The Fall and Rise of Psychoreligious Cooperation

Has America traded its soul for its psyche? Has the quest for our inner selves replaced the quest for God? Would we rather feel good than be good? Has therapy replaced religion in our lives? These questions have been posed, and for the most part answered in the affirmative and with alarm, in what is now a long string of popular exposés and scholarly works dating back to Philip Rieff’s 1966 classic, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic.* Early in the twentieth century, psychotherapy had been the preserve of the elite few who were cosmopolitan enough to want it and wealthy enough to pay for it. After World War II, however, it spread

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2 Although the general tendency has been to deplore primarily the popular expansion of therapeutic modes beginning around the time of World War II, a few authors specify slightly different moments as the source of the problem. For example, Pfister locates it in the rise of the American middle class in the antebellum period; Rieff traces the trouble to Freud’s epigoni, who could not resist harnessing his ideas to totalizing systems of salvation; and Rice finds it in the rise of what he calls a “liberation psychology” around
rapidly to the middle class, as popular media extolled its insights and thousands of new counselors made it affordable for many. As a result, by the end of the century we had become, according to one critique, “one nation under therapy.” Thoughtful observers have feared that the pervasiveness of this therapeutic outlook has had three intertwined and pernicious effects: It has corroded or corrupted religious faith, fostered ethical laxity, and weakened social bonds. If this is true, it threatens the vitality of our civil society; the cultural bedrock of our liberal democracy. But is it true?

I believe that these critics have not recognized the degree to which psychotherapeutic ideas and techniques changed as they were popularized. As psychology moved into the mainstream, the mainstream – with its considerable religiosity – moved into psychology. Believers harnessed therapy to their own purposes. They innovated psychospiritual programs that nurtured faith, virtue, and community rather than supplanting them.

Such programs were particularly successful among the socially isolated and spiritually alienated, who often rebuffed traditional forms of ministry, evangelism, and fellowship. I base this conclusion on my study of three psychospiritual programs: the training of seminarians and ministers in psychology, Alcoholics Anonymous, and The Salvation Army’s outreach to homeless men.

Some of the earliest efforts to forge convergences between the behavioral sciences and religion in America began among modernist Protestant clergy in the 1910s and 1920s. Their sporadic efforts caught on broadly in the 1960s. See Pfister, “Glamorizing the Psychological”; Rice, Disease of One’s Own; Rieff, Triumph of the Therapeutic.

Sommers and Satel, One Nation Under Therapy.

I define “religion” as a community-based system of belief and practices based on an apprehension of supernatural phenomena that give the world its ultimate meaning and structure. In the context of this study, “religion” refers generally to American Christianity with an emphasis on Protestants. “Spirituality” refers to the experiential aspects of individuals’ attempts to relate their lives to the supernatural phenomena that endow the cosmos with significance, whether or not this effort is aligned with Christian traditions. Similarly, I mean by “faith” an emotionally meaningful belief in any extrahuman, significance-conferring being or phenomena. I settled on these definitions after consulting Albanese, America: Religions and Religion; Fitzgerald, Ideology of Religious Studies; Fuller, Spiritual, but Not Religious; Hamilton, Sociology of Religion; James, Varieties of Religious Experience; Taylor, Varieties of Religion Today; Wuthnow, After Heaven.

Catholics pioneered efforts to link psychology and theology almost from the inception of academic psychology. However, the separation of their educational, intellectual, and institutional lives kept Catholic and Protestant pioneers from learning from each other until after World War II. For Catholic pioneers, see Gillespie, Psychology and American
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after World War II as ministers looked to the burgeoning field of counseling for ways to enhance their pastoral care. Protestant seminaries began offering, and eventually requiring, psychology coursework and hospital chaplaincy internships. During this education, students underwent the same kind of psychotherapeutically informed pastoral counseling they were being taught to provide. Some warned that such an education could pervert Christian doctrine and ministry by “substitut[ing] psychiatry and psychotherapy for the Word and the Sacrament.”

A minority of seminarrians did, in fact, make such a devastating substitution, styling themselves after therapists, whom they admired and emulated. Most found, however, that this new “clinical pastoral education” strengthened their clerical skills and self-confidence, especially by sharpening their self-honesty, enhancing their interpersonal interactions, and helping them mature in their faith.

