

2012

Ancient Christian spirituality as evidence base for practice in psychology

GS Stavros. 2012. "Ancient Christian spirituality as evidence base for practice in psychology." Edification: The Transdisciplinary Journal of Christian Psychology, Volume 6, Issue 2, pp. 104 - 105 (2).

<https://hdl.handle.net/2144/26923>

"Downloaded from OpenBU. Boston University's institutional repository."

wisdom within the practice of cognitive therapy not only confirms the value of integrating these two perspectives, it invites Christian therapists practicing a variety of modalities to explore the Church Fathers with a view to discerning how their wisdom may be reflected in therapeutic practice. Indeed, Trader has shown us that one can embroider Kingdom wisdom upon the world's cloth.

Kelvin F. Mutter completed his M.T.S. and M.Th. degrees in Pastoral Counselling at Wilfrid Laurier University and a Th.D. (Practical Theology) from the University of South Africa. Dr. Mutter is a Clinical Fellow (AAMFT) and a Pastoral Counselling Specialist (CASC/ACSS). He is a therapist at Family Counselling and Support Services in Guelph, Ontario and an Adjunct Professor in Ministry Studies at McMaster Divinity College, Hamilton, Ontario. He can be contacted at kfmutter@gmail.com.

References

- Aquinas, T. (1920). *Summa theologiae. Supplemental* (2nd ed.) (Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Trans.). London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne.
- Chrysostom, J. (1983). *John Chrysostom: On virginity, against remarriage* (S.R. Shore, Trans.). New York & Toronto: Edwin Mellen.
- Dunnington, K. (2011). *Addiction and virtue*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity.
- Hunter, D.G. (Trans.). (1992). *Marriage in the early church*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress.
- Mutter, K.F. (1996). St. John Chrysostom's theology of marriage and family. *Baptist Review of Theology*, 6(2), 22-32. http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_brt.php
- Mutter, K.F. (1998). An evaluation of Chrysostom's theology of marriage and family. *Baptist Review of Theology*, 8(1-2), 24-38. http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_brt.php
- Oden, T.C. (1984). *Care of souls in the classical tradition*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- Oden, T.C. (1994). Marriage and family counseling. In T.C. Oden (ed.), *Classical pastoral care, Vol. 4: Crisis ministries*, (pp. 96-118). Grand Rapids: Baker.
- St. Augustine. (1955). *Treatises on marriage and other subjects, Fathers of the church* (Vol. 27) (C.T. Wilcox, et al., Trans.). Washington: Catholic University of America.

Ancient Christian Spirituality as Evidence Base for Practice in Psychology

George Stavros

The Danielsen Institute at Boston University

Fr. Alexios's article is a welcome addition to the vital, underdeveloped conversation between ancient Christian spirituality and modern psychology and psychotherapy. While there is a growing openness

to such efforts within academic and training programs in the mental health disciplines, the wealth of experience and knowledge within the ancient Christian tradition that is waiting to be tapped and utilized for clinical and training purposes is inexhaustible. Fr. Alexios frames his essay as one which adds patristic spirituality to the evidence base that supports psychotherapeutic treatment. From the perspective of secular psychology, the American Psychological Association's Policy Statement on Evidence-Based Practice in Psychology (2005) states that "evidence-based practice in psychology is the integration of the best available research with clinical expertise in the context of patient characteristics, culture, and preferences."¹

This raises the lively questions of whether and how patristic spirituality has a legitimate place as an "evidence base" for psychotherapy. It is here that Fr. Alexios's ability to draw two different traditions of healing, one psychological and one spiritual, into interactive contact with one another, is most useful. He is able to demonstrate particular ways in which the evidence offered by patristic spirituality is actually two-fold. There is the textual evidence, which can be drawn from ancient Christian literature that has become increasingly accessible via Internet search engines and English translations. We also have the evidence of the patristic style of soul care that exists in the ongoing ministry life of communities of faith, in the forms of worship, prayer, service, and pastoral care and counsel. Fr. Alexios offers examples of the ways in which spiritual elders draw upon the patristic tradition by entering into the experiences and suffering of those in their care through the use of powerful metaphors from scripture and church tradition. He then connects these specific spiritual "interventions" to analogous efforts to build healthy and life-giving meaning systems through cognitive therapy, while simultaneously identifying, challenging, and altering destructive and self-destructive cognitive schemata.

The particular use of cognitive therapy as a partner with patristic spirituality in this effort at interdisciplinary conversation is compelling. Cognitive therapy emphasizes things like self-observation, the reframing of meaning, developing more sophisticated habits of mind, and the power of repetition to affect the mind, even at the level of brain physiology. Fr. Alexios points out ways in which a spiritual life focused on repentance, healing, and growth relies on these same elements as agents of change and intensified relationship with God.

