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# THE PSYCHOLOGY OF CONVERSION

by W. STANFORD REID

**P**ROFESSOR Stanford Reid is no stranger to our pages ; his name appears in the list of our Editorial Correspondents. He is Associate Professor of History in McGill University, Montreal, and he is a foremost leader of Reformed thought and life in Canada. He describes this article as "one of my somewhat more speculative efforts", but believes "it will be of interest in attempting to line up modern psychiatry with some aspects of theology". The renewed emphasis on evangelism on both sides of the Atlantic adds special interest to what is in any case a very interesting paper.

**T**HE phenomenon of Christian conversion is the dividing point between the Christian and the non-Christian. Prior to conversion the individual does not consciously believe the gospel while after conversion he does believe it, acknowledging Christ as His Saviour and Lord. The converted man has consciously turned around in his tracks so that he no longer trusts in his own good works or his own righteousness, but solely in the merits of Christ for his justification. But this is not all, for the newly converted Christian now has a different outlook not only on himself, but upon the whole of creation, upon the whole of reality. As Paul tells us, all things have become new, for old things have passed away. The Christian has a view which is antithetical to that of the non-Christian for he now sees all things *sub specie aeternitatis*, or rather he will endeavour to do so more and more as he advances in the Christian life (II Cor. 5: 17 ff.).

Naturally the question is immediately raised as to the origin of this change. Why has it taken place? To a good many people of Arminian leanings, it is ultimately the result of human decision. The sinner simply decided to accept the gospel. To the Calvinist, however, the Biblical explanation, that it is the result of the in-working power of God, is much more to the point. Conversion is not the result of human decision and human action. It is the outcome of the grace of God, who through the Holy Spirit has sovereignly created in the sinner a "new heart". As the Lord

explained to Nicodemus, he has been "born again", through divine action and intervention (John 3: 5 ; I Cor. 2: 10-16). From this regeneration follows infallibly the conversion of the one whose heart has been changed, for he has been "*effectually* called" to faith.

But when all this has been said, even the Christian is still faced with an ultimate mystery. Indeed, he would not even know of this rebirth were it not revealed to Him in the teaching of the Scriptures. Some aspects of the change which God brings about in the Christian's heart are explained there, so that man can obtain an idea of what has taken place within himself. Incompleteness, however, is the essence of his knowledge at this point, for even as man has not succeeded in explaining the nature of physical birth, neither has he been able to discover the secret of rebirth through the sovereign action of God's Spirit. It remains hidden in the mystery of the nature of God Himself.

Yet while admitting this fact to be a mystery which man will probably never solve this side of the grave, and perhaps not on the other, should not the Christian try to understand it as fully as possible? The answer would seem to be that, keeping in mind his own finitude and sinfulness, he should try to obtain an insight, if he can, into God's working in the human soul. He is to approach the matter reverently, but looking for all the light which God may throw on it. And some of this light may perhaps come from recent advances which have been made in the field of psychological and psychiatric investigation.

Now the author, when he makes a statement such as this, does not have in mind the thought that Christians should be prepared to regard a psychiatrist or psychologist as an oracle who speaks divine truth on the basis of his researches. But the author does feel that some of the facts discovered by the investigators of psychological phenomena, interpreted in the light of the teaching of the Scriptures, may give a deeper understanding of the meaning of regeneration and of its psychological effects which lead to conversion. It is to this end that the present article is written, in the hope that it may perhaps shed some light upon certain aspects of this important but difficult subject.

Without adopting the views of any particular psychological theory, one can say, perhaps, that the most important aspect of modern thought concerning man is the contemporary emphasis upon the subconscious. When one compares this with the earlier work of Locke, Hume or even the later behaviourists, he begins to realise that men have come to see human action as not always

having an obvious or logical motivation. Somewhere below the level of consciousness there is a murky area known as the subconscious which wields a powerful influence over man's conscious action. It has its effect like a deep running current in a stream, without ever showing at the surface. Gradually men have come to recognise that much human action is non-rationally motived. There is a background to all human thinking which men would frequently like to hide from the world. It is their subconscious mind.

To the Christian this is not something new. He has always recognised the evil of the human heart which is "deceitful above all things and desperately wicked" (Jer. 17: 9). He has felt that this evil is not merely a matter of wrong training, erroneous thinking or bad environment, but that it is something basic to man's whole being or "heart". The "heart" dominates man in all his ways, usually without showing itself, so that even its worst deeds are clothed in a garment of the purest white, or rationalized to provide the best possible excuse for the foulest of actions. This is why the Bible speaks of man as being corrupt and why the great thinkers of the Church have always held to the doctrine of man's "total depravity".

