

# **Incorporating Religion into Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy with the Christian Client**

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Albert Ellis, the founder of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT), has often said, "The deepest, most profound, change that you can help a client achieve is to help them change their philosophy of life."

St. Paul, in his second letter to the Corinthians, wrote,

From now on, therefore we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new. (2 Corinthians 5:16-17)

Since one's philosophy of life is a "way of seeing" life, the world, others, and the self, both Ellis and St. Paul are advocating a profound change in one's "way of seeing," in other words, one's point of view or set of beliefs that one holds about life.

In this booklet, I will suggest ways that Christian beliefs and practices can be incorporated into the practice of REBT to help Christian clients adopt a new "way of seeing," so they can experience themselves as a "new creation" with less emotional disturbance and self-defeating behaviors. I will also enumerate some of the more difficult issues that arise in psychotherapy with Christian clients and offer some possible ways to respond to these difficult issues.

## **The Genesis of REBT**

Many, if not most, people operate out of an erroneous emotional equation. This equation is "Events cause emotions and behaviors." It really isn't surprising that we hold such an erroneous equation. For example, let us say that Mary believes she is called by God to become an ordained minister. Holding that belief, she applies for entrance to several seminaries, but she is turned down by all of them. Immediately upon learning about being rejected, Mary feels depressed. The depression happens so quickly that it is natural that later when a friend asks her why she is so down, Mary says, "I am depressed because I just got rejected from seminary." Mary operates out of an erroneous emotional equation; she assumes that it is the event--getting rejected by all the seminaries--that caused her depression.

Albert Ellis found a line in Epictetus' Enchiridion that was a corrective to the erroneous emotional equation.

The line, "People are disturbed, not by things, but by the view they take of them," served as one of the inspirations for Ellis' ABC model of emotional disturbance. Ellis holds that when an activating event (A) occurs, it triggers a belief or set of beliefs about the event (B), which largely contributes to what we feel and do (C).

In our example, when all the seminaries rejected Mary (A), the following belief system (B) may have been triggered:

- I ought to have been accepted into a seminary.
- I will never be an ordained minister, and that is awful.
- I am a failure as a person for being rejected by the seminaries.

That set of beliefs is what largely led Mary to feel depressed (C). Now, let us say that Mary held a different set of beliefs, such as the following:

- I wish I had been accepted into a seminary.
- I don't like the fact that I may never be an ordained minister, but it isn't really a catastrophe. God still loves me, and I can still have a meaningful life and most likely find another form of ministry to serve others and God.
- I did fail at getting accepted into a seminary, but I am not a failure as a human or as a Christian.

With Mary's first set of beliefs she made herself feel depressed, and as a result her energy could not go into thinking of other ways to fulfill what she believed to be her call to the ministry. However, had she held the second set of beliefs, Mary might have felt sad and disappointed that she did not get accepted into a seminary, but not so depressed that she lost sight of other comforting beliefs. The second set of beliefs also permitted her to use her energy to begin to take steps to find another form of ministry that she might experience as fulfilling. So the strategy of REBT is to have people change their unhelpful or irrational beliefs to more rational or functional beliefs, so they can feel and act in more appropriate and helpful ways to achieve their life goals.

### **Irrational Beliefs**

F. P. Ramsey, a student of Ludwig Wittgenstein, poetically defined beliefs as "a map and something by which we steer" (Armstrong 1973). Irrational beliefs create a wild fanciful map that does not correspond to social reality, and when we try to steer by it, we encounter all kinds of life problems. Rational beliefs create a map that more closely

corresponds to social reality, and more importantly, when we steer by it we encounter fewer problems. Thus beliefs are not merely cognitive; instead, as Ramsey points out, they have an action component, that is, they frequently indicate a tendency to act in a particular way under certain conditions. C. S. Peirce, the father of American pragmatism, noted that beliefs are not only a tendency to act in a particular way, but they are held for emotional reasons, namely, to reduce or dispel the problem of doubt (1955). This view is similar to Ellis' view that cognition, action, and emotion are inextricably interrelated. When we think, we feel and have a tendency to act. When we act, we feel and hold beliefs. When we feel, we tend to act in particular ways due to the beliefs behind the feelings.

REBT holds that an irrational belief actually has at least two irrational parts: a core demand and a derivative. A core demand usually contains absolutistic words such as, "must," "absolutely should," "ought," "need," or "have to." For example, "I must be accepted into a seminary," "You ought to love me unconditionally," "Life should be easier than it is," and "The world has to be fair," and "I need you in my life."

A derivative takes one of four forms:

- Awfulizing: X is awful, terrible, horrible, catastrophic, or as bad as it could possibly be.
- Low Frustration Tolerance (LFT): I can't stand X, X is too much, X is intolerable or unbearable.
- Self-Downing: I am no good, worthless, useless, an utter failure, beyond help or hope, damnable, devoid of value.
- Other-Downing: You are no good, worthless, useless, an utter failure, beyond help or hope, damnable, devoid of value.

A core demand is usually combined with one or more derivatives:

- I must get accepted into seminary, and it is awful if I don't. (Demand + Awfulizing)
- I must get accepted into seminary, and I couldn't stand it if I didn't. (Demand + LFT)
- I must get accepted into seminary, and I'm a failure if I don't. (Demand + Self-Downing)
- I must get accepted into seminary, and the seminary admissions committee is damnable if it doesn't accept me. (Demand + Other-Downing)

Note that each of these pairs causes some unhelpful negative emotion. For example, the demand plus the other-downing might lead to anger at the admissions committee; the demand plus the self-downing might lead to depression; and the demand plus the LFT might lead to anxiety. Since anger, depression, and anxiety are likely to interfere with people's achieving their goals, it is in their best interest to change their core irrational demands and

associated derivatives

## **Rational Beliefs**

Of course, rational beliefs are rational alternatives to irrational core demands and derivatives. The rational alternative to a core demand is a statement of want, preference, or desire. For example, the rational alternative to "I must get accepted into seminary," is "I would like to get accepted," "I would prefer getting accepted," or "I want to get accepted into seminary." REBT does not aim at eliminating all desires, wishes, or preferences, only at eliminating the demands. A desire or preference recognizes that the world, life, the self, or others are they way they are. A demand, on the other hand, frequently does not correspond to social reality, and is, therefore, likely to cause the individual to feel or act in unhelpful ways.

