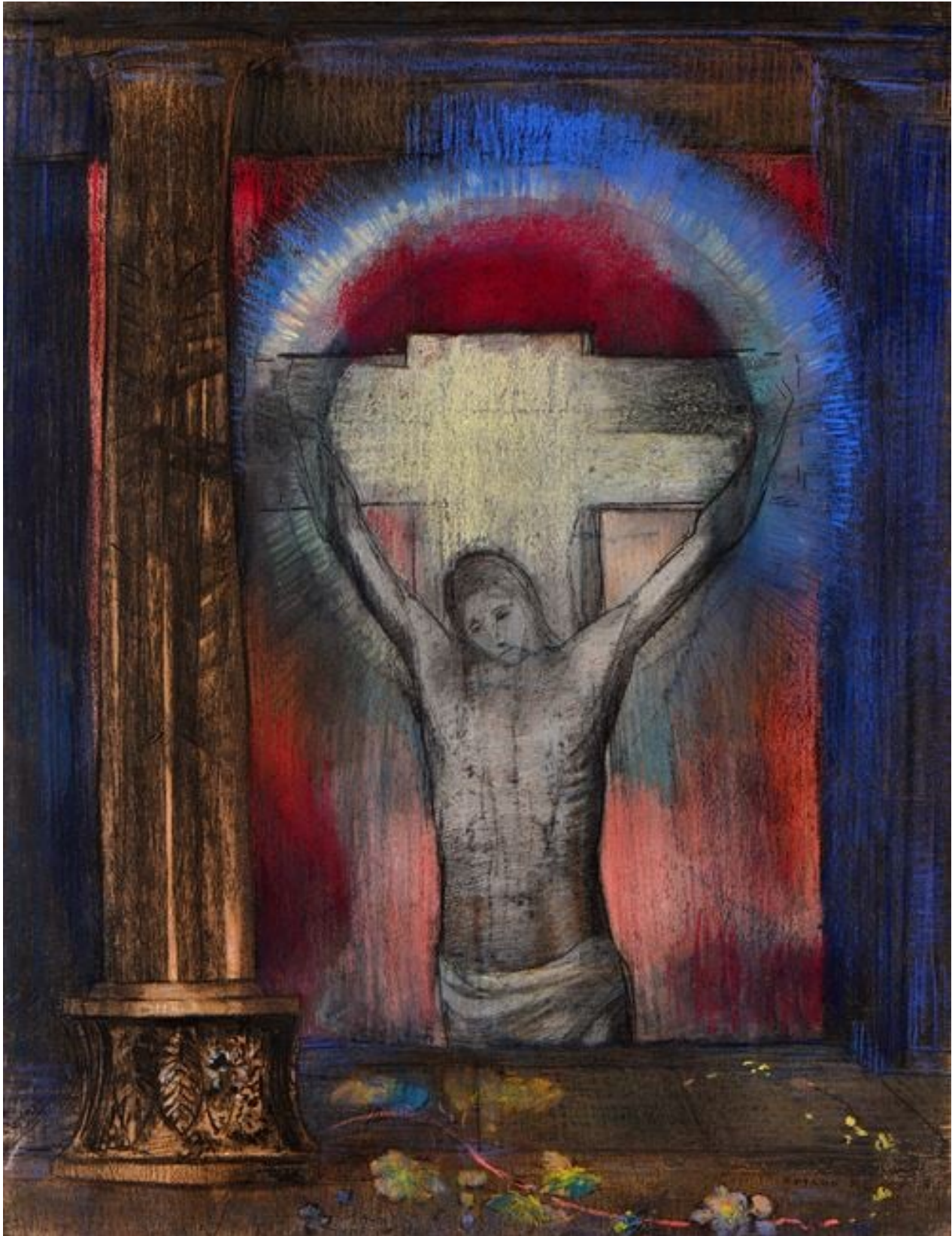


Religion and the Therapeutic

This is the fourth in a series. Please see Parts [One](#), [Two](#), and [Three](#).

by [Albert Norton, Jr.](#) (December 2023)



Christ on the Cross– Odilon Redon, 1897

Now we contrast the religious worldview, that was dominant in Western civilization for centuries, with the therapeutic

worldview. The therapeutic way of thinking has significantly eclipsed the religious, with the result that there is a fundamental difference in perceiving reality. People talk past each other without mutual understanding.

Religion provided a kind of mediation of opposing impulses. On one hand, the impulse to restraint and discipline and rule-making and rule-following, the impulse which Philip Reiff described, in [*The Triumph of the Therapeutic*](#), as “interdictory,” requiring “renunciation” of the opposing impulses. On the other hand, the impulse for “release” or “remission,” an emotive desire for freedom from external restraint, and suspicion of the normative institutions of tradition. Reiff’s “charisma” encompasses both, in proper balance, a way of describing in non-doctrinal terms the object of the religious impulse.

