

Through the Lens #16 — Summer 2015

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THEOLOGY AND SYSTEMS THINKING

In my travels I am often asked about the interface between theology and systems thinking. Though I think about this a lot, I must admit that I consider my thinking—and sometimes my ability to coordinate the two disciplines—is somewhat rudimentary still. I will keep thinking.

Dr. Bowen wrote about the subject rarely, but in going through some files at the Bowen Center in a recent visit, I found this little-publicized paper that I think might be of interest to many people I know and some I meet.

I publish it here as I found it. I don't agree with all of it, and Bowen was certainly not an authority on the history or theology of the Catholic Church. As he understood it—here it is—in its entirety...

The Theoretical Structure of the Catholic Church¹ By Murray Bowen, M.D.²

The Catholic Church has an organizational structure with striking similarities to a theory that was developed for non-religious purposes. This brief presentation will describe the goal and purposes of the original theory, the extension of the theory to organizational systems, and the chance discovery that the theoretical extension was similar to the theoretical organization of the Catholic Church. A theoretical view of basic process provides one way to see beyond an extensive volume of feeling-oriented content.

Family Systems theory and therapy, later known as Bowen Theory, involves the integration of a completely different group of human variables. It began forty years ago in a clinical psychiatric setting, with a life orientation that went beyond the feeling and subjectivity of conventional Freudian theory and therapy. After almost a decade of reading and clinical experimentation, the different life orientation, or theory, was moved to a clinical research institution, and put into operation with families instead of individuals. The new theoretical orientation quickly produced two popular by-products. (1) It resulted in the automatic development of a structured method of family therapy before it was known within the profession. (2) It helped initiate the therapeutic focus on the “family.” Professional people, inclined toward therapy and unaware of the importance of theory, proceeded to develop theory and research as if it was merely a technical appendage of conventional individual theory. Its popularity has continued to increase. It may be another century before academically inclined people slowly discover the unique importance of theory.

A different theoretical orientation is similar to the development of a new lens for observing the human phenomenon. It represents a different way of thinking about the world. It is difficult to attain, and near impossible to maintain in a world that does not “see” beyond the old. The new “observing lens,” slowly developed for most of a decade, permitted the author to “see” things never previously seen. The different theoretical orientation was an integration of evolutionary theory, some FACTS from Freudian theory, and natural systems theory. The evolutionary theory made it possible to see the human as an extension of all life on earth. The FACTS from Freudian Theory included transference and counter transference, as present between infant and caretaker, and as replicated in all future relationships. The number of variables required some kind of “systems theory” to handle the details. Natural systems concepts, developed from evolution, were far superior to general systems theory, which had been developed from mathematics. The body of conventional Freudian theory, which had postulated the

human as a uniquely different form of life, had included theoretical concepts based on feeling states, literature, the imagination of the author, and other forms of subjectivity. These could not be validated or proven according to the principles of the accepted sciences. Tedious disciplined effort went into the careful separation of feeling states from verifiable FACTS and the construction of different theory based on FACTS alone. It might require a century or more before human behavior finally becomes an accepted science, but when it becomes a science, it will have escaped the narrow compartment of a feeling dominated world, in which progress is restricted to redefinition of feelings within the compartment. A feeling oriented existence spawns dozens of partial theories, differing "schools of thought," and hundreds of different clans or "sects" which compete with one another about the preferred way to think about a universal problem. That has been one of the problems with religion. In the accepted sciences, progress in that one science can contribute to progress in another, and future progress becomes unlimited. When feelings are viewed as a function of the human, rather than as a part of the human, feelings can then be handled in therapy, without giving subjective status an importance in theory itself. Some two years after the start of family research, it was possible to say that human behavior will finally become an accepted science when evolution is finally accepted as a bona fide science.

