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## THE ROLE OF SPIRITUAL GUIDES FROM A PSYCHOLOGIST'S POINT OF VIEW

In times past when psychology used to be understood as the science of the soul, it might have been easier to speak of matters pertaining to spirituality from a psychologist's point of view. We have come a long way from that time when the main concern of psychology was theoretical speculation regarding the invisible soul and its rational, immortal or spiritual nature. Instead of the soul, mind and behaviour have become the subject-matter of its study ; instead of theoretical speculation, empirical research has become its methodology.

Though not interested in the soul, modern empirical psychology "invaded the very area of the soul ; it dealt intimately with the inner life of the mind and personality."<sup>1</sup> Instead of collaboration and co-existence, however, rivalries and mutual suspicions arose between religion and psychology. Sigmund Freud's rather naive observation that most religious phenomena are to be understood as forms of neurosis added fuel to the fire of this rivalry. Freud's psychology had lost only its soul ; it still had a mind, both conscious and unconscious. Recently though, through the development of the behaviourist school, psychology lost its mind as well. Behaviour took its place. The behaviourists reduced man to his behaviour—soulless, mindless behaviour. Psychology has become the study of human behaviour understood mechanically in terms of associationistic learning. How can such a "psychology without a soul" say anything about the dynamics of the spiritual life, in which it does not believe ?

### **The Realm of Spirituality**

Although psychology often deals with the same areas of man's inner life as spirituality, the empirical realities of mind and behaviour cannot be equated with man's spiritual dimension. Spirituality refers

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1. Charles F. Kemp, *Physicians of the Soul* (New York : Macmillan, 1947) p. 69.

to that dimension of a person's life which deals with his relation to the Ultimate Being or Goal in which he believes and with the realization of that relationship in his life here and now. As such, this dimension transcends the scope of any empirical investigation or research. "The basis of the religious attitude is constituted by the entire dependency and surrender to the highest transcendental Authority."<sup>2</sup> No empirical science can legitimately pass a judgement on this transcendental Ultimate or on one's relationship with it.

The spiritual dimension of man, although not equivalent to his psychic life, cannot be said to be totally unrelated to it. Man is an embodied spirit. As such, he can realize his spiritual aspirations only in and through his bodily and mental realities. The empirical sciences which deal with these aspects of man's life can, therefore, add to the understanding of his spiritual realization. Psychological insights "can enlighten and facilitate phases of religious encounter, particularly in the light of personality factors of the one 'receiving' or undergoing this experience."<sup>3</sup> Psychological techniques can provide spiritual directors with increasing skill and understanding of many of the conditions by which spiritual growth can be facilitated. No claim, however, is made here that the spiritual life and mental health can be equated. As Andre Godin says, "the grace of God does not depend directly on the psychic dispositions, and can perfectly operate the sanctification of the neurotic man before, during and after...treatment."<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, the different dispositions of a person before, during and after his healing as elucidated by psychology can be a great help to both the person concerned and his spiritual guides.

### **The Need for a Guide**

The world of psychology is not monolithic. There are different schools of thought and approaches in it, like the psychoanalytic school, the behaviourist school, the cognitive developmental school, etc. In spite of their differences and apparent irreconcilability with each other, they all agree on the need we all have for guides in our development. None of them considers man as an island who can develop and thrive

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2. J. J. C. Prick, "The Basic Relations of Man to His World," *Rencontre/Encounter/Begegnung* (Utrecht and Antwerp : Uitgeverig Het Spectrum, 1957), p. 395.
  3. Charles A. Curran, *Religious Values in Counseling and Psychotherapy* (New York : Sheed and Ward, 1969), p. 12.
  4. Godin, A.. "Therapeutic and Pastoral Work," *Life of the Spirit*, XII (October, 1957), p. 162.

in splendid isolation. Apart from the general dependence on each other, they also recognize the role that persons with deeper insight into the dynamics of human psyche can play in another person's growth. The role that such experts play has traditionally been distinguished and described in accordance with the state and stage of growth that the person to be helped is going through. Thus, psychological assistance rendered to a person in the course of 'normal' growth is called 'counselling'; it is described as 'psychotherapy' when it is applied to persons undergoing some abnormal phase in their development; it is considered as 'guidance' or 'direction' when the aim of psychological intervention is to lead the person to higher maturity.

### Different Approaches

Counselling, psychotherapy or guidance can thus be considered to be the application of psychological insights to the growth, healing, or the process of maturing of a person. There are many different schools of counselling, therapy and guidance employing different methods and rationale. These various trends which are prevalent today, however, can be classified as taking three distinct directions; (i) Non-directive, (ii) Directive, and (iii) Interactional.

