

Human Potential Movement

History, Beliefs, and Practices

Identity: The Human Potential Movement (HPM) is “a psychological philosophy and framework, including a set of values,”¹ that grew out of a humanistic² psychology created by Albert Maslow (1908-70) in the 1940s and 1950s. The term was first used for humanistic psychotherapies that became popular in the 1960s and early 1970s in the United States.³ But the term now covers a wide range of self-improvement groups and programs—some of which are shaped by New Age philosophies⁴ and alternative spiritualities.⁵ Basic to the movement is the view “that through the development of ‘human potential,’ humans can experience an exceptional quality of life filled with happiness, creativity, and fulfillment.”⁶

Founder(s): William James (1842-1910) (forerunner of HPM and proponent of human potential and altered states of consciousness); Abraham Maslow (1908-70). Psychotherapists who sought to explore human potential through schools of psychology and psychotherapy (e.g., Carl Rogers’ client-centered counseling and encounter groups; Fritz Perls’ gestalt therapy; Eric Berne; transactional analysis; Michael Murphy and Richard Price, the Esalen Institute).

History: In the 1940s and 1950s the humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow developed a psychological approach called the “Third Force,” because it rejected previous approaches based on psychoanalysis and behaviorism, and instead emphasized an individual’s power to grow and change in the present and to achieve self-fulfillment (or “self-actualization”).

In the 1960s the HPM found expression in a number of schools of psychology and psychotherapy (see “Founders” above). Clinical techniques were developed to explore inner resources and the innate potential of clients. Such techniques included sensitivity training and encounter groups stressing self-expression and intense emotional experiences. “Growth centers” became the centerpiece of the HPM, one of the largest and best-known of which is the Esalen Institute founded in 1962 at Big Sur, California, by Michael Murphy and Richard Price.⁷ Michael Murphy envisioned this training center as a place where humanistic psychology could be integrated with Eastern philosophies. One example of a concerted effort to integrate Eastern philosophy into personal growth centers is the Osho Movement. Osho, born as Rajneesh Chandra Mohan (1931-1990), brought his movement from India to the U.S. in 1981. Though his teachings, Osho

¹Elizabeth Puttick, “The Human Potential Movement” in *New Religions: A Guide*, ed., Christopher Partridge (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 399.

²According to *Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, “humanism” is “a philosophy that usu. rejects supernaturalism and stresses an individual’s dignity and worth and capacity for self-realization through reason” (Tenth Edition, 564).

³The term “Human Potential Movement” is said to have originated with George Leonard, president of the Esalen Institute.

⁴See evaluation of the New Age Movement at:

<http://www.lcms.org/graphics/assets/media/CTCR/New%20Age%20Movement%200806.pdf>

⁵According to Carl A. Raschke, Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Denver, “The human potential movement is a multilayered and eclectic blend of the new clinical psychologies with a dash of watered down Zen Buddhism, yoga, or other forms of Oriental mysticism.” <http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/oct1976/v33-3-article4.htm>, 1. The HPM paved the way for “the now widespread interest of mainstream society in personal development, the quality of relationships, emotional literacy, human values in the workplace, and the replacement of hard political causes with softer issues such as environmentalism.” Puttick, 399. Many well-known celebrities, and government leaders, have received “training” at the Esalen Institute (See “History” section below.)

⁶http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_Potential_Movement, 1.

⁷Esalen now offers over 400 courses and programs covering not just bodywork and spiritual therapies but health, philosophy, ecology, gender issues, arts, business, and professional training. Puttick, 400.

combined humanistic psychology, tantra, Buddhist breathing techniques, meditation, etc. to lead people to self-transcendence and personal enlightenment. This movement has influenced many in the HPM.

The HPM has entered mainstream society in the United States. Self-development centers have now proliferated in large numbers. One need only observe the abundance and popularity of self-help books and the widespread interest in personal development and spirituality (though usually not in traditional religious form), also in such areas as the workplace. Large numbers of personnel and management training programs now make use of human potential techniques that include sensitivity training, interpersonal skills development, role playing, feedback, and group dynamics. Among the more widely known are organizations such as: Landmark Education⁸ (formerly, Landmark Forum; a modified form of Werner Erhard's former EST,⁹ "Erhard Seminar Training," founded in the 1960s), WISE (World Institute of Scientological Enterprises) and Sterling Management (subsidiaries of the Church of Scientology), Programmes Ltd, Lifespring, Silva Mind Control and Insight Training Seminars of Movement of Spiritual Inner Awareness.

