

# Transformations of Science & Religion through Humanistic Psychology

by Mike Arons

I would like to consider in this talk some of the transformations which have been occurring in the relationship of science and religion over the past decade or so. Science and religion have co-existed in the West over the past few centuries and as some philosophers have pointed out have common origins, yet have recently been characterized by their opposition and their apparent incompatibility. It is my belief that humanistic psychology and the values associated with it - and with the new consciousness in general - have been helping to transcend the historical opposition between science and religion. In this process humanistic psychology has been helping to restore a basis of authenticity to both.

This restorative or healing process which I feel is underway has far-reaching implications for most other domains of our socio-historical existence - just as the end of a feud between two members of a family alters the vision and possibilities of the entire family. Our sense of ourselves, our sense of historical potential, our sense of what is important is due also to change in this process. Our science seems in process of becoming more value-centered, but also infused with the energy of a subjectivity hitherto denied. Put differently, our science probably will no longer be conducted exclusively by those who feel they must "play dumb" (i.e., deny subjective experience). But rather, the "objectivity" sought by a science through playing dumb will actually be enhanced to the degree that science owns up to subjective experience and is conducted by fully-functioning humans. On the other hand, our religion should come to see itself in terms of enlightenment rather than in terms of blindness, as in the sense of 'blind faith.' Self-discovery - personal or finite awareness and realization - should be seen as not incompatible with Divine communion. Furthermore, the stress on process already accepted as necessary in the sciences has also been centering the humanistic movement, but here relative to personal development. It is this notion of process orientation along with stress on the unfolding of consciousness which could restore a freshness to religion.

It is ironic that in attempting to get a feel for the healing process which I propose is now occurring between science and religion, I am obliged to point to a polarity which I feel underlies the transformation taking place. I speak here of the polarity of "direct salvation" and "indirect salvation." I suggest that humanistic psychology and the new consciousness have been lining themselves up on the side of "direct salvation," while modern science has identified itself with "indirect salvation." What is ironic is that by taking a countervailing position to science, humanistic psychology and the new consciousness risk being trapped in this polarity, just as they are helping science and religion to see how they can become "unhooked" from it. One measure of the inclination of humanistic psychology to identify itself with direct salvation is the refocusing or centering on the human rather than on the methodological. In general, we have seen a major shift in psychology - and in the society as well - away from the abstract and deferred kind of scientific psychology and towards the clinical, or human services. This trend extends at least to and through most of Western Europe. Youth there as well as here have

come to value the person-helping fields - the direct helping of others and of themselves. As a humanistic psychologist, I recognize that even behavior modification has benefited from this trend.

It is this general trend which I identify as the trend towards "direct salvation." But what has differentiated humanistic psychology from, say, behavior modification or medical approaches of the past is the focusing on consciousness. One of the clear-cut successes of humanistic psychology over the past decade or so was the reestablishment of the term consciousness in the vocabulary of psychology. That term now finds itself at the very center of the social revolution as we speak of Black consciousness, social consciousness, women's consciousness, and so forth. In the trend towards "direct salvation" in general, I see something of an anti-scientific mood - at least to the extent that much modern science has identified itself with "indirect salvation" and has implied that "direct salvation" is mostly an illusion. On the other hand, with the current stress on consciousness, I see a reaction against much of Western religion - which has always offered the possibility of "direct" and "personal salvation," but at the apparent price of irrationality or blindness (e.g., the "act of blind faith") accompanied by images of meekness, sheep-like servility, or acquiescence to authority. Understandably, then, science as it developed had to oppose itself to much of what had become associated with Western religions. But by siding with "enlightenment" as opposed to irrationality or blindness, science came to see the only possible "salvation" as the bit-by-bit elimination of darkness and irrationality - i.e., of the subjective - by a concerted long-term approach of scientific method coupled with the technology for application. The scientist sacrificed his or her personal considerations - even his or her normal life - for the distant goal of collective salvation in the form of alleviation of pain and suffering, for greater liberty through reduced burdens and greater understanding of options, and also for the simple joy of being part of a social team and of questing and testing.

