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Professional Psychology and the Doctrines of Sin and Grace: Christian Leaders' Perspectives

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What is a professional psychologist to do when a client brings up the concept of sin? To some, sin may seem like a stifling religious relic that has no place in contemporary psychology. But viewing sin from within the Christian faith, and in tandem with the doctrine of grace, can help psychologists understand why sin is such an important concept for many of their Christian clients. Psychologists' misunderstanding of sin and grace may contribute to relatively low rates of referral from Christian leaders to clinical psychologists, and may sometimes hinder therapeutic progress. Two methods of data collection, involving a total of 171 respondents, were used to discern what Christian leaders wish psychologists understood regarding the doctrine of sin. Respondents emphasized the nature and consequences of sin, grace, and the importance of psychologists understanding sin and grace. Implications for professional psychologists are offered.

Keywords: religious issues in psychotherapy, Christianity, sin, grace

For many throughout the world, certain forms of emotional anguish are handled by going to confession where a priest offers the sacrament of reconciliation. Others go to professional psychologists to learn behavioral, cognitive, or relational strategies to live healthier lives. If the story ended here, with a clear bifurcation between religion and psychology, then both clergy and professional psychologists would have simpler jobs—and those seeking their help, simpler choices—than is currently the case.

The dividing line is not so clear, however. Religious leaders end up seeing people with significant mental health issues and professional psychologists work with those facing religious and spiritual questions. In earlier times, the fuzzy distinction between religion

and psychology caused conflict and vigorous debate among clinicians (Bergin, 1980; Ellis, 1980; Walls, 1980). In 1960, for example, Albert Ellis wrote in one leading psychology journal that the religious notion of sin causes people to be psychologically disturbed (Ellis, 1960), while O. Hobart Mowrer wrote in another leading journal that psychologists have “cut the very roots of [their] being” by disregarding sin (Mowrer, 1960, p. 303).

Today's psychology is becoming friendlier to religious and spiritual issues (Ellis, 2000; Miller, 1999; Miller & Delaney, 2005; Richards & Bergin, 1997, 2000, 2004; Shafranske, 1996a; Sperry & Shafranske, 2005). There appear to be several forces behind psychology's more open stance toward religion. First, many of those who seek psychological services are religious. Psychologists cite different pollsters, but it is clear that the vast majority of Americans believe in God—somewhere between 94% and 96% (Miller & Thoresen, 2003; Powell, Shahabi, & Thoresen, 2003; Shafranske & Sperry, 2005). The majority of these are members of a religious community, believe in a personal God, and pray on a regular basis. Close to half attend religious services regularly. Almost 95% of religious Americans affiliate with some variety of the Christian faith—Protestant, Catholic, or Orthodox (Shafranske & Sperry, 2005). Second, increasing scientific evidence demonstrates that religion and spirituality are associated with some positive health outcomes (Seeman, Dubin, & Seeman, 2003). This is not to say that all forms of religion and spirituality are always associated with better health and recovery from disease, but an emerging body of scientific evidence suggests that certain religious beliefs and behaviors are related to some health variables, perhaps in part because of the healthy lifestyle choices related to religious beliefs (Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001; Powell et al., 2003). Third, psychologists have a growing interest in positive psychology (Snyder & Lopez, 2005), and religious perspectives often intersect with the constructs of positive psychology. For example, positive psychology considers topics such as humility, gratitude, forgiveness, altruism, virtue, hope, and positive coping—all of which are discussed in religious communities as well.

