Carl Rogers and Martin Luther—
A “Reformation” in the
Helping Professions

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ABSTRACT: The 16th century schism in Christian thought leading to the Reformation has an interesting analogy in Carl Rogers’ attempt to “reform” the helping professions. An exploration of this analogy clarifies much of the theoretical tension in the contemporary arena of pastoral counseling.

Lasch (1976), in his typically insightful manner, makes an interesting comparison between the 16th century schism in Christian thought and a schism within contemporary counseling. Lasch recalls that the reformers had become disenchanted with Papal authority, and had radically questioned the traditional standards of infallibility. A new emphasis arose concerning the autonomy of each believer-priest, and faith was viewed as direct, rather than mediated through a hierarchical structure. Individuals could trust their own sense of conscience or the Spirit’s illumination without having to have it interpreted or critically evaluated by a professionally trained person. This new emphasis clearly demystified the structures of authority, and dramatically questioned the rigid distinction between priest and layperson.

In a similar manner, a schism has developed in contemporary counseling approaches. Lasch refers to the two primary groups as “Catholic” and “Protestant” therapists. The Catholic therapists represent the older, more traditional, orthodox group. They completely reject the Protestant concept of the “psychiatric priesthood of all believers,” and insist that a psychiatrically-trained professional must mediate between the sacred texts and the layperson. The Catholics require a great deal of formal training in order to guarantee this distinction between priest and layperson. They have an abiding distrust in the individual’s ability to discover his/her own sense of inward direction. Whereas the Protestants attacked the concept of psychiatric infalli-
bility and authority, the Catholics attacked the subjectivity and na-
ive individualism of the Protestants.

In this effort, an attempt will be made to expand and elaborate on
this interesting distinction Lasch has offered. A recognition is made
of the dangers of oversimplification and the follies of another “typol-
ogy.” However, the value of a successful typology, such as Hick’s
(1978) distinction between Augustinian and Ireanaean theodicies, is
that it places two perspectives in polar opposition, and offers one a
chance to place oneself on the continuum of tension between the two.
In our particular case, the polar opposites move beyond the groups,
Catholic and Protestant, and focus upon two persons. In fact, Carl
Rogers will be described as a “Martin Luther of the helping profes-
sions” in his reaction to Freud. Rogers, more than any other repre-
sentative of the Protestant group, has questioned the majesterial au-
thority of priestly interpretation, and emphasized the self-directing,
trustworthy nature of the human organism. The primary issue, on
which all other disagreement appears to follow, is concerned with the
basic nature or inclinations of human beings. Can their natural,
organismic urges be trusted and released, or must they be blocked
and rechanneled in order for persons to live together in harmony?

A Central Issue in the 16th Century Reformation

As Popkin (1979) has indicated, the primary issue emerging from
the 16th century Reformation was an epistemological crisis concern-
ing all religious authorities. Luther had questioned the authority of
the Pope, church councils, and tradition. He insisted that the final
criterion for religious truth was that which conscience is compelled to
believe while reading Holy Scripture. Calvin slightly modified this fi-
nal criterion, saying that the illumination or inner persuasion of the
Spirit makes one know the final truth. The counterreformers, on the
other hand, argued passionately that this new standard for deter-
mining truth was helplessly subjective, a product of each particular
person’s slant on things. The counterreformers wasted no time in
pointing out that a wide spectrum of heretical views exist, all claim-
ing some type of “internal revelation” or subjective criterion. As
Popkin (1979) states:

The pandora’s box that Luther opened at Leipzig was to have the most
far-reaching consequences, not just in theology but throughout man’s
intellectual realm... To be able to recognize the true faith, one needed