

A 4-MAT Review System: Integrative Approaches to Psychology and Christianity

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Abstract

In his book, *Integrative Approaches to Psychology and Christianity* (2004), Entwistle presents the reader with a number of key questions concerning the possibility of integration with two seemingly divergent disciplines: psychology (science) and theology. From the religious fundamentalist point of view, psychology is a godless discipline relying exclusively on empirical data that is observable and necessary for a client's behavior modification. As for practitioners of the psychological discipline, their view of theology is oftentimes combative, relegating the notion of a sovereign God working in the affairs of His creation as nothing more than superstition and completely outside the proof tests employed by the scientific method. But Entwistle proposes that integration is not only possible, but necessary for both disciplines. The etymology of the word *psychology* reveals that it is a science which studies the soul *ψυχή*, that most essential element of the human existence which is unseen and therefore unobservable. The challenge, as Entwistle identifies it, is a matter of how we can modify our worldviews to accommodate the truth held in both disciplines. Humans, being finite creatures often fall short in their epistemological efforts in the search for truth. If God is the author of all truth, then His truth would be sovereign over all things to include psychology and theology. Entwistle further emphasizes God's sovereignty by defining Nature in all of its material manifestations as not our mother, but as our sister. Nature then is the result of the creativeness of God and not as the result of some ill-defined cosmological accident. (Entwistle, 2004, p. 116) Entwistle believes that our understanding about creation, science, all that we can see and cannot see is colored by the assumptions we hold in our worldviews. These worldviews affect the way we perceive the world around us and thus determine our actions. According to Entwistle, the expression of our

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worldviews naturally prompts us to form models which best represent them. The worldviews may be theological, scientific or a combination of both. (Entwistle, 2004, chap. 8) Individual positioning based on these models help us to form a more holistic approach to the healing sciences. For him, these models or paradigms from which we operate can create a framework for treatment on a scale from being adversarial (as an example: believing that operating from a secular view is better or more complete than a theological view), to a paradigm that results in the integration of secular and theological approaches. Of course, within this continuum are paradigms (identified by Entwistle as spies, colonialists, and neutral parties) which find a more middle-of-the-road approach to integration. These integrative models make it possible for the reader to understand that a relationship between the two disciplines of theology and psychology is indeed possible and useful especially in the formation of ethical standards employed by practitioners. As pointed out by Chrysostomos in his book *Orthodoxy and Psychology* (Chrysostomos, 2004), even Freud who has been demonized by adherents of the theological combatant paradigm of the Enemies model never fully discounted a theological basis for his theories. Further, Freud has often been described as being closer to the teachings of the early Church fathers in his assessment of the fallen nature of man.

Concrete Response

Entwistle's book brings to mind that absolutely nothing is beyond God. There is much to know that perhaps never can be fully known especially when it concerns the mind of God. So to discount even the possibility that a divine, metaphysical power is behind creation and life as we experience it today is beyond me. At the same time, I believe that as Christians we have a responsibility to understand the world around us and to appreciate God's creativeness as it finds

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its expression in the sciences. I am essentially a conservative, evangelical Christian and I do not consider myself a fundamentalist by any means. I believe that I am this way because I have been blessed to have experienced many people and situations which caused me to understand that there are some gray areas that I needed to approach with love and mercy. Reflecting on this on a more personal level, my father-in-law died after suffering with a long-time pulmonary disease. In his youth, the lack of medical knowledge concerning the long-term effects of breathing in airborne cotton fibers and chemicals used to process cotton would eventually cost him his life. This was something many young men did to earn a living for their families and it was at a time when science of the day could not observe. I can also look back on my life and remember the nightmare of three long years of coping with my then wife's manic depression. All that could possibly have been done medically and psychologically to help her was offered, but never accepted. Was this a failure of science or of God, or of both? The answer quite simply is neither. In both cases the end result was the extension of Godly mercy and compassion freely given through the doctors and nurses who touched my life and the lives of my family members.

Reflection

My only real criticism with this book is its lack of attention paid to the earliest practitioners of spiritual psychotherapy during the formative years of Christianity. There are many patristic texts concerning the spiritual healing of the soul. Byzantium which upheld so much of the genius of Roman culture, law, and medical science also made tremendous contributions to understanding the sickness and healing of the soul. A fuller study into the implications of being both a Christian and a scientist should have included more about the curative effects of meditation, fasting, breathing and other spiritual exercises that have found acceptance in today's

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medical community. These are redemptive practices to help the soul return to what the fathers call a pre-fallen state of redemption which is only possible through the saving power of Jesus Christ. The epistemology of the early church fathers did not discount the wisdom of ancient philosophers such as the Stoics; rather they integrated those aspects of ancient philosophy and science into the revealed truth of Jesus Christ.¹ The impression they may be given was that early theologians were always at odds with science, which would be further from the truth.

(McGuckin, 2004)

Action

In light of the secular humanist movement as identified by Francis Schaffer in his book, *A Christian Manifesto*, (Macdonald, 2006) it would seem that the anthropocentric discipline of psychology has become a religion unto itself. It is feared by some that its secular reasoning may be seductive to immature Christians and to those of little or no faith. (Elwell, 2006) Yet, I would point out that since God is the author of all truth, His truth can be found and practiced in the healing sciences. As previously mentioned, much of psychotherapy in its praxis finds its roots in the early Church. It is has almost been fashionable to rediscover patristic psychotherapeutic methods in today's post-modernist world and the need for Christian spiritual direction has never been more acute. If Christian counseling and psychology is to be competent, there has to be a healthy integration of science and theology. As part of God's creation theology can find a sister

¹ I am highlighting this point as the attitude of the fathers of the early church was in stark contrast to the Roman Catholic Church's condemnation of Galileo's heliocentric theories as explained in chapter 2 of Entwistle's book.

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in the sciences as we have a common Father. Christian counseling, according to Clinton and Ohlschlager (Clinton & Ohlschlager, 2002) shares attributes common to all counseling: it should be goal orientated, it should lead to greater maturity allowing the client to live more effectively and deliberately, and it should be diverse in practice with a willingness to explore all God-inspired methods (to include scientific methods).

Life experience has taught me that while there are biblical absolutes, my approach to Christian counseling calls me to not be black and white in my therapeutic practice, but to be open to the wisdom and truth contained in both the secular and Christian methodologies. I believe that Christian counselors have an ethical and moral responsibility to explore treatment methods that are most beneficial to the client, and at the same time progress the client toward his or her spiritual redemption.

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