

Institute for Christian Teaching
Education Department of Seventh-day Adventists

CHRISTIAN DISTINCTIVES IN PSYCHOLOGY TEACHING

by

Mei-Mei Cho

Taiwan Adventist College
Taiwan

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050 - 89 Institute for Christian Teaching
12501 Old Columbia Pike
Silver Spring Md 20904, USA

Introduction

I. Statement of the Problem:

We have come to a time when meaninglessness has become a human problem of epidemic proportions. Man is forever pursuing progress and prosperity without knowing the end. Education simply becomes a process in life which everybody has to go through in order to obtain a degree of some sort. School education often offers fragments of learning quite irrelevant to life and to one's faith. Different subjects only meet together on grade reports. There is a wrong concept but quite a prevalent one that among all the subjects offered in college, religion belongs to God and the rest belongs to the world. Thus, psychology along with the other so called "secular" subjects seemingly becomes irrelevant in the Christian's life.

II. Purpose of Study:

This study seeks to find out ways to present psychology in a distinctively Christian manner in the classroom, ways in which psychology is studied meaningfully and wholistically in congruence with Christian belief. Hence, psychology can be relevant.

Premise Regarding Christian Teaching in Psychology

Holmes (1977) in his book, All Truth is God's Truth, emphasizes that there is only one kind of truth, God's Truth, no matter where you may find it. Therefore, psychology and other so-called "secular" subjects are within God's rightful domain. Holmes' (1975) outright statement in another book gives enlightenment on this issue:

Christian commitment does not restrict intellectual opportunity and endeavor, but rather it fires and inspires purposeful learning. Christian education should not blindfold the student's eyes to all the world has to offer, but it should open them to truth wherever it may be found, truth that is ultimately unified in and derived from God. It should be a liberating experience that enlarges horizons, deepens insight, sharpens the mind, exposes new areas of inquiry, and sensitizes our ability to appreciate the good and the beautiful as well as the true (p. 19)

Psychology is a study of human behavior. It provides some satisfying answers to many important questions regarding why people think, feel, and act as they do. Without God in His rightful position, human behavior cannot be understood to its full extent. Psychology also has its practical aim in bringing healing and wholesome living to man's life. The Christian God is the God who cares for man's life on this earth. He is also very actively involved in human affairs. He desires for man to obtain a mature and optimal personality here on earth and also everlasting life in future. It is the responsibility of the Christian Psychology teacher to put God in His rightful position as he attempts to integrate faith in teaching. Thus, the basic premise is that God is the source of all true knowledge.

Basic Elements in Christian Teaching

There are three important basic elements in Christian teaching: the person of the Christian teacher, the content of the teaching, and the methods used in teaching.

I. The Person of the Christian Teacher:

If there is one single most important element in Christian education, it is that of the person of the Christian teacher. In order to present psychology in a Christian way, the psychology teacher must be a Christian psychology teacher. A psychology

teacher who is also a Christian will not do the job right, nor will a Christian who happens to be able to teach psychology. In other words, his professional knowledge is not just a requirement alongside of his belief. Instead, he must know his subject well in the context of Christian belief. He must be a committed Christian with a clear Christian outlook. He should know what he believes and have a clear concept of biblical values. His character must be based on a firm commitment to Christ.

As a result of his daily communication with the Lord, a Christian teacher will grow naturally in grace and exhibit the fruit of the Spirit in his relationships with students and co-workers, whether in classrooms, in counseling situations, or with daily casual acquaintances. He presents a Christ-like model in front of the students. Integrating faith and learning will be a very spontaneous and natural outcome when faith permeates the life. In every aspect of his life, he manifests Christ. When Mrs. White (1923) stated "The youth are in need of educators who shall keep the word of God ever before them in living principles (p. 88)", it is this kind of Christian educators that she referred to.