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Much of Pargament's (1997) work on religious coping actually came before the current interest in positive psychology, demonstrating how the psychology of religion can have a substantial impact on the larger field of psychology. Finally, psychologists have recently realized that religious and spiritual values are often a cherished part of one's identity and heritage. Religious beliefs are now seen within the larger milieu of human diversity. The current "Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct," published by the American Psychological Association (APA), stipulates that

Psychologists are aware of and respect cultural, individual, and role differences, including those based on age, gender, gender identity, race, ethnicity, culture, national origin, *religion* [italics added], sexual orientation, disability, language, and socioeconomic status and consider these factors when working with members of such groups. Psychologists try to eliminate the effect on their work of biases based on those factors, and they do not knowingly participate in or condone activities of others based upon such prejudices. (APA, 2002, p. 1063)

How does a professional psychologist apply this general mandate to respect religious diversity when providing psychological services? For example, what should one do when a depressed Christian client discusses concerns of being a sinner? Is this symptomatic of depression, or is this a religious value that ought to be respected as a matter of human diversity? The interface of religion and psychology can be complex, requiring psychologists to have at least a basic understanding of essential religious doctrines.

Discussions of religious concepts may seem like a foreign language to many psychologists. Psychologists value a language of science, and rightly so. Scientific advances have contributed to human welfare in various ways, including the helping relationships that clinical and counseling psychologists offer to those seeking their help. The language of scientific clinical psychology includes phrases such as empirically supported treatments, evidence based practice, randomized clinical trials, and so on. But prior to the advent of contemporary scientific psychology, many caregivers used faith-based languages to understand and help others. These languages included words such as sin, grace, confession, forgiveness, and so on.

It behooves psychologists to learn the languages of faith—at least in rudimentary form—for at least three reasons. First, it helps the psychologist understand ideas expressed by religious clients. The general public is more religious than psychologists (Shafranske, 1996b), so it is reasonable to expect that clients may be more likely than therapists to bring up religious ideas in therapy. Regardless of the therapist's personal religious and spiritual beliefs, it is important to have a basic understanding of major religious worldviews in order to understand clients' faith perspectives. Second, many individuals in psychological distress seek the help of clergy rather than psychologists. As many as 40% of potential counseling clients seek help from clergy, and only a small fraction of these are referred to mental health professionals (Meylink & Gorsuch, 1988). Some psychologists work closely with clergy and receive many clinical referrals from them (McMinn & Dominguez, 2005), but psychologists and clergy must share a common language and set of values to collaborate effectively (Chaddock & McMinn, 1999). Third, psychologists have demonstrated scientific interest in spirituality in recent years, finding points of conflation in the languages of science and faith. We see growing scientific interest in topics such as forgiveness (Enright, 2001; Worth-

ington, 2005), religious coping (Pargament, 1997), guilt and shame (Tangney & Dearing, 2003), and health and religion (Miller & Thoresen, 2003).

One relatively unexplored area in psychology has to do with the Christian construct of sin. This doctrine—foundational in Christian anthropology—suggests that all humans are tainted and wounded by their own misconduct and the misconduct of others. A few psychologists and psychiatrists have ventured into this area, such as Menninger (1973), Mowrer (1960), and McMinn (2004), but for the most part psychologists have not considered the notion of sin in human understanding and behavior (Monroe, 2001). Perhaps this is related to the misconception that people who see themselves as sinful are destined to a life of shame and defeat, making it quite natural and instinctive for psychologists to help remove the notion of sin from their clients' vocabulary. Over 25 years ago, Stanley Graham—a leading psychologist—had this to say to professional psychologists:

Quite early in the treatment process, the patient begins to use words like good and bad, and it is our tendency as therapists to diminish the intensity of these words since they relate to a value system within the individual which has led to the current state of stress. . . . We have collectively done an excellent job of diminishing the demonstration of good and bad and a very poor job of replacing these concepts with acceptable definitions which allow the individual self-acceptance and peace. (Graham, 1980, pp. 370–371)

Removing notions of right and wrong may provide some temporary relief from guilt, but in a Christian worldview it also precludes the possibility of grace. Properly conceived, a Christian theology of sin does not leave a person in a state of despair or distress, but points toward a gracious God who offers forgiveness, acceptance, and love. Therapists who strip away the language of sin from Christian clients may unwittingly be taking away a source of peace and hope by foreclosing the possibility of forgiveness and grace.

