Interview with Paul C. Vitz: A Catholic Looks at the Past, Present and Future of Christian Psychology

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ECB: Paul, you are perhaps the best known Catholic psychologist in the past thirty years offering a self-consciously Christian critique of secular psychology. Yet you were not a committed Christian when you began your studies. Did psychology play any role in your conversion to Christianity? Can you tell us about this journey of faith?

PCV: In many ways, my conversion was a return to Christianity by a process of elimination. After my marriage and the arrival of our first child, I began seriously to investigate what I stood for. What kind of father would I be for my family? Who was I? At the time, I saw only four possible world views: liberal politics; eastern religion and related spirituality; self-worship and professional ambition for personal success; and traditional religion, which, for me, meant Christianity.

During the 1960s at Stanford in California and at Greenwich Village in New York, I was immersed both in liberal Marxist socialist politics and in a good deal of early new age spirituality. Though I had met many people active and influential in both fields, none of them impressed me very much. New age spirituality struck me as a tourist religion. People picked and chose whatever snippets they wanted of eastern spirituality until a configuration of more convenient or popular beliefs came along. I found leftist politics filled with viciousness, intellectual denial, and clichés. My experience of reality had already inoculated me against the promise of a government-sponsored utopia.

Self-worship held a more powerful draw and naturally attracted me. The secular professional world presented it as normal, and, in many ways, still does. I had already begun to suspect, however, that whoever worships himself worships a fool. In time the hopeless illusion would be shattered by inexorable reality.

After these three were eliminated, I was faced with the remaining possibility, which didn't excite me—Christianity. I remembered having read quotes from time to time in the New York Times from Billy Graham or the Pope. And I knew the quotes were true. But I could not believe them. I was in the strange position of knowing something was true but unable to believe it. Despite the reasonable, even irrefutable, kernels of truth that I heard from Christian sources, the prospect of accepting the whole system was more than I could swallow. Nevertheless, in January of 1973, I began exploring Christianity. At first I was very doubtful about the intellectual basis for Christianity. Like many academics who know little about the faith, I had a negative attitude based on only a few stereotypes. Then I began reading authors such as C.S. Lewis and G.K. Chesterton. It quickly, and surprisingly, became clear that Christianity had answers; that it was a deep, consistent, and powerful framework—indeed a coherent worldview. It made the completed and exhausted secular ideologies look very limited. In short, the intellectual basis for my disbelief evaporated quickly.

The real issue that remained was with my will. I had to change the way I lived. This became a long

struggle which is still far from over. Most of my steps have been small with only moments of big change. (The story of my Christian conversion is discussed in more detail in "A Christian Odyssey," in *Spiritual Journeys*, R. Baram (Ed.) 1988. Boston, MA: St. Paul Books & Media, pp. 375-394; and in "The story of my life up to now," in *Storying Ourselves*, D.J. Lee (Ed.) 1993. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, pp. 111-129.)

ECB: Would you elaborate some of your criticisms of secular psychology?

PCV: In the 1960s and the 1970s, I was exposed to humanistic, self-actualizing psychology. I could not believe that people took it seriously. It seemed to me intellectually naïve. It emphasized narcissism and explicitly claimed, with a purported scientific rationale, that self-realization was the goal and endpoint of life. It seemed to me that the most ancient heresy, the same that was swallowed by Adam and Eve – "you shall be as gods" – had simply robed itself in scientific guise and taken a new incarnation. The self "actualized" in Christianity comes through following Christ and in obedience to Him. The self actualized in humanistic psychology comes through obedience to your own will. This is the self Jesus asked us to deny.

Although I was and remain critical of "self" psychology, I did not criticize experimental/cognitive psychology or psychoanalysis. I do have important differences with both, especially with respect to certain of their assumptions and attitudes. However, these psychologies are serious intellectual endeavors. Self/humanistic psychology had little of the genuine scientific basis of experimental/cognitive psychology, and lacked the depth, complexity, and awareness of tragedy and evil found in psychoanalysis.

