



www.PreciousHeart.net/ti

Volume 5 – 2016

**Can Pastoral Care Successfully Merge
Secular Disciplines with Biblical Theology?**

Rev. Dr. Vasileios Thermos, M.D., Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Pastoral Theology and Pastoral Psychology
Ecclesiastical Academy of the University of Athens, Greece¹

Introduction: Pastoral Care & Psychology in Ancient Themes..... 2
A. Pastoral Care Encountering Psychological Processes..... 3
B. Pastoral Care Permeated with Psychology Plus God..... 4
C. Pastoral Care in Theology vs. Epistemology 5
D. Pastoral Care Rich Patristic Theology 7
E. Pastoral Care Rich Patristic Theology 8
Conclusion—Disciplines Aid Pastoral Care’s End in Christ 9

All biblical excerpts are quoted from *The Oxford New Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1991).

¹ Thermos was born in 1957 at Lefkada, Greece, and studied at the Medical School of Athens University. After graduating he studied at the Theological School of the same University, specializing in Child and Adolescent Psychiatry which he still practices in Athens, Greece. In 1996-97 he was a Visiting Scholar at Harvard Divinity School. He has studied at Harvard School of Arts and Humanities, Boston College, Boston University, and Andover Newton Theological School. In 1997 he received his PhD in Pastoral Psychology from the Theological School of Athens University. In 1986 he was ordained a priest of the Orthodox Church of Greece and has been engaged into training programs for clergy in Greece, Cyprus, USA. See thermosv@otenet.gr.

He has written numerous books and articles in Greek, some translated into English, French, Russian, Romanian, Bulgarian, and Spanish. He is the editor of a new journal in Greek, *Psyches dromoi: Ways of the Soul*, published every 6 months on the relationships between theology/religion and psychiatry/psychology (first issue in May 2011).

In 2004, a master thesis on his total work appeared by Peter Kazaku at the Theological School of Balamand University, Lebanon: www.Uni-Muenster.de/CRS/Personen/petru_cazacu.html.

Introduction: Pastoral Care & Psychology in Ancient Themes

The Bible was composed many centuries ago in a premodern spatiotemporal context, whereas secular disciplines have emerged comparatively recently and still grow in the middle of a technological culture characterized by rationalism and other mentalities impressively different from the ancient mind. However, Scripture and its theology have been for decades in a continuous dialogue with modernity and the secular disciplines that sprang out of it, a dialogue with a variety of outcomes.

Pastoral care can definitely benefit from sociological research, economic theory, biological knowledge, and medical technology progress. In this essay I will focus on psychology, the topic on which I have had my specific experience. Among all secular disciplines that keep encountering biblical theology, psychology definitely prevails, which I find reasonable given that human beings and the way they function have always been in the middle of scientific curiosity. Besides, it is the domain of human psyche that triggers the most exciting discussions between ancient and contemporary perspectives, to the degree that they sometimes become competitive, as both parts vindicate the truth.

From the very beginning psychology makes manifest its importance while one reads about the first temptation (Gen 3: 1-6). What is at stake here is not the teasing taste of a particular fruit, but the perennial issue of *narcissism*. Fantasy completes the image: “You will be like gods.”

A pervasive psychological issue appears in the first sentences of the Bible. Narcissistic fantasies are so common that they make part of our everyday life, both individually and collectively. They often make the basis of interpersonal behaviors and distort ecclesiastical life. People may not fantasize that they are gods or that they will be (after all this would make a serious psychiatric delusion), nevertheless they frequently behave *as if* they are close to a divine power or infallibility or invulnerability.

Pastoral care encounters remarkable problems when facing narcissism. Some people divorce because of a lack of humility, others get sick because they adopt an unhealthy lifestyle permeated by ambition and greediness, and for sure we should not omit those who are reluctant or reactive to any pastoral advice because they

supposedly know better. What all narcissistic problems share in common is the implicit illusion that one actually does not need God or that one merely uses Him for one's own goals.

Pastoral care also deals with the social problems of *poverty* and *marginalization*; here we cannot but recall the parables of the two rich men (Luke 12: 16-21 and 16: 19-31). Pastors struggle with both, the narcissism of wealthy people who sometimes consider themselves Christians, and the pain of the poor who suffer from the formers' indifference. Use of money is the most crucial field in our society of wild capitalism where narcissism becomes the central motivation. At the other side of the gap depression or resentment may trouble the lives of the deprived ones who deserve our pastoral care too.