Gradually, the idea that faith could foster mental well-being and that emotional growth could pave the way to greater faith reached the laity, too. This realization helped a couple of self-described boozehounds trying to stay sober together in the 1930s. They immediately began to pass the word to fellow sufferers, who responded by gathering in small, mutually supportive spiritual groups. The smattering of such groups around the nation soon came to think of themselves as united in a fellowship they dubbed Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). At war’s end, thousands upon thousands of inebriates joined the movement and formed new groups. They did not share ministers’ admiration for psychologists and psychiatrists. Instead they argued that they themselves provided the best treatment for compulsive drinking. Doctors soon came to agree. As both a type of lay-led group therapy and a fellowship, AA provided an ethical and spiritual education that nudged members toward greater responsibility to others and to God. Although critics have ridiculed the self-help phenomenon, I found that AA not only strengthened members’ spiritual and even religious lives, but it constituted a massive democratic civil social institution in its own right.

Catholicism; Kugelmann, “Neoscholastic Psychology Revisited”; and Kugelmann, Psychology and Catholicism. For postwar diffusion of Catholic perspectives, see Heinze, Jews and the American Soul.

This concern was posed directly as a question to clinical training graduates in Bruder and Barb, “A Survey of Ten Years of Clinical Pastoral Training.”

I mean by “civil society” the private, voluntary associational ties that unite members of the public in liberal democracies. See Seligman, Idea of Civil Society; Eberly, ed., Essential Civil Society Reader.
American Protestantism in the Age of Psychology

Although modernist and mainline clergy pioneered the Protestant effort to connect Americans’ understandings of psyche and soul, it was not long before a vanguard of evangelical ministers began their own post-war efforts to claim psychology as a handmaiden to faith. The Salvation Army, a small conservative denomination with an enormous social service ministry, was at the forefront of this development. In the three decades following World War II, it gradually recast its evangelization of homeless men as psychospiritual rehabilitation. Drawing on clinical pastoral education and Alcoholics Anonymous and adding its own innovations, The Salvation Army forged psychospiritual convergences. It fruitfully exploited the overlaps between pastoral guidance and therapeutic counseling, Christian fellowship and group therapy, and the Protestant work ethic and work therapy. This therapeutic transformation of traditional evangelical methods was neither secularizing nor atomizing. Quite the opposite. In fact, the army found it nurtured homeless men’s religious lives.

From these findings, I conclude that our understanding of the therapeutic strands in American culture must be revised. In the United States, the achievement of mental well-being did not usually replace spiritual interest, as nearly all the literature alleges. On the contrary, many Americans understood it as confirmation of divine concern. The spiritual groups I have studied convinced millions of spiritually and socially alienated Americans that, in their pursuit of well-being, they needed to turn to God and fellowship, and that to do this they had to become more honest and altruistic. Psychotherapeutic perspectives came to enjoy wide appeal among a citizenry who found them useful in the pursuit of moral self-improvement, fellowship, and a sense of connectedness to God. 8

The Fall of Psychoreligious Cooperation in the United States

Americans have a long history of blending self-healing and inner exploration with spirituality, although this tradition was temporarily eclipsed

8 This argument was made by Fuller in Americans and the Unconscious, but it was neglected by the literature on the therapeutic. A cognate argument has been offered by F. H. Matthews, who says Freud’s popularity rested on “the easy and valuable inclusion of psychoanalysis into the ethic of service to the community” (60). It has been widely agreed that psychoanalysis and its offshoots became more optimistic and social in the American context; see Hale, Rise and Crisis of Psychoanalysis, Rise and Crisis of Psychoanalysis; Matthews, “The Americanization of Sigmund Freud”; and Sheehy, “Triumph of Group Therapeutics.”
in the first half of the twentieth century by the rise of the behavioral sciences. This amalgamation drew on long-term, broad developments within Western culture. Christianity, Protestantism especially, was experienced increasingly in the mind and heart.\(^9\) The emphasis on feeling one’s faith began to intensify in the eighteenth century.\(^10\) Religious claims rested less and less on textual, clerical, and social authority than on individuals’ intellect and feelings. Immanuel Kant and his intellectual heirs found evidence for faith on the grounds of universal reason. This did not spare faith, however, from the assault leveled by “cultured despisers.”\(^9\) By the eve of the nineteenth century, Protestant theologians, beginning with Friedrich Schleiermacher, had begun moving the burden of proof to the inward experience of believers. Their emotions and intuitions verified the existence of the divine realm.\(^11\) The urgency of this project was articulated by the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, Frederick Temple, in 1857 when he wrote, “Our theology has been cast in a scholastic mode, all based on logic. We are in need of, and we are actually being forced into, a theology based on psychology.”\(^12\)