(i) *Non-directive approaches.* The term 'non-directive' may give the impression that this method does not give any important role to the guide.<sup>5</sup> This impression, however, is not correct. The non-directive approach ascribes an important role to the guide. His role, though, is understood in terms of a sympathetic and non-judgemental presence which provides the person to be helped with an atmosphere in which he can grow, heal and progress towards maturity. According to Carl Rogers, the main proponent of this approach, the guide's function is to create an environment for the client<sup>6</sup> in which his inhibited tendency towards self-actualization can once again function properly. The basis of this approach is the conviction that "if certain conditions are present in the attitude of the person designated "therapist" in a relationship, namely, congruence, positive regard, and empathetic understanding, then growthful change will take place in the "other", the person designated as "client."<sup>7</sup> Rogers has a very optimistic view

5. In this article the term 'guide' will refer to counsellor, psychotherapist and guide or director.

6. The term 'client' will be used in this article to refer to the person being helped by the guide.

7. Betty D. Meador and Carl Rogers, "Client-centred Therapy," in R. Corsini (Ed.), *Current Psychotherapies* (Itasca, Illinois: F. E. Peacock Publishers, 1973), pp. 125-126.

of man. He postulates that in every human being there is a tendency towards self-actualization which will "develop all (its) capacities in ways which serve to maintain or enhance the organism."<sup>8</sup> The forces of this self-actualizing tendency clash with the expectations of significant people, like parents, teachers, etc., at an early age of a person's life. In order to gain acceptance and love from these people, the person begins to stifle these self-actualizing forces in a way that it suits their expectations. As a result, the process of self-actualization is nipped in the bud. The role of the guide is to provide once again the environment which can actuate "an already existing capacity in a potentially competent individual."<sup>9</sup> The guide provides such an environment through empathetic understanding, unconditional positive regard for the client and a therapist-client relationship based on genuineness and congruence.<sup>10</sup> No attempt is made in this method to impose the guide's value-system or insights on the client. Instead, the client's already existing forces of growth and self-actualization are provided a congenial climate in which to function.

(ii) *Directive Approaches.* If the atmosphere in the non-directive approach is a very 'permissive' one, that of the directive methods is one of 'regimentation'. Here it is the guide who decides the 'regime' the client is supposed to follow. He decides what is good for the client and how to arrive at that goal. Most methods of behaviour therapy, such as desensitization, aversive therapy, instrumental conditioning, etc., are strictly directive.<sup>11</sup> The client has to follow the guide's instructions if he wants to be helped. This method is based on the view that man is nothing but his behaviour. If you can change his behaviour, you can change him. Behaviourists understand change as the result of associationistic learning. They do not see much difference between teaching a little dog to do tricks and training an infant to be a good person. In spite of its inhuman or often anti-religious view of man, this method has some similarity with certain well-known practices of spiritual direction which were prevalent both in the East and West,

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8. Carl Rogers, "A theory of therapy, personality, and interpersonal relationships, as developed in the client-centred framework," in Koch, S. (Ed.), *Psychology: A Study of a Science*, Vol. III. *Formulations of the Person and the Social Context*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959), p. 209.

9. Carl Rogers, *Ibid.*, p. 221.

10. Carl Rogers, "Client-centred Therapy," in Silvano Arieti (Ed.), *American Handbook of Psychiatry*, Vol. 3 (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1959), p. 184.

11. Cf. Albert Bandura, *Principles of Behaviour Modification* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969).

where spiritual guides decided what was good for the clients and prescribed the precise steps to be followed in order to reach this goal. Apart from this superficial similarity, there does not seem to be anything in common between the modern behaviourists and these spiritual guides. The spiritual guides, for one thing, did not consider man as a bundle of behaviour patterns. Their methods of changing the behaviour of man were the result of a conviction that changes in insight or spiritual readiness by themselves were insufficient to effect transformation of long acquired habits.

(iii) *Interactional Approaches*. The third type of psychotherapies and counselling and guidance techniques can be described as 'interactional'. Unlike the non-directive or directive approaches, both the guide and the client are genuinely active here. Neither of them is totally passive; neither monopolizes the initiatives. The guide does not become a passive catalyst as in the non-directive approaches, or a strict disciplinarian as in the directive approaches. He communicates his convictions to the client and is ready to modify them through interaction with him. The client, on the other hand, is not totally a passive recipient of instructions, as in the case of directive approaches, or someone left to the dynamics of his own self-actualizing tendencies. Both the guide and the client are actively contributing to each other's well-being and growth in the interactional approaches.

