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Psychiatry and Catholicism

by

JAMES H. VANDERVELT, O.F.M., Ph.D.,

AND ROBERT P. ODENWALD, M.D., F.A.P.A.

BOOK REVIEW by F. T. SEVERIN, S.J., Assistant Professor of Psychology,
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PSYCHIATRY and CATHOLICISM is a long delayed answer to frequent question, "What does the Church think of psychiatry?" The reviewer is not certain whether this book was written primarily for doctors and priests or for laymen. It is non-technical in character and sufficiently elementary to appeal to the general reader.

The twenty four chapters deal with a wide variety of topics ranging from the Catholic view of personality and morality to the concepts and methods of psychiatry, counseling techniques, the symptoms of mental disorders, abnormal sex behavior, sex education, scrupulosity, alcoholism, the relationship of psychiatry to religion, and the psychological aspects of marriage problems.

The authors point out that, while religion is a powerful aid to mental health, it does not pretend to be a medical system and hence is no substitute for psychiatry. The former operates exclusively on the conscious level while the latter deals largely with unconscious mental activity. For the same reason, but more especially because of its purpose, confession cannot be considered primarily as a therapeutic device.

A large section of the book is devoted to an explanation and evaluation of depth psychology in its various forms. Favorable mention is made of the Vienna school of Existential Analysis which stresses the need of God and religion. Three aspects of Freudianism are considered: 1) the philosophical foundations and religious implications which are unacceptable to Catholics, 2) certain psychological concepts which can be isolated from Freudian philosophy and judged on their own merits, and 3) therapeutic methods which a psychiatrist may utilize without subscribing to psychoanalytic dogma.

It is surprising that the authors felt unable to distinguish between the philosophy of Carl Rogers and his nondirective type of counseling. They seem to think that the nondirective counselor must necessarily be indifferent to moral issues because he does not resort to advice and

persuasion. Many Catholic counselors will disagree with this point of view. There are times when a directive approach to an emotionally charged moral problem may have an altogether different effect than is intended. In these cases the nondirective technique is a handy tool in the counselor's kit and he may always fall back upon more directive methods if it fails.

The chapters on "Scrupulosity" and "The Priest and Mental Hygiene" seem to have been written primarily for the clergy. Priests will also find the chapters on sex helpful in pastoral counseling.

Several statements of a technical nature may be questioned by the psychiatrist, but he will probably agree with the general reader that this book is stimulating and well written.

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