It is important to remember, however, that while this doctrine of human corruption is part of the Christian faith, it has never been held that man is as bad as he might be, nor that he has ceased to be man. God in His "common grace" has restrained the effect of sin, so that it has not yet worked itself out to its final conclusion, for many of those now in this depraved condition will eventually be converted. Rather, it should be said that the image of God in man has been sadly defaced, for instead of recognizing God as God and himself as God's creature, man has set himself up as the ultimate interpreter and lord of reality. He has ceased to know or recognize God as Lord and has gone his own sinful way (Rom. 1: 20 ff.).

This raises the question of psychological repression. According to most psychiatrists, when man does not like something he pushes all thought of it down into his subconscious in an attempt to forget. The difficulty is, however, that although out of sight, it is not "out of mind". Instead it is there much like a cork in a basin of water under a tumbler. Let the tumbler be removed the cork will pop to the surface with considerable force. For this reason it is necessary to keep these various unwanted "corks" down by continually repressing them, and if they are too many or too strong the individual is faced with the threat of neuroses and other mental ailments.

Now, while Christians would agree that man does repress many things, they would go even farther. The Scriptures state bluntly that man's greatest and most universal act of repression is the effort to get rid of the knowledge of God. Paul tells us that when men "knew God; they glorified Him not as God, neither were thankful: but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened" (Rom. 1: 21). Following Paul's teaching, Calvin in the first five chapters of his *Institutes* goes into this matter in detail, pointing out that while all men have a knowledge of God from which they cannot escape, nevertheless they endeavour to deal with this knowledge by instinctively repressing it through "pride, vanity and contumacy" (I. iv. 1). "For", says Calvin, "as soon as a survey of the world has just shown us a deity, neglecting the true God we set up in His stead the dreams and phantasms of our own brains; and confer on them the praise of righteousness, wisdom, goodness and power, due to Him" (I. v. 15). This is why Paul could say that "the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness unto him" (I Cor. 2: 14). Man wants to get away from the fact of a sovereign God by declaring himself ignorant of such a Being, and by trying desperately to forget that He is.

At this point we are faced with the question: Why is this so? Speaking theologically in the light of Scriptural statements such as Romans 5: 12-21, the answer is that all men sinned in Adam their federal head, so that judgment passed upon all. The result is that all men have been corrupted. That is, all those descending from Adam by ordinary generation have an ethical twist or bias against God. No man coming into this world wants to acknowledge God as God. Instead, in his egotism he desires to set himself up as independent of God. But when the question is asked as to the way in which this bias is passed from generation to generation, the Christian must plead ignorance. Since God has not explained how a soul even comes into existence, how can one understand the way in which original sin is transmitted? That it is there, one must admit, but that is as far as he can go. In this the psychoanalyst is in no better position, for heredity is still to him a closed book.

What are the effects of this repression of the knowledge of God? The first one is guilt. Just as soon as Adam and Eve transgressed the commandment of God they wanted to hide. They knew themselves to be covenant-breakers who deserved only the judgment and condemnation of the just and righteous God. Even before God spoke, their consciences pricked them, so that when they actually

heard God's Word, they fled in terror. This has been man's fundamental problem ever since. He has had a guilt complex which has not been derived from some small happenings in his youth, but which is the inseparable concomitant of repressing the "sense" of God. Though he try to escape it by being very busy with his daily work, though he endeavour to forget it in immoderate pleasure and though he try to overcome it by all the rigours of asceticism, man still cannot get away from the fact that he is guilty of being a covenant-breaker. Whenever he is alone, particularly in the face of death, this fact crowds in upon him until absolute terror takes hold upon his soul. How right was Freud when he said that the fear of death is one of man's greatest psychological problems. His discovery, however, was nothing new, for the writer to the Hebrews speaks of those who "through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage" (2: 15). Guilt and fear going together are the first consequences of man's repression of the knowledge of God.

In everyday life, the result of this situation is a "guilt complex" in the psychiatric sense of the term. In the face of trouble, difficulty and conflict, there is no feeling that behind His providence God "hides a smiling face", but rather the suspicion either that all these things are the result of chance, or that they are some form of divine judgment. As Shakespeare expressed it: "Conscience doth make cowards of us all". The burglar in carrying out his plans is terrified by each shadow. He is, however, merely a type of every man who in this world has that deep sense of guilt which he tries to crush only to find that it will not down. If the occasion arises for stress to be laid upon it, a neurosis develops and away he goes to be psycho-analysed.

