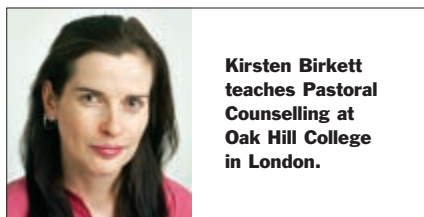


IN YOUR RIGHT MIND

Christianity and psychotherapy

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There are many ways of putting together the fields of theology and psychology, not all of them equally fruitful.



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What is the relationship between Christianity and secular psychology? Are they two totally incommensurable approaches to human beings? Are they simply answering different questions? Can they profitably interact?

The secular answer seems to be an emphatic ‘yes’, ‘irrelevant’, and ‘no’. But there is far more to the issue than that. Reading books about psychology, about its history, theory, and the differences between the various theoretical approaches, both from a secular and a Christian point of view, brings up a whole range of issues that Christians might profitably explore.

What is psychology for?

Recently I have been reading a history of theories of mental illness from ancient times to the present, by the noted psychiatrist Theodore Millon.¹ I was surprised to find that there is evidence of attempts to treat mental illness from prehistoric times, with archeological finds of trepanned skulls (that’s an operation where a hole is opened in the skull in order to relieve some problem inside —of course, that’s assuming it was done to fix a problem, and not for some other reason, religious, cosmetic, or whatever).

The first written records of treatment of mental illness in the West are from the eighth century BC. These treatments were

part of the temple practices of early Greeks and Egyptians. In the fifth century BC, Hippocrates suggested exercise and physical tranquillity should supplant exorcism and punishment as a general regimen for the mentally ill. In the first century BC, the Roman physician Asclepiades devised a measure to relax patients suffering from psychological distress, and condemned harsh therapeutic methods such as bloodletting and mechanical restraints. In ancient China, written records of mental illness, although fragmentary, go back much further; there is a record from the fourteenth century BC of treatment for “headaches and other head disorders reflected malevolent agencies in the wind”² There was even drug treatment to diminish anger, fear and jealousy.

But how were these patients recognised? Who were the mentally ill, those regarded as in need of treatment? This seems to be

Cultural standards heavily affect what constitutes mental illness and what we do about it.

something very difficult to define. Many authors tend to use vague or self-referential definitions; for instance, treatment was for “those who suffered psychic pain or behaved peculiarly”.³ In general, this is how mental illness across the ages is spoken of; something that is recognised by the sufferer and those around, but difficult to give a universal description to.

Certainly there are groups of symptoms that seem obviously aberrant. The Chinese complaint of ‘wind in the mind’ is described more fully in this much later medical document:

The insane person is somewhat violent, sometimes stupid, singing and laughing or sad and weeping. He gets no better even after months and years. The name for this impairment is ‘wind in the mind’. Others are boisterous, raving, stubborn and violent, abusing everyone indiscriminately. These persons may attach themselves to any eminence, sing at the top of his voice, take off his clothes, run wildly, climbing over walls or roofs in ways that no normal person could. Some persons are subject to fits, become dizzy or cannot recognize people they have known. They may fall to the ground, have convulsions and suffer from jerky behaviours over which they have no control.⁴

Such kinds of wildly unusual behaviour that have been recognised as signs of mental illness throughout history, in very different cultures. However as one looks into the theory more carefully, it can be seen that

definitions of what constitutes mental illness, and what to do about it, are heavily affected by cultural standards.

Consider the difference between the twentieth-century programs of existentialist psychology and humanist psychology, as described by Millon. These two traditions have almost exactly the same intellectual roots, developing out of the existentialist philosophy of Kierkegaard, Sartre, and the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger. The two traditions also have the same aims for psychology: not so much as ‘curing’ mental illness, but enabling any human being

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to achieve their greatest potential in living a meaningful life. However existentialist psychology developed primarily in Europe, whereas humanistic psychology was American. This led to distinct differences in what they aimed for on behalf of their patients, simply because the situations of the two places gave different views on life:

The existential tradition in Europe has always emphasized human limitations and the tragic dimensions of existence. Perhaps it has done so because Europeans have had a greater familiarity with geographic and ethnic confinement, with war, death and an uncertain existence. The United States (and the humanistic psychology it spawned) bathed in a zeitgeist of expansiveness, optimism, limitless horizons, and pragmatism ... the European focus is on limits, on facing and taking into one's self the anxiety of uncertainty and nonbeing, they Humanistic psychologists, on the other hand, speak less of limits and contingency than of developmental potential, less of acceptance than of awareness, less of anxiety than of peak experiences, and

oceanic oneness, less of life meaning than of self-realization.⁵

Mental illness is essentially being unacceptably different from the rest of society, and so of course whatever society regards as normal is highly important in making such judgements. Indeed, these days that is recognised openly. Mental illness is non-normal behaviour, and what counts as normal depends on what the majority thinks—or rather, what the majority of the influential people think. This is not to say that theories of mental illness are entirely relative, something quickly stressed by the writers of textbooks:

Social science offers two ways of distinguishing between the normal and abnormal. One emphasized by sociologists and anthropologists considers the question meaningful only as it applies to a particular culture at a particular time: abnormal is that which deviates from society's norms. The other, stressed more by psychologists, sets as the basic criterion the individual's well-being and the maladaptiveness of his or her behaviour.⁶

Nonetheless, despite the dismissal of what sociologists and anthropologists think, the psychologists' definition still relies on such relative terms as 'well-being' and 'maladaptiveness'.

Consider the following definition of what psychotherapy is meant to achieve:

The goal of all forms of psychotherapy is to enable a person to satisfy his legitimate needs for affection, recognition and sense of mastery through helping him to correct the maladaptive attitudes, emotions, and behaviour that impede the attainment of

such satisfactions. In so doing, psychotherapy seeks to improve his social interactions and reduce his distress, while at the same time helping him to accept the suffering that is an inevitable aspect of life and, when possible, to utilize it in the service of personal growth.⁷

What counts as a "legitimate need", "maladaptive", "satisfactions", "distress" and "personal growth", not to mention what level of suffering is accepted as "inevitable", are all concepts highly dependent on societal values and to a large extent on the available technology. In a society where antibiotics, corrective surgery and analgesia are widely available; where there is enough wealth that the average person is never in lack of food, clothing or shelter; where the nature of life is to be bombarded with a huge choice of luxury goods and lifestyles, the idea of 'inevitable suffering' is highly refined.

This is not to condemn all modern psychotherapy; in many ways, the aims of all therapies are relative to current standards. But when it comes to mental health, there seems to be something that Christians in particular can offer. That is, there is a Christian understanding of what it is to be 'in right mind', to be mentally healthy and thinking in the right way about the world, that is truly universal. For our aim is to become like Christ, the only truly right-thinking human who ever lived.

There is a strong theme of mental renewal in the New Testament. We are saved to have right relationship with God, and our thinking is a crucial part of this. The unsaved are lost "in the futility of their minds", Ephesians 4:17 tells us; they are "darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart". The sinfulness of humankind inevitably means that people "become futile in their thinking", and God as a result "gave them up to a debased mind" (Romans 1:21, 28). Christians, on the other hand, are to be "renewed in the spirit of your minds" (Ephesians 4:23) and "transformed by the renewal of your mind" (Romans 12:2).

This is congruent with the idea of wisdom, a significant theme of the Bible. For in the understanding of wisdom we have

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the idea not only of right relationship with God, and a moral renewal that makes us capable of obeying his righteous commands, but also of right understanding of the world. With the help of the Holy Spirit, we can understand things that the unredeemed mind simply cannot comprehend, “for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Corinthians 2:15). Knowing the mind of Christ, we have the capacity to aim for right thinking and judgement about the world. Also in the teaching of the Bible we have God’s revealed wisdom—that is, in the things the Bible addresses, we have the *content* of right thinking.

The above paragraphs are only a very preliminary venture into this territory. It is by no means a fully worked-out thesis; but it seems to be a fruitful line of inquiry. This, it would seem, is a far richer state of mind to aim for than the secular ‘mental health’.

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Does Christianity make you sick?

There is also another aspect of the histories of psychological theory and counselling that strikes the reader.

The history of psychiatry, even more than most history of science, is generally told as the story of the triumph of naturalistic, scientific theories and methods over the barbaric ideas of religion. Where once mental problems were regarded as demonic in origin and treated with cruelty and punishment, gradually people became enlightened to see that they were natural in origin and to be treated by medical science.

The earliest conceptions of the mind and its disorders started with a sequence of three prescientific paradigms that may broadly be considered *sacred*: the animistic, the mythological, and the demonological. These prehistoric phases of history slowly came to an end with the emergence of philosophically sophisticated and medically logical approaches. Certain beliefs dominated every historical period ultimately winning

out over previously existing conceptions while retaining elements of the old.⁸

The three sacred paradigms, we note, were not logical or sophisticated by definition. It was scientific medicine that achieved that. The scientific nature of modern psychotherapy is seen by most writers on psychology as extremely important. To be scientific is to be the good guy. As another introductory text has it,

Although there are a bewildering number of schools of psychotherapy, each proclaiming its own special virtues, viewed from a historical-cultural standpoint, all can be subsumed under two categories: the religio-magical and the empirical-scientific.⁹

There is no room for doubt in the reader’s mind which is the better way.