The different theoretical orientation made it possible to "see" a broad spectrum of family patterns that would not have been possible without the previous years of work on evolution and systems concepts. The new orientation had been only marginally successful in the clinical psychiatric setting in which Freudian theory was a basic two person system, and the clinical focus was on a single symptomatic "patient." There was a beginning awareness that the family somehow contributed to the problem in the patient, but the basic clinical patterns were vague and poorly centered. The different theory suddenly became alive and meaningful in the research institutions as the multi-person family proceeded to create symptoms in its own unit. Systems theory made it possible to see the family as a giant complex of interconnected parts that spread forward into the future, historically into the multi-generational past, laterally into the extended family, and laterally onto social and work systems. The relationship patterns were described in each small unit, as the small units functioned in reciprocal unison with larger and larger units within the total family system. An overall system of names was devised for all the new observations. It was a basic premise that "the family" might become an accepted science at some century in the future. To facilitate researchers of some future generation, and to preserve the multiple observations for the future, biological terms were used wherever possible. To avoid coining new terms, simple English words were used to describe patterns for which there was no biological inference. Among the new terms were evolutionary theory, natural systems theory, family diagram, emotional system, differentiation of self, the differentiation of self scale, triangle, fusion, cut-off, objectivity, projection to succeeding generations, the therapist's control of self, extended family patterns, extension of family process to work and social systems, and others. The details of the family diagram were created early to handle the vast amount of detail. The term "genogram," which some have used to describe the "family diagram," was rejected very early as conceptually inaccurate, as well as being a coined word. The term "emotional" was similar to a process described in Darwin's early writings. It also refers to the process by which the lack of differentiation causes family members to be connected with each other. The term "differentiation" came from embryology. Similar to the ways cells divide into separate cells, differentiation of self describes possible ways individuals might eventually become autonomous in relationship to other people. All people are different from each other, depending on the degree of fixed attachment to others, or, the opposite, the degree of differentiation they finally attain. The term triangle refers to a three-person system in constant motion as each person attempts to become more comfortable in relationship to the other two. The terms dyad and triad are well known in the literature to describe two and three person systems, but each term referred to rather fixed states. The term triangle referred to much more than the familiar triad. Fusion described the overlapping of personalities in closely associated family members with lower levels of differentiation. Cut-off describes the way people become distant from each other to achieve personal comfort.

The different life orientation was used with everyone, including the research staff, the ward staff, and the therapists. Everyone who works with families is important in the research. People who are close to families are vulnerable to giving up self (ego strength) to families, or in borrowing or using strength from the families. Along with the group of maximally impaired families with schizophrenic offspring on the research ward, there was another group of minimally impaired families in outpatient research and family therapy. The outpatient families provided contrast to the ward families during the research; it became clear that the same basic mechanisms were present in everyone, from the most impaired schizophrenic families, to those who were "normal" and free of symptoms. It was merely a matter of degree of impairment in the differentiation of self scale. Clinical families were all below about 50 on the scale. There was no direct correlation between symptoms and differentiation of self. Any level of differentiation could be stressed to the point of symptoms. Those who were lowest usually developed severe psychosis or some condition that required permanent institutional care. Those a little higher would develop borderline states or delinquency problems. It appeared to be a matter of basic differentiation and the amount of stress on a particular family.

There was one major omission in the decade of thinking about the theoretical orientation. It did not account for the long period that would be necessary for the ward and research staff and for the research institution to adopt the new attitude that went with the research effort. It required about two years for the ward staff, the research staff, and the hospital administration to give up their conventional theory and to think in terms of the different theoretical orientation. Repeated verbal communication was not enough. The people would say they understood and then "act" from their conventional orientation. For some two years the ward was chaotic with typical schizophrenic misbehavior that involved everyone. All the involved people tended to blame someone else for incidents and symptoms. It was often the "patient" who was locked in an isolation room. The families were irresponsible in saying and doing things that upset the patients. This may have made it worse than the average closed ward. A major effort had been to observe everyone without diagnosing anyone. During that period, a chief nurse said, "The schizophrenic patient is still schizophrenic in spite of nice words that deny it." At a time when the chaos threatened to terminate the research, the author rescued the situation by ignoring the chaos and focusing on theory. He was the clearly defined leader of the entire operation. When he stopped focusing on the problem and focused only on the part he played in it, the pandemonium was replaced by a dramatic calm that continued the remaining three years. The orientation was action on self, instead of telling the others what to do. When the therapist could calmly define himself, and communicate it to the families in advance, it was then possible to require the parents to be responsible for the behavior of the patients. Previously they had pleaded an inability to be responsible for the patients. They were not asked to control psychotic thinking, but merely the behavior. There was one small element in this which had a powerful effect on helpless families. Many new families were seeking admission to the research. The families were calmly told that if they could not control patient behavior, they would be replaced by families who could control psychotic behavior. Not a single family was ever replaced. The parents became super cautious with the patients. They avoided saying or doing things that might upset the patients, and they were finally able to deal with a new order of data in family therapy. When the patients were accidentally upset, the parents learned to ask for help from the ward staff or from other families. There are numerous other details involved in the therapist's differentiation of self, but this will convey the overall concept. When the leader can modify the part that he plays, and does not impinge on the other with talk or action, and he is not critical of other, his action then becomes a model to follow for one, and then another, and then another. The last three years, the ward was a model of quiet decorum. The ward door remained unlocked, and the families made significant progress in family therapy. This experience in ward management became the basis for family systems theory in administrative systems which has become widely used. A section on organizational systems was later established at the Georgetown University Family Center. A book on "Understanding Organizations" was published in 1982.