Creation, Fall, and Redemption

A popular pharmacy advertisement begins with the phrase, "In a perfect world. . . ." The advertisement goes on to describe how wonderful everything would be in a flawless existence. Then the advertisers declare that the world is not perfect, but at least we have this 24-hour pharmacy to meet some of our needs. Perhaps without knowing it, this advertisement describes a Christian theology of sin. A Christian view of persons begins with the assumption that the world was once flawless, but then human rebellion tainted all creation so now we experience sickness, evil, and all sorts of maladies. Whether one views the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden as literal or mythical, the essential Christian doctrine is that humans spoiled a pristine creation by rebelling against God's plan. This implies that God valued human agency enough to create humans with a capacity to choose between following God and following their own self-motivated desires. When humans chose to follow their own interests, creation lapsed into a broken state. This is known as "the fall." Creation is still beautiful and good, but it remains tainted by the effects of human rebellion.

Creation and the fall are two major motifs of Christian doctrine, but there is also a third: redemption. Christians assert that God is both loving and active in this fallen world, working to restore a

creation tainted by sin. The ultimate act of redemption is seen in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. There are various theological theories as to how God's redemption occurs, but all Christian views center on the person and work of Jesus, whom Christians deem to be the Christ, the Messiah. **The doctrine of grace, intrinsically linked to the doctrine of sin, teaches that God forgives humans of their sin and offers unmerited kindness and love to whomever acknowledges a need for redemption. (Some universalist forms of Christianity suggest that God offers redemption to everyone, regardless of whether they acknowledge a need.)**

Because of this tripartite view of God's relation to humanity (creation, fall, redemption), a Christian view of sin has implications for how grace is experienced. Removing a vocabulary of sin may seem wise to the psychologist who does not hold Christian beliefs or who sees no place for religious issues in professional psychology, but it may at times prove quite damaging to the Christian client who is searching for awareness of God's grace. Though psychologists need not understand all the theological nuances, several important facets of a Christian view of sin and grace are important for professional psychologists to understand when working with Christian clients.

Christian Leaders' Perspectives

To consider the Christian doctrine of sin in relation to professional psychology, we met as a research team throughout one academic year. During the first several months, we discussed theological and psychological perspectives on the nature of sin and grace. The emergent themes seemed to suggest some inherent compatibilities and differences in the way that Christian workers and psychologists view motivation and behaviors. We then gathered the perspectives of Christian leaders (pastors, missionaries, and Christian educators), using an online questionnaire and a mail survey.

Study 1: Online Questionnaire

In conjunction with the Wheaton College Center for Church-Psychology Collaboration (McMinn, Meek, Canning, & Pozzi, 2001), we sent an e-mail to a convenience sample of Christian ministry leaders explaining our interest in understanding the mistrust between psychologists and Christians. Through these initial contacts, the e-mail was forwarded to other Christian leaders in various forms of ministry including, but not limited to, mission boards, seminaries, college ministries, youth ministries, and local churches. The invitation included a link to an online survey developed specifically for this study. A precise response rate cannot be computed because we do not have any way of knowing how widely the e-mail invitation was distributed beyond our initial group of contacts. Of the 145 total respondents, 98 (68%) were male and 47 (32%) female. Most (82%) were European American, with 2% African American, 1% Asian American, 1% Hispanic/Latino, 8% international, and 6% other. Most (87%) were U.S. citizens. The average age was 41 years, ranging from 22 to 70. A number of different Christian leadership positions were represented: pastors (19%), Christian professors (19%), ministry leaders (20%), missionaries (11%), Christian students (9%), and other (22%).

Three opinion questions regarding psychology and Christianity were included in the online questionnaire, each rated on a Likert

scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*completely*). The mean response on the first item, "psychology is compatible with Christianity," was 3.8 ($\sigma = 1.0$), indicating a moderate amount of agreement. On the second item, "psychologists can be helpful partners in Christian ministry," the mean response was 4.2 ($\sigma = 0.9$), showing moderate to strong agreement. The third item was, "most Christian psychologists have adopted a view of sin that is compatible with the biblical view." The mean response on this item was 3.3 ($\sigma = 0.9$). Responses to these three items suggest that the sample consisted of those who are moderately supportive of collaborating with professional psychologists. The final item on the questionnaire, holding the greatest relevance for our research interests, was an open-ended item: "What do you wish every psychologist knew about the nature of sin?" The results of this question were combined with the results of Study 2 and are discussed below.