This theological and philosophical trend had popular analogues in Protestant pietistic and revival movements. They emphasized the importance of individual believers over that of corporate entities and of faith over other facets of Christianity (e.g., sacrament).\(^13\) In the face of the increasing challenges mounted against religion – and the growing importance attached to individuals’ mental lives – the vitality of faith in the West depended increasingly on believers’ ability to link psyche and soul. They would need to find evidence of the divine in their own minds. In the process, many also concluded that they could strengthen their psyches through the salvation of their souls.

These developments helped reshape Protestant denominations and the popular theological imagination in the United States. Disestablishment

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\(^9\) Many starting points are alleged for this trend, which was at least a half millennium in the making. For example, Bellah roots it in the Reformation, whereas Taylor locates its origins during the High Middle Ages. Phillip Cary pushes the date as back as far as Augustine. See Bellah, “The Protestant Structure of American Culture”; Cary, Augustine’s Invention of the Inner Self; Taylor, Varieties of Religion Today.

\(^10\) Heron argues that both the impulse to articulate a “natural theology” and pietism sprang from the common interest in what faith did and should mean for the individual believer. See Heron, Century of Protestant Theology, 10–11.


\(^12\) Rieff, Triumph of the Therapeutic, 41–2.

\(^13\) Ford, “Introduction to Modern Christian Theology”; Heron Century of Protestant Theology; Holifield, History of Pastoral Care; Taves, Fits, Trances, and Visions.
and the potent leveling impulses released by the American Revolution created a fertile climate for evangelists. They spread across the land with new understandings of the gospels that were individualistic, optimistic, and democratic. Over the course of the century, Americans new and old flocked to Methodist, Presbyterian, and Baptist churches. These new churches emphasized the idea in the New Testament that “whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Romans 10:13). Faith – understood as what happened in one’s heart and head – determined the fate of one’s soul.

The new importance of feelings and beliefs in Americans’ religious lives reflected and influenced profound changes in social relations and culture. For example, a new emphasis on intimacy infused families. Child-rearing shifted from broad multigenerational clans to bigenerational emotional “hot houses” that fostered tighter relationships and intense feelings between members of the nuclear family. Antebellum literature, like the religion that informed it, reinforced readers’ complex and “deeper” sense of selves.

The soul and psyche blurred and merged as nineteenth-century Americans perceived a deeper space inside themselves. This initiated a period of free play in which Americans asserted a bewildering variety of claims about what happened inside them and how this connected to the material and spiritual worlds outside themselves. In the antebellum era, many found an inner portal leading to an extra-individual sacred realm, a space that could be inhabited by holy spirits. Thus possessed, some Americans erupted into fits, fell into trances, spoke in strange voices, or...

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14 Bednarowski, New Religions; Finke and Stark, Churching of America; Hatch, Democratization of American Christianity; Hutchison, Modernist Impulse; Wood, Radicalism of the American Revolution.
16 Pfister, “Glamorizing the Psychological.”
17 Some historians, inspired in large part by Michel Foucault, have argued that this space was invented or imagined. This line of argument is better supported by theory than by a nuanced social history of the type that, for example, John Demos tells. Either way, all acknowledge that Americans did perceive this space. For one of the best books in the genre of a Foucauldian-inspired history of emotion, see Pfister and Schnog, Inventing the Psychological. Other Marxian and Foucauldian-inflected works include: Cushman, Constructing the Self; Kovel, “The American Mental Health Industry”; Levine, Constructions of the Self; Rose, Governing the Soul; Rose, Inventing Our Selves.
18 Cary, in Augustine’s Invention, argues that such a space hailed back to Augustine and was therefore intrinsic to the Western Christian tradition: “From its inception, inwardness meant seeking a glimpse of the soul’s inner relation to its divine origin” (10).
saw fantastic visions. Americans vigorously debated whether such phenomena were physical or religious, human or divine, sincere or fraudulent. Tens of thousands flocked to the new therapies, churches, and entertainments that coalesced around the idea of an overlapping psyche, mind, and spirit.\footnote{Fuller, Mesmerism; Fuller, Spiritual, but Not Religious; Meyer, The Positive Thinkers; Moore, In Search of White Crows; Taves, Fits, Trances, and Visions, part II.} While some merely sought amusement, many sought healing in an age in which doctors could offer little. For example, hypnotist Phineas Parkhurst Quimby (1802–1866) treated almost 12,000 patients.\footnote{Fuller, Mesmerism, 118–22.}

