

Finding the Fit: An Eastern Orthodox Approach to Pastoral Counseling

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The author presents pastoral counseling from an Eastern Orthodox perspective, which includes both science as well as noetic encounters with the uncreated energies of divine grace that evidence the presence of Christ. Pastoral counseling involves being present with and listening to others with the same ascetical sobriety, repentance, humility, and inner silence that one brings to God in prayer. The encounter is a reciprocal process affecting both counselor and client, ultimately becoming trialogical, when hearts “become flame” as on the Emmaus way. Healing and illumination by Christ, who appears in “between,” affects both client and counselor for whom therapy is part of a spiritual formation process.

A new commandment I give to you that you love one another as I have loved you.

—John 13:34

The most important problem for Orthodox theology will be to reconcile the cosmic vision of the Fathers with a vision which grows out of the results of the natural sciences... Theology today must remain open to embrace both humanity and the cosmos.

—Dumitru Staniloae (cited by Nesteruk, 2003, p. 6)

The one who enters through the gate is the shepherd of the flock. The gatekeeper lets him in, the sheep hear his voice, one by one he calls his own sheep and leads them out. When he has brought out his flock, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow because they know his voice. They never follow a stranger but run away from him; they do not recognize the voice of strangers.

—John 10:2-5

The ancient Greek inventor Archimedes is said to have boasted, “Give me a fixed point and a lever long enough, and I can move the world.” When considering pastoral care and counseling from an Eastern Orthodox perspective, I begin with St. Gregory the Theologian’s dogmatic formulation of God’s co-suffering love for humanity in Christ: “Whatever has not been assumed cannot be healed.” This becomes our fixed point. The lever is the combined action of the uncreated divine energies of the Holy Trinity and the created energies of human persons working together synergistically in the call and response of triologue¹ which not only “moves the world.” but transforms and redeems it as well. Humanity cannot be spiritually healed independently of God by any form of technique or humanly-derived science. Neither will God transform someone magically through communion without that person’s free assent and cooperation. Pastoral counseling is, therefore, a triologue of love whose transformative power and meaning arises from Christ’s presence in “between” counselor and client, which ultimately changes both.

Existential and moral considerations

The pastoral counseling relationship involves psychological and existential dimensions related to freedom of choice in specific and unique circumstances, as well as a larger ontological dimension stemming from the personhood and truth of God in Christ. Together these dimensions constitute the arena of human struggle involving the possibility of *Theosis*² and Eucharistic Communion which result from the encounter of the uncreated Triune God and created humankind. Given the more expansive anthropological vision Jordan (2008) has suggested that “all psychotherapy is clinical theology,” psychology and medicine can reasonably be viewed as branches of applied theology and whatever methodologies are employed should always therefore involve “testing the spirits” to see if they match the immense potential for life that is offered humanity by Jesus Christ—lest pastoral counseling be reduced to mere medicine and psychotherapy which in and of themselves can at best help physically and psychologically, but are unable to rise above the normative ends of a fallen creation..

Browning, (1976) put forth a similar thesis when he suggested that there is a moral context to all acts of care. Whether in professional pastoral counseling or ordained pastoral ministry, there remains a need for a theological plumb line to assess their validity. “Pastoral care and counseling must be able to show what is ‘Christian’ and ‘pastoral’ about what the minister—or the pastoral specialist—does when he/she offers services. And pastoral care must be able to show that what it has borrowed from other disciplines will not corrupt the essential thrust of hits own unique perspective.” (Browning, p. 19)

The importance of this discernment was underscored a few years later when Bellah, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton (1981) observed that American religious life had over the past half-century become increasingly a culture of the therapeutic—reinterpreting the meaning and value of love, marriage,

family, personal growth, and commitment in highly individualistic ways that often departed significantly from traditional Judeo-Christian values.

The quasi-therapeutic blandness that has afflicted much of mainline Protestant religion at the parish level for over a century cannot effectively withstand the competition of the more vigorous forms of radical religious individualism, with their claims of dramatic self-realization, or the resurgent religious conservatism that spells out clear, if simple, answers in an increasingly bewildering world (Bellah et al., p.238)

In some ways, within mainline Protestant churches, psychology has been a kind of Trojan horse subtly changing Christianity from within,³ after having been embraced for its obvious ability to offer consolation and assistance to persons malnourished by an impoverished civil religion.

A decade later, an article appeared in *American Psychologist* suggesting that “psychology is, in American society, filling the void created by the waning influence of religion in answering questions of ultimacy and providing moral guidance” (Jones, 1994, p. 192). This was particularly interesting in that the author also noted that surveys consistently revealed mental health professionals as “an atypical subpopulation in America today, with lower levels of religious participation and higher levels of agnosticism, skepticism, and atheism than the general population” (p. 192). Only 24% of clinical and counseling psychologists in another survey reported belief in God, and only 26% stated they valued religion as “very important,” (Pargament, 2007). This is not an altogether surprising finding given the fact that mental health counselors in general have received little or no training in addressing the religious and spiritual dimensions of human concerns. Even though evidence suggests a significant relationship between the religious integration of the therapist and their capacity for clinical empathy (Muse, Estadt, Greer & Cheston, 1992), surveys of training directors of counseling psychology programs in the United States reveal that less than one out of five programs even offered a course on religion and spirituality. (Shulte, Skinner, & Claiborn, 2002)

So the question arises, “As an Orthodox Christian counselor, what moral universe do I serve and how does it influence my practice of counseling?” How important is it to make clear with those who seek our services as mental health practitioners, the moral and religious universe we ultimately serve in our life and work as a part of informed consent since it is likely to be influential in subtle ways?

Even with informed consent, there remains an on-going stance toward others and the world in Christ which has a reality far beyond the counselor’s personal belief system and which may or may not be explicitly part of the counseling relationship, but will nevertheless affect it. For the Christian: there is, in the ultimate reality of things, no non-spiritual life that is closed off to the Holy Spirit... The world that

is called *profane* is in reality a *profaned* world and man is responsible for that. We have expelled God from this world: we do it every day. We chase him from public life by a Machiavellian form of separation between our private lives – pious and good – and the domains of politics, commerce, science, technology, love, culture and work, where everything is allowed. All these domains of human work depend upon the creative work of man, seized, modeled, and inspired by the Spirit of God. (Bobrinsky, 2006, p 192, emphasis added)

The person of Christ is central to both the counselor who functions pastorally in her/his role of psychotherapist, as well as in the way in which counseling and psychotherapy are conducted. Staniloae’s challenge that I quoted above (cited by Nesteruk, 2003), to unite the revealed patristic cosmic vision derived from the noetic encounter with divine grace, and the knowledge base of the human sciences obtained by empirical study, remains a vital one. Both Christian faith and the human sciences contribute to what it means for counseling to be pastoral. All would agree that counselors should be competent and skillfully trained in all scientific methods of healing. But Orthodoxy goes a step further, holding that there is in fact a “science” that pertains to and includes the noetically-perceived world of divine Grace, and this involves *ortho* (correct) praxis and *doxa* (glory/worship). Not any old form of either will do.⁴

Person of the therapist as the source of integration of spiritual and psychological

The unity between these two is clearly reflected in Orthodox tradition by a number of wonder-working, illumined, God-bearing *gerondas*⁵ or elders. Their encounters with those who seek their counsel and come to them for confession, are marked by clear evidence of possessing the charism of the Holy Spirit who works synergistically through them in ways that reveals the hidden inner thoughts of persons to them, heals diseases, and brings people to profound repentance on a frequent basis.⁶ While it is true that the “Spirit blows where it will” and remains ever out of control of human will, God is indeed responsive to the prayers of those who have reached *theosis*, and like Moses, St. Paul and the Apostles, speak with God and the Holy Spirit person to person.

