The Crisis in Psychiatry and Religion
A Review Article

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A PERSONAL NOTE

I FIRST became acquainted with O. H. Mowrer while doing research for my dissertation in 1954. His edited volume, **Psychotherapy: Theory and Research** presented a differing point of view with regard to the formation of guilt and its expiation through psychotherapy. It sounded good, in particular when I found substantiating theory in the writings of Rollo May and R. H. Fairbairn, and I used it.

Therefore, it was with real interest that I attended a conference in Chicago in 1959 at which Mowrer read a paper, entitled "Psychotherapy and the Problem of Values" (Chapter 9 of our book). The reaction to the paper was violent, in particular from the clergymen present. The second conference in which I saw Mowrer in action was in Columbus in March of 1960. He mentions the conference in the book and the puzzlement it caused him. What happened was that he did battle with a psychotherapist, Hugh Misseldine, who represented a mutual acceptance theory, and in doing so, alienated all the clergymen present. He found himself a "man without a country," but rather enjoyed his self-imposed isolation.

My last contact was a correspondence I carried on with him last summer with regard to a Fellowship program for Seminary professors who wish to study "The Problem of Guilt" during a sabbatical year, under his direction. At that time he sent me his book, **The Crisis in Psychiatry and Religion**, and after reading it, I sent him some reactions and criticisms. I shall refer to these in the main part of the paper. Let me say at the outset that Mowrer is a salty critic, a nettle, and a person to be reckoned with. I think he has something to say, but that he does not have the final word.

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MOWRER'S POINT OF VIEW

My plan will be to present Mowrer's general point of view and then specifically zero in on his ideas of the role of sin in psychotherapy, which have raised such a tempest. Then I want to raise my criticisms of the theory, from a theological point of view, largely. And finally I want to present his rebuttal, and close the paper with some pointed questions.

He begins by raising objection to the Darwinian conception of the mind as an organ of adaptation, concerned principally with ensuring physical comfort and well-being for the organism. He objects to this theory holding that the mind has its own special conditions for survival, found in the interpersonal and moral matrix of things. It is the psychological which makes men more than bodies but which makes them persons.

This leads him to his second objection to the course psychology has followed since Freud, that is the determination of the unconscious. Freud's approach states that the unconscious represents an alien and dissociated set of forces within the personality, and that the principal mechanism is repression whereby instinctual urges are denied entry into consciousness. The unconscious then is a seething caldron of sexual desire and aggression which society does not allow open expression. Man is against society, and because of society becomes against himself.

Mowrer follows an alternative view of the unconscious, which he says Ste-

kel and Boisen have also presented, namely, that it represents not only an animalistic force, but a creative force in man. Guilt is not just discreative but creative in its function and in the conflict between the id and super-ego, the repressive mechanism may work to put down the conscience and not the libidinal drives. To the anxiety theories of Freud, he adds a "guilt theory," namely, that anxiety arises not from acts which the individual would commit but does not, but from acts which he has committed but wishes he had not. As Rollo May reiterates, the American culture is no longer Victorian, in which repression operates in order to keep young people from expressing sexual drives and anger, but he sees something else today. Young men who are libertine in every way now come to the psychotherapist, having repressed their consciences and unhappy because this side of their lives is not developed. In other words, as Ronald Fairbairn points out, the adult may suffer from an infantile conscience as well as from repressed libido.

Mowrer makes his point also with respect to learning theory: that the individual may be unable to learn socially accepted behavior because he cannot perceive the signals from society correctly, because of the intervening variables of fear, disappointment, and so on. If ego-adequacy becomes a goal of therapy, then the values and ideological systems of the parents and other value-bearers in society must be taken into account, rather than the individual trying to live above them as the Freudian Hero does.