Something which Fr. Alexios clearly addresses, but which may benefit from even greater emphasis, is the inescapable and ubiquitous evidence that psychotherapy, regardless of the theoretical or technical approach, is successful only in the context of a therapeutic relationship, or alliance, that is experienced by the patient in particular, helpful ways (Duncan, Miller, Wampold, & Hubble, 2010, p. xxi):

"Therapeutic efficacy inheres primarily in the

patient's experience and in the use of remoralizing, resource-enhancing, and motivating relationship with a therapist who is supportive and challenging (in proportions and at times that suit the patient's needs and abilities)."

In other words, human relationships are the vehicle for human growth and change. Within the context of a solid working alliance, spiritual elders, both ancient and modern, as well as psychotherapists draw upon the particular *techne* (art and technique) that is most likely to facilitate change and growth in those they serve.

While Fr. Alexios effectively and creatively provides an interdisciplinary theoretical grounding for a conversation between patristic spirituality and cognitive therapy, the intensely unique and particular relational elements of the therapeutic encounter risk being underappreciated. It goes without saying that the spiritual elder must know the scriptures and tradition of the church in order to care for souls, and the master psychotherapist must know clinical theory and technique to treat patients. And yet, a skill that transcends the informational aspects of their disciplines is that of wisely and lovingly "knowing *how* to know another:"

"By understanding the idiosyncratic way an individual organizes knowledge, emotion, sensation, and behavior, a therapist has more choice about how to influence him or her in all these areas and to contribute to the improvements in life for which he or she has sought professional help" (McWilliams, 1999, p. 11).

The introduction of any idea, technique, suggestion, or resource into the therapeutic encounter, be it spiritual or psychological, is always mediated through a complex and dynamic interplay within the therapeutic relationship. The healer's ability to be a guide and partner to the person in his or her care, to maintain and contain adequate levels of trust, diminishment of shame, tolerance for ambiguity, clarification and progress towards goals, and cycles of rupture and repair is key to the facilitation of a therapeutic process. Specific texts and techniques from both the patristic and the cognitive therapy traditions, therefore, have the greatest opportunity for coming to transformative life as they are discerningly geared to the particular therapeutic relationship and situation.

Fr. Alexios has clearly identified a powerful convergence of ideas and approaches to depth psycho-spiritual healing in bringing patristic spirituality and cognitive therapy into purposeful conversation. It will be an important next step for the community of spiritually-oriented psychotherapists to continue to add to the evidence base by describing, through research and case vignettes, the impact of this convergence on the particular work they are doing with clients hungry for the kind of hope and change that emanate from this convergence.

Note

- ¹ APA Statement, Policy Statement on Evidence-Based Practice in Psychology (2005).

George Stavros, Ph.D., is Executive Director of the Danielsen Institute, Clinical Associate Professor in Boston University's School of Theology, and Director of the Counseling Psychology and Religion Ph.D. program. He can be contacted at stavros1@bu.edu.

References

- Duncan, B. L., Miller, S. D., Wampold, B. E., & Hubble, M. A. (2010). *The heart and soul of change: Delivering what works in therapy* (2nd ed.). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- McWilliams, N. (1999). *Psychoanalytic case formulation*. New York: The Guilford Press.

Ethical Challenges to the Clinical Use of Patristics

Lee Wetherbee

Ashland Seminary, Ashland, OH

I appreciate the opportunity to respond to Father Trader's article exploring the relationship between the *Philokalia* and aspects of Beck's Cognitive Therapy. This article presents a well-reasoned conceptual bridge between Patristic writings and modern therapeutic practice. The connections drawn between Aaron Beck's Cognitive Therapy and this ancient literature is both compelling and exciting, reinforcing for us that when many sources arrive at the same destination, we are in the presence of truth. As a counselor educator I am well aware of the challenges present in applying scriptural truth to the field of behavioral science research and practice. This article provides a perspective that enhances this connection from sources that I frankly had not previously considered.

I am supportive of the primary premise of this article and would like to offer some further practical considerations regarding the potential ethical implications for Father Trader's proposal. As a practicing psychologist who teaches ethics, practical application of the issues suggested in this article seem of primary importance. It should be noted that my reaction is from the perspective of a practitioner operating within an Evangelical Protestant worldview. Therefore, the difficulties of clinical use of Patristic texts may in large measure be a function of my lack of knowledge or awareness of these rich resources. In this way, this article challenges my limited worldview and ideally inspires me to become more aware of these resources that may serve my clients and students well. Toward that end I will briefly outline the portions of the article that I found to be most salient and then summarize the ethical and practical considerations I