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Orthodox Psychotherapy in Relation to Modern Western Psychology

Since antiquity, science and religion have been continuously in a heated debate over which field holds the answers to our existential questions. Man has been and will always be interested in the issue of his origins and purpose.

Nowadays, many researchers, philosophers, spiritual leaders, and freethinkers gravitate around two opposing views: (1) the scientific perspective according to which humans are the result of hundreds of thousands of years of evolution; (2) the spiritual/religious view which states that humans were designed by an omniscient and omnipresent Creator.

As Christians, we believe that humankind was made in the image of God. As Genesis 1:27 states, *“So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”*

Science and Christianity are two examples of man’s desire to know the truth. However, there’s a significant difference between God’s truth and the scientific truth. That is why, over time, the two (science and religion) conflicted because of the different hypotheses and concepts they were promoting.

Since theology progressed very slowly compared to science, today, many theologians no longer attempt to challenge the fundamental gains of science as they did in the past but tend to include some of the scientific results in their spiritual perspective (as long as these results don’t contradict God’s truth). In a sense, the fact that theologians are more “malleable” and scientists more tolerant, has allowed them to build bridges between two completely opposed worldviews

This significant debate has influenced even the way we perceive illness and health. One relevant example is the difference between Orthodox psychotherapy and modern Western psychology. While most evidence-based approaches focus on treating symptoms by following a carefully designed intervention plan, Orthodox psychotherapy places the relationship between man and God, in all its complexity, at the heart of the approach.

The foundations of modern Western psychology

From Freud's psychodynamic model to Beck's cognitive approach, researchers and mental health professionals have been continuously under pressure to validate psychology as a scientific approach. One of the main problems was that psychology isn't (and will probably never be) an exact science. But that did not stop them from progressing and gaining a better understanding of the human psyche.

Nowadays, psychologists possess a wide array of evaluation and intervention tools specifically designed to explore the intricacies of the human mind, fix the problems faced by patients, and even prevent mental illness.

But despite the fact that psychology, in general, has managed to establish itself as a "stand-alone" field, Western psychology is still very much under the influence of medical sciences. Back then, most mental conditions were addressed in clinical settings which means psychology was merely an extension of medical sciences.

One of the most notable advancements in Western psychology was the development of psychiatric drugs designed to fix the chemical and neurological imbalances that can cause mental illness. From alcohol (Jonas, Amick, & Feltner, 2014) and tobacco smoking cessation (Siu, 2015) to bipolar I and II disorders (Miklowitz, et al., 2014), depression and insomnia (Manber, et al., 2016), and neuropathic pain (Finnerup, et al., 2015), pharmacotherapy has proven to be a highly effective intervention strategy.

Pharmacotherapy is mainly based on the assumption that certain substances alter the neurochemical substrate of the disease or symptoms, thus alleviating the adverse effects of mental illnesses. Despite the fact that in many cases mental illness is the result of a chemical imbalance in the brain, we must also consider other aspects of the patient's life; aspects that can play a crucial role in his recovery. For example, some

researchers have chosen to focus on the relationship between brain plasticity and environment, in hopes of gaining a better understanding of how our brains change in relation to external factors. (Sale, Berardi, & Maffei, 2014)

Although the combination of psychotherapy and pharmacotherapy has proven to be effective in treating a variety of mental illnesses, many researchers believe there's still a lot of room for improvement. (Huhn, Tardy, & Spineli, 2014) To be more specific, the sooner mental health professionals start treating illness in a holistic manner, the sooner we can come up with highly-effective treatment plans.

Another relevant field of study that has shaped modern Western psychology is neuroscience. This relatively new field of study is actually a cluster of various sciences that share a common goal – to understand the intricacies of the human mind and brain function. From neuropsychology and psychobiology to psychophysiology and cognitive sciences, neuroscience emerged as a unitary field around 1970. Back then, medical specialists realized that brain function is too complicated to be solved by “classical” medicine. Furthermore, the newly emerged field of cognitive neurosciences aims to integrate cognitive psychology, psychophysiology, and psychobiology in one picture, in hopes of solving one of the greatest mysteries – the human mind.

The scientific community agrees that we are speaking of a field that offers an interdisciplinary approach. In other words, the pathology of the nervous system, combined with cognitive psychology, genetics, and physiology have led to the development of neuroscience, one of the foundations of modern Western psychology.

