



The Myth of Mental Illness, by Thomas Szasz

Reviewed by Charles Sigler, D.Phil.

Thomas Szasz began his challenge of the “excessively psychiatrized” American society with the publication of *The Myth of Mental Illness* in 1961; and as he observed in 1995, “I think it is fair to say that psychiatry has not been the same since.” Trained as a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, Szasz asserts that mental illness is only metaphorically a disease. The word “disease” should only be applied to “a demonstrable biological process that affects the bodies of living organisms (plants, animals, and humans).” Mental illness refers to the socially undesirable thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of persons who can only be sick in a metaphoric sense. “The classification of (mis)behavior as illness provides an ideological justification for state-sponsored social control as medical treatment.”

Responses to Szasz have varied from praise to scorn and denunciation. Over the years, his work was more favorably received by philosophers, psychologists, and sociologists, than it was by psychiatrists. Szasz calls for the abolition of involuntary mental hospitalization and the insanity defense; the separation of psychiatry and state similar to that of church and state; and the presumed mental competence of psychiatric “defendants” just as we presume that criminal defendants are legally innocent.

Politically, Szasz is a libertarian; theologically, he’s an atheist. Nevertheless, his thinking addresses some of the same issues that Christians do when attempting to think Biblically about psychiatry, therapy, and psychology. Jay Adams read *The Myth of Mental Illness* as he was formulating his own thoughts and critique of psychiatry and counseling before he wrote *Competent to Counsel* in 1970. Whether you agree or disagree with his ideas, some familiarity with Szasz’s work is necessary for anyone working within the fields of human services, politics and law.

Szasz is a prolific author, and has many examples of his thought in addition to *The Myth of Mental Illness* available, including: *Law, Liberty and Psychiatry: An Inquiry into the Social Uses of Mental Health Practices* (1963), *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis: The Theory and Method of Autonomous Psychotherapy* (1965), and *Cruel Compassion: Psychiatric Control of Society's Unwanted* (1994). Be sure to read *The Myth of Mental Illness*, the cornerstone for his later thinking. Further information on Szasz and his beliefs is available on his web site: <http://www.szasz.com>. I leave you with this last quote taken from another of his books, *The Second Sin*, and sited on his web site:

*If you talk to God, you are praying;
If God talks to you, you have schizophrenia.*

If the dead talk to you, you are a spiritualist;
If God talks to you, you are a schizophrenic.