

Biblically Based Christian Spirituality and Adlerian Psychotherapy

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Abstract

Clients embracing a biblically based perspective on Christian spirituality are often reticent to engage with therapists who may not share their beliefs. The author discusses the common ground between basic tenets of biblically based Christian spirituality and Individual Psychology. He concludes that the Adlerian approach to psychotherapy is amenable to working with clients who hold a biblically based view of Christian spirituality when the therapist provides thoughtful attention to and respect for clients' spiritual beliefs.

Regarding the topic of spirituality, the field of counseling and psychotherapy has made a 180-degree turn from a position of disdain and avoidance to one beginning to appreciate the influence of spiritual issues on cognition, emotion, and, ultimately, behavior (Propst, 1996). According to Mahoney (1995), "issues of value—good-bad, right-wrong, and sacred-profane" will become increasingly central in the future of psychotherapy, "with the dimensions of religiosity and spirituality taking on new meanings in psychological assessment" (p. 55).

The importance of attending to clients' spiritualities in counseling and psychotherapy cannot be overstressed. One value central to many clients is their personal spirituality. Without understanding their clients' spiritual perspectives, therapists are "operating with a vital value system and possibly even a member of the family, God, left at home and ignored" (Grizzle, 1992, p. 139). Spirituality is a vital area for therapists to understand because clients' spiritual beliefs typically provide the value systems by which they view themselves, others, and the world. To ignore or discount clients' spiritualities is to close one's eyes to a vital therapeutic factor.

Historically, most systems of psychology have had either a neutral or negative position toward religion and spirituality. Individual Psychology and Adlerian psychotherapy, however, have been more open than many other approaches in regard to religious and spiritual issues. According to Manaster and Corsini (1982), "the most common Adlerian position toward religion is positive, viewing God as the concept of perfection. . . . For Adler, religion was a manifestation of social interest" (p. 63). Mosak (1995) noted that

Adler's psychology has a religious tone. His placement of social interest at the pinnacle of his value theory is in the tradition of those religions that stress people's responsibility for each other. (p. 59)

Adler (cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964) stated, "I regard it as no mean commendation . . . that Individual Psychology has rediscovered many a lost position of Christian guidance" (p. 307).

Many clients who espouse more conservative Christian perspectives on spirituality "are hesitant or even fearful to see secular therapists out of concern that their faith will not be appreciated and perhaps even [that they will be] scorned or analyzed as pathological" (Grizzle, 1992, p. 140). According to Bergin, Payne, and Richards (1996), research indicates that these clients fear that secular therapists may

(a) neglect religious concerns; (b) deal with religious beliefs and events as pathological or psychological; (c) fail to discern religious language and ideas; (d) presume that religious clients share nonreligious cultural norms; (e) promote therapeutic conduct that contradicts their own particular sense of morals; or (f) make presumptions, explanations, and suggestions that their account of revelation is not valid epistemology. (p. 315)

Even though the Adlerian model tends to take a more positive position toward clients' spiritualities, many of the above concerns still must be addressed in order to engage in psychotherapy more fruitfully with conservative Christian clients. The purpose of this article, therefore, is to demonstrate the enormous common ground between biblically based Christian spirituality and Individual Psychology and Adlerian psychotherapy.

Biblically Based Christian Spirituality

An operational definition. There are numerous definitions of the term *spirituality*, and these descriptions are diverse and often conflicting. For example, Jenkins (1997) defined spirituality as "the human response to a mysterious, transcendent Other who for unknown reasons cares enough about us to initiate a relationship with us" (p. 2). Hinterkopf (1998) defined it as "a subtle, bodily feeling with vague meanings that brings new, clearer meanings involving a transcendent growth process" (p. 11). Giles (cited in Collins, 1998) described spirituality as the "ways in which people seek, make, celebrate, and apply meaning to their lives" (p. 91). According to Mahrer (1996), spirituality refers to "some kind of relationship between the person and a higher force, being, power, or God" (p. 435). The biblically based Christian individual views spirituality as more specific and personal than the above descriptions. Collins (1998) stated that it