Apart from mediating opposing dispositions in mankind, religion also mediated mankind’s relationship to the ineffable, by providing a necessary balance between the interdictory and the remissive inside a structure that also delivered genuine meaning and purpose to one’s life. With the demise of religion there has been a loss of appreciation for the necessity of forms and structure formed by immutable moral categories in our world. Those moral categories meant interdicts channeling our desires toward virtue, and corresponding renunciation of impulses to release and remission. Without such interdicts, moral forms and structure are corroded or collapse altogether. Self-indulgence is then the order of the day, a prioritizing of the impulses of release and remission against interdicts that would otherwise rein them in.

There is thus a clear distinction between the religious way of encountering the world, and that of the therapeutic. Philip Reiff wrote: “religious man was born to be saved; psychological man was born to be pleased.” This is the fundamental divide between the renunciatory mode of religion,

on the one hand, and the self-care mode of the therapeutic, on the other.

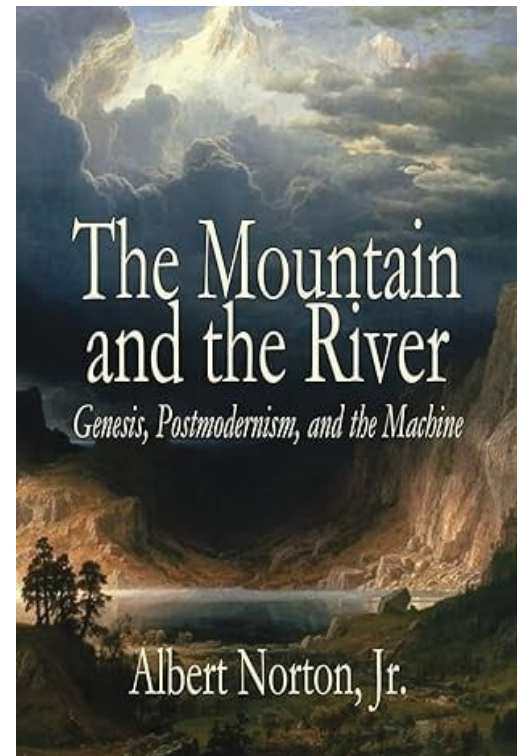
In the monotheisms, mankind is understood to be morally fallen and so at enmity to a perfect and just God. They must be saved, therefore; that is, reconciled to God by a power greater than people themselves can muster. In Christianity, they must be reconciled to God by God.

But why? Why does man need saving? Because without this reconciliation, he remains unredeemed. The wrath of God does not descend upon him because he doesn't believe. It remains upon him because he was born into it; a sinner unable to live to God's standards. Religious doctrine contains the principle of salvation necessitated by sin, and religious practice reinforces the need to minimize the sin. That practice is renunciation of natural but guilt-inducing desires. It is the system of "interdicts," in Reiff's phraseology, reinforcing the guilt-producing interdicts of the conscience.

Sin has no place in the therapeutic self-conception. Not that a person so affected will think that he's perfectly fine, all the time. Quite to the contrary, there is an ongoing need for therapeutic self-care that is every bit as important to psychological man as avoidance of sin is to religious man. Sin and psychological harm are quite distinct, as are their opposites: avoidance of sin and self-care.

The religious conception is that both good and evil exist in the heart. They are the same for everybody. They are moral universals, though they register in the individual conscience. The individual can exercise moral agency to renounce evil by embracing interdicts against them. Failure to do so is sin. Avoidance of sin means sensitivity to the conscience and respect for an external standard for behavior.

The therapeutic conception, by contrast, is that evil exists out there somewhere; the heart is innocent. Good and evil are registered as such according to how they affect the individual's emotions. They are not moral universals, therefore, and may mutate according to social norms. Society is expected to form around those social norms in order to avoid psychological harm. Self-care means sensitivity to one's own emotions and vigilance against external threats to them.



Thus, in the religious view society puts the individual's conduct to an unchanging universal moral test. In the therapeutic view the individual puts society's conduct to a changing ideological test.

The purpose of religion is to provide a cure for the unrest of the soul burdened with the dictates of conscience and awareness of reality beyond this mortal plane, in which resides a Person ultimately demanding if also ultimately loving. The cure is acknowledgement of sin and the need for saving. The cure is never complete in this life, but consists in continuous striving toward the model of perfection at the pinnacle of vertical values.

The therapeutic disposition offers no cure, because there is no illness—sin—to be cured from. There is no deviation from moral standard that must be addressed, but rather a balance to maintain among warring drives in the subjective inner psyche. This is a function of therapy. It does not provide meaning and purpose for human beings; it is a maintenance program. Rather than attempting to answer the question of meaning, the therapeutic attempts to eliminate the question.

In the religious disposition, there is a drawing out of oneself into the dictates of doctrine but also of community. The religious community of which one is a part is the mediation between the individual and the ineffable.

