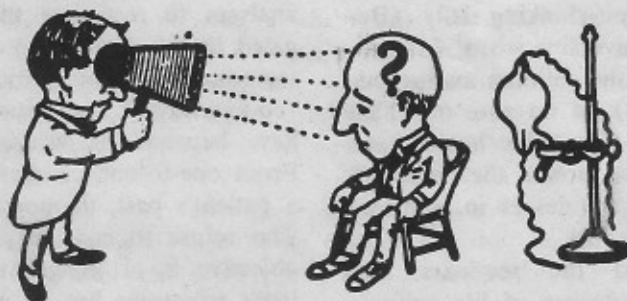


# RELIGION, PSYCHOLOGY AND THE STERILE SELF

JOHN N. KOTRE



## Current psychotherapies dampen the instinct to beget

For all its faults, the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* expressed a truth with which we are losing touch: procreation is essential to sex. To render sex infertile, to deny Eros a future, is to render sex trivial and, ultimately, to enervate it. *Humanae Vitae* faltered, however, as do those who hope to excise procreation from sex, by defining procreation in its narrowest sense, as the physical begetting of offspring. It seems incredible that a church concerned with the spiritual life of its members would fail to appreciate the phenomenon of spiritual procreation and so lose sight of religion's capacity to nourish that very phenomenon.

Several years ago I began to involve myself in the study of human fertility. By fertility I do not mean principally the bearing and nurturing of children—the passing on of physical life. Rather, my focus is on spiritual generation, that is, on certain qualities psychoanalyst Erik Erikson has labeled “generativity” and on others we ordinarily think of as creativity. Generativity refers to “a concern for establishing and guiding the next generation,” a desire to pass on to children, students, or successors the skills, customs and interpretations of life that define one's people. Creativity, on the other hand, refers to the ability to produce novel yet appropriate solutions to problems, to discover and express original yet insightful perspectives. In practice,

the two concepts are not that distinct: though creative products appear to emerge *ex nihilo*, they contain far more of the work of previous generations than even their creators may realize.

In my work I have often been forced to confront contemporary feelings toward human fertility. I have noted the neglect and even disparagement of it by several influential strands of current psychology, and I have reflected on the ways it may be sustained by resources within the Judaeo-Christian and American Catholic traditions.

### I.

Popular psychology has a curious hold on many affluent Americans. In its books and workshops and therapies it does more than enlighten or help with personal problems; it defines existence, as religion once did. The kind of psychology developed for and by the mobile, educated segment of our population is a reflection of the strains, ambiguities and aspirations it feels. To comment on this psychology, then, is to comment on the socio-economic niche in which it resides—a niche, by the way, into which increasing numbers of American Catholics are moving.

Historian Christopher Lasch writes that the dominant mood of the 1970s is therapeutic, not religious. “People today hunger not for personal salvation, let alone for the restoration of an earlier golden age, but for the feeling—even if it is only a momentary illusion—of personal well-being, health, and psychic security.” It is not the existence of therapy that alarms me, for competent therapy is a blessing, but the conception many therapists have of a “fully-functioning” or “self-actualizing” human being. As a member of a psychology

JOHN N. KOTRE is associate professor of psychology at the University of Michigan, Dearborn and the author of a forthcoming biography of Andrew M. Greeley (Nelson-Hall). This article is from *Toward Vatican III: The Work That Needs To Be Done*: David Tracy, Hans Kung, Johann B. Metz, Editors. Copyright (c) 1978 by The Seabury Press, Inc. Used by permission of the publisher.

---

*From one-to-one contact with an 'elder' interested in a patient's past, therapy has moved to groups of peers who refuse to consider anything but the present.*

---

faculty, I see the influence of their thinking daily. (Because of the location of the university where I teach, I see its influence specifically on the children and grandchildren of immigrant Catholics.) In no case of which I am aware do popular models of psychic health have any interest in progeny. For these models the "healthy" individual cultivates, or at least acquiesces in, spiritual sterility.