II. Content of Teaching:

A Christian teacher needs to be careful in choosing his subject matter. Teachers should provide the best materials possible, for our students need to be challenged by the highest standards. Ellen G. White states in her writing, Fundamentals of Christian Education,

While religion should be the pervading element in every school, it will not lead to cheapening of literary attainments. While a religious atmosphere should pervade

the school, diffusing its influence, it will make all who are truly Christians feel more deeply their need of thorough knowledge, that they may make the best use of the faculties that God has bestowed upon them (pp.116-119).

Therefore, it is the duty of the teacher to select quality materials, to give good assignments and to devise sound activities. In learning psychology, it is often confusing to the students when they are faced with many different kinds of theories. Teachers should help the students to discriminate and bring everything under the spotlight of Christianity.

Mayers and Jeeves (1987) state that psychology is not a single unified discipline but a federation of subdisciplines. Some psychologists study the responses of single cells, others the behavior of people in crowds (p.11). In any case, Christian teachers need to be alert to the hidden values and assumptions of the different theories. They should examine their psychology carefully instead of accepting every theory uncritically. Therefore, it is important for Christian teachers to be conscious of their own worldview and their philosophical assumptions regarding the origin of man, the present state of man and the destiny of man.

In psychology, students often come across the three main forces in contemporary psychology: psychoanalysis, behaviorism, and humanism. Each has its different philosophy and assumptions. A Christian teacher needs to be aware of the different assumptions which may be in conflict with Christian belief.

1. Psychoanalytic Theory:

Psychoanalysts believe that we human beings are conditioned by our psychic inheritance. For Freud, the task of the therapist

was to help human beings strip away their illusions and face the ultimately meaningless, cold-war struggles that take place among the id, the death wish, the conscience, and our rational adult egos. The psychoanalyst has two fundamental hypotheses. 1. psychic determinism: the view that all behavior is caused. None of our mental activities happens by chance. All thoughts, dreams, behavior, all mistakes, all forgotten matters, and slips of the tongue have a prior cause. 2. Most behavior comes from the influence of "unconscious mental processes" which results from the unfulfillment or frustration of basic instincts either because of external obstacles or internal mental imbalance.

The major assumptions underlying psychoanalytic theory regarding the origin of man, the condition of man and the destiny of man are:

1. There is no God. Human beings are left alone to struggle all their lives on their own.
2. The current states of human beings are rigidly determined by the unconscious, therefore human beings cannot be responsible for their own behavior. Human free will is denied. The nature of human beings is evil.
3. Human beings are heading for destruction. The best that a person can achieve is to restore a harmonious balance between the parts of the mind, and between the individual and his world through self-disclosure.

b. Behaviorism:

It is the belief of the behaviorist that people function like machines which can be programmed in the correct way or in an

incorrect way. Watson believes that human behavior is formed solely by the environment. Skinner believes that human behavior, including religious experiences, are acquired by reinforcements which are imposed on us in our environment. Thus, there is no self-determination nor freedom for mankind. He states (1965), "We will have to abandon the illusion that men are free agents, in control of their own behavior, for whether we like it or not we are all 'controlled' (p. 438)". Skinner also proposes that the empirical study of human behavior is the only way to arrive at a true theory of human nature. What happens in the laboratory, he assumes, will also apply to man, with only a little difference in complexity. All behavior can be reduced into smaller units in order to investigate it more easily and scientifically. Therefore, the philosophical assumptions underlying this school of thought are:

1. There is no God. Religions are merely practices that man learns through reinforcement and social institutions, to manipulate human behavior.
2. Being controlled by environment, the human condition is not much different from that of animals. A human by nature is born a blank slate. It is up to the environment to mold him. Thus, man is not accountable for his own behavior.
3. Social reform may be an answer to human problems. The human condition can only be improved through a strictly designed environment.

c. Humanism:

The humanist view states that man cannot be reduced to a

physical mechanism, but that there is nothing transcendent to aid us in bringing the human being to wholeness. To the humanist, man is a whole being whose behavior can never totally be determined by environmental or unconscious influences. Psychologists such as Erich Fromm, Carl Rogers, and Abraham Maslow hold this view. Erich Fromm (1947) states:

Man must accept responsibility for himself. There is no meaning to life except the meaning man gives his life by the unfolding of his powers. ... Man is alone in a universe indifferent to his fate there is no power transcending him which can solve his problems for him (p. 445).

