

Book review: Mental Disorders and Spiritual Healing. Teachings from the Early Christian East

Reseña de libro: Trastornos Mentales y Curación Espiritual. Enseñanzas del Cristianismo Temprano

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Abstract

Modern Western psychology is not a monolithic discipline for it has, at its disposal, a host of therapies and techniques. However, it is sustained by a set of hegemonic and totalitarian assumptions that have, in myriad ways, served to undermine other approaches. Mainstream psychology, which is based on a foundation of materialism, is largely incapable of providing authentic healing because it cannot access realms that transcend the empirical order. Yet, since time immemorial, there have been modes of spiritually based therapies connected to the diverse religious traditions of the world. In this ground-breaking work, Dr. Jean-Claude Larchet provides a compelling analysis of the Church Fathers' profound wisdom into the human condition and its various maladies of the soul. In doing so, he offers remarkable insights into how mental health treatment can be richly informed by traditional Christianity.

Keywords: christianity, patristics, psychology, science of the soul, mental health

Resumen

La psicología occidental moderna no es una disciplina monolítica ya que tiene a su disposición una gran variedad de terapias y técnicas. Sin embargo, se sustenta en un conjunto de supuestos hegemónicos y totalitarios que, de múltiples formas, han servido para subestimar otros enfoques. La psicología dominante, que se fundamenta en el materialismo, es en gran medida incapaz de proporcionar una curación auténtica porque no puede acceder a ámbitos que trascienden el orden empírico. Sin embargo, desde tiempos inmemoriales, ha habido modalidades de terapias basadas en la espiritualidad y conectadas a las diversas tradiciones religiosas del mundo. En esta obra pionera, el Dr. Jean-Claude Larchet ofrece un análisis convincente de la profunda sabiduría de los Padres de la Iglesia sobre la condición humana y sus diversas enfermedades del alma. Con ello, el autor ofrece una notable visión sobre lo que el cristianismo tradicional podría aportar de manera rica al tratamiento de la salud mental.

Palabras clave: cristiandad, patrística, psicología, ciencia del alma, salud mental

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The implicit reductionism of mainstream psychology is increasingly acknowledged. How modern Western psychology conceptualizes mental health and normality is not value-free or neutral as is often assumed. It is all too often forgotten that there is nothing absolute or universal about modern psychology or its massive index of therapies. In contrast, Christian psychology or the “science of the soul” recognizes that the human being is created in the “image of God” (Genesis 1:27) and that the Divine calls us to become “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4) and ultimately of what is everlasting and “not of this world” (John 18:36). The term *therapy* comes from the Greek word *therapeía* referring to “healing” in relation to those “that had need of healing” (Luke 9:11). The understanding and insight of the early Church Fathers on mental illness and what it means to be fully human is stunning and insightful, leaving modern psychology pale and insipid in contrast. It is through a comprehensive analysis of the Church Fathers’ timeless wisdom that a new look on psychology or the “science of the soul” and mental health treatment informed by the Christian tradition becomes possible.

As psychology has supplanted the role of religion in the contemporary world, individuals have gravitated to the likes of Freud, Jung, Watson, Skinner, or the approaches of cognitive behavioral therapy of various kinds or other treatment modalities, to find themselves or obtain a cure without reference to the human soul or the Spirit. All valid forms of psychology or the “science of the soul” prior to the modern world and the events of the Renaissance, Scientific Revolution, and European Enlightenment were rooted in metaphysics, as is the case with Christian psychology. During the mediaeval period, the West shared a common or underlying metaphysics with the rest of the world’s religions, that of the East and West or North and South, and it was only in the post-medieval world that this desacralized outlook atrophied and divorced itself from transcendence. It is in the transcendent unity of religions that the perennial psychology, which recognizes that within each of the divinely revealed religions exists a traditional psychology or “science of the soul,” that we can acquire diverse and holistic ways of understanding the human psyche.

This work is written by Jean-Claude Larchet, who is one of the most important scholars of Orthodox Christianity or the Eastern Church of

the present day. The work consists of the following chapters: Chapter 1: Anthropological Background: The Human Composite; Chapter 2: Insanity Due to Somatic Problems; Chapter 3: Insanity of Demonic Origin; Chapter 4: Insanity of Spiritual Origin; and Chapter 5: A Most Singular Kind of Folly—The Fools for Christ.