This is not to say that God does not act in the lives and relationships of persons who have not yet reached *theosis*. But the fact that it happens more consistently and at far greater depth, through those whose hearts have been deeply illumined by grace, according to Orthodox understanding signifies a *qualitative* difference between those “God-bearing” dispassionate souls and those in whose lives unhealed passions continue to fragment the self’s motivations, causing blindness to the spiritual eye. This suggests at the very least, that the primary training ground of pastoral counselors and caregivers is the religious foundations of repentance, humility, obedience of ascetical struggle, worship, prayer, confession, and

love that form the person of the therapist in the image and likeness of Christ. This formation is the heart of an Orthodox approach to Christian life and also the lynchpin or central hub around which all other clinical theory and practice of science are integrated.

To borrow a modern analogy, we could say that Orthodox Christianity has measured effectiveness empirically, not so much through brief, time-limited, double-blind, randomized, controlled studies, but rather over millennia-long periods of history replete with replicability of numerous examples, throughout varying historical epochs, over huge cross-cultural catchment areas involving billions of subjects. In this way, a recognizable pattern of human development and Christian formation is detailed throughout Church history.⁷ In addition, the detailed patristic writings of illumined persons bearing the fruits of Orthodox spiritual life reveal quite accurate observations of the various states of the inner world of persons entering into life in Christ through struggle with the passions, watchfulness, repentance, and deep interior prayer of silence. Orthodox Christian history in this respect constitutes a virtual two-thousand year “therapy trial” far more rigorous and comprehensive than the research for current evidence-based approaches stemming from time-limited studies pharmaceutical companies used to get new medicines on the market that are barely better than placebos.⁸

Documents and writings of the Church, from the Gospels to the ancient desert abbas (fathers) and ammas (mothers) along with modern saints, acquire respect as faithful guides to life in Christ in so far as they embody the same life found in the Bible which the Holy Spirit has confirmed through the communal witness of the Church. These all become part of the on-going empirical validation or “canon” of the Church’s therapeutic process. Heresy can be viewed as a blueprint for a form of treatment which is incomplete and therefore likely to lead to harmful, different, or no results at all.

Elder Archimandrite Sophrony (1977) identifies the traditional Orthodox Christian spiritual disciplines that support the Holy Spirit’s work of purifying the heart, as being integral to the formation of persons capable of accurately diagnosing and offering care to suffering persons. After long struggle, it may become possible according to God’s grace, that in prayer: eventually the mind sees not the physical heart, but that which is happening within it—the feelings that creep in and the mental images that approach from without....When the attention of the mind is fixed in the heart it is possible to control what happens in the heart, and the battle against passions assumes a rational character. The enemy is recognized and can be driven off by the power of the Name of Christ. With this ascetic feat the heart becomes so highly sensitive, so discerning, that eventually when praying for anyone the heart can tell almost at once the state of the person prayed for. (pp 112-114)

One such illumined person of recent memory was Elder Porphyrios, who served for many years as

chaplain of the Polyclinic Hospital in Athens. Elder Porphyrios began his training in prayer, worship, obedience, and asceticism as a monk on Mount Athos. Like many wonder-working saints, he never received a formal academic education, yet he was consulted by physicians at the hospital and persons from all over the world for his clairvoyance, healing prayer, and spiritual guidance as a result of the Holy Spirit’s illumination. A priest (Yiannitsiotis, 2001) describes the reason for his “initial consultation” with the Elder in Athens.

I was going through a trial that I had never experienced before... of great length and great intensity, which threatened to tear me apart both physically and spiritually. I was vulnerable because the wound came from somewhere where I had innocently expected support or, at the very least, understanding. I was at a complete dead end, and I did not know what to do, because I saw a totally unacceptable solution in all the choices open to me. (p. 28)

Things grew worse for him, and he could not separate the psychological elements from the spiritual. He was prepared to suffer his situation, whatever the cost, if it was God’s will, but “if it came from the devil, I was determined to fight it to the end” (Yiannitsiotis, p. 28). His spiritual father, a humble man of discernment and love, suggested to him what must be done, but he had trouble accepting the solution. Given the difficulty of the dilemma, he suggested, “The person capable of answering your difficult question is Elder Porphyrios. I don’t know what you’ll have to do, ask, phone, search, until you find him. He will solve the puzzle for you. Afterwards, come back and we’ll talk about it again. Until then I can’t tell you anything on the matter” (p. 29).

The priest was skeptical. He didn’t want his own freedom tied down, but his spiritual father assured him that the elder never did this to anyone. He had some difficulty finding Elder Porphyrios who had no permanent address at the time. Weeks passed without any success in locating him, although he had sent word to him through several persons who knew the elder. Then one day he noticed an unusual inner state.

Late one afternoon, as I was walking home from work engulfed in the sorrow that had burdened my soul for months, I suddenly felt something unexpected within me. The clouds of sorrow dissolved, a bright warmth comforted me with calmness, and I felt like singing.

I secretly made the sign of the cross over myself, again and again and whispered full of disquiet: “Lord have mercy!” I knew myself well enough in such situations. These kinds of problems needed time for me to get over them; the sorrow always declined gradually. Since I was at the very center of my trial, what did this sudden and unexpected shift from sorrow to joy mean? However, a few minutes later, that joy vanished, and the sorrow returned.

This strange happening was to repeat itself in the days that followed. The mystery was solved when I was informed much later that my stranger, who was to become an exceptional friend, had contacted the Elder and had given him my name, and it had been placed on his prayer list (p. 30).

He finally was able to get an appointment with the elder at the hospital some time later and describes his initial apprehension and skepticism. "Various emotions inundated me on the way: Hopeful expectation, uneasiness, curiosity, reservation. What could an elderly poorly educated monk possibly say about my problem?" (p. 30). But this was quickly overcome by the grace that he experienced in the elder's presence.

I arrived at the chapel and waited. When my turn came, I went up to the confession room. A small-framed little old father was waiting for me. I was impressed as soon as he approached me. I kissed his hand and sat opposite him. He looked at me from behind his glasses with a couple of bright blue and lively eyes. Throughout that moment, I felt that his gaze was piercing my soul. I felt that this person knew me already. I noticed, at the same time, that his lips were whispering something, and I realized that he was praying continuously. He gave the impression that he both was and was not present, that he was both here and elsewhere at the same time.

He opened his mouth, and I heard his voice for the first time – refined, calm and charming. "Well then, what do you want to tell me?"

I remembered my spiritual father's advice and put my problem to him very briefly, no longer than five minutes and then I fell quiet. The Elder listened thoughtfully and sighed every now and then. I had the feeling that he was suffering my pain more than I was. Then I was bombarded by a host of novel surprises. The Elder analyzed my character with great care. He described and gave reasons for both my faults and my merits with such accuracy that even my own parents could not have come close to it. I saw my own self for the very first time, as I really am and not as I would like to be. This self-revelation was a moving experience for me. It gave me the impression that I was born, or rather re-born. Afterwards the Elder came to my problem. He shed light on it and explained it from all points of view. Both from my point of view and from that of the other people who were involved. With great sympathy, he pointed the correct and mistaken moves taken by myself and by the others, whose characters he also described. Then he assured me that the event that led to the dead-end dilemma was a temptation from the devil. He advised me about the way to face it. My spiritual father had suggested the same method.

