



STATEMENT DP100

A Summary Critique: The Works of M. Scott Peck by Howard Pepper

Dr. M. Scott Peck was catapulted to notoriety through the runaway sales of *The Road Less Traveled* (1978, Simon and Schuster, which has published all his works). It has remained on best-seller lists most of the time and been joined there by his *People of the Lie* (1983). His third publication, *What Return Can I Make: Dimensions of the Christian Experience* (1985), is an audiotope of songs by Marilyn von Waldner with narration and expanded printed text by Peck along with drawings, lyrics, and sheet music. This unique work seems not to have attracted the attention that the two prior books did. Peck's fourth book, *The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace* (1987), has been out less than a year.

Peck is perhaps the most widely and enthusiastically read of recent writers on psychology and religion (particularly psychotherapy, group process, and spiritual growth). His readership includes both Christians and non-Christians. Because of his crucial subject matter and broad influence, it is important that Christians thoughtfully analyze and discuss his material. There is much to learn from Peck and there is much of which to beware. A further look at Scott Peck the person will help us understand his writings.

Ever heard of a scientific mystic? Although it may sound impossible, like Kipling's "pushmepullyou," it's a term that seems to fit Scott Peck: the mixture of a scientific mind with a spiritually sensitive one. Overall, Peck's philosophical, mystical side seems to predominate.

Peck is clear and unapologetic in identifying himself as a Christian but resists further categorization. In 1983 *The Wittenburg Door* asked him about his denominational affiliation. He told of being "baptized by a North Carolina Methodist minister in the chapel of an Episcopal convent." This was in 1980, after some period of growing interest in Christianity and internal debate as to which denomination with which to identify in baptism. "You can pin me wiggling to the wall as a card carrying Christian, but you cannot pin me down any further than that," he quipped. ("Door Interview: Scott Peck," *The Wittenburg Door*, Aug./Sept. 1983, p. 23).

Peck recounts the major shift in his belief and attitude toward Christ coming through his first serious reading of the Gospels at age 40, after writing *The Road Less Traveled*. He says, having tried for a dozen years to be a teacher and healer, "I was *thunderstruck* by the reality of the man, Jesus, that I discovered. . . ." (*What Return Can Make?*, pp. 49-50). His view of the Gospel writers changed from that of myth-makers and embellishers to "extremely careful and accurate reporters, utterly dedicated to presenting a truthful and documented account of the ministry of (Jesus) And that is how I began to fall in love with Jesus" (ibid.).

In introducing *People of the Lie*, Peck states, "My commitment to Christianity is the most important thing in my life and is, I hope, pervasive and total" (p.11). These last two quotes reveal the intensely personal and passionate nature of Peck's faith. Unfortunately, that faith is far from orthodox. As will be developed later, Peck's expressed view of God is unbiblical at key points, and seems formed more from his two-decade religious search, particularly in Zen Buddhist and Sufi Muslim mysticism, than from a deep search of the Bible or orthodox Christian thinkers.

Peck readily admits to a driven idealism — a desire to help save the world from self-destruction and create a harmonious world community. He has sought to spread his sense of mission through The Foundation for Community Encouragement, which he and nine colleagues began in December 1984.

Scott Peck was raised primarily in New York City. He grew painfully discontent with life in a secular boarding school and finished high school at a small Quaker school. He went on to Harvard and Case Western Reserve and became a psychiatrist for

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the Army Medical Corp from 1963-1972. He then practiced psychotherapy privately until 1983, when he became occupied fully with speaking, workshops, and writing. He is married, has three children, and lives in rural Connecticut.

THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED

The Road Less Traveled, like all Peck's books, is eminently readable, filled with interesting case studies and illustrations from the author's life and profession. It has genuine value in terms of its insights into human nature, relationships, and psychodynamics. Peck, not a disciple of any one "school" of psychology or therapy, artfully demonstrates the nature and value of well-practiced psychotherapy, showing how it can assist a person's search for truth, especially about himself. However, because of its inevitable dealings with questions of values, ideals, and reality, Peck's or anyone's therapeutic approach cannot be kept fully distinct from his religious beliefs. Thus, since there are serious problems in Peck's theology here I cannot fully endorse Peck's psychology either, although he offers many excellent observations and stimulating concepts.

A basic problem in Peck's psychology is his equating of the mental and spiritual realms. He says there is "no distinction between the mind and the spirit, and therefore no distinction between the process of achieving spiritual growth and achieving mental growth" (p. 11).

Since non-Christians are manifestly capable of mental growth, this equating of mental and spiritual growth diminishes the work of the Spirit, contributing to a view that all are somehow saved (or at least not judged or condemned by God), which Peck seems to hold even through his three works as a professing Christian. *The Road Less Traveled* never mentions the need for repentance and forgiveness from God. When his later works occasionally speak of it, there is a serious omission of the *how* of our forgiveness — Christ's atoning death in our place.