I am happy to report that the extreme self-focused psychology dating from the period of roughly 1955-1985 is now history. Although the "culture of narcissism" still lingers, its intellectual legitimacy has faded considerably. And its decline matches an increase in support for Christianity, the worldview that I came to accept.

ECB: Are you more hopeful for psychology now? If so, why?

PCV: Yes, I am; and I might add, much to my surprise. Beginning around 1990, I began to notice important and positive changes within the discipline of mainstream psychology. Evidence for the positive importance of religion in persons' lives was published and became widely accepted. Divorce was clearly recognized as harmful for children. A psychology of forgiveness began to emerge thanks to Enright and Worthington (Enright & Zell, 1989; McCullough & Worthington, 1994, Worthington, 2001). Seligman and others championed the development of a positive psychology focused on acknowledging the importance of the virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). I became part of a growing network of Christian psychologists, mostly evangelical Protestants, who encouraged me to continue my work integrating psychology with Christianity.

Psychology today is much more realistic as a discipline, and, as a result, I believe, contributing more honest and valid conclusions. It is also more humble. Its explanatory realm has been clipped. Biology as a discipline has begun to explain a good deal of mental pathology previously thought to be primarily psychological, such as obsessive compulsive behavior. The array of mental behaviors accounted for by psychology had been reduced from the biological side. On the other hand, there is an awareness of religion—at least understood as spirituality—as important for human well-being. Some decades ago people searching for meaning and purpose in life would often seek it in psychology. Today, many recognize that psychology can't provide this, but religion or spirituality can.

ECB: How do you see psychology and Christian theology interacting positively? Practically, how can psychology add anything to the Christian worldview?

PCV: In many ways, psychology gives us an understanding of barriers to human freedom and obstacles to faith. Pathologies are ways in which persons are bound or trapped. Psychology can be used to make straight the way to the Lord. John the Baptist, then, is the patron saint of a Christian understanding of psychology.

I have written at length in my book *Faith of the Fatherless* (Vitz, 1991) how psychology gives support to the understanding of God the Father. Freud's psychological theories also can contribute to Christian theology. Freud claimed that the Oedipus complex comprises the fundamental structure of every person. Within each man is the drive of violence and sex: every man wants to kill his father and every authority figure and to have sex with his mother and every mother figure. Christians can read Freudian anthropology as a conceptualization of the Old Man – such is the depravity of original sin. Psychoanalytic psychology has given us an insight into fallen human nature.

ECB: And vice versa, how can the Christian intel-

lectual tradition contribute to psychology?

PCV: The most obvious contribution of Christian theology to psychology is insight into the basic nature of the subject matter. Christian theology understands what it means to be a person. This present journal issue deals with this at length.

Christian theology also contributes to psychology in other ways. I believe that theology answers dilemmas—unanswerable problems—intrinsic to existing secular psychological theories. For example, I have argued that Christians are able to resolve the Oedipal dilemma presented by classical Freudian theory (Vitz, 1993). Jesus is the anti-Oedipus and the transformer of the superego. Christ also resolves a dilemma in Jungian theory. Jungians have proposed four basic archetypes underlying masculine psychology: the King, the Warrior, the Lover, and the Wiseman/Magician. These archetypes, however, create two large unresolved problems. Jungian psychology has no moral framework identifying how to live these archetypes in a positive rather than a destructive way. A second, larger dilemma is integrating and balancing these four archetypes together in a man's life. Christian theology contains within itself material for conceiving of Christian archetypes. The Divine Persons of the Father and the Son can be seen as exemplifying the four Jungian archetypes and unifying the types around the service of others. The concept of Father for Christians represents masculinity as the paragon of generosity and self-gift as it unites the four archetypes. The archetype of Christ represents the Father as the highest form of ethical masculinity: Christ the King, Christ the Lover, Christ the Warrior (spiritual warfare), and Christ the Wiseman/miracle worker. Other psychological theories contain dilemmas resolvable with theological answers but with no genuine psychological answers.

ECB: You have published on the concept of the transmodern world. What do you mean by transmodern, and how do you see psychology as being part of it?

