ORTHODOXY
and
PSYCHOLOGY

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CENTER FOR TRADITIONALIST ORTHODOX STUDIES

ORTHODOXY AND PSYCHOLOGY

A Collection of Reflections on Orthodox
Theological and Pastoral Issues from
a Psychological Perspective

by

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Introduction

In past eras, psychology was a topic integrated into theology and philosophy faculties or taught in medical schools as an adjunct subject concerned with matters beyond mere physical illness. Only since the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century has the discipline of psychology (or psychiatry) become a separate science unto itself. The deficits in this more contemporary trend—marked by a tendency to study the mind as a separate entity divorced from the soul, or brain function as something separate from cognition—have not gone unnoticed. They were at least *unconsciously* acknowledged by psychologists and psychiatrists in the biofeedback movement in the last century, just as they are nowadays *directly* addressed by adherents to the holistic health movement. Though much of the terminology that we now use to describe the study of human behavior focuses on the brain, the mind, and cognition, we must also remember that the very words "psychology" and "psychiatry" have their roots in the Greek word "ψυχή," or "soul." These sciences indeed encompass the study of the soul and should not be separated from their provenance therein.

The inherent instability of psychology as a discipline, when it is artificially separated from the concerns of the whole person and the soul, is obvious in the tendency of psychologists to split into two opposing camps: the researchers and academics versus the psychotherapists. This division clearly manifests itself in the polarization of professional psychological associations and agencies into theoretical and applied factions. Hence, the science of psychology tends to have no core area, but is comprised of many loosely related fields, from psychological testing and medical psychology to parapsychology and animal psychology. Psychotherapy, as a subdiscipline, fares no better, divided as it is into such diverse approaches as Freudianism, Neo-Freudianism, behaviorism, *Gestalt* therapy, and rational–emotive therapy, to cite but just a few of them. This situation is a further result of psychology's

limited understanding and truncated view of the person, as well as our modern tendency to espouse this year's novel ideas as better than last year's supposedly antiquated one—as though science were not, in fact, built on precedent and recapitulation, the present frequently encompassed and enriched by the past.

It seems to me that pastoral psychology, more effectively than anything else, addresses the deficits and instability of the modern science of human behavior. It adds to its concerns about the body and cognition the realm of the soul, emphasizing the important nexus between spiritual well-being and mental and physical health. In this respect, pastoral psychology is wholly in concord with the theology and anthropology of the Orthodox Church. The Orthodox Patristic tradition holds that the realization of full human potential lies in the harmonious interaction of all of the elements and components of the individual. Such harmony rests not solely on the correctness of the dogmatic and doctrinal formulae that form our credal traditions—for we are much more than just what we believe—, but is also intimately tied up with the incorporation of these traditions into our thinking and behavior. The effective ontological treatment of man's spiritual malaise by way of the orthodoxy, or correctness of doctrine, cannot be separated from the necessity of curing and treating those corresponding deficits in human psychology—in cognition and action—which impede the rationality that a supra-rational experience of Truth presupposes.

Ultimately, just as a soulless psychology is insufficient to address the realities of man and his world, so a religion or a theology which separates the soul from the mind comes to naught. In fact, one might argue that, from a Patristic standpoint (and certainly within the Hesychastic traditions of the Orthodox Church), a theology which ignores the ineluctable nexus between the spiritual aspects of man and his psychological nature and needs fails to be a *real* theology. It renders essentially ineffective the therapeutic milieu of Christianity, which seeks to restore the human being, through the Mysteries of the Church, to a state

in which the soul brings human action and thought into perfect harmony with the higher, noetic aspects of spiritual vision. Once more, I believe that in the field of pastoral psychology, as much as any other secular discipline, a full appreciation of these aspirations and visions of our Faith can be cogently and properly realized.

It is with the foregoing thoughts in mind that I have collected together in this book some simple *reflections* on Orthodox theology and contemporary pastoral issues from a psychological perspective. My focus is, of course, *Orthodox*. But many of the ideas and strategies discussed here will also be helpful to those of other Christian traditions and, as well, to those who—while perhaps not religiously inclined themselves—are open-minded enough to appreciate, beyond the implicitly religious context of my comments, insights with wider application. Most of these reflections are mine, in the sense that I wrote them, even if I owe to a number of people a significant debt for help in forming and refining them. They are taken largely from lectures that I have given in academic settings and from discussion papers presented in informal student gatherings or at Church conferences. In Chapters VIII and IX, which contain discussions of clinical depression and marriage, I have also included commentaries from, and answers to questions submitted to, the "Orthodox Psychologist" column in the journal *Orthodox Tradition*, a column which I write together with Thomas Brecht, a clinical psychologist with the Alabama Psychiatric Services and an Orthodox Christian. His contributions to the chapter on depression are clearly identified. Additionally, my essay on Jung and Orthodox mysticism was inspired by an article which I co-authored with Dr. Brecht and which was published some years ago in the journal *Pastoral Psychology*.

Aside from the work which my colleagues and I have produced, there are very few English-language books on the subject of the interphase between Orthodox theology and contemporary psychology. Among these few works are several translations

from the interesting Greek-language books of Metropolitan Hierotheos of Naupaktos, a Prelate of the Orthodox Church of Greece, who has tried to develop a vocabulary for understanding the spiritual therapy of the Orthodox Church in the context of modern psychology. (He has even written on the implications of the singular thought of Viktor Emil Frankl, the father of so-called Logotherapy, for Orthodox believers, though I do not believe that this particular book has appeared in English translation). In terms of more objective and specialized approaches to Orthodoxy by psychologists themselves, a recent publication by the American Psychological Association, the *Handbook of Psychotherapy and Religious Diversity* (Washington, DC: 1999), contains an engaging chapter entitled, "Psychotherapy with Eastern Orthodox Christians," by T. R. Young, a clinical psychologist. In this chapter, Dr. Young cites three of Metropolitan Hierotheos' books on Orthodoxy and Orthodox psychotherapy and discusses four of my own volumes on Orthodox Patristic psychology, setting forth our respective views and approaches in a very meticulous and compelling way.

I hope that the present small volume will help to spark greater and continued interest in pastoral psychology from an Orthodox perspective and promote the very important meeting of the science of the soul with the science of the mind, giving each discipline the indispensable and necessary breadth that it demands and enriching both areas of inquiry in that process.

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"There are very few studies of Orthodox psychology. Among these, some are written by theologians who have read books on psychology no more than casually, considering themselves good psychologists solely on the grounds of their theological formation. At the same time, other studies are written by psychologists who having superficially read a few books on theology imagine that they have spontaneously become psychologists conversant in theology and are thus authorized, in the name of Orthodox teachings, to put forth every sort of dubious theory or erroneous precept.

"Archbishop Chrysostomos, at once a theological thinker and a psychologist, endeavors to present our contemporary society with a much-needed alternative to the foregoing: that of a psychology founded on Orthodox teaching.

"This volume addresses itself to those who are sincerely searching, who read philosophy or psychology, not to distance themselves from Orthodox Tradition, but to succeed in confessing the treasure of Tradition in a form accessible to contemporary man."

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