

Preserving Guilt in the “Age of Psychology”: The Curious Career of O. Hobart Mowrer

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O. Hobart Mowrer had one of the most productive and curious careers of any psychologist in the 20th century, despite struggling with severe mental illness and anxiety about his sexuality. Early in his career, he was one of the country’s leading experimental psychologists. During the mid-1940s, he became interested in religion and argued that anxiety was caused by repressed guilt that came from real wrongdoing. By the late 1950s, he had abandoned mainstream psychology, arguing that religion had been corrupted by its embrace of psychology and psychiatry. He claimed that sin was responsible for nearly all psychological problems and that ethical living and confession of wrongdoing could prevent mental illness. During his religious period, Mowrer received an astonishing amount of fawning press attention and was embraced by a public desirous of a path to mental health that did not require jettisoning traditional conceptions of sin, guilt, and human nature. This article examines Mowrer’s life and career and situates him among other mid-century skeptics of psychology and psychiatry. Other historians have argued that by the 1950s, the conflict between religion and psychiatry/psychology in the United States had largely abated, with both sides adapting to each other. Mowrer’s life and the reception of his work demonstrate that this narrative is overly simplistic; widespread conservative and religious distrust of psychology persisted even into the 1960s.

Keywords: religion, pastoral/biblical counseling, therapeutic culture, psychoanalysis, guilt

The 1947 meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science held in Chicago, Illinois, was promoted as the largest meeting of scientists ever held anywhere in the world. Space was booked at seven hotels and two universities for 2,400 presenters (“*Science Meeting*,” 1947). However, one speech delivered by a slender and owlish 41-year-old psychologist named Orval Hobart Mowrer received a wildly disproportionate amount of attention in the popular press.

Hobart Mowrer likely could not have imagined the attention his speech would receive. To be sure, the topic was controversial. Numerous psychoanalysts believed that many people were dominated by an overly repressive and unforgiving superego, which led to neurotic and harmful guilt. Mowrer argued that the opposite was true; people suffered from anxiety and neurosis because they repressed guilt over real wrongdoing. The key to mental health was simple: Live a traditionally ethical and responsible life. The Old

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Testament, he indicated, was a remarkably useful guide to mental health (Mowrer, 1950, pp. 532–534, 537, 540). His rather dry speech captured the attention of reporters at the event and led to prominent coverage in *Time*, the *Washington Post*, and other publications (Blakeslee, 1948; “In the Age,” 1948). A laudatory, nearly full-page profile on the front page of the *New York Post*’s magazine section described Mowrer as a heretic who would “lead mankind ahead” and claimed that he “may have upset the entire theory of psychoanalysis” (Harrington, 1948, p. 33). Mowrer received even more attention when he later argued that psychology and psychiatry had corrupted religion and the culture, and that sin was responsible for nearly all mental illness. Secular psychotherapy had been a failure, he argued, and what was needed was a return to religion—unadulterated by psychology and psychiatry.

As I will argue, the rapturous coverage Mowrer received reflected a widespread worry that psychoanalysis and clinical psychology were beginning to drain traditional modalities, like guilt, of their religious significance and validity. Many were opposed to a psychotherapeutic worldview that framed eternal human problems in purely psychological and medical terms, and that seemed to cast doubt upon traditional understandings of guilt, responsibility, sin, and the soul.¹ At the same time, even those opposed to the psychotherapeutic worldview wanted to be happy and free of mental suffering. Part of Mowrer’s appeal was his claim that religion offered the best path to mental health, and thus people did not need to go to a psychotherapist or abandon traditional concepts of guilt, sin, and responsibility to be mentally healthy. Mowrer showed religious people that they could have their cake and eat it too. Or, to put it more psychoanalytically, Mowrer’s theory was a sort of compromise formation, reconciling religious people’s desire for the benefits promised by psychotherapy and their rejection of its authority as well as its metaphysical and normative implications.

Mowrer had one of the most productive and curious careers of any psychologist in the 20th century, all the while struggling with mental illness and anxiety about his sexuality. As a researcher, he was one of the leading experimental psychologists in the world and served a term as president of the American Psychological Association (APA).² Yet Mowrer eventually became disillusioned with mainstream psychology and psychoanalysis. During the 1960s, he argued that religion had been corrupted by psychology. His theories during this period inspired the biblical counseling movement, an enormously influential movement that rejected the use of secular therapists and accepted the Bible as the primary guide to mental health. Mowrer went on in the mid-1960s and into the 1970s to develop “integrity therapy,” a radical and combative form of group therapy. Finally, before he committed suicide in 1982, Mowrer expressed sympathy for eugenics and environmentalism.

¹ During the period under discussion, the 1930s to the 1960s, there was a wide gulf between psychoanalysis, psychiatry, and clinical psychology, on the one hand, and academic experimental psychology, on the other. Academic psychology during this time was dominated by neobehaviorism, which tended to eschew the study of mental states and processes, rejected introspection as a method, and focused instead on understanding observable behavior, often through studies of laboratory animals. As will be evident throughout this essay, average people and religiously oriented critics of psychotherapy tended to use the term “psychology” very loosely, meaning everything from clinical psychology to psychoanalysis and psychiatry (see Watt, 1991, p. 137). When I discuss opposition to “psychology” in this article, I am referring to this broad popularized conception. Although, it should be mentioned that figures like J. Gresham Machen, and even Mowrer himself, did occasionally criticize experimental psychology (Machen, 1923/2009, p. 11; Mowrer, 1964, p. 9). For a polemical history of behaviorism, see Mills (1998).

² A 2002 citation and reputation study placed Mowrer as one of the 100 most eminent psychologists of the 20th century, right ahead of Anna Freud (Haggbloom et al., 2002, p. 147).

Historians have largely either ignored Mowrer or denied that he had any cultural impact.³ This is unfortunate because Mowrer's work and its reception reveal issues and currents in mid-century America that have received little study from historians. Most important, widespread cultural discomfort with clinical psychology and psychoanalysis was not confined to the 1920s and 1930s but continued on even into the 1960s. This has received scant attention from historians. For example, in his excellent cultural history of psychoanalysis, [Eli Zaretsky \(2004\)](#) claims that Erich Heller's observation that in 1950s America, psychoanalysis was not just one theory among others but was "close to being the systematic consciousness that a certain epoch has of the nature and character of its soul" was only "somewhat overstated" (p. 276). [Nathan Hale's \(1995\)](#) pioneering history of psychoanalysis in the United States argues that by the mid-1940s, the cultural struggle over psychoanalysis was largely over, and psychoanalysis had won (pp. 276–277). Historian [Jonathan Engel \(2008\)](#) mentions the tension between religion and psychotherapy but concludes that "ultimately, most pastors and therapists recognized the need for both" (p. 160). Although cognizant of the conflict between traditional beliefs and psychology, [Alan Petigny \(2009, pp. 45, 50–52\)](#) argues that widespread acceptance of psychology in mid-century America liberalized the culture in fundamental ways.⁴ Religious historian [David Harrington Watt \(1991\)](#) argues that in the 1950s, there was still some evangelical hostility to psychology, but even evangelicals were beginning to muzzle their criticism. By the 1960s and 1970s, he argues, "evangelical spokespersons embraced modern psychology with great enthusiasm and only minor reservations" (pp. 138–139).

Historians of psychology and religion have thus argued that America reached a pro-psychology consensus by the mid-century and that the conflict between religion and psychology mostly melted away.⁵ This was, as *Life* magazine dubbed it, the "Age of Psychology" ([Havemann, 1957, p. 68](#)). [David Hollinger \(2013\)](#) has argued that recent scholarship on the relationship between religion and science more broadly has displayed a neo-harmonist tendency, which "mock[s] as hopelessly anachronistic the old idea that science and religion are in conflict" (pp. 82, 84).⁶ In the case of scholarship about religion and psychology more specifically, the perspective is unabashedly harmonist, arguing that mid-century religion and psychology were not just not in conflict but were working together.

Of course, this story is partially correct. Many liberal Protestants embraced psychotherapy. By even arguing about the therapeutic value of the Bible, Mowrer and his

³ In his otherwise magisterial history of pastoral counseling, [E. Brooks Holifield \(1983, pp. 320–321\)](#) erroneously claims that Mowrer converted few to his views. Mowrer has not been completely ignored, occasionally appearing as part of a larger narrative. [Rebecca Lemov \(2005, pp. 87–106\)](#) devotes a short chapter of her history of early social engineering to Mowrer's brief period at the Yale Institute of Human Relations. A short chapter of [Donald Meyer's \(1965/1980\) *The Positive Thinkers*](#) also discusses Mowrer's views (see pp. 296–303). Susan [Myers-Shirk \(2009\)](#) briefly discusses Mowrer's impact on the pastoral and biblical counseling movements in her history of pastoral counseling. Finally, [Allison Stokes \(1985\)](#) briefly discusses Mowrer's critique of Freud and liberal Protestantism in her book, *Ministry After Freud* (see pp. 60–62).

⁴ Petigny argues both that psychology was a dominant cultural force and that few people were aware of the conflict between psychology and traditional beliefs. I argue in this article that both claims are wrong.

⁵ One book that is exceptionally subtle and insightful in its discussion of psychology and religion but that tends toward the consensus narrative is [Jason W. Stevens's \(2010\) *God Fearing and Free: A Spiritual History of America's Cold War*](#). Stevens writes, "After regarding Freudian psychology with initial suspicion in the twenties and thirties, many Protestants internalized Freud's critique of religion . . . but also made significant modifications to Freud's ideas" (p. 211). Catholic concerns about psychology, Stevens argues, were more long lasting, but eventually the relationship between Catholicism and psychology resolved into "respectful complementarity" (p. 204). [Myers-Shirk's \(2009\) *Helping the Good Shepherd*](#) is also unusually insightful in its discussion of the relationship between religion and psychology.