involves personal intimacy with God, a process of being conformed to the image of God for the sake of others. The spiritual journey is an ongoing experience of being shaped by God toward wholeness. . . . Christian spirituality is compassion oriented. It reaches out to the poor, the hungry, the needy, the sick, the victims of violence and their perpetrators, the down-and-outers in poverty-entrenched neighborhoods, and the up-and-outer suburbanites who often are too proud or self-sufficient to admit their neediness. Christ modeled concern for the needy, care for those in distress, and a willingness to come alongside people in their times of pain and confusion. He was deeply concerned as well for people who didn't know him, and he instructed his followers, as a last word of admonition, to go into the world and make disciples. (pp. 91, 190)

Croucher (cited in Collins, 1998) offered a clear and succinct definition of biblically based Christian spirituality, one that will serve as the operational definition for the purposes of this article:

Christian spirituality is about the movements of God's Spirit in one's life, in the community of faith, and in the cosmos It is concerned with how all realities relate, enlivened, enlightened, empowered by the Spirit of Jesus. [*Spirituality is*] the dynamic process whereby the Word of God (Bible) is applied by the Spirit of God to the heart and mind of the child of God so that she or he becomes more like the Son of God (Jesus). (p. 91; emphasis added)

Core beliefs shared by persons espousing this biblically based perspective on matters of faith and spirituality include the following: (a) God is a personal being who created humans for relationship with God and with fellow human beings; (b) God took on human form (the incarnation) and offers forgiveness of sins through faith and following of Jesus Christ; (c) the Bible is the divinely inspired Word of God, and it serves as the fundamental guidebook for learning spiritual truths and for living in relationship with others; and (d) the church is a body of Christ's disciples who are called together to worship, to love one another, and to love and minister to a world of people, all created in the image of God (Grizzle, 1992; Horton, 1998; Lewis, 1943/1996; McGrath, 1997).

Characteristics of healthy Christian spirituality. According to Butman (1999), the literature on spiritual and psychological health suggests the following qualities as characteristic of the psychospiritually whole person:

A strong religious faith commitment expressed both individually and corporately; the ability to resist silencing or pressures to conform; a small circle of intimate friends; a deep appreciation of God's handiwork; the ability to generate novel solutions to problems (i.e., creativity); self-acceptance and openness to others; the desire and the ability to confront others openly, directly, and honestly; a good balance between the rational and the emotional; involvement in helping those less fortunate than oneself; interdependence; good decision-making ability; a tolerance for ambiguity in life; a high level of moral

development; and a belief that one's actions make a difference and that one is not the victim of forces beyond one's control. (p. 193)

In a survey of mature Christian faith, Benson and Eklin (cited in Collins, 1998) discovered eight core characteristics descriptive of a healthy and mature Christian spirituality. The core characteristics are consistent with the above description of healthy psychospirituality. A biblically based Christian who is healthy and mature (a) trusts in God's saving grace and believes firmly in the humanity and divinity of Jesus; (b) experiences a sense of personal well-being, security, and peace; (c) integrates faith and life, seeing work, family, social relationships, and political choices as part of his or her religious life; (d) seeks spiritual growth through study, reflection, prayer, and discussion with others; (e) seeks to be a part of a community of believers in which people give witness to their faith and support and nourish one another; (f) holds life-affirming values, including commitment to racial and gender equality, affirmation of cultural and religious diversity, and a personal sense of responsibility for the welfare of others; (g) advocates for social and global change to bring about greater social justice; and (h) serves humanity, consistently and passionately, through acts of love and justice.

For persons conversant with the Adlerian approach, some of the similarities between Individual Psychology and the above descriptions of healthy Christian spirituality are readily apparent. In the remainder of this article, I address in greater detail many of the similarities between Individual Psychology theory, Adlerian psychotherapy, and biblically based Christian spirituality.

Biblically Based Christian Spirituality and Individual Psychology

According to Jones and Butman (1991), Individual Psychology is one of the most adaptable systems for working within a religious or spiritual framework.

