

# Freud, Mowrer, and the Problem of Anxiety

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C LERGYMEN and clinical psychologists and psychiatrists are coping with the growing problem of neurotic and psychotic behavior. But in past decades those theologically oriented and those scientifically trained have not been able to attack this problem in a spirit of mutual confidence. More often than not, psychology charges that religion is prescriptive without being diagnostic, while religion charges that psychology is diagnostic without being prescriptive. Today, however, there are signs which indicate a possible reconciliation between religion and psychology.

Many feel that there is a healthy *rapprochement* beginning between two groups which for years not only had been separated by lack of mutual interest and communication but have in some instances shown suspicious, resentful, disdainful, or actively hostile attitudes to each other.<sup>1</sup>

Forsaking the Freudian approach, a new school of psychologists, led by men like Erich Fromm, O. Hobart Mowrer, Moreno, Sullivan, Stekel, and others, has arisen which espouses a view of the cause and cure of anxiety which promises at least a partial reconciliation between psychology and religion. It is the intent of this paper to examine this new view to point out its positive as well as its negative features.

As a point of departure, and by way of contrast, it will serve our purpose to examine briefly the Freudian approach, which since the end of the nineteenth century has dominated the field of psychoanalytic technique. To understand both Freud and Mowrer it is necessary to clarify the concepts of the id, the ego, and the superego. Heidebreder defines the id as

. . . the deepest and most primitive part of the personality. It is profound, obscure, unconscious, and powerful . . . the id, though powerful, is quite without perception; it is unmoral, unenlightened, imperious, and rash. Seeking only the pleasures of the moment, it demands its satisfactions insistently and blindly.<sup>2</sup>

The id is often called the sum total of the instinctual drives. The superego is the sum total of all of the laws established by God or man, parents, society, or even the self-imposed laws of the individual. It is the artificial self we feel we ought to be because of the introjection of the parental vetoes, as Freud called it, plus the inherited conventions of society.<sup>3</sup> The ego is really the will of the individual. It endeavors to manipulate the environment and to regulate the id with reference to it. The ego seems to correspond quite closely to the will of the individual.

Freud maintained that conflict is produced when the blind but insistent demands of the id are vetoed by the demands of the superego, which acts like a policeman in its relationship with the id. Because Freud found that sexual difficulties lay behind the neuroses of a high percentage of his patients, sexual experience was for Freud the clue to neurosis.<sup>4</sup> When a person finds that the superego will not permit the id to carry out its drives, the ego suppresses the id and consciously denies the existence of the repressed instinctual drives.

R. S. Woodworth regards the two theories of repression and infantile sexuality as the twin pillars on which the Freudian hypothesis rests. He says:

If we put the two theories together, we have in a nutshell the fundamentals of Freud's psychology . . . the importance of repression, the importance of sex desire and the importance of the infantile period are Freud's three main emphases . . . a neurosis originates in repressed infantile sexuality—that is his main proposition.<sup>5</sup>

Now, when because of fear of the oppressive superego, these libidinal drives are repressed, they avenge themselves by mental symptoms of anxiety, or fear, or physical symptoms.<sup>6</sup> The anxiety becomes disassociated with the original fear and becomes a free-floating general condition of the patient.<sup>7</sup>

Since the cause of the anxiety remains out of reach of the conscious mind of the patient, Freud turned to the search of the unconscious mind in an effort to bring it to consciousness. His method was that of free association and interpretation of dreams.

Freud's method aims at recovering to consciousness the repressed material in the unconscious mind. In that vast

depth are stored, he teaches, all the memories of the past, right back to the hour of birth, and perhaps before that. When these memories have reached consciousness, been re-lived again so as to express their emotional content, the patient can the better adjust himself to life, for his inner-emotional abscess has discharged its poison—to use a psychological figure—and he can guard against recurrence because he sees the factors that formed it in the first place.<sup>8</sup>

The goal of the psychoanalytic treatment is to have the patient develop insight into the causes of his anxiety, to remove fears by showing him how absurd the demands of the superego and to provide release for the instinctual drives.

