Group Process and the Catholic Rites of Reconciliation

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ABSTRACT: While individual and group psychotherapy are often referred to as forms of secular confession, the relationship of early religious confessional practices to the psychology of contemporary helping group processes needs further exploration. An examination of the theology and form of the Catholic rites of reconciliation indicates that their psychology and structure clearly parallel many of the healing processes at work in group psychotherapy.

Psychologists have long been aware of implicit “helping group processes” at work in various religious rituals and traditions.

Since time began small groups have flourished as healing agents whenever old values and behavior patterns were no longer working, and people were forced to question life and look at it anew. Religious healers have always relied heavily on the use of group forces to inspire hope, increase morale, offer emotional support, renew confidence in the benevolence of the universe, and, thus, counteract many psychic and bodily ills.

Writing on the history of peer self-help psychotherapy groups, Hurvitz points to several varieties of group confession ceremonies—the communal confession and repentance of the Jewish Day of Atonement, the communal and private confession of Catholics, and the mutual criticism of Anabaptists. While individual and group psychotherapy are often referred to as forms of secular confession, the relation of early religious confessional practices to the psychology of contemporary helping group processes needs further exploration. Would an in-depth examination of these religious confessional practices reveal an implicit group psychology? Are the curative factors operative in group psychotherapy likewise operative in these forms of religious ritual? To what extent do the structures of these early confessional rituals resemble group interventions?

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Rather than exploring these questions in general, I shall examine closely one of the prominent forms of religious confession, the Catholic rite of reconciliation, which includes public and private confession. Careful scrutiny of the theology and form of the Catholic rite of reconciliation can help clarify the scope and limits of the relation between confession and group process in therapy and religious ritual.

Bridging the dichotomy between the secular and sacred is essential to understanding religious ritual. The sacred permeates the secular or, as Kiesling argues: "All created agents and actions are 'natural symbols' of God's self-living and transforming action, for they realize that gift and transformation, and in realizing them manifest them." Any attempt to understand religious ritual must begin by asking the more general question of what human activity might mean in all of its depth and breadth. Understanding Catholic sacraments like the rite of reconciliation, Kiesling explains:

Through Jesus Christ men were given the insight that in ordinary human existence, its joys and sorrows, its woes and disappointments, its daily activities like eating and relaxing, conversing and enjoying companionship, its use of things and interaction with people, God is at work transforming men into his children in whom he wishes to dwell in a communion of life.

Religious rituals, then, convey a cluster of meanings—sacred and secular. Mitchell calls the symbols and action of ritual "places to live, breathing spaces that help us discover what possibilities life offers." Within this general framework of sacramental theology, Catholic confession is intended to reflect not simply reconciliation with God, but all human forms of reconciliation, whether intrapsychic or interpersonal, whether between members of families or between whole communities; the Catholic rite of reconciliation is intended as a paradigm of all human reconciliation.

While the "confessional" quality of ritual is thought to be implicit in group psychotherapy, the healing or reconciling processes of group psychotherapy are also clearly at work in the rituals and symbols of religious reconciliation. Moreover, group therapy involves symbolic actions insofar as group work attempts to recapitulate various social interactions and/or groupings. Aspects of important relationships are symbolized and transformed through various forms of ritual enactment—for example, psychodrama, Gestalt role playing, and so forth. In the Catholic form of reconciliation, the movement of the ritual is also toward transformation and freedom in human relationships, although such transformations are ultimately rooted in and directed by one's faith in God. In their ritualizing aspects, both group psychotherapy and the Catholic rite of reconciliation instill hope for change, a potent therapeutic factor, in their respective clientele.

To determine the extent to which various modes of group process and the Catholic rite of reconciliation share ritual elements and a common psychol-