As Mowrer says,

> . . . an adult is free, i.e., self-determining and autonomous, only so long as he is good and that when he sufficiently violates the trust of his conscience, the latter 'takes over', perhaps far from gently and almost certainly with a feeling on the part of the individual that 'things are happening to me'. Like the parents of an earlier day, conscience thus deprives the individual of his freedom and will restore it only when he has shown that he can again be trusted. Thus, the objective of therapy is not to 'make the unconscious conscious'. If the view just indicated is valid, the very root of the difficulty is that the unconscious (now understood as the conscience) is all too much in evidence—and the objective is to get it to subside, retreat, relax; and this it will presumably do only when the ego or the autonomous part of the personality has redeemed itself.[1]

THE ROLE OF THE CONCEPT OF SIN IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

With the above background, Mowrer sets out to reverse the whole field of psychotherapy. Rather than freeing the individual from guilt feelings, which have been incurred by his reaction to authorities who would not allow him to express his animalistic drives, the psychotherapist must set as his aim the making of the individual into a fully human person, who is fully related to his society. The way of doing this is not by encouraging the growth of insight into past determinisms of parents and other teachers so as to be free of them, but through encouraging the growth of conscience and its processes of awareness of guilt and the restitution and reform which it demands. Psychology which has denied sin as a concept has been deprived of one of its most important tools both for understanding human behavior and for working for its healing. Mowrer pleads for the use of sin as a concept and for the constructive possibility which its acknowledgment and confession can make in psychotherapy.

He defines sin as that which sends one to hell, not a metaphysical hell but a hell on earth, operationally seen as neuroses and psychoses. Sin or wrong behavior has the effect of bringing on neuroses and psychoses only where it is acutely felt but not acknowledged and corrected. This, of course, allows a place for the sociopathic personality, while attempting to make the neurotic person

[1] *The Crisis in Psychiatry and Religion*, Mowrer, p. 31.

own up to his responsibility in making himself sick.

Which brings up the dilemma of sickness or sin, which has faced society recently. The committees on alcoholism for example do the alcoholic no good, says Mowrer, by calling him sick. This tends to let him off the hook of moral responsibility for his own difficulty. What he needs is to grow up to his adult share of duty, and not to continue, childlike, to blame his parents, his mate, his boss or just fate for the mess that he is in. He sees the implication of what he is saying very clearly: that the psychologists and clergymen have surrendered their role in handling moral difficulties, by referring these difficulties to the physicians. The antiseptic atmosphere created by handling a moral problem in a doctor's office, and not imputing guilt, has finally clouded up in a secularized society which has lost its way with respect to right and wrong. What is most diabolical to him is to see the clergyman "aping" the psychiatrist, in trying to be totally accepting and not representing some sense of judgment and condemnation of sin and guilt. Ministers have gone down the crimson path, following Freud and Rogers, to their own impotency, and have not done their proper job in helping individuals handle their real guilt and find religious salvation.

In summary, then, Mowrer presents the following syllogism: (1) sinning is unjustified, (2) I have sinned, and not just made a mistake or lacked knowledge of what I was doing, (3) therefore, I must justify my existence by acknowledging my sins, changing my ways, and becoming a non-sinner. Mowrer admits a dilemma (what religionists since Paul have called a mystery) when he says, "There is some evidence that human beings do not change radically unless they first acknowledge their sins; but we also know how hard it is for one to make such an acknowledgment unless he has **already changed.**"[2] But he feels that this justification is by works, rather than by faith. It is by restitution of things, and reformation of relationships, that one undoes what he has done wrong in action. This fits in well with his learning theory approach to behavior, as well as his pragmatic and non-mysterious approach to religion.

A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF MOWRER'S IDEAS

One must say that Mowrer has served as a gadfly to both psychiatrists and ministers. He has made several good points, but he has done so in some very damaging ways both as to the truth and as to counseling practice. Let me say at the outset, that I acknowledge the clinical truth of his statements about the repression of superego, and one of the goals of therapy being the growth of an adult conscience. However, it is still possible in working with so called religious people to see the repression of bodily impulses and to see the oversevere superego making them sick. Freud is not to be seen as the incarnation of Satan, but as a demiurge which has made us rethink our conceptions of personality. The Neo-Freudians, in particular Sullivan, Horney, Fromm, and Anderson, take account of Mowrer's criticisms, but reformulate their theories in not so black or white fashion. Mowrer tends to throw the baby out with the bath too often.