Many of those most interested in these new forms of hybrid spirituality were motivated by matters of faith rather than, or in addition to, medical concerns. It appealed especially to people who found more traditional religious forms and ideas implausible or un compelling. In the decades after the Civil War, many of the traditional grounds for faith, such as revelation and the physical world, were undermined as challengers argued that they were the work of human or natural hands.\footnote{Ibid; Smith, ed., The Secular Revolution; Turner, Without God, Without Creed.} By the late nineteenth century, Congregationalist minister Lyman Abbott echoed the Archbishop of Canterbury when – dismayed that he found no room for God in the new scientific literature – he said that “if I was to retain any really forceful belief in God and immortality, or even in practical morality, I must believe in the trustworthiness of spiritual experience.”\footnote{Turner, Without God, Without Creed, 188.} In the late nineteenth century, personal experience became the one realm safe from challenge to which educated Protestants could turn for validation and confirmation of their religious longings and intuitions. The pietistic trends that had flourished in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries attuned believers to feeling their faith, to feeling the divine spirit stirring their souls. The immediacy and intimacy of this experience could not be gainsaid by scholars who insisted, for example, that geology and archeology provided a better natural history of the world than Scripture did.

A new development, however, eventually threw this approach into question. It would curtail the ability of Americans to blend their beliefs easily with their healing: the rise of the academic and professional disciplines of psychology and psychiatry. The first psychology laboratory was established at The Johns Hopkins University in 1883, and a few years later the school awarded its first doctorate in the subject. Over
the ensuing fifteen years, dozens of schools set up psychology departments. Williams James, one of the most impressive and famous students of the new discipline, published his magisterial *Principles of Psychology* (1890). And scholars of the burgeoning discipline established the American Psychological Association along with multiple national and regional journals. When Lightner Witmer founded the first psychological clinic for patients in 1896, American behavioral scientists entered the field of mental and psychosomatic healing that theretofore had been dominated by lay practitioners such as Quimby and his students.

As with any new field, psychology’s early years were characterized by diversity and disagreements over paradigmatic questions about boundaries, foci, and methods.\(^23\) One contentious issue was the relationship of the new field to theology, spiritual lay healing, and claims of religious experience. Neoscholastic scholars began an ambitious program to bridge the worlds of scientific psychology and Catholic doctrine.\(^24\) Some Protestants also felt that psychology could and should retain a close and collaborative relationship with faith, even if it was a heterodox one. This was advocated and practiced by some of the key figures in the founding of American psychology, most famously by William James, who published his lectures on the *Varieties of Religious Experience* in 1902. It became an instant best-seller despite its massive size and erudition.\(^25\) One small subgroup of liberal Protestant researchers began work on the psychology of religion, by which they hoped to explain such questions as why conversions failed, how to nurture ethical development, and what the nature of religious experiences is.

The relationship of psychology to religion was of interest not only to students and practitioners within the new discipline – a broad array of Americans outside it were emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually invested in the matter as well. Some liberal Protestants hoped to draw on the new disciplines to revitalize theologies that they found implausible and church communities they deemed hidebound. National religious magazines such as the *Christian Century* published many articles on the


\(^{24}\) Gillespie, *Psychology and American Catholicism*; Kugelmann, “Neoscholastic Psychology Revisited.”

psychology of religion movement and other developments in the young field. Two Episcopalian priests who had done extensive graduate work in psychology in Germany, Elwood Worcester and Samuel McComb, started a clinic at the Emmanuel Church in Boston in 1906. They had as their goal to “awaken faith” in their patients through contemporary miraculous healing. The “mental health clinic” at the Emmanuel Church consisted of individual counseling with a minister, a religious service, and a social meeting. Ministers used relaxation techniques to put patients in receptive states of mind and then suggested healing messages to them. The project sparked an immediate enthusiastic lay response, with patients gathering together at the church even when no events were planned for them. Widespread national and even international media coverage publicized the work of the clinic to an audience of clergy, doctors, and psychologists.

