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Can Pastoral Care Successfully Merge Secular Disciplines with Biblical Theology?

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

Introduction: Pastoral Care and 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 much 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 the 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 manifested its importance as 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 up a big part of our everyday life, both individually and collectively. They often form 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 their spouses because of a lack of humility, others get sick because they adopt an unhealthy lifestyle permeated by ambition and greediness, and we certainly 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 must 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 in the Garden of Eden, we come upon another core issue of psychological theory, especially of the psychoanalytic kind. 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 O.T. is implemented and justified in the N.T., the scapegoating ritual, rather than accepting projection, reveals its pervasive nature and emphasizes that with Christ scapegoating is needless, even 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 arising within interpersonal relationships as if the merciful Christ was not 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 help resolve conflicts, because no one accepts responsibility and blames the “bad other” for 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 and substance abuse. The list has no end.

Besides, some people are subject to self-victimization in the form of self-scapegoating or yield to pathological guilt and fall into 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 our spiritual lives and our interpersonal relationships. It is true to argue that numerous individual, family, and group problems that are the recipients of pastoral care, and are likewise generated by a failure to handle guilt in a constructive way.

Shifting now to a different kind of psychological issue, I revisit 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 a *disheartening* or a *depression*. The Greek original reads ἀθυμία, which means *low mood*. It is reasonable: for if even nowadays when provoked by their father many children would not dare to express their anger or aggression to their fathers, we can hardly imagine what the conditions were 20 centuries ago!

How is pastoral care involved in this context? Pastoring families often include silent yet angry children. This includes coercive or

explosive adult children who have spent years being depressed or in passive-aggressive resistance. Pastors handling anger and aggression with pastoral care never have an easy task, and the psychological hint of this verse partially explains why. We should not omit here the dire contexts in which those provoking and inducing anger or aggression have been and could be 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 Romans 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 in themselves), but this passage focuses upon those conflicts which pertain to faith and virtue. A pastor has to reply to hard questions in order to encourage or to discourage choices, to support spiritual lives, to facilitate spiritual warfare, and to help the Christian discern behaviors that are impulsive or self-made “solutions” of existential conflicts. Listening is hard work. Pastors try to facilitate the liberation of souls from meaningless conflicts as well as hazardous conflicts.

Generalizing here, I would dare to say that our inner psychic divisions, when externalized, become the causes of great social conflicts and fragmentation, a field in which pastoral care is called to intervene in the form of social activism and social change.

In general, the spiritual and the psychological elements are mutually intertwined. Pastoral care deals with most of the situations in human life, regardless if it appears as secular or spiritual, because secular or spiritual element may be disguised as the other one. Who fully knows the heart? So psychology permeates almost every theological truth expressed in the Bible, with the only exception being the Triadological and Christological doctrines, for—obviously—God cannot be examined by mere human psychology.

C. Pastoral Care in Theology vs. Epistemology

So far so good—the reader has my positive answer to the title question: yes, pastoral care *can* successfully merge the secular disciplines with biblical theology.

Let us further explore some corollary theological and epistemological issues. From the history of the Church we have learned that heresies emerge 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 O.T.: yet how and why did some end up requiring circumcision for the Gentiles and others did not?

Examples like these show that implications derived from the Bible are always mediated by interpretation. The reader is not merely internalizing what they are reading; instead, one interprets constantly in a certain way, even at times when one has no idea they may doing that.

I consider the same valid for the question posed at the title of my chapter. What exactly is “Biblical Theology”? Which Biblical Theology should we have in mind in attempting to reply to such an interesting question? Biblical Theology is not actually something completely settle and therefore 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, and many of those view that “definite form” should not be contaminated by secular science because secular science is a product of a godless modernity. For many of the most “conservative,” pastoral care is basically condensed to teaching the Bible, implying that if someone merely applies the divine commandments they would be cured and not find themselves in conditions requiring pastoral care. So, on this particular issue, they almost reject psychology wholly and manufacture what they call “biblical counseling”; the strictest of them have coined the term “psycho-heresy,” a construct which threatens the purity of what they perceive as Biblical Theology.