Today Freud's approach to the problem of anxiety is seriously criticized. His basic supposition that anxiety results from the suppression of instinctual drives is seriously questioned.<sup>9</sup> Experience demonstrates that some who practice continence are emotional stable, while, at times, libertines are filled with anxiety. But more seriously, Freud is charged with promulgating a doctrine of social irresponsibility which has penetrated deeply into our culture. In a recent book Richard LaPiere, a sociologist, declares the Freudian ethic has penetrated deeply into our culture and is characterized by individual passivity and irresponsibility, reflected in the permissive home, progressive school, and other agencies, adopted in the new middle class, modern guildism, political materialism, and the security goal. He declares that while the Freudian ethic abounds in such terms as guilt feelings, personal insecurity, frustration, aggressive tendencies, traumas, there is a total absence of such terms, “. . . prominent in the protestant ethic—self-confidence, personal integrity, self-reliance, responsibility.”<sup>10</sup>

Finally, Freud is to be condemned for his antipathy to the values of Christianity. To him religion is nothing less than a universal obsessional neurosis of humanity. In his book, *Future of an Illusion*, he says:

Thus religion would be the universal obsessional neurosis of humanity. It, like the child's, originated in the Oedipus complex, the relation to the father. According to this conception one might prophesy that the abandoning of religion must take place with the fateful inexorability of a process of growth, and that we are just now in the middle of this phase of development.<sup>11</sup>

You have to defend the religious illusion with all your might; if it were discredited—and to be sure it is sufficiently menaced—then your world would collapse, there would be nothing left for you but to despair of everything, of culture, and of the future of mankind. From this bondage I am, we are, free. Since we are prepared to renounce a good part of our infantile wishes, we can bear it if some of our expectations prove to be illusions.<sup>12</sup>

O. Hobart Mowrer's approach to the cause and cure of anxiety is, in many respects, the very antithesis of the Freudian view. His major premise is that man is a responsible subject. He points out that man is able to weigh the future against the immediate consequences of his action. This gives man flexibility and freedom and, by inference, responsibility. In this sense man differs from the animal. Addressing the convention of the American Psychological Association in Cincinnati recently, Dr. Mowrer declared: "The idea that man can have the benefits of an orderly social life without paying for it through restraints and sacrifices is a subversive doctrine."<sup>13</sup> Rollo May correctly concludes that for Mowrer ". . . the problem of neurotic anxiety is placed squarely in its cultural and historical nexus, and is related specifically to man's distinctive problems of social responsibility and ethics."<sup>14</sup>

Neurotic symptoms develop not as a result of too little self-indulgence and satisfaction or from the suppression of the demands of the id, but from irresponsibility, from ignoring or suppressing the demands of the superego. Anxiety arises from the repudiation of moral feelings, from a lack of ego strength. To put it quite simply, neurotic symptoms arise from sin. Using the analogy of the child-parent relationship Mowrer explains his position thus:

So long as a child is good, his parents are benign and loving and the child is comfortable; but when the child is bad, the parents become punitive and the child knows no rest. Only when the child once more takes it upon himself to do as he is supposed to do can he hope to find peace, freedom, an amity in his relations with the parents. Translating this early interpersonal trauma into the intrapsychic events of later life, ego and superego (as the legatee of parental authority) are harmonious only when the ego obeys or, perhaps more accurately, anticipates (honors) the demands of superego. When there is an ego failure, superego takes matters "into its own hands," in a manner analogous to the way parents "take over"

when the child, as they say, fails them; an amity is re-established only when ego (or child) again accepts the responsibilities that are regarded as its proper portion.<sup>15</sup>

To Mowrer the return to the doctrine of sin is impermissible. He declares, ". . . we have disavowed the connection between man and his misconduct and psychopathology; we have also largely abandoned belief in right and wrong, virtue and sin." Stekel agrees with Mowrer.

On the basis of his rich clinical experience, Stekel also formed the opinion that in the precipitation of the typical compulsive syndrome the breakdown of the parental moral authority plays the central role, and that the compulsion—neurotic structure centers around traumatic secrets connected with this "complex of shattered authority." Memories related to the traumatic events are never really forgotten but annulled, pushed aside, as it were by the neurotic affects and preoccupations.<sup>17</sup>

Mowrer continues by showing that a man cannot sin with impunity. Sin, as he conceives it, is a break with sincerity; an abrogation of human intimacy, integrity, honesty, and faith. It is the estrangement of the individual from those whom Sull calls "the significant others."<sup>19</sup> And sin breeds a sense of guilt. Guilt, in turn, breeds fear, fear of detection and fear of punishment.