Current psychotherapies—and the seminars and training sessions into which their view of life spills—dampen the instinct to beget in at least three ways. First, they encourage "open," transient relationships in place of bounded, durable ones. Second, they view the past as a prison and seek, with great success, to liberate individuals from it. Third, they set as an ideal a limitless, fluid self with ever expanding consciousness. All three characteristics dovetail in an interpretation of life that rules out concern for posterity. Lasch writes, "To encourage the subject to subordinate his needs and interests to those of others, to someone or some cause or tradition outside himself . . . strike[s] the therapeutic sensibility as intolerably oppressive, offensive to common sense and injurious to personal health and well-being."

The orientation of which Lasch speaks developed in the 1960s, a time when social commentators began to see and welcome the increasing transiency of human relationships. In *The Secular City* theologian Harvey Cox described the anonymity and mobility of the modern metropolis and insisted it was a blessing, for it delivered us from the Law and gave us choice in personal relationships, ideas and values. Tradition was disintegrating, he said, long-term acquaintanceships declining, impersonality on the upswing; we were, as a result, freer, more tolerant, more open to change. Psychologists Warren Bennis and Philip Slater were less euphoric than Cox about the increase in "quick" relationships, but in *The Temporary Society* they made one thing clear: the tide would not turn, so we had better learn to move—to be flexible, to "get love, to love and to lose love." As the divorce rate continued to climb, Nena and George O' Neill spoke of the benefits of "open marriage." And Alvin Toffler predicted in *Future Shock* that "people of the future" would know how to plug only part of their personality into any new relationship and would become adept at breaking off old ones.

In a different vein, Margaret Mead spoke of a cultural shift in the United States from "post-figuration" to "co-figuration." She meant that influence no longer flowed from elders to the young, that the shape (the *figura*) of our culture was no longer set by the past. Instead, the young, cut off by a generation gap, modeled their behavior on that of their peers and were influenced by the present.

One need not be in total agreement with these analyses to recognize that the psychotherapies propagated in the 1960s and 1970s treat their clients on a temporary basis and focus on the present. They are "co-figurative." The years required for a psychoanalysis have become the weekend required for a marathon. From one-to-one contact with an "elder" interested in a patient's past, therapy has moved to groups of peers who refuse to consider anything but the present. The objective is no longer to alter durable and resistant inner structures but to modify a segment of outer behavior, to eliminate "games" the patient is playing.

The client-centered approach of Carl Rogers, conceived in the 1940s, was an important precursor of these co-figurative therapies. Rogers was the first to relinquish the role of elder in therapy, the first to be "non-directive." To Rogers's way of thinking, the therapist's only task is to empathize with his client and "reflect" his feelings in an atmosphere of caring and warmth. Reconstructions and interpretations of the past are studiously avoided: what matters is the feeling the client articulates and the therapist clarifies in the present moment. The client's inner self is thought of as fluid, constantly changing, constantly emerging. Though client-centered therapy is neither quick therapy nor group therapy, its philosophy and techniques—and, indeed, its originator—have been easily absorbed into the group movement.

Sensitivity training originated in the same decade as client-centered therapy and was based on Kurt Lewin's field theory, another psychology of the present. Sensitivity training, however, did not become a cultural force until the late sixties, some two decades after its official birthdate. According to Kurt Back, the growth of the movement was intertwined, both as cause and effect, with the social unrest of the sixties. It finally took hold in the United States, as it failed to in Europe, because of our postwar affluence (we had the time for T-groups and the money to pay for them), because of secularization (the decline of traditional religion created a void in people's lives), and especially because of mobility. Back notes that sensitivity and encounter group centers took hold in recipient areas of internal migration in the United States, particularly in suburbs and in California. And what have they offered to people "on the move"? A new ritual expressed in the language of science that enables broken roots and severed connections to regenerate *quickly*. A chance to find iden-



tity, to become aware of how one "comes off," even with a group of strangers. An opportunity to develop one's ability to adapt to any new situation, to become intimate in a hurry. The group trainer, therefore, steers the participants to a consideration of their own transactions and construes as escapes references to past and futures outside the group. It is most significant that the catchword of the sensitivity/encounter movement is *here-and-now*, and that the title of the popular magazine reporting on its rapid mutations is *Psychology Today*.