Carl Rogers rejects Freud's pessimistic view and Skinner's rigid determinism. He maintains that man is innately good, unique, creative, and free to develop his own destiny. Maslow develops a creative new listing of human needs and believes that by developing their unrealized potential people can reach a state of psychological maturity that he terms self-actualization. These psychologists hold very different assumptions from those of psychoanalysts and behaviorists:

1. Any transcendent power beyond man does not exist.
2. Man has in his hands tremendous power to determine for himself. Man is responsible for himself.
3. There is great potential within man waiting for him to unfold. He is born good and free. He can reach the highest potential of his inner being.

In summary, the basic assumptions of contemporary Psychology are different from those adopted by Christians. Christian teachers need to be cautious with the metaphysics, epistemology and axiology of these theories. The empiricism, determinism, relativism, reductionism and naturalism in these theories may

easily creep into our teaching unnoticed. This is not to say there is no value in studying these theories. All these theories cover portions of human phenomena which can be useful in understanding man. For example, Freud's theory regarding the components of the psyche -- id, ego, and super-ego can be helpful in understanding the 'self'. The importance of childhood stressed by Freudian psychoanalytic theory sheds light on early childhood education. The effects of reinforcement on human beings' behavior as formulated by behaviorists help educators to find ways to reinforce desirable behavior and extinguish undesirable behavior in the classroom, especially among exceptional children. The tender and caring approach of the humanists places human beings in a superior position which is helpful in all helping professions. However, the sum of the parts does not equal the whole. Each of these portions of human phenomena needs to be studied in the light of Christianity to give it meaning. With a clear understanding of Christian assumptions regarding the supernatural origin of man, human condition and man's destiny, one can have a better picture of humankind.

The Christian doctrine of man sees man as a valuable being, created by God in His very image. He was created to have a very special position in the universe. He was entrusted with dominion over the rest of the creation as recorded in Genesis, chapter one. Man is unique among other animals for his being able to think, love, choose freely, and act according to his choices. God created man for fellowship with Himself. Only through loving and serving God can he fulfil the purpose of his life (I

Corinthian 1:20).

After the fall (Genesis 3), Man's relationship with God was disrupted. He had misused his God-given freedom of choice. He had chosen evil rather than good. Thus, instead of being good and pure in nature, man was now born with sinful inclinations. However, this should not lead us to believe in Freudian pessimism. Despite the fact that "all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23), Ellen White (1952) in her book, Education, says,

Not only intellectual but spiritual power, a perception of right, a desire for goodness still exist in every heart. But against these principles there is struggling an antagonistic power. ... There is in his nature a bent to evil, a force which, unaided, he cannot resist. To withstand this force, to attain that ideal which in his inmost soul he accepts as alone worthy, he can find help in but one power. That power is Christ (p. 29).

All through history God has shown man that He is still in control and is eager to win us back. He is the one initiating the plan of redemption and restoration. He gave His only Son to pay the ransom. He gives us the free will to choose between good and evil, between God Himself and Satan. Human beings are involved in this great controversy. Only through the saving power of Jesus Christ can we win the battle. Only if man follows the divine guidance of his Creator can he achieve the highest level of his God-given potential. On this point we differ from the humanistic self-sufficient outlook.

Christians believe in the final victory to be achieved by Jesus and His followers at the end of the world. By their own choice, Christians can accept the redemption given by God freely and be able to be reconciled with God. It is the conviction and

hope of the Christians that every believer in Christ can be transformed into perfect physical, mental and spiritual condition, and be given the privilege to be with God forever.

