A Wilderness Journey: In Search of Mental Health

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Abstract: What does it mean to be mentally healthy? Is it merely the absence of mental illness or is there more to it than that? And what of the several contradictions between theological and psychological perceptions of what it means to be human? What insights might be gained by exploring and perhaps even reconciling what may be only apparent contradictions? Two contradictions of significance to human life-formation – consciousness and redemption – are explored here within the framework of Raimon Pannikar’s theological anthropology. The overall assertion is that what it means to be a human person is synonymous with what it means to be mentally healthy. It is this realisation that demands a critical conversation between theology and psychology, and that this conversation take place in a context of pastoral care. A context of pastoral care ensures person becomes and remains the focal point, rather than becoming the peripheral ‘data’ of intellectual theory.

Key Words: mental health; mental illness; theological anthropology; psychology; consciousness; redemption; Raimon Panikkar

There is a burning question, as yet unanswered, that is, with the social situation, becoming more and more imperative with every passing day. What is mental illness? Is it an organic disease or a spiritual dis-ease? In spite of decades of research, no biochemical, neurological or genetic markers have yet been discovered for any of the mental illnesses.¹

In its infancy, modern psychology (via Freud and Jung) noted the correlation between what we might call the spiritual dimension and what we now call mental illness. Freud blamed belief in God for anxiety and neuroses.² Jung noted that the problems dealt with by clinical psychology were more the domain of the pastor or priest than the psychologist.³ Over time, the lines between spiritual dis-ease and mental disease have become so blurred that they have now disappeared, leaving us only mental disease. Any concerns once thought to have a spiritual origin are now symptoms of mental illness. Why? How did this happen? And why is theology – with its expertise in the spiritual dimension – not active in the field of mental health?

This paper outlines a doctoral dissertation I have written named “A Practical Theology of Mental Health: a critical conversation between psychology, theology, pastoral care and the voice of the witness”. Its thesis is that theological and psychological

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³ In chapter XI “Psychotherapists or the Clergy” Jung makes it clear that he believes there is little if any distinction between ‘spiritual suffering’ and neuroses. Modern Man in Search of a Soul (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1933), 262.
contradiction with regard to what it means to be a human person underlies the impotence of the current mental health system to heal mental illness. The contention is that theology and psychology need to collaborate, to explore and resolve the contradictions between them in the interest, not just of mental health, but of better understanding of authentic human life-formation. A key element in the exploration is input from the sufferer, the one who has experienced mental illness, the one referred to throughout the dissertation as 'the witness'. The one whose voice, in the first person, is currently unheard.

**Loss of the Spiritual Dimension**

In a culture dominated by intellectual ways of knowing the spiritual has lost its place as a dimension of reality. Spirituality is now, socially speaking, considered to be a private, personal choice that impacts only on interior life. It has no bearing on the concrete landscape. The result of this in the mental health arena is a subtle, but definite perception of a two-tiered humanity. That is the sane, who are allowed to make personal choices regarding the spiritual dimension, are also able to reflect, interpret, make decisions and generally take responsibility for themselves and their lives. The mentally ill are not allowed a spiritual dimension. All references to a dimension of reality that is not available to sensory perception are perceived, by their carers, to be symptomatic of mental illness. While they may be able to reflect, their reflection cannot produce a valid interpretation of reality. They are therefore incapable of making informed decisions, and so cannot be held accountable for themselves or their lives.

In this we have a two-tiered humanity. Theologically speaking God has gifted some people with the ability to reason and denied this gift to others. By its silence in this domain, theology denies its own fundamental claim: that every human person is made in the image and likeness of God.

Many contradictions between theological and psychological perceptions of what it means to be a human person emerge from this two-tiered perception. We will deal here with only two: the nature of human consciousness, and the reality of redemption.