There is more compatibility between Christianity and Adlerian conceptions than with . . . most other systems of psychotherapy . . . In [Individual Psychology], we find an approach that respects human responsibility, rationality, individuality, social interconnectedness and capacities for change. It is a view that has received scant attention from religious counselors over the years, and may bear further investigation in the future. (p. 243)

There is substantial common ground between the basic assumptions of Christianity and Individual Psychology regarding humankind. Both Christianity and Individual Psychology discuss human functioning from cognitive, psychodynamic, and systemic perspectives. Both conceptualize humans as creative, holistic, socially oriented, and teleologically motivated (goal-

directed). In addition, both perspectives emphasize the equality, value, and dignity of all human beings (Ansbacher, 1983; Benner & Hill, 1999; Chamblin, 1993; Cloud & Townsend, 1995; Collins, 1988, 1993, 1998; Crabb, 1997a, 1997b; Elmore, 1986; Erickson, 1986; Grenz, 1994; Guthrie, 1981; Huber, 1987; Jones & Butman, 1991; Kirwan, 1984; Ladd, 1974; Manaster & Corsini, 1982; Mosak, 1995; Thurman, 1999; Watts, 1992).

The strongest area of common ground between Christian spirituality and Individual Psychology—and one that encompasses many of the previously identified areas—is the shared relational perspective. Individual Psychology is a relational psychology (Manaster & Corsini, 1982), and the most important contribution of Individual Psychology is social interest.

If we regard ourselves as fellow human beings with fellow feeling, we are socially contributive people interested in the common welfare, and by Adler's pragmatic definition of *normality*, mentally healthy. (Mosak, 1995, p. 53)

Christian spirituality is a relational spirituality. Most of the characteristics of healthy Christian spirituality described by Butman (1999) and Benson and Eclin (cited in Collins, 1998) soundly resonate with the relational emphasis of Individual Psychology. The teachings of the Bible are the foundation or anchor of meaning making in biblically based Christian spirituality. The focus of the Bible is on relationships. The Bible affirms that humans have a three-fold relational responsibility: to God, to others, and to themselves. Most of the Bible addresses this three-fold responsibility (Elmore, 1986; Erickson, 1986; Grenz, 1994; Guthrie, 1981; Ladd, 1974). For example, the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1–17) are relationally focused. The first four address a person's relationship to God, and the following six address his or her relationship to others. When Jesus was asked to identify the greatest commandment in the Law, he stated,

"You shall love God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and foremost commandment. The second is like it, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commands depend the whole Law and the Prophets. (Matthew 22:37–40, New American Standard Bible, 1977)

It appears that Jesus is stating that the focus of God's revelation addresses how people are to be in relationship to God and how they are to be in relationship with their fellow human beings. The Bible speaks of covenants, commandments, doctrines, sins, and holiness. All of these concepts imply some sort of relationship, either a vertical relationship between God and humans or a horizontal, person-to-person relationship between humans. Yet, as Kirwan (1984) noted,

these concepts are often discussed as if they were entities unto themselves, as if they had nothing to do with relationships. . . . To discuss these concepts apart

from the relationships which they involve results in false and damaging teaching. When we interpret Scripture, a central hermeneutical question should be: "What relationship(s) is (are) involved here? How should this passage be interpreted in light of that relationship (those relationships)?" Because relationships were partially lost, and certainly blurred, in the fall, we can easily lose sight of their critical role in both theology and psychology. (p. 81)

According to the Bible, the very nature of humankind—created in the image of God—is to live in community with other persons (Grenz, 1994).

It is not surprising that ultimately the image of God should focus on "community." As the doctrine of the Trinity asserts, throughout all eternity God is "community," namely, the fellowship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit who comprise the triune God. The creation of humankind in the divine image, therefore, can mean nothing less than humans express the relational dynamic of God whose representation we are called to be. Consequently, each person can be related to the image of God only within the context of life in community with others. . . . In the final analysis, then, the "image of God" is a community concept. It refers to humans as beings-in-fellowship. (pp. 232–233)

Elmore (1986) noted that Cain's question, "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Genesis 4:9) brings to light another aspect of humankind's relational and social nature.