One of those mutations was the Gestalt therapy of the late Fritz Perls. Perls was very much an elder—a tyrant, some say—in the groups he directed; yet his therapy is predominantly co-figurative. The person in a Gestalt group's "hot seat" is forbidden to bring up his personal history; others in the group join as therapists or become the target person's "alter ego." Direct, aggressive intervention is used to get to a person's problems as quickly as possible, to get him to act them out, to make him dramatically aware of the splits and the missing parts in his personality, and, hopefully, to enable him to construct a better whole (Gestalt) than he previously possessed. Responsibility for the future, for what happens to someone after therapy, is disclaimed. Perls wrote, "Sir, if you wanted to go crazy, commit suicide, improve, get turned on, or get an experience that would change your life, that is up to you. You came here of your own free will."

Behavior therapy, having different roots than either the client-centered, sensitivity, or Gestalt approaches, nevertheless shares their concentration on the present. Behaviorism, a distinctly American school of psychology, always has stressed that at birth man is a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate unmarked by the impress of past generations, capable of bearing whatever inscriptions the environment makes. But the behavior modification techniques that spread rapidly in the sixties and seventies carry Locke's dictum a step further: adults, thirty or forty years old, are now slates, if not blank, then at least erasable. The past has no holding power; it can be unlearned. A phobia, for example, does not lie in some durable internal structure; it is not symptomatic of a deeper disease. It is simply an overt behavior that can be disposed of.

An apparent exception to these therapies of the present is transactional analysis, originated by Erich Berne and popularized in *Games People Play*, *I'm OK—You're OK*, and *Born to Win*. Indeed, when TA speaks of parent and child ego-states (roughly equivalent to Freud's *superego* and *id*), it recognizes the importance of "scripts" that a person carries from the past to the present. Yet in practice transactional analysis is a close cousin of encounter-group therapy, Gestalt therapy, and even behavior therapy; it draws little or nothing from its theoretical parent, classical psychoanalysis. Indeed, Berne's original intent was to shorten

the process of psychotherapy, to eliminate harmful "games" rather than to rework an entire personality. The popularity of transactional analysis, I am suggesting, like the popularity of the other new therapies, is due to its compatibility with a configurative clientele, cut off from the past, centered on the present, more and more transient.

Carl Rogers often has preached the hope offered by these new therapeutic techniques to the affluent, politically leftish, well-educated middle class. He told a graduating class at Sonoma State College of a New Man emerging from "encounter groups, sensitivity training, so-called T-Groups." The New Man "recognizes that he will be living his transient life mostly in temporary relationships and that he must be able to establish closeness quickly. He must be able to leave these close relationships behind, without excessive conflict or mourning." He has a distrust of marriage as an institution, religion as an institution, education as an institution. His culture is a "cocoon" from which he struggles to break free. "Liberated" from the past, he is "turned on" by interpersonal experience, by mediation, by drugs—by the present.

Not only is the New Man of popular psychology skilled at temporary relationships, not only is he "liberated" from the past, he also believes he carries unlimited human potential. All things seem possible now that he has left the "cocoon" of tradition, the confines of durable intimate relationships. Gurus from the East tell him that lines between himself and everything else are illusory, that his self is to become immersed in a cosmic consciousness. Gurus from the West insist on the opposite: his self is to be asserted, expanded, and fulfilled—in Fritz Perls's words, "You do your thing and I'll do my thing." But there is a curious similarity between the transpersonal humanistic psychology of the East and the assertive humanistic psychology of the West. The two agree that the self has no limits. Therefore, says one, let it actively taste of every experience, let it become now this impulse now that, let it "expand" and "raise" its consciousness. Consciousness, of course, is never expanded in the direction of recovering early experience, for the past must be fled at all costs. Nor is there recognition of the fact that expansion can only take place by way of self-imposed frontiers that both hold a person in and give him something to go beyond.