⁶ According to [Hollinger \(2013\)](#), "if our recent historiography does not openly reaffirm the once-fashionable 'harmonist' perspective (science and Christianity are ultimately 'harmonious'), the historiography is subtly 'neo harmonist'" (p. 84). This scholarship is reluctant to acknowledge that "there has persisted an authentic struggle over the epistemic principles that shall shape modern culture" (p. 84).

conservative followers were, in a sense, making a concession to their opponents. Mowrer's anti-psychology polemics were replete with therapeutic language. Nonetheless, the use of therapeutic language should not obscure the profound conflict. During the time of his greatest popularity, Mowrer and his allies wanted to do away with mainstream secular therapy and opposed the use of medication to treat mental illness. They believed that mental illness was caused by sin, and thus mentally ill people were blameworthy. They believed that clinical psychology and psychiatry were destroying the culture. The harmonist perspective elides these conflicts.⁷

Mowrer's mid-career work is also an important instance of the rich and sometimes ironic interaction between psychology and religion in America. His many contradictions confound traditional ways of talking about religion and psychology. First, he muddled the boundaries between secularity and religion. His aim was always the secular one of human flourishing here and now, rather than transcendence, but he believed that undiluted biblical modalities were the path to this flourishing.⁸ Second, he blended conservative and liberal Christianity. He was liberal in his belief that religious doctrine had to be justified by reason alone and, more specifically, by its practical benefit, but he also defended Old Testament conceptions of guilt and sin and was most popular with conservative Christians. Finally, he provides a fascinating case study in the phenomenon that many have called "therapeutic culture." Despite his criticism of psychology, there were arguably therapeutic elements to his thought, and the difficulty of situating him within debates about "therapeutic culture" highlights the ambiguity of the term. In short, his career demonstrates that the line between liberalism and conservatism, religion and secularity, and therapeutic and anti-therapeutic cannot always be so easily drawn.

This examination of Mowrer's life and work is organized chronologically. I begin with a look at Mowrer's early life and his work as an experimental psychologist. I then examine his early writings on psychotherapy and the origin of the theory that would drive much of his career, namely, that anxiety and neurosis were caused by repressed guilt. I argue that Mowrer's worry about the place of traditional concepts like guilt and sin in the culture was widespread. I then discuss the period during which Mowrer became increasingly religious and began to aggressively intervene in the public conversation. I focus, in particular, on the reaction to his first mass-market paperback, *The Crisis in Psychiatry and Religion* (Mowrer, 1961c). Finally, I end with a brief consideration of his work on group therapy and the final two decades of his life.

The Early Years to the Yale Institute of Human Relations: 1907–1940

Orval Hobart Mowrer was born in 1907 on a farm outside of Unionville, Missouri. He was the youngest of three children, and his parents were members of the town's White Protestant middle class (Mowrer, 1966).⁹ His early childhood was happy and uneventful, but at the age of 13, Mowrer's life changed dramatically when his father died suddenly.

⁷ Here I am responding specifically to David Harrington Watt's (1991) argument that evangelical use of therapeutic language was evidence of acceptance of modern psychology (pp. 148–150, 154). One of the historiographical aims of this essay is to draw a distinction between the use of therapeutic language and the embrace of clinical psychology and psychiatry. By analogy, no one denies that there is a profound conflict between mainstream science and creationism just because the intelligent design movement uses the language of science.

⁸ Charles Taylor (2007) writes that "one could offer this one-line description of the difference between earlier times and the secular age: a secular age is one in which the eclipse of all goals beyond human flourishing becomes conceivable" (p. 19). Taylor defines religion in terms of transcendence. The crucial aspect of transcendence is "the sense that there is some good higher than, beyond human flourishing" (p. 20).

⁹ The best source of information on Mowrer's early life is Mowrer (1966), "Abnormal Reactions or Actions? (An Autobiographical Answer)" (see pp. 2–8).

After this, Mowrer's mother went into a severe depression, and she was never again much of a presence in his life. A little over a year later, Mowrer, too, experienced the first of many episodes of psychological trouble when he woke up one morning with a feeling of unreality about himself and the external world (Mowrer, 1966, p. 7). Mowrer later attributed this episode not to his father's death but to what he called an "ugly sexual perversion" that caused him extreme guilt and anxiety throughout his adolescence. He kept his sexual issues to himself and struggled with depression throughout high school (Mowrer, 1966, p. 18; Mowrer, 1974, p. 346).

Mowrer began his studies at the University of Missouri in 1925. Upon arriving on campus, he wrote back to his home newspaper to assure worried parents that a university education posed no threat to Christian faith, but after taking a couple of science courses and a rhetoric class taught by an intelligent young atheist, Mowrer came to believe that science had made religion obsolete. By his second semester, he had already abandoned his Protestant faith. Because of his psychological struggles, he was interested in the workings of the human mind, and he majored in psychology, working with the early behaviorist Max Meyer (Mowrer, 1966, pp. 8–9).

Mowrer continued on to Johns Hopkins University's psychology doctoral program, where he met his eventual wife, a fellow psychology graduate student named Willie Mae (Molly) Cook (Mowrer, 1966, pp. 13–14; Mowrer, 1974, pp. 332, 335–336). At the time, Mowrer was studying vestibular and visual aspects of spatial orientation in humans and pigeons—narrow and technical work that lasted throughout his graduate career and for several years thereafter (Mowrer, 1932, 1935). Mowrer earned his doctoral degree in 1932 and went through a series of fellowships before landing a permanent position at Yale University as an instructor in the Psychology Department and a Research Associate in the Institute of Human Relations (IHR; Mowrer, 1974, pp. 336–338). This was a particularly important time in Mowrer's career.

The IHR was a pioneering interdisciplinary institute that had been founded with a major grant in 1929.¹⁰ By the time that Mowrer became associated with the IHR, the behaviorist Clark Hull had become the Institute's unofficial leader, and he pushed it to adopt a particularly mechanistic version of behaviorism as its paradigm (Lemov, 2005, pp. 73–76; Morawski, 1986, pp. 220, 231, 237). Through the isolation of basic and universal laws, rigorous thinking modeled on the deductive reasoning of mathematics, and laboratory experimentation, Hull and his allies believed that they could develop a "unified basic science of behavior" that would allow for the development of effective programs of social control (May, 1971, p. 151).¹¹ Beginning around 1936, IHR psychologists inaugurated a research program aimed at integrating behaviorism and psychoanalysis (Lemov, 2005, pp. 132–133). The hope was that psychoanalytic theory could be translated into the stimulus–response terminology of behaviorism and made experimentally testable. Because they were behaviorists first, the group focused their attention on Freudian ideas that could be simplified and made to fit within the behaviorist paradigm.¹²

Being at the IHR had a dramatic influence on Mowrer. He abandoned his study of the physiology of spatial orientation and adopted the IHR's research program as his own. Following Hull, he began to study learning theory (Mowrer, 1974, p. 337). Mowrer also became interested in incorporating the insights of psychoanalysis into his work. This interest was more than academic; he was in analysis 5 days a week from 1936 to 1939, working on his sexuality and aggression (Mowrer, 1974, p. 347). Most important, during

¹⁰ For an account of the early history of the IHR, see Lemov (2005, pp. 71–76) and Morawski (1986, p. 219).

¹¹ The IHR archives are replete with strikingly formalistic memos.

¹² For examples of this tendency of the group's work, see Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, and Sears (1939/1967), pp. 21–22, Hull, "Seminar Announcement" (Yale Institute of Human Relations, February 14, 1936), quoted in Shakow and Rapaport (1964), p. 139.

this time, he commenced a lifelong study of anxiety.¹³ This enduring preoccupation would provide a connective tissue throughout the many dramatic changes in his views.

In the first of his papers on anxiety, Mowrer noted an interesting phenomenon. He and other experimenters had found that when human and animal subjects were presented with a series of recurrent painful stimuli, such as shocks presented at a regular interval or after a cue, a clear pattern was discernable. Subjects, expecting a shock, would experience escalating anxiety or tension until they felt the shock, at which point the tension would drop immediately and precipitously. Mowrer noticed that the pain from the shock seemed to come as a relief; the real discomfort came from the state of tension and expectancy—or anxiety (Mowrer, 1938, pp. 71–73).

Mowrer drew a number of conclusions from this phenomenon. He, Hull, and others at the IHR theorized that all action was motivated by drives or needs, such as hunger, thirst, and pain, and that reinforcement (or learning) occurred when a response was followed by a reduction in drive (which functioned as a reward). For example, a hungry animal would seek out food, and behaviors that resulted in food would be reinforced. Yet a problem for this theory was that much human behavior was not motivated by organic drives. Mowrer theorized that the cycle of anxiety he found in the shock experiments looked like what occurred with organic drives, that is, cycles of rising tension and relief. Thus, anxiety motivated people in the same way that organic drives did, and behaviors that reduced anxiety acted as a reward and were reinforced (or learned; Mowrer, 1938, pp. 74–75).

Mowrer saw an important point of agreement between behaviorist learning theory and psychoanalysis. The drive theorists believed that the fundamental aim of life was to be free of tension or needs. Pleasure was a by-product of tension reduction—a point dramatically illustrated by Mowrer's own experiments. Mowrer noted the similarity to Freud's view that organisms aimed to keep the amount of excitation at a minimum or constant level (the principle of constancy), and that pleasure was a lowering in tension (an aspect of the pleasure principle)—though Mowrer himself failed to distinguish between these related but distinct principles. Thus, the Hullian behaviorists and Freud agreed about some fundamental matters (Mowrer, 1938, pp. 74–75; see Freud, 1961a, p. 3).

Mowrer refined his discussion of anxiety in an influential subsequent paper. Here, he argued that anxiety was a learned reaction, not an instinctual one. After a neutral stimulus was paired with a painful stimulus, the formerly neutral stimulus would come to function as a danger signal, eliciting anxiety, that is, uncomfortable tension. Anxiety, Mowrer argued, was adaptive because it both readied and motivated creatures to escape from anxiety-inducing situations, which also tended to be dangerous (Mowrer, 1939, pp. 554–555). Moreover, because reductions in anxiety functioned as rewards, such behaviors would be learned. Of course, anxiety could also be maladaptive. Both religion and neurotic symptoms reduced anxiety and were therefore reinforced, which explained the persistence of symptoms and religion, but they did not address the real underlying danger (Mowrer, 1939, pp. 559–560). Nonetheless, Mowrer argued, the desire to relieve anxiety about the future explained most human actions and some of humanity's greatest accomplishments (Mowrer, 1939, pp. 558, 564).

Again, Mowrer highlighted the similarity to Freud's later, revised theory of (signal) anxiety. Anxiety, Freud wrote, arose when a situation resembled a prior traumatic situation, and the ego released anxiety as a warning signal. The ego, which had been forced to passively experience the trauma previously, now recreated a lesser version of this trauma to force the system to take precautions against the coming danger (Mowrer, 1939, pp. 555–556; see Freud, 1959, p. 102). Here was another major point of agreement between behaviorism and psychoanalysis.

¹³ For a discussion of the implications of this research, see Lemov (2005, p. 97).