The openness to psychospiritual experimentation, creativity, and contention that prevailed in the first quarter-century of the development of modern American psychology almost vanished during the subsequent dozen years. The year 1908 marked a turning point. That is when the psychologists and doctors affiliated with the Emmanuel clinic resigned amid controversy, implying that the clinic’s procedures were not medically respectable. Other doctors attacked the program as well for trespassing on a bailiwick they believed belonged uniquely to them. In the decades that followed, medical professionals successfully claimed monopoly power to heal American mental and psychosomatic problems. When a trickle of ministers in the 1920s and 1930s began to study psychology and offer therapy, the lessons of the Emmanuel movement prompted them to do so covertly, avoiding any challenges to the authority of doctors. When the lay-led spiritual therapy movement Alcoholics Anonymous emerged in the late 1930s and 1940s, its leadership went out of its way to procure the endorsement of the medical and psychiatric communities.

This constriction of free psychospiritual exploration affected psychological research as well. In 1910 William James died. He had been the most respected and widely read psychologist who found common ground between mental and spiritual phenomena. And this outlook had hurt even

26 Meador, “Psychology’s Secularizing of American Protestantism.”
27 Caplan, Mind Games, 117–48; Gifford, Emmanuel Movement, 63–4, 75; Taves, Fits, Trances, and Visions, 309–25.
his standing in the field.\textsuperscript{29} After his death, no one promoting research into the psychology of religion matched his intellect or stature. Pushed to the far margins in the 1920s, the subfield fell off the map entirely by 1930.\textsuperscript{30} At the same time, the ongoing work of Catholic scholars to bridge psychology with theology was confined to their own institutions.\textsuperscript{31} During this period, Sigmund Freud became increasingly familiar to educated Americans. He began publishing work arguing very explicitly that readers should be totally skeptical of religious experiences.\textsuperscript{32} “Religion is an illusion,” he famously claimed.

This atheism was shared by most academic psychologists who had by this time established behavioralism as their dominant mode of inquiry.\textsuperscript{33} Concerned entirely with the description, prediction, and control of behavior, they eschewed any interest in the internal goings-on of the human mind as unworthy of a scientific discipline.\textsuperscript{34} Behavioralists not only scorned religious explanations for human experience, but they even disdained the concept of the psyche altogether as a kind of bowdlerized soul in disguise. Although the work of Sigmund Freud had come to dominate psychoanalysis by the 1930s – and although Freud advanced a distinctly atheistic concept of the psyche – behavioralists understood that when Americans thought about what they felt and believed deep inside, most thought about their souls and God.\textsuperscript{35}

Modern research psychology and professional psychodynamic psychiatry drove a wedge between emotional healing and spiritual beliefs. It became more difficult, especially among the educated, to connect psyche

\textsuperscript{29} Bjork, \textit{William James}.
\textsuperscript{30} Beit-Hallahmi, “Psychology of Religion 1880–1930.”
\textsuperscript{31} Kugelmann, “Neoscholastic Psychology Revisited”; Kugelmann, \textit{Psychology and Catholicism}. The Protestants whose documents I examined for this study rarely seemed aware or interested in what other Christians engaged in psychoreligious theorizing or programming were doing. The one exception is Bill Wilson, AA founder. The General Service Office of Alcoholics Anonymous in New York has extensive correspondence between Wilson and Fathers Edward Dowling and John Ford.
\textsuperscript{32} Freud, \textit{Future of an Illusion}. Some Americans liked Freud precisely because of his utility in mounting antireligious attacks, see Hale, \textit{Rise and Crisis of Psychoanalysis}, 81, 84–5.
\textsuperscript{33} Catholic scholars in Catholic colleges and universities were following a different path, but they walked it unaccompanied by those outside their schools, see Gillespie, \textit{Psychology and American Catholicism}; and Kugelmann, “Neoscholastic Psychology Revisited.”
\textsuperscript{34} Leahey, \textit{History of Modern Psychology}, part III.
\textsuperscript{35} Fuller, \textit{Americans and the Unconscious}; Hale, \textit{Rise and Crisis of Psychoanalysis}; Matthews, “The Americanization of Sigmund Freud.” The most influential psychoanalyst who argued for a spiritualized psychic realm was Carl Jung, see Noll, \textit{Aryan Christ}; and Noll, \textit{Jung Cult}. 