A. Pastoral Care Encountering Psychological Processes

Amplifying further with the first temptation we come upon another core issue of psychological theory, especially of the psychoanalytic one. These are the *ego mechanisms of defense*, among which *repression* and *projection* dominate. "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree and I ate" and "The serpent tricked me and I ate" (Gen 3: 8-13). To be more precise, *splitting* between a totally good and a totally bad person paved the road, only to find repression and projection cooperating in an admirable way with the purpose of offering the subject a relief from *guilt*. These mechanisms are unconscious, omnipresent, and quite popular; pastoral care comes upon them literally every day in all types of human relationships, and is called to overcome them if it is to be effective.

Later God institutionalized a ritual of projection (Lev. 16: 7-26), obviously not to sanction mechanisms of defense but to depict vividly what was going to happen with Christ's sacrifice. As the entire Old Testament is implemented and justified in the New Testament, the scapegoating ritual, rather than accepting projection, reveals its pervasive nature and emphasizes that with Christ it is needless, let alone sinful. We do not need scapegoats anymore; it is Christ Who undertook the burden of guilt so that we are enabled to face our own guilt without fear and to repent for our sins.

But the practice of scapegoating keeps being familiar in interpersonal relationships as if merciful Christ has not been incarnate, thus motivating pastors to convince people to abandon this

dysfunctional practice. In general, pastoral care includes various aspects of handling guilt. Sometimes the pastor has to resolve conflicts where no one accepts responsibility because the ‘bad other’ is causing the trouble. Other conditions subject to pastoral care pertain to behaviors which stem out of an anxious effort to avoid or repress guilt; they may include anger, complaints, workaholism or other manic defenses, substance abuse etc. Besides, some people are subject to victimization in the form of self-scapegoating or yield to pathological guilt and fall to depression. And for sure we should not forget spiritual guidance and growth, with repentance being a central point, which makes a core part of pastoral care.

B. Pastoral Care Permeated with Psychology Plus God

This issue of spiritual life is excellently described in 2 Samuel 12: 1-13 and Matthew 18: 23-35. The combination of repression and projection (by David and the servant in the respective passages) shows very eloquently how unconscious psychological processes affect seriously both spiritual life and interpersonal relationships. It would be really true to argue that numerous individual, family, and group problems that are recipients of pastoral care, are generated by a failure to handle guilt in a constructive way.

Shifting now to a different kind of psychological issues I will revisit the Saint Paul’s dictum: “Fathers, do not provoke your children, or they may lose heart” (Col. 3: 21). In this short commandment the dynamics of repression of anger or aggression is considered, namely as a means to produce *disheartening* or *depression*. The Greek original reads ἀθυμία, which means low mood. It is reasonable: if even nowadays many children would not dare to express their anger or aggression to their fathers when provoked by them, we can imagine what the condition used to be 20 centuries ago!

How is pastoral care involved in this context? Pastoring families often includes silent yet angry children, or even coercive or explosive parents’ adult children who have spent years depressed or in passive-aggressive resistance. Pastorally handling anger and aggression has never been an easy task, and the psychological hint of this verse partially explains why. We should not omit here contexts in which those provoking and inducing anger or aggression are symbolic ‘fathers’, figures of power such as leaders and pastors. The dynamics

in the ecclesiastical groups and organizations can be quite exhaustive and destructive, requiring much of pastoral care.

I will finish this indicative list of biblical excerpts with the famous description of Rom. 7: 15-25, where the inner conflict is vividly expressed. Inner conflicts, a quite familiar human condition, provides us with dilemmas, anxieties, doubts, pressure, regrets etc. This passage does not refer to common everyday conflicts, which are not trivial though, but to those which pertain to faith and virtue. A pastor has to reply to questions, to encourage or discourage decisions, to support spiritual lives and facilitate spiritual warfares, to discern behaviors that are impulsive self-made ‘solutions’ of existential conflicts, to liberate from meaningless conflicts etc. Generalizing here I would dare to say that our inner psychic divisions, when externalized, become the causes of social conflicts and fragmentation, a field in which pastoral care is called to intervene too in the form of social activism or social change.

In general, the spiritual and the psychological elements are mutually intertwined. Pastoral care deals with almost any situation of human life, regardless if it appears as secular or spiritual, because each of them may be the disguised other one, and vice versa. So psychology permeates almost any theological truth expressed in the Bible, with the only exception being the Triadological and Christological doctrines: obviously God cannot be examined by psychology.

C. Pastoral Care in Theology vs. Epistemology

So far so good; the reader has already identified my perspective which is a positive answer to the title question. Yet I would like to explore some theological and epistemological issues.

From the history of the Church we have learnt that heresies emerged out of people reading the same Bible. This is quite impressive: how could people read the same Gospels and Epistles and some of them believe that Christ was only God whereas others imply that He was only a man? How is it possible that, studying the same Scripture, some concluded that the Holy Spirit is God and others that He is not? Ancient Christians used to read the same Old Testament: how and why some ended up requiring circumcision for the Gentiles while others not?

