CHARACTERISTICS OF INTERPERSONALISM

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"Interpersonalism" refers to interaction between persons, mutual relations, compenetration, mutuality, transaction. Interpersonal unity is the kind of thing John expresses with his a-in-b-in-a formula (*e.g*., John **10**:38; **14**:10, 11, 15-16, 20, 23, 38; **15**:4-9; **17**:21-24; 1 John **2**:24-28; see also Colossians **1**:27-28). Paul speaks about being *"members of one another"* (Ephesians **4**:25). Interpersonalism contrasts with law, ritual (sacramentalism), nature (materialism), idea (rationalism), and mysticism. The ordinances are performative; they are acts by which we "say something" more than "means of grace' that we get from them. By them we say something by what we do (cp. Titus **1**:16).

What is envisioned approximates Martin Buber's "I-Thou" expression. "I-Thou" stresses the individuals in relationship. The "we" concept may be preferable since we are *"friends of God"* (2 Chronicles **20**:7; Isaiah **41**:8; James **2**:23; note Jesus and his disciples: John **15**:13-15; cp. Luke **12**:4 as well as Matthew **11**:19, *etc*.). There may be affinities also between interpersonalism and the view of the common-sense philosophers and Bostonian personalism. Interpersonalism correlates with Kohlberg's post-conventional thinking because it calls for people to live by principles instead of gut reactions, rules and regulations, or cultural conventions. Paul Tournier's "The Personalism of the Bible" is referred to by Lloyd John Ogilvie in *The Cup of Wisdom* (Baker, [l972] 1985), p72. Note also Henry Van Dyke, *Gospel for an Age of Doubt*, pp. 64-65 and James G. Van Buren's statement in T. H. Johnson's "The Lord of the Early Christians" (1954), p. 32.

I. The Scope of Interpersonalism: Holistic

A. Interpersonalism addresses all people, that is, as many as are persons. It requires positive relationship <u>between people</u>. Interpersonalism establishes the validity of the individual. Reality does not lie with the group aside from the individual. The group combines individuals to form a gestalt that equals more than the sum of the individuals. A group cannot gain some sort of validity or value aside from the individuals that comprise it. There is unity, compenetration of personalities, and reciprocal influence unto mutual change by degrees over time.

Nevertheless, individuals retain their individuality. They do not get lost as unidentifiable units within a group. They retain their ability to influence, and be influenced by, a distinct other. Simultaneously they have individual and corporate identity. Interpersonalism avoids the two extremes of unrelated individuals (chaos) and the undifferentiated One. It calls for unity between individuals.

Interpersonalism establishes the <u>logical relationship</u> of individuals to the group. The group does not precede the individual nor *vice versa*; they are coterminal. The individual joins the group through <u>identification</u>. Identification may occur in a rite of passage that focalizes it, but identification is primarily an interpersonal act and process.

Interpersonal holism militates against egocentric and ethnocentric behavior as well as classes based on non-interpersonal considerations. It does not foster elitism in any form. Interpersonalism avoids <u>self</u>-centeredness by the reciprocal mechanism. The tendency away from interpersonalism in the Western world shows itself in an unreal, individualism and in preoccupation with egalitarianism.

Interpersonalism avoids <u>ethno</u>centricity by the reciprocal mechanism (see under reciprocal below). The individual neither follows nor precedes the group or any other individual, because the actions do not go in just one direction.

For the same reason that interpersonalism militates against egocentrism it militates against self-negation, or <u>other</u>-centeredness. Neither the self nor the other is negated or absolutized. So, we do not destroy the individual to have the whole (Eastern religious thought), to depersonalize the other to have the self (<u>ego</u>centrism), or negate the self to have the other (<u>allo</u>centrism). Individuals can be distinct, can relate, and can act reciprocally to create unity within the group. Interpersonalism shows the relationship between the one and the many. The other can be more important, greater, and so on, but the other is not absolutized.

Not only is there <u>interaction</u> back and forth, but that <u>reciprocation</u> takes the form of <u>interdependency</u> as well as mutual edification. Inasmuch as there is <u>mutual influence</u>, there is also <u>compenetration</u> of personalities. There is what has been called "transaction," where change can be caused on each by the other, which is more than "interaction."

