PSYCHOLOGY AND THE RELIGIOUS LEADER'S TASK

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This article is about the task of those who are expected to lead in the religious life of a local church or a community. These leaders may bear different titles as "priest," "minister," "teacher," "pastor," or their functional equivalents. Despite differences among titles, the basic task is common to all. That task of religious leadership should clearly be understood in advance by any leader. Under the searchlight of psychology it may be seen in clear outline and perspective. Otherwise it can only be guessed or imitated. What, in the light of psychology, does the task appear to be? Of what advantage may the psychological approach be to the religious leader?

Every religious leader is governed in his procedure by a particular mood or prevailing spirit in which he enters all his undertakings. That mood or spirit will silently, but surely and powerfully, determine his aims, methods, and appraisals. Among any one-thousand religious leaders taken at random there most certainly may be identified several types of leadership mood. Here are a few most frequently met with.

The imitative mood—The imitative religious leader assumes that some leaders have already performed the task acceptably and that others are now doing so. His tactics, therefore, are to read about and directly observe the aims, methods, and appraisals of other more or less eminent leaders and then to reproduce them as nearly as possible, hoping thereby himself to be of like value and eminence to his time. He repeats their utterances, apes their mannerisms, adopts their calendars, holds their beliefs.

The danger in this imitative mood lies in the fact that the eminence of the leader imitated is not a sound indicator of the value of his output. Eminence may be gained by sheer power of personality that may not be productive of real religious growth in the eminent leader's followers.

The common sense mood—Under this mood the leader relies on information and judgment picked up by chance in the course of his life without direct endeavor at vocational training. He is likely to over-rate his "self-made" or "natural" ability as superior to that of the trained man of the schools and their theories. He takes undue pride in the notion that he is an "unspoiled" servant of God, and that he, therefore, works much more closely in harmony with the divine Will.

The danger in the common sense mood is in the implied assumption that the untutored mind — if less profusely informed—is, nevertheless, more accurate in judgment and decisions than is the mind crowded with conflicting scientific and philosophical theories. Such an assumption will not bear investigation. It serves best the rationalizer in his attempt to find refuge from his own deeper conviction that he is inferior.

The mood of supernatural motivation—This is the mood of the leader who feels himself, more or less of the time, quite under the influence of supernatural power; that his aims are a revelatory deposit in his consciousness and his signals for action are provided him outright in unusual and mysterious phenomena; that his whole being—body and mind—is but the medium of a supernatural workman. This type of leader depends much upon "revelations" and impressions which he does not critically examine because he believes it would be disloyal to the divine Will to do so.

The danger in this mood is in the implied assumption that knowledge

and impressions that one is unable to trace in one's own mental processes are to be attributed to supernatural origin, and are, for that reason, more reliable and peremptory. The individual is likely thus to be fooled by his own repressed wishes coming up from time to time in the disguise of divine revelation.

The mood of subservience to institutions—The leader of this mood places great emphasis upon religious traditions and institutions whose long history and current popular power dictate to him his procedure. He takes his cue from what is written and accepted as institutional custom. His belief is that traditions and customs will automatically do good to those who take the trouble to learn and faithfully practice them; that his principle function is to perpetuate them by "transmission" to the rising generation.

The danger in this mood is in the implied assumption that current human needs to which he now seeks to minister are the same as those for which these traditions, customs, and institutions first arose. On the contrary, traditions, customs and institutions are so unlikely to be suited to current needs that no leader can safely permit them to dictate procedure without critical re-examination.

The psychological mood—This mood is an aspect of the more general scientific mood. The scientific leader observes, inquires, thinks, decides, and acts in systematic sequences, referring persistently to a rich background of well-organized information. He tests his own experience for reliability, and is governed in his procedues by the laws of the world of nature of which the members of his flock are themselves seen to be a part.

The psychological leader may adopt the ways of some other eminent leaders, but only when found to meet the best tests of value. He supplements common sense with the more precise findings of science. He re-examines traditions, customs, and institutions and appropriates only whatever current values remain in them at the time. He recognizes and draws upon extra-human resources, but ever holds himself responsible as a determining factor in the religious re-making of his people.

It seems reasonable to regard the religious leader's task as having to do with realizing some supreme good in the lives of his flock; and to think of his immediate part as the bringing of his own powers and skills into the process necessary thereto. His task must be one in which his abilities have a place. It follows that those tasks in which his abilities have no place will not be his tasks.

In the light of psychology, some leadership functions widely claimed are found to be quite beyond human capacity to perform. The claims to be able to "transmit" knowledge and to "dispense" spiritual blessings are examples. It is again reasonable to expect religious leaders to limit their claims of leadership service within the bounds of their human capacity. Some leaders err at this point because they either do not fully understand human limitations or are not aware of all the powers they have. They choose and are known by different titles supposed to indicate different functions and tasks, such as priest, prophet, evangelist, pastor, minister, teacher. In reality, these titles indicate various superficial aspects of the one and only part any human being can play in determinig the outcomes in the life of another. Let us see the basis for this view.

