

Response

The Psychologisation of the Church:

on Jack Dominian's review of J.G. Sullivan's book 'Journey to Freedom: The Path to Self-Esteem for the Priesthood and Religious Life' (May, pp. 258–9).

Dr Dominian's review illustrates a tendency in the contemporary Church that has concerned me for some time—what I have called *psychologisation*, a rather ungainly term to evoke first the colonisation of religion by ideas derived from psychology, and, second, the (post-colonial) reduction of religion to psychology.

The traumatic event of recent Church history was, of course, Vatican II. Whatever else it may have been, it was a psychological event: it touched all of us in various ways and required a response of us. The range of individual reactions was as varied as the variety of human beings—the whole gamut of human emotions was involved. We might even say that there were 'victims' of the trauma; for many Church 'professionals' there ensued an 'identity crisis' that can itself be remembered primarily as a psychological event.

Moreover, many of the ideas of the Council are peculiarly vulnerable to a psychological interpretation though they are not themselves just psychological. For example, by being asked to *participate* in, rather than just observe, the liturgy, I am being required to make an adjustment that I may experience as psychologically difficult or rewarding. If I choose to describe the change (as I'm tempted to do) in terms of my own psychological adjustment, then I have begun to 'psychologise' the Church.

Furthermore, Vatican II was an event of the 1960s, the decade that has come to symbolise (or be blamed for) the many changes our society has undergone, including the new shift towards the individual, the belief that, even if you cannot change society, you can change yourself—a psychologically important shift.

All those priests and religious with their newly acquired 'identity crises' were a most vulnerable and hungry market. They had lived apart—usually quite literally—and suddenly found themselves, ill prepared, turned out into a confused and confusing world. Many, of course, did not survive. At least some of the rest were placed in the hands of the psychologists, the only 'experts' who could deal with the casualties. These 'experts' were at first brought in from outside; later we produced our own. In either case, however, the implicit assumption was that *our* wisdom, the wisdom of religion, could not cope: we handed over to the new wisdom of the psychologists. In this sense, too, religion began to be colonised by psychology.

In his opening sentence Dr Dominian says:

If one talks to a collection of priests in Britain about personal relations, feelings and emotions, one gets a variety of responses from the few who appreciate their importance to the many who hardly recognise their significance.

Dominian places himself in judgement on the psychological condition of Britain's priests, on the basis of their reaction to what I presume were his talks. The really important point is that 'the many' do not recognise the significance of the psychological perspective which is self-evident. This is not, as one would normally expect, a matter of disagreement, but of failure, failure which is, of course, proof of the priests' psychological inadequacy. It is, of course, *quite inconceivable* that the priests might be relying on a rather more ancient wisdom than psychology.

If that first sentence neatly puts all the Church's priests under the care of the psychologists, by the third sentence the psychologists have theology as well:

Despite the increasing awareness of the Church as a community of the People of God in which availability, love and sacrifice are the prominent credentials, priests are still trained mainly to offer the Sacraments and preach the word of God.

Seeing that a priest who did not 'mainly' offer the Sacraments and preach the word of God could hardly properly be described as a priest, you would expect his training to centre 'mainly' on what the Church expects its priests to do. But the really important point here is contained in the confidence with which the phrase 'community of the People of God' is interpreted primarily in terms of what psychological attributes it requires. Dominian says of his own parish:

after twenty years of Vatican II, the parishioners have hardly grasped that the Church as a community implies deep interaction between its members.

The crucial mention of Vatican II is, of course, our signal to read this as another failure—this time of Dominian's poor fellow parishioners. It is also to invoke the 'psychologised' version of Vatican II. But the real blow is delivered with that one word 'deep'. Whatever interaction may occur in the parish, it has to satisfy this extra criterion of being deep. And who could judge that except a psychologist? What could the parishioners do to satisfy Dr Dominian?

At the 'centre of this interaction', according to Dominian, 'lies the priest'. With his authority 'stripped of its significance', he is supposed to be left with the capacity to be Christ-like 'in the sense that Jesus had an enormous capacity to relate, love and experience empathy with his people'. Therefore 'his personality must be mature, free and available to relate in depth with his people'. If I am correct, he must, in other words, be a psychological phenomenon, the fully integrated person (this notional person is surprisingly difficult to track down), an *alter Christus*

... except that this time he really has to be just like Christ. (If this super-priest is not every anti-clericalist's nightmare, what would would be?)

Oddly, despite psychological screening, 'it is not possible to exclude wounded personalities' from the priesthood and religious life. In fact, it is often their wounds that 'motivate them to serve God in the celibate life'. (I thought this was a compliment until I read the next sentence, which says that these people are 'unsuitable for the life of service they have chosen'.) Unfortunately we cannot exclude the wounded, for the Gospel does not allow us—our religion is based on a conviction that Christ came to *save* us, i.e. that we are all wounded.

Strangely, Dominian tells us that the relevance of Sullivan's book for everybody 'is that we are all wounded people', but this is not a contradiction, for in the case of priests and religious it is 'their very wounds' which motivate them—that is what is wrong. (Mind you, he notes that they can mature, leave the priesthood or religious life and *marry*—apparently marriage is a sign of maturity!)

The final coup of this psychologisation is to undercut the necessity for Christ and the Church at all, by doing away with the concept of sin: 'While we find it acceptable to use the term "Sin" for our wounds, we run away from the possibility that these may be psychological, which is often the case.' We could translate this into: do not go to your priest if you have sinned, go to your psychologist. Dominian actually concludes with what amounts to a commercial for psychologists. If through reading Sullivan's book 'one finds that it has a special relevance for one's own personality, *and as a result seeks help* [my emphasis], then the aim of the author to liberate people from their wounds will be amply rewarded.'

This review is only one very good example of a tendency that could be much more widely documented. It was a surprise to find it so baldly stated. As I said, the process of 'psychologisation' put down its roots in the years after the Council but fed also on a more general movement in the West. Nowhere, so far as I know, has this colonisation managed to survive so well as in the Church. It is time, in my view, that we fought back, if only to catch up with everyone else, who saw through it years ago.

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