation*—emphasizes ways in which religion supports scientific discovery.

Haught considers the *confirmation* approach most acceptable and readily accessible when a rational yet transcendent based religion shares in the quest for knowledge, similar to but not imitative of science. By so doing religion may serve to prevent science from reductionistic ideologies. Haught sees religious belief in its forms of transcendent trust as providing the foundational trust from which comprehensive scientific inquiry can emerge.

Besides these four forms of relating, Haught also cautions against “conflation”. That is to say, he sees a danger of distinct items from science and religion being used in such a way that their definitions collapse so that their differences are confused or lost. Haught cites as an example how those who believe the Bible as being inerrantly inspired can lead to the belief that the Bible gives the most reliable scientific information as to the origin of the universe (e.g. the creation science and intelligent design debates.)

Let us turn now to consider how these four categories may be seen in terms of Catholicism’s engagement with modern psychology. In addition to Haught’s template, I would like to add three other categories: ideas, institutions, individuals. In this sense, a table with horizontal rows and vertical columns can be constructed. First let us look at *conflict*.

In terms of ideas psychology, being clinical, eschewed religious practices, notably Catholicism. Because psychoanalysis was so often associated with Freud’s own atheistic positions, Catholic psychologists during the first half of the twentieth century, often found themselves isolated and Catholic thinkers, found it necessary to wage counterattacks through publications and pulpit alike. For example, in response to Freud or what he termed Freudianism, Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, in a noted sermon delivered in New York’s St. Patrick’s Cathedral in 1947, found the psychoanalysis popularly practiced in those days as based on four assumptions, namely materialism, hedonism, infantilism and eroticism, which he saw as antithetical to Catholic belief. *Conflict* may also be seen at the institutional levels as schools of psychoanalysis tended to resist accepting religious applicants into their training schools.

The category of *contrast*, meanwhile, may be seen in the ways in which experimental psychology relied on the philosophy of positivism. Proponents of psychology as the emerging science of

psychology such as J.B. Watson and B.F. Skinner thereby asserted that the scientific method produced the only form of authentic knowledge. As a result, their determinist explanation of human behavior, was contrary to the Church's view of freedom and will. For many years an institutionalized embodiment of positivism was seen institutionally in the ways in which some professional scientific organizations essentially ignored religion. Generally speaking this has been the case with the American Academy for the Advancement of Science's seeming refusal or perhaps reluctance to deal with topics related to spirituality, much less Catholicism. With regard to psychology, it may be seen in the lack of any reference to religious issues in psychology textbooks. While this has changed somewhat in recent years (e.g. the number of books published on religion and spirituality by the American Psychological Association press), it is rare to see the word "religion", "soul" or "spirituality" in any psychology text throughout most of the twentieth century. This, in effect, proved the adage, that in its efforts to establish itself apart from theology and philosophy, psychology first lost its soul and then its mind.

Haught's category of *contact* whereby religion and science were found to have implications for one another may be found institutionally in the emergence of the American Catholic Psychological Association in 1948. Such figures as Fr. William Bier and Virginia Staudt Sexton were some of the Catholic psychologists who founded ACPA in 1948. According to Sexton the organization had two primary goals:

- 1) To interpret to Catholics the meaning of modern psychology, and to advance its acceptance in Catholic circles.
- 2) To work toward the integration of psychology with Catholic thought and practice.

It should be noted that, until its demise in the late 1960s *The American Catholic Psychological Association* (ACPA) held its meeting within the context of the annual meeting of the *American Psychological Association*. Such meetings demonstrated that religion and psychology could find a context for creative contact. What's more, after the demise of the ACPA, many of its members merged with other psychologists interested in religious issues to form what is now Division 36, Psychology of Religion, of the *American Psychological Association*.

Finally, the category of *confirmation* whereby science and religion share in a common but not imitative quest for truth can be found in the Thomistic principle *gratia perficit natura* (grace perfects nature)

which the Jesuit psychoanalyst, William Meissner has for some forty years used as a means for developing common pathways for psychoanalysis and Catholicism.

Institutionally *confirmation* may be seen in the ways that clergy met with psychiatrists and psychologists at the St. John's Collegeville Summer Institute. From 1954 until 1973, an ecumenical body of clergy and religious met with the leading clinicians of the day to discuss mental health as they pertained to ministry and religious life. Many of the clinicians were leaders in the field, including Drs. Leo Bartemeier, Francis Bracleand, Karl Stern, Hymann Lippman, Elvin Semrad and Gregory Zillborg. Some of the clinical instructors were also religious, including Fr. /Dr. James Gill, S.J., Fr. /Dr. Noel Mailloux, O.P and Sr. /Dr. Annette Walters. C.S.J.. All together in the twenty years of its existence the Summer Institute was a setting whereby some 2500 clergy and religious met with the leading clinicians of the times.