Irrational derivatives also have rational alternatives:

- Rational alternative to Awfulizing: I don't like X and it may be really bad, but it isn't a catastrophe.
- Rational alternative to LFT: I don't like X and it certainly isn't pleasant, but it isn't unbearable.
- Rational alternative to Self-Downing: I may not have acted in the way I would like, but that doesn't make me an utter failure as a human.
- Rational alternative to Other-Downing: You may not have acted in the way I wish you had, but you are not utterly damnable.

REBT helps us minimize the occurrence of the unhelpful negative emotions and self-sabotaging actions by giving us a method by which we can recognize our irrational beliefs, demonstrate to ourselves why they are irrational (dispute them), and replace them with rational alternatives. In other words, REBT helps individuals achieve a radically new and more effective "way of seeing."

## **REBT and Scripture**

Ellis referred to Epictetus to describe the role of belief in human emotional disturbance. An even older source, namely, the book of Proverbs in the Old Testament, says essentially the same thing: "As one thinks in one's

heart, so is one." For this reason, some writers have concluded, "RET [REBT] is based on a thoroughly biblical principle, the importance of what one thinks" (Lawrence 1987).

Several places in Scripture demonstrate that beliefs, not events, cause actions and feelings. Consider the Old Testament story of Jonah. In the beginning of the story, God asks Jonah to go to Ninevah and cry against the wickedness of the Ninevites. Since the Ninevites were the traditional enemy, and Jonah does not relish the thought of standing in the midst of his enemies and telling them they act wickedly, Jonah avoids doing what God asks. Instead, Jonah escapes on a ship headed toward Tarshish but he ends up being thrown overboard by the ship's crew and swallowed by a great fish. Inside the fish, Jonah repents. He seems to be cured of his self-defeating behavior of not doing what God asks, but we soon discover that a deeper problem, "a demand," lurks in his psyche and continues to cause him emotional and behavioral problems. When the fish releases Jonah, God again tells Jonah to go to Ninevah and preach that the great city will be overthrown for its wickedness. This time Jonah goes and, in fact, does such a good job of preaching that the Ninevites repent and God spares them. Jonah is furious; he was internally demanding that God punish the Ninevites. God, very much like an REBT therapist, says, "Do you do well to be angry?" In other words, God is asking how Jonah's demand is helping Jonah. Job doesn't respond, but he escapes to the east of the city in the hope that God will change and destroy Ninevah. God doesn't destroy Ninevah, but does send a plant to give Jonah shade from the heat. However, as Jonah becomes accustomed to the shade, God sends a worm to destroy the plant. Jonah is angry again, probably telling himself that he can't stand the loss of the plant and declaring, "It is better for me to die than to live." Again, God essentially says, 'How is this helping you?' Jonah still doesn't get it, so God gives him a live analogy. God reminds Jonah that Jonah pities the loss of the plant for which he did nothing, so why can't God pity Ninevah with its more than 120,000 people who repented.

The story of Jonah shows how Jonah's beliefs caused him to engage in avoidance of his responsibility, which got him in all kinds of trouble, and to experience a rage so unpleasant that Jonah wanted to die. God shows the inadequacy of those beliefs by asking Jonah how the irrational beliefs are helping him and by offering a concrete

analogy that demonstrates the illogical and unjust nature of Jonah's beliefs.

Another very clear demonstration of REBT in Scripture is Jeremiah in Lamentations 3. Note the hopelessness, misery, distress, bitterness, anguish, sense of being constrained or trapped, fear, despair, depression, and physical symptoms in the following passages:

I am the man who has seen affliction  
    under the rod of his wrath;  
He has driven and brought me  
    into darkness without any light;  
surely against me he turns his hand  
    again and again the whole day long.  
He has made my flesh and my skin waste away,  
    and broken my bones.  
He has besieged and enveloped me  
    with bitterness and tribulation;  
He has made me dwell in darkness  
    like the dead of long ago.  
He has walled me about so that I cannot escape;  
    He has put heavy chains on me;  
Though I call and cry for help,  
    He shuts out my prayer;  
He has blocked my ways with hewn stones,  
    He has made my paths crooked.  
He is to me like a bear lying in wait,  
    Like a lion in hiding;  
He led me off my way and tore me to pieces;  
    He has made me desolate;  
He bent his bow and set me  
    As a mark for his arrow.  
He drove into my heart  
    The arrows of his quiver.  
I have become the laughingstock of all peoples,  
    The burden of their songs all day long.  
He has filled me with bitterness,  
    He has sated me with wormwood.  
He has made my teeth grind on gravel,  
    And made me cower in ashes;  
My soul is bereft of peace,  
    I have forgotten what happiness is.  
So I say, "Gone is my glory,  
    And my expectation from the Lord."  
Remember my affliction and my bitterness,  
    The wormwood and the gall!

As David Stoop has pointed out, the reason Jeremiah experiences this long list of extremely unpleasant feelings is revealed in the following verse: "My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me" (33). Jeremiah feels the way he feels primarily because he keeps dwelling on his belief that his state of affairs is truly awful. As he continues to tell himself how awful it is, he continues to feel awful!

What permits Jeremiah to escape his misery? The answer is in the next verse: "But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope." Jeremiah replaces his depression and anger with hope because he begins to think differently; he embraces a new way of seeing his situation.

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,  
His mercies never come to an end;  
They are new every morning;  
Great is thy faithfulness.  
"The Lord is my portion," says my soul,  
"therefore I will hope in him."

Many other stories in the Bible demonstrate that the activating event (A) does not directly cause C. The stories often involve two different people who experience the same event, A, but who have different C's. For example, in Luke 10:38-42 it is said that Jesus went to visit the house of Martha and Mary. While Mary sat at the feet of Jesus and enjoyed his company, Martha ran around the house working. Eventually, Martha went to Jesus because she was troubled that her sister was not helping her. Jesus points out that Martha was troubling herself about many things and Mary had chosen the better part, which was not troubling at all. Martha was probably thinking thoughts such as, "Mary should be helping me with the work," "It isn't fair that she isn't helping," and "Jesus should tell her to help me."

Another example of the same activating event (A) being responded to with different C's is the story of Jesus coming upon the scene where an adulteress is about to be stoned for her sin. It is reasonable to assume that those who were about to stone her might have been thinking thoughts such as, "It is awful that she committed adultery, and she must be punished for it." Jesus, on the other hand, may have been thinking, "Adultery is a sin and certainly not good,

but we have all sinned, so none of us has the right to punish a sinner. We can forgive and direct the sinner to refrain from future sin."