Then he caught hold of my hand and took my pulse and pointed out my bodily sicknesses. This diagnosis was a summary of the sicknesses discovered by my doctor years before; it was also an explanation for them. Finally, he blessed me by making the sign of the cross over my head and said with much love,

"Well, get going now and we'll talk again the next time we meet."

I got up, kissed his hand. Overcome with emotions of wonder, peace and joy, I went towards the door. There, I turned right around and stood still, looking at him as though thunderstruck and trying to comprehend all the unbelievable things that had just happened to me – things that challenged my innate disbelief and rationalism. The Elder looked at me, smiled and said, "Why did you stop? Just do what I told you." I replied, "Elder, I didn't stop because I felt it was difficult to do what you told me, but rather to express my surprise. What you have told me to do is exactly what my spiritual father advised me to do. But, while I had some inner difficulty with him, with you, the way you explain the problems, I have no difficulty at all with continuing, not in thought, not in my heart, not in will. On the contrary, I feel that I would have rejected all other solutions other than the one you gave. It fits me perfectly, like a glove. I shall carry it out with pleasure." A broad grin lit up the Elder's face, which shined with joy, and added: "Go, go on now."

I bowed to him and left. As I went on my way, spiritually enchanted by the discovery of a real *staretz*,⁹ I realized the most wonderful thing of all the things that he had surprisingly revealed to me. With unrivalled pastoral skill, the Elder was able to calm my troubled soul, in a brief amount of time, and to make me joyfully desire what I had rejected just a short while before: God's will regarding my complicated problem. (p. 30)

A human heart not illumined by Grace cannot "see" or listen to the heart of a suffering person in the same way as one who having experienced *theosis*, is consistently humbled, contrite, and filled by the presence of Christ. Human science unaided by Grace, no matter how advanced it is, cannot come as exact to finding the precise *fit* that is needed for a person, as can the Holy Spirit. This is not a justification or excuse, as some use it, to refuse psychotherapy and human help unless it comes from a presumed clairvoyant elder. There are many pathologies inherent to such prideful seeking of perfection before being willing to risk vulnerability with another. By the same token, this does not excuse an Orthodox priest or lay counselor, who is not gifted with illumination, from getting appropriate training and supervision in human sciences, proper supervision and psychotherapeutic investigation of one's own issues, to be able to offer all that one can to suffering persons by way of up-to-date scientific understanding, as well as humble compassionate regard and trust in God as the healer. Good psychotherapy is helpful to repentance.

The "science" of spiritual formation

In light of repeated experiences of clairvoyance and miraculous interventions that occur throughout Orthodox history up to the present day as in this example, it is reasonable to ask if there is anything about how counseling and psychotherapy are conducted,

that lends itself to being corrected or improved by being informed by Orthodox Christian perspectives and being offered by Orthodox counselors formed in Christ through its ethos of worship, prayer, and ascetical self-restraint? Are outcomes better for persons who engage in Orthodox-informed therapeutic practices as compared with those who do not (Vujisic, 2011)? Can it be confirmed that there are significant differences in outcomes among those seeking healing from God through persons who are being themselves healed and illumined in Christ? If the answer to these questions is that it makes no difference whether one is Orthodox or not, illumined or not, whether one worships and prays or not, etc. then it becomes difficult to argue that Orthodoxy (or any other Christian theological perspective) has any relevant meaning.

The test of truth, as for medicine and all science, is ultimately a practical one. Does it work? This is the question that is vital to be asked in terms of Christianity itself, “for if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised and our faith is futile” (I Cor 15:17). And if those who are in Christ are not illumined, then our worship and prayer are useless. If illumination and *theosis* are nothing more than mere assent to various historical facts and philosophical presuppositions, and do not arise from an encounter with the uncreated God, then they have no power to transform and could reasonably be viewed as artifacts of a pre-scientific era we would do well to be free of entirely.

Dogmatic considerations

The Eastern Orthodox Church views sin primarily as a combination of spiritual and mental illness along with what could be termed a spiritual developmental immaturity which needs life-long treatment. Christianity is above all a love relationship that becomes a path or “way” of healing and transformation through personal encounter which cannot be reduced to legalistic formulations and ‘justifications’ by logical propositions to which one intellectually or emotionally assents, as has become common in the West. Neither can it be reduced to psychological development alone, but requires an encounter with God that goes beyond psychology as in the example above.

God is not viewed as a righteous judge who must be appeased for human sin so much as a Lover who offers His own life as an invitation for humanity to do the same in return, thereby coming to be *person* as God is *Person*, and to love as God loves. This is the process of sanctification known in Orthodoxy as deification by grace or *theosis*.

Practically speaking, Romanides (2008), reflecting on the teaching of the Church Fathers, suggests that being mentally and spiritually ill “means your *nous*¹⁰ is full of thoughts...Anyone whose soul has not been purified from the passions¹¹ and who has not reached the state of illumination through the grace of the Holy Spirit is mentally ill” (pp. 23-

24), though not necessarily in a psychiatric sense according to the DSM-IV. St. Basil, in the fourth century, considered the church a hospital and the priests to be therapists of the soul. He created the first modern hospital complete with quality control, a geriatric wing, social services, and sanitation, uniting spiritual care and the best science of the day in the service and care of persons (Miller, 1985). From its beginnings, the church has cooperated with science in a harmonious way that was responsive to both the spiritual and psychological dimensions of human suffering (Larchet, 2002, 2012).

For this reason, in many ways, salvation (*theosis*) is best conveyed in the modern context as being both a medical treatment and a developmental process that unfolds through dialogue of personal encounter between other persons and God. However, this metaphor must not be understood reductionistically as conflating spiritual and psychological realities, which is an epistemological error, but rather as expanding the anthropological view of humankind beyond medicine and psychology, which deal solely with created realities, to include the developmental potentials of salvation that are available only through encounter with the *uncreated* energies of the divine *Persons* of the Holy Trinity..

The Holy Trinity’s uncreated essence is beyond human psychology, beyond all created analogies, and cannot become the object of rational thought. We know the invisible God through faith and obedience to Christ by the witness of the Holy Spirit. These are personal noetic encounters with the uncreated divine energies who are one essence with God the Father,¹² which in turn are expressed existentially through our bodies and feelings in relationship with others and which constitutes our psychological selves. The disciples’ encounter with Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, on the Mount of Transfiguration is an example of this (Lk 9:27-36), as is that between Motovilov, St. Seraphim of Sarov, and the Holy Spirit in the forest of Siberia (Zander, 1975, p. 89ff). Motovilov, who had wanted to be “certain that I am in the Spirit of God” suddenly found himself unable to look at Fr. Seraphim, “because your eyes are flashing like lightning. Your face has become brighter than the sun” (Zander, p. 90). Each of these examples is considered by Eastern Orthodoxy to be experiences of the uncreated light of the Divine presence which is not possible apart from the assistance of the Holy Spirit.

