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PERSONAL TRANSCENDENCE IN CHRISTIANITY
AND GESTALT THERAPY

Present-day psychological therapeutic techniques often proceed without reference to Christianity. Mr. Whitfield, taking Gestalt therapy which Perls derived in part from Zen, as a case in point, shows that its basic principles can be found in the New Testament. In the last resort, however, Gestalt therapy does not provide what man needs, whereas Christianity does.

If the task of Gestalt therapy is to create a unity between thought and feeling so that organismic self-regulation may replace regulation by the environment; to make people whole is also an explicit purpose of the Christian religion. "Organismic self-regulation" sounds technically awesome. It is intended to convey the sense of the organism, the full person functioning as a spontaneous whole, unimpeded by defence mechanisms which inhibit freedom but provide a haven of safety from unpleasant levels of awareness. Christianity goes further in explicitly seeking to make people and the world whole. It states that the eternal Logos has come in the flesh — in Christ — and is to be encountered here and now. To experience Christian faith is to discover that Christ lives in human personality now, that a man may realise his true, full and developing self now. Moreover this is not an isolated personal realisation, for there is corporate organismic self-regulation in becoming a sharing member of a living body of people, i.e. the church.

To attempt to practice and work out these convictions has let the church into all sorts of booby traps, often of her own making. Some people have a jaundiced view of Christianity which, seemingly, is not entirely without foundation. As a result Christianity is discarded by many thoughtful people because they view it as a repressive rather than a liberating philosophy. At this point let me say that I am not embarking on arguments for the existence of God or the truth of Christianity, both of which I shall assume. Discussion of such a vast field is beyond the compass of a short paper.

Barriers to Growth

The founder of Gestalt therapy, Fritz Perls, is insistent that in order to transcend the self, one has first to become aware of one's own self-defeating behaviour, an awareness which often arises from a feeling of anxiety. Once established, the new sense of awareness either becomes a focus of incipient growth, or of further concentration on self-defeatism in the personality-restricting defensive levels of behaviour. In the former case anxiety leads to excitement whereby we can transcend our psychological pain barriers and complete the unresolved agendas of our earlier years. To bring about this desirable result a spectrum of techniques has been developed, which link with Moreno and his Psychodrama theory. Thus simple rituals like addressing an empty chair, or having a conversation with the image of a person, e.g., a parent, can be employed to deal with the hurt and pain of the past. However this is not the place for discussion or description of the techniques. The therapy, it is claimed, can lead to a further extension of the boundaries of life and a departure from previous restrictive modes of behaviour: an individual can now take responsibility for opening up the material buried in his psyche which formerly distorted his behaviour and relationships, and so pave the way for further growth.

For reasons best known to himself Fritz Perls turned to Zen for much of his philosophy. Whether this was a consequence of disillusionment with American Christianity I do not know, but he could have found what he needed within the pages of the Bible. However Perls misunderstood Christian faith to a remarkable degree when he said in *Gestalt Therapy*, "Christianity says nature does not count, only the supernatural counts."¹ Yet Christianity is more earthly, fleshly and natural than any of the other major religions. Jesus had a body and knew all about affliction and joy in the here and now. Did He not warn the Jews about their fantasies of the past concerning Solomon and his greatness, and their fantasies of the future *re* the Messiah? He told them in forceful ways to stay in the here and now of awareness and feeling and to take no anxious thought for the morrow (Mt.6:25-34). Certainly He set His face against many things. For example, one fundamental biblical concept is that slavery is never to be tolerated. Thus, when the Jews were in Egypt in the time of the Pharoahs the task of Moses to redeem a people from captivity was seen as the direct purpose of God. These slaves were redeemed by a whole series of events and so became a nation, yet that nation later found itself losing this fundamental biblical principle, and itself enslaved others. This development probably reached its peak or abyss in the time of Solomon when even Jews were put into slavery to achieve the ends of their own royal house, and the decline continued until Israel itself became a servile people.

The New Testament takes up the theme, asserting that everything that enslaves a man is against the will of God, whether it is a political system or a servitude to sin. Anything therefore that debases man and society is to be confronted. The Christian view is that Jesus faced all the destructiveness of evil displayed by men and exposed it for what it was. At the same time He called upon people to abandon their self-centred life style, yet He retained an attitude of empathy towards them. Always He faced reality, never for a moment, save in the Garden of Gethsemane, did He swerve from the anxiety and dread that were eventually to meet Him. The price He paid was to endure the agony of the Cross and in so doing He absorbed the hate of man in all its destructive force. The Resurrection speaks of His vindication; the significance of His death and resurrection in terms of psychodynamics and therapeutic effectiveness will be referred to in the sequel. People who are persuaded by the Christian view-point hold that mankind is created to enjoy God's world and to use it responsibly -- yet with the sense of freedom that proceeds not from coercion but from awareness. The process of human maturation must lead to a point where we go beyond commandments, where "we have to do this and have to do that", to where human activity and relationships are summed up in the liberty of agape.

