



Book Review

Towards a Christian Psychology or Cure of Souls

Samuel Bendeck Sotillos¹

Institute of Traditional Psychology

¹ Mental Health Therapist, Writer, and Researcher. E-mail: samuelbendeck@yahoo.com

**A Catholic Christian Meta-Model of the Person:
Integration with Psychology and Mental Health Practice**
Edited by Paul C. Vitz, William J. Nordling,
and Craig Steven Titus
Sterling, VA: Divine Mercy University Press, 2020, PP. 736,
Paperback: \$45.00; Hardcover: \$93.00.

The Enlightenment project took root in the modern West. It was not a natural outgrowth of Christianity but, rather, a repudiation of its sacred tenets. Prior to the gradual secular trajectory of the West, the Christian tradition shared a common metaphysical understanding of reality with other spiritual traditions of the world. It is this sacred epistemology that provides a unitive understanding of the human being and a psychology or “science of the soul” that integrally connects the person to the Divine. The development of modern Western psychology as a distinct discipline is due to the European Enlightenment and its desacralization and reductionism, which is its inescapable legacy that it still has not come to terms with. Paradoxically, psychology is the study of the psyche or soul, yet its science denies the existence of Spirit and therefore it cannot be an authentic psychology. In fact, in the Middle Ages we find the Latin expression *cura animarum*, or “cure of souls,” which conveys the integration of spirituality and psychology, always situating the human psyche within the spiritual domain that transcends and includes it.

Corresponding author:
Samuel Bendeck Sotillos
E-mail:
samuelbendeck@yahoo.
com

eISSN: 2458-9675

Received: 09.04.2022
Revision: 08.05.2022
Accepted: 10.06.2022

©Copyright 2022
by Author(s)

To perpetually modify the understand of the person according to an ever-expanding index of psychological theories and practices based on the current whims and fashions of the discipline is to miss the mark and inevitably leads to confusion and misunderstanding, due to the

Citation: Bendeck Sotillos, S. (2022). Towards a Christian psychology or cure of souls [Review of the book A Catholic Christian Meta-Model of the Person: Integration with psychology and mental health practice by Paul C. Vitz, William J. Nordling, and Craig Steven Titus]. *Spiritual Psychology and Counseling*, 7(2), 257–262. <https://dx.doi.org/10.37898/spc.2022.7.2.172>

limitations of not only what is included, but more importantly what is excluded. The human being escapes all attempts to be reduced to a mental health theory or diagnosis. A basic postulate of this work under review is that: “our understanding of the nature of the person is fundamental to all aspects of mental health practice. Such a vision of the person defines the scope of what we see as human problems, our understanding of how such problems develop, and what is to be done to promote healing, growth, and even flourishing” (p. xi). Furthermore, “an understanding of the person based solely on psychological perspectives of the person and the collective wisdom of the mental health field is itself still too reductionistic to fully express the complexity of human nature” (p. xi). For this reason, the discipline of psychology and the field of mental health need a transpersonal dimension in order to facilitate a multidimensional framework by which one can understand the depths and heights of what it means to be human.

This book consists of twenty-six chapters that are divided into five parts: *Part I: The Meta-Model of Integration*, consists of two chapters introducing the Catholic Christian Meta-Model of the Person (CCMMP) and its implications for the field of mental health, along with the understanding of the human being according to the Christian tradition. *Part II: Psychological Support*, contains four chapters identifying the benefits of integrating a spiritually based understanding of the person into contemporary psychology and psychotherapy and provides a critique of personality theories established on secular and reductionistic principles of mainstream psychology. *Part III: Philosophical Support*, has ten chapters articulating the underlying assumptions of the human being within the Christian tradition and how they fundamentally differ from the secular assumptions of modern science, the focus on a holistic understanding the human being as a tripartite structure of Spirit, soul, and body, the relationship between man and woman, the notion of vocation and human flourishing, and the psycho-spiritual importance of virtue. *Part IV: Theological Support*, consists of three chapters addressing the human being created in the image of the Divine and what this means given our fallen condition, the ways of redemption, and its implications for mental health treatment. *Part V: Theoretical and Clinical Applications of the Meta-Model*, contains seven chapters that cover the principles for training in this comprehensive multidisciplinary and faith-based approach for mental health professionals and offering case conceptualizations, group therapy in light of the Christian tradition, a critical overview of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) and the *International Classification of Diseases* (ICD), and a case for the need to include the spiritual dimension to address the fullness of the human being in psychological assessment and diagnosis.