A group is a <u>gestalt</u>, where the whole is more than the sum of the parts. The superaddita include unity, reciprocation, interdependency, corporate personality, shared influence toward the outside as well as among the compenetrating individuals within the group. Interpersonalism stresses the viewpoint of the whole without losing the identity of the individual in the process. Interpersonalism avoids reductionism.

B. Christian interpersonalism calls for positive association between <u>vertical and horizontal personal relationships</u>. Hermitage, monasticism, cloistered and ascetic life are not natural to the holism between all forms and ranks of persons. (See also "Two Basic Points About Baptism.")

C. Interpersonalism incorporates <u>all</u> aspects of the individual person. It subsumes the individual person under it and requires positive relationship between elements <u>within a person</u> if for no other reason than to enable harmonious association with those beyond oneself. Interpersonalism includes all aspects of reality (being, action, and relationship) and all levels of it

(inorganic, organic, personal, and social). Those additional elements may not be included in the entity itself, but they are under the responsibility of interpersonal. Interpersonalism is holistic because it involves (1) all the aspects of each individual person and brings them to bear on (2) associations with all other persons. It incorporates (3) all levels of reality and sets the stage for the use of (4) all categories of things—law, logic, and nature inclusively. Interpersonalism deals with the highest and most complex form of reality; so it is holistic and synthetic like persons instead of analytical and reductionist. Activities in one aspect of people's life bleed off into other aspects of themselves and their associations. One reciprocating pattern sets off side effects through related reciprocating patterns.

The holistic character of Christian interpersonalism contrasts sharply with all forms of fragmentation—ethnocentrism, egocentrism, and spirit-matter dualism. The contrasts with spirit-matter dualism distinguished Christianity from Greek and Eastern hypostatic dualism and the behaviors, agenda, and practices that grew from it. Stoicism represented the ascetic approach, which disdained the flesh, while Epicureanism satiated the flesh, because flesh and spirit could supposedly not affect each other.

Unfortunately, in the history of the church, Christianity came to reflect the dualistic approach in its more stoic form, which led to asceticism, monasticism, the doctrine of natural depravity, the practices of flagellation, celibacy, celibacy in marriage, the doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary, her immaculate conception, and the like.

Because of its holistic nature, interpersonalism has a strong integrative capacity. It does not depend on any outward, or physical, circumstance like place (John **4**:20-23 re worship). It is not limited to any time frame. Interpersonalism takes place despite the flux of external factors wherever persons exist. Interpersonalism establishes proper use of ideas, physical reality, and legal process.

Because of its holistic nature, interpersonalism is not subject to entropy or the law of diminishing returns. For that reason, Paul can say that spiritual things are eternal; they do not perish with the using (Colossians **2**:12). Personal relationships have growth potential.

II. Viewpoints in Interpersonalism: Objective and Subjective

As to the holistic perspective, an individual lives from a viewpoint within the system (imminence) rather than looking at it from the outside or from above it (transcendence). The individual and the individual's group, on the one hand, and other persons or groups, on the other hand, have a legitimate place in that whole. That means the individual does not dissolve the "other" by subordinating it and its value; that would constitute egocentrism and ethnocentrism. On the contrary, a person does not have to dissolve the "self" by "getting out of the way."

Keeping the individual and the other in balance is the only appropriate way to operate in holistic fashion.

Since the difference between objective and subjective can break down, interpersonalism can take that into account in a relationship as long as the attitude and motive are not defective. Sincerity counts for something. Paul told the Corinthians, *"If the readiness is there, it is acceptable as people have, not as they do not have"* (2 Corinthians **8**:12). *"As people think in their heart, so they are"* (Proverbs **23**:7). Abraham's intent to obey in the offering of Isaac met God's essential requirement without the outward follow-through.

The objective-subjective variable sets up the difference between how people have acted and how other people regard them. It can also put "guilt" in abeyance until the other persons become aware that what they did was wrong. Then they become responsible for repentance and restitution. So, interpersonalism can allow a significant role for <u>motive</u> and <u>attitude</u> without vitiating the aims of the process.

III. Manner of Operation: Direct

Interpersonal operation takes place directly between the persons. Its processes do not depend on any third factor for their validity, effectiveness, or propriety. Christianity does not require, or even allow, for an institution or some third party to legitimize proclamation, administer ordinances, absolve sins, or originate doctrine. The interpersonal character of the faith automatically sets aside the formal clergy concept and the post-apostolic dictum: *"Where the bishop is, there is the church."* Instead, the persons in Christ are themselves a *"nation of priests"* (Revelation **5**:10; cp. **1**:6; **20**:6; 1 Peter **2**:5, 9).