However, the contemporary world of psychotherapy (as distinct from experimental

psychology) in fact struggles to be scientific. Consider the following quotation, taken from the preface of the same book as the above:

Psychotherapy ... is a nebulous term with widely differing connotations; the controversy over its value is still with us; dozens of psychotherapy schools, each with its own theories on psychopathology (often contradictory) and particular set of techniques, compete for the trainee’s attention; and there is no apparent link between research and clinical practice—psychotherapists are influenced only occasionally by the results of research. Overwhelmingly, theory determines practice and works vigorously to protect itself from forces that might lead to change.¹⁰

It seems that cherished therapeutic theories are slow to react to experimental findings, and are largely self-protecting; this is not scientific. The above description fits very well into philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn’s ‘pre-science’, before a general paradigm emerges. There is nothing

inherently wrong with this; it is inevitable as we struggle to understand what is an extremely difficult subject, the human mind. However it does temper some of the dogma about the virtues of ‘scientific’ psychotherapy over discarded ‘religious’ beliefs.

The problem of anti-religious bias also manifests itself in a radical ignorance of what ‘religion’ is.

Religio-magical therapies are grounded in what has been termed the perennial philosophy [citation of Julian Huxley’s work]. This underlies all major religions and avers that humans are manifestations of the ‘Divine Ground’ which links us into a kind of seamless web. Each individual, as it were, contains the universe. The conventional or sensory reality in which we live is only one of reality. Health is a harmonious integration of forces within the person coupled with a corresponding harmony in his relations with other persons and the spirit world. Illness is a sign that he has transgressed the rules of nature or society, thereby disrupting his internal harmony and creating vulnerability to harmful influences from other persons and spirits.¹¹

As any reader familiar with Julian Huxley’s work would know, the ‘Perennial philosophy’ is a nice idea that endeavours to prove that all religions are really the same. But as the above quotation displays, it really describes none of the major religions. There are echoes of Hinduism and Buddhism, with some neoplatonic and animistic ideas thrown in—but this is entirely deficient as a description of any one ‘religious’ approach to illness.

Ironically, one of the complaints about the treatment of mental problems these days is that the number of things expected to be cured by mental sciences has exploded far beyond the capacity of resources to cope.

We turn to the psychosciences to run our private relationships, to raise our children, to try our criminals, to interpret our works of art, to improve our sex lives, to tell us why we are unhappy, depressed, anxious, or fatigued. Over the past few generations, an immense professional structure has developed to cater to our elaborate and expanding psychological needs.¹²

With so many ‘normal’ people seeking psychological help, the system is overwhelmed, and it is inevitably the seriously ill—the

hardest cases—that are left out. But is this expansion of the domain of psychoscience at all surprising? Having been thoroughly taught that mental problems are not spiritual and cannot have a religious answer; that the place to find the answers is naturalistic science, not anywhere else; is it surprising that now people turn to science for everything? With no wider framework to understand what we are as people, how to relate, what our lives mean, why there is suffering in the world, we have deprived ourselves of understanding of what are just normal aspects of living in a fallen world. Especially with no doctrine of suffering, we cannot understand why we feel unhappy or why bad things happen. Naturalistic apologists have urged us to turn to science for all our answers; it is not surprising that people now do so, even when they are not actually ‘sick’ at all.

The Christian response

With such fierce anti-Christian opinions colouring psychological theorising, it is not surprising that some Christian psychologists have reacted to secular psychology rather negatively. This is not universal, but while some Christian psychologists recognise the value of many secular techniques, there is also a great deal of suspicion about secular psychology in Christian circles.

One author who has provided a helpful overview of Christian approaches to psychology is Tim Keller.¹³ He sees four basic ‘models’ for the relationship between Christianity and psychology, as revealed in the Christian psychological/counselling literature.

His first model he calls the ‘levels of explanation’ model. He sees its basic premise as:

Psychology and biblical theology deal with different dimensions of human life, use different methods of study, ask different questions, and really look at two different things. The Bible looks at the human spirit and relationship to God. Psychology looks at how the human brain functions, how people adapt and react to natural and social environments. Psychology and biblical theology therefore provide insights which are supplemental but not contradictory to one another.

Keller criticises this model as separating the two areas too much.