In *The Road Less Traveled*, the central goal and process of our lives is spiritual growth. Unfortunately, "spiritual growth" here is *evolution*, rather than biblical *conversion* followed by *transformation* by the Spirit of God into the image of Christ. And evolution to what? "God wants us to become Himself (or Herself or Itself). We are growing toward godhood. God is the goal of evolution" (p. 269). It is coming to "attain His position, His power, His wisdom, His identity" (p. 270).

Peck does make it clear that we will not lose our individual consciousness and thus repudiates the complete monism (unity of all things) of much Eastern thought. Nonetheless, the God of *The Road Less Traveled* is not the infinite, personal God of the Bible, many of whose qualities we will never attain. This is critical to discern here, and watch throughout Peck's works, because our view of God is the starting point and very determinative of the rest of our theology.

Of course, this non-Christian work never professes to express Christian views. Still, Peck often describes the dynamics of spiritual growth in almost biblical terms. Examples are his discussion of love and its relation to discipline, and the existence and process of grace (as in the concept of "common grace"). But discipline gets more weight than it is due because Peck sees God abiding and loving us primarily through the inner "godhood" part of ourselves and our discipline done in our strength.

There is substantial value in this book: good case examples, some realism about human nature and psychotherapy, emphasis on pursuit of truth, the reminder (often needed even by those of us counseling as Christians) to look closely at the religious aspects of a person's worldview, and other concepts. There is also real danger in the book: its false religious concepts that may mislead non-Christians or unfounded young Christians, and its implication that little or nothing can or should be done to help a person retain an element of faith through a period of questioning, skepticism, and trying to find personal reasons for his or her beliefs. This can be crucial to the ultimate strengthening of true, properly-directed Christian faith after the crisis period.

POST CONVERSION WORKS

It will be helpful to summarize Peck's theological thinking in all his works as a professing Christian before analyzing the two major ones more specifically. In all three books, Peck openly identifies himself as a Christian and says he speaks from that viewpoint, although only *What Return Can I Make?* is written mainly for a Christian audience. Given his claims, we would expect Peck to express a theology in harmony with the major points of historic orthodoxy. Unfortunately, this is not what we find. Like *The Road Less Traveled*, there are both valuable contributions and numerous points of heresy in these books, despite Peck's apparently sincere, meaningful conversion and commitment to Jesus Christ as he perceives Him.

A descriptive term for Peck's theology is one from foreign missions: syncretism. As people groups often do with their native religions after some exposure and response to the gospel, Peck seems to retain much of his Buddhist and non-Christian mystical background, trying to fit Christianity into its framework. It can't be made to fit.

The serious, foundational mistake of which Peck seems to be guilty is not submitting his thought thoroughly to that of Scripture. In fact, he nowhere speaks of or evidences a serious depth study of it. He approvingly cites non-Christian mystics and heretical theologians such as Teilhard de Chardin (whose philosophy is one of the main sources of the contemporary New Age movement) and Matthew Fox (a prominent New Age theologian) as much as or more than he does the Bible (especially beyond the Gospels) or evangelical writers. He clearly does not accept the entire Bible as authoritative, God-inspired, and internally consistent truth.

Peck also suffers from a tendency to do just what he urges in *The Road Less Traveled* — play God. He has grandiose plans and efforts going toward the achievement of world harmony — and that apart from the Christianization of the world. (He is way too optimistic about the potential of unregenerate mankind.) We indeed are called to be peacemakers (without ignoring the need for people's conversion to Jesus Christ), but Peck's approach seems dependent largely on his own understanding of world affairs and on human effort, not on a humble calling upon and following of the Spirit.

Finally, Peck seems to have trouble submitting to the authority of God's Word because he does not want to accept some difficult doctrines such as the wrath and judgment of God. He lets *his* sense of what is right and what people need shape his theology. Another example of this is his weak, uncertain view of the Atonement. He believes that thinking Jesus has done it all on the cross compromises human responsibility and encourages passivity regarding our own sin. (See Ben Patterson, "Is God a Psychotherapist?", *Christianity Today*, March 1, 1985, pp. 21-23.) In Peck's thinking there is evidently no need for atonement through a qualified substitute, since he does not accept the just anger of God against unrepentant sinners and thus the need for an appropriate means of satisfying God's wrath to provide for reconciliation with us, the offenders.

People of the Lie: The Hope for Healing Human Evil

The above problems aside, *People of the Lie* has much to commend it. One has to respect Peck's courage. As a psychiatrist, he is addressing in this book his very secularist, religiously skeptical colleagues and a general audience with affirmations of the existence of a personal devil who even "possesses" people. Yet Peck the scientist has not checked out: "It is the central proposition of this book that the phenomenon of evil can and should be subjected to scientific scrutiny" (p. 127). This thrust of the book tends to be overlooked, perhaps because psychological research is little understood, or because there are more intriguing aspects of the book.