It is ultimately Christ’s own presence in our lives who “treats” and completes our human condition. Knowing about or “believing” things about Jesus’ historical life, while our actual existential engagements on earth remain unaltered, unexamined (lacking continuous on-going repentance) and with the same anthropocentric goals and objectives as before, does not move us beyond self-centered aims within the created world. Additionally, when we refuse to truly encounter any other person, we refuse Christ and our own healing, and full human development is diminished as well. Both are essential, “for the one

who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen” (I Jn 4:20).

The primary core dogmas which are foundational to an Orthodox approach to pastoral counseling are the Holy Trinity and the seamless unity of divine and human natures in Christ. Together, these provide a context and dogmatic plumb line for existential engagement that makes possible the struggle to live the truth of the faith in and through relationship with both the created and uncreated worlds. Intellectual apprehension and consent to verbal formulations of doctrines does not constitute faith. It has been said that the Nicene Creed does not belong to you until you live it. Faith is expressed existentially in love through the call and response of relationship. Truth is a relationship with Christ that must be lived in order to be understood, something that emerges from personal encounter from a depth of heart that is evidenced by “sighs too deep for words” before it ever becomes formulated into concepts. Experience is always I-It; a subject-object representation of what is already past. Or as Soren Kierkegaard observed somewhere, “We live forward but we understand backwards.”

Epistemological considerations

The divine and human natures of Christ seamlessly united in his Person “without division or separation, without confusion or admixture”¹³ provide the bridge for two distinct realms of knowing that are part of pastoral care and counseling. One dimension involves direct noetic perception by means of encounter with the uncreated energies of God. This is the result of the action of the Holy Spirit working in the heart through faith, which is outside of human control, but, as in any love relationship, responsive to human intention and assent.¹⁴ The other has to do with integrating the psychological processes of the created world, such as intuitional, sensual, and irrational ways of knowing, along with the scientist-practitioner’s rational empiricism and clinical theory in the service of attending to the other with vulnerability, humility, and dispassionate love. One is aware of being in the presence of God and guided by Holy Scripture and Patristic witness as one seeks to listen, discern, and respond in love.

The foundation for offering pastoral care and counseling rests with the counselor’s continuous repentance,¹⁵ the necessity for on-going examination of the proverbial “log in one’s eye” from the standpoint not merely of the counselor’s counter-transference, but one’s entire psycho-somatic functioning in relation to God. Ideally speaking, the pastoral counselor seeks to approach each person as it were, “through Christ” with recognition that every personal experience and every theoretical model including the entire experience of the counselor, inevitably distorts and objectifies the other, totalizing and/or deconstructing the other from the uniquely real and particular being he or she is in specific concrete situations, into a kind of abstraction. This is what philosopher Martin Buber calls the relationship of *I-It* (Buber, 1970), which is inevitably

monological. This recognition of the impossibility of fully knowing or encountering the “other” apart from Christ through subjective experience alone, which is inevitably I-It, is consonant with the Orthodox perspective which regards each person as an icon of the Lord so that “as you have done unto the least of these you have done unto me” (Mt 25:40). Just as is the case with God, there is an apophatic dimension to each person whose essential life remains “hid with Christ in God” (Co. 3:3) and ultimately beyond the experience of the counselor. This is a humbling reminder for the necessity of approaching the client prayerfully, with on-going examination of the “log in the therapist’s own eye” as well as an important reminder not to lose people behind diagnostic labels and psychological theories, however useful they may be for organizing data and securing payments from third party insurers.

The plumb line for the pastoral counseling relationship, as interpreted by Holy Scripture, the witness of the Church and Tradition, is Jesus Christ who promises to be present “wherever two or more are gathered in my name.” (Mt. 18:20) in “between” counselor and client.¹⁶ This is the dimension of Buber’s (1970) *I-Thou* relationship which is the larger relational context in which intersubjective dialogue becomes the triad of $\delta\iota\alpha\text{-}\Lambda\omicron\gamma\omicron\varsigma$ (Muse, 2011, 2013)—an encounter of created persons with each other through Christ. In encountering one another, both client and counselor stand before Christ, whose image each one invisibly bears. It is a reminder that ontologically, the counselor is never “above” the other as “judge” but always co-pilgrim in a reciprocal relationship with him or her. As a servant of Christ, the counselor imitates John the Baptist who must “decrease” in order that the recognition of the client being in Christ may “increase.” This is a Copernican revolution in terms of challenging the usual power differential of the “doctor-patient” relationship, just as it is for God in Christ to become human and a servant of all. It is the *kenosis*, or self-emptying of Christ, that makes room for the other to appear. The humility, stillness, and inner silence of the therapist are what make room for the client. Compassion, born of the presence of Christ, is what comprehends a person’s uniqueness. If the client is not for me one to whom I say *Thou*, as through Christ in between us, then I am not yet in right relationship with myself, with the client or with God.

Sola Scriptura and the Person of Christ

While for the Orthodox Church, Holy Scripture is the inspired canonical standard from which Tradition does not depart¹⁷ and provides the basis for most of its worship life, the Church’s understanding of Scripture is situated within a robust epistemological and existential context. The text of the Scripture does not stand alone apart from the experience of personal encounter with Christ and the Church. Scripture does not interpret itself apart from the confirmation of the Holy Spirit alive in the Church through its worship,

mysteries (sacraments), and the witness of those God-illuminated persons throughout the centuries that comprise the “theologians”¹⁸ of Orthodox tradition who have experienced glorification (purification, illumination, and *theosis*).

Romanides (2008) emphasizes the Orthodox approach to Holy Scripture which is careful not to confuse intellectual apprehension of the words of Scripture with the reality of the infusion of divine life to which the words point:

Is there a single Church Father who identified the Holy Scripture with the experience of *Theosis* itself? No, there is not one, because God’s revelation to mankind is the experience of *Theosis*. In fact, since revelation is the experience of *Theosis*, an experience that transcends all expressions and concepts, the identification of Holy Scripture with revelation is, in terms of dogmatic theology, pure heresy (p.109).

Scripture was written by persons who had experienced *theosis*; those who by the power of the Holy Spirit had witnessed the glorified Christ. In the same way, its interpretation must be from those who have encountered Christ. In this sense, the authority of Scripture is charismatically rooted (understood as illumination by Grace within the Body of the Church) rather than based solely and primarily on the text of Scripture. The illumined community of the Church exists *prior to* Scripture whose authority and canonicity is confirmed by the Holy Spirit whom Jesus sent to guide the Church from generation to generation until the end of time (Jn 14:16). Apart from this on-going charismatic life of the Church, Florovsky (1987) points out how:

if we declare Scripture to be self-sufficient, we only expose it to subjective, arbitrary interpretation, thus cutting it away from its sacred source. Scripture is given to us in tradition. It is the vital, crystallizing centre. The Church, as the Body of Christ, stands mystically first and is fuller than Scripture (p. 48).

At the same time, the Church itself, if it were to rely on using human reason alone, apart from the noetically illumined theologians within it, can also fail to interpret Scripture correctly as the historical divisions and excommunication of persons later recognized to be correct attests. Therefore, it is important to apply the same understanding to the theologians of the Church as Romanides (2008) does to Scripture when he writes:

You cannot hope to theologize correctly simply because you have read the Bible and base your theology on the Bible....Holy Scripture can be correctly interpreted only when the experience of illumination of *theosis* accompanies the study or reading of the Bible. Without illumination or *theosis*, Holy Scripture cannot be interpreted correctly (p. 129).