PCV: Almost all cultural theorists today recognize that we are in a period of late and decaying modernism. For want of a better vocabulary, this era is described as postmodern; (I have sometimes referred to it as "morbid" modernism). A generally nihilistic and deconstructive attitude characterizes the intellectual climate of our period. Many Christian writers have critiqued this morbid modernity. Pope John Paul II, for example, in his justly famous encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, called it a "culture of death." Certainly, trends within the arts and popular culture celebrate death. And present day cultural enemies of the West recognize well the self-destructive weakness created by the culture of death.

I have proposed the term transmodern to describe a new era or historical period which I believe is dawning. The transmodern culture would take the best of modernity and *transform, transcend,* and *transfigure* it. Transforming modernity means taking the developments of modernism and contextualizing them within a larger framework. Rather than rejecting modernity, the transmodern removes the anti-religious bias, but retains the core objective findings. Transmodernism contrasts sharply with fundamentalism. Fundamentalists of whatever stripe – Protestant, Catholic, Islam, Hindu – seek to reset the world to where it was 150, 200, or 500 years ago. Transforming modernity does not return to the past, but lives in the present without discarding the past. Transcending modernity incorporates a religious or spiritual view and an idealistic moral system. Transmodern culture recognizes that the human person is not a mere machine, but called to go beyond the self. As a result of this transforming and transcending, modernism will be transfigured, such that the actual shape or physical environment in which we live will be changed. Such a vision is implied in John Paul II's request that we "cross the threshold of hope" and envision a "new culture of love."

I see many modest but important signs of such change already occurring. Of course, the dominant aspects of our dying modern cultural framework are obvious and all around us, yet there are reasons for optimism. I see the Christian approach to psychology itself, including its emphasis on forgiveness in psychotherapy, as one of these new, small, yet significant examples of a transmodern culture. The placement of psychotherapy within a Christian context transforms the best elements of existing modern practices. The acceptance and reinforcement of a theistic interpretation of the spiritual life of the patient transcends psychotherapy. Thus, the future practice of psychotherapy is transfigured and placed within church, family, and retreat settings.

On Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays I am optimistic about this proposed new cultural era. On Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays, I am pessimistic about its possibility. And on Sunday, I let theoretical speculation rest!

ECB: You have already identified positive interactions of psychology and Christian theology and signs of a coming transmodern world. Looking forward to the next century, what advances do you see in psychology and how do you see the field changing?

PCV: First, I think the psychology of the virtues will develop very steadily. Secular psychology will be supported by the labor and insight of Christian psychologists. A psychology based on virtue will change the whole focus of psychology from an attempt to explain maladies caused by past traumas to an emphasis on human flourishing by the development of virtues both in and out of the context of therapy. The prominence of virtue within psychology returns to an idea foundational not only within the Western intellectual tradition, but also within the cultural past of most world traditions. I think this will slowly remove the victim mentality so common today in psychology and bring a new focus. In the future, once a person is identified as suffering from a dysfunction based on past traumas or developmental inadequacies, the focus will then turn to what the patient is going to do about it.

Second, I think psychology will continue, in a modest way, to lose ground in explanatory power. On the one side, biological-neurological-genetic approaches will advance in explaining mental problems, and, on the other side, spiritual, religious, and moral responses to mental pathologies will continue to make progress. As a result, I think that psychology will play a smaller role in the understanding of the human person by the end of the 21st as compared to the 20th century.

Third, positive mental health practices may become part of our culture. In the history of public health, one of the major contributions was the discovery of the causes of disease, thus allowing us to prevent them. Most of increased life expectancy is not due to the improved ability to cure diseases, but to the fact that most persons do not get many diseases in the first place. We learned about bacteria and viruses, clean drinking water, good plumbing and sewage systems. The common biological pollution found before the year 1800 which previously resulted in such poor physical health has been cleaned up. Similarly, we are just beginning to learn the causes of poor mental health. For example, we are learning about the importance of both mothers and fathers to healthy children. The early mother-child relationship crucially affects later relationships. Well-documented research shows the importance of fathers for helping their sons avoid criminal behavior and their daughters make positive relationship choices. Because of discoveries like these, a mental health culture could be created in our society that takes precautions to ensure the most positive environment possible for the healthy development of children. In that culture, modern individualism, selfishness and pleasure-seeking will be seen as mental pollution. Therefore, pornography, divorce, etc. would be seriously discouraged. An atmosphere supporting the positive mental health of children may become integrated into our society's laws, customs, and preoccupations.

