
THERAPY, POLITICS AND SPIRITUALITY

by

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There is no doubt that a big movement towards spirituality is taking place today in the human potential movement. More and more books like **A Course in Miracles** or Ken Wubers's books are being read and studied. Courses on meditation, Amerindian teachings, dream work, guided imagery, voice techniques, and other spiritually inclined subjects proliferate.

One could suggest many reasons for this turn. The initial reaction of humanistic psychologists against analytic tradition and behaviourism - with their intellectual aridity, their medical bias, their objectification of people as 'sick' - means a turn to the body, to feelings, to the non-rational, to notions of wholeness. It seems inevitable that eventually the limitations of an ego-based psychology would be superceded, and the beginnings of a beyond-the-ego psychology would be formulated. This already has a long history - in Jungian psychology, in psychosynthesis, in the Castaneda cult of the sixties, in the growth of Subud and other spiritual groups, in the influence of Zen in the U.S. and in much else. Yet today the 'spirituality' movement appears to be gaining a second wind, perhaps finding more mature foundations and formulations.

As well as the push beyond ego-psychology (which Jung was working on many decades ago), another important factor is a powerful disenchantment with Western materialism. The post-war ideals and optimism have shattered irrevocably. The exuberant sixties gave way to the grim seventies and the violent eighties. One reaction to this decay in Western values, and the slump of the Western economies, is the **turn to the world of the spirit, and the search for enlightenment and liberation from suffering and separateness.**

Hence the shift to spirituality doesn't take place in a vacuum. It occurs in an extremely unstable socio-political context. It also has behind it centuries of post-Enlightenment disillusionment with religion. What effect does the **historical context** have on us today?

Historically Western society has suffered enormous psychic splits. A tremendous emphasis on individualism dating from the Renaissance led to the fundamental separation of spirituality from politics - religion became concerned with individual salvation, with the after-life and, as often as not, with the preservation of the Church's considerable privileges and wealth in this life. It

is still often said that the function of religion is in the **private** sphere of personal spirituality. Yet if we go back to the roots of Judaic-Christian ethics and spirituality, we find that the Jewish vision of the 'new age' was both spiritual **and** social. It involved not just a transcendental relationship between the human being and the divine, but also the establishment of the just community - the state of 'shalom'. However this sense of social justice - still found in early Christianity - proved too radical for Western society and the established churches, and religion came either to support the status quo absolutely, or became other-worldly. Curiously enough, many of the spiritual groups that have sprung up in the last two decades have also tended to focus exclusively on the individual and his/her enlightenment.

The same historic split produced an aversion in political liberation ideologies and movements towards personal development, particularly spiritual development. Thus Marxism, as the key modern philosophy of political liberation, has explicitly denied the spiritual nature of human beings, and has concentrated on the liberation of **material** conditions and relationships.

Thus our culture is riven in two by a horrific dualism, or set of dualisms: matter and spirit; humanity and God; flesh and love - these apparent opposites confront each other across an abyss.

Attitudes towards personal development in our society have very much reflected these splits. On the one hand the book **A Course in Miracles** as an example of individual spirituality is very much concerned with **me**, and **my** relation with God, spirit, love and so on. Personally I find it a depressingly narcissistic vision. At the other extreme we find the Marxist Left, many of whom attack the whole of personal growth as "petit-bourgeois individualism".

There is something tragic about this split. Both spirituality and politics are facets of the human need for transcendence beyond the finite - to put it in more psychological terms, a transcendence over the ego. Spirituality offers the surrender to an egoless, non-divided world of experience. The political vision aims for the transcendence over poverty, oppression, injustice. But to follow one at the expense of the other is lopsided. If my own spiritual growth still leaves me blind and deaf to the cries of the starving and the tortured and the oppressed, is it growth at all? Equally, if my political vision refuses to admit the importance of individual emotional, physical and spiritual liberation, we are led to the collectivist nightmares we have experienced in this century in the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany and more recently in Kampuchea.

Therapy itself may not only take us to the limits of a previously known identity, to the limits of the ego, the personality, the body; it may also

guide us to a deeper sense of identity, to the Self, the "eternal I" that goes under many names today. On the other hand we are also able to set the therapeutic journey within a socio political context - your growth and your personal problems are not exclusively yours, but are also a reflection of immense global social and political upheavals which are breaking up previously stable structures such as the nuclear family.

Essentially the split between the two modes of awareness is spacious. It is itself an alienation. If through spiritual work I go beyond the fortress of my own ego, I inevitably encounter others - or my spirituality has remained narcissistic and solipsist. This encounter with others brings up all the issues about community that are fundamentally political - how do I live with others in freedom and mutual cooperation? If our present society doesn't correspond to that community, how do we change it?

Equally the search for political liberation must deal with the nature of the individual who has been politically and socially oppressed and psychologically alienated. In what ways have sexuality, the emotions, spirituality, the body, been subjugated in a society full of political alienation?

The consequences of a failure to heal this dualism are dire: on the one hand an ethereal, fundamentally narcissistic spirituality which states: "I am the world; if I am enlightened, then the world is enlightened. My thoughts create the world, therefore if I change my

thoughts, the world changes. On the other hand, politics without spirituality leads to the collectivist tyranny and the gross abuse of the individual.

In therapy we confront all these issues. Therapy is both a spiritual and a political process - the two are intertwined.

I am not suggesting every client will - or should - follow a spiritual or a political road. But surely every therapist, counsellor and psychologist, everyone interested in the path of a truly human psychology, must be alive to these issues.

I am reminded of two great figures who attempted to heal some of these splits. Thomas Merton was a Trappist monk who, after spending years living as a hermit, became acutely alive to the horror of war, particularly the Vietnam war, and became involved in the anti-war movement.

He actually describes in his writings how it was within the silence and interiority of his own spirit that he became aware of the sufferings of others in the world. This strikes me as testimony to the fact that the movement inward, to the inner world, eventually presents us with the outer world. In fact transcendence means the overcoming of the split between inner and outer. If I am the world, then the world is my concern.

The other figure is Reich, before the War in Germany attempted - and succeeded - in bringing therapy and politics together and showed that the oppression of the human body

and particularly sexuality was a **political** concomitant of capitalism.

Perhaps it's significant that these two pioneers both died prematurely and tragically - Merton electrocuted in a shower while attending a meeting in Bangkok between representatives of Asian religions; Reich in an American jail, hounded to his death by the U.S. authorities. Does this tell us that the personal cost of achieving some kind of synthesis of the psychological/political/spiritual can be very great?

There are many areas today where work along these lines needs to be done in the human potential movement. I am thinking of the nuclear issue, ecology, the peace movement, the politics of sexuality, racism, feminism, unemployment. Of course much work is being done, particularly in the women's movement. But as yet we are still scratching the surface of an immense and rich mine of human experience. Psychology is presented with the opportunity of achieving a genuine synthesis, a whole vision, of human existence and of life itself.

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