While the ABC emotional equation may be found at work within scripture, it doesn't necessarily follow that the Christian "way of seeing" would always agree with REBT's view that demandingness, awfulizing, LFT, and self and other downing are problematical.

### **Demandingness**

The Biblical view is that God alone is the creator and sustainer of the universe; consequently God alone may legitimately demand. Humans on the other hand, although created in the image of God, are not God and have no legitimate authority to make absolute demands. Thus acting demandingly generally proves to be self-defeating and emotionally disturbing because our demands do not create reality in the way Christian theology says God does. Thus, in the story of Jonah, Jonah, a mere mortal, is demanding that God punish the Ninevites, and as a result, he makes himself enraged, which ultimately does not help him in any way.

Some individuals may claim that scripture tacitly approves of Christians being demanding about some issues. Such individuals might think that the Bible demands that we do the good and refrain from doing the bad. For example, a Christian should feed the poor but refrain from stealing. However, an important distinction needs to be made between "metaphysical demands" and "moral demands." A metaphysical demand is of the form, "Reality (X) must be a particular way," whereas a moral demand is of the form, "To be moral one must do or be Y." The moral demand can be written as a conditional (as an if-then statement), namely, "If one wants to be moral, then one should (must) do or be Y." Thus a moral demand is always a conditional, a non-absolute demand. A metaphysical demand, on the other hand, is never a conditional; it is an absolute demand.

Let's consider some examples. If I am indeed talking to Mary right now, then metaphysically I must be talking to her. I cannot be talking to her and not talking to her at the same time and under the same conditions. That would be a metaphysical impossibility. On the other hand, if I believe that as a Christian I should feed the poor, then



what I am saying is that if I want to be a good Christian, then I should feed the poor. Feeding the poor is not a metaphysical demand because it is conceivable that someone doesn't care to be a good Christian, in which case there is no necessity to feed the poor. The moral demand is only binding if certain conditions are fulfilled, in this case, if I have the desire or wish to be a good Christian. However, if certain conditions have to be fulfilled for the moral demand to be binding, then it is not an absolute demand. In philosophical ethics the question is asked, "Why be moral?" There are many reasons offered for being moral, but the mere fact that reasons are given for why it is preferable to be moral demonstrates that morality is a choice, and because it is a choice, it is not a metaphysical demand or necessity.

I am aware that Kant held that moral demands are categorical or absolute. One statement of his categorical imperative is "I must act in such a way that I can at the same time will that my maxim of action be a universal law." Although Kant apparently believed that the categorical imperative is an absolute moral demand on a par with a metaphysical demand, the wording of the imperative reveals that it cannot be absolute in the metaphysical sense. If I have to will that my maxim of action be a universal law, then it is not a metaphysical absolute. Willing is irrelevant to a metaphysical absolute, and the fact that it is integral to acting morally demonstrates the contingent nature of the categorical imperative.

When God gives commandments (demands), as in the Decalogue, those are moral demands that are binding only if one wants to be moral, desires eternal life, etc. The Ten Commandments are not metaphysical demands, in other words, they do not create the reality they command. If they did, humans would have no choice but to honor parents, refrain from killing, avoid stealing and adultery, etc. The commandment, "Thou shalt not kill," is contingent on one wanting to be moral and thus it would be better to state it in the following form: "If I want to be moral, then I must not kill." If "Thou shalt not kill," were truly a metaphysical "must or demand, it would be impossible for humans to kill; but if you pick up any newspaper, you will see quite vividly that killing is not an impossibility. In fact, if moral demands were metaphysical demands, then humans would have no free will and morality would not

make sense. Morality presupposes having the freedom to choose to act and to choose to refrain from acting.

REBT only declares as irrational and problematical the absolute metaphysical demands, not the conditional moral shoulds or oughts. In Christian terms, if God allows us the freedom to be moral or not moral, how can humans legitimately demand that others act as though they had no freedom and be the way we demand them to be.

### **Awfulizing**

When REBT asserts that an event can never be truly awful, what is being said is that nothing is ever truly completely bad, as bad as it could possibly be, or world-shattering. It may be tragic, but never completely and utterly catastrophic in the sense of negating all meaning, purpose, and the possibility of pleasure and happiness. This is not to be Pollyannaish or to make a mere semantic distinction. What is being asserted is that bad events do occur. If we are realistic, we will acknowledge the undesirability of the event, and perhaps even assert that we never want anyone to undergo such an event, but the event cannot metaphysically determine the future as utterly catastrophic. Why? Events simply are; they are metaphysical realities. Evaluations of events are mental acts. Evaluating an event as tragic, unfortunate, undesirable, or very painful is rational, because it is simply an evaluation about the event's current impact on oneself or others in light of one's life goals and values. Evaluating an event as awful, that is, utterly and completely devastating for all times and for all people, is irrational because a) it makes an absolute prediction about an unknown future, and b) it is an overgeneralization and exaggeration of the current data. Awfulizing implies that if the current situation is very unpleasant or tragic, the future must inevitably be so. It asserts the erroneous A→C relationship: Awfulizing says that because the current situation is very bad, I must feel very badly and I will always feel that way because the event has negated the possibility of any future meaning, purpose, pleasure, or happiness in my life or anyone else's life.

Antiawfulizing is fundamentally scriptural. The Biblical way of seeing is that nothing, absolutely nothing can separate us from the love of God, and therefore, nothing is truly awful (Romans 8:39-39). Christian clients can also be directed to the following scriptural passages that are patently antiawfulizing:

- Proverbs 3:25
- Isaiah 41:10
- Philippians 4:6-7
- Matthew 6:34

### **Low Frustration Tolerance (LFT)**

Just as the biblical way of seeing is that there is nothing that is truly awful, then, correspondingly, there is nothing so bad we cannot stand it. Obviously, situations and circumstances can be unpleasant—very, very unpleasant, as we see in the story of Job, but because we are grounded and supported by the love of God, we can tolerate our lot. Numerous scriptural passages promote frustration tolerance. In his letter to the Philippians, St. Paul makes this point very strongly when he says, "For I have learned to find resources in myself whatever my circumstances," and "I have strength for anything through him who gives me power."

Low frustration tolerance can be insidious, and many Christians can succumb to it, while actually viewing their LFT as a virtue. This form of LFT is the assertion that, "I am so weak and sinful, but God is so great; I can't do anything of myself, so, therefore, God must do it all for me." Job tries this tactic with God (Job 40:4-7). God's response to Job is instructive. Twice God tells Job to gird his loins, and that the questions of life will be posed by God to Job. The work of finding the answers, however, is the work of Job and of all other humans. God makes it quite clear that it is the dignity of humans that we gird our loins, accept our majesty, and do the difficult work of finding answers to life's problems and alleviate the suffering that can be a part of life. We are not alone; God helps, but we are to do the work!