The primary goal pursued by neuroscience is to gain a clear understanding of how the human mind works, why it “breaks down,” and how it can be fixed. That is the reason why neuroscience has become a hot topic among scientists; a new and exciting point of view that poses considerable challenges to researchers who are always searching for ways to better explore the intricacies of the human mind.

All and all, modern Western psychology is a field that has been built around fundamental scientific principles that have helped researchers gain an objective and unbiased perspective on mental health and illness. Sadly, most scientific approaches tend to overlook or reject one crucial aspect – spirituality.

Orthodox psychotherapy – an emerging and promising field

First and foremost, one of the fundamental beliefs of Orthodox psychotherapy is God created man in His image, and our existence derives from the Creator. The meaning and purpose of life spring from God and are a testimony of His wisdom and holiness.

Only God's immense power can fill the inner emptiness that modern man has to endure so often. No matter how we seek to fill that spiritual void, no matter how many surrogates we use, without an uninterrupted relationship with our Creator, we can never feel completely whole.

Orthodox psychotherapy is a new and promising approach to mental health which aims to place God at the core of the therapeutic process. The fundamental principle onto which this therapeutic approach was built is that the most severe disease that can cripple a person's physical, emotional, and spiritual health is the absence of God from their life. Consequently, our ultimate purpose is to rediscover and rebuild our relationship with God. As Romans 11:36 teaches us, *"For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen."*

Orthodox psychotherapy and counseling are practiced by a professional who has received extensive training in psychotherapy and who has also mastered the fundamental principles and values of Christianity. In other words, a Christian counselor or psychotherapist is a practicing Christian who is continuously investing in his personal relationship with God and uses the Holy Bible as a valuable source of knowledge to help patients put their lives in order, thus improving their mental health. In fact, the Holy Bible is the basis of Christian psychotherapy and counseling.

Once we turn to God, admit our sins, and ask for forgiveness, we can then enjoy a rich and healthy spiritual life that will indirectly improve our physical and emotional health as well.

By combining God's wisdom - that has been passed on to us through the Holy Bible – with effective therapeutic techniques, Orthodox psychotherapists can alleviate the pain and suffering caused by mental illness and provide detailed strategies to overcome the emotional problems that modern man is facing.

Every condition, be it physical or mental begins in our mind. Many of today's patients are unconsciously setting the stage for poor physical and psychological health by

neglecting one of the fundamental aspects of life – spirituality. The more we move away from God and the holy path that He encourages us to take, the bigger the chances of dealing with suffering and disease.

Authentic healing begins when we start contemplating a life without suffering and sin. A life governed by our Creator. A life that is a reflection of His holiness and wisdom. As Mark 9:23 clearly states *"everything is possible for one who believes."* If we put our faith in God and allow Him to take charge of the healing process, the results will be beyond expectation.

Although Orthodox psychology is rooted in God's principles and many researchers believe that this approach lacks practicality, the Bible shows us an entirely different picture. To be more specific, God doesn't enforce His principles; He gently guides us towards His holy path and gives us plenty of encouragements to help us live a happy, healthy, and fulfilling life.

As Philippians 4:6-7 teaches us, *"Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."* In other words, God encourages us to bring our problems to Him, and, through prayer and gratitude, achieve health and well-being. Furthermore, 2 Timothy 1:7 states that *"God has not given us a spirit of timidity but of power and love and discipline."* That means that each and every one of us is capable of overcoming whatever life throws down our path, as long as put our faith in God.

Similarities and differences between Christian psychology and modern Western psychology

Since both Orthodox psychotherapy and modern Western psychology have the same goal – to prevent and treat mental illness - many researchers and mental health professionals gravitate around integrative approaches that combine strategies from various schools of thought.

But before we can place Orthodox psychotherapy in the context of modern psychology, first we need to look at the similarities and differences between the two approaches.

One significant difference between the two is how they address and explain the leading causes of mental illness. While many of the modern psychological approaches still gravitate around the biomedical model, Orthodox psychology seeks to define psychological illness using God's infinite wisdom.

Psychiatric illness or mental illness is a term used to designate a group of disorders that cause severe disturbance in one's thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Mental illness can affect anyone regardless of age, gender, race, social status, and cultural background. It's important to understand that mental illness is a problem like any other. Just as in the case of physical disease, mental illness can be addressed through a series of treatment plans that allow the patient to live as close to normal as possible. As long as the patient follows the treatment plan, in theory, results should be noticeable after a certain period (depending on each case).