Larchet informs readers, “Regardless of historical period or the nature of the society involved, mental illness has been always with us” (p. 1). This may be the case, yet what is striking about the present day is the prevalence of mental illness as it is everywhere to be detected and appears to be a unique qualifier of this topsy-turvy era. The world as it is known today has become increasingly toxic on all levels and for this reason is antagonistic and even hostile to psychological health and well-being. It is difficult to avoid being bombarded with psychotropic drug advertisements, as their uses have in many ways become normalized in the dominant culture. At the same time, there has also been an explosion in the marketplace of healing and wellness products, as health and wellness have become commodities for profit, which is a symptom of our times. How then can we be surprised to find that almost everything and everyone we know is somehow sick or struggling with some sort of affliction?

The author makes an important point regarding the limitations of the therapeutic approaches of modern psychology and their fundamental dilemma with claims of efficacy that the field has yet to contend with:

All the different approaches to therapy claim success. The fact that such heterogenous therapies, founded as they are on a different and even contradictory theories, can have similar results violates the logical principle of non-contradiction and leads one to think that efficacy is the result of something other than their specificity, such as the attention or direction given to the patient, and such as might well occur outside of a professional milieu. (Larchet, 2005, p. 3)

In fact, it has been demonstrated that the efficacy of mental health treatment depends on the quality of the human relationship between the individual participating in the therapeutic process and the therapist regardless of the type of treatment modality or technique employed. It has been

determined that the effectiveness of psychotherapy does not indicate that one type of modality or technique is better or worse than any other¹. As clinical psychologist Bruce Wampold (2001) concludes: “Clearly, the preponderance of the benefits of psychotherapy are due to factors incidental to the particular theoretical approach administered and dwarf the effects due to theoretically derived techniques”². For this reason, it has been proposed that it is the human relationship itself that takes primacy in the encounter, and that is why contradictory theories can have both beneficial and detrimental outcomes, as it is the relationship that makes the treatment effective rather than the modality or technique utilized.

Larchet additionally weighs in about the limited and potentially harmful scope of present-day psychiatry: “Psychotropic medications will act to alleviate symptoms, but in most cases have no effect on underlying causes. While they unquestionably act to relieve distressing symptoms, it is often only at the cost of an internal and external inhibition and blunting of affect that causes as much distress to the patient as did the original illness” (p. 3). Given the chaotic and disintegrating conditions of the present, the same support systems and ways of understanding the mentally ill that existed and continue to exist in the traditional world or certain communities are unavailable to many. In a sense, the prevalence of the medicalization of human existence today represented by the explosion of the use of psychotropic medications attempting to cure or remove all unwanted symptoms, which does not heal or get to the root cause of the illness, appears to be an inevitable consequence of the demise of the traditional world and the sense of the sacred that pervaded the diverse cultures. This does not therefore mean that psychotropic treatments cannot be useful in some cases, yet the psychiatric inflation that we are witnessing today is cause for alarm. These are again strange times where the recognition of the divine Norms is no longer what it once was.

It warrants noting that the Church Fathers acknowledged that some forms of mental illness had organic causes and were regarded to have a somatic origin. They recognized that substance use, whether through the consumption of alcohol or drugs, could give rise to psychological disorders. It is incorrect to assume that they only attributed mental illness to supernatural causes. The Fathers viewed the possibility of demonic

causes to occur on the psychic realm, directly or through the intermediary of the human body. Accordingly, “demonic etiology in no way indicates a naiveté of belief, an ignorance of other causes, or an inability to explain things otherwise” (p. 45). It needs to also be added here that: “To ascribe a belief in demonic etiology to a lack of education in monastic communities is to forget that some of these monks were among the most cultivated men of their times, and that several of them possessed extensive medical knowledge” (p. 47).

The etiology of the Church Fathers offers an integral model for understanding mental illness, as it includes the psycho-physical and the spiritual domains:

If the writings of the Fathers provide fewer and less precise details, and if their nosology differs from both modern as well as ancient ones, this is because they were less interested in detailed descriptions or in determining the nature of an illness from an external or clinical point of view, than in defining its basic inner and spiritual origin. (Larchet, 2005, p. 46)

At the root of the crisis within mainstream psychology is the Cartesian bifurcation, the dualism between mind and body (and matter) that has plagued the mindset of the contemporary West since the seventeenth century. This dualism does not exist within perennial psychology or the “science of the soul” as it is understood across the diverse religions and spiritual traditions. The reductionism of the biomedical or medical model to the corporeal or the more inclusive biopsychosocial model cannot facilitate a multidimensional framework or a pluralistic epistemology of understanding mental health and the fullness of the human being.