Endurance in the face of adversity and frustration is held up as a Christian ideal in scripture.

Indeed we call blessed those who showed endurance. You have heard of the endurance of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful. (James 5:11)

### **Self and Other Downing**

Christians live with three fundamental theological realities:

- Everyone is created in the image of God
- Everyone has sinned
- Everyone has been redeemed by Christ

The denial of any or all of these theological realities creates theological problems, and under certain circumstances may also create emotional problems.

A. Denial that everyone has sinned. To deny that humans sin, in other words, that they sometimes act in unloving or evil ways, is a denial of reality. Evil exists in the world, and to deny it yields an overly-Pollyannaish world view. By denying the reality of evil people may put themselves in situations or in relationships that are dangerous or at least not in their best interests.

B. Denial that everyone is created in the image of God and is redeemed by Christ. Few Christians would consciously deny such fundamental Christian beliefs, but they sometimes act as though they do. To deny that humans are created in the image of God and redeemed by Christ may lead some to view humans as merely sinners with no hope for being anything but a sinner enslaved to sin. The Christian view--the Gospel or good news--is that since we are created by God and redeemed by Christ, we all have the potential to experience the great goodness of salvation. In Paul's letter to the Ephesians, he makes it clear that this salvation is an unmerited gift of God. It has nothing to do with something we have done; rather it is the result of the grace of God.

A Christian can only legitimately put herself, himself, or others down as utterly worthless or as total failures by embracing an irrational belief. St. Paul makes it clear that while we can accept that we are sinners, we are still worthwhile because we are loved by God, even in our sin. "But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8) All humans are worthwhile because we are created and loved by God with the fullness of that love exemplified by Christ crucified. Human sin is real, but we can never legitimately reduce a human to sin. Thus the rational Christian accepts both that there is evil in the world and the potential for humans through the grace of God to transcend sin and to do the good. Kurt Vonnegut put it quite nicely in Player Piano when he wrote:

That there must be virtue in imperfection, for Man is imperfect, and Man is a creation of God.

That there must be virtue in frailty, for Man is frail, and Man is a creation of God.

That there must be virtue in inefficiency, for Man is inefficient, and Man is a creation of God.

That there must be virtue in brilliance followed by stupidity, for man is alternately brilliant and stupid, and Man is a creation of God.

Even though scripture says, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," this belief does not mean that we should divisively down ourselves or others and thereby weaken the Christian community. The belief that Christians are members in the body of Christ can lead them to love and support each other, rather than put each other down.

### **Is REBT too Self-Centered**

In one study, Christian pastoral counselors were surveyed about their level of agreement or disagreement with what the authors took to be five principles of REBT. Those principles were:

- . Irrational beliefs are the primary causes of feelings.
- . People are limited and fallible.
- . There is no valid way of evaluating the worth of people, hence there is no valid use for, or judge of, self esteem.
- . There are no pure "needs" or "musts" in life beyond our physical survival needs.
- . People are best served when they function as long-range hedonists.

Over 75 per cent of those surveyed agreed with the first four principles, but 54 per cent disagreed with the fifth principle. One of the reasons people offered for disagreeing with this principle was that it appeared to them to encourage self-centeredness, whereas the Christian ideal is a balance of self and community (West and Reynolds 1997).

But what does Albert Ellis actually mean by "long-range hedonism"? And is this phrase really inconsistent

with the Christian ideal? Ellis has written that his concept of "long-range hedonism" is not to be viewed as synonymous with Maslow's concept of "self-actualization," which has been criticized by some for being too individualistic, self-seeking, and indulgent. Ellis says that REBT includes both self-interest and social interest, and that individuals would be better served by being concerned about the welfare both of particular individuals and of one's community. In other words, REBT upholds both individualism and social involvement, and not just one to the exclusion of the other. In fact, Ellis has described the emotionally and mentally healthy individual as having the following traits:

- Is considerate and fair to others
- Avoids endlessly harming others
- Engages in collaborate and cooperative endeavors
- Is altruistic
- Enjoys some measure of interpersonal and group relationships

Thus Ellis' concept of "long-range hedonism" is not synonymous with the overly-indulgent philosophy of "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you may die." The latter is not only too short-ranged and indulgent, but also lacking in healthy self-interest. Ellis' concept is closer to the Christian ideal than it is to the overly self-interested ideal of Maslow's self-actualized individual.

It may be that it is the word "hedonism" to which some Christians are opposed. If "hedonism" connotes only pleasure seeking with an emphasis on the quantity of pleasure rather than the quality of pleasure, then most Christians would likely oppose it. However, if we hold that there are qualitative differences among pleasures, then there may be less opposition. If pleasures such as doing the will of God, experiencing the joy of salvation, praising God, and loving our neighbor as ourselves are held to be qualitatively higher than the pleasure of eating a hamburger, buying a new pair of shoes, or getting an "A" on a calculus exam, then the word "pleasure" is less objectionable. Christians would not generally object to long-range hedonism as an ideal if that hedonism is understood to include and elevate the pleasure that comes from serving God and our neighbor and from being a child of God.

### **Special Problems Working with Christian Clients**

Guilt. Many Christians live a considerable portion of their lives suffering from guilt. Many also believe that they should feel guilty; in fact, some Christians believe that scripture even seems to recommend and praise guilt. However, an important distinction needs to be made between remorse or godly grief and worldly grief or neurotic guilt.

Remorse, or godly grief, is the emotion people experience when they transgress what they take to be a rule of good behavior wish that they had not done so. Although that feeling is unpleasant, it spurs one to repent and change one's ways—to be more Christ-like.

Neurotic guilt, on the other hand, is the emotion people experience when they believe that they absolutely should not have transgressed a rule of good behavior and that they are no good or worthless as a result. This form of guilt tends not to spur people to repent and change; rather, it leads to depression, inactivity, or a vicious cycle of beating themselves up emotionally, feeling guilty, tiring of the guilt, repeating the transgression, and beating up on themselves, ad nauseum.

When scripture talks about guilt, it is describing what REBT calls remorse or what St. Paul calls "godly grief."