The boundless, infinitely changeable self of human-

---

***The self that is 'into behavior mod' shops in the supermarket of human traits for whatever it needs this year: better sexual performance, less anxiety, less weight, etc.***

---

istic psychology is actually a relative of behaviorism's empty, unknowable self, even though humanistic psychology considers itself distinct from behaviorism. The self that is "into behavior mod" shops in the supermarket of human traits for whatever it needs (and is featured) this year: better sexual performance, less anxiety, less weight, more assertiveness, whatever. Such a self unknowingly assumes it has no permanence, no physiological substratum that affects its traits, no early experiences that stamp indelible marks. There is no identity, no internal structure around which it scribes an ego-boundary, saying I am this way, I am not that way, for life. Humanistic psychology talks incessantly about the self, telling us either to lose it or expand it. Behaviorism ignores the self. But both, explicitly or not, preach the virtues of a fluid self, without limits, incapable of choice, incapable of loyalty to something outside itself.

Though Slater admits in *The Temporary Society* that it is difficult "to imagine ways of integrating the rearing of children with temporary systems," psychologists at large fail to notice that its New Man is a spiritual eunuch. He cannot be tied down long enough to a single place, be it spiritual or physical, to be a parent—again, spiritually or physically. Having lost a sense of historical continuity, he is incapable of identifying with predecessors or posterity and is left with the goal of psychic self-improvement. And though he speaks of mankind's unlimited potential, the truth is that his unbounded self is so dissipated, so blurred that it cannot harness the energy to create.

To its credit, psychology has devoted considerable energy to children and continually strives to identify the kinds of climate in which they flourish. It also has facilitated the escape of individuals from those pasts that deserve abandonment and helped them cope with the resultant fluidity. I would hope, however, that it will begin to teach other "skills"—permanence, loyalty, fidelity, and duty—and that it will begin to see that limited, contained, rooted selves are the only kind capable of creativity and generativity. Whether psychology will ever do so is another matter altogether.

## II.

According to anthropologist Clifford Geertz, religion is a set of symbols that creates long-lasting moods and motivations in men by providing interpretations of life that seem to them uniquely realistic. Religion generates convictions about such things as birth, death, intimacy and nature by saying that to believe in this, or to act in this way, is to live in harmony with a fundamental reality. Psychology grounds a particular attitude toward life by saying it is "healthy," religion by saying it accords with the way things "really" are. Having outlined some attitudes of recent psychology toward human fertility, I would now like to bring a specific question

to religion. What resources does religion have—in particular, what resources does the Judaeo-Christian symbol system have—to generate those moods and motivations that nourish such fertility? What capacity does it have to underwrite convictions about human life that stand in contrast to those of psychology's New Man?

The human imagination has always closely associated divinity and fertility. All the earth's cosmogonies, all those mythical accounts that tell the nature of things by narrating their origins, are stories of the generation of life. Indians from the Pacific Northwest speak of a woman turning into the earth, her hair becoming the trees and grass, her flesh the clay, her bones the rocks, her blood the springs of water. Children spring from her, derive nourishment from her, and ultimately return to her. Polynesians describe the beginnings as Heaven and Earth in intercourse; children confined in the darkness between them push them apart and see the light of day for the first time. California Indians say the



world was made by a turtle who dove to the bottom of the sea for a speck of dirt and by a dove who found a single grain of meal; the dirt and the meal are combined and grow into an earth covered with seeds and fruit. Jews and Christians tell of a God who fills an eternal void with the simple power of his word and commands his creatures to be fruitful, multiply and fill his earth. To live in a world with plants and animals that reproduce themselves, and to be fertile oneself, these creation stories say, is to be favored by the forces of the universe.

Religion, too, has always incorporated in its ritual the experience of returning to "the beginnings," to the sacred time and place of creation. The experience of renewing contact with roots, of being cleansed by living in the idealized time of the ancestors, is indeed a fertile one. David Bakan has argued that the insights of psychoanalysis came to Sigmund Freud at a time in his life when he felt rejected by the Gentile world of science and so returned home, psychologically, to a Jewish mystical culture. That culture regarded human beings religiously the way Freud "discovered" them to be in a secular context. The generative and creative people I know, religious or not, are individuals who maintain a



strong sense of connection with their origins and do not hesitate to draw on them.