Along with this tendency to a sense of guilt with a consequent fear, is a basic hostility. Naturally, when a man feels that he is guilty of something which is going to bring him destruction, he quickly develops a feeling of enmity towards the one responsible for inflicting judgment. The law-breaker, whether a murderer or a speeder, has a deep sense of hostility to the police. In much the same way, man is hostile first and foremost to God. He objects strenuously to interpreting reality in the light of the eternal God, for that would force him to admit that he is a sinner. Instead, he wants to interpret everything immanently. To do this he may adopt the position of a Kant, declaring that while man can know the phenomena adequately by his own scientific method, he cannot know what is beyond, and so should forget about it. Or he may accept the view of Hegel, that man can go beyond phenomena, but when he does, he invariably objects to any but a limited, evolving

god who knows no more than man. The fashion today is to carry this position through to its logical conclusion by deciding that there is no ultimate reality except chance and chaos. But even here he cannot escape, for with Jean-Paul Sartre he has to admit that man lives in anguish with a tendency towards death. Thus, the natural human reaction to the idea that man is a sinner, is one of hostility. Man would far sooner believe in ultimate chaos than in an ultimate, sovereign God, for if he should do the latter, he would have to admit the righteousness of his own condemnation. This he will never do, but vainly represses it along with his knowledge of God.

The effect of the repressed sense of guilt, coupled with this hostility, is a fixation. The sense of guilt and its companion, fear, along with hostility, has become ingrained in man's personality. He will not acknowledge his responsibility either to his Creator nor to his fellow-man. In the beginning, the immediate consequence of this situation was murder, something which has been known ever since down through the history of the race, while outward expressions of every other kind of sin have been common. Moreover, mental troubles resulting from the conflicts which take place within man as a result of his repressions, have also been universal phenomena. To escape from this hopeless situation man has created for himself his own gods, whether they are primitive material idols or the more sophisticated economic, sociological and psychological forces of the modern age. These gods he has worshipped, to them he has made sacrifices and for them he has even been willing to die, trying to fool himself into the confidence that, like the golden calf at Mount Sinai, they are the gods which will be his saviour. To salve his conscience he has "changed the truth of God into a lie and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed forever" (Rom. 1: 25). But his gods have been of no use and of very little help. Man still has that gnawing fear and continual conflict in his heart.

From even a cursory reading of psychiatric literature it is quite evident that the results of man's repression mentioned above are recognized as affecting men in a hundred and one different ways. Above everything else the sex instinct has been greatly stressed, probably because it would seem to be closely connected with man's sense of guilt as well as his aggressive motivation, which results from his sense of hostility to God and his fellow-man. Man has frequently sought to repress this as well as many other desires, ambitions, fears and terrors, with disastrous results to himself and to those around him. The outcome has been frequently insanity, depression and "nervous breakdowns", which have required

psychiatric treatment. In the rehabilitation of those suffering from such troubles much has been achieved in recent decades, so that many people have been rehabilitated and enabled to live once again normal, useful lives. Yet while this is true, from the Christian point of view the real problem, the cause of all the trouble, has not been solved. The surface wounds have been healed by teaching people how to control their emotions, or by enabling them to direct the forces involved in new and constructive channels. But suppression or sublimation are not the answers, for deep down in the heart of man there is still that basic problem of man's relation to God. As long as he is going to repress the knowledge of God and of his responsibility to Him, there will always be trouble, grief and anguish for which no psycho-analytic treatment can offer a solution.

Under these circumstances, while the Christian should freely admit that the psychiatrist can do much to help people, even Christians, with problems, yet he cannot get down to the very root of the trouble. No man can, for no man fully understands the heart either of himself or of any other man. No man can by any means change the ethical bias of his own heart or that of another. The knowledge and the power required for such a major operation lie in the hand of God alone. Man's most fundamental repression, the repression of the knowledge and love of God, is something which he will not surrender if he can possibly help it. It is his basic denial which determines the direction of his whole personality, so that superhuman power, the power of the sovereign God, is the only thing which will bring release.

The Bible teaches that the change which is worked in and through the power of God is so radical that it defines it as regeneration or being "born again". Man's ethical bias against God, his endeavour to serve himself and satisfy his own ego, is changed. Instead, he now has a new outlook and new approach to himself and to God, a radical revolution having taken place in his heart. When, however, one has said that, he has said about all that can be said concerning the basic change which has taken place in man. How has it taken place? Man cannot say. It is solely by the mysterious working of the Spirit of God with and in the human spirit. The Lord Himself warned us against hoping to reach the ultimate explanation when He said: "The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit" (John 3: 8). This is part of the mysterious



working of the sovereign God into which no man can pry in the hope of satisfying his curiosity.

