

Sermon: Christianity and True Psychology

Psychology is a word derived from the Greek word *psyche* which means *soul*. Your soul is not some part of your person like your elbow or your liver. Your soul *is* your person. It is what makes you, you. Psychology then is the study of the person. I want to look briefly at the most prominent forms of psychology of the last hundred years or so, to show where they fall short of an adequate understanding of the person and then to give an outline of the Christian understanding of the person as the true psychology.

I suppose when anyone begins to think about psychology, one thinks of Freud. Freud has not been confined to the academy or the clinic: his name and his opinions have penetrated western thinking for a century. Freudian jargon has become part of everyday conversation. We speak of *complexes*, *ego and id*, *sublimation*, *repression*, *projection*, *phallic symbols* and all the rest. And Freud's views have powerfully influenced – even dominated – the 20th century novel and certainly films. Alfred Hitchcock and Woody Allen are celluloid Freudians, apostles, you might say of the unconscious. Salvador Dali is psychoanalysis in pictures. Decadence chic

So what did Freud teach? His views changed over his lifetime, but certain themes recur. He believed that the conscious mind is profoundly influenced – even controlled – by the unconscious mind. He thought particularly that our adult behaviour is caused by events which happened to us when we were infants and which are now buried deeply in our unconscious mind. When this behaviour causes us to suffer – when it is pathological – we need the Freudian psychiatrist to psychoanalyse us by using the techniques of hypnotism, free association or suggestion.

He taught that we all go through the same stages of development and in the same order: and he called these *oral*, *anal* and *genital*. This is his doctrine of *infantile sexuality* which so shocked the Edwardians. He coined the expression *Oedipus complex* which says that every little boy between six and eight fervently desires to kill his father and sleep with his mother. I do not myself recollect this urge. I seemed to prefer to escape my mother – because she was always giving me jobs to do – and go fishing with my dad. Freud would suggest that adults who smoke are stuck in the infantile oral stage. He himself smoked like a chimney but denied his cigars were phallic symbols, special pleading in his own case by saying, *Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar*.

The popular description of someone as *anally retentive* comes directly from Freud. I find it mysterious that a man who was fixated on the last six inches of the alimentary canal should have the name Freud, which derives from the German for *joy*. But the mainspring of Freudian psychology is determinism. He was the third in the 19th century trio of determinists along with Darwin and Karl Marx. For Freud, freewill is an illusion. Let me give a practical example. A couple of years ago there was a shocking case of a young man who murdered his parents, stole all their money and ran off to New York with his girlfriend. He was not convicted of murder because a psychiatrist described him as suffering from *Narcissistic Personality Disorder*. Non-Freudians might rather describe him as an evil little prat.

Freud was an atheist. He said that God is a projection of the human mind – an image of the Oedipal father figure. His psychology appealed to our age because it had the

hypnotic, lurid attractiveness of a potent new myth. Also because it provided excuses for our sometimes unacceptable behaviour. If we are all the victims of unconscious processes, then we are not to blame for the things we get up to in daily life. That's a pretty destructive thought. But worse is what follows from it: if we are not to blame when we do wrong, we cannot logically be praised when we do right. So Freudianism does away with all morality. You can see why it had a certain appeal. But a world without right and wrong, without freewill, the possibility of actual choices and the reality of personal responsibility is not a human world. It contradicts our deepest presuppositions about human nature. It undermines all our promises and relationships.

The 20th century alternative to Freudianism was Behaviourism. This theory denied altogether the existence of the mind – conscious or unconscious. Human beings are merely bundles of *stimuli* and *responses*. So we get the language of *conditioned reflexes, operant conditioning, rewards and punishments* and *behavioural therapy*. Anyone can be conditioned to do anything. It began with Pavlov and his dogs and ended with a man called Skinner. (Skinner's initials were B.F. by the way) He conditioned pigeons to play table tennis and rats to respond to electric shocks. Arthur Koestler in his book *The Ghost in the Machine* described Behaviourism as follows:

Now that we have lost our souls, gone out of our minds, and seem about to lose all consciousness, what is there left for psychology to study? Professor Skinner answers, RATS!

So the dominant psychological theories of the last hundred years are both forms of determinism. They deny freewill and the ability of the individual to make responsible choices. Freudianism and Behaviourism are forms of psychological totalitarianism corresponding to the forms of political totalitarianism with which they were concurrent. Skinner actually invented a programme for the abolition of the very concept of the human being and he wrote a book about it called *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*.

The Christian understanding of the human person is the antidote to both Freudian and Skinnerian determinism. Christian psychology begins with the dignity of the person. Freud says God is only the image or projection of our wish-fulfilment. The Gospel tells us the very opposite. You could not put human dignity higher than say *God made man in his own image*. And in the creation of human beings, God bestowed upon us the gift and the responsibility of free moral choice. Determinism dehumanises the person. Christianity celebrates the person by paying him the highest compliment possible: we are like God, a little lower than the angels.

Christianity is not a theory. It is practical psychology. We *know* we have choices and we value ultimately our ability to make choices. We know also that we sometimes make wrong choices. The technical jargon for this is *sin*. The tendency to keep on making wrong choices is called *Original Sin*. There's no avoiding this. Dammit, we *know* when we do wrong – and there's no excusing it with phoney concepts such as *unconscious motivation* or *conditioned reflex*.

But we're not left in our sins. *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to cleanse us from all our sins*. We are not totally depraved. As St Irenaeus said, *Though we are mired in sin, the image of God burns brightly in each one of us*. Christianity saves us

because it is not a fantasy. It is the reality principle. It enables us to look at ourselves as we are: half-rotten but also half-glorious. Because the Christian faith tells the psychological truth about us as flawed and fallen characters, it alone can prescribe the cure.

The cure is the grace of God to forgiven sinners. And that's another piece of technical jargon – that word *grace*. But grace is simply the gymnasium of the soul. Grace is God's gift which dignifies us with moral responsibility and enables us to work out our salvation with fear and trembling: not fear as terror but as awe and wonder. Not trembling in horror but in delight at the promises of God which are more than we can either desire or deserve.

And there is something else – some more reassurance for you – something even more wonderful, if that were possible. When our faith tells us we are made in the image of God, it actually means that precisely. The human soul, our psyche, our person is the image of the Blessed Trinity. We exist. We know we exist. And we love our existence. Each one of you is being, intelligence and will. Made in the image of God

This is what St Augustine means when he says that you do not need to *go outside yourself* to find salvation – perfect fulfilment. For God has put the model of that fulfilment within you. Our own created nature in the gymnasium of God's grace is naturally inclined and impelled towards a deeper realisation of that Trinitarian image of God within us. God is simply calling you to become more fully what you really are. God wants to give you your true self. This is love. Love and nothing else.