Both psychologists and pastors agree that the sense of guilt plays a large part in neurotic behavior. It is at the bottom of many anxiety states. Weatherhead distinguishes three kinds of guilt: 1) Normal guilt—the sense of sin which follows wrong doing; 2) Exaggerated conscious guilt—the intolerable burden which follows some incident, the guilt of which has been exaggerated out of all proportion; and 3) Repressed guilt—"The feelings of guilt which have been repressed into the unconscious because they are so objectionable to the consciousness."<sup>20</sup>

Schizophrenic patients are victims of this repressed guilt. Harried by fear of detection and punishment, they lapse into neuroticism, bizarre behavior, and self-rehearsed stratagems. A graduate student of psychology, himself a schizophrenic, has defined schizoid personality thus:

. . . he is a terrified, conscience-stricken crook, who has repressed his interest in people, unavowedly insincere

and uncooperative, struggling against unconscious sexual perversion. He is of no mean Thespian ability. And his favorite commandment is that which one nowadays facetiously calls the eleventh commandment, "Thou shalt not get caught."<sup>21</sup>

If the cause of anxiety is guilt produced by the loss of moral integrity, the cure lies in helping the individual to develop a sense of community, openness and relationship.<sup>22</sup> To put the matter another way, if anxiety has resulted from ego weakness, the cure lies in developing ego strength within the individual so that he will comport himself in a manner acceptable to the demands of the superego. Alexander says, "The ego's integrative function is the basis of the regenerative process in the field of personality disorders."<sup>23</sup> The supportive therapy is not to be aimed at freeing the individual from a supposedly unrealistic and traumatic superego, as Freud taught. It rather endeavors to help the individual to do the things he realistically should do and not do the things he realistically should not do.<sup>24</sup>

In this program of strengthening the ego, the counselor plays a more significant role than Freud would allow. Mowrer and his school emphasize that the contact between the anxiety victim and the counselor should be a mutual and collaborative one. Cholden says, "Our ability and interest in empathizing hold significant meaning for the patient. Ferenczi is quoted as having said, 'It's not so bad being crazy, if someone goes along who knows the way back.'"<sup>25</sup> In a similar vein Whitehorn declares:

Our observations, already reported in some detail, led us to state that in the psychotherapy of schizophrenic patients, improvement seems to be determined, in large measure, . . . by the differences found among physicians in the extent to which they are able to approach their patients' problems in a personal way, gain a trusted, confidential relationship and participate in an active personal way in the patients' reorientation to personal relationships. Techniques of passive permissiveness or efforts to develop insight by interpretation appear to have much less psychotherapeutic value.<sup>26</sup>

The function of the counselor is indeed to attempt to help the anxious soul find insight into the cause of his anxiety. But Mowrer, unlike Freud, says that the development of insight is not sufficient.

The individual must learn to act as a responsible subject in society. In attempting to provide the anxious soul with the necessary strength, Mowrer advocates a number of methods. The first of these is self-therapy. Moreno declares that this method is essentially a self-cure through self-realization and integration into the social environment. He indicates that convincing historical illustrations of this method are to be found among famous personages like Jesus, Buddha, and Francis.<sup>27</sup> Another form of self-help is bibliotherapy. Mowrer avers that a careful study of what ordinary people find helpful in reading might be highly suggestive as to what it is that the frustrated and sick person is seeking.<sup>28</sup> Building on the principle that people do not get well in analysis, but in life, Mowrer also favors group therapy.

Group psychotherapy has received recognition because it satisfies certain needs which the individual therapies cannot satisfy. We live from birth on in groups. Disturbances which are conditioned in a large measure by the world around us cannot be resolved unless the milieu is made a part of the therapeutic situation and treated simultaneously. Group psychotherapy approximates more closely the natural setting in which people live. This does not mean that individual methods of therapy have lost their usefulness, but group psychotherapy includes them and opens up a new vista. The individual is not treated in isolation, but *in situ*, in the context in which he is found: in the family, in the workshop, in the community, or in clinics as members of synthetic groups.<sup>29</sup>

The validity of group therapy is substantiated by the fact that in World Wars I and II and in the Korean conflict the treatment of combat casualties in or near the combat zone proved to be more effective than the results with patients evacuated to the rear. This experience seems to underscore the value of the therapeutic community for the anxious soul. Here Mowrer sees the value of the congregation as a therapeutic agent.