Scientific cynicism concerning the possibilities of "direct salvation" has tended - as science has succeeded - to be accepted as truths in the society at large; and despairing of any possibility to achieve "direct salvation" or refusing to blind themselves, several generations have grown up developing their lives and values around the unique prospects of "indirect salvation" through science. Yet those same successes of science, liberating as they were, also pointed increasingly to the greater failure at the level of human meaning. One lady, it is said, phoned the T.V. station during the broadcast of the third moon walk to bitterly complain that this boring nonsense was replacing the Smothers Brothers. Ludicrous, perhaps, but all the moon shots show little promise of relieving our everyday problems of meaning here in this life on this earth. Indeed, the successful shots which apparently sent the first man out into space revealed at a more subtle level the inability of humans to really escape their context, their environment. In fact, what was sent into space was a can packed with a man and his juices. The existentialists - who provided some of the historical roots for humanistic psychology and the new consciousness - focused on the poverty of meaning even during a cornucopia of facts, knowledge, and understanding of the natural world and of humans as epiphenomena of natural law.

Camus, for one, never denied science or its potential value, only its relevance to his life here and now. To him, religion offered significance only to the extent that one bought a hopeful future on blind faith. That kind of meaning he refused. But he also refused the usual alternative, that life without meaning is not worth living - i.e., the alternative of suicide. It is hard to say what Camus

did buy. But one has the feeling it was process, for as Camus inferred - one could only imagine, not know - that Sisyphus, though condemned eternally to his rock, is nonetheless happy. Whatever the particular route taken by Cairns or the other existentialists, the existential shift was definitely again towards some form of "direct salvation." Existentialism rejoined us to this long but recently eclipsed Western tradition. Socrates, of course, had led his students to a domain of consciousness-recollection - via which the student could come directly in touch with universal truths or essences. Socrates' approach is that of the guru, an approach highly favored today by many young persons as they seek something beyond the sterile indifferent facts which constitute their normal academic curricula. Indeed, the students now seem to insist that what is taught come from the soul or experience of the teacher, and in a dialogue of souls. This is another way of saying that the student wants knowledge and understanding to transform his or her own soul. Nothing is more demeaning as a prospect for today's youth than that they end up like engineers - understanding and pushing fact or knowledge buttons - without some personal transformation occurring. Of course, this tendency can lead to what Peter Mann calls "narcissism." But logically it needn't.

In the Western tradition of "direct salvation," revelation of course provided the possibility of receiving communication directly from the divine. Still, for those not in tune - who could not verify the authenticity of the communication - revelation led as easily to authority. And it was as reaction against such authority that the age of reason and subsequently the age of modern science developed. Indeed, to assure the elimination of all claims to salvation or understanding not verifiable by the common senses, science denied the very existence of revelation or intuition and metaphysics. Kant falls into the Western tradition of "direct salvation" in that he saved intuition - against the attacks of the empiricists - as a possible source of understanding and of transformation. Psychoanalysis is in the same tradition of offering at least a promise of limited "personal salvation" by the individual breaking through from illusion to reality - though as Freud pointed out, the finite reality achieved in therapy offers itself as a much more modest form of salvation than the divine reality promised by religion. Carl Jung, of course, is a very good representative of the school of "direct salvation" in the Socratic sense, for his collective unconscious is the reservoir for greater universality which can be tapped by the individual. Jung provides the modern link to connect Socrates with the long tradition of "personal" and "direct salvation" found in the Orient. If the historical roots of humanistic psychology are in European existentialism, the field has been blossoming through its contact with Oriental philosophy. Not only does that tradition tend to stress "direct salvation," it often stresses it as enlightenment - i.e., becoming fully conscious.

There are three points of transition that I would like to emphasize which have been inviting psychology, scientists, and others in today's society in general towards a more Oriental emphasis. First, I shall mention in passing - but certainly with no attempt to de-emphasize - the importance of the psychedelic movement and the kinds of experiences reported there which verge both on the religious and on expanding consciousness.