My criticisms of his sin and guilt theories will come from theology, by and large, but theology that has been influenced by the behavioral sciences.

(1) Mowrer falls victim to Pelagian thought, in denying the unconscious influence of parents and society upon human behavior and in attempting to exalt human freedom and responsibility above these influences. Freud's point, as is that of Augustine before him, is that things are done to the child before he is accountable for his behavior which predisposed him to sin. It is not just that biological impulses are repressed, but that the strivings of the child for autonomy, and egocentric dominance,

[2] *"Sin, the Lesser of Two Evils,"* Mowrer, OH, Amer. Psych, Vol. 15, 1960, p. 304.

are held in check usually by the socializing parents. Original sin is the sin of Adam, in wanting to be as gods. This the child falls victim to in his aggrandizing fashion. His awareness of himself as free comes to pass in a society which is already predisposed to certain sins, built into the structure of the institutions and agencies, and which makes it difficult for him to choose other than to sin. Racial prejudice, the sin of war, and of exploitation of one class by another in the economic sphere are examples of this.

(2) Mowrer fails to see the relation between sin and evil in a theological sense. I called this to his attention in my letter to him. "There is suffering in the world which is not the direct result of individual sin, which makes the righteous question the justice of God." There are certain theological assumptions made about the nature of God, namely, that he is all powerful, and therefore has control of events which to the human being can be interpreted as good or evil. Another assumption is that He is all-loving, and all-protecting and will not let anything untoward happen to the faithful. The religious person in confronting the problem takes one or the other horn of the dilemma in order to explain the universe to himself, or to justify God.

Mowrer answered my criticism in the following fashion:

> In the second paragraph of your letter you raise a most interesting question, which I have not, I believe, ever attempted to deal with in print but have given some little thought to. Granted certain theological assumptions, that is to say certain assumptions about the nature of God, I suppose the 'problem of evil' does arise in the way you exemplify in your letter. However, this is just not a problem for me, personally. I simply do not believe that physical suffering and moral suffering are in the same plane. Through no fault of my own, I may contract a painful and fatal cancer or an accident may occur to me that will be seriously incapacitating. In neither instance should I blame myself or God. These things, by and large, are simply not in the moral realm. If, on the other hand, I get depressed, i.e., if I develop a mental dis-ease, I hold that I am in some way responsible and that God also is involved. The Psalmist catches the thought just right when he says, 'Yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken.' The righteous are subject to the same vicissitudes of misfortune and illness as the rest of us, but they are not 'forsaken' in the sense that a neurotic or functionally psychotic person is forsaken, alienated, alone. And I would say that when theologians encounter the kind of reaction which you describe, they have themselves largely to blame for it. They have presented God as an all-loving, all-protecting creature who never lets anything untoward happen to the faithful. This, from my point of view, is a kind of blasphemy. As far as I am concerned, God is moral principle in the universe and eternity; and, as I see it, we simply have to separate moral principle from, for example, physical and biological principles.

Now it seems to me that Mowrer has divorced ethics from religion in separating the moral principle from the natural world. He shows he is going to do this in the introduction to his book, in separating the body from the mind. He continues to do it in making God an abstract principle who is not concerned with the ordering of the physical universe and who is powerless in governing the life of man on this planet. Now, it is true that the resolution of these problems of evil and sin are not perfectly made by the Judeo-Christian faith, but Mowrer's protestations are, it seems to me, kicking against the goads of childhood religion. When he returns to religion, he wants to remake it according to his own personal needs, rather than performing the long and difficult struggle with the problems raised by the theologians. The problems that he raises on page 52, "Who am I? What is my destiny? What does living (existence) mean?" involve one not just with moral principle, but with divine reality, which includes natural events, i.e., evil as well as sin. Mowrer

seems to me not to be aware of the real questions here.

