

Hypnosis:

Fact or Fiction?

an interview with Rev. Caesar G. Orrico, Ph.D.

Jeremy Miller, O.P.

This interview stemmed from an informal talk Fr. Orrico gave to the theological students at the Dominican House of Studies, Washington. Fr. Orrico is the Administrator of a parish in Emerson, New Jersey and is a certified hypnotherapist. He is the President of the American Pastoral Psychological Association, a Fellow of the American Society of Clinical Hypnosis Research Foundation, and an Associate Member of the International Society of Child Psychiatry.

Bro. Jeremy: *Hypnotism has an aura of quackery and magician-like associations in the minds of many people. Is there any truth to this, Father?*

Fr. Orrico: First, may I make a friendly objection to the word hypnosis, for this particular word does have overtones of the theatrical. Psychologists prefer using hypnosis and hypnotherapist to hypnotism and hypnotist. Secondly, it is true that for only too long hypnosis has been associated with quackery and the undesirable, but unjustly so. For me, hypnosis is one of God's gifts to his children which can help them in a natural manner. Unfortunately, we have been negatively conditioned by the *Late Late Show* and the histrionics of Bela Lugosi to view hypnosis as something spooky; or we hear about stage hypnotists taking people from the audience and making them bark like dogs and quack like ducks. To me this is almost a sacrilegious use of a God-given gift.

Could you tell us something of the nature of hypnosis?

It is a difficult thing to define, Brother. It is easier to say what it isn't than what it is. It is nothing of the mystical or theatrical, as I briefly alluded to. It is not sleep; electroencephalograph tests of people in hypnotic trance have shown that they are not asleep. But the person is not awake either. It's sort of an in-between, twilight zone.

In a more positive way, I would say that hypnosis is that state which renders one more susceptible to suggestion, and this state is brought about by a thoroughly complete relaxation of the person.

Could you indicate more fully how this differs from the waking state?

As I stated, the person under hypnosis is more susceptible to suggestion. Exactly how does this come about? There are various theories. My theory is this. Human beings operate on a tri-level of consciousness: the conscious, the pre-conscious, and the sub-conscious. You and I are using the conscious now. The pre-conscious is usually called the memory; things stored here can easily be called to mind. The sub-conscious is that part of the mind which stores everything you have ever done, suffered, experienced, etc. These latter experiences cannot easily be brought into our awareness, especially those of an unpleasant or, as we say, traumatic nature; in this case, the pre-conscious acts as a censor which keeps pushing unpleasant memories back into the sub-conscious. Nevertheless, the memories of the sub-conscious still definitely influence our actions. My idea is that, in the relaxed state brought about in hypnosis, we quiet down the conscious and pre-conscious, and we deal directly with the sub-conscious, either exploring its contents or implanting suggestions.

We can directly will to bring something from the pre-conscious to the conscious, but not from the sub-conscious if it is traumatic. Is this the idea?

Yes, and hypnosis is the vehicle which allows one to reach the sub-conscious and to instill suggestions, which can help someone to overcome his difficulties. Let me give you an example. A young college student got a job over the Christmas holidays in a department store. But every time he had to pass by the store Santa Claus, he got weak in the knees, his heart sped up, and he eventually fainted. A psychol-

ogist, using hypnotherapy, discovered that as a young child, this student was brought by his mother to visit Santa. While he was waiting in line, a clerk with a large shipping cart knocked him down and unconscious. When he came to, about thirty people were milling around him, and he felt he couldn't breathe. This bad experience was stored in his sub-conscious mind, but long since forgotten. The censor in the pre-conscious, you see, pushes unpleasanties back into the sub-conscious, things we don't want to think about. When this college student saw Santa Claus, this knowledge tried to come forward. The pre-conscious blocked it. Yet the urge to come forward was so strong that it surfaced under a different form, namely, in a physical way. Thus, his bodily reactions.

I imagine hypnosis is an excellent vehicle to discover things one has forgotten.

Absolutely. I had a person who misplaced a very important document. He came to me for help, and while in an hypnotic trance, told me exactly where he had put it. In effect, we were quieting down the distractions of the conscious and pre-conscious to get to this information.

Can hypnosis be of help in other fields?

I am glad you said *help*, Brother. Hypnosis is not a discipline in itself. It is a help, an adjunct. It can be used in the fields of education, medicine, anesthesiology, obstetrics, to name but a few. But may I footnote this: it is not a panacea, a cure-all. It won't cure your dandruff. You will still need to wear glasses. A decayed tooth will still have to be pulled. Would you like some examples of its use?

Yes. You mentioned education. How would it be used there?

A few years ago, a school in Northern Italy experimented with hypnosis. They took two groups of equal ability. The first group was taught the matter in the usual fashion, that is, in the waking state. The other group was taught the same matter while under hypnosis. After six months, the second group was found to be far advanced in knowledge and in the ability to handle that knowledge.