Why is this distinction important for pastoral counseling? Because the same is true for the hermeneutical relationship between the pastoral counselor and the client, who as a “living human document” (Gherkin, 1984), and ultimately

requires the same kind of illumined “interpretation.” Otherwise, we constantly risk normalizing persons and reforming theology according to implicit cultural and psychological norms rather than those of the Christian faith for whom Jesus Christ is the developmental azimuth and “the same yesterday, today and forever” (Heb. 13:8).

Only a relationship of love in Christ preserves both the freedom of the individual person as well as the freedom of the Church as *personal*, rather than being crushed and constrained under the weight of human centered, ideological appropriations of Christ. Where humble personal encounter and repentance leading to illumination are set aside in favor of self-centered human reason, Scripture, Church, doctrine, and ascetical life are all in danger of being ideologically appropriated and absolutized, effectively holding the person of Christ captive to an idolatry that serves untransformed human purposes. This inevitably results in a parallel process of diminishment of personhood for both counselor and client. The Russian theologian Nicholas Berdyaev elaborates on the necessary order:

Everything is decided in the life of the spirit, in the spiritual experience. The Holy Spirit does not act like the forces of nature or the social forces. The hierarchical organization of the Church, which is historically unavoidable, the constitution of the canons, are secondary phenomena, and not paramount. The only paramount phenomenon is the spiritual life and what is discovered in it. It is the spiritual life that keeps the Church sanctified (cited by Struve, 2007).

The importance of this distinction can be seen for example, in the Gospel account where a conflict arose between Jewish scholars who objected to Jesus healing a paralytic on the Sabbath and for calling God his Father, “making himself equal with God” (Jn 5:18). Jesus’ response is quite clear regarding the error of placing Scripture and ideology over persons and failing the test of love lived out in relationship in response:

The testimony which I have is greater than that of John; for the works which the Father has granted me to accomplish, these very works which I am doing, bear me witness that the Father has sent me. His voice you have never heard, his form you have never seen; and you do not have his word abiding in you, for you do not believe him who he has sent. *You search the scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness to me; and yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life* (Jn 5:36-39).

Where freedom is constrained by ideology or by failure to existentially encounter the other, love is not possible. Where love is not lived, truth is absent. If God is not *Person*, belonging to what Zizioulas (2007) calls a “communion of otherness” that exists between the members of the Holy Trinity, showing forth the distinctive uniqueness and unity of each person in

love, then neither can we be. An Orthodox approach to pastoral counseling is possible only by protecting both love and freedom, looking to Christ as the author and finisher of our faith in the context of existential engagement, the personal character of which alone confirms the living presence of the Trinitarian God.

God is a community of Persons who know and are known through love

The ontological heart of the Eastern Church is the *personhood* of the Triune God and a distinction between the energies and personal essence of God in contrast to the Western Church's increasing reliance, after the Enlightenment, on a scholastic approach following Thomas Aquinas, which conflates¹⁹ these, beginning with *substance* and then reasoning by analogy about the nature and existence of God as an object or force through logical categories.

Eastern Orthodoxy's noetic epistemology of personal encounter with God leading to *theosis* resists change based on psychological and social forces, while the West's increasing reliance on a scientific approach delimited by reason, utilizing discursive thought and logical categories to know about God as revealed in Scripture, has led to a variety of theological changes. These differences have resulted in distinctly different approaches to pastoral care and counseling which are evident among the different emphases of various professional organizations for pastoral counselors.

For example, in the American context, the American Association of Pastoral Counselors (AAPC), which had its beginnings in the early 1960's, began with ordained clergy getting clinical training drawing from humanistic, psychoanalytic, and later transpersonal psychological theories to enhance pastoral care and counseling. Beginning as a professional group for specialized ministry within the church, AAPC has since moved to embrace a variety of religious faiths, gradually redefining "pastoral" care and counseling within a pluralistic and inter-religious context, which at times is arguably far removed from its Christian origins, as for example in the case of a Protestant clergyman who presented for therapy with depression and loss of vocational satisfaction.

In listening to his story, it became clear to me that he had been teaching and preaching Jungian psychology in his parish for some time in the guise of Christian faith. Individuation had taken precedence over formation within the communion of Christ. Like Rudolf Bultmann (e.g., 1984), he rejected the literal resurrection of Christ because it was not scientifically tenable. Gradually the people had begun to reject him, and he was depressed. I suggested to him that he had departed from traditional Christian faith and was in effect teaching a different "gospel" without being upfront about it. Like Jung himself, he had lost confidence in the Christianity of history and was seeking to refashion it along psychological lines delimited by logic, as other modern theologians and denominations are doing in a variety of ways. Borg (2003), for example, argues for a non-traditional

Christian theology because the traditional orthodox understanding is no longer acceptable to modern consciousness:

The image of the Christian life that goes with this image of Jesus emphasizes believing all of this to be true: that Jesus is the only Son of God, born of a virgin; that he died for our sins; that he rose physically from the dead; that he will come again; and so forth. This image of Jesus no longer works for millions of people, both within and outside the church. For these millions, it's literalism and exclusivity are not only unpersuasive, but a barrier to finding Christ (p 82).

I submit that because of a failure to be clear regarding the distinction between the created energies of psychology and the uncreated spiritual energies of God that are seamlessly united in the person of Christ, while remaining distinct, the field of pastoral counseling has been unable to avoid gradual trending in this same anthropocentric direction. Thus, there have arisen all manner of psycho-spiritual amalgams of Christianity, syncretistic "Esperanto" faiths representing psychological manifestations, rather than directives of the Holy Spirit. In this sense they are modern forms of ancient heresies for whom Timothy's warning seems justified, that these have "the form of religion but are lacking its power" (II Tim 3:5) to transform.

Repentance, humility and love are the crux of integration between theology and science

Fr. Georges Florovsky (1987) observes, "No one profits by the Gospels unless he be first in love with Christ. For Christ is not a text but a living Person, and he abides in his Body, the Church" (p.14) and "an unbeliever has no access to the message, simply because he does not 'receive' it (p. 14). For him, there is no "message" in the Bible (p.19) in the same way that there is no "message" in everyday life apart from faith.

From the perspective of an Orthodox priest or counselor working with an Orthodox Christian, counseling (and confession) are pastoral to the extent that they further the ends of the Church in forming persons in Christian life and helping nurture the love for Christ that has been awakened in them by the Holy Spirit. Often times, pastoral care is about deepening a person's capacity to bear suffering in faith more so than stimulating freedom of feeling and self-expression as understood in the American context that prizes individualism and self-love over obedience to Christ and loving service to the community. At other times, pastoral counseling involves addressing forms of characterological disorder and the sequellae of metabolic disturbances, and trauma which can become a means through which spiritual deception occurs, impeding formation in Christ. Both spiritual discernment and psychological science have their proper places according to the need of the client and the gifts of the therapist.

Nevertheless, just as God "causes his sun to

rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Mt 5:45), Christ came for all people, and an Orthodox approach to pastoral counseling serves those who confess Christ as well as those who do not,²⁰ albeit in different ways. This occurs in secular, interdenominational, and interfaith contexts in which counselors who are Orthodox work with clients who are not. Excluding ideological appropriations of Orthodoxy which are a betrayal of Christ, we can ask the question, “What makes counseling *pastoral* in such settings, when it occurs with persons who do not confess love for Christ and who are not within the Church sacramentally, or with those who proclaim atheism or confess other faiths?” Likewise, what about those who profess to be Christian, but who existentially appear to be closed off from Christ in their hearts; their religion serving only their egos? An elder²¹ from Mt Athos observes how it is the illumination and transformation of the heart that is the true sign of Christ’s presence, not the outer form. From this vantage point, he defines the true atheist as “a person who has no real relationships with the Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit is not active in his or her heart. Such a person may appear externally as deeply pious, going to church every Sunday, doing all the things that one is expected to do as a Christian, but his or her heart is completely shut off from the energies of the Holy Spirit” (Markides, 2012, p. 95).