Actually, modern psychology and biblical theology *do* look at the same things—motivation, coping with suffering and abuse, anger, worry, fear, meaningless in life, and so on. ... Keep in mind that this approach, which tends to rankle Christians with a high view of the Bible, is mainly held by Christian academics as a way they do their research. It enables them to simply publish their research findings without having to run them through a biblical critique.

Certainly Keller is right in pointing out the overlap between psychology and the Bible, but there certainly is a difference in focus. Biblical theology is about God’s plan of salvation; along the way it provides a good deal of information about people, but this is incidental rather than something ‘looked at’. The fact that Christian academics separate their Christian beliefs from their academic research is hardly unique to psychologists; it is a coping mechanism used by Christian academics in any field.

With no doctrine of suffering, we cannot understand why we feel unhappy or why bad things happen.

Keller then looks at the ‘Integration model’. The basic premise here is that psychology and biblical theology are both looking at the same thing—human nature, what’s gone wrong with it, and what can put it right. However, the two fields use different tools. Psychology uses general revelation, theology special revelation. This sounds fine, but Keller considers it basically meaningless as a position, for it offers no specific criticisms of psychology or directions in counselling.

Keller’s third model is the ‘Christian psychology’ model. Here the basic premise is:

What is your foundational working theory of what is wrong with human beings and what will put them right? This is your theory-narrative of human nature. That is what fundamentally controls your counselling and that is what should come from biblical theology....[psychological] research proceeds from fundamental philosophical/religious assumptions about human nature...Christian Psychology, therefore, insists that counselors must have strong, biblical-theological theory-

narrative as their foundation. a Christian understanding of creation, fall and redemption, of sin and grace.

This is obviously Keller’s preferred position, as he does not offer any real criticism of the approach. Indeed, as far as this brief description goes, it seems to be praiseworthy, although of course we would need more detail for a proper critique. One important aspect of this model is its focus not just on theory but on underlying assumptions.

The fourth model is what Keller calls the ‘Biblical counselling model’, and this is the negative end of the spectrum.

The Biblical Counselling movement is united by the conviction that modern psychology brings with it underlying, non-empirical, quasi-religious theory-narratives of human nature that don’t fit the biblical revelation.

Keller writes that there are older and newer models, but basically this approach rejects much modern psychology. His criticism is

that under this model there is too much of a tendency simply to call people to repent without enough appreciation of real psychological problems.

It is helpful to see that Christians have reacted to modern psychology in a number of ways, from positive to negative. The focus is obviously on therapeutic psychology; it is important to remember that ‘psychology’ involves a lot more than this. Many writers speak of ‘modern psychology’ as almost synonymous with ‘counselling theory’. This becomes relevant when we consider sentences such as “psychology and biblical theology are both looking at the same thing—human nature, what’s gone wrong with it, and what can put it right”. We have already noted that actually biblical theology is not ‘looking’ at these issues, although we gather a great deal of incidental material in the pages of the Bible. We should also note that psychology is not ‘looking’ at just what is wrong with people and how to fix it, either. Psychology



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Secular views see the normal person as one who is psycho

as it now exists in universities around the world is the study of how the mind works, normally. It seeks to provide a model of the human brain as it is, in a normal person; the assumption is, then, that nothing has ‘gone wrong’ in general with human nature. Specific people have specific problems; even a vast number of people may have problems, but psychology as a discipline is not simply problem-centred. There is a difference between psychology as an experimental study of the human mind, and psychotherapy as various ways to help people who appear to have mental problems.

That is, there seem to be two levels of discussion. To understand the relationship between Christianity and secular psychology, it seems necessary first to understand what does the Bible say about how a person works, and what psychological theories say about it. The second level of discussion is to consider how a biblical view works out in practice, and how that interacts with a various kinds of psychotherapy.

Both levels of discussion are intricate and still in need of further research. On the theoretical level, the language of soul and

spirit in the Bible has attracted all sorts of imported, neo-Platonic ideas over the centuries and needs to be clarified. Recently in the pages of *Case* I reviewed a book edited by Malcolm Jeeves, *From cells to souls—and beyond: changing portraits of human nature*. This addressed precisely this theoretical issue: to what extent do the biological/neurobiological sciences help us understand issues of personhood and soul? I noticed that although all the writers are highly intelligent researchers who have thought deeply about the issue, there were significant communication problems. Each writer has to struggle to define words such as ‘soul’, ‘person’, ‘mind’ and so on, without a common knowledge of history of discussion or accepted usage.