Study 2: Mail Survey

When sending questionnaires to 200 Southern Baptist pastors for another research project (McMinn, Runner, Fairchild, Lefler, & Suntay, 2005), we included an optional reply card with our primary research question: "What do you wish every psychologist knew about the nature of sin?" Study 2 employed a quota sampling method, selecting 40 names each from 5 predetermined regions of the United States. We selected Southern Baptist pastors in order to get a theologically conservative perspective. This was based on the assumption that theological conservatism is often associated with concerns about psychology. We wanted to learn from our critics. We received 113 responses from the 200 pastors for purposes of the other study (McMinn et al., in press), but only 26 of these included a reply on the postcard. No demographic data were available for the second set of respondents.

Findings

These two methods of data collection generated a final pool of 171 participants who responded to our primary question, "What do you wish every psychologist knew about the nature of sin?" We then met as a research team to discuss the categories of meaning evident in our data set. Then all responses were coded and evaluated using grounded theory, with the help of Nonnumerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theory-Building (N6) software. We ultimately derived four broad categories based on the content of responses we received: the nature of sin, consequences of sin, grace and sin, and the importance of sin and grace for the work of professional psychologists. Each of these four broad categories had various subcategories and frequency counts which space does not permit us to describe. Rather, we concentrate on the main themes emphasized by our respondents and then discuss implications for professional psychologists.

The Nature of Sin

Many of the Christian leaders we surveyed attempted to articulate a theological description of sin. Some responses were written in outline form, as if they were part of a creed or doctrinal statement. Because the questionnaire was sent to many Christian leaders from a variety of perspectives, the responses reflected

diverging perspectives in Christian theology about the nature of sin, but **two primary themes emerged: sin as state, and sin as act.** These correspond with important Christian tenets.

Sin as State

Christianity posits that sin is both a state and an act. Those viewing Christianity from the outside are undoubtedly familiar with certain acts that are deemed sinful—adultery, murder, greed, dishonesty, and so on. But this is only a superficial understanding of Christian doctrine, analogous to a cognitive therapist attempting to correct dysfunctional thoughts in a socially isolated client without looking for underlying maladaptive relational patterns. Beneath acts of sin lies a deeper problem having to do with the state of all creation. Christians believe that all creation exists in a state of being fallen and corrupted from God's initial intent.

Among the Christian leaders surveyed, 23 emphasized that sin is an innate part of our human state. Examples of such comments include

I wish that psychologists understood that sin is inextricably interwoven into the fabric of human existence. We are all born with it. . . .

Sin is comprehensive (affecting the whole person), universal (affecting every individual), inherited (coming from our shared humanity), a condition (a status, not a series of choices).

Also, 27 respondents emphasized the notion of total depravity—a concept that is often misunderstood by those inside and outside the Christian faith. Total depravity means every dimension of human experience has been tainted by the effects of sin, but it does not mean that people are as bad as they can be. Clearly, there is much good in humankind and the wonders of a good creation ought to be celebrated. But Christians believe every nook and cranny of this good creation has been contaminated, at least slightly, by the effects of the fall. Respondents emphasized total depravity with comments such as

Our environment is broken, our bodies are broken, and most of all our emotions are subject to all sorts of problems. The fundamental problem, though, is our sin nature.

Sin has affected every area of our lives: intellectual, spiritual, emotional, physical, and so forth.

Notice that one implication of the doctrine of total depravity is that interventions should not be limited to spiritual means. **Some fundamentalist Christians seem to think that all problems can be resolved with prayer and Bible study, but this is not only bad psychology, it is also bad theology.** Total depravity means that serotonin levels can be disrupted just as surely as spiritual priorities.

