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# Prophet of the Therapeutic Age — Philip Rieff Dead at Age 83

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Philip Rieff, who died last Saturday at age 83, was one of those few individuals in any generation who names their own age in indelible ink. Philip Rieff, known best as a sociologist and interpreter of Sigmund Freud, did this in 1961 when he wrote of the “triumph of the therapeutic” in contemporary culture.

In his book, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud* (1966), Rieff displayed his disillusionment with Freudian thought and psychoanalysis. The purpose of therapy in the 1960s, he understood, had become superficial, banal, and narcissistic. Furthermore, every problem now became a syndrome or evidence of psychosis.

Or, as the psychotherapeutic worldview now promotes, all persons are either in therapy or in denial. Everyone is sick, and therapy is the answer. All issues necessarily revolve around the sovereign self as the ultimate unit of meaning, and everyone needs analysis.

On the other hand, Rieff also believed that those who think themselves immune from the therapeutic virus are themselves mired in therapeutic quicksand. In an interview with *The Chronicle of Higher Education* published last November, Rieff made this comment about orthodox believers:

*“I think the orthodox are role-playing,” he says. “You believe because you think it’s good for you, not because of anything inherent in the belief. I think that the orthodox are in the miserable situation of being orthodox for therapeutic reasons.”*

While I would reject that categorical summary, there must be some truth in his analysis. Some persons might hold to traditional Christian beliefs, not because they believe them to be fundamentally and eternally true, but because they think such beliefs are helpful or healthy. Understand this — Christianity is not a form of therapy.

Philip Rieff aimed his critique primarily at those he considered to be the enemies of social stability and cohesion, and he frustrated orthodox Freudians by turning Freudianism into an argument for tradition and rather conservative values. He understood that humans need a sense of guilt and shame if we are to maintain any sense of moral order. He knew that therapy promised more than it could ever deliver, and that the therapeutic industrial complex needs ever-new diagnoses to fuel its expansion into the culture.

Evangelical Christians owe Philip Rieff, a Jewish thinker, a very great deal. His critique of the culture at large is invaluable. But evangelicals need to consider the extent to which therapeutic concerns and ideologies have infected our own worldviews, churches, and understandings. More on this to come.

OBITUARIES OF NOTE: *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*.