The editors of this work have advanced the following framework, entitled “the Catholic Christian Meta-Model of the Person” (CCMMP). Its aim is outlined here:

The Meta-Model is an overarching comprehensive view of the person, which provides a framework for integrating the rich understandings about various dimensions of the person

that are explored in existing personality theories, while avoiding the reductionism that results when a vision of the person is based on one or only a few of these personalities theories. (p. 6)

An imperative point to understand about this book is that “the Meta-Model does not replace existing therapeutic models in the field, but instead provides a framework for the thoughtful selection of one or more interventions based on its comprehensive view of the person” (p. 6). The objective of the CCMMP framework is to provide a more comprehensive vision of the human being in order to support sound psychological theory and research for mental health practitioners and individuals utilizing services.

Within modern Western psychology, there has been a wide acknowledgment that the field is in crisis due to its dehumanized and reductionistic science, its eclecticism devoid of an integrative framework, and its lack of consensus on important facets of the discipline; some even question its efficacy altogether. The editors hold that modern psychology has developed myriad “partial” theories for understanding the human being. Although correct, this assessment underestimates and minimizes the negative impact that modern psychology and its secularizing tendency have had by attempting to substitute itself for the role that religion and the spiritual traditions have played. We must not forget that modern psychology viewed religion as a mass neurosis and pathologized it.

Partial theories cannot be piecemealed together to establish a complete theory. Due to the lack of an integrative theory, the editors recommend that “There is a need for a unifying framework” (p. 9). With this noted, again “partial” theories cannot be amalgamated to establish an integral or complete psychology of the human being. What is needed is an integrative and nonreductionist model established on metaphysics to access the spiritual dimension. Psychology, when understood as a “science of the soul” as found within all of the spiritual traditions, consists of a wholeness that cannot be reduced to the sum of its parts. Just as religion cannot be reduced to the sum of its parts, the same is true for the sacred psychologies found within all of the religions.

A distinct qualifier for therapists who embrace a spiritually informed approach is the recognition of the sacred and the way that it permeates the whole of human existence. The theological vision of the Christian tradition is based on the idea that human beings are created in the “image of God” (Genesis 1:27) and we are all called to be “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4). To fail to view the person in the here-in-now as someone struggling with whatever problem that they are trying to remedy and at the same time in full possession of their theomorphic identity is to miss the person or to only see a fragment.

Those who take up the practice of Christian psychology do not see it as a vocation among many, but rather as a calling. As noted, “Christian mental health professionals view professional work as a calling from God and not simply a job” (p. 15). This

viewpoint greatly differs from that of secular psychotherapists, who likely do not hold that “Service to their clients is seen as a way of loving both God and neighbor” (p. 15). Another distinction between Christian and secular therapists is that “Christian mental health professionals pray for and work to develop the supernatural virtues of faith, hope, and charity” (p. 15). Therapists utilizing this approach need to apply this spiritual medicine to themselves before attempting to apply it to others and take heed of the important injunction: “Physician, heal thyself” (Luke 4:23). A spiritually based therapy recognizes that human behavior is connected to ethical norms and the development of virtues of a given spiritual tradition. This is observed here: “Well-regulated emotions, along with the contributions of reasons, volition, and other people, are necessary for virtuous moral action” (p. 39).

The editors of this volume make an attempt at “integrating a Christian understanding of the person with modern psychology” (p. 47). While this is commendable and one can certainly find common ground between the spiritual psychologies and mainstream psychology, no integration between the two is possible without first examining their foundations for inherent conflicts. Because of the exclusion of the sacred, one must ask how the modern discipline of psychology can ever be a true “science of the soul.” It cannot be ignored that the emergence of modern science and its psychology was an all-out assault on the metaphysical roots known across the sapiential traditions and their own integral psychologies.

