

GUILT CONVERSION AND MODERN PSYCHOLOGY

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We do not mean, in such a short report, to make an exhaustive study about such a wide subject. However, within the brief space allotted we shall try to reach the simplest and most concrete form possible.

1. Critical evaluation of psychological interpretations about guilt

a. Sigmund Freud published his book *Totem and Taboo* in 1913. On the basis of Darwin and Alkinson this work gives a peculiar theory, according to which man acquires the feeling of guilt for having "fallen into the sin of parricide" in order to be able to satisfy his sexual needs by means of an incestuous form. According to that theory, primitive men used to live in small tribes, under the domination of a despotic chief: the "father." All the women of the tribe belonged exclusively to him. The father resorted to human sacrifices, castration, or expulsion from the tribe as a means for the maintaining of his sexual monopoly. All this led the young people to rebel against the father's tyranny: they banded together and killed him. Moreover, they ate his flesh in order to inherit his virility. Once they had thus satisfied their hatred, they got back a feeling of love for the father, which had been suppressed. It is in this kind of ambivalence, *hatred-love*, that the feeling of guilt is expressed.

We agree with Dr. J. H. van der Berg of *Psychology and Faith* when he says that "the accuracy in this ingenious theory becomes a starting point." Surely, the sexual behavior of primitive men — according to the opinion of a few anthropologists — does not fit into Freud's theory. This is clearly demonstrated in Dr. Malinovsky's book, *Sex and Repression in Savage Society*.

Freud published his *Totem and Taboo* before his *Second Topics* on the psychic apparatus. We may accept, on the basis of his second topic, his interpretation of the feeling of guilt as a result of the tension between the I and the Super-I.

Freud distinguishes two causes to the feeling of guilt: the fear and respect for the Super-I. The first obliges us to give up the demands of the "He." Yet the second one, who is much more exigent, leads to seek punishment, since it is impossible for him to hide the constant, forbidden desires from the Super-I. Such Freudian reflection is very important for the preacher of the Gospel, for it shows that the feeling of guilt may be the cause, and not the result of sin. One knows that some become delinquents for they unconsciously seek punishment from society in order to thus quieten their consciences. In my pastoral

work, I have come across many cases where the feeling of guilt is not necessarily the result of sin, e.g., a woman feels herself guilty of her mother's death, because of a provoked miscarriage. At the age of fifteen she had an argument with her mother about the birth of a little brother. The mother miscarried and died. The daughter had not sought this, yet she feels herself guilty of that miscarriage and death.

Dr. Rolio May makes a distinction between neurotic and ontologic guilt. I prefer to distinguish between neurotic and existential guilt. Existential guilt is something normal, since we are all sinners. Neurotic guilt is generally depressive. Nervous breakdown expresses itself by a disgust for life, a feeling of illness, a general discouragement which prevents initiative and realization. Such reflections are very important for those who want to evangelize. Most evangelists tend to intensify the feeling of guilt as a way to induce repentance. However, what happens with those who suffer from feelings of guilt which are not the result of sin? Is one not in danger of reaching the opposite result from what one is expecting? Is it possible that sin be converted into a form of self-punishment advocated from the pulpit?

It is also necessary to keep in mind the fact that there is not only a conscious guilt, but also an unconscious one. "Yet, such a feeling of guilt does not always penetrate into the realm of consciousness. On the contrary, it is sometimes entirely suppressed into the unconscious and manifests itself indirectly through irritability, bad temper, apathy, depression, psychosomatic troubles and so on. In other cases, it expresses itself through an interior tension, provoking a deep-uneasy feeling with continual suffering and fear of some coming catastrophe. These latter expressions are deeply associated with a necessity for punishment." In my book *Pastoral Psychology for all Christians*, I also mention the following symptoms of unconscious feeling of guilt: susceptibility, insomnia, feeling of insecurity, abnormal activity, tendencies to suicide and sensation of being away from God. The preacher must keep in mind the reality of unconscious guilt, in order to be able to help arrogant and self-satisfied persons who seem to have no feeling of guilt and affirm that they do not need to repent because they haven't offended anyone. Persons with such an attitude are the ones most in need. The feeling of guilt had been hidden in the unconscious, since the conscious mind found it intolerable. It becomes the sub-conscious mechanism of repression.

b. *Critical evaluation of psychologic interpretations about conversion.* The psychology of religion deals with conversion as a psychological phenomenon. Before going ahead with the different psychological interpretations, we must admit that the endeavors of that science are defeated in advance for the cause producing the effect, i.e., God, cannot be subject to any possibility of scientific examination.

