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Father MacKinnon Named Moderator of National Federation of Catholic Physicians' Guilds

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Religion and Psychiatry* 

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The old arguments concerning the hostility between religion and psychiatry are drying down. Clergymen may still be suspicious of psychiatrists and psychiatrists may be intolerant of the clergy but these are personal attitudes and do not represent any fundamental incompatibility between their two disciplines. Religion is concerned with spiritual matters; its central concern is the relationship of man (or his soul) to God. Psychiatry deals with the inappropriate or inadequate ways man copes with his problems here on earth. Clergymen and psychiatrists are similar in their desire to help people. Though their basic approaches differ radically, each can help the other by knowledge of one another's basic assumptions and methods.

Erikson's distinction between psychology (including psychiatry and psychoanalysis) and religion seems almost like poetry to me: "Psychology endeavors to establish what is demonstrably true in human behavior, including such behavior as expresses what to human beings seems true and feels true... Religion, on the other hand, elaborates on what feels profoundly true even though it is not demonstrable; it translates into significant words, images, and codes the exceeding darkness which surrounds man's existence, and the light which pervades it beyond all desert or comprehension."1

Psychiatrists are primarily concerned with all kinds of troubled people while clergymen must deal with those of their parishioners who are troubled; perhaps they must spend more of their time with them than with those who are not involved in any quandaries. But troubled people appear in many places and under a variety of labels. In the juvenile courts the delinquents appear. In the schools the troubled ones appear as truants, disciplinary problems, dropouts, or underachievers. In family service agencies the quarreling parents and their children who respond with anxiety, physical symptoms, and behavior problems are omnipresent. Police officers find them as chronic traffic violators, alcoholics, drug addicts, robbers, and molesters of women and children. Judges deal with the troubled in divorce proceedings, custody problems, and in their decisions as to what should be done with those who disturb the peace of a community. In the confessional priests must deal with every form of behavior not acceptable to society or to the individual confessor. Public officials must learn how to cope with cranks, zealots, members of hate groups, and those who would bribe or be bribed.

It is all too easy to classify people as troubled or untroubled, sick or well, bad or good, dishonest or honest. This tendency is not logical. All people display admixtures of desirable and undesirable characteristics. Our task as individuals is to learn how to keep our desirable qualities in control; as clergymen and physicians our energies are directed toward teaching our troubled parishioners


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