I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting; for you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us. For Godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret, but worldly grief [guilt] produces death. (2 Corinthians 7: 9-10)

What about the demand that seems to be a part of guilt? Some Christians believe that there are things that a Christian absolutely must not do. St. Paul makes it very clear that there is no such moral demand that has the force of a metaphysical demand. Twice in his first letter to the Corinthians he says, "All things are lawful for me" (1 Corinthians 6:12). He can do all things; he has free will. Once recognizing that fact, St. Paul could truly be moral because as he writes, "not all things are helpful." David Stoop, a Christian writer commenting on this passage, says

that the point is, "All things are lawful, so remove the demands on yourself" (122). Christians believe that Christ came to free people from slavery and condemnation, so why enslave oneself again with the demand behind guilt?

King David committed adultery and murder, but despite those sins he wrote, "[God] wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin" (Psalms 51:2-4). David assumes he is redeemable, and so he does not damn down his entire self for his transgressions. He recognizes his deeds as wrong, and he asks for God's forgiveness. David concludes with, "Purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow." Focusing on God's grace that can restore him to purity, David avoids a self-deprecating guilt that offers no hope to be different. There is no self-blame or condemnation in him, but rather self-awareness, proper moral judgment of his actions, confession, and the acceptance of forgiveness and restoration.

You were dead through the trespasses and sins...But God who is rich in mercy, out of great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ. (Ephesians 2:1, 4-5)

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits—who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's. (Psalms 103:2-5)

Unconditional Self Acceptance (USA) vs. Self-Rating. Closely related to guilt is self-rating. There would be no guilt unless a person rated herself or himself harshly. Many Christians believe that being a sinner demands self-rating. This makes it impossible, however, to accept oneself unconditionally.

For Christians, the greatest model of acceptance is God's acceptance of us in the act of salvation.

But when the goodness and loving-kindness of God our Savior appeared, He saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to His mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. (Titus 3:4-7)

Just as God was loving toward us and saved us without looking at our deeds or acts, but simply as an act of merciful acceptance on God's part, we too can lovingly accept ourselves and others regardless of our deeds. This does not mean that we accept or deny our sin and failings; but rather it means that we will commit the godly act of evaluating our actions according to the norms of God, accept ourselves as God accepts us, and then cooperate with the



Holy Spirit in doing the work necessary to change our behavior. This kind of unconditional self-acceptance is entirely consistent with Ellis' philosophy.

Suffering as Ordained by God. It is not uncommon for Christians who are undergoing some life crisis to say, "It is God's will." For some people this is an effective coping statement in the face of an unpleasant event. However, for others, especially those who hold the erroneous emotional equations, it can support the belief that their misery is inescapable, awful, and ordained by God. The obvious response to the latter is that although God may ordain the event (A), the free will of humans means that humans can choose their belief about the event, and consequently are responsible for their own misery. That is to say, God ordains A, but humans are responsible for B and C.

This response would not satisfy radically deterministic Christians who hold that God determines not only the event (A), but B and C as well. They might hold that while psychologically one feels as though one has free will, in actuality that feeling is only an illusion and that it is God who absolutely determines everything. This view is scripturally problematic, because while numerous biblical verses are commandments from God, what sense do moral commandments have unless there is some free will. Without free will a commandment is superfluous. Other verses, if not commandments, are directives from God; for example, "If today you hear his voice, harden not your heart." Again, what sense does such a verse make without free will? Thus it can be pointed out to clients that they choose to accept the deterministic belief that causes their misery.

Be Ye therefore Perfect. Some Christians use the verse, "Be ye therefore perfect as your father who is in heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:48) as a justification for self- or other-downing. Still other Christians accept the verse, but they don't torture themselves with it. How do the two groups differ? The individuals in the first group seem to demand that they must have all the attributes of God and be perfect. Clearly, if one accepts Anselm's definition of God as "that than which nothing greater can be conceived," then we are never perfect in that ontological sense. If Christians read the verse as a command that humans are ontologically to fulfill the Anselmian definition, then God seems to be commanding an impossibility, which would be unjust.

Matthew 5:48 is the last verse of the chapter, and it is the culmination of the entire chapter's discussion on loving action toward others, especially those who are difficult to love, such as one's enemies. The conclusion is that our perfection is in our love; however, this is at odds with what may be our natural tendency to love only our neighbor but not our enemy. The verse does not follow a discussion of the perfection of God, but rather how in the realm of human action loving forgiveness is a godly perfection and an ideal toward which Christians are to strive. Instead of ordering the impossible, it is acknowledging imperfection and directing Christians to accept this universal fact and to forgive others and oneself as God has forgiven us. "Be kind to one another, tender hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.." (Ephesians 4:32). Our perfection is our love and that love is a perfection because God is love.

### **Religious Interventions within REBT**

The general strategy of REBT is to help people dispute the irrational beliefs that cause inappropriate negative emotions and self-defeating behaviors, and then replace them with rational beliefs. If a belief is a map and something by which we can steer, then at least two approaches may help us change an irrational belief. The direct and elegant approach would be to change the map--the irrational belief itself. This is perhaps the most elegant solution, since once we are able to see more rightly or clearly, then steering through life becomes more proficient. However, sometimes people cling tenaciously to wild fanciful maps out of habit and fear of the unknown map, despite the pain and failures that the inadequate map causes them. When this kind of clinging is extremely tenacious, the psychotherapist might better expend energy by taking an indirect, inelegant approach by encouraging the client to steer differently for awhile without directly attacking the irrational belief. This is not a new concept: AA advocates "fake it until you make it," in other words, act as if you believed and felt differently. More successful steering through life may loosen the grip on the irrational belief and help the individual adopt a more adequate one and ultimately feel and behave better.

Let us consider a client who has a phobia of riding in elevators. His irrational belief is "The elevator might

malfunction and I might plunge to my death, and that would be horrible." Rather than having the client dispute the awfulizing or the overgeneralization, the therapist might encourage him to ride in elevators while practicing relaxation techniques. The relaxation techniques may decrease the client's level of anxiety, and while the client is dependent on the distraction, at least he may be able to ride in elevators. Of course, a more elegant solution would be to have the client replace the irrational belief behind the anxiety with a rational one that helps him to be concerned about riding in elevators, but not overly-anxious.

How can religion be used as something more than mere distraction but rather to dispute an irrational belief and change the person's map? In the following section, I will offer several uses of religion within REBT that therapists may find helpful in working with Christian clients.