Another article in Mowrer's creed is that "It is easier to change yourself into a new way of thinking than to think yourself into a new way of acting."<sup>31</sup> "A person gets well of emotional difficulties not just by being treated by others, but by himself being a 'helpful person.'"<sup>32</sup> Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous support the truth that one helps himself by helping others. Joseph Scher reports an experiment in which patients in a mental hospital were required to perform certain tasks and in which obedience

insisted upon. "The results of this experiment in responsibility were significant. The patients put out a newspaper, a number of them became well enough to return to normal society. Assaultedness progressively decreased. The patients took up interest in their appearance."<sup>33</sup>

Moreno summarizes the advance that has been made in treating the anxious in the following manner:

From the patient on the couch, to the patient in the chair, to the patient on his feet, and, finally to the patient able to act-out and integrate his initial and external relationships *in vivo*, a considerable part of the psychotherapeutic movement since the beginning of the century can be charted. On the other hand, from the analyst as a black screen, to the middle-of-the-road, more active psychotherapist (Adler, Stekel), to the openly participating and integrating psychodramatist, a long way has been trodden.<sup>34</sup>

How shall we assess the position of Mowrer with respect to the cause and cure of anxiety? Certainly we can see a number of elements with which we agree. Mowrer himself feels that there is a close connection between his view and that of religion. Concluding his study he says:

If our present analysis is valid, religion is perhaps the most powerful device ever discovered for making the unconscious conscious, in the sense of replacing compulsion (sin, neurosis) with choice (integration, volition, self-direction).<sup>35</sup>

Certainly we can agree with Mowrer on the following points: That man is a responsible creature, that sin is the cause of anxiety, that sin breeds guilt, that a counselor should be a cooperative, helping other, that living altruistically is to be preferred to living selfishly, and that there is value in viewing the church as a helping community.

But Mowrer is to be criticized because he fails to make room for God in his explanation both of the cause and of the cure of anxiety. From the Christian point of view this failure is fatal.

Health is the complete and successful functioning of every part of the human being, in harmonious relationship with every other part and with his relevant environment . . . and for Christians the name of that environment is the God whom Christ revealed.<sup>36</sup>

In his excellent book, *Counseling and Theology*, Hulme argues man cannot be separated from his relationship with God. He declares:

Since the sting of guilt is in the separation it produces between an individual and his God, the adequacy of any non-religious solution to this problem is doubtful. It would fail to meet the deeper level of anxiety that grows out of the break between man and his Creator, which can never be basically dispersed at the upper levels of human relationships.<sup>37</sup>

This exclusion of God in Mowrer's thinking is a serious fault because it discredits the fact that man lives under the judgment of God because of sin. To say that sin is only social insincerity is to fail to realize the deeper consequences of sin in terms of man's estrangement from God. Furthermore, conversion is infinitely more than making a truce with one's fellowmen. It is fundamentally getting right with God, by turning from self-will and self-rule to a life in Christ under the will of God. Again, in Mowrer's view there is no room for the concept of forgiveness in the Scriptural sense. No man can find peace for his guilt except he find peace with God through Christ. Otherwise he remains without God and without hope in this world and in the world to come. For these reasons we must conclude that though Mowrer approaches some of the basic concepts of the Christian message, his view is still far from the Kingdom.

However, a study of his position does alert the pastor and preacher to his task. If it is true that there is wide-spread anxiety in the world, then we ought to view the sermon as a medium for mass counseling and preach sermons that are therapeutic in character. This is not to say that we are not to preach doctrine, but it does underscore the thought that we ought not to preach doctrine for doctrine's sake, but always preach it in lively rapport with human need.

In the second place, Mowrer's view reminds us that the staple of our preaching ought to be law and gospel, sin and grace. In fact, I once heard Mowrer charge modernistic pulpits with monstrous truancy for neglecting the preaching of these basic scriptural truths.

In preaching the law we ought to emphasize the fact that man is a responsible subject before God. His very creatureliness makes him accountable to God. Furthermore, sin ought to be preached for what it has always been, rebellion against the just demands of God. Again, sin ought to be preached in terms of its consequences. Sin brings guilt upon the individual and the just punishment of a holy God.

But in rapport with the preaching of the law must be the gospel of the infinite grace of God who commended his love toward us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. No guilt-ridden soul can find rest until in repentance he turns from sin in genuine sorrow and accepts by faith the love of God in Christ. Only in the knowledge that he is not under the law but under grace can the guilty soul find rest.

The doctrine of justification satisfies the need of the individual for acceptance (forgiveness); and for acceptance as he is (by grace); and in acceptance he may claim as his own (through faith). No pastor who has witnessed the power of this doctrine in leading another Luther out of his prison house of guilt into the free air of redemptive grace can ever doubt that it is fundamental not only to a system of theology but also to pastoral counseling.<sup>38</sup>

Nor should the preacher underestimate the power of the Word of God both in his preaching and pastoral care. It is the power of God because through it the Holy Spirit accomplishes his work of convicting the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment, of re-creating the guilty soul as a child of God at peace with God. This regenerating power of the Holy Spirit gives the individual the ego strength he needs. Once the sinner realizes the mercy of God for him in Christ, the Spirit of God continues to work in him to will and to do God's will.