The first work on psychology of religion, by E. D. Starbuck, appeared in 1899. It deals fundamentally with conversion. According to Starbuck's statistics, conversion occurs most frequently at the age of seventeen. It is relatively seldom after forty. Starbuck does not believe in any exclusively human phenomenon, a common experience in the development of adolescence. Though a conversion is claimed to be a relation between God and man, he says, this is purely an assumption.

The converted person thinks he has been transformed, yet he is mistaken.

George A. Coe made statistical studies, seeking to prove that those who are converted are mostly of a temperament where sensitiveness predominates over intellect. Thus the conversion or non-conversion of a person is determined by his or her temperament, not by the action of a transcendental being.

For T. A. Leuba, a psychologist of religion, God exists only as a psychical process. God had only a "subjective existence."

Yet not all psychologists of religion have an atheistic point of view. William James, in his famous work *Varieties of Religious Experience*, dedicates a chapter to "The Reality of the Unseen," which recognizes the existence of a transcendental being. He defines conversion as "the gradual or sudden process by which an I, up to then divided and consciously wicked, inferior and miserable, becomes unified and consciously good, superior and happy, as a consequence of his or her former attachment to religious realities."

For George Gerguer, when the psychologist of religion wants to convert to transcendence in a mere subjective experience, he is trying to eliminate a perturbing element, i.e., the "other side" from which the believer receives his faith and where he directs it.

Dr. William Sargant, a famous English psychiatrist, who, at the same time acknowledges himself as a Christian, has more recently written a study about the psychology of conversion. He writes that he has a deep belief and owes a great deal to the Christian education he received. He adds, "My choosing Wesley for a special study about the technique of religious conversions comes from my own Methodist education."

For him, religious conversion and "brain washing" correspond to the same physiological laws that cannot be controlled by their subject. According to Sargant, the religious technique of conversion basically consists in increasing suggestiveness, in order to then implant new ideas. Under the effects of that hyper-suggestiveness, the said ideas remain engraved in the subject. "An individual or a group may adopt new beliefs or ways of behavior as the result of a sudden and intense interior illumination, generally after a period of strong emotional tension." "In the same way, *brain washing*, having a political object, is aiming at the discovery of a new way of salvation, after calling forth a shock of violent emotions (anger, fear, and others) as a means of disengaging the old "burgess" mental system. If the communist gospel is accepted, love may be replaced by fear; yet, the ones who use such methods must know that an implacable judgment is awaiting them."

In much detail Sargant relates the conversion to communism of Arthur Koestler following a succession of sad events. On the other side, speaking of mass conversions on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), he shows that the story corresponds to modern physiological observations. He emphasizes the fact that, at Pentecost, Peter was successfully using the methods described in Sargant's book, and he advises using such techniques in evangelization. "Reality demonstrates," he says, "that there cannot be an authentic religious revival of protes-

tantism while other proselytism is mainly based on an appeal to the reason and intellect of adults. A stand must be taken against the emotional barriers which already exist. This would help extirpate previous points of view and make it possible for new and desired ones to be accepted. Even Wesley's efforts were relatively inefficacious until his heart was warmed from the outside."

Sargant's point of view is extremely dangerous for the Christian idea of evangelization. Indigenous preachers may obtain, with Sargant's technique the same results as those obtained by the communists with similar methods. True, we can accept the existence of the physiological mechanism described by Sargant; yet this also means the acceptance of Starbuck's thesis, according to which conversion is an exclusively human phenomenon. Describing some phenomenon does not explain its etiology.

We do not have sufficient space, here, for a more detailed critical analysis. But we offer a possibility of investigation.

2. Reflections about the psycho-theological aspects of preaching

We have too little space to elaborate on a psychology of evangelical preaching. We merely want to share a few psycho-theological reflections about the preaching against sin, aiming at conversion.

We think it necessary to establish a clear differentiation between (the) feeling of guilt and sin itself. The first is a psychological concept; the second is theological. The New Testament speaks about sin and not about the feeling of guilt, even if the latter is often implicit, as a consequence of sin. Paul refers to sin as a kind of being abiding in him (Rom. 7:14, 17, 20, 23, 25) producing an emotional state (feeling) of guilt which leads to the statement that he feels miserable. However, as mentioned earlier, a person may feel guilty while his emotional state is not necessarily the consequence of sin. Therefore, the preaching of the Gospel must be positive. When it speaks of sin it must always leave some hope, emphasizing the way leading to liberation in Christ. (Such idea of sin as a being abiding in the Christian would correspond to what is called the "child" in transactional analysis, where the "states" of the I are meant to express themselves as if there were several persons in one. Sometimes one of them is appearing, sometimes another.)