In the therapeutic disposition, by contrast, there is no drawing out of self toward the ineffable. There is instead ongoing analysis of the inner self; an ongoing search for peace through self-care of the inner being. Society outside the self no longer mediates. It is instead a solvent, in which one can lose oneself in the oceanic feeling of community, but only insofar as that community poses no threat to the equanimity of the inner being. The self is not strengthened against the barbs of this world. Instead the world is to be brought into conformity with a negotiated standard of psychological self-care.

Religious man and psychological man stand at opposite poles. There is no overlap. And yet, the difference is shrouded in misunderstanding. Psychological man's sense of inner tension may be conflated with the religious impulse. The transcendence of God may be deemphasized in favor of His immanence. One would think that self-confident teachers of religion would be zealous in glorifying God, which would mean preserving an understanding of the givenness of His creation, and His demand of righteousness. But we allow softer, gentler impulses to blunt the hard edges of truth. It's an attempt to tame the wild God; to try to make Him less dangerous. We understand Jesus as sacrificial Lamb but forget the Lion of Judah in our eschatology. The Holy Spirit, God present in the world, can be conflated with the same psychology the atheist culture presents.

The secular world contributes to the watering down of what Christians say they believe, so that psychological man seems to be the same as religious man. Indeed, religion may be thought to compel our turn to psychological man, as both religious man and psychological man are poorly understood.

They are antagonistic, yet are conflated. The church is not immune to the persuasions of the therapeutic mentality, far from it. Christianity's messages of love, forgiveness, and forbearance have been allowed to occlude its messages of sin, evil, and need for redemption. And this to such an extent that whole denominations of Protestants have calved off the believing church to form enclaves of therapeutic reinforcement that are churches in name only. Likewise factions of Catholics and Orthodox and others.

Commentators with understanding of what has happened to the Christian church have repeatedly warned that congregants who haven't thrown over belief altogether nonetheless dilute it to the degree that it is not Christianity at all, but "moral therapeutic deism." An etiolated form of interdictory structure remains, compromised by social norms of secular society, especially concerning sexual ethics in the wake of the sexual revolution. The nuances of trinitarian Christianity are ignored, replaced with a rationalistic necessary-god deism, much like that of Aristotle and many of the Enlightenment-era intellectuals.

The "therapeutic" portion of the new religion speaks for itself in the context of this discussion. The modern church is no longer primarily concerned with the supernatural, or virtue, or purity, or sin. Instead it is concerned with self-actualization: being the best one can be, the old lie of prosperity hawkers cherry-picking among doctrines to emphasize only what is this-world relevant. Left in the trampled dust are principles of heaven, hell, sin, confession, shame, the crucifixion, and the demand that we take up our cross daily and bear it. These have no place in the therapeutic arena of self-actualization, in which the gritty reality of human depravity makes no appearance.

The concept of self-actualization is sometimes attributed to Abraham Maslow's conception of a hierarchy of needs, in which essentials of living, like food and shelter, are satisfied

first, and then various psychological needs in ascending order, culminating in self-actualization. One could debate the extent of Maslow's direct contribution to pop psychology, but certainly the concept it embodies has become ubiquitous. Its operative principle is self-self-self; I-I-I: how can *I* get what *I* need to be all *I* can be? Postmodern man in prosperous societies reflexively looks for meaning and purpose internally, in work and recreation and relationships. This way of thinking epitomizes psychological man's priority of care for the inner being.

In the age of psychological man, the therapeutic mindset has superseded the sense of sin as an explanation for missing the mark. Our actions are not construed as acting properly or improperly according to eternal moral standard. Instead they're construed according to a therapeutic standard: whether they contribute to, or detract from, one's mental well-being. If you act improperly, under the therapeutic regime, you're manifesting a disorder of the inner subjective being, rather than exercising agency in an objectively wrongful way.

If right and wrong is fixed and immutable, then people exercise agency to choose right or wrong. This is freedom. Fixed moral standards contrast to relativism, whereby we change the standards rather than the choices we make. But an even more basic and relevant contrast is the therapeutic, in which psychological health is the point of inquiry, rather than moral standards. In the therapeutic mindset, freedom and agency are no longer relevant values except in muddled confusion with the paradigm of fixed moral standards. Moral standards become mutable according to how they affect the health of our inner being.

The focus, in other words, is on the disordered actor, rather than those harmed by the actions. And on that actor's psychological health, rather than his freedom. By drifting into the therapeutic self-care model of evaluating behavior, we also drift away from freedom and responsibility for how we

exercise it. It is a move from agency to passivity.

The moral therapeutic deism of the modern church is both cause and effect of the church's general [passivity](#), in matters of doctrine and practice. General passivity induces a kind of indifference to hard doctrine, allowing the anti-faith therapeutic mentality to sweep in and soften the edges of hard principles like judgment and hell. And moral therapeutic deism is hardly a set of religious principles worth putting oneself out for. It will grow no martyrs who prefer death to denying Christ. It is in fact the prevailing secular culture, but with the addition of a vaguely remembered story line of that Jesus guy. It induces passivity rather than zeal, the soft lukewarm tasteless mush about which we have been [warned](#).

[Table of Contents](#)

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