This interaction, however, can take place on two levels: on a 'superior-subject level', or on an equal-to-equal level'. On the superior-subject level the interaction takes place between a guide who is an authority figure, either a parent or a teacher, or someone holding some office in the community, and a client who is someone subjected to him. On the equal-to-equal level, or 'peer-group' level, there is equality of the participants. Direction is not received from an authority figure but from a friend. There is no constraint to accept the guidance or direction. If it is accepted it is out of conviction, not through coercion. Jean Piaget holds the view that peer-group interaction is better than unilateral respect for authority figures for the development of a child's moral attitudes.<sup>12</sup> He is especially critical of the role of parental authority in this development. If the child accepts a value-system from the parents, not out of conviction, but out of fear of losing their affection or some privileges, or out of fear of being punished, that value-system may not be long-lasting in the child. When the pressure

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12. Jean Piaget, *The Moral Judgement of the Child* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1932), pp. 319-320.

is removed the value-system which was drummed in through pressure will begin to evaporate. The conclusion, therefore, is not that the parents and teachers should not present their children with a value-system, but that they must do so in an atmosphere in which the children are free to question it and enter into a discussion about it without the fear of being penalized in any way. Hence, even the authority figures, if they can create an atmosphere of 'peer-group-interaction', can facilitate the growth and development of their children. The same holds good for the guides who are engaged in helping persons in their growth, healing or maturity.

### **The Better Method**

Now the question arises : which of these approaches is the ideal one in spiritual counselling, therapy or guidance ? Should the spiritual guides be Rogerian-type catalysts who follow the Lao-Tse's method of "Wu-Wei" or non-action because "to interfere with life of things means to harm both them and one's self" ?<sup>13</sup> Or, should they be Skinnerian-type regimentarians who know what is best for their clients and how to reach it ? Or, should they all follow an interactional approach on a peer-group level ? There is sometimes a tendency to extol the virtues of one method exclusively, especially by the followers of that method, and prescribing it as a panacea for all ills. Any attempt to answer the question of methods or approaches in a vacuum, without any reference to the state and need of the client seems to be doomed to failure. Any approach must be suited to the client's disposition and needs. From this perspective, one can say that all three approaches we have discussed may have some role to play in spiritual counselling, therapy or guidance. For example, in the case of a person who finds it difficult to mend his ways in spite of his convictions and spiritual readiness, non-directive or interactional methods may be of little help ; what he needs may be the support of the directive method of some behaviour therapy. A person, on the other hand, whose growth, healing or maturity is thwarted by an overstrict environment of inhibition and regimentation may be greatly benefited by the sympathetic and understanding presence of a genuine and congruent director. The interactional approach, especially on a peer-group level, is always conducive to growth and healing and maturity in a person with a sense of self-awareness. As we shall see below, the ability to function on a 'pal-to-pal' basis is one of the basic requirements for the success of

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13. Lao-Tse, quoted in Martin Buber, *Pointing the Way* (New York : Harper and Row, 1957), p. 54.

any counselling, therapy, or guidance, even when non-directive and directive methods are employed. One and the same person may be in need of the different approaches at different stages or periods of his development. He may even be in need of these different approaches even within the same stage or period with regard to different issues or problems. For example, one and the same person may be in need of the help of the directive method with regard to his sexual problems, and of the interactional approach with regard to justice-related issues. The success of any guidance depends on the ability of the spiritual guide to sense the pulse of the client and respond to his needs with wisdom and love.

### Qualities of a Spiritual Guide

As in any other field of counselling, in therapy or guidance one of the essential characteristics of a good spiritual guide is spiritual wisdom; he must have the basic insights into what he is dealing with. He need not be in the highest levels of spiritual life. In other words, a spiritual guide need not necessarily be a 'saint', although it helps, no more than a good physician need be the healthiest person around, or a good economist be a successful businessman. A spiritual guide who is a saint certainly adds credibility to his guidance. But a 'saint' without the necessary spiritual wisdom will never be a competent spiritual guide, just as the healthiest man is not necessarily going to be the best physician. Teresa of Avila, one of the great spiritual guides of the past, once said that if she were given a choice, she would select a wise person rather than a saint to be her spiritual guide. A person with spiritual wisdom and psychological insights would be of great assistance in helping people to make progress in their spiritual life.

Another basic quality which has always been considered essential to the success of any spiritual guidance, and which of late has been lost sight of, is that the guide must be a friend of the person to be guided. In other words, there must be room for peer-group interaction with the guide. Piaget's valid observation that peer-group interaction is the proper atmosphere conducive to the personalization of values is relevant here. Such an interaction without constraint or coercion or fear was possible in the days when the spiritual guides and fathers were not part of the establishment. They were often hermits, desert fathers or monks who were not authority figures. The only authority they had was the authenticity of their wisdom because of the lives they led. People who went to them for guidance could reveal their problems

and accept their directions without fear or constraint. Even in the middle ages the Irish confessors, who guided the believers with the help of the 'penitential books', were called *anmchara* or "soul friend".<sup>14</sup> Such friendship and freedom from any sort of coercion is essential for the success of any guidance. A spiritual guide, appointed by the 'authorities', is not often regarded as a friend by the persons 'obliged' to receive guidance from him. To be a helpful guide he has to prove himself to be a friend, a "soul-friend", rather than an authority figure, with whom people can interact on a peer-group level, and whose guidance they can accept on conviction rather than through direct or indirect coercion.

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14. John T. McNeill, *A History of the Cure of Souls* (New York: Harper and Brothers, Publishers, 1951), p. 115.