The Vulnerable and Invulnerable in Therapy

Gestaltists assert similar views about man's maturation without necessarily including religious concepts; they hold that mankind is created to enjoy the world and to use it responsibly with the freedom that results from awareness. It is here, of course, that there may be the Achilles heel of the society that is not founded on spiritual values. For how is a person to know when there is liberty to love? May we not also question whether the Achilles heel of therapy does not lie precisely at this point, for from whence does a man obtain his sense of worth and value? Fritz Perls sees it in terms of a person's family, his career, his prowess, etc... Yet all this is vulnerable, for when a man loses these props on which his false sense of status is precariously perched, what then? Social workers, medical practitioners and all those in the helping professions repeatedly find themselves up against the old, old problem of neurosis. This may be dealt with in part, but how can man go on to obtain a sense of personal worth and value that is invulnerable?

The reply of the Gestalt therapist is that a man quits his self-defeating environment in favour of organismic self-regulation. Janov in his *Primal Therapy*² takes us to a position where man discovers his utter dereliction and screams his agony and protest. However, even when a man has moved beyond dereliction and experiences a new awareness, how can he establish his personal integrity objectively? It is claimed that the purpose of Gestalt and other

therapies is to undo the defects in human personality which originate in pre-verbal interactions. This may be excellent, but how can the undoing put a person in touch with any true transcendence? Where is the invulnerable certainty to be found that can provide a spring-board for the leap into spontaneous living?

The Relevance of the Gospel

The therapeutic genius of St. John's Gospel is essentially where it talks of a man's worth and value. That worth and value lies not in a man being worthless, as many Christian hymns and many Christian preachers would have it, but in the almost unbelievable fact that while a man is in a state of alienation and pursuing all types of self-destructive acts, he is seen to be precious and worth dying for (Jn. 3:16), and it is for this that Good Friday has stood for over 2,000 years. Here is the ground for transcendence, here is the status of man, here is his worth and value, for he is a son of God. He has been created a son of God. No-one can take this status away from him. It is inviolable. Here therefore is the ground of his being. Early deprivations which have sent man on a self-manipulative road where he has been dictated to by his environment and has had his real self distorted can be dealt with on this basis. It opens up the capacity for new life.

With new insight we view the words of Jesus when He said, "You need to be born again" (Jn.3:7). For a man can be born again into a life where God's acceptance and love are acknowledged. There is now the possibility that man's achievement will exceed expectations based on his normal behaviour patterns, for they will no longer emanate only from his own grasping, insecure, inadequate personality.

The Gap between Theory and Practice

Now let me say straight away that this, of course, is according to the book. In reality, things often tend to turn out differently. The Church has its fair share of neurotics. Indeed are we not all to some extent neurotic? One of the most foolish of all notions is that before a person can engage in counselling or therapy at any level he must himself be altogether mature and unblamable. Surely we share with others a common humanity which enables us to help one another. God preserve us from becoming unfeeling human automata, so put together as to be beyond the common human experience of need. As with all other philosophies and religions there is in Christianity a huge distinction between belief and practice.

The Book of Genesis (1:27-31) teaches that man is, in origin, good because he is made in God's image, but our obsessive super-egos, enemies of genuine religion, often make us see our lives as bad quite apart from any actual moral failure or religious transgression.

For example, we have for centuries been frightened by our bodies because of a mixed up confusion concerning our sensuality. Christianity sees it as belonging to God, but Christians see it as the favourite hunting ground of the Devil. To get Christians to love their bodies and to love one another is just as difficult as to get others to do the same. Alexander Lowen brings us to new fields of understanding here. Though the established theory says that when you know God loves you you can love yourself and then love others, in practice it often happens that a failure to love ourselves means that we find it impossible to believe that God can love us, and "I'm not OK, you're not OK",³ in the language of Harris, all too often operates in experience. The churches have too often demanded that needs should be denied rather than satisfied. Over against this, Christianity and Gestalt offer a freedom to fulfil needs within a responsible social context.