Despite the constricted understanding of fertility found in documents like *Humanae Vitae*, there are symbols within their parent tradition that are capable of supporting fertility in the fullest sense of the word. May I suggest only a few?

1. *The Demanding Fidelity of Yahweh.* The relationship that Yahweh insists on between himself and his people is one of permanence, exclusivity and loyalty. It is hardly "open." On Sinai, God tells the Hebrews, "I am Yahweh your God . . . you shall have no gods except me." Demands and promises are made; a covenant is struck. In current psychological jargon, "boundaries" are firmly established. As the Old and New Testaments unfold, the promises are not always kept, the boundaries not always observed. Yet the covenant—the "frame" or "ground rules" of the relationship—is returned to and ratified again and again. In the Old Testament God is a king who punishes violations of the boundaries; in the New Testament He is a Father who mercifully welcomes prodigals who stray beyond them. In both, the frame of the relationship is indispensable; it creates the trust that allows love to develop.

To take the relationship between Yahweh and his people as the prototype of human relationships is to assert that what is essential to intimacy is the assurance of fidelity, the conviction that the other will always be there and on your side. This fidelity is not the "unconditional positive regard" of client-centered therapy, for it is a fidelity that sets conditions, makes demands, and insists on a certain closedness in relationships. I am suggesting that the security of such confines sets the stage for true intimacy and, later, for generativity.

2. *Humanity's Stewardship.* Political scientist Patrick Dobel, writing in the *Christian Century* last October, has taken issue with ecologists who claim that the command in Genesis to dominate nature has led to Western man's exploitation of the world's resources. Dobel believes an exegesis of the Old Testament would show that man is not to be the absolute lord of nature but its trustee. The earth is owned by God. It is bestowed upon humanity "for all generations" and strict limits are placed upon its use. Judging from the parables of the Good Steward and the Talents in the New Testament, each generation is not merely to preserve God's state but also to improve it. The world is not to be left in its natural state; it is to be acted upon and controlled for the betterment of mankind. Its resources are to be husbanded but not exhausted, passed on in better condition than they were received.

Human beings who regard themselves as stewards take a far different stance toward their own life than the New Man of recent psychology. They believe that their life is owned not by themselves but by God. If life is something received, it is something that ultimately

has to be passed on. Consequently, rights to self-fulfillment are tempered by duties to predecessors and successors. In contrast to the position taken in *Humanae Vitae*, stewards regard their reproductive processes as part of a heritage that is to be acted upon and controlled for the well-being of posterity.

3. *Pruning.* The steward treats nature the way a farmer treats his orchard. Reverence does not demand that the trees be allowed to grow untrammelled. It requires instead that they be cut and limited, sometimes extensively, so that they bring forth an abundant harvest.

Metaphors of fruitfulness appear frequently in the Gospels and barrenness is treated with impatience. A tree that fails to produce good fruit will be put to the axe and thrown into the fire. The kingdom of God will be taken from the chief priests and the scribes and given to a people who will produce its fruit. Jesus curses a fig tree with nothing but leaves, even though it is not the season for figs, and the tree withers and dies. Later, he likens himself to a vine, his disciples to the branches, his Father to the vinedresser. "Every branch in me that bears no fruit he cuts away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes to make it bear even more. You are pruned already." The disciples are commissioned to "go out and bear fruit, fruit that will last." To do so they must remain in contact with the vine and they must be cut back. To be fertile one cannot grow without limitation.

4. *Spiritual Parenthood.* The Catholic Church has long been the home of "fathers" and "mothers" who are celibate and childless. Such symbols of spiritual parenthood are of great importance during a time when it is imperative to restrict population growth while nourishing feelings of fertility. What an example of generativity is offered by someone like Mother Teresa of India!

Though I have not observed firsthand the church's examination of its tradition of celibacy, I wonder how much emphasis is being given to spiritual fatherhood and motherhood in emerging rationales. (Donald Goergen's *The Sexual Celibate* said next to nothing of these archetypal Catholic symbols.) To choose celibacy is to place a limit on oneself so that one can care for more human beings. It is an act of pruning that remains an enigma to those expanding their consciousness in all directions.