The lesson taught in the story of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4) is that we are responsible for each other as God's special creation. Complete individuality is a violation of God's creative intent. We cannot be responsible to God without being responsible for our fellow human beings. We are all kinsmen in the flesh and in the spirit. The mutual welfare of all is to be the concern of each. (Elmore, 1986, p. 127)

The idea that humans are responsible for caring for one another may also be seen in the teachings of Jesus (Elmore). For example, in the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:30–37), Jesus taught the importance of personal involvement in caring for others. In the First Letter of John, the author personalized this ministry of caring when he said, "But whoever has the world's goods, and beholds his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?" (1 John 3:17).

According to the Bible, the most disruptive factors in relationships—individual, family, society—are selfishness and pride. For example, in an act of selfishness and spite, Cain murdered his brother Abel. The ramifications of that act severely affected both Cain and his family. "Selfishness and pride are in direct contradiction to the image of God in man. Love is the primal attribute of deity and, thus, also the most appropriate expression of the divine likeness" (Elmore, 1986, p. 132). Jesus emphasized the importance of dual affection for both God and other humans. "You shall love the Lord your God . . . and your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:37–39). Elmore stated that when people are in proper relationship to God, they are free to love one

another and to live by the golden principle of social goodwill: “Therefore, however you want people to treat you, so treat them, for this is the Law and the Prophets” (Matt. 7:12).

Jones and Butman (1991) summarized the relational similarity between the biblical perspective and that of Individual Psychology:

For Adler, persons must be ultimately understood in social context; it is in relationships that humans have their meaning. Erickson correctly suggests that this is a strong point of contact with Christianity. He criticizes the “Christian individualism” that so characterizes conservatives and notes that humans properly understood in biblical perspective are always “humans-in-community.” This is a point stressed by McDonald, when he wrote that in Hebrew thought, “the individual was summed up, as it were, in the community. . . . Yet [at] no time was the individual quite lost.” Psychological theories tend to be either individualistic (especially the humanistic theories) or collectivistic (family psychotherapy)—in the former community disappears; in the latter, the individual disappears. Adler’s views, on the other hand, are a healthy balance of the individual rooted in relationships. (p. 237)

Implications for Psychotherapy

As I noted earlier, the teachings of the Bible are the foundation or anchor of meaning-making in conservative Christian spirituality. Although not necessarily written as a psychotherapy text, the Bible is nevertheless filled with stories of relationships and guidelines for living in relationship with others. Even Albert Ellis, a long-standing atheist, now speaks affirmatively of the Bible’s ability to help clients: “I think I can safely say that the Judeo-Christian Bible is a self-help book that has probably enabled more people to make extensive and intensive personality and behavioral changes than all professional therapists combined” (cited in McMinn, 1996, p. 99).

The Bible never claims to be a textbook on counseling. It deals with loneliness, discouragement, marriage problems, grief, parent-child relations, anger, fear, and a host of other counseling situations, but it was never meant to be God’s sole revelation about people helping. (Collins, 1988, p. 22)

In counseling or consulting with colleagues working with clients holding a biblically based spirituality perspective, I find it useful for the therapist (a colleague or myself) to inform clients about the enormous common ground between central aspects of the Adlerian therapeutic approach and the Bible’s perspective. This revelation helps in building the therapeutic alliance because clients better understand that the therapist is sensitive to their perspectives on spirituality and that the counseling model and process will be compatible with their beliefs.

Client-therapist relationship. Adlerian psychotherapy is commonly viewed as consisting of four aspects or phases. The first and, for most Adlerians, the most important is *relationship*. Because psychotherapy occurs in a relational context, Adlerian psychotherapists focus on the development of a respectful, collaborative, and egalitarian therapeutic alliance with clients. Therapeutic efficacy in the other phases—analysis, insight, reorientation—is predicated upon the development and continuation of a strong therapeutic alliance.

As I've noted, biblically based Christian spirituality is a relational spirituality. Grenz (1994) noted that because all persons are created in the image of God, all are equal in the sight of God. Thus, psychotherapists should relate to other persons—and especially clients—in an egalitarian fashion. Created in the image of God, all are worthy of dignity and respect. Furthermore, spiritual growth is relationally predicated according to the Bible. Without an ever-deepening relationship with God, members of the faith community, and other fellow human beings, people cannot grow spiritually.