Today the American Society of Humanistic Psychologists represents an active and well-organized group promoting human potential ideas.

Beliefs and Practices

The Human Potential Movement is not a "religion" according to the usual understanding of this term. Yet, the underlying philosophy and techniques employed to fulfill its aims have undertones of spirituality. Dr. Carl Raschke, distinguished Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Denver, has spoken of HPM as a form of "pschyoreligiosity" that "makes use of psychological principles and techniques as surrogates [substitutes] for traditional beliefs and practices. It aims to fulfill and gratify inner personal longings for identity and meaning..."¹⁰ HPM in New Age contexts promises "the personal transformation of the individual, changing an individual's belief and value systems so that unlimited potential of the divinity within can be realized."¹¹ HPM practitioners often refer to this quest as the process of "self-actualization." Founder Abraham Maslow believed in a "peak experience," a transcendent moment of self-actualization characterized by feelings of joy, wholeness, and fulfillment.¹² HPM advocates commonly came to speak of this mystical "experience" of enlightenment (when participants in HPM seminars "Get it") as "transformation"—which, it is said, is the only true "reality" (all other experience is, essentially, unreal).¹³

A common thread running through new therapies spawned by the HPM is that the individual human will is a powerful force that can be unleashed and that can determine the state and outcome of one's whole life.¹⁴ Human potential seminars claim that their methods will "radically empower individuals through unleashing of untapped powers of the mind." Since a person's mind determines and shapes reality, it is further claimed, people can experience their true (even divine) potential and influence all areas of their lives for the better.¹⁵ According to one source, the Landmark Educational Corporation "provides a model of philosophy as the practical art of uncovering and expanding self-

⁸According to Elizabeth Puttick, a central theme of Landmark Education training "is for a person to be free from their personal history, including events, education or influences, and instead to look to the future as their main reference point." *New Religions*, 407.

⁹Werner Erhard's name was originally John Paul Rosenberg. His brother Harry became the chief executive of Landmark Forum. After its purchase of EST methods and materials and its founding in 1985, the Forum became Landmark Education in 1991.

¹⁰<http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/oct1976/v33-3-article4.htm>, 1

¹¹Eldon Winker, *The New Age Is Lying to You* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1994), 149.

¹²http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_g2699/is_0001/ai_2699000166

¹³Ankerberg and Weldon, 259-60.

¹⁴Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979), 9.

¹⁵John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1996), 259-60.

knowledge and thereby generating unforeseen ways of being in everyday life.”¹⁶ In language distinctive of New Age philosophies, these new “ways of being” are called a “paradigm shift” bringing a new life and unlimited possibilities.¹⁷

The humanistic philosophy on which HPM is based promotes a positive, optimistic view of human nature.¹⁸ In fact, the core of Maslow’s ideology was the idea of the natural innocence and goodness of human beings. In leading persons to the exploration of their human potential, a spokesman for one influential institute states that his organization “resists religious...dogmas.”¹⁹ Religious teachings or dogmas are considered obstacles to what human potential seminars call a person’s “breakthrough” or realization of a new “way of being.” Hence also, the HPM “encourages a break with conventional morality.”²⁰

The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions speaks of Werner Erhard’s human potential seminar EST, the precursor of Landmark Education, as “a self-development religion.”²¹ Especially to the extent that HPM incorporates Eastern forms of spirituality (e.g., Zen), the religious nature of HPM becomes apparent.

A Lutheran Response

From a Lutheran theological perspective, there is a sense in which we can speak of “human potential” for achieving identity, purpose, and meaning in life. On the basis of their understanding of the Bible, Lutherans in their official writings teach that human reason does have a certain natural capacity or power to deal with the ordinary or external affairs of life in this world.²² This would imply that through self-reflection, human beings can learn much about themselves and establish meaningful goals in life. They can make decisions that affect their lives for the better—bringing a level of happiness and a measure of well-being, also in the face of human problems and suffering. Lutherans affirm God-pleasing aids provided by the social sciences toward this end.