During his time at Yale, Mowrer was also a coauthor of the famous book *Frustration and Aggression* (Dollard et al., 1939/1967). The book's central thesis was that "the occurrence of aggressive behavior always presupposes the existence of frustration and, contrariwise, that the existence of frustration always leads to some form of aggression" (Dollard et al., 1939/1967, p. 1). From this rather anodyne idea, the book deduced broad conclusions about the ideal organization of society and about the causes of prejudice, violence, war, and so on (Dollard et al., 1939/1967, pp. 26, 39–40, 151–153, 160). Mowrer wrote a section of the book that applied the frustration-aggression hypothesis to the problem of crime.¹⁴ He postulated that people who deviated from population norms faced more difficulties in life and hence experienced more frustration. If frustration led to aggression, then these people were more likely to be criminal (Dollard et al., 1939/1967, p. 111). Thus, Mowrer argued that African Americans, Native Americans, poor people, people with less education, shorter people, young people, less attractive people, people with physical disabilities, children of single parents, unmarried people, divorcees, and so on were all more likely to be criminal. Those posing the least threat to society were "normal" people (Dollard et al., 1939/1967, pp. 110–138; Lemov, 2005, p. 140).

Mowrer's argument in this chapter can be understood as a reflection of his view that the aim of life was to be as free of tension as possible. Mowrer seemed to believe that tensions could be best reduced by adjustment.¹⁵ Any deviation from society's norms would only lead to conflicts and tension. This was a hypothesis Mowrer seemed to derive not just from his experimental work but also from his personal life. His own deviations had only caused him pain.

Harvard Graduate School of Education, World War II, and Personal Crisis: 1940–1947

In the spring of 1940, Harvard University offered Mowrer a job as an assistant professor in the Graduate School of Education with a joint appointment in the Department of Psychology. Soon after arriving in Cambridge, Massachusetts with his wife and newborn daughter, Mowrer experienced another bout of severe depression. He decided to reenter analysis, this time with the famous psychoanalyst Hanns Sachs (Mowrer, 1966, p. 15). While at Harvard, Mowrer continued the line of research he started at Yale.

During World War II, in the spring of 1944, Mowrer was assigned to the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) to carry out psychological assessments of soldiers assigned to undercover missions.¹⁶ He was in his position only a week or so when he began to experience another severe breakdown. He was breaking under the strain of concealing what he called his "ugly sexual perversion"—which was possibly same-sex desires. His Chief of Operations assumed that he was a "latent homosexual" and gave him a month off to work through his issues. Mowrer quickly returned to Boston for 7-day-a-week analysis with Sachs. After his month off, Mowrer was able to continue his OSS work, though with great difficulty. During this time, however, he became frustrated with his lack of progress in psychoanalysis and decided to discontinue treatment (Mowrer, 1966, pp. 15–16).

Mowrer later wrote, "If the proverb 'The darkest hour is just before the dawn' ever had validity, it was in respect to my life as the year 1944 drew to a close and 1945 began" (Mowrer, 1966, p. 17). The dawn occurred when, while doing assessment for the OSS, he met the psychiatrists Harry Stack Sullivan and Frieda Fromm-Reichmann and subse-

¹⁴ Mowrer revealed that he wrote the chapter on criminality in Mowrer (1983, p. 291).

¹⁵ Rebecca Lemov (2005, pp. 138–140) has discussed the ways in which the IHR as a whole was preoccupied with adjustment and normality.

¹⁶ For more on the use of psychology during World War II, see Herman (1995).

quently enrolled in courses at Sullivan's Washington School of Psychiatry. Sullivan and Fromm-Reichmann were both pioneering neo-Freudian analysts who explored the interpersonal dimensions of mental illness. Sullivan argued that mental illness was often caused by poor relationships. The key insight for Mowrer was that "'neurosis' lies not in intrapsychic conflict but in *interpersonal disturbances*, or what Sullivan sometimes referred to simply as 'problems of living'" (Mowrer, 1966, p. 17; emphasis in original).

The encounter with Fromm-Reichmann and Sullivan was the catalyst for dramatic events in Mowrer's personal life. He felt compelled to do something about his own "problem of living." In April of 1945, Mowrer revealed to his wife the truth about his sexuality. He told her about what he called his "perversion" and revealed that he had been unfaithful to her. It appears that Molly Mowrer accepted this confession and forgave her husband. According to Mowrer, this hour of confession had more therapeutic value for him than all his time in analysis. He had spent countless hours in analysis working under the assumption that he was overly repressed, but, he now believed, he had not been repressed at all. He had been suffering from guilt caused by his transgressions, and his confession to his wife relieved him of this guilt (Mowrer, 1966, pp. 18–19).

Psychoanalysis might have failed him, but Christianity had long ago pointed out the value of confession and ethical living. Christianity had been so right about the value of confession, Mowrer thought, perhaps it had other valuable insights. Thus, he began to reevaluate the worth of religion and to occasionally attend a Unitarian church (Mowrer, 1966, p. 33). For the next 8 years, he did not experience any major breakdowns (Mowrer, 1966, p. 21).

The influence of Fromm-Reichmann and Sullivan, the failure of his own analysis to yield positive results, and the salutary effects of his confession caused Mowrer to begin questioning his psychological views. Perhaps inspired by Sullivan and Fromm-Reichmann, he started to practice counseling, in part to test new ideas (Mowrer, 1966, p. 24). His new perspective soon started popping up in his theoretical work. In the final paragraphs of an otherwise orthodox 1945 paper that attempted to account for the persistence of harmful behaviors, Mowrer argued that psychology should move back toward a religious understanding of behavioral disturbances (Mowrer & Ullman, 1945, p. 86).

The Guilt Theory of Anxiety and Popular Notoriety: 1947–1948

The Guilt Theory of Anxiety

Mowrer believed that he had discovered a key principle of mental health. Repression and strict societal norms did not cause psychological disturbances; real wrongdoing and deserved guilt did. But now he saw a problem. Many of the era's most important psychoanalysts and clinical psychologists viewed guilt not as a reliable indication of wrongdoing, but as unreliable and a frequent source of oppression and neurosis. The most important theorist of guilt, Freud, offered a naturalized etiology of guilt that denied it any special authority. Guilt was anxiety felt by the ego about not living up to the standards set by the superego (Freud, 1960, p. 51). The superego arose during the oedipal conflict, when parental authority was introjected in order to help restrain oedipal desire; its strictness later in life was determined in part by this primal sexual conflict (Freud, 1960, p. 30). The sense of guilt was then heightened by the restrictions of civilization, which forced our outwardly directed aggression back inward, where it was taken over by the superego and directed against the ego. Such guilt was necessary to the functioning of civilization, but it came at the cost of much of our happiness (Freud, 1961b, pp. 114, 128). More than a source of unhappiness, guilt was often dangerous. The superego could be cruel and overly demand-

ing, causing neurotic guilt and attendant illnesses such as obsessional neurosis, melancholia, and moral masochism (Freud, 1960, pp. 52, 54).¹⁷

Some of Freud's most influential successors were even more skeptical of guilt feelings. Karen Horney argued that much of the guilt experienced especially by neurotics, but even by normal people, was not genuine shame or regret over wrongdoing, but excessive fear of disapproval (Horney, 1937, pp. 235–236). Whereas Freud aimed merely at reducing the severity of the superego, Horney famously thought it was possible to be free of its inner dictates altogether (Horney, 1950, p. 375). This view was shared by Erich Fromm, who believed that psychoanalysis should free people from the demands of the superego—which he called the “authoritarian conscience” (Fromm, 1947/1967, pp. 148–150, 156, 160). Fromm believed that the guilt felt by people who followed their authoritarian conscience was nothing more than an excessive fear of authority. This guilt was not an indication of wrongdoing but was a barrier to independence and freedom (Fromm, 1947/1967, pp. 150, 154).

Even therapists not in the psychoanalytic tradition seemed to be questioning the traditional conception of guilt. Client-centered therapy, as first articulated by Carl Rogers in 1942, was based on the idea that therapists should be nondirective, accepting, and encouraging (Rogers, 1942, pp. 19–47). A good therapist did not even distinguish between negative and positive feelings and expressions; moral judgments never entered the therapy room (Rogers, 1942, p. 40).¹⁸

These were the sort of views Mowrer was reacting against in a presentation to the 1947 annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Mowrer began his address by noting that religion had traditionally offered the devout a defense against anxiety (Mowrer, 1950, p. 532). However, he no longer argued that this response was unrealistic or neurotic. Instead, he claimed that the Old Testament writers were the greatest theorists of anxiety until Kierkegaard and Freud came along (Mowrer, 1950, pp. 533–535). Mowrer then laid out his interpretation of Freud's theory of anxiety, or, more specifically (and Mowrer himself did not make this clear), one particular type of anxiety: neurotic anxiety caused by a return of the repressed.¹⁹

According to Freud, Mowrer said, anxiety was different from fear because whereas fear had an object, anxiety was objectless. During childhood, there were conflicts between impulses to commit forbidden acts and the fear of punishment. These conflicts were often resolved by repression of the impulses, but when a repressed impulse later attempted to return, one felt anxiety. In fact, what one experienced was actually a fear of the impulse and the accompanying punishment and conflicts, but the content of the impulse itself never reached consciousness, so it was experienced as anxiety. In the final step, neurotic symptoms formed as a sort of compromise between the repression and the impulse attempting to return. These allowed one to avoid some of the anxiety, without addressing the underlying issue (Mowrer, 1950, pp. 534–537). In short, Mowrer interpreted Freud to say, anxiety was a consequence of too much restraint, punishment, and societal restriction. The solution to anxiety was to weaken the superego and help people to act on their impulses (Mowrer, 1950, p. 538).

Mowrer accepted the idea that anxiety was objectless, the mechanism of repression, and the mechanism of symptom formation. However, he went on in his address to modify these ideas in radical ways:

¹⁷ More precisely, moral masochism was characterized by unconscious guilt (Freud, 1995, pp. 282–283).

¹⁸ For illuminating discussions of Horney, Fromm, and Rogers, see Stevens (2010, pp. 195–201) and Petigny (2009, pp. 19–21).

¹⁹ People listening to Mowrer's address or reading the published version would have received the impression that all anxiety was caused by the return of the repressed. When, in fact, anxiety, according to Freud, had a variety of causes and was often adaptive and realistic, as Mowrer's own early work stressed (see Freud, 1959, pp. 100–104; Freud, 1964b, p. 106).