The conflicts set up involving evil are intense and tend to be fascinating, even to those to whom these conflicts are not new. One chapter, "Possession and Exorcism," overviews two successful exorcisms in which Peck participated. A major problem in this section is a lacking in Peck's understanding of how God's authority works in relation to the demonic — for example, his welcome in an exorcism process of any person who is a "loving presence," regardless of his religious beliefs (Buddhist, Muslim, atheist, etc.).

Peck's case studies are chilling and attention-riveting, such as that of the parents who gave their son his brother's recent suicide weapon (a rifle) as a Christmas gift and seemed to have it fully justified in their minds. What would lead parents to such a degraded act? Peck suggests it involves finally arriving at a place in which there is an "absolute refusal to tolerate the sense of their own sinfulness" (p. 71). That is a key characteristic of those who have "crossed over the line" and become "evil people." Instead of seeing their sin, they scapegoat others, projecting their own evil onto them.

Their lives are a massive pretense, so subtle and well-concealed that they are likely to be members in good standing in your church or mine. (What better place to hide out?) But they scrupulously avoid situations such as intimate fellowship or any type of extended counseling or therapy, since such confrontation or accountability might shed light on their lives.

Peck argues that the psychiatric classifications (e.g., as reflected in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*) should include one for the evil, perhaps a variant of narcissistic personality disorder (p. 128). He is well aware of and discusses the dangers of such a classification, or even the application of the scientific method to the study of evil. His plea is that any efforts in these areas be motivated by love alone.

Peck's work points out that even within the church, our actual understanding of how evil operates and grows in people is very limited. The book adds to our knowledge, particularly in the area of evil's dynamics in the family and interpersonal relationships.

A major flaw, resulting from Peck's weakened doctrine of God, is that although he makes a strong statement on God's victory over evil through the cross and resurrection (p. 205), he speaks little about God's direct present power in the "mopping-up operations."

This is not a book for every Christian, and should be recommended with caution. But mature, theologically well-founded believers, particularly those in personal ministries and teaching, may find it profitable to read this provocative book and grapple with its content.

The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace

The Different Drum follows the Peck tradition of being profound and compelling. As an analysis and critique of American society, the U.S. government, and some of the failings of the church, it is hard-hitting and says many things that need to be heard and dealt with. As a treatise on group process and the building of community, it is very insightful and helpful — probably its greatest contribution lies in this area. As a scenario of the future or a road map for specific action, I must rate it much lower because of crucial theological flaws.

If Peck were submissively and seriously studying Scripture and moving the direction we would hope in his beliefs, in this his latest book, we would expect to see 1) a further development or at least a reiteration of his earlier (even pre-Christian) primacy of the search for truth; 2) a renunciation or at least movement away from his Eastern and liberal views on God and man; and 3) some sharper focus on the atonement of Christ as the provision for our forgiveness, and with it the doctrine of justification by faith. Sadly, we do not see these things.

The main thesis of *The Different Drum* is stated succinctly in the opening line: “In and through community lies the salvation of the world” (p.17). This book particularly displays Peck’s idealistic thinking to excess — his hoping for a disarmed world, with an international government, operating in harmony and welcoming even antithetical religious differences. The only return of Christ he apparently expects is not a bodily one but “the resurrection of Christ’s spirit, which would occur in the Church if Christians took him seriously” (p. 296; for a similar statement, see also *What Return*, pp. 152-53). In the face of his denying God’s judgment and radical intervention in human history to establish His Kingdom as so repeatedly emphasized in Scripture, one can only ask, “Dr. Peck, what have you done with all the prophecy of the Old Testament, the Gospels, the Epistles, and Revelation?” None of the differing orthodox end-time theologies presents a picture anything like his rather “New Age” vision of the Kingdom.

This view of Peck’s implies what elsewhere is explicit — an absolute tolerance of religious pluralism (see p. 20 for a good example). In some places, Peck implies that he views the Christian faith as uniquely embodying God’s truth and conveying His life (through the Holy Spirit), but these other statements cancel this view out.

I agree with much of Peck’s critique of the modern church as failing to radically follow Jesus and do His works. He is right that we *must* involve ourselves in the politics and economics of the arms race as well as of abortion or other issues. He is right that the church is doing very poorly overall at creating communities, even within the flock. But he seriously diminishes Christ’s and the Apostles’ teaching on the church when he denies that there *is* a very real and meaningful community of believers that exists on several levels from the “two or three gathered in My name” to the entire Body of Christ. Even with its faults, I believe this community is the most successful (and influential) in the world, not Alcoholics Anonymous (though I highly respect its work and success), as Peck states (p. 77). His doctrine of the church is also overly negative and unbiblical when he says, “Currently the Church is not only not a Body of Christ, it is not even a body, a community. It must be a community before it can serve as the Body of Christ” (p. 300).

As with Peck’s other books, I believe mature Christian leaders could benefit from reading *The Different Drum* thoughtfully and prayerfully. I must also reiterate the dangers of his mixed-and-matched theology, and challenge Dr. Peck to submit his thought rigorously to the authority of God, which is fully expressed in *all* of Scripture.

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