Of significance, too, is Mowrer's emphasis on the congregation as a helping community. The pastor ought to view his congregation not simply as a collection of individuals but rather as the body of Christ, in which the strong bear the infirmities of the weak, in which they share their faith with one another, strengthening one another in the Christian way. Certainly our Bible classes and congregational organizations can do much to make the congregation

the sort of helping community it can be. Furthermore, the congregation offers every individual the opportunity for the need and healthful program of service to Christ and his church.

Finally, every pastor ought to remember that the person of the counselor is more important than his method. Each of us has a reason to pray daily for the gift of the Holy Spirit that we may minister with people with some of the loving concern of Jesus for those who labor and are heavy laden.

## NOTES

1. Paul E. Meehl, *et. al.*, *What, Then, is Man?* (St. Louis, 1958), p. 116.
2. Edna Heidbreder, *Seven Psychologies* (New York, 1933), p. 398.
3. Leslie Weatherhead, *Psychology, Religion, and Healing*, (New York, 1952), pp. 263f.
4. *Ibid.*
5. R. S. Woodworth, *Contemporary Schools of Psychology* (Ronald P. Maudsley, 1931), quoted in Leslie Weatherhead, *op. cit.*, pp. 275f.
6. Weatherhead, *op. cit.*, p. 252.
7. Rollo May, *The Meaning of Anxiety* (New York, 1950), p. 116. In fact, Freud reversed himself by saying that the repression does not create anxiety; anxiety is there first; then comes repression. Cfr. Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures in Psychoanalysis* (New York, 1918), p. 119.
8. Weatherhead, *op. cit.*, p. 262.
9. Cfr. Wayne Oates, *Anxiety in Christian Experience* (Philadelphia, 1955), who lists other causes for anxiety: Economic anxiety, Financial anxiety, Anxiety of grief, Legalistic anxiety.
10. Richard La Pierre, *The Freudian Ethic* (New York, 1959), pp. 63f.
11. Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, p. 76 quoted in O. H. Mowrer, *Psychoanalysis and Religion: A Partial Reconciliation* (Champaign, 1957), p. 7.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 95.
13. "Sin and Psychology," *Time*, LXXIV, 69.
14. May, *op. cit.*, p. 116.
15. O. Hobart Mowrer, *Psychoanalysis and Religion: A Partial Reconciliation*, p. 28.
16. "Sin and Psychology," *op. cit.*, p. 69.

17. *Progress in Psychotherapy*, F. Fromm-Reichman and J. L. Moreno, eds. (New York, 1956), p. 137 quoted in O. H. Mowrer, *New Perspectives in Psychotherapy* (Champaign, 1957), pp. 78f.
18. Mowrer, *New Perspectives in Psychotherapy*, p. 9. Mowrer's views parallel those of Soren Kierkegaard. Cf. Kierkegaard's *Sickness Unto Death* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1948) and *The Concept of Dread* (Princeton; Princeton University Press, 1946).
19. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
20. Weatherhead, *op. cit.*, p. 341.
21. Tom Wilson, *A New Theory of Schizophrenia* (Champaign, 1957), p. 40. To safeguard his identity, Dr. Mowrer has used a pen name for the writer of this article.
22. Mowrer, *New Perspectives in Psychotherapy*, p. 12.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 56.
24. Mowrer, *Psychoanalysis and Religion: A Partial Reconciliation*, pp. 23f.
25. Mowrer, *New Perspectives in Psychotherapy*, p. 25.
26. F. Fromm-Reichman, *op. cit.*, pp. 64-65.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
28. Mowrer, *New Perspectives in Psychotherapy*, p. 62.
29. F. Fromm-Reichman, *op. cit.*, p. 64.
30. *Ibid.*, pp. 186-187.
31. Mowrer, *New Perspectives in Psychotherapy*, p. 22.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
33. E. Pumpian-Mindlin, "Changing Concepts of Therapy in a Veterans Administration Mental Hygiene Clinic," *The American Journal of Psychiatry* (1957), CXIII, 1095-1098.
34. F. Fromm-Reichman, *op. cit.*, p. 326.
35. Mowrer, *Psychoanalysis and Religion: A Partial Reconciliation*, p. 33.
36. Weatherhead, *op. cit.*, pp. 311. 315.
37. William E. Hulme, *Counseling and Theology* (Philadelphia, 1956), pp. 109f.