In essence, Freud's theory holds that anxiety comes from evil wishes, from acts which the individual would commit if he dared. *The alternative view here proposed is that anxiety comes, not from acts which the individual would commit but dares not, but from acts which he has committed but wishes that he had not. It is, in other words, a "guilt theory" of anxiety rather than an "impulse theory."* . . . The difference between these two views is that the one holds that anxiety arises from repression that has been turned toward the *id*; whereas the other holds that anxiety arises from repression that has been turned toward the *superego* or *conscience*. (Mowrer, 1950, p. 537; emphasis in original)

Mowrer noted that his theory was in some ways closer to Freud's early theory of anxiety²⁰ (i.e., anxiety caused by repressed libido discharged as anxiety): "Instead of dammed-up libido, it is 'dammed-up' moral force and guilt which, as they erupt into consciousness, undergo the qualitative transformation and are experienced, not as guilt, but as anxiety" (Mowrer, 1950, p. 539). The upshot was that for "most, if not all, neurotics," the problem was to help them live up to the demands of conscience, not to rid them of guilt. Mowrer argued that one of the major advantages of his view was that it brought scientific theory into agreement with the world's religions and demonstrated the validity of social authority and conscience (Mowrer, 1950, pp. 538, 540).

This was a strange argument for perhaps the most astute behaviorist interpreter of Freud to make. First, Mowrer offered no evidence for his guilt theory of anxiety other than its correspondence with Christian religious tradition, and it faced a host of theoretical problems, such as how repression of the *superego* worked and why repression was exclusively directed at the *superego*.²¹ Mowrer also badly misrepresented Freudian psychoanalysis, the goal of which was not to give free reign to the *id* or to eliminate all repressions, but to better control the *id* and to create more stable defenses against instinctual impulses.²²

This new view of anxiety was, in some ways, quite different from the view of anxiety Mowrer had developed as an experimenter at Yale. Under the influence of Sullivan and Fromm-Reichmann, Mowrer now stressed the interpersonal determinants of anxiety. Also evident was the influence of Mowrer's personal transformation. He believed that his own mental illness was caused by repressed guilt from his sexual desires, and that his confession to his wife was responsible for his recovery. Like many psychologists and psychoanalysts, he believed that he could generalize from his own case.

²⁰ Freud's early theory was that repressed libido that could not be contained was transformed directly into anxiety and discharged (see Freud, 1962, 90n).

²¹ Mowrer argued that not just guilt but also the *superego*, or "conscience," could be repressed. Freud offered a complex story about how instincts were repressed, but Mowrer did not explain how guilt and moral strivings could be repressed. In the case of conscience, what was being repressed? Moral beliefs? The desire to act morally? Or something else? Regarding repressed guilt, why would guilt that returned from repression be felt as anxiety? Wouldn't it be felt as guilt? Finally, notice that for Mowrer, the basic conflict was the same as for Freud: The ego was torn between the desires of the *id* and the demands of the *superego*. Yet Mowrer offered no reason to think that his resolution of the conflict in favor of the *superego* was preferable to the opposite resolution or to a mixed view.

²² Mowrer misinterpreted Freud in a number of ways. First, Mowrer argued that the aim of Freudian psychoanalysis was to help weaken the *superego* so that the *id* could have free reign. Of course, one goal of analysis was to free people from an unnecessarily restrictive *superego*. However, Freud's intent was not to unleash the *id* but to control it through the ego. Freud (1964b) said that the intention of psychoanalysis was "to strengthen the ego, to make it more independent of the super-ego, to widen its field of perception and enlarge its organization, so that it can appropriate fresh portions of the *id*. Where *id* was, there ego shall be" (pp. 99–100). The major problem with the *superego*, for Freud, was not that it was a source of discipline but that it could be abusive, overweening, and sadistic. Second, Freud did not want to eliminate all repression; some repression was healthy and necessary (Freud, 1937/1964a, p. 237). One of the aims of psychoanalysis was eliminating childhood repressions precisely so that the defenses could be rebuilt on a firmer foundation (Freud, 1937/1964a, p. 227). Third, in the specific case of neurotic anxiety, Freud did not think that if people simply acted on their *id* impulses, this would solve the problem of neurotic anxiety. The conflicts, established in childhood, were too great for this, and there were numerous external barriers to acting on *id* impulses. Moreover, the cause of neurotic anxiety was a weak ego, not insufficient freedom for the *id* (Freud, 1964b, pp. 110–112).

There were also important continuities. This was still a signal theory of anxiety. Anxiety signaled that something more serious was wrong in one's life, for example, one was betraying others, concealing something, and so forth. He continued to view anxiety as adaptive because it pushed people to correct their ways and make amends before it was too late. Also recall his finding that people punished themselves with anxiety just anticipating a pain or punishment. In a sense, anxiety-inducing guilt was the ultimate form of self-punishment. After being acculturated, people punished themselves for wrongdoing before any external source could get around to it, and this anxiety was often worse than the pain that came from society's punishments. Just as the nervous subjects in his experiments at Yale felt relief when the electroshock finally came, confession and the revelation of wrongdoing would actually come as a relief.

Another important continuity with his experimental work was the continued emphasis on the importance of tension reduction, adjustment, and normality. The idea of the guilt theory was that a failure to live up to the norms and standards of the community led to anxiety and neuroses—just as the thesis of *Frustration and Aggression* (Dollard et al., 1939/1967) was that failure to conform to society's norms led to frustration and aggression. He continued to believe that the best route to mental health was to conform to the norms and demands of society. In many ways, then, Mowrer's guilt theory of anxiety was a translation of his earlier ideas from their stimulus–response terminology into a more religious idiom.

Popular Distrust of Psychology

Mowrer's address might have been rather dry, but it captured an astonishing amount of press coverage. Despite the competition for attention from 2,400 other presenters spread out over seven hotels and two university campuses (“Science Meeting,” 1947), Mowrer's address was the most covered one at the event. *Time* devoted more words to his talk than any other presentation at the conference. The article began, “If King David knew what he was talking about, then Freud was off base.” It declared that Mowrer's address was “almost a psalm” and quoted large portions of it (“In the Age,” 1948). The *Washington Post* similarly reported on Mowrer's speech in detail (Blakeslee, 1948).

The *New York Post* featured a nearly full-page profile of Mowrer, complete with a large picture of him in his office. The article began,

A revolution is brewing in an ivory tower, where a quiet professor may have upset the entire theory of psychoanalysis. Freud was wrong about neurotics, he dares to say, offering proof: neuroses don't come from repressed sex or aggressive instincts but from repression of conscience. (Harrington, 1948, p. 33)

The article played up the fact that Mowrer had been in analysis three times for his own neuroses. It reported on Mowrer's three children, his family, his habits, his hobbies, where he spent his summers, and so on. Mowrer, relishing his new-found celebrity, declared to the reporter, “Now you have met a heretic.” The article ended, “He is not the first ‘heretic’ to lead mankind ahead” (Harrington, 1948, p. 33).

What accounted for Mowrer's appeal? His address discussed many of the hot topics of the day. The culture was obsessed with the idea that this was a uniquely anxiety-inducing age. Much of the press was also fascinated by all things psychological. But Mowrer's address did not garner attention just for these reasons. Many psychologists never received the attention Mowrer did, and much of what he said about anxiety went against the grain.²³

What really garnered attention for Mowrer's address was that he was tapping into broad opposition to psychoanalysis and clinical psychology, and widespread worries that their modalities and epistemologies might soon replace religious and traditional ones. Michel

²³ He did not argue, like others did, that this was the age of anxiety, nor did he advance the popular theory that societal factors like war, technological change, and loss of meaning were contributing to anxiety. Quite the contrary, he said that anxiety was a constant of the human condition (Mowrer, 1950, p. 531).

Foucault argued that during the 19th century, domains like sexuality became medicalized. Thus, matters like sex were “no longer accounted for simply by the notions of error or sin, excess or transgression, but [were] placed under the rule of the normal and the pathological” (Foucault, 1978/1990, p. 67). But this transformation was largely confined to the medical and scientific spheres. Science might have dropped sin and immorality as explanatory concepts, but average people continued on accounting for matters like sex with these categories.

Many worried that something new was happening in the 20th century: The discourse of psychotherapy was beginning to encroach on popular and everyday discourse—thanks in large part to Freud.²⁴ It seemed that a new psychotherapeutic culture was taking shape. That is, on the popularized psychoanalytic view, wrong actions were often ascribed not to our sinfulness but to our unconscious impulses. Although figures like Freud, Fromm, and Horney differentiated between real guilt and neurotic guilt, it could often seem that they left little room for real guilt. Thus, much guilt was described as a neurotic reaction, rather than a justified response to transgressions. A scrupulous person was not an example to be admired but a neurotic suffering from a psychological illness. People worried that confession to a therapist was replacing confession to a member of the clergy or to God.

Of course, this concern about clinical psychology and psychoanalysis was a component of a larger concern about secularization and the hegemony of science, but because clinical psychology and psychiatry addressed ideas of the soul, self, personal conduct, and human relations in ways that other sciences did not, it had a unique potency—a fact recognized by the conservative theologian J. Gresham Machen early on (Machen, 1923/2009, p. 5). Perhaps most troubling, psychology and psychiatry threatened to liberalize sexuality, in particular female sexuality. That psychologists and psychoanalysts discussed female sexuality with such frankness was itself troubling. Moreover, the critique of repression proffered by theorists like Freud, Horney, and Fromm challenged the societal restraints of sexuality.²⁵ Clinical psychology and psychiatry, it seemed, challenged Christian doctrine in a way that even evolutionary biology did not. The fact that Mowrer, a leading academic psychologist, was voicing such concerns showed to many that these worries had merit. Here was an eminent psychologist, a secular person, someone who accepted many of Freud’s ideas, and even he was saying that psychoanalysis had become hegemonic.

Mowrer’s status as both a leading psychologist and a critic of psychoanalysis brought him a great deal of attention, but he was merely one of many expressing this critique. The famous theologian Reinhold Niebuhr expressed, in more sophisticated ways, many of Mowrer’s concerns. A chief failure of psychology—and psychoanalysis in particular—according to Niebuhr (1941/1996), was its failure to account for the complexity and necessity of guilt. For the modern (psychological) person, Niebuhr wrote, the sense of guilt expressed in Christian myth “is to him a mere vestigial remnant of primitive fears of higher powers, of which he is happily emancipated” (p. 94). He continued, “The sense of sin is, in the phrase of a particularly vapid modern social scientist, ‘a psychopathic aspect of adolescent mentality’” (p. 94). Modern psychology, Niebuhr argued, viewed guilt, particularly guilt about sex, as abnormal and caused by repression, ignoring guilt’s profound spiritual importance and the necessity of social restraints of sexuality (p. 238). For Niebuhr, psychology was unable to account for the deeper dimension of the self, the intermingling of spirit and nature.

