

Response to Rebecca Davis, "My Homosexuality Is Getting Worse Every Day": Norman Vincent Peale, Psychiatry, and the Liberal Protestant Response to Same-Sex Desires in Mid-Twentieth Century America

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"Pastoral power is the power of care," Michel Foucault explained during a 1978 lecture at the Collège de France. "It looks after the flock, it looks after the individuals of the flock, it sees to it that the sheep do not suffer, it goes in search of those that have strayed off course, and it treats those that are injured." Foucault emphasizes the broad parameters for this kind of pastoral care over and against the obligations of the cleric who is tasked to a particular precinct. Pastoral power pervades, surpassing sectarian borders to serve whomever is in need of care.

The star of Rebecca Davis' history is someone who possessed the special ability to translate a miniscule precinct into a multinational metaphorical pulpit. While serving the tiny congregation at Marble Collegiate Church in New York City, Norman Vincent Peale (1898-1993) became a celebrity of generalized morality. Peale's success was not due to his adjudication of a particular community or his administration of ritual; rather, it was through the distributive potency of his discourse. Which is just to say that we know Norman Vincent Peale, professional pastor, not because of his successful intimate work within a particular flock, but because of the ways he translated intimate counsel into nuggets of soothing ubiquity.

Central to Davis' research is Peale's role as a pastoral Dear Abby for *Look* magazine. As Davis describes it, Peale "had a well-established reputation as an authority on morality and on mental health, when *Look*, in its December 11, 1956, issue, carried his answer to a nineteen-year-old who, his excerpted letter explained, feared that he was homosexual." (351) By the time Peale replied to this anxious young man, he had become someone to whom questions of private suffering were directed. He had authority as a voice on a page, available to all comers, no matter their sectarian stripe.

Peale's power was, therefore, symbolic and ephemeral. With little knowledge of his actual moral autobiography or ecclesiastical opinions, readers accepted Peale because his voice—cheery, forgiving, therapeutic—was the one they wanted as reply to their worries. *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1952) achieved stratospheric levels of acclaim because it "promised unlimited happiness for people who believed in a benevolent God." Peale promised a win-win bargain between his readers and their concept of religion: believe in God (a cheery, forgiving, therapeutic God), and you will be happy. Peale commanded no social obedience, he prescribed no communal rituals or fealty. In *The Power of Positive Thinking*, he conveyed—by his very diminishment of the structures of religion—that his job, as pastor, was to help you find your way to your best feeling. Religion was one word for the space between those two things (between you and your wellness), psychology was another. It didn't matter what you called it; what mattered was that Peale was your shepherd for it.

This emphasis on Peale as a shepherd for good feeling (rather than, say, theology or paternalism) explains, too, Peale's limitations, which—as Davis recounts—are quickly exposed in his outsourcing prescription. "I have received many letters through this page relative to this problem," Peale replied, "Depth psychology has worked out effective methods of treatment for such trouble. Consult a good psychiatrist." As a pastor, Peale could make most people feel good. But there were certain maladies his generic R/x (that cheery, forgiving, therapeutic God) could not rejoinder. Correspondents with Peale voiced their frustration that Peale did not prescribe

prayer power to the young man. However, Peale could only recommend such a practice for those whose suffering was already within the bounds of his cultural norms: outside of them, he had no wisdom, no power. He served the suffering; he did not, it was clear, believe he had domain over everything that made them suffer. Davis emphasizes how liberal Protestants like Peale appropriated psychiatry and its mid-twentieth century understandings of sexual identity. Davis concludes that Peale's reference to depth psychology is an example of such scientific deferral, and she uses this incident to identify a historical shift in which liberal religious folk increasingly collude with psychological authority while conservative religious folk will organize their own competing institutions of Christian psychological care.

This sort of narrative about the tango between religion and science is a familiar one, and Davis' conclusions coordinate with the historiography on the subject. I would like to dwell a little longer in Peale at this moment, a moment when I think we can see Peale at his pastoral limits. Much of the literature on the changing tides of religion in the twentieth century have emphasized the usurping role of science in the lives of believers, i.e., what once was explained by religion was now explained by science. But Peale's correspondent didn't write to any one of the many popular scientific magazines like *Discover* or *Scientific American* for a reply to his problem. He wrote to Peale at *Look*. And Peale replied: *I don't have the answer for you*. This is a choke not often exposed in the literature on secularism, since it flips the blame for religious changes from scientific ascendance to pastoral failure. It wasn't that science gave better answers, it was that pastors didn't seem to have any answers, at all.

Davis invites us into this minor discursive moment as an illumination of certain sexual norms assumed within mainline Protestantism. Yet I think this correspondence tells us less about presumptive heterosexuality than it does about pastoral inadequacy. To be sure, in this moment we witness one of many instances in the twentieth century when the public histories of the homosexual and the pastor collided to painful effect. If we step away from the maudlin of the moment, though, we can observe the stunning plot of these histories, since in the end the pastor will not emerge triumphant. Considering this decline, it seems reasonable to wonder about the relationship between sexual experience and public power, between pastoral competency and therapeutic expertise. What if the rise of identity politics contributed to the decline of pastoral power? What if the assertion of sexual experience as significant wisdom was itself contributory to the diminishment of pastoral significance? The tale is too complicated by far to render so simply, or so easily, but the long view is worth pondering, especially since gay identity movements are so connected to the racial, feminist, and even Christian identity movements that transformed late-twentieth century American media, politics, and culture. Which is just a way to say that the sort of suffering articulated by that nineteen-year-old would, over the next fifty years, get increasing amounts of attention. And columns like Peale's would be taken over by unaccredited psychologists and self-appointed sexperts. As we continue to wrestle about the details of that history, I want to ask what forms of authority (and what sort of resultant society) triumph in and through such testimony and its authorization. Davis's case study invites us to think again about the conjunction of the history of religions and the history of sexuality not as a series of reactive dynamics, but as perhaps a fight about authority: a fight about whose wisdom, and what sort of experience, will be most relevant to the American pursuits of happiness.