

Roberts, R C & Talbot, M R (eds) 1997 – *Limning the psyche: Explorations in Christian psychology*

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This book is the result of an ecumenical meeting representing many of the mainstream churches in the United States of America. Psychologists, philosophers and theologians talked about the Christian understanding of who we are as persons, guided by the Bible and the Christian tradition. The problematic nature of the relationship of theology to psychology is well exemplified in the words of Roberts: "We see Jesus moving his mouth ventriquoistically, but hear the thoughts and voice of Abraham Maslow." The central question is whether theology has capitulated to psychology and become a pre-scientific superstition. The authors intend to design a Christian psychology that will draw on the tradition of the Bible to understand the nature of the psyche and to formulate a personality theory. A Christian psychology's purpose is to come to a "rich and accurate account of our own nature" (p 4).

The question of the nature of the relationship between science and psychology is addressed in a number of chapters. The relative youth of psychology as a science is emphasised and the importance of pre-scientific assumptions and commitments is attended to. In view of the scientific reductionism of psychology, the important role of theology is emphasised, especially as theology goes beyond human behaviour as mechanical response to external stimuli, to include agency and the importance of beliefs and desires, intention, choice and responsibility.

In an attempt to construct a Christian psychology from the Bible, many authors end up using the Bible in a fundamentalist and naive way. One extreme example is Martin's idea that the biblical texts referring to women having to be submissive to their husbands, are based on the basic biblical view of human nature. In an attempt to develop a Christian psychology, the tendency in this book is to develop a psychology that originates from the Bible. Instead of commitment to a current psychological theory that is then connected to the Bible, a biblical account is first developed and then used to address contemporary psychological theory.

A basic tendency of the book is to reduce the distance between theology and psychology. Psychology is viewed as an alternative to Christian spirituality. This, however, is done by identifying a biblical psychology that is then equated with theology.

In the process of developing a Christian psychology, three important parameters of such a psychology are covered in the various chapters.

Firstly, the sociality of the psyche is emphasised. In opposition to individualistic ideas about emotional independence and separateness, many of the authors postulate a more social approach to individuals or persons as being typical of a biblical or Christian approach.

Secondly, the Christian concept of agency challenges the psychological notion of behaviour: we are performers of actions and do not merely behave like machines.

The third parameter concerns sin as a psychological concept. The notion of psychopathology is replaced by the Christian idea of sin. Sin becomes the way in which to understand deviant behaviour and personality problems. It is relational, making a dis-relationship with God basic to human dysfunction. Human problems are in this way hamartologised and the solution is soteriologised.

The task of Christian psychological thinkers is, in the words of one of the editors, Roberts, "largely one of *retrieval* – of making accessible to ourselves and our contemporaries the psychological para-

meters of Scripture and the insight of great Christian psychological thinkers ...” (p 19). Interdisciplinary conversation as practiced in this book, becomes the way of developing a Christian psychology.

Although a lot of hard work and thinking has gone into this book and the project of developing a Christian psychology, it is a pity that the dominant epistemology guiding the author is very modernistic, structuralist and fundamentalist. This is clear from the very first paragraph describing the purpose of the conference from which the book originated: “... we shared the desire to think about persons in ways strongly guided by the Bible and the great classical tradition of orthodox Christianity” (p 1). This limits the contribution the book can make to a specific community of Christians. This book will be of value to Christian pastors, psychologists and people who approach the issue at hand with the assumption that the Bible can provide answers to all problems concerning understanding human beings and is able to solve “psychological” problems people experience.

I miss attention to the issue from a more adequate epistemological position – critical self-reflection would change the question that the book tries to answer. The question is embedded in a modernist, fundamentalist, positivist scientific approach. Postmodern and constructionist ideas would change the question at hand. The method of addressing the question would change to such an extent that the endeavour to create a Christian psychology (that is a biblical psychology) would become in itself an unacceptable and problematic issue.

To call it Christian psychology (why not anthropology?) obscures the importance of the real implications of this shift. This is a move away from privileging psychology as having the dominant say about understanding being human. What we need is a deconstruction of the dominance of the modernist, positivist psychologising of people, a move towards a more culturally and politically sensitive way of thinking about being human.

Confusing matters further is the assumption from which the problem is approached, namely that ‘Theology’, ‘Christian’ and ‘Biblical’ are more or less synonymous. A biblical or Christian psychology is assumed to be a theological position, which, from my point of view, is unacceptable. What is presented eventually is a contemporary psychological analysis of cultural discourses, and not necessarily a theological analysis. Psychology as such is a modernist invention. The same also applies to modern theology, which is also based on rationality. In both reason becomes normative for what is psychological and theological, and both disciplines become fundamentalist.