**Psychology's Unconscious**

Unable from its infancy to deny the spiritual dimension, and dominated by its scientific methodology, psychology brought forth theories to logically explain a dimension of reality of which it had no knowledge. Its theories allowed it to claim knowledge and understanding of a dimension of reality that theology once called mystery. Psychological theories posit an Unconscious filled with drives, instincts and urges (more demonic than angelic) that have the power to drive humans to behave in ways beyond their control. Freud theorised that pleasure was that driving force. Adler believed the inherent desire for power drove human beings. A plethora of theories has arisen since, theories with one thing in common: all insist that humans, to a greater or lesser extent, are not responsible for their behaviour. This line of theorising came to its conclusion in Skinner who put forth his ideas in his book Beyond Freedom and Dignity. In this book he claims that the human being has no indwelling personality, no will, no intention, no self-determinism or personal responsibility. He insists that modern concepts of freedom and dignity have to fall away so human beings can be intelligently controlled to behave as they should.

While few accept this radical position, it serves to highlight the theory underlying psycho-therapy; that some human beings who do not know, and cannot understand

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themselves, (the mentally ill) need to be guided, if not controlled, by other human beings who do know and understand them. Theology's divine guidance is usurped by psychology's human guidance.

This of course raises the question of divine guidance. And that raises the question of ways of knowing, or levels of consciousness – in a nutshell, the reality – or not – of a transcendent or spiritual dimension; a consciousness or way of knowing unavailable to intellect, unavailable to psychology.

**Consciousness: A Theological Paradigm**

Fortunately theology also has a model of human consciousness. This was developed by Raimon Panikkar to facilitate critical conversation in the field of his expertise: inter-religious dialogue. It is applicable here for several reasons. Firstly it helps discern the nature of mental illness – that is, whether it is predominantly mental disease or spiritual dis-ease. If a spiritual experience is being heard and interpreted by secular ears, then all the skills of inter-religious dialogue come into play. To facilitate dialogue Panikkar’s hermeneutics has developed a communication process he calls ‘dialogical dialogue’. This dialogue insists that each dialogue partner is an ‘equally original source of understanding’ – including the witness. His dialogue involves communication categories he names mythos, logos and pneuma. Understanding these is critical to understanding his theory of consciousness – a consciousness he calls kairolological as opposed to psychological theories which are essentially chronological.

**Mythos**

In the language of hermeneutics – which is where Panikkar’s concept begins – he acknowledges context as a reality that is, rather than constructing context from text, as psychological theories do. The originating context is myth; as a communication category it is mythos.

The concept of mythos is not new. In his book Practical Theology Terry Veling has dedicated a full chapter, quoting from several credible reference sources, to describe what is here meant by mythos. For Bernard Meland it is appreciative consciousness or a “felt wisdom”. For Jacques Maritain it is intuitive reason. For Paul Ricoeur it is the realm of the poetic and symbolic that “gives rise to thought.” Panikkar’s claim is that: “The mythical context is always the first given.”

Trying to describe mythos is similar to describing culture in the concrete world. Definitions of culture abound, but the culture we live is difficult, if not impossible to grasp. I quote from Veling’s book:

> Part of the problem is that we are swimming in culture; it is like an ocean surrounding us, as water surrounds a fish. Or it is like the air we breathe. Or it is like a lens we see through, without us consciously noticing that we are wearing spectacles. ... No one “from outside” can ever fully share it, and no one “from inside” can ever fully describe it.

Mythos might be called the interior culture of every human person; the common ground no human person can fully describe because every human person lives “from inside” it. It is the cultural context that forms the common ground, hermeneutically speaking, for

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6 Veling, *Practical Theology*, 202-203.
8 Veling, *Practical Theology*, 159.
human understanding across all exterior divisions; the context in which every human person is made "in the image and likeness of God" (Gen 1:26).

**Logos**

Logos is the gift of reason. Logos gives expression to mythos as “a canvas of possibilities for expressing human creativity.” It is intended to be "an authentic avenue of human insight." The primary purpose of logos (for theology) is not the gathering and accumulation of knowledge or facts about the spatio-temporal dimension, but the facilitation of I-thou relationships.

An excellent symbol of logos in this sense is the Logos of the Second Person of the Christian Trinity, the eternal link between the Primordial Mystery (symbolised by mythos) and the human family.