A few other concepts about families are important. The use of the term “power” is erroneous in family decision-making. It is more a question of the vulnerable one being forced to accept a responsibility he does not want. This is present in most families to some degree, but it is most intense in impaired families which are simply incapable of clearly defined decisions in relation to one another. Impaired families passively wait for someone else to make a decision. If forced by the situation, they may use a magazine story as authority, force the psychotic one to break a tie vote with a partial decision that feels right, or resort to autocratic authoritarianism. When the parents were forced to accept responsibility for the patients in the research, one parent would become quite autocratic and even mean in his pronouncements, but the family would respond favorably to that family member, finally taking some kind of a stand. For that family, an autocratic posture is better than silence and passivity.

The religions have to postulate some kind of connection beyond the unseen Deity and human existence. That task was beyond the scope of the original family research which focused on a different phenomenon. After the family operation was moved to Georgetown University in 1959, there was occasion to compare the theoretical structure of the Catholic Church to organizational concepts previously developed in human family research. In some areas there was a striking similarity, especially in the mature development of leadership qualities and their transmission from generation to generation. The Catholic Church has a unique way of helping leaders choose themselves, and to be chosen by others. A major quality in the differentiation of self is complete selflessness in which “doing for others” replaces personal selfish goals. Jesus Christ has been a model for total selflessness.

The first Pope was Peter, who had been a disciple of Jesus Christ while Jesus lived on Earth. Peter was also one of the authors of the New Testament. As a spiritual successor to Jesus Christ, Peter was the first in a long series of popes, who functioned for life as the spiritual and administrative leader of the Church. Each has been buried in the soil beneath the Vatican, which was his home. Each has used his own self to interpret theology as he understood it, and has used himself to adapt the theology to the conflicting social issues of the time. At times the pope has stressed spiritual values to influence social issues. At other times he has used social and research change to modify theology. Each pope has been part of an orderly succession of spiritual leaders that has prevailed almost two thousand years.

The work force of the Church hierarchy is the priests and nuns who are in the best contact with people. They figuratively “marry the Church” in a considered and conscious preference that supersedes family and reproductive goals. A few priests are chosen on the basis of life performance to fill higher and higher administrative positions. The highest of these is Cardinal, which probably represents the highest order of selflessness, modeled by the leadership of Jesus Christ. When a Pope dies, the College of Cardinals meets to select a new Pope. One can only guess at the emotional process, as an assemblage of selflessly oriented Cardinals meets to select the most selfless of all. It simply has to be an elimination process in which each considers self unworthy for such an exalted position.

The differentiation of self in the human has important principles that are similar to the theoretical structures of the Catholic Church. A well differentiated self in families has to get beyond the selfish promotion of self. One has always to be aware of “the other.” To slavishly duplicate another, without due consideration of self, is a “no self.” To automatically oppose the other, without thinking, is another “no self” trap that involves many. A self is assembled in relationship with others, particularly around emotional reactivity with the other. A model based on the lives of others can be a guide if the model is always a model and is never divorced from thinking. When selflessness is motivated by the feeling process, it can create predictable complications. When selflessness becomes a thinking model, largely separate from the feeling process, it can become a vehicle for a special form of differentiation. With that orientation, true selflessness, devoid of selfishness, can become a part of differentiation itself.

The major part of this presentation has been devoted to the observation that an organizational structure developed in family systems research has striking similarities to the theoretical structure of the Catholic Church. This observation is entirely dependent on process and not content.

¹ Paper for Seminar on the Implication of Bowen Theory for Catholic Theology, Silver Spring, Maryland, July 11-12, 1987

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**If you have a question or comment you would like addressed in this column,
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