With the preceding knowledge regarding our faith, Christian teachers can give a more wholistic view of human behavior. The task of psychological study is not to fragment human behavior as the behaviorist so often does. For the sake of convenience, subject matter is often broken into smaller units; however, the ultimate goal is to have a wholistic picture of human beings. Christian psychologists do not need to eliminate the empiricism in behaviorism totally. In place of this, expanded empiricism should be adopted. Christian teachers assume that sense experience is only one of the channels through which God reveals His truth (Collins,1989). On the issue of determinism as strongly proposed by psychoanalysts and behaviorists, Christians believe in God's influence through the power of Holy Spirit. However, God has given us the gift of free choice. Therefore, a human being is held responsible for his behavior. On the other hand, Christians can agree with the humanists on the possibility of man's infinite potential provided that the missing God is retrieved. The Christian belief in absolute truth cannot be compromised even when relativism has become so popular in the study of psychology study. Our belief should be grounded on the teaching of His holy Bible.

In summary, Christian psychology teachers hold a unique world-view through which all knowledge in psychology is filtered. The basic assumptions coming from this world-view are:

1. There is an all-powerful God, who is our Creator,

Protector and our Sustainer.

2. After the fall, man has been involved in the great controversy between God and Satan. Although human beings are born sinful and unworthy of God's love, God is willing to redeem and restore them through Jesus Christ. There are both good and evil in human nature. There is a constant struggle between these two forces within a person's heart. It is up to man to choose between the two sides, good or evil. If we are willing to accept God's help, He will restore in us the lost image of Himself. Therefore, in a sense, man is responsible for his behavior.
3. There is hope for Christ's followers. There is a transcendent power beyond us to save and to uplift us to live a life according to His will. Heaven is prepared for those who choose to accept Christ as their personal and only Savior.

III. Methods:

As a very minimum requirement for Christian teaching, the Christian psychology teacher should present the subject matter in a professional manner. However, Christian teachers cannot stop here. There is more to Christian teaching. Students should be led to see the power of God in transforming human lives and the superiority of Christian psychology contrasted with the other approaches. It is important, however, to make use of all the good ideas of other theories in a Christian context. Christian teachers should not be satisfied with passing on mere knowledge. Bloom's theory regarding the six levels of learning is very

useful in structuring our teaching. The objectives that we set, the teaching strategies and the evaluation process should cover these six levels: Knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Students need to be challenged to apply what they have learned in the Christian life, in addition to knowing and understanding the facts. Students need to be stimulated to think for themselves, to critique and to evaluate what they learn against the standard of what they believe. After learning about the human condition, a sense of mission needs to be awakened among the students to want to improve man's condition. Relating present learning to the preparation for future service should be one of the main focuses in Christian teaching in a psychology classroom.

For example, while presenting the Need Theory of Abraham Maslow, the Christian teacher's job will not be considered finished until the students are challenged to think beyond the theory, beyond Maslow's Self Actualization stage which can be very self-centered in nature. Challenge the students to consider what their highest need actually is for themselves. The highest goal in life will thus be guided by this perceived need. A critique of this theory can be developed which questions the basic assumption of this theory. For example, is it necessary for man to satisfy all his personal needs before ministering to others? How do people like Jesus, the apostle Paul, the beloved disciple John, and Stephen, the martyr in the Bible, fit into this theory when they gave up their personal security to do God's will through self-denial?

We as Christian teachers have the ideal model in Jesus'

teaching as presented in the four gospels in the Bible. He cared for every individual. He structured his lectures in such a way that even the common people could understand. He made use of simple illustrations and life audio-visual aids to help people understand. He always stimulated thoughts and ideas. He conveyed the message of the Heavenly Kingdom in simple topics. He challenged students for future missions. He proposed thought-provoking questions for clarification, to stimulate them and to challenge them. If we come into our classrooms with the same degree of enthusiasm, the same goal, the same desire for heavenly knowledge, the same creativity, and the same compassion as Jesus, we are not far from being Christian teachers.

Summary

With the basic understanding and conviction that all truth is God's truth, a psychology teacher should give God His rightful position in his teaching. The most essential elements in Christian teaching are the person of the Christian teacher, the content, and methods patterned after Christ's. An awareness of the basic assumptions of different theories in psychology contrasted with Christian assumptions is essential as we attempt to filter the content of our teaching through the Christian world-view.

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