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The Christian Spiritual Perspective of Healing in the Psychological Therapeutic Process

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Abstract: This paper aims to explore the Christian spiritual dimension of healing in the psychological therapeutic process. We started our approach with a parallel analysis of what mental suffering and spiritual suffering mean. Then, we brought into view a series of questions about the optimal way to treat mental illness and the specific methods of each field (psychology and religion) to deal with the needs of a mentally ill person. The paper discusses the weak points and strong points of each of the two ways and concludes that the two approaches are not mutually exclusive, but must represent a continuum from which the one who benefits is the patient.

Keywords: *psychological healing, therapeutic process, Christian psychology.*

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1. Introduction

We are currently witnessing a real increase in the psychotherapy phenomenon. On the one hand, individuals require a psychologist in their efforts to manage various crises, especially related to identity, brought on by human existence as part of a postmodern society dominated by individualism, mass culture, and technology. The atomization of society, the overbidding of attention, stress, and more and more work are just as many causes that fuel fatigue, anxiety, complexes, and imbalances in the lives of citizens. Christian spirituality has developed a coherent framework in which believers have the opportunity to make an effort to transform their lives under the guidance of a spiritual parent. The context of the relationship between discipleship and the mystery of confession provides the support for good self-knowledge, for forms of therapy that remove the problems and weaknesses of the spirit, in accordance with a dynamic and relational vision of human nature.

Contemporary cognitive science has shown the extraordinary extent to which our thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and actions are connected to the body - namely, our brain and chemical interactions. That body and soul are so connected is fundamental to a biblical perspective on humanity. Because individuals are psychosomatic (body-soul) units, physical and spiritual matters intersect in ways that cannot be easily separated. If we look at it from one perspective, the naturalistic one (Aubrey, 1939), we should accept that humans are reduced to the sum of the physical and also chemical processes within our bodies. From another perspective, the hyper-supernaturalist reaction (Orr, 1907) is to treat physicochemical problems only as spiritual ailments. We are rightly wary of scientific naturalism, also called "reductive physicalism" (Encycopedia, n.d.), which excludes spiritual factors from behavior.

The purpose of this article is to compare psychological and religious perspectives on mental illness and psychological suffering, to investigate the strong points and the weak spots of each method, and to give suggestions for a correlated use of the two approaches to mental illness.

2. Spirituality and healing

Church services and religious activities are built to meet this tendency of people to solve problems related to self-esteem and valuing others, to find safety and comfort for their daily experience in the complexity of today's world, and to build an identity that is dominantly defined by professional experience. In some cases, attending religious services is a form of group therapy (Mapasure, 2022). The sermons have a motivational character and

place great emphasis on the positive side of the Christian experience, on the importance and place of everyone in the divine plan, on God's support in all things, on the victorious approach of those who follow Jesus, etc. Also, community life requires religious activism that gives the feeling of belonging to a community and involves more and more believers in meetings with various roles and with different categories of people, using management schemes that are as well developed as possible (Westerfield & Doolittle, 2022).

The existence of tension and uncertainty between people, arising from the clash of different visions of the world and life and from the confrontation of very different social models, produces effects with a strong psychological impact, traumas, and problems that require therapy (Bosire et al., 2022). A certain inertia of changes in mentality comes from the tendency of some traditional structures to preserve themselves, and the influence of institutions such as the church or school is perceived by the general public to contribute to this mechanism of hindering the innovation to which people's lives are subjected on various ways.

The best support that a person struggling with mental suffering can receive comes from a community that knows how to be next to them and their needs, taking over part of the burden that they have to carry every day. Thanks to the millenary experience it has, the Church has made important progress in understanding mental illnesses. Priests are considered frontline workers in the fight against mental disorders. Religious experience does not qualify them to diagnose and treat mental illness, but it helps (Marques et al., 2022) them become better front-line workers in identifying mental health problems in the community they shepherd.

At the same time, exposure to Western culture rapidly demands changes in thinking and behavior, and people feel this constant pressure that can exacerbate certain problems of their existence. In general, the Church has used tools to assess and solve people's problems that are currently considered the features of psychology. Christian theology and spirituality were and are concerned with understanding human nature (Smith, 2022) and the experience of the person as a uniqueness that is defined and expressed relationally, both in relation to divinity and to fellow human beings.

3. Science and spirituality – between mutual exclusion and integration

The authors of a 2006 study found that regular churchgoers believe it is the clergy's responsibility to counsel and assist those suffering from a mental disorder, and people over 60 years are more likely to see in their spiritual leaders a source of help in this regard. The need for collaboration between representatives of Christian cults and lay providers (Roginski & Rocha, 2022) of mental health services must be highlighted, in order to provide holistic care to patients because priests (at least most of them) do not have medical training and psychiatrists do not have dogmatic training either.

By referring to the methods of scientific psychological therapy, the church is forced to make certain evaluations regarding its own spirituality and the way in which the models it operates with are relevant and topical, bring effective results to the problems of believers, and present the alternative to a contemporary spirituality model (Wyatt & Welton, 2022). Through an open and serious dialogue between the two fields of knowledge, it is possible to arrive at the foundation of a way of life that can correspond to the demands of the Christian faith in the current context.

This is where the idea of Christian psychology starts, which involves the dialogue between science and theology, an approach that leaves room for action in both fields in people's lives, knowing very well the means, goals, and limits of each path. In the context of a tense social environment, that has a strong impact on the identity of individuals, the opening of believers both to the results of anthropology and Christian spirituality, as well as to the results of psychology (Arshinoff et al., 2023), can have a positive impact on maintaining a personal balance.