The important thing would seem to be the fact that this change in man's nature, this removal of his fundamental bias, has a releasing effect upon his "God-consciousness". Whereas before he desired to forget God while exalting himself, his desire now is to glorify God. The result is that the repression which has been exerted against the knowledge of God is released, allowing it to come to the surface, allowing it to come to expression in his heart, his mind and emotions, his personality. This in turn immediately makes man conscious of what he has been doing, not that he has been unconscious, but that he has been trying to forget Him who is the source, sustainer and redeemer of his soul. Regeneration is thus a sovereign act of God whereby He renews man's heart, making him once more conscious of his true position in the world. It is not man who does this by any act of the will or mind, but God alone who does it, thereby releasing the repression of man on his "God-consciousness".

God, however, does not leave man at that point to work out his own salvation. It is true, man's basic drive, his fundamental ethical principle, has been completely reoriented, but he must needs have further knowledge and strength if any result is to appear. Man has up to this point been not merely neutral towards God, but actually antagonistic, so that he is really ignorant of the truth. Therefore, God never brings about his regeneration without at the same time bringing to him a knowledge of his true situation and condition. This knowledge comes through the proclamation and exposition of the Word of God, the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. This does not mean that the exposition must necessarily come through a formal sermon, but may come through any means which God in His sovereignty desires to employ. But when it does come, the Holy Spirit who regenerates the individual, bringing about the release of his "God-consciousness", working within the hearer's heart makes it effective.

To understand what this means, one must glance at the content of the Word. This may be summed up in a simplified fashion in three propositions. First of all it speaks of man as a sinner, as one who while knowing God, still refused to acknowledge Him as God, but repressed that knowledge with all his strength in order that he might serve and glorify himself. This has resulted in man's coming under God's wrath and curse, from which man can by no means find a way of escape. In the second place, it proclaims to man the fact that Christ the God-man, having fulfilled the law on

man's behalf, paid on Calvary's cross the penalty for sinners. He rose again from the grave, ascended into Heaven and today is the Intercessor for, and King of, all those for whom He died. Finally, man is told clearly that the only way he can "have an interest" in Christ is by accepting God's offer of forgiveness to all who place their trust in Christ as their substitute, remembering that He did this of His own mere love and grace for sinners.

Now, some, as soon as they hear of God's offer, may close with it, placing their trust in Christ as Saviour. On the other hand, there are many who, still governed by old habits of thought, although much disturbed by the fact that they are faced with the existence of the sovereign, righteous God, are not willing to lay hold upon the divine promises. They, therefore, work the harder at self-justification. They become morose, legalistic, hypercritical of others and not infrequently extremely unpleasant, particularly if faced with the gospel call. This is simply part of the struggle going on within, since they have been brought face to face with the fact of the sovereign God. They are in rebellion, clinging to the old way, the way of repression. But it is a losing fight, for their hearts have been changed and there can be no more retreat, no more repression of the knowledge that they are God's creatures who owe to Him faith and obedience. As the gospel comes to the regenerated rebel he eventually is forced to a point of decision. The time for this may arrive almost immediately after regeneration, or some considerable time later, but one cannot tell exactly the temporal relation of the two, for the beginning of the work of the Spirit is so far below consciousness that no man can say that he knows the day of his rebirth any more than he can say that he remembers the day of his physical birth. But the hour of decision, no matter what the man may do, will come.

When that hour of decision arrives the individual is faced first and foremost with himself revealed in the light of God's Word. i.e. that he is a condemned sinner. This is no mere academic knowledge, but an inescapable fact driven home by his heart's clear consciousness which has now come fully into his understanding. From this he cannot find a way out. If this were all that he knew, however, his situation would indeed be most miserable. But thanks be unto God, he is also faced with the revelation of God's free offer of salvation in Christ, being pressed by God to accept Him as his one and only hope. The outcome of this situation cannot but be acceptance, for man knows even in the inmost recesses of his own personality that for him there is no other way. Therefore,

with no trust in himself, but only in Christ, he accepts the offer of salvation and is converted.

Conversion is not the end. It is rather the beginning. Once a man has come to recognize Christ as His Saviour and Lord, he cannot but go on from there, to apply this knowledge to all facets of life. But it is not merely a matter of knowledge, for once his will is re-oriented so that he does not repress the inward consciousness of God, he desires to do his Sovereign's will. Thus day by day, in every sphere of existence, man's "recreated heart" leads him to acknowledge Christ as Lord, to serve, love and honour Him more fully. In the face of the world which is hostile, one more soul grows "in grace and in the likeness and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ". This is the process through which he goes until his days' end.

All this began with conversion, for it is conversion which makes the fundamental difference in man's life, the fundamental difference between himself and the world. How did this change come? We cannot say for certain exactly what has taken place, but following the lines of thought developed by recent psychological and psychiatric investigation, it is possible that we have been able to gain something of an understanding of the way in which God deals with man, when bringing him from sin and darkness into the light of the kingdom of Jesus Christ.

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