²⁴ Petigny (2009) makes a similar point. However, my claim is merely that traditionalist like Mowrer were worried that psychotherapeutic language was entering popular discourse—not necessarily that, as Petigny claims, terms like “penis envy,” “anal retentive,” “superego,” etc., were actually part of the “everyday language of ordinary citizens” (p. 152).

²⁵ This gendered critique was just under the surface of Mowrer’s address, but in his later work his obsession with female sexuality became explicit.

The clergy often critiqued the role that clinical psychology, and especially psychoanalysis, was playing in the culture, particularly the effect on conceptions of guilt and sin. Nine months before Mowrer's address, Monsignor Fulton Sheen delivered a much publicized sermon that hit many of the same notes, including the emphasis on unresolved guilt. The *New York Times* reported that Sheen "assailed psychoanalysis as 'a form of escapism' that produced 'morbidity and disintegration' and failed to relieve 'the unresolved sense of guilt of sin' from which 'most people who consult psychoanalysts are suffering.'" Highlighting again the importance of gender, Sheen was most worried that male psychoanalysts were using the technique of transference to seduce female patients. For his attack on psychoanalysis, Sheen reportedly received messages of support from across the country ("[Sheen Denounces](#)," 1947, p. 18).²⁶ Similarly, the prominent Rabbi Edgar F. Magnin warned that psychology could not replace religion and that any viewpoint "which would ignore the real problems of human beings or glide over their sins and shortcomings by seeking excuses in subconscious motivations is not of a very high order" ("[Psychology Can't Replace](#)," 1952, p. 3). Religious defenders of psychotherapy felt on the defensive. A Catholic University psychologist stated that a "widespread distrust for the field of psychiatry and psychoanalysis, especially among Catholics," could be attributed to mere misunderstanding ("[Treatment of Sin](#)," 1950, p. 1).

In fact, during the 1950s—this supposed golden age of the acceptance of psychoanalysis—Freud's books, such as his *General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, were being taken off the shelves of bookstores in a number of cities. In Cleveland, the books were taken out of bookstores in response to a city ordinance outlawing sin in books and movies. In Brooklyn, 16 stores voluntarily removed Freud's works after a drive by local churches. The purported justification was obscenity, but, interestingly, the publisher of the *General Introduction* attributed the opposition to church groups' longstanding opposition to Freud's theories themselves ("[Cleveland Shops](#)," 1953).

These worries were evident even in the popular culture. In *Miracle on 34th Street* (Perlberg & Seaton, 1947), released the same year as Mowrer's speech and Sheen's sermon, the film's protagonist, Kris Kringle, believed that he was Santa Claus, and the film's villain, the psychologist Mr. Sawyer, got Kringle involuntarily committed to Bellevue.²⁷ Sawyer also told the impressionable young Alfred that he only helped the poor because he suffered from a "guilt complex." The themes of the film are suggestive of an anxiety about the power of psychology in the culture and its potential for abuse. Another theme was the conflict between organizing the world by traditional categories like belief and faith versus psychological categories like delusion and mental illness. Concepts like "belief" and "faith" were continuously contrasted with psychotherapeutic ideas, such as "guilt complex," "delusion," "maladjustment," "analysis," "repression," and "Oedipal conflict," which were used either sarcastically or to inaccurately describe Kringle and Alfred.²⁸

Of course, some prominent religious voices advocated a rapprochement between religion and psychotherapy. Harry Emerson Fosdick's (1943) *On Being a Real Person*—which was respectful of the benefits of clinical psychology—and Rabbi Joshua Loth Liebman's (1946) *Peace of Mind: Insights on Human Nature That Can Change Your Life*—which embraced Freudian psychoanalysis—were both massive bestsellers.²⁹ Figures such as Paul Tillich and Rollo May combined theological and psychological insights in their works. Pastoral counsel-

²⁶ After facing pressure from psychologists and psychiatrists, he was forced to clarify that he was attacking Freudian psychoanalysis specifically and thought that psychiatry was perfectly valid. But by that time, his comments had already had a major impact (see "[Msgr. Sheen](#)," 1947).

²⁷ There was some question in the film about whether Sawyer was a real psychologist.

²⁸ The actual words "repression" and "Oedipus complex" did not appear, but the concepts were present.

²⁹ For a discussion of Fosdick's and Liebman's relationships to psychology, see [Hedstrom](#) (2013, pp. 180–194).

ing, which had its beginnings in the 1920s in the work of Anton Boisen and others, was a major topic of discussion in liberal seminaries (see Myers-Shirk, 2009). Nonetheless, the significance of this can be overstated; Mowrer himself overstated it. Curiosity did not always equal acceptance, and, as I will argue, the extent to which pastoral counseling accepted mainstream clinical psychology has been exaggerated.

The opposition to clinical psychology and psychoanalysis, particularly that expressed by many members of the clergy, had an effect. This was demonstrated by a major 1957 mental health survey. Faiths that were more open to psychology, such as Judaism, unsurprisingly showed higher use of psychologists. Among those who used professional help,³⁰ 32% of Jews used a psychiatrist/psychologist (11% used the clergy). By contrast, religious groups that were more critical of psychology showed much lower use of psychological help. For Baptists and Fundamentalists who sought professional help, only 7% and 14%, respectively, used a psychiatrist/psychologist (42% and 46%, respectively, used the clergy). For Catholics and Presbyterians who sought professional help, only 15% and 18%, respectively, used a psychiatrist/psychologist (46% and 45%, respectively, used the clergy; Veroff, Kulka, & Douvan, 1981, p. 172).

Importantly, the authors of the study pointed out that controlling for differences in income levels among the groups did not fully account for the differences in the use of psychotherapy. Even low-income Jews, Episcopalians, Congregationalists, and members of other denominations that expressed less opposition to psychotherapy were high users of psychotherapy. Instead, the authors postulated that differences in doctrine and the way that religious groups framed personal difficulties helped to explain differences in the use of psychotherapy (Veroff et al., 1981, 179n., 180).³¹

The Religious Period and *The Crisis in Psychiatry and Religion: 1948–1961*

Exploring Religion and Rescuing Sin

In 1948, Mowrer accepted a position at the University of Illinois as a Research Professor, which carried no teaching responsibilities (Mowrer, 1974, p. 340). He elaborated on his guilt theory of anxiety in two collections of papers published in 1950 and 1953, but these papers did not add all that much to the central theory (Mowrer 1950, 1953). In recognition of his extraordinary work in learning theory, he was elected President of the APA for the year 1953–1954. However, during this period of great success and after 8 years without serious psychological issues, Mowrer experienced perhaps the most severe depression of his life. When he began to seriously consider suicide in the fall term of 1953, he decided to admit himself to a psychiatric institution (Mowrer, 1966, pp. 21–22). As Mowrer described it,

³⁰ That is, the following are the proportions of a subset of respondents who had used the help of a member of the clergy, a doctor, psychiatrist or psychologist, a marriage counselor, etc. The numbers for the total sample are very different. For example, only 2% of the total sample had used the help of a psychiatrist or psychologist (Veroff, Kulka, & Douvan, 1981, p. 134).

³¹ My interpretation of this data is quite different from Alan Petigny's. Most important, Petigny (2009) claims that the data show that "by the late 1950s, a slight majority of respondents accepted the legitimacy of professional psychological services" (p. 23). As support, Petigny cites the survey's finding that 14% of people had used *professional help*, 9% could have used help, and 27% might need help in the future (Veroff et al., 1981, p. 79). But, as the study used the term, "professional help" included ministers, doctors, social service agencies, and even lawyers (Veroff et al., 1981, pp. 130, 134). It is thus a mistake to conflate professional help with psychology. Petigny makes the same error—equating the use of professional help with the use of a psychologist—in discussing the Kelly Longitudinal Survey data examined by May (1988) in *Homeward Bound* (Petigny, 2009, p. 134n27). Thus, Petigny claims that one in six Americans had visited a psychologist by mid-century, when, in fact, only 2% had (Petigny, 2009, 134n27; see Veroff et al., 1981, p. 134).

Upon entering the hospital my condition deteriorated rapidly: I became actively suicidal, sleep virtually departed except for a few hours of oblivion made possible each night by paraldehyde, my speech became disorganized, I was out of contact with reality part of the time, and the rest of the time I suffered severely from tension and depression. I felt I had indeed “lost my mind” . . . and that I could never function intellectually or professionally again. (p. 22)

Mowrer made steady progress, and by December he was allowed to return home (Mowrer, 1966, p. 22). After his crisis, Mowrer was desperate. Psychoanalysis had failed him. Confession had worked marvelously for a while but did not prevent the latest breakdown. Having few options, he turned to Christianity—not to save his soul but in the hope that it might be able to save him psychologically. Mowrer’s belief that religion might offer a path to mental health was in part the product of an unlikely influence for an eminent psychologist: the bestseller *Magnificent Obsession*, written by the minister Lloyd C. Douglas (Mowrer, 1964, pp. 65–71). The book’s theme was that doing good deeds quietly led to spiritual power, or as the book put it, “You can have anything you want, do anything you wish to do, be whatever you would like to be” (Mowrer, 1964, p. 67). In 1954, Mowrer, his wife, and their two daughters became Presbyterians (Mowrer, 1966, pp. 33–34). He also came to the conclusion that confession to one or two people was not enough; one had to make restitution for wrongdoing and to confess one’s sins widely. Thus, he went around confessing to friends, family, and old colleagues his sexual secrets and transgressions (Mowrer, 1966, p. 24).

Around the same time, Mowrer’s increasing skepticism of psychoanalysis was bolstered by his discovery of two thinkers who were experiencing similar doubts. First, Mowrer came across the work of Freud’s onetime associate Wilhelm Stekel, who had come to believe that psychoanalysis was in crisis (Mowrer, 1966, pp. 21–23; Stekel, 1950, p. xiv). Stekel also argued that many nervous disorders were “diseases of the conscience” (Stekel, 1950, p. 320). According to Stekel (1950), in these cases, “the patient suppresses his remorse, tries to drown the voice of conscience, and feigns immunity. Nature takes vengeance” (p. 327). Second, in 1956, Mowrer met Anton Boisen (Mowrer, 1966, p. 23). In the 1920s, Boisen had founded Clinical Pastoral Education, which brought theological students into hospitals to investigate the relationship between religion and mental health (Myers-Shirk, 2009, pp. 16–61). Unknown to Mowrer, Boisen (1936/1971, pp. 28, 53–56, 60) had also been arguing that guilt, character failings, and concealment could lead to mental illness.³² Although Boisen made one of the earliest attempts to systematically integrate religion and psychology, he, too, worried that psychotherapists were taking over problems that the church had traditionally addressed. He worried about the decreasing authority of the clergy, writing, “Having accepted the findings of modern science and having given up the authority of their own religious tradition, they have no ground of their own to stand on” (Boisen, 1936/1971, pp. 234–235).