It is logos that gives us the ability to reciprocally share perceptions of reality "in search of meaning and in terms of binding [ourselves] with the Absolute, [with God] thus, relinking [ourselves]" with our originating myth.

**Pneuma**

Pneuma is ‘space’, infinite openness, a place of hope, of creativity. Between two or more dialogue partners, pneuma is the space wherein divine authority both arbitrates, and engages in the dialogue. As arbiter, divine authority is truth. As dialogue partner, it is love. Within the space of pneuma a new reality can be created and a new myth born out of the incessant perichoretic dance between mythos, logos and pneuma.

**Kairological Consciousness**

With some understanding of these communication categories, we can now return to kairological consciousness. Of kairological consciousness Panikkar writes: “The movement of consciousness is neither straightforward nor chronological, but rather spiral and kairological.” It embraces past, present, and future in the immediate moment. He unfolds his kairological consciousness in ‘three moments’, touching the depth or origin of human consciousness, observing the horizontal plane and breaking through to the transcendent dimension. The correlation can be seen here between mythos – the unthought, logos – thought, and pneuma – the unthinkable.

The first moment Panikkar names the Ecumenic Moment. In this moment the divine is subsumed in nature, which is not merely natural, but sacred. But neither is there any division between human and nature. The union of divine-nature-human is not intellectually apprehended by 'Man of Nature.' It is simply what is: a belief transparent to the believer: interior context - mythos.

The second moment Panikkar names the Economic Moment. It echoes Descartes ‘cogito ergo sum’: the turn to the subject. Here "Man discovers the laws of the universe, the objective structures of the real; he distinguishes, measures, experiments.”

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9 Veling, *Practical Theology*, 159.
be called the recognition if not the discovery of logos. The human being recognises 'self' separated from, if not independent of, the divine.

The Economic Moment has two interludes. The first of these is named Scientific Humanism. In this interlude, not only is the human mind the criterion of intelligibility, but in the absence of mythos, perhaps even of reality. It is in this moment that the human mind turns to examine human consciousness. "Man here is caught in the very act of examining his power to know."15

While human intellect has a great capacity to objectively interpret what it perceives, without mythos it cannot transcend the empirical horizon to become truly logos. It perceives reality as an objective cause-effect structure. It is incapable of recognising relationship as the fabric of reality. Truncated from the transcendent, exhausted with cause-effect that ultimately has no meaning, futility was bound to emerge, drowning us with a nihilistic non-vision of a future that has no future.

Panikkar calls this futility the second interlude of the second moment of kairological consciousness, and names it the Ecological Interlude. It comes when human intellect realises it cannot penetrate the empirical horizon. It is in this interlude that despair produces a variety of irrationalities, one of which is mental illness.

The Ecological Interlude brings the realisation that there is a reality that cannot be mastered. It is the "inner discovery of the limits of Man, limits whose cause is not some lack of factual know-how, but something deeper, something ultimately unfathomable."16 In spite of intellectual brilliance, able to connect one logical thought and/or fact to another, human beings have failed to create their dream of a truly humane civilization.

Reality as I-thou relationship, beginning with the primordial relationship, has escaped us. Suddenly we are confronted with the wisdom of the Christian scriptures. We cannot live on bread alone. (Mt 4:4).

There seems to be no resolution. All attempts to ‘go back’ fail. We destroy what we seek when our only ‘tool’ is intellectual. Context – mythos – is destroyed by intellectual analysis. In revealing this truth Panikkar has revealed an insight lost to psychology. While the need for more than bread begins to dawn upon us, we are still ignorant of what more is needed and doubt that there is any more. There is no hope unless we go forward to the third kairological moment.

This third moment Panikkar calls the Catholic Moment, and pinpoints it as the moment of a radical metanoia. Paradoxically we are forced to:

overcome knowledge by non-knowledge, by a leap of faith, confidence, feeling, intuition. ... Only redemption can bring about the new innocence. Whatever existential form this redemption might take, its structure is marked by the experience of the intrinsic limitations of our consciousness.17

It is in this moment, according to the voice of the witness, that mental illness can be healed. The healing is initiated by an experience of faith at the level of mythos; faith that is not a belief system, but faith that is a constitutive dimension of the human person; faith that is resident in the interior, cultural context of mythos. But that is the story of a new innocence to emerge from the unification of mythos and logos. Time does not permit us to explore this healing journey, but we will taste its fruit, so to speak, when we explore the second contradiction – redemption.