It is extremely helpful for speech therapy also. A young man came to me who stuttered so badly he could not hold down a job. I put

him under hypnosis and he spoke beautifully. When he came out of it, the stuttering returned. In a subsequent session I recorded his voice and then played it back when he came out of the trance. I told him he could speak like this if he made up his mind to. With the tape as a motivation and with some good speech therapy lessons, he is now able to speak without stuttering.

How does the Church feel about hypnosis, Father?

Pope Pius XII was one of the first great leaders to recognize the validity of hypnosis. In allowing it, he mentions three conditions in which it would be licit to use hypnosis: (1) There must be a sufficient reason; this would rule out the theatrical. (2) The person must be willing to undergo it. (3) The person who induces the hypnosis must be a qualified therapist.

You would then underscore its potentially dangerous use by a non-qualified person.

Absolutely. No one should hypnotize someone *prima facie*. Some psychotherapeutic sessions should always precede the use of hypnosis. The history of the person should be well known. Less than a year ago, a theatrical hypnotist put a lady into a trance and told her she was surrounded by snakes. This man, knowing nothing about her background, was unaware that she had a phobia about snakes. He created a situation to which the woman with her predisposition reacted with psychosis. No one should allow himself to be hypnotized except by a qualified hypnotherapist.

Even apart from dangerous theatrical usages, many people fear undergoing hypnosis, thinking they would reveal something they do not want to, or be told to do something unethical. Are their fears grounded?

No one will reveal anything under hypnosis he doesn't want to. In the vernacular of the kids, he will not "squeal on himself." A rule of thumb would be: you would not tell me anything under hypnosis you would not eventually tell me in the waking state.

About doing things against your will, strictly speaking, no one, under hypnosis, will do anything against his moral code. You can, however, be brainwashed under hypnosis. Although an unethical

suggestion, whether commanded to be done post-hypnotically or within the trance, may well cause you to snap out of the trance, you could be skillfully brainwashed into eventually doing that suggestion. In a sense, it would presuppose changing your moral code.

Does the subject remember everything that happens while under hypnosis?

You not only know where you are and who is speaking to you, but you also remember everything that happened after you come out of the trance, that is, unless I would give you a post-hypnotic suggestion to forget. While under hypnosis, the person is so aware of what is going on, and so remembers all of this later that he is apt to remark, "I wasn't under hypnosis at all because I knew all the time where I was."

You mentioned post-hypnotic suggestion, Father. Could you give more details on what it is?

Gladly. It is a suggestion given to someone in hypnotic trance to do or not do something when he comes out of the trance. This can be tremendously helpful. For instance, a young man with a fine operatic voice was entering a contest offering a scholarship to La Scala. But whenever he sang before a group of twenty or more people, he would crack on high C. He came to me for several sessions, and I gave him a post-hypnotic suggestion that he would stay relaxed, no matter how many people were present. He sang to his full potential in the contest.

One hears about self-hypnosis. Is there such a thing?

Yes there is. Self-hypnosis is a very fine practice for people having difficulty studying, relaxing, or even sleeping. In these days of great anxiety, I think everyone is justified in sitting down 15 minutes each day and relaxing to the point of self-hypnosis, to quiet down his tensions. You can even give yourself positive suggestions of being successful in your endeavors. Our many negative attitudes in life are in fact negative suggestions we feed ourselves in the waking state. I might caution, however, that anyone wishing to learn auto-hypnosis should only do so under the direction of a competent hypnotherapist.

What are the possibilities of going into a hypnotic trance and not being able to revive?

This is a common fear, but it has no foundation in fact. Anyone going into an hypnotic trance will come out of it. Even if a therapist puts you into trance and abandons you, you would simply fall into a natural sleep and in one or two hours wake up naturally.

This may be another popular misconception. One hears that you cannot be hypnotized unless you are willing.

As a general rule it is true. However, a very good therapist can hypnotize anyone to some extent. In hypnotherapy we speak of three levels of trance: light, medium, and heavy. Anyone can be brought to the level of a light trance. Deeper trances would depend on the person's willingness and their ability to respond to the therapist.

How does hypnotherapy compare with other techniques used by psychologists and psychiatrists?

Nothing can be done under hypnosis which can't be done in a waking state in psychotherapy. However, hypnotherapy can usually accomplish the task in half the time. It compares very favorably with the other techniques of psychotherapy.

Father, have you found your knowledge of hypnotherapy useful in your work as a Priest-Counselor?

My deepest consolation as a priest, in using hypnotherapy, is the realization I have helped people return to the Sacraments who had been away from them for many, many years. The lady, for example, who had claustrophobia and couldn't enter a confessional box and consequently stopped going. I was able to help her overcome this fear. Another person couldn't stand in line for Communion; he felt all eyes were fixed on him and he felt he would faint. Such fears kept this person away from the Sacrament many years. I was able to help him overcome this. Then too, helping a young mother to become cheerful with her children, rather than being continually on edge and constantly harping at them. Being able to help in these situations has been a great consolation to me. It has been well said—"to meet another's need is to meet Christ Himself."