The discovery of Douglas, Boisen, and Stekel pushed Mowrer to begin questioning the whole field of psychology, not just Freudian psychoanalysis, and he soon largely abandoned his experimental work. Two collections of academic articles published in 1960 marked the end of Mowrer’s serious engagement with learning theory (Mowrer, 1960a, 1960b). One of the earliest public examples of his changing views was an address that he delivered at a panel on “The Role of the Concept of Sin in Psychotherapy” at the 1959 meeting of the APA. Mowrer argued that psychologists had “very largely abandoned belief in right and wrong, virtue and sin, in general” (Mowrer, 1961c, pp. 40n, 41). He urged that psychologists could speak of sin in completely naturalistic terms. Sinful acts were the wrong, guilt-inducing acts that put us in danger of being sent to earthly hell:

³² Of course, the idea that sin or wrongdoing could contribute to mental illness was hardly original to Mowrer. This view was held by some early members of the pastoral counseling movement, such as the well-known minister John Sutherland Bonnell and Charles Holman (see Myers-Shirk, 2009, pp. 73–80, 185).

neurosis and psychosis. Neurotic and psychotic people, he claimed, had generally led exceptionally disorderly and immoral lives. What about the people who lived immoral lives but who suffered from no mental illness? Some of these people, Mowrer claimed, expiated their sins through confession or good works. Others were psychopaths, lacking the conscience to feel guilt. Mowrer then dramatically argued that if sin really was the problem, then there was no reason to think that psychologists, psychiatrists, or social workers had any particular expertise or competence to deal with the issues of neurosis and psychosis. Thus, he bleakly concluded, “We are in a real crisis with respect to the whole psychotherapeutic enterprise” (Mowrer, 1961c, pp. 42–43, 45).

Fortuitously, the pioneering cognitive–behavioral therapist Albert Ellis was on the same panel and presented a response. Ellis, who was the author of books like *Sex Without Guilt* (Ellis, 1958), had waged a campaign to banish words like “guilt” and “sin” from the American vocabulary, believing that such terms were harmful and debilitating (Ellis, 1958). Ellis argued against Mowrer that any introduction of the concept of sin into therapy would be pernicious and anti-therapeutic. “I shall contend,” he said,

that no human being should ever be blamed for anything he does; and it is the therapist’s main and most important function to help rid his patients of every possible vestige of their blaming themselves, others, or fate and the universe. (Ellis, 1960b, p. 189)

He worried that if clinical psychology accepted concepts like sin, it would cause patients to berate themselves and to label themselves sinners. Such a view would only hamper people’s ability to address their problems (Ellis, 1960b, pp. 189–191).

Once again, Mowrer’s comments received a surprising amount of press attention. *Time* hyped Mowrer’s address in an article that began,

Sin has long been an unfashionable word in most analytic circles, but last week the American Psychological Association offered 7,000 members . . . a soul-searching symposium entitled “The Role of the Concept of Sin in Psychotherapy.” Upshot: the idea of sin, at least for use in treating the sick psyche, is making a comeback. (“Sin & Psychology,” 1959, p. 71)

The article continued, “The University of Illinois’ famed researcher O. Hobart Mowrer began with vigorous kicks at the moribund body of classical Freudian theory as he defined it” (“Sin & Psychology,” 1959, p. 71). The rest of the article was a lengthy rehearsal of Mowrer’s comments, as well as a brief discussion of the views of the other panelists. A writer for the *Los Angeles Times* argued that psychology’s criticism of sexual restraint had led to an atmosphere of sexual license in which oversexed girls had to be institutionalized and were driven by guilt to the verge of suicide. Mowrer’s speech, the author argued, was a prime example of a trend away from this criticism of all restraint. Whitman, “Science Takes a New Look,” (Whitman, 1959, pp. 4–5). Discussions of Mowrer’s speech also appeared in *Newsweek* (“Psychology: Hell on Earth,” 1959) and *America* (“Sin & Psychology,” 1959).

Mowrer’s address generated so much attention, he decided to expand on it in a short article published in the *American Psychologist*. Mowrer began by noting that after his address at the APA convention, many psychologists had asked him why he had to use the word “sin” instead of a more neutral term (Mowrer, 1961c, p. 47).³³ He argued that the choice was between the medical model of neurosis and the moral conception, with its attendant concept of sin. Mowrer asserted that the medical model had been a complete failure. The use of the term “mental illness” denied the moral dimensions of mental disorders and the responsibility people bore for their own suffering. Given the choice

³³ This was first published in *The American Psychologist* (Mowrer, 1960d).

between treating mental disturbances as mental illness or as sin, Mowrer argued, the concept of sin was preferable (Mowrer, 1961c, pp. 48, 50–51).

Mowrer's brief article again generated a flurry of debate, this time by psychologists who wrote to the *American Psychologist* to express their disagreement. For the second time, Mowrer's most important interlocutor was Albert Ellis, who put forward many of the same objections he had last time (Ellis, 1960a, pp. 713–714). A clinical psychologist wrote to say that whatever the philosophical or theological implications of the concepts of "sin" and "guilt," clinical psychologists should not be concerned with these ramifications. In therapy, one was dealing with excessive guilt, which should be described as what it was: sickness (Livingston, 1960, p. 714). Hans H. Strupp, a respected psychologist at The University of North Carolina, wrote disdainfully,

One could comment on many aspects of this impassioned plea for irrationality, but it seems prudent not to. It was common to misinterpret Freud's discoveries in the early days of psychoanalysis: it is regrettable that it occurs in 1960 and from the pen of a distinguished psychologist. (Strupp, 1960, p. 714)

George H. Frank of the University of Miami wrote in to say that Mowrer was simply being unscientific (Frank, 1960, pp. 715–716).

It is striking that every published letter about Mowrer's article was negative, particularly when one considers his uniformly positive reception by the popular press. Even more striking is the fact that there had been no such reaction to Mowrer's guilt theory of anxiety. In fact, after Mowrer debuted that theory, he continued to rise in the world of psychology.³⁴ In these two new pieces, Mowrer was not saying anything substantively different from what he said in the late 1940s. Both his guilt theory and his new emphasis on sin were highly moralistic, one-sided, lacking in evidence or support, and based on misinterpretations of Freud. The only difference was that he now posed a threat to the field's authority.

The authority of psychology and psychiatry was based on the claim that their methods were uniquely well suited to the treatment of mental illness. Their power was partly constituted by the fact that they had the authority to define certain actions and persons using their terminology and categories: normal, abnormal, pathological, obsessive, neurotic, and so on. It was considered perfectly acceptable for Mowrer, as a psychologist, to say, for example, that homosexuality or some other culturally condemned behavior was abnormal or pathological, but it was not acceptable to say that it was sinful. If mental illness was caused by sin, then the best treatment was moral treatment, and psychologists and psychiatrists did not have any particular authority in this area. Indeed, Mowrer and his religious followers would soon be arguing that religious authorities were actually better equipped to treat mental illness than psychotherapists.

In the wider culture, in which Mowrer was always warmly received,³⁵ the cultural struggle over psychotherapy, particularly Freudian psychoanalysis, continued unabated from the 1940s—contrary to what other historians have said.³⁶ Mowrer became one of the press's favorite cudgels against psychoanalysis. A long article in the *Chicago Tribune*, which was carried in other papers throughout the country, cited Mowrer as an eminent psychologist and critic of psychoanalysis (Browning, 1961, p. 79). An article in the *Christian Century*, reporting on a speech by Mowrer, stated, "Sigmund Freud was getting his comeuppance at the hands of O. Hobart Mowrer" (Culver, 1960, p. 324). Press reports on Mowrer's attacks often emphasized the fact that he was a respected psychologist. For example, a United Press International report stated that Mowrer "is a leading light in the

³⁴ Recall that a few years after Mowrer published his guilt theory, he was elected President of the APA.

³⁵ In fact, I have not found a single negative article about Mowrer in the popular press. All were either neutral reports or positive.

³⁶ See introduction.

science of psychology” (Smith, 1960, p. 11). In fact, he was invited to write an article for the *Atlantic Monthly*, in which he attacked not only psychoanalysis but also academic psychology (Mowrer, 1961b).

Mowrer was not the only one on the attack. In 1959, eminent Stanford sociologist Richard LaPiere (1959b) received press attention for writing an anti-Freudian polemic that criticized psychoanalysis for leading to social irresponsibility and despair (See, e.g., LaPiere, 1959a). In the same year, Philip Rieff’s book *Freud: The Mind of the Moralizer* (Rieff, 1959) was released. Rieff’s book was no polemic against Freud; it was a respectful and brilliant interpretation of Freud’s thought. Nonetheless, Rieff worried that psychoanalysis was changing the culture in fundamental ways. He wrote, “It is just those Freudian terms with a religious resonance—such words as ‘guilt,’ ‘anxiety,’ ‘conscience’—that reproach the corresponding religious notions” (Rieff, 1959, p. 273). There was a particularly wide gulf between the Freudian and the religious notion of guilt. He explained, “This Freudian conception of guilt is cast strictly within the critical language of pathology.” This pathologization of guilt meant that “the sense of guilt can hardly be considered a reliable index of real felony and warrantable remorse” (p. 275). In fact, Rieff argued that psychoanalysis had introduced a new type of human being, “psychological man,” who was freed from many of the constraints and demands of community, the past, and religion (pp. 329–330). The psychological man was always analyzing himself, perpetually chasing normality and psychological health, with nothing to affirm except the self (p. 355).

Although it is true that Mowrer and Rieff were expressing similar concerns, there were serious differences. Rieff (1966/2006) argued that in the new “therapeutic culture,” as he later termed it, “old ideological contents are preserved mainly for their therapeutic potential, as interesting deposits of past motifs of moralizing.” He continued, “Psychological man, in his independence from all gods, can feel free to use all god-terms; I imagine he will be a hedger against his own bets, a user of any faith that lends itself to therapeutic use” (pp. 19–20). As will become clearer, these criticisms could likely apply to Mowrer. His primary interest in Christianity seemed to be precisely that it could be put to therapeutic use.³⁷ At times, he seemed to treat the Bible merely as a text that could be plundered for useful psychological principles. Mowrer’s system included the sort of “moralizing demands” and communal accountability that Rieff valued, but, in a move that Rieff never anticipated, it used just these moralizing demands for their therapeutic potential.