The outcomes expected in any type of religious leadership might be described in terms of changes in the experience and behavior of the leader's people in the direction of the supremely desirable kind of living. If salvation be the goal for them, that state—insofar as it may be affected by the

leader—may be described in terms of their knowledge and beliefs, their attitudes and dispositions, their volitions and actions. The general effect of the leader's work turns upon his ability to bring about changes in these various responses his peoples make to their respective life situations — his ability to make them learn. Through psychology it is found that the learning process follows natural laws of the mind; that, given certain conditions, certain changes in experience and behavior will follow. It also turns out that the effect of the religious leader in the process of learning is produced by his setting of conditions from which learning inevitably follows. One indispensable condition is some activity in the learner — intellectual, emotional, or volitional, usually all together. It may truly be said that all the leader is ever able to do is to stimulate and direct this learner activity. Changes do not happen in passive people. Learning takes place only in active minds. When, therefore, the religious leader calls himself a priest, or is so ordained by the church, his ability to affect people's lives is of the same nature as if he were ordained under any other title that might be mentioned — the ability to set conditions for learning. We may say that one religious leader "ministers," another "prophesies," another "evangelizes," while another "teaches." The only effect any one of these can have upon people is through whatever ability he may have to set the conditions of learning. Their techniques may differ; but their task is fundamentally the same and calls for the same fundamental understanding of the human mind. Speaking of the "priestly" function, the "evangelistic" function, the "pastoral" function, or of the "prophetic" function cannot properly be regarded as referring to fundamentally different functions. Even ordination by the church cannot change the laws of learning nor relieve the leader of the responsibility to abide by them and accept their restrictions.

In the light of these findings it must be concluded that the most important thing for the religious leader is his knowledge and appreciation of the laws of learning and his skills in controlling the learning processes according to those laws. His title and how he came by it are of secondary importance, having very little to do with the outcome. There is a discipline whereby he may acquire these essentials. In our language it goes by the name of "educational psychology." The prospective leader may give it any other name, or no name at all; but he cannot sidestep undergoing the discipline itself and at the same time satisfy the demands of the vocation of religious leadership. This is so because, in the final analysis, the religious leader is a shaper of human minds, a craftsman in human experience and behavior.

Religious values do not inhere in institutions, but in human experience. For this reason the religious leader must look to human experience for his task. He must find out how he can so effect the experience and behavior of his people as to make that experience and behavior richest and most meaningful.

It stands to reason that the most worthful religious experiences and behaviors should be given greatest emphasis in the religious leader's work. Through psychological study he may gain the extensive knowledge of religious response necessary for accurate discrimination between the worthful and the worthless, and thus be prepared to place emphasis most wisely. While the non-psychological leader will be choosing his emphases by limitation, under subservience to tradition, or waiting for impressions, all of which have been shown to be untrustworthy and only suggestive at best. The psychological approach offers no greater advantage than at the point where the leader must vary his emphases with developmental changes in individuals as they advance in years from baby-

hood through childhood and youth to maturity and old age.

And where shall the religious leader get his method if not from the psychology of the religious experience he hopes to develop? If he imitate the methods of other leaders, or take his method from tradition and custom, what is the probability that such methods will meet the needs of his particular situation? If he take his method from impressions or "intuitions," what is the probability that these are not born out of habit, fantasy, rationalization, or other false reactions to problem situations? Such questions should be sufficiently suggestive to the religious leader that he study the conditions that make for or against the religious experience chosen for emphasis and let those conditions suggest method. For example, tradition may be strong for young children memorizing a standard catechism or scripture verses taken at random; whereas psychology finds that the conceptual nature of catechism material is foreign to the child mind, and that memorization of scripture is no guarantee of its effect upon character. Again, tradition may be strong for indiscriminate but universal visitation of the homes of a parish by the pastor; whereas psychology finds that the pastor's individual dealing with the religious problems of individuals is the more necessary to insure religious health and growth in the parish.

The presentation up to this point may have left a picture of modern psychology as necessary but a nonetheless fearful disrupter of the joy that is supposed to be the reward of the servant of God who enters religious leadership. But the joy of religious leadership should root deeper than in the sense of being in an honorable vocation — it should root in the sense of sure-footed workmanship. This sense of precision the psychological approach is designed to give the leader. Reluctance to submit to the disciplines of psychology in preparation for religious leadership is much like the disposition to tend one's garden according to impulse, likes and dsilikes, tradition and custom, or in imitation of neighbors rather than look for guidance in scientific works on gardening; or like the disposition to treat one's health matters by limitation, tradition, common sense, or superstitious practices rather than follow the findings of the science of medicine and hygiene. The deeper, more lasting joy is the lot of him who leads by the more certain way of tested knowledge of human nature and the laws of its control. We may note in passing that these are the very laws of God. Psychology, then, should be regarded as the religious leader's great friend and teacher — his light on a vocational path beset with pitfalls and sharp turns.