However, Lutherans also teach on the basis of the unanimous witness of the Bible, that when it comes to spirituality, or spiritual matters, human beings cannot know the truth about themselves, nor determine the ultimate purpose and meaning of human life. Nor does the human will possess the power to decide issues pertaining to true righteousness before God. Human reason cannot see or fathom the “inner impurity of human nature. For this cannot be diagnosed except by the Word of God.”²³ The Bible testifies that human beings are conceived and born in sin; they are “dead in the trespasses and sins” and are “by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind” (Ephesians 2:2, 3). In this natural condition, a “person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God (who comes through the Christian message, the Gospel), for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Corinthians 2:14). Only the true God Himself, through the action of His Spirit operating through His Word, gives enlightenment in spiritual matters (2 Corinthians 4:6; 2 Peter 1:19).

Not only is human understanding regarding spirituality totally corrupted by sin (Romans 7:18), but the human will is by nature actively turned away from God. As a result, people become angry with God, rebellious and hostile toward Him, and opposed to doing what pleases Him (Genesis. 8:1; Psalm 14:2-3; Jeremiah 17:9; Galatians 5:17; Romans 8:7). Thus, any kind of HPM “self-actualization that claims

¹⁶http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Landmark_Education, 6. See McCarl, Steven R., Zaffron, Steve, Nielsen, Joyce McCarl and Kennedy, Sally Lewis, “The Promise of Philosophy and the Landmark Forum” . *Contemporary Philosophy*, Vol. XXIII, No. 1 & 2, Jan/Feb & Mar/Apr 2001 or DOI: 10.2139/ssrn.278955 Available at SSRN

¹⁷<http://www.metroactive.com/landmark/landmark1-9827.html>, 4-5.

¹⁸http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_g2699/is_0001/ai_2699000166/print

¹⁹http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Esalen_Institute

²⁰Raschke, 5.

²¹*The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 319.

²²The Apology of the Augsburg Confession states, “Because human nature still retains reason and judgment concerning things subject to the senses, it also retains the ability to choose in such matters, as well as the freedom and ability to achieve civil righteousness.” Ap XVIII, 4. (*The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000], 234.)

²³Apology of the Augsburg Confession, II, 12.

spiritual enlightenment is an illusion. In fact, the capacity for self-enlightenment has been mortally crippled by the fall into sin (Genesis 3). Moreover, true happiness, true peace of mind, and genuine fulfillment are beyond human potential to grasp, however fervent the quest.

Lutherans believe that only through God's gracious action in His Son Jesus Christ to rescue us from our sinful human condition (1 Peter 1:18-21; Ephesians 5:1) can we truly know ourselves (1 John 3:1-3), experience real fulfillment, transformation, and well-being, in the present world and in the world to come. The Bible teaches, "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17). By the power of the Holy Spirit, God gives us "the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator" (Colossians 3:10). By the same Spirit God gives his children "love, joy, peace..." (Galatians 5:22). In a word, when a person becomes a Christian a real transformation takes place (1 Peter 1:3, 22-25), which continues throughout this life: "...but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:7).

There is no limit to what God can do in the lives of those who trust in Him (Ephesians 3:14-21). To those who believe in Him, Jesus has promised: "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). And, as the apostle Paul wrote to the Christians, "All things are yours" (1 Corinthians 3:21).

Every Christian can now say, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20). Christ died in order that "those who live might no longer live for themselves..." (2 Corinthians 5:15). In Christ there is freedom from the bondage that a preoccupation with self-fulfillment or self-improvement inevitably brings.

For Further Reading

- Ankerberg, John & John Weldon. *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs*. Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 1996.
- Lasch, Christopher. *The Culture of Narcissism: American life in an age of diminishing expectations*. New York: Norton, 1979.
- Lewis, James R., ed. *Odd Gods: New Religions and the Cult Controversy*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2001.
- Puttick, Elizabeth. "The Human Potential Movement," in *New Religions: A Guide*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004 (pp. 399-402).
- Winker, Eldon. *The New Age Is Lying to You*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1994 (pp. 145-155).

Links and Websites

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- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Esalen_Institute
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_Potential_Movement
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