Examples like these show, I think, that implications derived from the Bible are always mediated by interpretation. The reader is not merely internalizing what he/she is reading; instead, one interprets constantly in a certain way, even when one has no idea of doing so.

I consider the same being valid for the question posed at the title of my chapter. What is exactly ‘Biblical Theology’? Which Biblical Theology should we have in mind in attempting to reply such an interesting question? Biblical Theology is not actually something completed and treasured, waiting to be quoted; rather it is a product of continuous interpretation.

On the particular issue of the contribution of secular sciences we come upon a vertiginous range throughout Christianity. At one hand, conservatives and fundamentalists tend to consider Biblical Theology as a body of truth shaped in a definite form, which should not be contaminated by secular science because this is a product of a godless modernity. For them pastoral care is basically condensed to teaching, implying that if someone applies the divine commandments he/she would not find themselves in conditions requiring pastoral care. So, on this particular issue, they almost reject psychology and manufacture what they call ‘biblical counseling’; the strictest of them have coined the term ‘psychoheresy,’ a construct which threatens the purity of what they perceive as Biblical Theology.

At the other extreme of the spectrum one finds liberal churches that have completely surrendered to psychology, which has been upgraded to their basic tool. They are willing to apply all available psychological knowledge to pastoral care, yet one can legitimately wonder whether this care is pastoral anymore. Pastors behave as counselors and the ecclesiastical life is organized around a variety of ministries which boast of being very inclusive. Unfortunately one can hardly discover theological concepts or spiritual elements of the Christian message in the middle of this anthropocentric activism.

The situation of worldwide Christianity is quite nuanced of course, but I decided to describe the two extremes in order to show how much the key to answer the title question lies on the spirit of the particular Christian(s) and on how one interprets the Scripture. Is the Church perceived as a sect that should be isolated from the world? Then the answer to the title is angrily negative. Is the Church perceived as an organization whose message can be led or watered

down by the ‘triumph of the therapeutic’? Then the answer is enthusiastically positive.

What is my position? Where can I posit myself in this extremely divergent and multicolored spectrum? Judging from the first part the reader may imply that I am standing somehow at the middle. Without denying it I would like to further explain my attitude though.

D. Pastoral Care Rich Patristic Theology

In the Christian tradition to which I belong the Fathers of the Church are considered respectable figures and occupy a remarkable space of interpretive work. For us, the Bible is not the exclusive source of truth. Exegesis in the Orthodox Church is continuously active, yet it neither perceives a 20-centuries gap (as if the Holy Spirit was present only during the Scripture times) nor attributes the same validity to anyone attempting to articulate Biblical Theology. The fundamental criterion is *sanctity*: to the degree that the interpreter has been (or is being) sanctified, namely spiritually transformed, his/her Biblical Theology becomes perspicacious and reliable. People actively engaged in the process of their spiritual transformation contribute to the enrichment of Biblical Theology.

Thus Patristic Theology (this is the name under which the theology of the Fathers is known) has been a huge and ongoing body that evidences their effort to derive theology out of the Bible. Needless to say, they do not agree in everything; their concept of tradition is not a ‘copy-paste’ one. Yet this does not make a problem because theology has plenty of space for divergent interpretations which serve the marvelous mosaic of truth. Human complexities demand multifaceted arrays of theological contents and pastoral techniques.

Have the Fathers made use of secular disciplines like psychology? The question makes no sense because at their premodern times no science as we know it today existed. They use a terminology of their times which is not scientific. So how can we guess about their attitude?

There are two aspects of their behavior that can be of help. First, they accepted the healthy parts of philosophy, which was the prevalent and officially acknowledged branch of thought during their times. They accepted it critically of course, but they were bold enough to respect its achievements and not demand it to merge into theology.

Second, they recruited any psychological intuition they could, although not yet invested with the status of a separate discipline.

More specifically, patristic works are full of psychological remarks, most of them still useful for pastoral care.

- **Saint Gregory the Theologian** (A.D. 329-390) writes that usually it is men who legislate, so that is why the laws favor men against women.
- **Saint Basil the Great** (A.D. c. 329-379) makes a crucial distinction between our real selves and things around us or belonging to us or attributes of us. Such a distinction sounds so timely in an era of alienation through and reductionism to wealth and fame.
- **Saint John Chrysostom** (A.D. c. 349-407) advises the teacher not to scorn pupils in public because by doing so they are humiliated and thus the corrective words cannot reach their hearts. Saint
- **John of Sinai** (A.D. c. 579-649) in his famous ‘Ladder’ warns that chastity sometimes is accompanied by a latent bitterness. Saint

Gregory Palamas (1296–1359) defends affects and desires while he considers fake a spirituality that is based primarily on the intellect.