Some are neurotically seeking a pastor who gives them "spiritual lashes" from the pulpit, every Sunday. The "masochism" of certain parishioners needs the "sadism" of certain preachers. Thus a neurotic relation is established between preacher and parishioner, which is a guarantee of faithful attendance. I have often seen that neurotic need for punishment applied by the "messenger of God." Also, some parishioners after making their confession, have asked me, "Don't you despise me, pastor?" Sometimes it takes the form of a pleading, as if they are asking, "Please, despise me." I remember a girl saying to me, "Please, beat me. I feel some trembling in my chest and I can't cry, please give me the strongest possible box on my ear." This is a conscious expression of what some parishioners are unconsciously seeking. To beat them — either with the hand or with words — means nothing

else than to satisfy some neurotic necessity similar to some heathen expiation. However, Jesus Christ suffered on the cross for our redemption and therefore we do not need to suffer for our sins. True, the Lord is expecting our repentance. Yet to beat people from the pulpit, instead of being a means for their spiritual growth, is nothing more than to feed their neuroses.

The preacher has to deal with sin as with a theological problem because it separates man from God and from the goal of his existence. He must not try to increase the feeling of guilt as a psychological problem, but always remember that existential guilt is the expression of an emotional break. Berne shows that great troubles in our lives often take the form of games. His disciples have developed his ideas. It seems that a favorite game is "beat me." The pastor should not indulge in that game, neither from the pulpit, nor in private talk. The shepherd carries a stick, but it should be used to rescue the sheep that have fallen into the abyss, and not to beat him.

If the pastor helps to increase the feeling of neurotic guilt — which is not necessarily a consequence of sin — he may paradoxically help the people to fall into sin, one sin feeding the next sin, i.e., a sin that brings the punishment desired by the person in order to get rid of the feeling of guilt for a time.

The preacher ought to take as his basic hypothesis the fact that every human being feels himself a sinner, consciously or not. The forgiveness of God, objectively expressed by the atoning work of Jesus Christ, is, on a psychological level, the greatest healing power that exists. On a theological level it includes redemption.

It is not our intention to eliminate preaching against sin. We only intend to underline the dangers of increasing the feeling of guilt and remind us of the fact that preaching should be positive and liberating. We want to advocate the kind of preaching that contributes to the entire salvation of the believer including mental health. In his last book the famous American psychiatrist Karl Menninger (founder of the Menninger Hospital of Topeka, Kansas) insists upon the necessity of maintaining the preaching against sin. Moreover, he recognizes that psychiatry has helped to create a sort of erosion of the notion of sin. What we need today is balanced, evangelical preaching, based on a valuable exegesis and hermeneutic. Without falling into a cheap psychology we should be conscious of our need of both spiritual and mental health if we want to be channels of grace.

One last reflection about conversion. There are authentic conversions and others that are non-authentic. The latter is a sclerotic experience. Jesus invites us to "follow him on the way" and this makes abundant life possible. Conversion is necessarily lineal. A line is a continuation of dots. New birth is nothing else but one of those dots.

3. Elements for the elaboration of a theology of evangelization

Evangelical preaching insists, and so do we, on the new birth. Yet to remain a child is not the ideal Christian; for an ankylosed child becomes a dwarf. That is why the preaching of the Gospel should be supported by a good exegesis and hermeneutic. A Christian is one who

is in the process of becoming the Image of God. A Christian is also a pilgrim seeking fullness in Christ. "Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13-14). We have been developing these ideas in two books.

Biblical anthropology includes an implicit soteriology. The fullness of Christ (second Adam — Rom. 5:12-21; I Cor. 12:21,22 — or image of God — Col. 1:15) is the arrival at the end of the process of salvation, which includes not only the essence of man, but also his existence. A theology of evangelization should be supported by three basic points:

(i) A good exegesis and hermeneutic of the Gospel as proclaimed by Jesus, the gospel of the kingdom, good tidings to the poor and the gospel of salvation.

(ii) Becoming acquainted with the sociology and psychology of the man to whom we want to communicate the Gospel.

(iii) A methodology which, on one hand, must have a biblical foundation and, on the other, should be adjusted to the reality of the man of our time.