As I pointed out in that review, if I had to construct from these essays the syllabus for ‘The basic philosophy and theology you need to know in order to discuss issues of mind and soul’, we would have a very confusing and eclectic mix of sources, covering Aristotle and Plato, medieval theologians, mystics, Greek immortal souls, Cartesian dualism and modern monism.

Even if we sort all that out, it is just background to developing a biblical critique of actual psychological theories. Keller’s paper offers an initial, basic critique of some particular ideas that have come from secular science; for instance, that cognitive therapy, while effective in some areas, suffers from isolating thinking as the primary factor in mental health; other views isolate emotions or will. In general, secular views see the normal human as psychologically healthy; this does not include a notion of sin, or of the purpose for the human psyche.

Then the next step is to consider how Christians are best to make use of any of these secular tools, and to what extent they will help in ministry. Keller seems to lean towards the ‘Christian psychology’ model, and I would agree with him. In practice, it would seem to be that the goal of pastoring people is to see them in right relation with God, which is the only way to find ultimate psychological health—that is, in heaven, when we are remade in the image of Christ, the perfect human. Before heaven no one will have perfect psychological health, but in many ways counselling techniques might

help with the nuts and bolts of getting there.

Alan Craddock, emeritus professor of psychology at the University of Sydney, is very helpful here.¹⁴ His model seems similar to Keller's 'Christian psychology model'; he calls it 'complementary'. Craddock talks about counselling being primarily about developing insight; that is, helping the person to understand better how they are thinking and feeling, and why. Craddock says, "My experience as a counselling psychologist has led me to the conclusion that one of the most powerful parts of the counselling process involves facilitation of insight through the working relationship formed with a client."

In this way, Craddock is able to distinguish between the roles of psychological and biblical knowledge in helping a person. I can imagine this working out in particular pastoral problems. So, for instance, a person comes to the pastor with a problem — 'I'm

effort to be far more effective.

Craddock's ideas suggest a profitable way forward. There are ways in which the discoveries of psychology can be useful tools in ministry, as part of exhorting a flock towards greater understanding and obedience to God. This, I think, is not to claim too much for psychology. As various authors point out, there is a great deal of practical insight in the Bible so that a person steeped in the Scriptures can learn to do things that, in effect, mirror psychological techniques — filling one's mind with profitable thoughts and so on. What a science of psychology with counselling applications can do is to distil, by observation, the most useful of such techniques.

So secular psychology, and secular counselling practices, can provide significantly useful tools for Christian ministry. It's easy enough to say that. The problem, of course, is distinguishing the tools that are useful from

privilege of redemption by the one perfect human being, and we are being remade to be like him.

It always struck me as odd that in the science and religion literature, physics is the dominant science for developing models of interaction, because it is the hardest of sciences. I would have thought that psychology was much more important, and a better contender for science/religion discussion. For while God did indeed create and maintains atoms and quarks and electrons, the most significant part of his creation is humanity.

The blinkered naturalistic views that see the story of psychology as the story of an escape from Christian 'superstition' need not deter us from taking advantage of the riches of psychological research. As Christians, we are in an excellent position to study and understand people—we have the motivation not only of caring for others and wishing to

logically healthy, without a view of sin or human purpose.

forever losing my temper and shouting at people'. From the Bible, the pastor can clearly counsel that this is wrong behaviour, and the person should try to stop it with prayerful willpower. At the same time, tools from psychology might be very useful in that effort. The person can be helped to understand 'What is my self-talk at the time I get angry?', 'What emotional reactions from my past have I not properly understood and dealt with?', 'What behavioural cues can I change in myself to help me control my angry outbursts?'

In this way, both the moral directives of the Bible and the psychological techniques of counselling are working in the same direction. We know that this person must try to control his anger. But if he does not understand why he gets angry, or what is happening when he gets angry, he may well be trying in a totally wrong way. Effort alone will not necessarily create right actions (although of course the Bible itself, with the help of the Holy Spirit, contains guidance). A child learning to ride a bicycle may be putting tremendous effort into pushing the pedals backwards. Some helpful instruction about pushing forwards can enable the

those that come imbued with an ungodly ethic or unbiblical assumptions. This seems to me to be where the real work lies, and deals in specific claims and theories, not models of how psychology as a whole relates to the Bible as a whole.

It will surely be especially profitable to explore psychology and biblical ideas of humanity. I say especially so, because humans are the peak of God's creation; we are in the image of God; we have the incredible

help them, but of knowing that God created humans and cherishes them as the peak of his creation. We have every reason to want a thorough understanding of humans and their value, and we know the context into which to place our knowledge. ©

END NOTES

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