IV. The Pattern of Interpersonalism: Reciprocity

A. Active

Interpersonalism deals with reality in motion; it is not static. Interpersonalism takes hold of change, viewing it as an opportunity for improvement. Heraclitus of Ephesus enunciated the intriguing dictum that the only thing that is permanent is change. The important thing is process, in this case, interpersonal relating. Interpersonalism seeks security, not in static being or substance, but in active social relations.

B. Qualitative

Interpersonalism gets away from a purely quantitative approach to things and incorporates the <u>qualitative element</u>. Examples of qualitative matters include intentionality, attitude, sincerity. Law, nature, and logic operate in a more quantitative, categorical, binary, either-or manner.

Interpersonal process does not quantify the elements in its operation. The Christian system does not specify how many times we forgive a fellow Christian (Matthew **18**:21-22), how many times a day we pray, how many times a week we fast (Luke **18**:12), what amount or percent of our resources we contribute, how many times a week we "go to church." The New Covenant calls for governing these matters by need, opportunity, capacity, circumstance, and interest. We determine such matters for ourselves as reflections of our devotion and commitment to the other Person and his people.

C. Degree

Interpersonalism is subject to <u>degree;</u> so there can be increase or decrease in the continuum. The degree capacity shows itself in the sanctification process and in social change generally. Since it is not binary, categorical, or either-or, a person can become.

D. Reciprocal Causation

Degree becomes possible by reciprocation. Reciprocation means that A affects B, which turns around and affects A. <u>Reciprocation</u> is two-directional unlike the <u>domino effect</u> (straight-line causal series) or a pattern like <u>thesis-antithesis-synthesis</u> (Hegelianism, dialecticism). In the latter, the new synthesis may react with a new antithesis that merges with it into another synthesis, and so on. Two-directional causation means that the process can start from either pole in the relationship. Interpersonal reciprocal causation represents the most complex causal pattern and incorporates into its purview lesser patterns like straight-line causal series and dialecticism. Popular terms for reciprocation are "vicious cycle" (if moving in a negative direction), the "spiral effect," "the snowball effect," circular causation, transaction, interaction.

Because of its reciprocal format, interpersonalism avoids infinite regress. An infinite regress presupposes a straight-line causal series (chain reaction, domino effect) characteristic of so many impersonal processes. Infinite regress may apply to thesis-antithesis-synthesis format also. The reciprocal process in interpersonal relationship is nicely expressed in the term <u>one another</u> and similar expressions (note Gene Getz's little book of yesteryear *Building Up One Another*. Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, l976):

1. Christians <u>need</u> one another (interdependency) like the parts of a body
   (1 Corinthians **12**:3-31; Romans **12**:4-8; Ephesians **4**:4-16);
2. Christians <u>are devoted to</u> one another as a family (Romans **12**:10);
3. Christians should <u>honor</u> one another (Romans **12**:10);
4. Christians should have the <u>same mind</u> toward one another (Romans **15**:5);
5. Christians <u>accept</u> one another (Romans **15**:7);
6. Christians should <u>admonish</u> one another (Romans **15**:14);
7. Christians <u>greet</u> one another (Romans **16**:16);

8. Christians <u>serve</u> one another (Romans **12**:10; Galatians **6**:2);

9. Christians <u>restore</u> one another (Galatians **6**:2);

10. Christians <u>bear</u> one another's <u>burdens</u> (Ephesians **4**:2);

11. Christians encourage one another (1 Thessalonians **5**:11).

(Ephesians **5**:21 [*"submit one to one another"*] is one-directional rather than reciprocal; see "Greek Helps.")

E. Mutual Change (Transaction)

Reciprocation can involve mutual change. <u>Circular causality</u> is a term sometimes used here although it is not entirely appropriate. When the causation comes back around, it comes around on a higher plane, reflecting the change that has occurred in the interaction. That spiral effect can occur because choice exists in both poles of interaction. There is potential change on <u>both</u> sides instead of just one. So, interpersonal reciprocation avoids the determinism in stimulus-response causation.