Before ending we would give a brief exposition of what we call *Evangelization of Tension* which will be exhaustively explained in my forthcoming book. The basic principles are alluded to in *Psychology of Religious Experience*. We are reproducing three paragraphs of the same. "The conclusions of this work are a call to humility for all evangelists . . . If I am not a living Gospel, but only have a knowledge of the Gospel, I shall only be able to offer biblical education, i.e. a transmission of knowledge, but not *communicate* the Gospel . . . We evangelists sometimes fall into pride and arrogancy, and this stems from three false presuppositions: 1. that we are a bag full of wisdom and power from God; 2. that the other person is also a bag, but empty of any knowledge of God; 3. that the evangelical task consists in pouring into the other some of our contents, so that he should be filled. We should not be deceived, nor deceive others. If our life is incomplete, why haven't we started to pattern it according to the stature of Jesus Christ. Moreover, the other one is *not* an empty bag, since in the worst of man there is the *Image of God*, asking for completion. That is why our approach should be respectful.

Concerning Evangelization

"I am convinced that the majority of evangelists of our time have tended to fill up bags and not to win men and lead them according to the dimension of Christ.

"The conclusions of said work demonstrate the necessity of a communication of the Gospel aiming at a linear conversion, whereas the technique of the full bag leads to "punctual" conversion. The linear includes the punctual, since a line is a succession of points. True conversion, i.e. the linear one, is the space between two points, the point where one *is and stands* and the point where one *should be*.

"Jesus knew that there is an *Imago Dei* in the worst of men and that, because of sin, this image of God is calling for completion. Hence,

what every human being needs is to discover himself as a man and as a perfectible man in the light of Jesus Christ. No man is an empty bag. The problem is not to put new contents into the bag, but to help tidy up that which is already in it, in order to be able to receive, in a harmonious form, that which is missing. It is to show the difference between what one is and what one should be. With a clear vision of his problem, man feels challenged, by his existential emptiness, to seek his ontological vocation. It is a question of trying to reach the fullness of his human condition given in Jesus Christ.

"Evangelization must tend to the "creation" of interior tensions for the discovery of our "to be" and "should be." The *evangelization of tension* goes out from the reality according to which there are, in every man, two deep realities: an *Imago Dei* distorted by sin and, as a logical consequence, the *necessity of completion*. Unfortunately, many are using conscious or unconscious mechanisms in order to ease the interior tension until it almost disappears. Yet the existential emptiness remains. The psycho-theological presuppositions developed in the present work determine the method we have called "*evangelization of tension*."

GUILT CONVERSION AND MODERN PSYCHOLOGY REPORT

Chairman: A. Martinez

Secretary: R.N. Nelson

The content of Dr. Leon's paper should be communicated to all who are involved in evangelism. This was the overwhelming conclusion of the participants in the group. The material Leon presented received enthusiastic acceptance in the group. A chief concern of the participants was that his books should be translated into English.

The significance of Leon's ideas lies in the damage that is being done to many members of congregations because of pastors' ignorance of the points covered in the study paper. This makes it imperative, in the opinion of the participants, that the Congress take steps to disseminate this material.

Leon's paper begins with a treatment of guilt as related to evangelization and conversion. Drawing from the works of other psychologists, Leon distinguishes between "existential guilt" and "neurotic guilt." For him, existential guilt is a realistic and healthy recognition by an individual of his own sin. Neurotic guilt, on the other hand, is the sick obsessive preoccupation of a person who has failed to recognize the expiation that the Lord Jesus has made once for all on the Cross. People who are predisposed toward neurotic guilt tend to seek out preachers who will punish them by continually emphasizing their badness. A neurotic interaction (*symbiosis*) can thus be established between neurotically guilt-laden persons and preachers who themselves have a neurotic need to inflict suffering on others. It constitutes a masochistic-sadistic partnership between persons whose problems feed on others' sickness.

This kind of dynamic may seemingly be effective in producing "conversions," states Leon, but cannot be seen as the result of the Holy Spirit's work. It is to be shunned, because instead of producing spiritual healing, it promotes emotional and spiritual sickness.

Quoting from Sargant, Leon points out that some preachers resort to brain-washing techniques to produce conversions, and that this brainwashing corresponds with identifiable physiological laws. Leon insists that brainwashing is not an ethical tool for the evangelist to use in proclaiming the Gospel.

Leon's paper distinguishes between sin as a theological issue and guilt (the subjective awareness, conscious or unconscious, of sin) as a psychological issue. The preacher has to deal with sin because it separates man from God, but he must not resort to tormenting guilt feelings in a neurotic manner.

Evangelical preaching, states Leon, should insist on the new birth as the beginning of a process of perfecting the image of God which is in every man. In order that the newborn Christian experience this perfecting of the divine image that is in him, hermeneutic and exegetical preaching is necessary.

From the lively interaction and contributions of those who participated in the discussion resulting from Dr. Leon's paper, the following