5. *The Eucharist.* The Gospel account of the Last Supper begins with Jesus's realization that his hour has come. The prospect of death, a death that will extend

---

*Symbols of spiritual parenthood are of great importance during a time when it is imperative to restrict population growth while nourishing feelings of fertility.*

---

the fidelity of Yahweh, heightens his concern for posterity. In a simple gesture of sharing bread and wine, he passes his life on to others.

In the Eucharist Christ is symbolically transmitted from generation to generation, so that for millennia his followers have been able to return to the beginnings, participate in their own creation, and nourish themselves on the person of their founder. The core ritual of Christianity is a guarantee of continuity and generativity through time. It reaffirms that one is a steward, not an owner, of one's life.

American Catholicism consists not only of symbols like these but also of experiences that may appear merely incidental. For me, the experience was one of growing up in a family and an urban neighborhood where most everyone shared the same world-view. No one talked about religion but everyone did religion. It was part of the atmosphere. I lived in a "post-figurative" culture—rigid, to be sure, and incapable of change; but it was not, at least not to me, who could walk unannounced into half the houses or apartments on the street, oppressive. It was a secure, limited, rooted environment. I

knew my place. There were numerous people, numerous "fathers" and "mothers" and "sisters" whom I pleased and displeased, but on whose word I always counted.

Such a setting was neither uniquely Catholic nor uniquely American, but it happens to be the one that shaped the lives of many American Catholics of my generation. As I stepped from that environment to the one I now inhabit—the mobile, secular, co-figurative world of the psychologized affluent—I could not help but feel, somewhere in my bones, the loss of something of value. I argue now for bounded relationships, for connection with the past, for selves with limits, for fertility, because doing so, in a way, recaptures my own, admittedly idealized, beginnings.

Today, the god-like impulse of fertility, a source of so much ambivalence, will have to be nurtured, controlled, redirected, its proper place in sex asserted. In this task, there is much in the spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and moral resources of American Catholicism to draw upon—in the riches of the Judaeo-Christian symbol structure, in our concrete experiences of family, church and neighborhood.

---

## THE FARMERS' STRIKE

HAROLD F. BREIMYER

### Plight and prospects

The most improbable event of 1978 has to be the spectacle of farmers in tractor cabs and coal miners in headlarned regalia competing for news lineage and public sympathy.

The farmers were the ones out of character. Coal miners on strike have been a part of the scene since the days of the Shakespeare-quoting John L. Lewis. But farmers have been notoriously anti-organized labor. They have declaimed especially against industrial unions in industries that supply farm inputs, such as tractor manufacture. Big farmers on the West Coast have fought Cesar Chavez tooth and nail.

Yet in the winter of 1977-78 a sizeable number of farmers from the Great Plains, Midwest and South declared that without a promise of "parity" prices they would "strike." Although the verb was given various interpretations the upshot was that they would not plant their crops in the spring—or, some said, they would plant only half their normal acreage. Meantime, various contingents engaged in scattered incidents of harassment; and delegates stalked the halls of Congress and

the offices of belabored Secretary of Agriculture Robert Bergland.

Farmers' unrest and demonstrations are by no means new. They are as old as the Whiskey Rebellion of 1794. Never before, though, has the industrial term of a strike been borrowed. If the 1794 event was rebellion, in the early 1930s farmers staged a "holiday movement," and in the later 1950s and 1960s Oren Lee Staley led his National Farmers Organization into "holding actions."

Along with their staged visibility, participants in the newly born American Agriculture Movement shouted their economic distress. Perhaps more than ever before, farmers' wives joined in testifying to the financial pinch they were feeling.

Symbol of what AAM farmers asked for was price parity. Parity as a word is an abstraction signifying equity or equality. In agricultural affairs it has a special meaning. It refers to a constant buying-power exchange ratio for farm products. The term dates from 1921 when George Peek, a tractor manufacturer, proclaimed that farmers should be able to buy, from the proceeds of selling a given quantity of wheat, hogs, or milk, the same number of shirts, hats, bags of twine,

---

HAROLD F. BREIMYER is Perry Foundation Professor of Agricultural Economics at the University of Missouri-Columbia.