**I. Prayer.** Most prayers acknowledge the adversity (A) and perhaps the pain and suffering of the individual (C), and then proceed to ask God either to change A to a more pleasant one or to grant the individual the ability to accept the suffering as part of God's plan. Ignored is the individual's contribution to C, namely, his or her irrational beliefs. The erroneous emotional equation is reinforced by such thinking as, "A happens; I can't help but feel C, but the omnipotent God can either change A or C, and I will feel better either way."

I use an alternative form of prayer when working with clients for whom prayer is important. What the client is to do in the REBT-consistent form of prayer is as follows:

- . Within the prayer acknowledge the A and C.
- . Name the irrational beliefs (demands plus derivatives)
- . Name the corresponding rational belief.
- . Ask for God's help in achieving a more rational belief and a healthier negative C.
- . Pray the prayer several times a day.

The REBT-consistent form of prayer is considerably different from the form used by most Christian psychotherapists and pastoral counselors, even those therapists/counselors who purport to embrace a cognitive-behavioral form of therapy. Craigie and Tan write,

Indeed praying with clients that they may be liberated from resistant misbeliefs, that they may be empowered to do the truth, and that

they may come into a deeper relationship with the truth can sometimes be a most powerful experience (98).

Note that the form of prayer mentioned by Craigie and Tan has the therapist praying with the client for the client's liberation from irrational beliefs. However, in this form of prayer the client is relatively passive. He or she is not actively disputing his or her irrational beliefs. The passivity may reinforce the client's irrational belief in their helplessness and their low frustration tolerance: namely that disputing their irrational beliefs is too difficult, so let God and their therapist liberate them from that work. Wouldn't it be more helpful to have clients experience cooperatively working with God to dispute their irrational beliefs than having God do it all?

I have the client compose the prayer in the therapy session; we then write it down, and I keep a copy in the client's file. The client also keeps a copy to pray several times a day between sessions. Sometimes I have them do only this; and at other times, it is more with the traditional disputes.

Some pastoral counselors have rightfully questioned the use of prayer in therapy. When prayer is a mere distraction, it should be used very cautiously and always with an eye toward eventually disputing the irrational beliefs directly. Where prayer takes the responsibility away from the client in pursuing change and fosters client dependency, it should be avoided. On the other hand, when the client experiences prayer as a partnership with the therapist and God to have the client actively dispute the irrational beliefs, it can be effective.

I met with a 40-year-old single male client, Anthony, who had a heart condition that was beyond help. He was extremely anxious and afraid of his imminent death. Together we composed the following prayer that he said at least three times a day for the four weeks before his death:

Oh God, source of all goodness and wisdom, I am anxious and afraid about my death, which may come very soon, because I keep telling myself that it will be unbearable. Help me to remember your Holy Word in which you promise us that You will neither let us be tested beyond our powers, nor face any trial beyond what we can bear. Let me not test myself or worry myself more than You would ask, nor make my very real burden unbearable. Help me to experience the Kingdom of God that is at hand in which you lovingly call me beyond my anxiety and past my fears into Your peace. Grant me the strength to be concerned about my fate so that I put my affairs in order for those

I love, but to realize that in Your Kingdom nothing is unbearable because whatever happens, including my death, cannot separate me from your love. I ask this through Jesus my brother, the Light and Life of the world. Amen.

When we began therapy, Anthony, who was hospitalized, was screaming and crying so loudly that it disrupted the other patients as well as the medical staff. A devout Christian for whom prayer was very important, Anthony eventually accepted his condition and his impending death and was able to write letters to those he loved. By the third week, a week before his death, he went from room to room, with the help of a wheelchair, visiting other patients and helping to lift their spirits. He died very peacefully.

I saw another client who experienced severe depression for years. While we did not use prayer in session, during our last session I recommended that she form a prayer circle at her church in which she would teach REBT and use it in prayers within the prayer circle. She took up my suggestion and later reported that she was experiencing it as very helpful for her and to many of the other women in the group.

**II. Meditation:** When pastoral counseling has employed meditation or guided imagery, the technique has generally functioned as a distraction, which interrupts the client's obsessively ruminating about the adversities (A's) in her or his life. While distraction can work to alleviate symptoms, it rarely gets at the irrational belief underlying the problem. Thus meditation or guided imagery as mere distraction is inelegant and necessitates continued meditation. Of course, there are worse activities than meditation; but the elegant solution would be to eradicate the irrational beliefs that form the basis of the rumination.

The following is a slight variation on REBT's technique of rational emotive imagery (REI). In religious REI, the therapist has the client do the following:

- . Imagine the problematical A.
- . Feel the unhealthy C.
- . Identify the irrational belief(s) contributing to the C.
- . Stop when the irrational belief is identified.
- . Again imagine the problematical A.
- . Call upon and/or imagine Jesus or God disputing the irrational belief so that the client feels a healthy C.
- . Identify the rational belief God and/or Jesus want(s) the client to have.
- . Practice the meditation at home or the office

**III. Scripture:** Ellis has written,

I think I can safely say that the Judeo-Christian Bible is a self-help book that has probably enabled more people to make more extensive and intensive personality and behavioral changes than all professional therapists combined (336) .

Several therapists, secular and religious, have used scripture in conjunction with REBT to dispute irrational beliefs. For example, Hank Robb's small booklet, How to Stop Driving Yourself Crazy with Help from the Bible, lists common irrational beliefs and then identifies scriptural passages that seemingly refute or dispute the irrational beliefs. This is probably the most common religious method employed in a religiously oriented use of REBT.

This approach may be a very effective technique when working with conservative or fundamentalist Christians who see scripture as the sole source of religious authority for their faith. The process is simple. Each of the client's irrational beliefs is paired with a scripture expressing a relevant rational belief. For example, if the person is awfulizing, then the therapist chooses the antiawfulizing scriptural passage closest to the client's circumstance.

With Christians who are less literal or less "Bible-centric," the therapist may approach scripture differently. If the Christian client views scripture as myth (myth not as untrue story but as story functioning to reveal deep and significant aspects of human experience and Divine-human interaction), then biblical stories can be used to demonstrate rational beliefs that help with difficult human conditions (A's).

For example, the liberal Christian may not believe there was an actual Jonah who was swallowed by an actual divinely appointed creature, sees the story as revealing the all too common human tendency to avoid unpleasant tasks, to be overly self-centered, and to demand that life and others be the way we want them to be--all of which create and intensify our misery and alienation from others, ourselves, and God. People do not have to believe in a historical suffering Job to see that crying "Why me; ain't it awful?" about one's misfortunes gets them nowhere but feeling even more miserable. However, people realize from the story that God tells Job that God asks the big questions and that it is Job's responsibility is to come up with the answers to God's big questions about life. What helps Job to assume that

responsibility, which God says is a part of human dignity, is the realization that even in the midst of the misfortune God is with Job and God will always be with him.