While not all the conservative fundamentalists reject all of psychology, those that do reject all the good psychology that does not conflict with biblical precepts are led astray and away from very good

natural revelations to be had in the “psychology” of the person, just as seen in the rest of God’s creation.

At the other extreme of the spectrum, one finds liberal churches that have completely surrendered to psychology, which has been seen, sadly, as a kind of upgrade to their basic biblical tools, and not a mere accessory. They are willing to apply all available psychological knowledge to pastoral care, even to counter the Bible, yet one can legitimately wonder whether this “care” is “pastoral” anymore. In several cases, pastors behave more as counselors, and the ecclesiastical life is more organized around a variety of ministries which boast of being very inclusive. Unfortunately, one can hardly discover theological concepts or the best spiritual elements of the Christian message in the middle of this anthropocentric activism.

While worldwide Christianity is quite nuanced, I chose the two extremes in order to show how much the key to answering the title question lies within the spirit of the particular Christian and on how they interpret the Scripture. Is the Church perceived as a sect that should be isolated from the world? Then the answer to the title is an angry negative. Is the Church perceived as an organization whose gospel message can be watered down by the “triumph of the therapeutic”? Then the answer is “No!” Is the Church an organization led by God who ordained the natural laws, the sciences, and the wonders of psychological truths that help define the *Imago Dei* of “humankind”? Then the answer is enthusiastically positive.

Where can I position 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.

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-century gap (as if the Holy Spirit was present only during the Scripture’s authors’ 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, so that their 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-and-paste one. Yet this does not create a big problem, because theology has plenty of space for divergent interpretations which serve as portions of the marvelous mosaic of truth. Human complexities demand multifaceted arrays of theological contents and pastoral techniques.

Have the Fathers made use of the secular disciplines like psychology? The question makes no sense, because during their premodern time very little science existed as we know it today. They used the terminology that was not as scientific as today. So how can we guess about their attitude?

Two aspects of their behavior help. First, the Church Fathers accepted the healthy parts of philosophy, which were not only prevalent but also an officially acknowledged branch of thought. They accepted “philosophy” critically of course, but they were bold enough to respect its achievements, its truths, and did not demand it to merge into theology. Second, they recruited any psychological intuition they could. Even though psychology as a discipline was a long way off, looking back at their writings, they were heavily invested with psychological processes.

Augustine’s *Confessions* (c. AD 397) has become a classic and even exquisite case study. The Patristic works are full of psychological remarks, most of them still useful for pastoral care today.

- **Saint Gregory the Theologian** (AD 329–390) writes that usually it is men who legislate, so that is why the laws favor men against women.
- **Saint Basil the Great** (AD 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 reductionism to wealth and fame.

- **Saint John Chrysostom** (AD 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 Climacus of Sinai** (AD 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-century 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 the contemporary tools of 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 no merger happen, there would be no new name. Instead, with a merger, we have the disappearance of the old and the assimilation of the two into one entity.

What is the new entity between a Biblical Theology and Psychology? Let me recall: if such an entity existed, little to none of the two domains could be discerned inside the new entity. That is, the new creature would consist of neither “Biblical Theology” nor “Psychology,” but such would form a new street mixing new forms.

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

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 true 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, and, in a way, the term *integration* may undermine both the integrity of each component and their mutual interaction.

This issue reminds us of the Chalcedonian doctrine (AD 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 in which 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 as a work of and about divine revelation, and psychology about human endeavor, are both called to coexist synergistically, without altering or reducing each other. This is somehow difficult to capture. The human mind tends to perceive unilateral conditions more easily than those which make space for both entities, and that is 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 the 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 perplexing 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 systematically

articulates all the 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 the 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 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 one measure of success. Furthermore, if pastoral care is conceived as the sum of practical ways for announcing and making manifest Christ's anthropic presence and power and mercy through psychological support in the varieties of human troubles, then success becomes something that takes place deep in the 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 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 crises in 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 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. Pastoral care is 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

Testamentum Imperium – Volume 5 – 2016

saying: “We take every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Cor 10:5).
The Bible has the answer once more.



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