Christian psychology posits the union of the body and the soul and that the human being is neither exclusively the body nor the soul but is simultaneously both. Each facet of the human being is interconnected and impacts the whole: “It is in the nature of the human being that no element can act without the other being implicated” (p. 22). In fact, every movement of the soul is reflected and manifested in the human body. It could therefore be suggested that the Church Fathers were aware of psychological trauma and its relationship to the body long before the explosion of interest in trauma that is currently proliferating³. Christian

psychology can be understood to be a precursor to trauma-informed therapy.

“By affirming that a human is at once soul and body,” Larchet says: “they [the Church Fathers] opposed every form of materialism and naturalism that denied the soul or reduced it to being an epiphenomenon of the body, or something derived from and determined by the body” (p. 17). Although the soul and body are unified, the soul takes precedence over the body. According to St. Makarios of Egypt (c. 300–391), “The soul, which is a subtle body, has enveloped and clothed itself in the members of our visible body, which is gross in substance” (p. 25). However, the human soul requires the body to manifest itself and cannot do so without it.

Characteristic of the human condition is the faculty of reason, and beyond this faculty is the Spirit (*pneuma*) or Intellect (*nous*). The Intellect is considered the highest faculty within the human being. It is through the Intellect, which is connected to the Spirit, that the human being can know and transcend themselves. The human being is created in the “image of God” (Genesis 1:27), which can be distorted by sin but can never be eradicated. Larchet points out: “The *nous* is in effect the image of God in man. This image can be masked or soiled by sin, but it cannot be destroyed: it is the indelible mark of man’s most profound being, of his veritable nature, the *logos* or constitutive principle of which cannot be altered” (pp. 28–29). This Christian teaching on the innermost nature of the human being and its connection to the Divine that can never be destroyed is extremely important, especially when working with individuals struggling with mental illness and/or substance use issues, as it offers an everlasting source of hope that no matter how bleak the circumstances may be, there is always an innermost or core part of us that is untouched by the transitory world around us.

Christian psychology, akin to other forms of perennial psychology, upholds the principle that mental illness derives from three primary sources: corporeal, psychic, and spiritual. For this reason, the etiology of mental illness of Christian psychology is situated on a much different perspective than that of modern psychology. Larchet points out that:

In cases where an organic disorder is clear, the function of the physician is ... limited to the physiological level alone. By

affirming that in such cases the soul in its very nature is not harmed, and hence preserves its autonomy, hampers the claim of a certain kind of medicine or psychiatry to take charge of the human soul through the body and dictate to it its own ideas and values. (Larchet, 2005, p. 42)

Where the origin of the disease is identified to be organic in etiology, the human psyche in its essence remains unchanged. Additionally, when illnesses manifest in the soul, they do not solely affect the human psyche; they also affect the Spirit (*nous*).

Larchet notes the difficulties of discerning the true origin of mental illness, due to having three distinct etiologies of the corporeal, psychic, and spiritual and the possibility of being misled by the presenting symptoms. The discernment of forms as they apply to appearances is especially complex when dealing with demonic phenomena. This is particularly the case given the materialistic bias of present-day therapies that rule out such possibilities. Larchet writes:

If “profane” or “rational” medicine chooses to ignore such a demonic etiology, it is because it accepts phenomena as the only reality that can be objectively considered.... True, it is especially difficult to determine the presence of demonic influence, to define its manner of acting, or to gauge its importance. Such an understanding escapes the eyes of the profane. Only those who have obtained the charism of the discerning of spirits from God are capable of exercising this spiritual discrimination. (Larchet, 2005, pp. 47, 49)

The notion that the Church Fathers or the saints of Christianity had certain spiritual gifts that can heal flies in the face of contemporary psychology and psychiatry, which reduces mental health treatment in large part to the psychophysical realm. For example, the grace and healing provided by the sacrament of Baptism makes no sense according to secular or materialistic psychology, as it both goes beyond the psychophysical and includes the spiritual domain. The author states:

The Christian, by the grace received in Baptism, is freed from the tyranny of the enemy and always retains the power of opposing demonic activity. According to