14 Panikkar, The Cosmotheandric Experience, 33.
15 Panikkar, The Cosmotheandric Experience, 34.
16 Panikkar, The Cosmotheandric Experience, 39.
17 Panikkar, The Cosmotheandric Experience, 51-52.
In summary: psychology has developed its theories of consciousness in a linear, cause-effect, chronological framework, as though nothing outside the empirical world could impact upon human consciousness. Kairological consciousness, a concept developed by a theologian, is understandably at the service of mystery, allowing a dimension to consciousness that transcends the empirical. The contradiction between them comes into sharp relief when we ask a question of the issue that divides them: Is the human person created to be a receptacle for the demonic, or for the divine?

The Second Contradiction

The second contradiction we will explore here is that of redemption. While psychology does not use the word ‘redemption’ it is, in broad and general terms, what it attempts to do in its efforts to heal mental illness. What is redemption in psychological terms?

Psychology, for its healing/redemption, relies upon human intellect and will, working collaboratively to implement and maintain change. Theology relies upon the divine initiative of grace to bring about transformation. Dr. Gerald May, deservedly well known for his acknowledgement of the spiritual dimension in the world of mental health, makes the point poignantly in his book *Addiction and Grace*.

I am choosing my words carefully here. Deliverance enables a person to make a change in his or her behaviour; in my experience deliverance does not remove the addiction and its underlying attachments. Something obviously happens to the systems of the brain when deliverance occurs; either the addicted systems are weakened or the ones seeking freedom are strengthened or both. I have witnessed many healings of substance and non-substance addictions and many other disorders. In none of these miraculous empowerments were people freed from having to remain intentional about avoiding a return to their old addictive behaviours. The real miracle was that avoidance became possible.18

In the world of psychology (and sadly this is the dominant voice across the landscape of western culture), the alcoholic is forever an alcoholic, the drug addict eternally a drug addict, so too for the criminal, the paedophile, the mentally ill and so on. Visible change such as giving up alcohol or drugs, or acting like a normal person after having been ‘diagnosed’ mentally ill, seems to mean that one is acting out a part. The ‘real self’, the drug addict or alcoholic, or schizophrenic, or whatever, is ever lurking in the background, threatening to break loose. Our society does not believe in redemption! Voices of priests and pastors preach redemption, but none seem to believe in it as an accomplished reality, awaiting only recognition and affirmation.

The significant difference between change and transformation is the apparent contradiction between psychological and spiritual perceptions of redemption. Change can be effected by human intellect and will. Transformation is divine initiative. They do not necessarily contradict one another. Change may facilitate transformation, but cannot implement or control it. Collaboration between psychology and theology in a context of pastoral care would bring insights currently ‘lying on the surface’ waiting, not so much to be discovered, as to be recognised. Why a context of pastoral care? Pastoral care operates out of a context of love. This would eliminate the shuffle for supremacy that can occur when two sciences seek to collaborate.

Psychology has valuable expertise in freeing the human person from slavery; the slavery of what was once called sinful habits. Psychology has rolled up its sleeves, so to

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speak, and fully involved itself in the messiness of the human condition. It does not throw failure and inadequacy into the ‘too hard’ basket of prayer, as theology has tended to do. But psychology can only take us out of the ‘land of Egypt’ into the wilderness, where our own exhausting, eternal vigilance is needed to maintain hard won freedom. It is not surprising that so many are tempted, and sadly all too often surrender, returning themselves to the land of slavery. Only theology can lead us forward to the Promised Land where transformation – redemption – does indeed make the yoke easy, and the burden light.

Redemption is not just something we will experience at the end of this life, but something that is here and now, a reality we need only acknowledge to make the kingdom of God visible on earth. To be mentally healthy is to see that kingdom.

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