Facilitating the Growth of the Person

Gestalt therapy has three ground rules to enable a person to contact with his environment, the environment with all its stimuli being crucial, for all too easily we can deny God's world and so deprive ourselves of what we are meant to experience. Fritz Perls is forever to be thanked for getting us to talk about "How do you feel?"¹ rather than "Why did you do it?". This brings us into the immediate "here and now", thus saving unnecessary reflection on historic far away happenings. He delivers us also from the Anglo-Saxon, "One-does-this-and-one-does-that" and encourages us instead to talk about "I and thou". His techniques, despite their limitations, enable people to contact their environment, human and situational, instead of avoiding it. Perl's emphasis on personal responsibility for growth and development corresponds with the Christian emphasis on an individual's responsibility to be himself. To live firmly by these principles means that we can meet each other and choose to cherish and enrich them instead of avoiding each other and remaining stunted.

It would be unfair to omit reference to people like Wilhelm Reich and Alexander Lowen⁴ to whom we are indebted for putting us in touch with the language of the body, which harmonises so well with Gestalt. Janov, too, has had the courage to move to the area of primal needs and to stress the excruciating pain occasioned by the threat of non-being. However, man's dereliction need never be total because he may be accompanied by the Christ who was also forsaken, scorned and rejected and who descended into Hell and who can therefore accompany man in his extremity. Dereliction in infancy is total but in adulthood a person who rediscovers this experience behind his defences may gain access to resources not known by the baby. Indeed, the adult can know that dereliction is an experience of Christ's own pain. Janov, however, is without a companion who can come to the rescue. He provides a therapist as

an empathetic, sensitive, pain-experiencing onlooker, who with all his gifts and empathy can still only be an onlooker.

The Gestalt practice of ensuring that a person contacts his environment means that he contacts his anxieties, and as the defences are confronted the barriers are gradually brought down. The camouflage may slowly slip away and all this is the rightful process of discovering who is really there, and yet this means a man must become aware of his utter emptiness. But not emptiness only, for when the early pangs of pain have been accepted and assimilated he also recognises his strength and endowments. Certainly the world is there to affirm him, but is that enough to provide a man with sufficient belief in himself so that he can exceed his nature and move to a level of transcendence? It is at this point that Gestalt itself is at its most vulnerable, because it puts all the responsibility on to the client: in practice this is one of the least impressive aspects of the Gestalt stance and is open to serious question. Avoiding dependency and trusting in the strength of people is fine. However, it is not good enough to be encouraged to take your psychological clothes off only to be told that it is your responsibility if you soon find yourself freezing outside in the cold. This unclotting can be destructive and even highly irresponsible. However Christianity talks of another Man who was stripped and left outside a city wall who still speaks to the afflicted today so they need never be alone. In realising this a man discovers integrity and destiny.

Dealing with the Taboos

A further development and yet a further paradox is seen in attitudes to the basic human drives of lust and aggression. The Churches have long set their faces against overt expression of these instinctive drives. To exhibit anger or physical desire is to invite immediate condemnation, yet the New Testament talks about the body of the Christian being the temple of the Holy Spirit, which presumably means that he is to enjoy what he has been given, indeed to luxuriate in it — God "giveth us richly all things to enjoy" (1 Tim. 6:17). Furthermore, the violence of the Crucifixion is accepted unconditionally. Gestalt has always insisted on the need to complete an unfulfilled agenda, i.e. that where there is pent-up anger it should be expressed, and that when there is a retroflected desire for love, this should be liberated.

The New Testament does not seem to deny this but only seeks for an appropriate discharge of the needs that will be ultimately creative. To be violent does not put you beyond the pale of God. Awareness of sexual needs may horrify the saints but it does not appear to shock the Redeemer. If a man is enslaved by his retroflected needs then Christ will seek to deliver him from this slavery,

but Jesus turns his face against unreality and falsehood. To be able to tell God that you bitterly resent the way He treats you seems to be sanctioned by both Fritz Perls and the Bible (Cf. "O Lord, thou hast deceived me, and I was deceived" Jer. 20:7) because it is genuine, externalised and completed. It then opens the gateway to expressions of love and affection, but how can you tell anyone that you love them when you have so much negative feeling inside you which a social or religious contract forbids you to express? Jesus had much to say about those who said "Lord, Lord" (Mt.25:27). He spoke about the knowledge of the truth setting men free. All too often a man is faced with his unacceptable self but seeks to create an acceptable self-image. This brings scorn from Gestalt and also from genuine Christianity. The desire of both is that they should move away from this defensive mould which produces so much manipulative and unreal behaviour. Both offer a way through to a discovery of the self as being ultimately an organised, spontaneous whole.

Personal transcendence may be costly, and indeed it may never be totally realised, but it is a road along which we may walk. Yet while Gestalt and Christianity would invite people to walk along the same road, Christianity provides a Companion for the journey who was Himself truly human as well as divine, and who reveals through Himself that which may make men individually and socially transcendent.

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