Mowrer is thus difficult to situate in debates about therapeutic culture, an idea that has been developed by not only Rieff but also Christopher Lasch, T. J. Jackson Lears, and many contemporary writers. There were therapeutic elements to Mowrer’s thought, such as the concern with mental health and self-improvement, the belief that happiness could be attained through the right actions and attitudes, and the idea that the Bible could be used as a guide to mental health. Nonetheless, the therapeutic elements of his thought should not be exaggerated. He did not want to alleviate psychological pain and suffering for everyone. He believed that a mental disorder was not an illness or disease but a “god-send and blessing” because it forced one to confront one’s immoral lifestyle (Mowrer, 1966, p. 18). He also vigorously opposed elements of therapeutic culture, such as the authority of psychology and psychiatry, psychological conceptions of guilt, responsibility, and so forth, and a preference for therapists over clergy.

The Publication of *The Crisis in Psychiatry and Religion*

Mowrer’s positions received wide attention again when his mass-market paperback, *The Crisis in Psychiatry and Religion*, was published in 1961 (Mowrer, 1961c). This

³⁷ I discuss this in more detail in the next section.

collection of papers and addresses was a hit. One Minnesota lawyer preordered 1,500 copies, and the book's first printing sold out in less than 2 months (Mowrer, 1961a, 1960c). The book demonstrated that Mowrer was becoming increasingly strident and monomaniacal. A significant percentage of mental problems, he argued, was attributable to guilt and sin, even problems like schizophrenia (Mowrer, 1961c, pp. 84–91). Such a view led to radical conclusions, such as the idea that perhaps punishment, in the form of electro-convulsive shocks, could be used as a treatment for psychological problems (Mowrer, 1961c, p. 56). Mowrer's hatred for Freud reached astonishing proportions, and parts of the book were openly anti-Semitic. Mowrer argued that Freud was "very probably influenced, consciously or unconsciously, by a singular and indeed somewhat sinister variety of Jewish mysticism" (p. 114), namely, Kabbalah. He claimed that Freud not only repudiated traditional conceptions of God but also "*identified himself with the Devil*" (Mowrer, 1961c, p. 114; emphasis in original).

Psychoanalysis was not Mowrer's only target; he attacked the whole fields of psychiatry and psychology. He criticized Carl Rogers's nondirective therapy for its failure to hold people responsible for their actions (Mowrer, 1961c, pp. 164–165). His increasing sympathy for and association with the anti-psychiatry movement was also evident. In one article, he worried about the impending psychopharmacological culture: "Psychiatry is now captivated by the chemical 'tranquilizers'" (Mowrer, 1961c, p. 59). He claimed that therapists were persisting in the dubious practice of psychotherapy because it was lucrative. At times, he sounded like Erving Goffman, favorably citing a call for the rapid dismantling of large mental hospitals (Mowrer, 1961c, pp. 76, 78).

A major theme of the book was that religion had betrayed its own values in accepting psychology. He asked, "Has evangelical religion sold its birthright for a mess of psychological pottage?" (Mowrer, 1961c, p. 60). Mowrer's answer was "yes." One of his major targets was the liberal pastor Harry Emerson Fosdick. Fosdick's (1943) bestseller *On Being a Real Person* was not only quite accepting of psychotherapy but also acknowledged that some people suffered from an overly scrupulous conscience. Although Fosdick was no great fan of Freud, Mowrer labeled the idea that people suffered from neurosis due to an overly scrupulous conscience or superego as the "Freud-Fosdick" position, and he argued that this view was widespread (Mowrer, 1961c, p. 66). Mowrer was particularly concerned that pastoral counseling had been infected by Freudian disdain for the superego, and that ministers were too willing to refer people to therapists and psychiatrists. He argued that churches should return to the practice of confession and expiation through restitution (Mowrer, 1961c, pp. 73, 78).³⁸

The obsession with sexuality that dominated Mowrer's personal life was clearly evident in this book in a way that it had not been in his earlier works. His moralism and desire to fit everything into his theory often led him to appallingly misogynistic interpretations of case histories. On a number of occasions, he discussed case histories of women who were the victims of rape and incest during their childhoods and who later suffered from mental illness and trouble being intimate with men. Instead of accepting these cases as exceptions to his theory—as the clearest cases imaginable of unearned guilt—Mowrer thought that these women, too, were suffering from deserved guilt, and this was causing their mental illness. He chastised the women's therapists for viewing their guilt as neurotic and not seeing that the women—or more accurately, the children—must have been to some extent complicit in the incest (Mowrer, 1961c, pp. 91–96, 208–214).³⁹

³⁸ Mowrer was wrong to think that clergy were often referring people to therapists. The 1957 mental health study found that only 2% of people who sought help from psychiatrists and psychologists had been referred by the clergy (Veroff et al., 1981, p. 141).

³⁹ Perhaps the most significant fact about Mowrer's discussion of these cases is that few reviewers criticized or even mentioned Mowrer's troubling interpretations of them.

Psychologists were not the only targets of Mowrer's ire. He also expressed a strong dislike of John Calvin, believing that the Calvinist doctrine of predestination was nearly as debilitating as Freud's determinism (Mowrer, 1961c, p. 159). The Apostle Paul was also labeled a pernicious influence. Mowrer believed that the Pauline doctrine of justification by faith was inferior to the doctrine of good works that he found in the book of James (Mowrer, 1961c, pp. 185–189). However, Mowrer did not offer theological arguments against either Calvin or Paul. Instead, he offered psychological arguments. Both doctrines had negative social and psychological consequences; therefore, they had to be rejected. "Fundamentalists, literalists, and revelationists sometimes make a great point of the *internal consistency* of the Bible," Mowrer noted. He, in contrast, had no trouble acknowledging that there were obvious disagreements between the books of the Bible (Mowrer, 1961c, p. 188). Mowrer believed that theologians should attempt to

make religion empirical, to validate it by its accomplishments, instead of reducing it to a set of dogmatic asseverations which are to be taken purely on faith, without any reference to the consequences which flow from them in the real world. (Mowrer, 1961c, p. 184)

This was perhaps the most succinct statement of Mowrer's own theological views.

Mowrer's intervention in these theological debates highlights the difficulty of trying to situate him within one of the era's theological camps. He had much in common with religious liberals. He certainly agreed with what Gary Dorrien (2003) has called "the essential idea of liberal theology," namely, that "all claims to truth, in theology as in other disciplines, must be made on the basis of reason and experience" (p. 1). He was also interested in naturalizing and demystifying some religious doctrines. In addition, as Matthew Hedstrom (2013) has pointed out, one important strand of 20th-century religious liberalism drew on William James's idea of the "religion of healthy mindedness" (p. 8). These liberals were part of the mind-cure/new thought (more recently, "positive thinking") tradition, which stressed the practical value of religion and its ability to cure disease (James, 1902/2002, pp. 94–95, 122). Mowrer, with his constant emphasis of our sinfulness and guilt and his belief that mental disorder was a blessing, might seem to fit better within the neurotic and melancholic tradition that James called the religion of the "sick soul" (see James, 1902/2002, p. 145). Yet Mowrer was firmly within the healthy-minded tradition.⁴⁰ His view of religion was relentlessly practical, and his theory was actually quite optimistic. Even the worst mental suffering had a purpose. Moreover, no one was destined for mental disorder. Mental disorder could be healed through confession and restitution, and one could avoid serious mental disorder altogether through right living.

Despite this, Mowrer also had much in common with religious conservatives, particularly in his criticism of the secularization of the faith and of Christianity's failure to more aggressively defend its territory. The primary objects of criticism in *The Crisis in Psychiatry and Religion* (Mowrer, 1961c) were liberals like Fosdick, who, Mowrer believed, had been too willing to acquiesce to secularism. He was skeptical of interfaith dialogue with Asian traditions (Mowrer, 1961c, p. 181). He criticized Christianity's easy acquiescence to modern culture, and he shared the conservative critique of excessive permissiveness in society, particularly in regard to female sexuality.⁴¹ He was neither a firm liberal nor a firm conservative. Finally, there were neo-orthodox elements of Mowrer's thought. His critique of psychotherapy sounded much like Niebuhr's. He criticized figures like Fosdick for diluting Biblical conceptions of sin, guilt, and responsibility. Yet his heresies, such as his rejection of justification by faith and his unabashed Pelagianism, make neo-orthodoxy a poor fit for him.

⁴⁰ This is why Donald Meyer (1965/1980) discussed Mowrer with Mary Baker Eddy and Norman Vincent Peale in his book *The Positive Thinkers*.

⁴¹ This was even more apparent in his subsequent collection. Mowrer (1964, p. 49). Interestingly, although Mowrer discussed gender extensively, he rarely mentioned race.

Thus, these categories—liberal, conservative, neo-orthodox—cannot be applied in any straightforward way to Mowrer's thought.⁴² Perhaps because Mowrer had little interest in theology and doctrine, his religious thought was full of tensions and incongruities. Nonetheless, these tensions partially explain the broad appeal of his thought—popular with everyone from the secular press to the fundamentalist Christians who would go on to found biblical counseling. Different groups could seize on aspects of his thought that were amendable to their own thinking.

The Reception of *The Crisis in Psychiatry and Religion*

Despite Mowrer's prominence in the field, *The Crisis in Psychiatry and Religion* (Mowrer, 1961c) did not receive many reviews in mainstream psychology journals.⁴³ The book received far more attention in the religious press and among members of the pastoral counseling movement. Most of these reviews were very positive, but there was also some criticism of Mowrer's overly harsh tone and his theological views—particularly his criticism of the doctrine of justification by faith.

Typical was a review that appeared in *The Christian Scholar*. The reviewer noted that Mowrer was in danger of equating God with conscience and that Mowrer's failure to see the difference between neurotic and normal guilt was a problem. Nonetheless, the reviewer wrote,

There is no doubt in my mind that Mowrer has thrown his weight in a direction in which we need to move. And he has done so persuasively at many points, particularly in some of his highly illuminating case studies. (Havens, 1962, p. 77)

Anton Boisen (1961) had a few quibbles, but he wrote an overwhelmingly positive review, claiming that Mowrer's book had "frequent flashes of genius" and raised searching questions (p. 231). A review in the *Journal of Pastoral Care*, in which Mowrer's views were often discussed, expressed discomfort with Mowrer's tone, but stated that his diagnosis of the pastoral counseling movement was spot on (Touchet, 1962, pp. 101–102). Another reviewer raised questions about "Mowrer's thinly veiled humanism." "Yet," the reviewer wrote, "this is an important and valuable book" (Douglas, 1961, pp. 125–126). One of the few harsh reviews appeared in the journal of the liberal-leaning Union Theological Seminary. The review criticized Mowrer's anti-Semitism and his misinterpretations of psychoanalytic theory (Loomis, 1962, pp. 101–103).