Notice the number of times that the words “one another” appear in the New Testament epistles. We are instructed to build up, accept, admonish, be devoted to, be at peace with, serve, bear the burdens of, be kind to, teach, encourage, confess our faults to, pray for, and love one another (Rom. 14:19; 15:7, 14; 12:10, 18; Gal. 5:13; 6:2; Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:16; 1 Thess. 5:11; James 5:16; 1 John 4:7). While this activity extends beyond counseling, it also includes much of what is involved in the counseling process. (Collins, 1988, p. 596)

Goals. The *basic* goal of Adlerian psychotherapy is to facilitate clients' experiencing new information that is discrepant with their existing cognitive structures. Thus, clients have the opportunity to create perceptual alternatives and modify or replace growth-inhibiting life themes with ones that are growth-enhancing. The *ultimate* goal for psychotherapists is the development or enhancement of the client's social interest. Congruent with Adlerian personality theory, the goals of Adlerian psychotherapy have a relational orientation.

The Bible clearly teaches that self-examination is important (e.g., 1 Corinthians 11:28; 2 Corinthians 13:5) and that healthy behaviors and emotions result from healthy thinking (e.g., Proverbs 23:7; Romans 12:2; Philippians 4:8). Adlerian psychotherapy shares the biblical perspective between cognitive/verbal intervention, on the one hand, and the importance of action on the other. The Bible and Individual Psychology suggest that genuine insight or cognitive change always leads to behavioral change (Huber, 1987; Jones & Butman, 1991). For example, in Matthew 7:20, Jesus stated “you will know them by their fruits” and affirmed that simply acknowledging God does not equate to having a relationship with God. The Letter of James also supports this position.

But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. . . . Even so, faith, if it has no works, is dead being by itself. But someone may say, "You have faith, and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works." . . . But are you willing to recognize . . . that faith without works is useless? (James 1:22, 2:17–18, 20).

Furthermore, as noted earlier, both the Bible and Adlerian psychotherapy stress the relationship between spiritual-mental health and social interest. Mosak (1995) presented the Biblical mandate to love one's neighbor as a succinct illustration of social interest. For the Christian, the cardinal virtue is *agape*, the highest form of love, a form that is primarily volitional and self-giving rather than emotional and self-centered. Jones and Butman (1991) noted that *agape* "is rooted in humans being created in God's image. [Humans] are thus not to be worshipped. Rather, we serve God in some profound way through our service to others" (p. 235). The behavioral characteristics of *agape*—perseverance, benevolence, trustworthiness, humility, altruism, unselfishness, optimism—are similar in many respects to Adlerian descriptions of social interest (Watts, 1992).

In summary, both the Bible and Adlerian psychotherapy stress the importance of understanding the influence of core lifestyle convictions (schema) on an individual's present-moment thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Both address the importance of monitoring thoughts, beliefs, and assumptions. Both stress the importance of replacing growth-inhibiting convictions with growth-enhancing ones. The methodologies or techniques of both seek to facilitate both cognitive and behavioral change. Ultimately both place as preeminent the role of relationships and social interest (or *agape*) for spiritual and mental health.

The process of encouragement. Both Christian spirituality and Individual Psychology emphasize the importance of *encouragement*. Adlerian psychotherapists consider encouragement a crucial aspect of human growth and development. Dreikurs (1967) and Adler (cited in Ansbacher and Ansbacher, 1956) believed that encouragement was essential for all relationships, therapeutic or otherwise. Stressing the importance of encouragement in psychotherapy, Adler stated: "Altogether, in every step of the treatment, we must not deviate from the path of encouragement" (p. 342). The process of encouragement includes demonstrating concern for clients through active listening and empathy, communicating respect for and confidence in clients, focusing on clients' strengths, assets, and resources, helping clients generate perceptual alternatives for discouraging fictional beliefs and oppressive narratives, focusing on efforts and progress, and helping clients see the humor in life experiences (Watts, 1999). Encouragement is the therapeutic modeling of social interest, and it is both an attitude and a process of facilitating growth.