The above list is quite short because its intention is to show that the 20-centuries old Christian tradition has not hesitated to recruit products of human thought and experience (later known as psychology) if they can serve salvation. At premodern times those products lacked any autonomous scientific existence as they have today. But nowadays the patristic principles of pastoral care can be described and classified through contemporary tools that are called secular disciplines, especially psychology.

E. Pastoral Care Rich Patristic Theology

An additional point to consider is the word ‘merge’ in the title:

Are Biblical Theology and secular disciplines
really meant to merge?

When a merger takes place a new entity is created. Two companies merge into a new brand, two streets merge and another one appears in a new name. Should it not happen we have no merge; instead we have disappearance or assimilation of one entity into the other.

What is the new entity that the two domains may create here? Let me remind that, if such an entity existed, little to none of the two domains could be discerned intact inside the new entity. The new

creature would consist of neither “Biblical Theology” nor “Psychology” but of a mixture of both in new forms.

To my knowledge I am not aware of such a mixture that functions as a new entity. Instead, I know that there exist:

1. Pastoral Counseling, counseling informed by pastoral theology;
2. Pastoral Psychotherapy, therapy inspired by pastoral concerns;
3. Sacrament of Confession, enriched by a pastor’s psychological knowledge and training.

These genres are not a result of a merger; rather they are distinct entities in which a dialectical *coexistence* unfolds, thus enhancing their fruits. (I am not even sure that the widely used term *integration* of theology and psychology is epistemologically correct. Obviously it does not indicate a merger, yet in a way it may undermine both the integrity of each component and their mutual interaction).

This issue reminds us of the Chalcedonian doctrine (451). When the 4th Ecumenical Council articulated the ecclesiastical credo about the person of Christ, they spoke about “two natures, divine and human, existing indivisibly and unconfusedly.” This double condition, that the two natures are simultaneously not separated and not merged, warrants the *integrity* of either nature, as well as their salvific cooperation. From that point on the Chalcedonian doctrine has become the archetype of any synergistic relationship between God and human beings.

As sciences are products of human beings, the same principle applies here. Biblical Theology, a work of and about divine revelation, and psychology, a human endeavor, are called to coexist synergistically, without altering or reducing each other. This is somehow difficult to capture; human mind tends to perceive unilateral conditions more easily than those which make space for both entities, and that’s why the extremes of fundamentalism and ecclesiastical secularism are more popular. Simply put, indivisible and unconfused coexistence is part of the mystery that surrounds our entire life, the *Mystery of Incarnation*.

Conclusion—Disciplines Aid Pastoral Care’s End in Christ

Biblical Theology and secular disciplines, particularly psychology, can and must encounter each other and let themselves be affected by each other. This is my stance, consistent to the fact that I

have dedicated my entire life to this project. Contemporary perplexed subjects need much psychological knowledge in order to be thoroughly served in pastoral care. After all, what are the secular disciplines if not updated forms of the human effort to describe the reality of the world? In the case of psychology it makes a systematic way to articulate all available empirical experience of what it means to be human, in terms of intellect, emotions, desire, unconscious, memory, imagination, behavior etc. Who would find a reason to object to such a synchronization of descriptions if the content of the ecclesiastical message remains intact?

Indeed, the core of the Scripture in the good news of the renovating power of Christ's Cross and Resurrection remains and will continue to be our hope and the meaning of life. These are what should prevail and lead during this encounter.

This is the right moment, I think, to consider another word of the title:

What does 'successfully' mean?

By what measure is that success assessed? Having said all the above, I would dare to imply that, if pastoral care is defined as merely an (ecclesiastical) intervention to a variety of problematic human conditions, then its effectiveness in terms of assessable results becomes the measure of success. But if pastoral care is conceived as the sum of practical ways for announcing and making manifest Christ's the anthropic presence and power and mercy through support in the varieties of human troubles, then success becomes something that takes place in the deep heart and is difficult to estimate.

Without this latter option we are to experience various forms of sophisticated care carried out by persons wearing a collar and vestments (a care thus called pastoral), while wondering why Christianity keeps losing its nerve and potential in the West. To me charismatic movements, including healing ones, are not the answer to the devastating crisis of Christianity, because (a) they are primarily immanent and utilitarian, seeking for soothing and inventing emotions; and (b) they seem to ignore the redemptive and transformational theology that the Bible contains.

To regain the balance we need also to embed a spiritual perspective into pastoral care: a pastor's mission cannot be reduced to

counseling the divorced, the sick, or the youth. It makes an indispensable part of his calling, yet secularization remains an insidious danger if priority is not given to live the mystery of theology in the practice of our real lives.

Secular disciplines are neither to be expelled nor idealized, but invited to serve this mystery, according to Saint Paul's saying: "We take every thought captive to obey Christ" (2 Cor. 10: 5). The Bible has the answer once more.



www.PreciousHeart.net/ti