Should the therapist engage in a duel with the client's irrational beliefs using relevant biblical verses or engage in selective story telling? The choice is best determined by finding out how the client views scripture. Let the client's attitude toward scripture be your guide.

The following is a list of scriptural passages that may be useful for disputes. The verses are categorized by the type of irrational belief they dispute.

### **A. Demandingness**

**(I must/ must not do this thing):** All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any (1 Corinthians 6:12).

**(I must be loved):** If you find that the world hates you know it has hated me before you. If you belong to the world, it would love you as its own; the reason it hates you is that you do not belong to the world (John 15:18-19).

**(I must be treated fairly. Life should be fair):** Anyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus can expect to be persecuted (2 Timothy 3:12).

**(I must not suffer. Life should be free from suffering.):** I tell you all this that in me you may find peace. You will suffer in the world. But take courage! I have overcome the world (John 16:33).

### **B. Awfulizing**

For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come. Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38-39).

Dismiss all anxiety from your minds. Present your needs to God in every form of prayer and in petitions full of gratitude. Then God's own peace, which is beyond all understanding, will stand guard over your hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4: 6-7).

Fear not. I am with you: Be not dismayed: I am your god. I will strengthen you, and help you and uphold you with my right hand of justice...for I am the Lord, your God, who grasps your right hand: It is I who say to you, "Fear not, I will help you" (Isaiah 41: 10,13).

Be not afraid of sudden terror, of the ruin of the wicked when it comes; For the Lord will be your confidence, and will keep your foot from the snare (Proverbs 3: 25-26).

Blest are those persecuted for holiness' sake; the reign of God is theirs. Blest are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of slander against you because of me. Be glad and rejoice, for your reward is great

in heaven: They persecuted the prophets before you in the very same way (Matthew 5: 10-12).

I consider the sufferings of the present to be as nothing compared with the glory to be revealed in us (Romans 8:18).

Peace is my farewell to you, my peace is my gift to you; I do not give it to you as the world gives peace. Do not be distressed or fearful (John 14:27).

Which of you by worrying can add a moment to his life-span (Matthew 6:27).

Come to me, all you who are weary and find life burdensome, and I will refresh you. Take my yoke upon your shoulders and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart. Your souls will find rest, for my yoke is easy and my burden light (Matthew 11: 18-30).

You will hear of wars and rumors of wars. Do not be alarmed. Such things are bound to happen, but that is not yet the end. Nation will rise against nation, one kingdom against another. There will be famine and pestilence and earthquakes in many places. These are the early stages of the birth pangs. They will hand you over to torture and kill you. Indeed, you will be hated by all nations on my account. Many will falter then, betraying and hating one another. False prophets will rise in great numbers to mislead many. Because of the increase of evil, the love of most will grow cold. The man who holds out to the end, however, is the one who will see salvation (Matthew 24: 6-13).

### **C. Low Frustration Tolerance**

I give no thought to what lies ahead but push on to what is ahead (Philippians 3:13).

I do not say this because I am in want, for whatever the situation I find myself in I have learned to be self-sufficient (Philippians 4:11).

I am experienced in being brought low, yet I know what it is to have an abundance. I have learned how to cope with every circumstance--how to eat well or go hungry, to be well provided for or do without. In Him who is the source of my strength I have strength for everything (Philippians 4:12-13).

I warn you then: Do not worry about your livelihood, what you are to eat or drink or use for clothing. Is not life more than food? Is not the body more valuable than clothes? (Matthew 6:25)

No test has been sent you that does not come to all men. Besides, God keeps his promise. He will not let you be tested beyond your strength. Along with the test he will give you a way out of it so that you may be able to endure it (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Our desire is that each of you show the same zeal till the end, fully assured of that for which you hope. Do not grow lazy, but imitate those who, through faith and patience, are inheriting the promises (Hebrews 6:11-12).

They [earthly fathers] disciplined us as seemed right to them, to prepare us for the short span of mortal life; but God does so for our true profit, that we may share his holiness. At the time it is administered, all discipline seems a cause for grief and not for joy, but later it brings forth the fruit of peace and justice to those who are trained in its school (Hebrews 12:10-11).

Blessed be God...the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we



may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God (2 Corinthians 1:3-4).

#### **D. Self and Other Downing**

But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8).

For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23).

And, behold, one came and said unto Him [Jesus], Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life? And He said unto him, Why callest thou me good? There is none good but one, that is God: but if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments (Matthew 19:16-17).

Be kind to one another, tender hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you (Ephesians 4:32).

Ye have heard that it hath been said, thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you (Matthew 5:43-44).

Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, until seven times; but, until seventy times seven (Matthew 18:21-22).

#### **E. Special Passages for Guilt and Forgiveness**

I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting; for you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us. For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret, but worldly grief [guilt] produces death (2 Corinthians 7: 9-10).

You were dead through the trespasses and sins...but God who is rich in mercy, out of great love with which He loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (Ephesians 2:1, 4-5).

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all His benefits--Who forgives all your iniquity, Who heals all your diseases, Who redeems your life from the Pit, Who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, Who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's (Psalms 103:2-5).

But when the goodness and loving-kindness of God our Savior appeared, He saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to His mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:4-7).

Purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean; wash me and I shall be whiter than snow (Psalms 51:7).

#### **IV. Rituals**

It is not surprising that the pastoral counseling movement began within mainline Protestantism rather than Catholicism or Eastern Orthodoxy. The latter two had the confessional in which the penitent sought psychological relief from the guilt associated with sinning. While many Protestants may not be comfortable with a highly

formalized rite of reconciliation, a less ritualized rite may be helpful for some Christians to overcome the self-downing that is a part of guilt. In REBT terms, a confessional or reconciliation ritual can function as an attack on people's shame of failing or sinning, and on their self-downing, and can even be a declaration that they can transcend the sin--that the sin is not one's fate.

