

Transactional Analysis. . .

redeemable for Christian purpose?

by R. Bertram

If Transactional Analysis (TA) could limit its soteriological pretensions and could admit that what it is describing is not the whole of human existence, but is only a very partial abstraction from the whole, then TA could give real promise of being redeemable for Christian purpose. For instance, suppose TA could admit that what it means by being "OK" is but a fraction of what is needed to be really OK. Better yet, suppose TA could be so radicalized that it could say "We're not OK but in Christ we are OK," and could make theoretic and therapeutic sense out of that. That would have possibilities.

Meanwhile, even short of such redemption, TA already provides the sort of provocative and picturesque terminology which Christian theology would do well to appropriate and baptize into Christ. Take TA terms like "transaction," "potency," "games," "script," "pay-off," "permission," "protection," my "Adult" and my "Child," etc. Several of these terms, of course, have long since been anticipated in traditional Christian discourse. Others which have not, like the term "OK" might suggest real theological possibilities.

Beyond the more conspicuous level of language, a number of TA's basic categories and assumptions about man are important to the Christian understanding of man. TA places emphasis upon man's own responsibility; but this is weakened, I think by TA's Pelagian notion of human freedom. Also of importance are TA's willingness to trust directive and verbal communication, TA's high regard for the group (especially in the interest of healing), and TA's supervening interest in human change. The last of these, alas, is not as significant as it could be, seeing how TA's definition of change is too moralistic and gnostic to qualify as really radical metanoia.

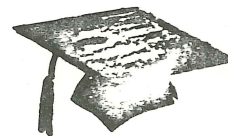
Especially important in TA's anthropology is the emphasis it places upon a person's believing he is accepted ("OK"). Really, for TA this is more than important, it is an obligation. Still, I think TA stresses this obligation much too weakly. By contrast, for instance, Luther stresses that the demand to believe ourselves pleasing to God is though humanly impossible, an absolute demand by God himself (*De Servo Arbitrio*). With TA, however, there is no clear indication where this demand for "I'm OK" originates, except perhaps out of a built-in need for evolutionary survival. But that only begs the question: Why should I believe I'm OK?

On the other hand, where does my "I'm not OK" originate? TA is clear enough, at least in terms of psychodynamic origins. That negative self-appraisal originates from, or at least as an infant I infer it from, my enviroing, restrictive "Parent." But, suppose OK means not only my own appraisal of myself nor even other people's appraisal of me. Suppose OK means, as some transactional analysts like Berne and Harris clearly intend it to mean, my ultimate value. If so, then returning once more to the negative appraisal of me, where do I get the impression that I am ultimately "not OK?" According to TA that negative self-appraisal (which we all have and which most people continue to have all of their lives) is essentially a self-chosen misimpression of reality. Thus, the "I'm not OK" is nowhere as firmly rooted in reality as the "I'm OK" is assumed to be.

But, what if, contrary to TA and in agreement with Luther (*op.cit.*), the very source who demands that I believe I am OK is the selfsame One who constantly confronts me with irrefutable evidence that I am not OK? What then? Even if we were to leave aside any implications that such a Lutheran, will-enslaving anthropology might have for TA's optimistic notions of human freedom, one thing is sure: such a theology would deprive TA of the luxury which it now enjoys, namely of separating the source of the "I'm OK" from the source of the "I'm not OK." But, perhaps, that separation, that "theological" dualism which is so characteristic of gnosticism, is more than a luxury for TA. Perhaps it is necessity for TA in its present form. I hope not.

Almost needless to add, TA renders Jesus Christ quite unnecessary. TA views healing largely in terms of "enlightenment," as a teaching-learning device or as educational correction of childhood ignorance. In a pattern such as this Jesus functions as little more than a teacher of truth. Worse than that, TA's most prized and supposedly healthiest life position—"I'm OK, you're OK"—is equated by Harris with "grace." Yet he does so in a way which not only makes Christ superfluous but, by that very token, makes grace itself (as Bonhoeffer called it, and Luther before him) cheap grace.

For the most constructive use of TA by Christians I would propose two alternatives. We should either demythologize TA's soteriological pretensions and then employ it for a very limited level of secular, interpersonal behavioral change, or we should radicalize it with the anti-Gnostic Secret of the Christian Gospel and then use it for the Kingdom unabashedly and outright. Of these two alternatives, my preference is the second.



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