Finally, I should note that Haught's cautions against *conflation*, which occurs when distinct ideas and concepts of psychology and religion collapse and lead to confusion and imprecision, may be seen at times in the ways that words such as spirit, spirituality and even soul are tossed around by some popular psychologists and new age spirituality.

### **Positive Psychology: An Emerging paradigm**

We have thus far explored past encounters between Catholicism and psychology as instances of the encounter between faith and reason. In doing so, we have seen how such encounters may be categorized according to a two dimensional matrix. Let us now turn to a consideration of a current encounter between religion and science in the emerging paradigm of positive psychology. It is important first to note that positive psychology is not positivism, which represents a particular methodological approach to science and has philosophical positions that are generally opposed to non-empirical ways of knowing such as religious knowledge. Positive psychology refers to the content of research more than to methodology. At the same time, it does have philosophical principles and positions.

In essence, positive psychology is a movement within mainstream psychological research that seeks to explore how positive aspects of human experiences can promote health and happiness. In some ways, it resembles humanistic psychology, but whereas the latter movement tended to emerge from clinical writings this former movement has emerged more from empirical studies.

Among the chief proponents of Positive Psychology is Dr. Martin E.P. Seligman, who in 1998 served as president of the American Psychological Association. Author of such significant works as *Learned Helplessness* (1975) and *Learned Optimism* (1990), Seligman enabled positive psychology to become a force through his presidency of the American Psychological Association. For example, at the 1999 APA convention at which Seligman presided, it was easy to feel as if one were at a church. In addition to rising incense there were songs such as “Oh, Happy Day when Jesus was Born” and an address—or should I say a sermon—by Rev. Jesse Jackson, who compared the role of the psychologist to that of the Good Shepherd who rescues the lost sheep, *i.e.*, the marginalized members of society. The year following Seligman’s presidency the *APA Monitor* published a series of articles describing the importance of positive psychology for the present and future state of the profession. Then in 2002 Seligman popularized the positive psychology movement with his book *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment*. In 2004 Seligman co-authored with Christopher Peterson an empirical work titled, *Character Strengths and Virtues*. Both works display openness to philosophy and religious concerns. But herein lies the rub. At what point, we might ask, do Seligman’s positions and those of some other positive psychologists on happiness, character and virtue come into conflict with or serve to confirm religious principles? For instance, might positive psychology be in danger of conflation by collapsing character and even spiritual categories into psychological ones? This may be seen when as psychologists they seek to understand scientifically how happiness and health can be enhanced. But there is always the danger of converting findings into a form of natural faith, whereby happiness can be sought without accounting in some way for spiritual or religious motivation. And when this occurs, it moves one into the danger of Pelagianism, *i.e.*, pursuing happiness through one’s own efforts without considering God’s providential role. (Zagano & Gillespie, 2006)

Now it is important to note that none of the positive psychologists explicitly ignore religion. Indeed, in a personal conversation, Seligman wanted to collaborate in helping with the training of chaplains. But like any movement there are always hazards of misuse and misunderstanding to be attended to and avoided. Through the guidelines offered here in terms of *Conflict*, *Contrast*, *Contact* and *Confrontation* we may be able to use and apply the vast amount of insights that are emerging from positive psychology’s considerable research.

## **Common Pathways for the Knowledge of the Soul**

This overview of Catholicism's encounters with some of the currents of past and present psychology provides some ways of organizing some key questions and significant issues. The two dimensional matrix may provide ways of understanding not just the past but also present and future concerns, for they are contemporary manifestations of ancient concerns. Indeed, the relationship of faith and reason has been and will continue to be a perennial concern not just to psychologists and theologians, but for the manifold ways that the sacred encounters the secular, that religion dialogues with science. And the Church, through its psychologists and its theologians alike, needs to continue to be on the forefront of such encounters as it endeavors to bring Christ into the cultural debates of the day. For no less than the knowledge of our very souls are at stake.

Perhaps Pope Pius XII said it best when, in an address to the Fifth international Congress of Psychotherapy and Clinical Psychology, April 13, 1953, he stated:

Be assured that the Church follows your research and your medical practice with her warm interest and her best wishes. You labor in a terrain that is very difficult. But your activity is capable of achieving precious results for medicine, for the knowledge of the soul in general, for the religious dispositions of man and for their development.

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