I frequently have clients compose their own rite of reconciliation or a forgiveness ritual (what Mitchell Robin calls "Rites for Wrongs") that can be performed alone or with a group. I give the clients the freedom to incorporate whatever elements they find meaningful, with the following directives:

- . Acknowledge at some point early in the ritual the feeling of guilt or shame.
- . Distinguish between godly grief and neurotic guilt or shame and ask God's help to achieve godly grief.
- . If there is neurotic guilt or shame, identify the irrational beliefs behind it--the self-downing and awfulizing.
- . Praise God for the advantages of godly grief over neurotic guilt or shame (include a litany of advantages).
- . Pronounce your acceptance of God's love and forgiveness and your ability to tolerate the unpleasantness of the godly grief.
- . Try to sin that sin no more.
- . Think of ways to help you avoid sinning in that way.
- . Ask for God's help to avoid the sin.

**V. Fasting:** REBT describes two types of anxiety: discomfort anxiety and ego anxiety. Behind discomfort anxiety is frequently low frustration tolerance, the belief that "I can't stand the discomfort." Most people with low frustration tolerance try to avoid the activating event or adversity associated with the discomfort. To help clients develop high frustration tolerance, the therapist guides them in disputing the low frustration tolerance and encourages them to embrace frustrating situations and develop the courage to withstand the frustration.

The practice of fasting may be a way to help some Christian clients develop high frustration tolerance. For Christian clients for whom fasting is meaningful, I have them engage in an REBT form of fasting that has the following elements:

- . The client is asked to notice any discomfort during the fasting, especially a desire to break the fast.
- . The client identifies the irrational beliefs behind the actual or imagined efforts to sabotage the fast or associated with great frustration.
- . The client visualizes Jesus or God offering a rational belief, "This isn't pleasant, but you can handle it. I am with you always."
- . The client repeats the rational belief forcefully and frequently.

. The client thanks God for giving her or him the strength to handle the frustration.

I have clients who use fasting as an occasion to tackle other areas of low frustration tolerance, for example, the low frustration tolerance associated with working with unpleasant coworkers. Handling the fast is a reminder that the client can handle almost any frustration and that it is nothing more than a frustration.

## **VI. Religious Self-Talk**

Many Christians frequently repeat to themselves short irrational phrases such as "I'm no good," "That's awful," "I can't stand it anymore," and "I am nothing but a miserable unworthy sinner". For centuries the Roman Catholic church has had very short prayers or utterances to help individuals maintain a religious consciousness and uplift themselves. Having Christian clients frequently repeat phrases such as the following can help the client replace the irrational phrases with more functional ones:

- I'm a person who occasionally sins, not a person who only sins.
- Oh happy sin (fault) that I should receive such a Redeemer.
- I am loved even when I act unlovingly.
- God doesn't create failures, only people who sometimes fail.
- God gives us hassles for character, never horrors to destroy.
- I am loved simply because I am.
- Nothing can separate me from the love of God--absolutely nothing!
- Hate the sin; love the sinner.

## **VII. "Christian Hope Chest"**

One of the most problematical and most recurrent emotions for Christians is guilt. Frequently Christians create guilt because they see themselves as transgressing a law or the love of God, they irrationally equate their being with their doing, and then they down themselves for the bad action. I have developed a technique to move the Christian from focusing on the sin and self-downing to embrace hope. One of my clients called the technique "The Christian Hope Chest."

The technique is simple. On a piece of paper the client creates three columns. One column is headed "Sinful Act," another is headed "Undesired Consequences," and the third column is headed, "God's Grace." Under the first column, the client describes the act seen as a sin or sinful. Next to it in the second column, the client lists the

undesirable consequences of the sinful act, both actual and possible. In the final column, she or he lists ways in which God could help the person to move beyond the undesirable consequences.

For example, let us say that Jim has lied to his girlfriend, Mary, about seeing his ex-girlfriend. His "Christian Hope Chest" might look like this:

<u>I. Sinful Act</u>	<u>II. Undesired Consequences</u>	<u>III. God's Grace</u>
1. I lied to my girlfriend much as she used to	1. She might not trust me as who don't trust me.	1. I can do good to those
worldly guilt.	2. She might leave me about the lie but not	2. I can feel godly grief
I meet someone as good for me	3. I would miss her company my ways.	3. I can repent and change
God, not even this lie.	4. It might be a long time before God despite the lie.	4. I would be loved by
than we can handle.	like me--those who sin. me from the love of	5. Christ came for people
	give us a burden greater	6. Nothing can separate
	tell the truth next time.	7. God promises never to
		8. I have free will so I can

The Christian client has realistically acknowledged the undesirable consequences of her or his actions but has mobilized religious resources to move beyond the self-downing and awfulizing about those unpleasant consequences. In this way we can help the client move from anxiety, guilt, or depression to remorse, self-acceptance, and hope.

### **VIII. Witnessing as Shame Attack**

Ellis is famous for the "shame attacks" he prescribes for clients and those who attend his REBT training programs. A shame attack is an exercise in which one does something that she or he would normally experience as shameful or embarrassing. For example, one could ride on the subway and yell the name of the stops whenever the train stops. An adaptation of the technique for Christians is to have the ashamed person talk to a stranger or colleague about their Christian faith and what it means to them. For those Christians who would not experience this as shameful or embarrassing, the technique would not be helpful. However, for those who are embarrassed about their faith or hide it, the technique, if practiced, may help the person identify the irrational beliefs beneath the shame and

embarrassment that prevent them from witnessing.

## **IX. Rational Religious Songs**

Anyone who has heard Ellis lecture or attended one of his workshops knows that he loves to use humorous songs that make light of irrational beliefs that many of us hold. This technique can easily be adapted for use by Christian clients. The following is an excerpt from a song written by two Christian counselor friends of mine, James Esposito and Susan Grande. They entitled the song, "Great Art Thou, Rational," which is sung to the tune of "Great Is Thy Faithfulness."

### **Verse 1**

When I can't stand it, when it seems awful  
I simply stop and I think of your truth  
Consequences are better when I see things your way  
Help me be rational, Lord is my plea.

### **Refrain:**

Great art Thou, Rational  
Great are Thou, Rational  
Morning by morning, your beliefs I seek  
Activating events can't keep me from your glory  
As Thou art Rational, help me to be.

## **Conclusion**

The flexibility of REBT and the fact that it does not attack Christian clients' values or goals, but only their irrational beliefs about those values and goals, make it a very powerful and effective form of psychotherapy with Christian clients. Moreover, the ability to incorporate into REBT those religious beliefs and practices most meaningful to Christian clients maximizes the possibility of achieving profound changes in the clients' philosophy of life and thereby decrease their emotional pain and suffering and self-defeating behaviors. REBT, more than any other form of psychotherapy, increases the likelihood that the clients will, in the words of St. Paul, be "a new creation," for whom "everything old has passed away" and "everything has become new".

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