Christian psychology does not deny that in some cases psychological problems are associated with genetic, biochemical, or other factors outside the agency of the individual. The meaning given to a person’s suffering and the behaviors enacted can facilitate therapeutic well-being or reduce the possibilities of the onset of psychopathology. From the perspective of religious and spiritual traditions, “morality is for the benefit and flourishing of the person” (p. 65), which can support the integrity of the human psyche as “it is understood that some psychological problems can arise from violating the moral law and ... many aspects of psychological flourishing develop from keeping the moral law” (pp. 65–66).

References made to the threefold constitution of the human being can be found in St Paul’s first epistle to the Thessalonians: “May the God of peace Himself sanctify you wholly; and may your *spirit and soul and body* be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thessalonians 5:23). As human beings have both a body and a mind, it is important to first turn to the body and investigate with the individual their physical health prior to determining a mental health diagnosis. Once a physical health problem has been ruled out, a person’s mental health can be further assessed. At the same time, maintaining awareness of the fundamental mind-body unity and its relationship to the tripartite structure of Spirit, soul, and body at all times is central to any spiritually-informed therapeutic approach.

The human being is always seeking to transcend itself in order to find wholeness and healing but cannot do so without access to an agency beyond itself. The empirical ego or separate self, because of its fallen condition, is unable to accomplish this. It is in the restoration of the primacy of our essential nature or the “image of God” (*imago Dei*) within us that we can transcend our limited self-concepts and beliefs. The Divine is both transcendent and immanent; however, mainstream psychology and its “secular approaches all neglect transcendence and assume only immanence” (p. 80). This is problematic, as there can be no immanence without a prior transcendence; in the same way that the vertical dimension informs the horizontal, everything proceeds from the spiritual dimension and its metaphysical roots. It is in abiding in both the Divine transcendence and immanence that we can obtain wholeness and healing: “Be anxious for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:6–7).

Contemporary psychology, although divorced from the sacred, is itself not free of its own metaphysical assertions. The discipline appears to be oblivious that it has constructed its own pseudo-metaphysics that end in *psychologism*, the attempt to reduce all of reality to psychological criteria. Reductionism can take on many forms, and the discipline of psychology is often unaware of them. Mainstream psychology “reduce[s] the soul to the mind and the mind to an epiphenomenon of the brain, which itself is the product of environmental factors” (p. 153). As Christian psychology has a spiritual basis, it can provide a holistic understanding of the human being. The editors write, “there is each person’s basic *call to flourishing or goodness* as a human person” (p. 214).

Present-day psychology and psychotherapy not only produce what could be viewed as “partial” theories and applications but offer a fragmented understanding of the human being and the nature of reality. This predicament will remain as long as psychology does not acknowledge the centrality of metaphysics and the spiritual dimension within the discipline. The human being’s connection to the Divine needs to be at the front and center of all treatment approaches as is affirmed in Christian psychology (see Larchet, 2011; Tan, 2011) and all other spiritually based therapies.

Mental health professionals will benefit from this comprehensive manual that has been extensively researched, as it provides a way forward in the direct application of the Christian tradition in a therapeutic context. This book restores the authority within psychology back to the spiritual dimension rather than the empiricism and rationalism that is the legacy of the Enlightenment project and consequently of mainstream psychology. An important matter not addressed in this study are the arguably deleterious impacts of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) on the hearts and minds of the faithful, not to mention the crisis in religious vocations

to which it has led. Therefore, references to the doctrinal teachings of Vatican II (and the contemporary church) should be considered with discernment so that a clear distinction can be maintained between traditional Catholicism and some of its modern aberrations (Coomaraswamy, 2006). Notwithstanding, the book has many strengths that will benefit therapists who are interested in Christian psychology, or the “science of the soul” found within all of the world’s religions. It is by adhering to one of the divinely revealed spiritual traditions that we can gain access to a liberating discernment—“Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32)—which is essential for any integral therapy and healing.

References

- Coomaraswamy, R. P. (2006). *The destruction of the Christian tradition*. World Wisdom.
- Larchet, J. C. (2011). *Mental disorders and spiritual healing: Teachings from the early Christian East* (R. P. Coomaraswamy, & G. J. Champoux, Trans.). Angelico Press/Sophia Perennis.
- Tan, S.-T. (2011). *Counseling and psychotherapy: A Christian perspective*. Baker Academic.