

Position Paper #2

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GCN 618: Mental Health & Theology

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March 22, 2023

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Eric Johnson (2018), discusses his views on the integration of Christianity and psychology through several key theological points. He begins by tracing biblical psychology to creation, positing that the biblical narrative of creation, fall and redemption, presents a rationality that can be verified in the psychological realm. While Johnson acknowledges that the two fields often seem to be at odds, he advises on having critical ability for understanding and encourages engaging with both scripture and psychology seriously to formulate new understanding.

This paper will address three of Johnson's main ideas in regards to the integration of psychology and Christianity and offer points of congruence as well as critiques of his views. The first idea is Johnsons' explanation of psychopathology through a biblical lens which is more comprehensive than the explanations offered by psychology. Another idea Johnsons presents is a theology of suffering through a biblical context with a central theme of sin. Finally, Johnson attempts to categorize various psychopathologies through a biblical view of weakness vs. sin.

Johnson offers an explanation for how individuals develop various psychopathologies as a complex interplay of ethical, psychosocial and biological factors. Similar to Entwistle's view (2009), Johnson shuns Albert Ellis' view of extreme metaphysical naturalism and espouses a more holistic view that allows for both biopsychosocial and spiritual realities. Rather than see Christianity and psychology as mutually exclusive realities, Johnson and Entwistle offer a less bifurcated view, acknowledging the limitations of a solely naturalistic view yet incorporating aspects of it that provide a more comprehensive view of human nature and functioning. Johnson would argue that biblical theology offers a more comprehensive view of the human condition,

with the most integral aspect being humans as spiritual beings. Until recently psychology really lacked any acknowledgement about the soul and spiritual matters, thus Johnson's view of the centrality of the soul offers a more holistic and Christian view.

Johnson offers a theology of suffering focused on sin and the consequences of sin. Johnson (2009), defines sin in several ways, a disorder of the soul, as a hole/wound in our being and essentially anything that compromises our ability to relate to God and one another. While Johnson's theological reasoning is sound, his view seems rather simplistic and narrow. The Biblical text does attest to the notion that all suffering is the result of sin, including moral injuries, disease and death, and even natural catastrophes. Yet, Johnson simplifies a very complex issue without including a discussion about systemic sins such as racism, colonization and oppression. The Christian worldview narrative includes personal agents other than God and humans such as angels and demons and systems of evil. Thus, some instances of evil are revealed to be the result of demonic activity, while others are not. Overall, then, the Christian narrative encourages a balanced, non-reductive approach to suffering and evil. Suffering comes from multiple causes and has multiple explanations (McMartin, J. et al, 2020). This is where the world of psychology can offer additional explanations for the complexity of suffering. Feminist and multicultural perspectives have not only enhanced the discussion on the complexity of pain and suffering, it has also successfully challenged the profession's belief in value-neutral therapy. Ethical counseling brings attention to these matters and in turn allows room for values such as religion and spirituality into the counseling room (Holeman, 2009).

The final point discussed in this paper will address Johnson's categorization of psychopathologies through the dual lens of weakness and sin. Johnson (2018), attempts to categorize the source of pathologies as either biblical weakness (described as creational damage

that we are not responsible for) or sin. He categorizes conditions such as autism, hallucination and paranoia, depression due to child abuse, and homosexual orientation as weakness. The conditions that fall under sin are considered to be conditions where one is at fault and he lists depression due to the loss of a job because of repeated poor work and performance, alcohol addiction, habitual anger and homosexual activity.

The binary nature of this categorization can be misleading at best and actually cause additional shame and harm at worst. While there is clearly a place to label and call out sin, using binary categories oversimplifies more complex conditions. For example, depression due to the loss of repeated poor work performance can be attributed to many factors that have nothing to do with “the sin of being lazy.” Also labeling alcohol addiction simply as sin is problematic as the issue of addiction is much more complex than that. Larry Crabb stresses that the primary problem with people with addiction is misplaced dependency (Crabb, 1977 a cited in Choi, 2005). He thinks that this misplaced dependency comes from their motivation to feel significant and safe (Choi, 2005). If someone adopts an alcohol dependency because it was the only way that they could find safety and relief from the pain of abuse, one could hardly say that the alcohol addiction is solely due to sin.

Johnson presents a critical understanding of the integration of psychology and Christianity but some of his views seem to lack some needed nuance and complexity. While Johnson’s view may provide a helpful framework for future Christian counselors, a greater appreciation for the complexity of the human soul is needed when applying these principles to the counseling relationship.

References

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