Many of the more obvious contextual variables of empathy and use of appropriate evidence-based theories and methods will be quite similar among practitioners. Where the difference might be seen has to do with the formation of the therapist. Ideally, pastoral counseling becomes an offering of the prayerful presence of one’s own collected three-dimensional being to dialogue with the other in the presence of God, whether acknowledged overtly or not. This requires the counselor’s ongoing ascetical struggle for humility, repentance, obedience, and love through continuous prayer, regular confession, spiritual direction, and worship. Whatever else she or he does, the Orthodox Christian pastoral counselor, the same as the priest at the Divine Altar, enters into call and response relationship invoking God’s presence and seeking to be receptive to God’s activity unfolding in the here and now with the intention of recognizing Christ in the other, and offering Christ to the other while serving at the altar of the human heart.

Whether or not the client is Christian, the pastoral counselor who is, will operate within a Christian worldview, formed and informed by Christian faith and life, though not in an ideological sense. In a now famous debate with Werner Heisenberg, who was insisting that only empirical data should be included in a theory, Einstein responded, “It is quite wrong to try founding a theory on observable magnitudes alone. In reality the very opposite happens. It is theory which decides what we can observe” (quoted in Watzlawick, 1977 p. 58.). In this case, the “deep

things of the Spirit” are the basis of Orthodox faith and life and are what gradually transforms a person. These affect what we can “see” even more so than do the gender, family of origin, culture, and worldviews of the times we live in. Illumination by the Holy Spirit is more cross-culturally relevant than the various clinical theories and the normative presumptions inherent to the diagnostic criteria of the DSM-IV. There is a shared life and human essence, made in the Image of God, with the potential for being in God’s likeness. This is common to all on the earth, regardless of all these variables, just as each of these dimensions contribute to rendering each one utterly unique in Christ Who fulfills and safeguards this uniqueness, as Zizioulas (2007) has pointed out, while being in communion among all just as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one and yet each unique persons. Like sunlight which shines on all, Orthodoxy is a science of spiritual reality available to all, not an ideology emotionally grasped from an anthropocentric foundation that renders it simply one form of religion among many.

All data-gathering and diagnosis involve subtle distortions and an objectification of persons. Only the relationship of love, which involves communion beyond time and space and beyond the will and desire and the possibility of an individual person to create, stands in relation to the other in such a way that Christ is sacramentally present between the two in the mystery of *meeting*. This means that healing in its fullest dimension is not and can never be *merely technical*. Nor can Christian-based pastoral counseling, while indeed evidence-based, be correctly viewed as an ideology, a methodology, or reduced to a worldly “psychotherapy” that can be delivered from a workbook as a standardized method.

This means that the counselor, as far as possible, approaches each person as British psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion has suggested, with “a state of mind so that at every session he feels he has not seen the patient before. If he feels he has, he is treating the wrong patient” (as cited by Wallin, 2007, p. 329) This *unknowing*, when rooted in love and dispassion with faith in Christ as the primary therapist, has the utmost implications for the practice, calling, and training of pastoral counselors, as well as for those in ordained pastoral ministry. This unknowing is founded upon the deeper unknowing that is inherent to the noetic meeting of the created person with the uncreated God.

Love is authentic only where Christ is present

Without a humble attitude and presence that includes loving sensitivity and respect for the other’s uniqueness, along with vulnerability and ascetical fidelity to the Holy Spirit, any one of us, whether armed with the latest science or even genuine spiritual experience, is capable of missing the mark and so failing to respond to the hidden depth and uniqueness of a person. This can be the result either by lack of real meeting with them, losing major aspects of the person by fitting them into the Procrustean bed of our theories and unexamined privilege,²² egocentricity

and ethnocentricity,²³ or by settling for too imprecise a fit resulting from the counselor's own untransformed passions and unconscious countertransference impeding understanding. Sincerity of intention and scientific precision, in and of themselves, do not guarantee discerning the exact "fit" for a person and a given situation. This is the work of the Holy Spirit working in conjunction with the person's freedom.

There is a reciprocity to a clinical encounter in which the counselor is also affected. Aboriginal elder Lila Watson captures this with the caveat, "If you have come to help us, don't bother, but if you have come recognizing that your liberation is bound up with ours, then let us work together."²⁴

I believe this expresses also the relationship within the Christian community and the world—one not of any sort of triumphalism, whether overt or more subtle, but rather a clear recognition of the oneness and diversity of humanity who share a common Creator and a common mutually responsible life, yet approached in as many unique ways as there are people. I tell my students, "If you haven't been changed by your relationship with your clients, then you haven't met them yet."

This is because real "meeting" is never imperialistic in which I who *am* or *have* or *know* do unto you who *are not* or *have not* or *know not*. Rather, it is always co-pilgrimage in which both are changed by the encounter with the Lord who appears in our midst, whether recognized or not. We enter into love for one another that is authentic only where Christ is present. As an Orthodox Christian, I believe that it is Christ alone who makes such meeting possible, whether recognized or not – a reality rendered dogmatically by the doctrine of the *perichoresis*²⁵ of the Holy Trinity, which may be considered prototypical for marriage, friendship in community, as well as the healing relationship.

Summary: So what makes counseling pastoral?

In practice, pastoral counseling as an Orthodox Christian involves the difficulty of balancing rational science with receptivity to Holy Spirit-illuminated noetic perception as a kind of mid-wife who seeks to discover the exact "fit" for a particular person in a given situation, which the Holy Spirit is bringing to birth. This entails the difficulty of meeting a person dialogically along what Martin Buber (1970) referred to as the "narrow ridge" between the *a priori* surety of mathematical models and the inviolable freedom and uniqueness of persons in the created world. In the final analysis, counseling is pastoral to the degree that it serves the truth of Christ, which respects the complexity and uniqueness of each person in the sight of God, for whom every hair is numbered and every sparrow that falls from the tree is noticed. The I-Thou relationship is what reinvigorates and changes us through the miracle of "meeting." Because Christ is in the midst of this *δια-Λογος* (dia-Logos), as in Emmaus, it is always potentially salvific in contrast with merely 'improving' or relieving psychological or

physical symptoms.

Without such dialogue in which I and You are linked *between* by uncreated love – the Eternal Thou of Christ who is forever in our midst wherever such dialogue occurs whatever our theoretical orientation and motivation – we can be sure we are approaching the counseling relationship merely technically, without an authentic reaching out to the other in love which is the essence of dialogue. The encounter remains monological, I-It, which Buber (1993, p. 24) warns "is Lucifer." It is only through *δια-Λογος* that love is truly present, and we become human beings. For as Jesus pointed out to his disciples, "Wherever two or more are gathered in my name, there *I AM*."