St. Symeon the New Theologian [949–1022], baptism gives us “freedom no longer to be held against our will in the devil’s tyranny,” and “the enemy cannot take any action against us unless we of our own will obey him.” (Larchet, 2005, p. 55)

It is Divine grace itself that dispels malevolent phenomena, as St. Diadochos of Photiki (c. 400–c. 486) writes: “So long as the Holy Spirit is in us, Satan cannot enter the depths of the soul and remain there” (p. 51). The Church Fathers welcomed those who were afflicted with mental illness and treated them with love and compassion. Some were known to have constructed a hesychasterion (*esukhasterion*), a residence that was away from the busyness of daily life that could provide peace and quiet (*esukhia*) for individuals struggling with mental illness so that they could be supported.

For the effective treatment of the mental illness, the human being and the therapist need to collaborate and work with one another for healing to happen. Within Christian psychology a reorientation of the will needs to occur and does so through prayer and fasting. Christ himself taught that healing takes place by: “prayer and fasting” (Mark 9:29). The very presence of a saint is itself a powerful intervention and a form of treatment, as they are known to be able to heal all forms of mental illness.

The Church Fathers provided remedies that were unique and appropriate for each individual and their particular circumstance. Unlike the present day, where individuals are taught to avoid all forms of physical discomfort or suffering, as they offer no meaning or higher purpose, Christian psychology teaches individuals to recognize the gifts of suffering and to learn to live with it. For example, St. Theodosius (c. 423–529) teaches that suffering can be beneficial if used correctly, in order to transform suffering so that virtue may increase. The task is to ultimately thank the Divine for one’s suffering and to embrace these ordeals as if they asked for them themselves. Hence, Christ has said, “You will gain possession of your souls through your patient endurance” (Luke 21:19). In an age where the human collectivity is almost indoctrinated to take a psychotropic drug to remove all physical discomfort or suffering, such forms of spiritual therapy appear to be cruel or inhuman, when they are in all actuality designed to bring the individual closer to the Divine, the source of all healing.

The perennial psychology views mental illness to be partly based on the misuse of human will. As every human being has been endowed with free will, the process of healing requires the individual to reorient their will to the Divine. Consequently, both treatment from “within” the human being through the use their will and from the “outside” with the use of authentic spiritual interventions are needed for healing. According to Christian psychology, this becomes visible when there is a demonic possession, and an exorcism is conducted:

If the Fathers tried to have the possessed/insane participate as much as possible in their own deliverance, it was because the individual must, if he is to be delivered from demonic influence, turn his will from himself and orient it towards God. God, in effect, does not grant healing unless it is asked of him, for he has created man free and in all the cases respects his will and will not act against it. However, the will of the individual is not always fully at his disposal.... Those whose consciousness is disturbed in a significant way cannot even ask for their own healing or give evidence of their faith.... And yet it is possible for such individuals to be delivered and healed thanks to the faith and the prayers of those around them or accompanying them, as well as to those of the saint to whom they are entrusted. But the power of the saint’s intercession is so much stronger when the faith of those asking for the deliverance of the possessed is more ardent and their prayers more fervent. (Larchet, 2005, pp. 78–79)

Healing cannot occur without Divine grace, and therefore no one can truly heal another person without a supernatural agency. As Christ has said: “Heal the sick, cast out devils. Freely have you received, freely give” (Matthew 10:8). The idea of spiritual illness is connected to a distortion of the human being’s relationship to the Divine. Due to the fallen state of humanity, it has affected both the will and the Intellect. The fall has created confusion in the will and has darkened the Intellect. An individual may be suffering from an illness that derives from the spiritual domain, yet its effects may appear on the level of the human psyche.

Mental illnesses of spiritual origin should not be confused with the spiritual illnesses themselves. Spiritual illnesses are formed by a disorder or perversion of nature (more precisely of nature's mode of existence) in the personal relationship of the individual to God. On the psychic plane, mental illnesses correspond to somatic disorders on the plane of the body; mental illness has to do with difficulties in the psyche considered in itself, with a dysfunction of the psyche's nature considered within its natural order.... From the point of view of Patristic anthropology, such a distinction can only have a relative value, for nature can never be considered in isolation and is fundamentally defined by its relationship to God. (Larchet, 2005, p. 89)

Discernment between the illusory and the Real, between the relative and the Absolute are needed for the mental health practitioner to be able to recognize illness and its connection to the triadic constitution of the human being consisting of: Spirit, soul, and body. Larchet makes an important point about Christian psychology, which also applies to all forms of perennial psychology: "the psychic is integrated into the spiritual plane and is dependent on it for both etiology and treatment. But we also see how the spiritual dimension exceeds and transcends the psychic dimension" (p. 125).