(3) Mowrer does not sufficiently take into account the doctrine of the atonement for sin by God himself. He again falls victim of Pelagian thinking, with respect to man saving himself by doing good works rather than bad works. In my letter to him, I say, "Isn't it possible for atonement to take place by one person suffering for another's sins. I agree with you that each person bears responsibility for his own salvation, but there is sin in the structures of society—like racial prejudice or war—and the suffering love displayed by the Freedom rider or the pacifist can have an influence in melting down the hard hearts of those committed to social sinning. This is the cross in human life—it is not necessarily substitutionary but as Abelard says a moral example. So the Scripture, "If I be lifted up, I will draw all men unto me." This is the Love which judges as well as saves.

He answered:

> In the same paragraph you ask, 'Isn't it possible for atonement to take place by one person's suffering for another's sins?' First of all, as a scientist, I don't like to try to say what is possible and impossible in the universe. That puts things much too categorically for my own sense of competence. Scientists are much more inclined to speak in terms of probabilities. And if I can now rephrase the question, I would answer it by saying that I think it improbable that one person's suffering atones for another's sins. Here, I know, that I am committing what in many people's eyes is the unforgivable Protestant heresy. Paul surely made it very explicit that as far as he was concerned, 'in Adam's fall we sinned all,' and that by the same token in Christ's death on the cross we were all redeemed. But except in some very allegorical or metaphorical sense, I just don't believe this for one minute. One of the reasons religion was never any use to me as a child and why I left it as soon as I could, when I went off to college, was that it was always represented to me as a kind of magic which simply involved one's saying 'I believe . . . .' and Christ would immediately 'go to work for you.' This is a kind of magic in which I have almost exactly as much faith as I do in what I sometimes call 'salvation by insight.'
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> On the other hand, I would not only agree but emphatically insist that the sacrifice made for by one person may have a great influence for good in the life of another person. I have discussed this with a number of very thoughtful people and cherish some wonderful things they have said in return to me about this. If I went through my correspondence for the last year or so, I could round up quite a collection of very pertinent things that have been said to me. But the important thing, as far as I am concerned, is the fact that when we see another person not only carrying his own burdens bravely and well but also able and willing to shoulder some of our own, I think it makes us pretty ashamed of ourselves and determined, if we have any character at all, to get busy and at least carry our own burdens for a change. In other words, another person' sacrifice, as far as I am concerned, does not in the least excuse me or atone for my sins—rather, it puts the bee on me in no uncertain fashion to get busy and do something about the situation myself. I must confess to a dark suspicion that a lot of theologians teach the doctrine of the substitutionary atonement because they sense in it, quite rightly, the particular brand of magic which they offer for sale; and if they did not push this point of view, they would not be sure of what they had to say or do at all.

Again, I believe that Mowrer is so dedicated to his theory of good works, that he fails to see what the faith one can have in the power greater than ourselves can have in "conversion," in turning one around, and in reorientating one's life toward God. The puzzlement he expresses at the end of the article on Sin has some clues in religion, if he will but look for them.

CONCLUSION

The fact that Mowrer has a Foundation[3] behind his study of Guilt can bode well or ill, depending on his administration of the research. If he is willing to listen to the theologians and engage

in genuine dialogue in setting up his hypotheses, and then harken to the empirical results of his study, the whole area of guilt and its expiation can be enlightened in the days ahead for psychiatry and religion. But if he becomes dogmatic and asserts his claims in a loud and harsh voice, despite what others have found and are finding, I can foresee that he will soon become a "voice c r y i n g in the wilderness," heeded by neither psychologists or clergymen. The path of the martyr appears very enticing to him, it seems to me. It is up to us, as his audience, to listen to the constructive things he has to say, but also to be aware of others, like Rollo May, Victor Frankl, and Ira Progoff, who say similar things, but who give us more promise for accommodation between the disciplines of psychiatry and religion, than the sharp conflict which appears in Mowrer.

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[8] Lilly Endowment Fellowships for Seminary Professors, at University of Illinois, Urbana, Illinois.