By reducing persons to fit a model, however scientifically accurate or dogmatically correct, the value of the human person is sacrificed on the operating table of theory and ideology, rather than the counselor standing before the altar of the heart and opening in mercy to a reciprocal personal encounter which invites growth and transformation because Christ is present in the midst. It is precisely the self-sacrifice and loving service of the counselor in dialogue with the other which are necessary until that "fit" is discovered, which is "Truth and Life" for the person with his or her particular nature and circumstances. Using power and control over the other that is not necessary or appropriate to protect the freedom of the person and the boundaries of counseling, is abuse, whether in religious or scientific form. However dogmatically correct or scripturally consistent one seeks to be privately, the necessity for "not knowing" – the sacrifice of certainty – remains on the part of the caregiver, so that the greater life of soul in the other is preserved against the unconscious aggressions of the smaller life of the ego seeking its own self-preservation.

Eric Fromm (1989), in his lovely book *The Art of Loving*, captures the paradox of this tension with his arresting image of the scientist (or book-learned theologian) who can name and categorize every aspect of the butterfly pinned to the page, except for its life, which can only be known through love while it is alive, flitting from one flower to the next. For me, the answer to the question of "What makes counseling pastoral?" is simply the "fit" that connects one with Christ and all others without betraying anyone's freedom. This is because the sheep will only obey the shepherd's voice. The right approach is the only one that actually works. The yoke that is "easy" and the "burden that is light" is the one that fits EXACTLY – the one made ONLY for you or for me; the one that allows us to "hit the mark" for which God intends us in a given situation and over a lifetime.

If not for the imagery of sheep and shepherd that permeate Christian history, the English word "pastor" would not be so rich with evocations of spiritual care and comfort. The heart of what I am saying is rooted in what this imagery is meant to convey about our relationship to the Good Physician of our souls and bodies and about the process of salvation that results from it. What makes counseling *pastoral* is

that it is ultimately focused on what is redemptive. By addressing a disorder specified in the DSM-IV within the larger developmental context of potential life in Christ, a way is opened to *theosis*. Apart from this there can be no truly pastoral counseling, except to the extent of course, that all healing and relief of unnecessary suffering is in and of itself, *good*.

The effectiveness of counseling from an Orthodox Christian perspective is the degree to which it contributes to and facilitates the formation of a *person* in Christ by clearing away obstacles to the fullness of life in the Church and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. In this sense, the Orthodox Christian psychotherapist is midwife to the greater healing and developmental processes of God at work in the Church and in the world to bring redemptive life to those whom God has created and loved at great price to Himself, as we see in the cross and passion of Christ depicted in the Gospels. When this occurs with non-Christians and the name of Christ is not even mentioned, it will still be informed by the loving presence of the pastoral counselor and to this extent will be an aspect of pastoral counseling.

So there remains a paradox here. When we Orthodox Christians sing in the Liturgy, “We have found the true faith,” it is not a license to confuse the Living Christ with a static institutional form or ideological model that obviates the uniqueness or freedom of other persons to find Christ in their situations, knowingly or unknowingly, for we acknowledge that through the Holy Spirit Christ is “in all places and fills all things.” He is larger than the institutional structure of the Church, as he is larger than the Temple and the orthodoxy of the Law “made by human hands” in the Israel of his day. Thus Metropolitan Kallistos Ware’s (1997) perspicacious remark, “We know where the Church is, but we do not know where it isn’t” (p.308), remains a corrective to pride and authoritarian fundamentalism masquerading as faith. The difference between co-opting faith and the Church to serve the ego and sacrificing the ego in faith to serve the Church is as night and day. We are ever pilgrims and sinners who can be confident and hopeful in the love of God while at the same time mindful that it is “not I but Christ who lives in me” who acts “between” us to heal and redeem us. We are never in control of the process. It is ever a gift.

A working definition of pastoral counseling

Counseling is pastoral to the degree that it emerges out of an existential stance that accords inviolable freedom to the person to choose her/his own way while

bringing to bear science, humble faith in God as healer and respect for the mystery of the person whose self (life) is forever beyond any diagnosis “hid with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3) and which

evidences a love that endures all that is part of an eternally open-ended dialogical relationship with the other rooted not primarily in what I the counselor

do, but in God who loves each of us as set forth in the Holy Scriptures and revealed through the Holy Spirit at work among the cloud of witnesses who make up the Church universal.

To the extent that the counselor is on the path of purification, illumination, and *theosis* as understood by the Orthodox Church, he or she is more likely to fulfill these conditions. This is not in any way to be understood as placing limits on the Holy Spirit’s activity among persons beyond our understanding and regardless of the theoretical model we are working within. Rather, it locates the essence of pastoral care and counseling in the *person*—of God and of the therapist and of the client— instead of in any methodology, ideology, worldview, or technical precision of science. While all these have their place and value, the words of the Apostle Paul from I Corinthians 13 remain most relevant. It is love that “believes all, hopes all and endures all” (I Cor 13), and love is not a human virtue or power, but a function of the abiding *presence* of Christ drawing life into the dust of us and uniting us in meeting with the living God through Himself. “Cut off from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). From an Orthodox understanding, Jesus Christ is and shall remain the source of all spiritual growth and psychological healing.

Notes

¹ In Greek the word λειτουργία, (*leiturgia*), from which the Divine Liturgy takes its name, means “work of the people.” This “work” refers to the call and response intended between priest, the people, and God. The entire worship is chanted. Sadly, in many churches, this has fallen to priest and Psalti (cantor). Ideally, each person should be responding with full prayerful collected attention of body, mind, and heart, throughout the service, as an invocation to God and the Holy Spirit through Christ “who is ever in our midst” or “between us.”

² *Theosis* (not to be confused with the LDS teaching regarding deification or what they call “exaltation”) is the salvation that is the end result of sanctification resulting from the encounter with the uncreated divine energies of God that purify and illumine the heart, bringing a person into union with the Holy Trinity through indwelling in Christ. As St. Athanasius pointed out, humanity remains by essence human, but by grace, God, just as iron remains metal by essence, but becomes fire by the indwelling of heat.

³ This is not the fault of psychology per se, but the result of a confused epistemology and ecclesiology that does not distinguish the created and uncreated worlds. When psychic and spiritual realities are conflated, there is theological perspective from which to critique psychology other than reason, which in our fallen state, is corrupted.