A priest who is well prepared to help those with mental health problems is one that meets four major conditions (Sarfati, 2022):

- recognizes the signs of a mental disorder;
- recommends a mental health service provider and can connect the patient to mental health specialists;
- relates in a compassionate way with the person who is suffering and their family members;
- rethinks and implements recovery programs that serve the special needs of those struggling with mental illness.

The church cannot (nor must) do everything, but it must extend its ministry - centered especially on the spiritual component - to the physical and mental needs of individuals, because the church is the right place for recovery (Weru & Nafula, 2022), because it has something to offer beyond of what the world offers, a hope that transcends circumstances.

Often, mental disorders have an organic origin. Medicine recognizes that a chemical imbalance of the brain, certain genetic factors, and even some physical illnesses can lead to a deficient functioning of the brain, which results in mental and emotional disorders. Psychological pressures, such as stress (Aubrey, 1939), can also trigger emotional disturbances. Thus, in today's social circumstances, the efforts a person makes to maintain an ethical and moral behavior (which in Christianity translates as avoiding sin), to remain morally upright, and to cultivate an ethical personality can be a cause of tension in itself (Orr, 1907). This happens when there is a conflict between individual values, often of a religious origin, and the secular values that are socially promoted, or rather the lack of stability of these secular values.

Hieromonah Sava Aghioritul (Orr, 1907) believes that the so-called mental illnesses, among which depression occupies a leading place, are in reality spiritual illnesses - "they are due to people's submission to the slavery of passions" (Orr, 1907). The author calls the general confession "divine psychoanalysis", because through it the man is cured especially of the so-called psychological problems and depression.

From the point of view of psychology, thinking is the process that orients, leads, and makes the most of all other mental processes. Moreover, it has the ability to reintroduce its own products (ideas, concepts, theories) into the information circuit, thus becoming a trigger of a new intellectual process (Mapasure, 2022). Thinking is conceived as the internalization of behaviors or customs, in favor of developing the representative function of language.

From a spiritual point of view, religious behavior, seen as an attitude, understood as living and acting, can be a language by itself, a trans-language towards the sacred because it makes dialogue between human beings possible by relating to the sacred (Westerfield & Doolittle, 2022). Man can become a unified being in and with himself, only through and after the integration of the sacred.

4. Christian psychology

The purpose of Christian psychology is to understand the human condition by developing a distinct Christian model to address mental illness. Many specialists from different fields (like counseling, psychology, theology, and philosophy) have tried to connect Christianity and psychology while searching for a comprehensive way to understand human nature (Bosire et al., 2022) from a Christian perspective. Christian psychology represents the abstract and clinical research of the Christian tradition in search of its psychological resources and puts together some concepts that have been traditionally used to describe and understand what well-being is, how the

human psyche behaves, what is perceived as being healthy or unhealthy and how mental health is affected by people's emotions, their desires and their behaviors (Marques et al., 2022) Christian psychology identifies and explains all these concepts while avoiding to theorize extensively, but rather through practical applications and approaches, as the practitioners of Christian psychology believe that mental health is sometimes just a process of transition between healthy behaviors and desires, and unhealthy ones, with obvious consequences regarding what people experience, feel, and how they behave accordingly.

The year 2004 was when the Society of Christian Psychology was founded. Its goal is to promote "the development of a distinctly Christian psychology - including theory, research, and practice - based on a Christian understanding of human nature" (Smith, 2022). Although Christian psychology, in a commendable manner, aims to rediscover a way of looking at man from a Christian perspective and is duly alert to unbiblical worldview approaches in secular counseling approaches, it might appear that efforts made in order to develop such a system are not taking shape. Christian psychology has difficulty accurately interpreting and applying biblical text. In practical counseling (Roginski & Rocha, 2022), Christian psychology manifests itself in a surprisingly secular way, since Scripture and the Gospel are not necessarily the main source of information and direction for the counseling process.

A sound interpretation and exegesis of what biblical writings entail are mandatory if Christian psychologists wish to accomplish their goal and to develop a distinct branch of psychology as a form of Christian psychology. Christian psychologists affirm the sufficiency of Scripture, but explain this doctrine in a way that actually departs from Scripture in the matter of soul care. Scripture is the truth, and does not reveal the truth only to the ones who are informed, but to all in an equal manner, so to get close to the biblical text is not about the amount of information that one might receive about a particular subject (Wyatt & Welton, 2022). Rather, the Bible guides in an unbiased way in all matter it addresses.

However, Christian psychology has addressed many issues too often ignored in terms of assumptions in secular psychological systems. Christian psychologists are careful about spiritual worldview commitments and their impact on psychological conclusions (Arshinoff et al., 2023). Christian psychology can therefore be regarded as extremely useful for its willingness to become a Christian witness in a secular psychological environment.

5. Conclusions

The evidence suggests that one cannot completely understand the human psyche and its nature unless one takes into account the religious aspect of the human personality, which cannot be ignored. From another perspective, though, it is up to psychology to actually recognize that religion is not only something achieved socially, culturally, or historically, but, as Jung (2018) might say it, it is a personal problem.

If we understand how religion does or does not influence human consciousness and behavior have become one of the major goals of the psychology that studies religion. Vergote (1988) affirms that "psychology was born and comes with man, so does religion, therefore everything in religion is psychology, but not all religion is psychology because religion does not coincide with its psychological facet".

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