One example of reciprocation shows up in the interaction between love and hope. Colossians **1**:4-5 speaks of love coming from hope. It is equally clear in the faith-hope-love set that love creates trust that brings hope. Colossians **1**:9-10 assumes the pattern of reciprocal causation when the text begins with knowledge that leads to walking that leads to increased knowledge. A similar pattern appears in 2 Peter **1**:5-8, where the apostle starts out adding knowledge to virtue and adding self-control (*etc.*) to knowledge with the result of being fruitful unto the knowledge of Christ. Everyday examples of reciprocation are feedback between an amplifier and a guitar, the interaction between a furnace and thermostat, the development of topsoil, and symbiotic relationships between pairs of living things.

V. Mechanism of Transfer: Influence

An interpersonal system moves forward by influence rather than by force, authority, or form. "Influence" refers to the way one person affects another. Influence is exerted through distinctively personal capacities. One person can affect another by <u>communicating</u> <u>ideas</u> in <u>logical</u> fashion, thus appealing to the <u>rational capacity</u> persons share. A person can weep with those who weep, thus expressing the <u>emotional capacity</u> that persons have. People can <u>care</u> about and show <u>concern</u> for other people by spending time, offering help, giving resources, "putting themselves in the other person's shoes." Such acts involve the <u>volitional capacity</u> because nothing is forcing the person to get involved in the life of the other. As a result of such outward-directedness, the second person may freely change attitudes, beliefs, and actions.

Influence relates to <u>conditionality</u> as distinguished from causation. One person may offer to help another, but that benefactor may require certain actions of the other that do not aid in bringing about the benefit needed, which the benefactor gives. Those requested actions indicate

"good faith"; so the persons in need through those conditions show they are not trying to take advantage of other people's benevolence.

Influence contrasts with various kinds of determinism. One such determinism is <u>natural force</u>, where no choosing is going on within the "object" affected. Natural forces hold natural processes together, and they do so in a way that eliminates indeterminacy (except the Heisenberg principle) because choice is not involved. <u>Logic</u> holds rational processes together in a way that gives validity. Authority holds legal processes together in a way that the only variability involved may come only because of the persons carrying out the law. Even then the only legal variation that can occur is within the specifications of the law. Law, nature, and logic are deterministic systems that contrast with influence, because they do not involve free will. Because of free will in social process, no one-to-one relationship exists between the influence and the response. There is "slippage" in the system and, therefore, a degree of unpredictability.

VI. Flexibility-Variability

As a result of slippage, social processes have flexibility. Things do not "have" to be a certain way. Actions are appropriate rather than necessary. Appropriate variation is bounded by effects on the other and by effectiveness toward the common goal other persons share. Furthermore, the operations are reversible when the natural requirements of the relationship cease to be the case on either side of it.

VII. Complexity

Because interpersonalism is holistic and flexible, it is also highly complex. This analysis of interpersonalism takes away much of the mystery of persons, but it does not remove all the mystery. There is a degree of mystery about persons and about relationships between them, because people as volitional creatures have creativity, which reduces predictability.

VIII. Process/Continuum More Than Category

Interpersonal processes are not so precise as to "when." They involve more "gray areas." Interpersonalism is not time-referenced. When people enter a relationship, they give no thought to <u>how long</u>.

The "gray area" applied to time passage means that we do not have the degree of time-when exactness as exists in miracle or law. If salvation is an interpersonal process, we do not expect it to have a pinpoint time-when. Establishing a friendship is not something that has a specific time-when exactness. Salvation does involve decision and commitment, which occur at a relatively more precise time than becoming a friend does, but they have a "looser" time-when

than miraculous conversion or legal enactment, which are the alternatives proposed for the conversion and salvation process.

IX. Permanence

The fundamental needs of people do not change over time. They are permanent and universal, having a desire for meaningfulness, love, security, and innocence. The notion of "horse and buggy" religion does not properly perceive the nature of the Christian faith, which is characterized by interpersonal concerns.

X. Reality

Interpersonal processes conform to the nature of the case. Legal processes are valid even when they do not fit the situation very well, because their validity depends on authority rather than on conformity to what is real (true). Christianity relies on reality instead of rules because rules are too approximate and too rigid for what the New Covenant addresses: interpersonal reconciliation to fellowship with God and other people.

In sum, interpersonalism is holistic, direct, reciprocal, influence-driven, flexible, complex, and real.

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