⁴ This is not to say that God does not work in and

- through incorrect doctrinal understanding, but rather that this fact does not thereby legitimate such misunderstandings as being equally “correct.” For a summary of the dogmatic foundations of an Orthodox ascetical approach to spiritual illness, see Larchet, J. (2012). *Therapy of Spiritual Illnesses*. Vols. I-III Montreal: Alexander Press, and Chrysostomos, A. (2006). *A Guide to Orthodox Psychotherapy: The Science, Theology, and Spiritual Practice Behind It and Its Clinical Application*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
- 5 Greek, literally meaning “old man” (the Russian word is *starets*) is both an affectionate and honorific title given to those persons who are regarded as god-bearing, illumined persons gifted with clairvoyance and other gifts of the Spirit evidenced in people’s lives.
- 6 For a fuller account of some 20th century miracle-working, illumined elders see Joseph of Vatopaidi, (1999). *Elder Joseph the Hesychast: Struggles, experiences, teachings (1898-1959)*. Vatopaidi Monastery: Greece: Vatopaidi Monastery; Yiannitsiotis, C. (2001). *With Elder Porphyrios: A spiritual child remembers*. (Marina Robb, Trans.). Athens: Holy Convent of the Transfiguration of the Savior; Sophrony, A. (1991). *St. Silouan the Athonite*. Essex, England: Stavropegic Monastery of St. John the Baptist; Markides, K. (2001). *The Mountain of silence: A Search for Orthodox spirituality*. New York: Doubleday.
- 7 Cf C. Cook. *The Philokalia and the Inner Life* (Cambridge, UK: Clarke & Co., 2011). A physician examines the writings of the fathers of the *Philokalia* from the perspective of modern psychotherapy.
- 8 Cf. Begley, S. “Studies suggest that the popular drugs are no more effective than a placebo. In fact, they may be worse.” *Newsweek.com*. Feb.8, 2010, pp. 35-41.
- 9 Russian name for a Holy Spirit-illumined elder.
- 10 *Nous* (nous) refers to the noetic faculty of intelligence or “eye of the heart” as distinct from the *διανοια* (dianoia) or the logical, discursive reasoning faculty. Orthodox anthropology holds that in the fall, instead of dwelling in the stillness of the heart attentive to God where it belongs, the *nous* left the heart and became identified with the content of thoughts and with reason, leaving humankind subject to all manner of spiritual delusions, anxieties, and passions associated with the suffering of self-centeredness and death. An Orthodox approach involves restoring the *nous* to its proper place. Cf Bradshaw, D. “On drawing the mind into the heart: Psychic wholeness in the Greek Patristic Tradition,” accessed July 2012, <http://www.cas.sc.edu/socna/research/papers/bradshaw-mindheart.pdf>
- 11 In Orthodox usage, *passions* are afflictive, unredeemed psychological states and emotions that effectively darken the heart, creating strongholds of sinful proclivities. When purified and illumined of these, the heart sees and reflects God as in “Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.”
- 12 The essence-energies distinction is clarified by St. Gregory Palamas in the 14th century, in a famous debate with Barlaam, the Calabriate, who put forth the Western church’s viewpoint that God could not be experienced, as the Eastern Christians claimed, but only known about discursively. This subsequently led to a significant spiritual divide in Western and Eastern Christian approaches to prayer, worship, and formation.
- 13 From the Chalcedonian formula clarifying the single person and two natures of Christ seamlessly and unconfusedly united.
- 14 In Orthodoxy, experience has confirmed for two-thousand years that the activity of the Holy Spirit works to make our hearts humble and to cleanse us of passions, gradually illumining us over time by the divine uncreated energies of God received through the *nous*, so that it becomes true as St. Paul observes, “it is no longer I but Christ who lives in me.”
- 15 The Greek word translated as repentance, *μετανοια* (metanoia), refers to the process that reverses the fall, in which the *nous* re-enters the heart and remains there still, free of passions and identification with thoughts, and so able to receive and metabolize the energies of grace.
- 16 Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1954) captures the existential implications of this well. “Because Christ stands between me and others... I must release the other person from every attempt of mine to regulate, coerce and dominate him with my love. The other person needs to retain (her) independence of me; to be loved from what (s)he is, as one for whom Christ became man, died, and rose again, for whom Christ brought forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Because Christ has long since acted decisively for my (neighbor), before I could begin to act, I must leave him freedom to be Christ’s; I must meet her only as the person that she already is in Christ’s eyes. This is the meaning of the proposition that we can meet others only through the mediation of Christ. Human love constructs its own image of the other person, of what (s)he is and what (s)he should become. It takes the life of the other person into its own hands. Spiritual love recognizes the true image of the other person which he has received from Jesus Christ; the image that Jesus Christ himself embodied and would stamp upon all (persons).” (pp. 22-23)
- 17 St Gregory the Theologian’s 4th century AD view of Scripture is characteristic of the Orthodox approach to Holy Scripture to the point of “the accuracy of the Spirit to every letter and serif (of the Scripture),” C. Browne & J. Swallow (Trans.).

- Orations of Gregory Nazianzus: In Defense of his Flight to Pontus.* From the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers Series, section. 105. Posted at http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Orations_of_Gregory_of_Nazianzus/In_Defence_of_His_Flight_to_Pontus/Part_III#Section_105
- ¹⁸ A *theologian* in the Orthodox sense is not one who studies with the mind, but one whose heart has been purified and enlightened by the divine energies of grace through prayer and obedience so that what the Scriptures testify to in words is understood through experience.
- ¹⁹ Aquinas argues in *Summa Theologica*, (1.11.4), “God is considered to be pure energy or ‘pure act’ in that His divine energies are the same as His essence” (Dounetas, 2009, p. 31). If this were true, humanity would not be able to encounter God personally, but only contemplate Him rationally as object. *Theosis* would be impossible, because no creature can commune with “pure act” who is not “person.” For implications of how a Scholastic understanding of the Holy Trinity is associated with cultural trends which give rise to human being as defined by needs of nature (*ousia*) ousia and possessions (*perousia*) perousia or “what one accumulates” instead of “who one is,” cf. Dounetas (2009).
- ²⁰ It is necessary to distinguish between those who confess Christ with the lips, but may not with their lives, while others may refuse assent to certain intellectual propositions regarding Christ, but may actually be confessing Christ as evidenced by the Spirit at work in their hearts and lives without their understanding it. So the Orthodox pastoral counselor is de facto an evangelist by virtue of being a psychotherapist in the sense of the Catholic theologian Karl Rahner (as cited by Kaiser, 1981), who suggests the problem of theology is not how to get religion into people, but how to draw it out. The loving act of listening and confirming another human being’s reality is deeply evangelical at the process level, even if at the content level, Christ is never mentioned. Why is this? Because “God is love” and love is not possible unless Christ is present.
- ²¹ An ‘elder’ or ‘*staretz*’ (Russian), signifies one who, usually after long struggle and obedience, has gained maturity and some degree of illumination in the faith, giving rise to the ability to discern spirits and guide others in their prayer life and journey in Christ.
- ²² Cf. Lewis Z. Schlosser. (2003). “Christian privilege: Breaking a sacred taboo,” *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, 31, 48-49; Peggy McIntosh. (1988). “White privilege and male privilege: A personal account of coming to see correspondences through work in Women’s Studies,” 70-81, In M. L. Andersen & P. H. Collins (Eds.), *Race, Class, and Gender: An Anthology* (pp. 70-81). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- ²³ Hinkle, J. & Hinkle, G. (1992). Surrendering the self: Pastoral counseling at the limits of culture and psychotherapy. *Journal of Pastoral Care*, 64, 103-116.
- ²⁴ This quote is often attributed to Lila Watson, an aboriginal elder and activist. Watson has suggested that she is not comfortable being credited with something that belongs from to the collective process of the Aboriginal elders than to herself. Cf. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lilla_Watson (retrieved December 31, 2012).
- ²⁵ *Perichoresis* is constructed from the Greek words *περί* ,(peri) for “around” and *χωρεα* (chorea) for “space” used by St. Gregory of Nazianzus and others, to signify the mutual indwelling of the persons of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As this is explained by Jesus to the disciples in John 14-17, once the Holy Spirit is given to them, they will dwell in Him as He dwells in the Father and all will be perfectly one. *Perichoresis* refers to the mystery of the unity of the three distinct persons of the Trinity who reciprocally contain one another through the co-inherence of their self-emptying love. “One permanently envelopes and is permanently enveloped by, the other whom he yet envelopes” (Hilary of Poitiers as cited in Elowsky, 2007, p. 131).

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