Next, I should like to point to the body of recent psychological research on creativity, which leaves the indelible message that the greatest discoveries in science - even science at its most objective level - are made not by denial of subjectivity or the so-called primitive experiences including emotions, but via this subjectivity. The paradoxical nature of the creative experience,

from which science is a major beneficiary, is well-expressed by Frank Barron as he describes the creative genius:

He may be at once naive and knowledgeable, being at home equally to primitive symbolism and to rigorous logic. He is both more primitive and more cultured, more destructive and more constructive, occasionally crazier and yet adamantly saner than the average man.

The creativity research suggests that some of the greatest contributors to “objective” knowledge serving “indirect salvation” in the arts and in science are also those who most consistently report creative, peak, mystical, or other religious experiences. The link between “indirect” and “direct salvation” - between science and religion - seems to be in the way the person experiences, and hence in the nature and quality of the experience.

Third, I would like to recall some of Maslow’s contributions to the resurrection of subjectivity. By distinguishing between deficiency and being types of experience, he points to the possibility of two kinds of “subjectivity”; one as scientists have always claimed - which is obstructive - in that the world is seen through the bias of “subjective” needs, or put more generally, through some form of narcissism. By contrast, Maslow calls the being type of experience the potential for a Taoistic kind of science - a subjectivity which encourages the world to reveal itself as it is unconditionally, beyond responding by desperation to deficiency needs which obliges that the world must then be dealt with instrumentally. This defenseless sort of Taoistic subjectivity intrinsically rejoices in its communion with reality and hence is a fuller experience of it.

Maslow, of course, was encouraging this latter kind of science which was the corollary of “personal salvation” or of personal development. Yet he recognized that not only was science the only way that knowledge could progress (i.e., lead to “indirect salvation”), but also that by aiming “outwards” with science - and not “inwards” at “direct salvation” - the individual was more likely to attain “direct salvation.” Here Maslow was warning against salvation becoming a goal or end in itself, one which would then be pursued instrumentally. Under such circumstances, God (or all the symbolism of the struggle for salvation) becomes rubricized - i.e., turned into idols, or graven images.

If humanistic psychology has helped to re-spiritualize science (Leary speaks of “sensualizing scientists”), then what has it been offering to religion? There is now the prospect of religion giving up playing dumb and seeing salvation as quite compatible with greater understanding and insight - just as science can give up its act of playing dumb by denying all subjectivity and can see subjectivity as a legitimate basis of understanding. Popular religion has tended to specialize in some abstract spirituality, as popular science has been seen as specializing in hard facts. But existentialists like Camus, humanistic psychologists like Maslow, and Oriental philosophers like Lao Tzu have all stressed the discovery of the infinite in and through the finite. The here and now is already the after-life. Each soul is, or is a portal to, the infinite. Again, it is a matter of how the finite is experienced. Existential, humanistic, and Oriental philosophies have all stressed experience as process. Thus, humanistic psychology contributes perhaps even more greatly to religion by not itself becoming a religion. All humanistic psychologists have pointed to the anti-spiritual consequences when religion becomes fixed and then defensive.

Paul Ricoeur has been making a particularly subtle study of the path from the dawning of consciousness to the other end - the reified consciousness - which he calls evil. The sacred and the evil being dimensions of each other, the sacred is experienced in the context of

ambivalence. It is in the tolerance for ambivalence, or what those studying creativity called tolerance for ambiguity, that something beyond the definable may be discovered. This indefinable Ricoeur sees as the "Wholly Other" - discovered in our own ambivalent, existential condition - between our determinisms and our meanings. This "Wholly Other" is experienced as a call, or Kerygma. I do not think that Maslow was referring to anything much different when he used the less religious, more psychological term "potentials." The call, or the sense of potential, is not a goal or end - but rather an experience, signaled by meaning and fulfillment, which through divinity ties one to all. It seems to me that it is at this level, the call, that humanistic psychology ends and differentiates itself from religion. The call is heard, experienced. But the caller remains unknown.