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Review of Vitz and Felch (2006)

The self: Beyond the postmodern crisis

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Invitation:
Readers of *Edification* are invited to submit reviews of books that they have found stimulating and that fit into the discussion of Christian Psychology. Please contact the book review editor to explore this possibility. His email address is bmaier@biblical.edu.

Featured Review

Vitz, Paul C. & Felch, Susan M. (2006). *The self: Beyond the postmodern crisis*. Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, Pp. 341, $30.00. (Reviewed by Michael J. Donahue, who is an Associate Professor of Psychology and Director of Training Research at the Institute for the Psychological Sciences, Arlington, VA. He can be contacted at mdonahue@ipsciences.edu.)

There Is Really Nothing to All That Nihilism

There is general agreement that devotion to something greater than the self is required for a truly fulfilling life.

This understanding has been challenged of late by an understanding of the self which is referred to as "postmodern." This is defined by Paul Vitz in an introductory essay to this volume as a rejection of all overarching meaning-endowing theories and as "characterized by a rejection of universal truth and objectivity and by a rejection of systematic, binding morality" (p. xii). In contrast, the "transmodern self" is characterized as attending to a stable, rational self, the recognition of the importance of spirituality, and the presumption that the self is cohesive and relatively permanent (p. 163), or again as a self that is embodied, relational, and humble (p. 199).

Postmodernism has not been without its critics. As long as ten years ago, Daniel Gilbert (1998), one of the editors of the fourth edition of *The Handbook of Social Psychology,* referred to it as "today's glorification of the irrational," and quoted with approval the opinion that "postmodernism has invited an obscurity and a pretentiousness almost unmatched in the long, often obscure and pretentious history of philosophy. . . . [It] isn't a philosophy. It's at best a holding pattern, a cry of despair" (p. 135). But this of course has not prevented academics, for example Gergen (1991) and others, from proposing postmodernism as an acceptable understanding of, and model for, personality in contemporary times.

The selections in this anthology seek to note the inadequacy of postmodernism as a model for human flourishing, and propose transmodernism in place of it. It is a particularly broad introduction, including sections that present philosophical reflections (section I. New Theorists of the Self), therapeutic understandings (II. Love, Values, and the Self), the view from cognitive psychology and neuropsychology (III. The Body and the Self), sociological critiques (IV. Contemporary Society and the Self), empirical social-psychological research (V. College Students and Self), and theological essays (VI. The Trinity and the Self). Thus individuals with almost any form of interest in the topic will find a discussion in a voice to which they are accustomed, as well as insights from other intellectual approaches.

In spite of the diverse viewpoints, some consistent themes emerge. The rejection of Descartes' maxim, "*Cogito ergo sum*" is sounded by several of the authors. Gil Bailie's contribution on "The imitative self" suggests that the basis of personhood is the desire to imitate another, a model, an ideal self; Christ for the Christian. Thus a Cartesian approach of beginning inside the self – in isolation, away from the social reality – is inherently insufficient. Bailie notes that Rousseau's declaration of ultimate individuality is likewise artificial, given that it requires a society that one is unique in contrast to. Bert Hodges defines the self as a locus of inherently social *values* and proposes that development of a "value-realizing psychology" will demonstrate the bankruptcy of Cartesian-based self-centered approaches.

Karen Coats' analysis suggest that, in contrast to Descartes, a more adequate maxim would be "I love therefore I am," fleshing out the theme with psychoanalytic analyses of *Charlotte's Web* and *Where the Wild Things Are.* David M. Holley's essay suggests that "Finding a self-love" – the proper love of a properly nurtured self — in concert with love of others, would be most appropriate.

William B. Hurlbut's and Vitz's essays both ex-