For the perennial psychology in all its distinct therapeutic modalities, prayer is fundamental to all forms of healing in order to remember "one thing is needful" (Luke 10:42). St. John Chrysostom (347–407) insists that the individual "will and desire his own healing" (p. 108). St. John Cassian (c. 360–c. 430) teaches that we are "healed by a meditative heart and by constant watchfulness" (p. 111), or healing occurs when "our mind is occupied constantly with spiritual meditation" (p. 115). Christian psychology holds the remembrance of death to also be a vital remedy. All of life is to be regarded as sacred, for as St. Paul asserts, we must "redeem the time" (Ephesians 5:16) because: "Our life on earth passes like a shadow" (Job 8:9).

The "Fool for Christ" is an individual who consciously simulates folly for spiritual purposes. We are told that "For the foolishness of God is wiser than men" (1 Corinthians 1:25). Larchet explains the tradition of the fools for Christ:

He pretends to be a fool, has chosen to appear the fool, and does everything he can to seem to be so in the eyes of others, so that he is really believed to be a fool. He controls every act and word, precisely calculating their effect. For certain individuals who have discovered his secret or he himself has chosen, he lays aside this mask of foolishness, just as he does whenever he is alone, and reveals himself to be perfectly sound of mind. (Larchet, 2005, p. 132)

The temporal world for such a person is regarded as an illusion, which connects one to the Christian teaching that we are "not of this world" (John 18:36). Due to the fallen state of humanity and the darkening of the Intellect, the illusory world is misperceived to be real, when only the Divine is ultimately True and Real. At the heart of each authentic psychology or the "science of the soul" is the recognition of the need for a psycho-spiritual transformation or *metanoia* as all healing is predicated on this fundamental *change of mind*.

Larchet has done a praiseworthy job in revealing the dimensions of Christian psychology as recognized by the Christian East. In its pages, it becomes apparent that much of what constitutes mental illness according to Christian psychology exists outside the competence of mainstream psychology and psychiatry, which does not take the spiritual dimension into consideration. Their attempts to reduce the human being to the corporeal or the psycho-physical devoid of what transcends these dimensions will always be shortsighted and provide a fragmented understanding, which may in some cases produce a temporary cure or removal of unwanted symptoms, but not true healing. Larchet carefully distills the complex and diverse multi-level etiologies for readers interested in these profound questions of ultimate meaning as they are related to the Christian tradition and its "science of the soul." When confronted with modern Western psychology's myopic and truncated outlook on mental health and what it means to be human, it becomes evident that modern psychology is ill-equipped to provide integral therapy or healing. We cannot repeat enough that there is in fact nothing absolute, or universal for that matter, about what modern psychology views as mental illness or psychological health. In taking mainstream psychology to task for its reductionism and materialistic outlook, we are not therefore reducing all psychological problems to spiritual problems.

As this is again a very complex issue where much remains enigmatic and unknown, we need to tread lightly and with great humility. This work will be of significant interest to mental health practitioners or individuals wanting to gain deeper knowledge of Christian psychology and integral forms of healing.

Footnotes

1. See Mary Lee Smith and Gene V. Glass, "Meta-Analysis of Psychotherapy Outcome Studies," *American Psychologist*, Vol. 32, No. 9 (September 1977), pp. 752–60; Janet Tracy Landman and Robyn M. Dawes, "Psychotherapy Outcome: Smith and Glass' Conclusions Stand Up Under Scrutiny," *American Psychologist*, Vol. 37, No. 5 (May 1982), pp. 504–16; Martin E.P. Seligman, "The Effectiveness of Psychotherapy: The Consumer Reports Study," *American Psychologist*, Vol. 50, No. 12 (December 1995), pp. 965–74.
2. Bruce E. Wampold, "Implications of Rejecting the Medical Model," in *The Great Psychotherapy Debate: Models, Methods and Findings* (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2001), p. 209.
3. See Bessel A. Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2014).

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