Modern Western psychology believes that the origin of mental illness is a combination of biological and environmental factors. (Uher, 2014) However, the exact causes of mental illness are not yet fully known, with many factors playing a role in portraying each condition. From genetic influences and neurochemical imbalances to deterioration of brain functions as a result of head injury (Orlovskaya, et al., 2014), high levels of stress (Cooper & Marshall, 2013) and unhealthy habits (Depp, et al., 2015), scientists believe there are hundreds of factors that can affect our mental health.

Although this approach has provided mental health professionals with plenty of useful knowledge about the origins and development of psychiatric disorders, some researchers believe the biomedical model of mental disorder presents some significant drawbacks. For starters, this approach has witnessed little clinical innovation while the outcomes have worsened significantly. (Deacon, 2013)

Orthodox psychotherapists have a somewhat different perspective on the cause of poor mental health. They believe that spiritual diseases correspond to the – as the Holy Fathers call them – “guilty” passions. But the fact that spiritual illness plays a role in the development and maintenance of physical and mental illness does not mean that the physically or mentally ill are more guilty or sinful than the rest.

A person who has abandoned God will eventually be haunted by passions. In a sense, each patient develops an emotional problem that is linked to his spiritual pathology. However, in many cases, the psychological issues that patients deal with tend to

manifest subtly. They don't necessarily appear as perceptible and diagnosable disorders that can be easily treatable.

In some cases, mental illness can be related to personal mistakes and the one who has made them can be considered directly responsible for their poor health. However, in many other cases, the patient is nothing more than the victim of a godless world. In other words, people affected by mental illness are the ones who, due to personal, professional, and social circumstances, have not managed to maintain a balance between their emotional and spiritual life.

One of the main issues with modern psychology - and the reason why some professionals have chosen a different path - is the mechanistic view that Western psychology uses when addressing mental health problems. In other words, modern scientific psychology has reduced humans to nothing more than a system of biological processes that interact and influence each other, thus resulting what we call consciousness. Christian psychology, on the other hand, perceives the human condition as a complex interaction between our physical, emotional, and spiritual self. As a result, Orthodox psychotherapists seek to treat both the emotional and spiritual components of mental illness.

When it comes to exploring the source of a patients' emotional problem, both Orthodox and Western psychotherapy have a relatively similar strategy. To be more specific, they both seek to offer the patient a clear perspective on how mental illness came to exist in his life. However, while Western psychologists use an anthropocentric perspective (using thoughts, beliefs, and ideas), Orthodox psychotherapists work in a more theocentric way by using both the therapeutic method and the spiritual means through which we come in contact with our Creator. (McDonnell, 2017)

In a nutshell, Orthodox psychotherapy doesn't seek to disprove the modern scientific explanations of mental illness, but to enrich them by adding a spiritual dimension and holistically addressing psychological health.

As one recent study points out, *"a deeper integrative understanding of the relationship between culture, theology, psychology, and ethics is an urgently needed foundation for a more global and integrative Christian psychology."* (Gingrich & Bradford, 2014)

Integrating Orthodox practices in modern Western psychology

Theology deals with the trauma of sin and redemption through Christ. Psychology deals with the functions and dynamics of the human psyche. Counseling and psychotherapy help patients cope with their emotional problems. Psychiatry deals with severe mental disorders.

But despite all the various fields of study that have emerged over the last century, the prevalence of anxiety, depression, stress, and other more severe mental illnesses is on the rise. That led some researchers to believe that the entire Western approach to mental health needs to be revised and updated urgently.

As one paper highlights *“One can not acquire harmony and inner balance without Him, therefore the absence of divinity in man’s life makes mental and spiritual diseases very hard to cure. Relating psychology to genuine Orthodox spirituality provides new perspectives in understanding and curing mental illness.”* (Lefter, 2015)

What if we were to integrate these four important fields into one comprehensive approach that helps patients achieve health and well-being? What if we took the scientific rigor and meticulousity of modern Western psychology and combined it with the holistic and spiritual approach to Christian psychology?

Current research suggests that religion can have a positive effect on various aspects of our physical and mental health. From helping people develop healthy habits (Hoil, Clark, Debnam, & Roth, 2014) to lowering depression and mortality (VanderWeele, 2017), religion seems to be a crucial factor in achieving and maintaining mental health.

Perhaps the growing body of literature that highlights the positive influence of religion on mental health will convince more researchers and mental health professionals to change their perspective and start treating patients as a whole – mind, body, and spirit.

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