

Sin and a Theological Perspective on Psychopathology

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William B. Whitney from Azusa Pacific University conceptualizes the integration of theology and psychology as a two-way street. Christian theology broadens and further informs traditional secular psychology, and traditional secular psychology expands upon aspects of Christian theological beliefs. (Whitney, 2020) Modern psychopathology arose in the late 19th century. Modernism became a prominent worldview in the era and psychoanalysis was deemed the best treatment for people with emotional issues. (Holeman, 2012) At that time, Sigmund Freud used his theory of psychoanalysis and evolutionary biology to justify an atheistic worldview. He claimed religion was used in primal societies as a moral code and useless to modern life. Moreover, he posited that religion was simply a defense mechanism for an imagined father that could keep humankind safe. (Whitney, 2020) In the early 20th century, behaviorism became a prominent worldview and non-behavioral things such as spiritual issues, emotions and thoughts that were not able to be empirically studied, were therefore considered irrelevant. The later fields of positive and developmental psychology prioritized these unseeable and non-concrete aspects of human inner life. Behaviorism, psychoanalysis, and humanism were worldviews that competed with Christianity. (Holeman, 2012) Modernism, psychoanalysis, and behaviorism viewed human beings as inherently vile and destructive. Dr. Eric Johnson, in his lecture “Toward a Christian Psychopathology”, summarized this view as “People are just advanced animals.” Therefore, the idea that human beings are good or have a purpose is borrowed from a Christian worldview. (Johnson, 2018)

According to a Christian worldview, all human beings have inherent worth and value because they are made in God's likeness, or, the “*imago dei*.” God called the creation of

humanity “very good.” (Genesis 1:31 NIV) In fact, God calls creation “good,” a total of seven times in the first chapter of Genesis. Our physical reality, our emotions, and our bodies are declared good by God and are worthy of care.

God created the world in an ordered, methodical, and loving way as opposed to other ancient stories of creation, where the world was created through bloodshed and violence. For example, the creation story for one ancient Babylonian civilization involved a goddess being ripped in half and humans being created from her blood. In stark contrast, not only did God lovingly create reality as we know it, but he also created conditions specifically for human life to thrive and remain in connection with human life years after he created it. (Whitney, 2020)

Humans have the capacity to grow and develop toward God’s ultimate purpose, or “telos” (a Greek word translated literally as “purpose”), which is for us to become like God through Christ. (Kim van Daalen, 2012) However, this purpose is hindered by sin. Sin is also described as the “disorder of the soul” or “a wound in our nature.” (Johnson, 2018) This is primarily characterized by a disordered relationship between creator and creation. Sin hinders God’s glory. It is in opposition to the ordered way God created reality and is therefore the embodiment of ethical and spiritual disorder. Dr. Johnson referenced a chart in his original lecture that further illustrates the ways sin hinders God’s created order. He also encouraged the audience members to make their own charts to describe this phenomenon, and my representation is in Figure 1 below.

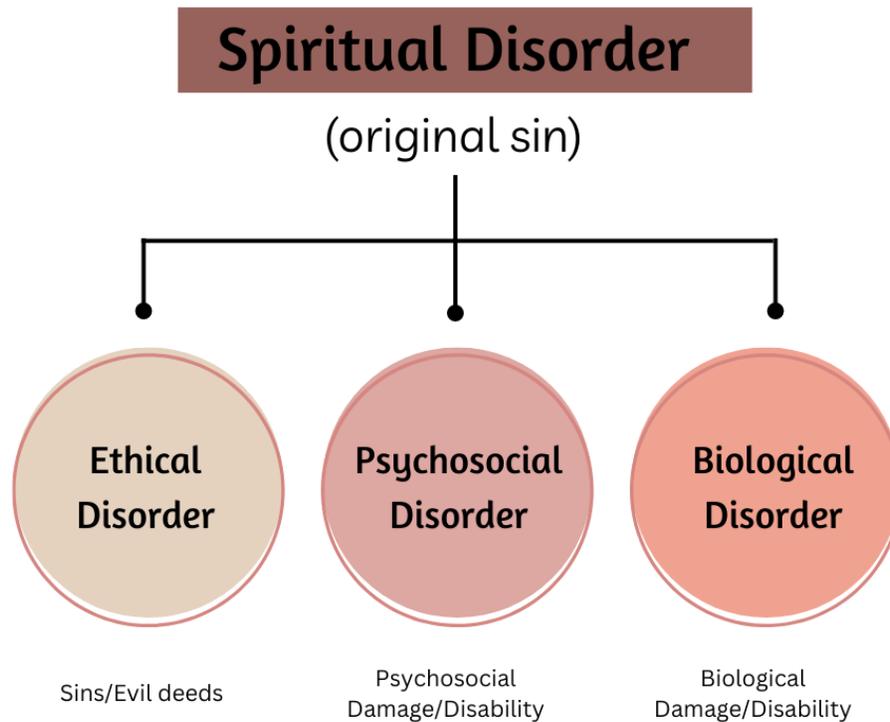


Figure 1 (Johnson, 2018)

Sin is the cause of a disordered relationship with the creator. Sin creates in humankind an element that is inherently against God. From sin flows 1) ethical disorder, or behaving in ways that are morally wrong, 2) psychosocial disorder, which are ways in which we are not able to reason well or ways in which the formation of a healthy personality structure is stunted, creating an inability to relate to others, and 3) biological disorder, which causes issues with the brain and body that distort the way we think about ourselves and God and distorts the ways we physically relate to the created realm.

Sin is both cyclic and systemic. It is the foundation for systemic issues like racism, sexism, and xenophobia. It leads to relational breakdowns in families, among friends, and between lovers, for generations. Mark Wolynn, in his bestselling book *It Didn't Start With You*, references animal studies that explore the transgenerational effects of trauma; one study involving female rats revealed that pregnant rats exposed to mild stressors passed measurable

effects of those stressors to their offspring. The researchers conceptualized that children from human parents who experience a traumatic event would pass down the effects of that event to their children and grandchildren. (Wolynn, 2017) Therefore, the effects of sin are demonstrably cyclic.

Human beings can shape reality through cultural changes, and God's Kingdom is constantly moving towards the new reality, or New Creation. Humankind was created by a triune God. This means that humans have also been sustained by this same triune God and offered an opportunity for redemption from sin, something which threatens God's created order. God created our reality as being knowable. Humankind can use reasoning skills to pursue areas like psychology and the sciences in order to understand the world we are living in. The "cure" for sin is a personal reordering of desires and returning to a Christ-centered worldview. God gives humankind this opportunity for redemption, through Christ. Becoming a disciple of Christ, and conforming one's thoughts to biblical standards is the first step.

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