The Bible also stresses the importance of encouragement (Collins, 1988; Crabb & Allender, 1984). Although other words are sometimes used in addition to encourage (e.g., “affirm,” “build up,” “edify,” “strengthen”), the importance of encouragement, or the modeling of social interest, is nevertheless strongly supported in the Bible (e.g., Acts 14:21–22; 1 Corinthians 13:4–7; 14:26; Galatians 5:22–23; Hebrews 3:13; 10:24; Jeremiah 29:11; Philippians 1:16; 2:3–4; 4:8; Psalms 138:3; Romans 1:12; 12:8; 14:19; 15:2; 1 Thessalonians 3:7; 5:11, 14–15; Titus 2:6–8).

Techniques. Adlerian psychotherapists use a variety of cognitive, experiential, and behavioral techniques to achieve the aforementioned goals of psychotherapy. They select techniques based on the unique needs of each client (Manaster & Corsini, 1982; Mosak, 1995).

A similar perspective is evident in reading the Biblical accounts of how Jesus interacted with people.

Jesus used a variety of counseling techniques depending on the situation, the nature of the counselee, and the specific problem. At times he listened to people carefully without giving much overt direction, but on other occasions he taught decisively. He encouraged and supported, but he also confronted and challenged. (Collins, 1988, p. 19)

In helping Christian clients, counselors should use techniques that are consistent with their clients’ belief systems. Most techniques created by or consistently used by Adlerians meet this requirement. Propst (1996) contended that all therapeutic techniques and especially those based in cognitively oriented therapies

place cognition at the center of the therapeutic work. . . . Furthermore, this cognitive process of modifying and transforming one’s assumptions interestingly bears resemblance to aspects of religious expression. There is, for example, a similarity between cognitive restructuring and the religious idea of “repentance,” which comes from [Koine] Greek, meaning “to change one’s mind about how one’s self and the world is to be viewed” (Michel, 1967). Consistent with this claim, there appears to be similarity between the idea of the challenging and transforming of one’s assumptions and schema with ideas presented in Christian thinking. . . . Thus, both the cognitive therapeutic change models and theological inquiry urge a change of perspective for transformation. (p. 394)

I find it helpful to use Biblical passages in responding to clients’ maladaptive private logic. If they do indeed view the Bible as the Word of God, then facilitating a dialogue between the Bible and their maladaptive beliefs and behaviors often proves helpful. Creating perceptual alternatives or cognitive restructuring could be described as “a type of spiritual transformation of the mind—a spiritual exercise” (Propst, 1996, p. 394).

While it is not generally appropriate to challenge the basic faith beliefs of clients, it can be extremely helpful to point out in their own faith language how they may have followed one extreme principle to the exclusion of another within their own faith framework. Knowing these principles can help the practitioner address these belief systems in a faith supportive manner. . . . Often clients may have taken one aspect of belief to an extreme without recognizing the other balancing principle. By pointing this out within their faith framework, they may be able to modify their patterns without feeling their basic beliefs have been challenged. (Grizzle, 1992, 142–143)

Techniques are often more acceptable to clients when described in a language in which they are comfortable. For example, Romans 12:2 states “do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. . . .” Using Biblical insights in cognitive restructuring is congruent with the “renewing of the mind” principle in the faith language of biblically based spirituality.

Conclusion

The common ground between biblically based Christian spirituality and Individual Psychology is significant. For therapists cognizant of and sensitive to the beliefs of clients espousing this form of Christian spirituality, Adlerian psychotherapy has tremendous applicability. To be optimally effective with these clients, Adlerian therapists may need to become more conversant with the conservative theology and spirituality literature, as well as the literature integrating theology and spirituality with psychology and counseling.

When working with Christian clients, it may be useful for psychotherapists to consult or dialogue with clergy from the clients’ faith tradition to gain insights into how to best serve the clients. Finally, it is important to be aware of good therapists who espouse a biblically based perspective of conservative Christian spirituality for purposes of consultation or referral.

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