The debate over Mowrer's views became so heated among pastoral counselors that the premier journal of the field, *Pastoral Psychology*, did not discuss his book until a review article appeared four years later in 1965. The journal's editor, Seward Hiltner, one of the century's most influential liberal pastoral counselors, explained in a lengthy editorial that the journal had, for years, rejected articles about Mowrer because they were always "uncritical adulation or throat-cutting attack" (Hiltner, 1965, p. 5). Despite Hiltner's thinly veiled distaste for Mowrer's views, he acknowledged that they were enjoying a great deal of popularity among religious people, and one could sense in his editorial his fear that Mowrer's reactionary ideas were rapidly gaining adherents (Hiltner, 1965, pp. 5–6). The actual review of Mowrer's work also began by noting Mowrer's growing influence and popularity among pastoral counselors (Krill, 1965, p. 27). The reviewer, a social worker named Donald Krill, pointed out that Mowrer's approach seemed more related to his own personality than to any well-thought-out system. Krill's primary critique was theological.

⁴² Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for asking me to be clearer on this point.

⁴³ It did receive some positive reviews from mainstream psychologists. For example, the Oxford psychologist Michael Argyle criticized aspects of the book, but ultimately concluded, "Nevertheless there are parts of this account which strike the reviewer as very important. The new approach to therapy certainly seems worthy of investigation" (Argyle, 1964, pp. 341–343).

Mowrer, he wrote, “is describing essentially the religion of the Pharisees, one of rules, self-perfection, and social conformity” (Krill, 1965, pp. 30, 32).

These reviews highlight a crucial point. The existence of a robust pastoral counseling movement and the interest in discussions of clinical psychology in seminaries and in the religious press are often taken as evidence of the harmonious relations between psychology and Christianity (see, e.g., Engel, 2008, pp. 158–159; Petigny, 2009, pp. 76–82, 93–94; Stevens, 2010, p. 205). However, a closer look at the contributors to these journals and participants in these discussions complicates this interpretation. Many pastoral counselors were enthusiastic about Mowrer’s vicious attack on not just Freud but the whole fields of psychology and psychiatry. The interest in the topic of clinical psychology and the desire among many pastors and religious leaders to practice some sort of counseling did not always indicate comfort with psychology’s role in the culture. Mowrer’s many followers in the pastoral psychology movement were evidence of this.

One of the most important consequences of the release of *The Crisis in Psychiatry and Religion* (Mowrer, 1961c) was that it led to Mowrer receiving a 5-year Lilly Endowment grant, which allowed him to bring theology professors, pastors, counselors, and students to Illinois to study with him (Mowrer, 1966, p. 25; Mowrer, 1974, p. 356). Mowrer, with his Lilly Fellows in tow, crossed the country spreading his anti-psychology gospel to enthusiastic audiences. Donald Krill’s critique of Mowrer in *Pastoral Psychology* began with a report on one of these events. Krill (1965) wrote,

Considerable enthusiasm and controversy were stirred up in the spring of 1964 at a four-day workshop in Denver, Colorado, when O. Hobart Mowrer and four of his Lilly Fellow lecturers led an attack on counseling practices before a large group of ministers and professional counselors.

He concluded, “It was apparent that the . . . attack rallied many sympathetic spirits among the ministers” (p. 27).

Two of Mowrer’s Lilly Fellows were particularly important. Jay E. Adams, who described reading Mowrer’s (1961c) book *The Crisis in Psychiatry and Religion* as an “earth-shaking experience,” went on to found the enormously influential biblical counseling movement. Under the influence of Mowrer, Adams came to believe that what was called “mental illness” was really just a manifestation of sin (Adams, 1970/1986, pp. xvi, 28–29). He completely rejected secular psychotherapy and believed that laypersons could be effective counselors. He argued that the Bible was the most important guide to counseling (Adams, 1970/1986, pp. 51–52, 59–60). Another of Mowrer’s students, John Drakeford, developed one of the country’s leading training programs for Christian counselors at the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and taught numerous students a type of therapy based on Mowrer’s ideas (Drakeford, 1967; Myers-Shirk, 2009, p. 212).

Today, biblical counseling is practiced widely across the country, and it is the official counseling theory of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (2015). The biblical counseling movement represented the culmination of the earlier conservative distrust of psychoanalysis and clinical psychology. Now the conservatives had an organized response rather than mere complaints. It was the fulfillment of Mowrer’s vision of treating mental disorders with the Bible rather than psychological concepts. Ironically, this response, which stressed that psychologists had no special authority, had its origins in the writings of one of the most eminent psychologists of the 20th century.

Integrity Therapy and the Final Two Decades: 1961–1982

As Mowrer’s book was leading to fierce debate, his personal life was relatively calm and free of serious psychological problems. In 1964, he published another mass-market

paperback (Mowrer, 1964). This book was largely a rehash of his last book, but it also explained his views on group therapy. In addition to confession and restitution, he began to emphasize community and honesty with a larger group, which was modeled on his own practice of confessing his sins to seemingly everyone he met. He and his wife Molly Mowrer began practicing and advocating a form of group therapy—which they eventually called integrity therapy—that required members to be radically honest with the group about all aspects of their lives (Mowrer, 1966, pp. 24–25).

During the hours-long, mandatory meetings, members would take turns confessing their transgressions. The rest of the group would interrogate the person and challenge her to admit her transgressions and commit to changing her behavior. Aggression, yelling, swearing, crying, and screaming were all allowed and even encouraged when appropriate (Mowrer, 1972). During group exercises, a member might walk up to another member and repeatedly scream, “I’m angry at you,” or ask the other member, “Will you love me?” (Mowrer, 1972, pp. 23, 30). Groups even exercised control over members’ lives by sanctioning members who did not fulfill their commitments. Mowrer reported that integrity therapy was so intense and demanding, some accused it of being a form of brainwashing (Mowrer, 1972, p. 20). He spent time with radical drug treatment communities like Synanon and learned from the gestalt therapy and encounter groups that were occurring at Esalen in California—though he disapproved of the permissive atmosphere at Esalen (Mowrer, 1972, p. 23; Mowrer, 1974, pp. 356–357).⁴⁴ After these experiences, he introduced physical touch into his integrity groups. The administration of the integrity groups also became more democratic, operating without paid leaders or “therapists” (Mowrer, 1974, pp. 356–357).

If the larger culture of discipline and confession seemed to him to be disappearing, Mowrer’s solution was to recreate it in his small groups. These groups, which were spread out across the country, formed a counterpublic in which the traditional rules of discourse and decorum were suspended.⁴⁵ Integrity groups allowed members to define themselves in opposition to what they perceived as the insincere, individualized, permissive discourse of the dominant culture, at the same time wanting to change the dominant culture with their own example.

A great deal of the zeal and monomania in Mowrer’s writings from the late 1950s into the mid-1960s can likely be explained by the fact that after his severe breakdown in 1953, he did not have another episode until 1966. He believed that he had found the cure to mental illness (Mowrer, 1974, p. 348). When he suffered another depression in 1966, he did not abandon his belief in confession or group therapy, but he did become somewhat more circumspect about their power. He responded well to antidepressants, and came to accept that somatic and genetic factors contributed to mental illness. Mowrer’s acceptance of the idea that there was a genetic basis for mental illness once again led him into an extreme position, namely, the support of eugenics. He wrote, “Personally, I would like to see a widespread eugenic attack made on this and several similar problems; but there are many highly informed persons in this field who are against such a program” (Mowrer, 1974, p. 359).

During the 1970s, Mowrer was largely preoccupied with his integrity groups. He continued to be cited by the press, and he continued to publish. But by the mid-1970s, he suffered health problems, which greatly decreased his productivity. He suffered a devastating loss when his wife died in March of 1979. After this, Mowrer became increasingly pessimistic about humanity. It seems that he also became very interested in ecological ideas (Mowrer, 1974, p. 322). He was also saddened by the destruction of indigenous

⁴⁴ For a history of gestalt therapy and encounter groups, see Grogan (2013, pp. 157–208). For a history of Esalen, see Kripal (2007).

⁴⁵ Building on Jürgen Habermas’s work on the public sphere, Michael Warner (2002) describes counterpublics as spaces for “developing oppositional interpretations of its members’ identities, interests, and needs”: “They are structured by different dispositions or protocols from those that obtain elsewhere in the culture” (p. 119).

societies, which he came to believe were superior to Western cultures. He expressed doubt that the last century's technological and scientific progress had been a positive event. "As I look back upon my life and historical era," he wrote, "I can find little satisfaction in what has thus far transpired" (Mowrer, 1974, pp. 324–325). Nonetheless, Mowrer (1974) wrote,

As human beings go, I have been singularly fortunate, bountifully blessed—in my family, friends, work, and recognition. Now, as I move into the twilight of my existence, I feel sad for the reasons mentioned; but I am also profoundly grateful for the gift of existence—and inexpressibly awed by the miracle of earth and the wonder we call the universe. (p. 328)

Soon after writing this, in 1982, Mowrer ended his own life (Hunt, 1984).

Conclusion

Mowrer's life is important because it illustrates themes that have received relatively little attention from historians, most importantly, widespread worries that psychiatry and clinical psychology were draining traditional modalities of their religious significance and validity—worries that, contrary to what other historians have said, continued without abatement into the 1960s. These themes have been noted throughout the paper, but perhaps it is best to end by pointing out the poignancy of Mowrer's life. Through all his numerous and dramatic changes, there was a central drive behind nearly everything he did: the desire for and obsession with normalcy. He believed throughout his career that deviating from the norm was the cause of most psychological and social problems. Mowrer was consumed by the desire to stamp out deviation both in his own life and in society. This was the basis of his animal experiments and the thesis of *Frustration and Aggression* (Dollard et al., 1939/1967), particularly the chapter he wrote. The same idea was quite explicit during his religious period. Even when, near the end of his career, he came to accept that genetics and biology played an important role in causing mental illness, he suggested that an "enlightened program of eugenics" might be the solution—essentially calling for the elimination of people like him. One wonders what sort of career Mowrer might have had if he had accepted his own sexuality and did not blame himself for his psychological issues.

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