Viewing sin as a state, and not only as a set of actions, means that the brokenness of creation is evident all around—in poverty, war, abuse, injustice, oppression, and so on. It is not that some people sin and others do not, but all people are affected and infected by the problem of sin. In an oft-quoted passage from *The Gulag Archipelago*, Russian novelist Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn describes his awakening to the doctrine of sin as he was being held in prison.

When I lay there on rotting prison straw . . . it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart—and through all human hearts. . . . Even in the best of all hearts, there remains . . . an unuprooted small corner of evil. (Solzhenitsyn, 1973/2002, p. 312)

This, of course, is an amazing realization for one being held political captive by one of the most cruel and heartless regimes of contemporary times. But Solzhenitsyn captures the essence of Christianity well here—every person is tarnished by the state of sin, even those who appear quite noble in comparison to others. Though some Christians miss this point and become judgmental toward others while neglecting to see their own state of sin, this is contrary to the teaching of Jesus who instructed his followers to “stop judging others” (Matthew 7:1) and to “get rid of the log from your own eye; then perhaps you will see well enough to deal with the speck in your friend's eye” (Matthew 7:5).

Sin as Act

In addition to the pervasive state of sin, Christians believe that certain attitudes and actions are sinful. Like Jews, some Christians look to the Ten Commandments and other Old Testament writings to understand proper conduct. Some are more inclined to look to the teachings of Jesus and other New Testament writings. Some emphasize the Seven Deadly Sins articulated throughout the first millennium of the Christian church or other standards emerging from church tradition. In all these cases, Christians attempt to hold up standards of proper behavior and then to monitor their attitudes and actions accordingly.

Among the Christian leaders in our survey, 18 highlighted the importance of acknowledging personal responsibility for sinful behavior. Examples of these comments include

Sin must be owned; each person must take responsibility for his or her sin and not try to pass blame onto someone or something else.

I hope that psychologists don't excuse individual or corporate sin on the basis of psychopathology. I hope they would still hold people responsible for their actions, because that is what separates humanity from the rest of creation—their ability to choose right from wrong.

Sin as a state is not something to feel guilty about because it is not related to personal choice—every part of creation is tainted with the problem of sin. In contrast, acts of sin—personal choices that violate God's moral will—are often associated with feelings of guilt, but even these guilt feelings can be adaptive insofar as they motivate a person to make amends to others and to make different choices in the future (Tangney & Dearing, 2003).

Consequences of Sin

A Christian view also emphasizes the damage caused by sin. Life might be likened to a demolition derby, where everyone is running into one another in ways that cause damage—sometimes intentionally, and sometimes accidentally. The parent who abuses a child causes great damage to a precious human being made in God's image. The greedy multinational corporation does damage, perhaps to economies of other countries, to the environment, or to the moral character of its employees. The person who makes

lifestyle choices deemed to be immoral—such as betraying loved ones, oppressing others for personal gain, and living deceitfully—will suffer personal damage from those choices, and will hurt others along the way also.

Christian leaders in our survey emphasized the negative consequences of sin, noting both damage caused to individuals and the general dysfunction in the world as a result of choices that people make. The most frequent consequence noted—mentioned by 12 respondents—pertained to psychological effects of sin. For example,

Sin produces guilt. Guilt leads to depression, anger, and so forth.

Sin should not be the cause of every disorder. Neither should it be dismissed or minimized as a root cause either.

Some behaviors are not merely non-normative, but are actually corrosive to the well-being of the person.

Naturally, there is overlap between psychopathology and sin because they both describe a pattern of relating to self or others that is dysfunctional, abnormal, or maladaptive in nature.

The consequences of sin can seem a gloomy and dismal matter, but traditional Christian theology has coupled the doctrine of sin with the doctrine of grace. Grace is God's choice to love and accept humans despite their sinfulness.

Grace and Sin

Sin is neither the beginning nor the end in Christian theology. The Christian story is first a story of a loving God who delights in a good creation. Even though creation is tainted by sin, creation is still good and God still loves it. Christianity is ultimately based in hope, because this loving Creator is always working to restore and redeem that which has been tainted by sin. Christians believe that grace is not only a divine occurrence, but something that should also be extended from one human to another. Thus, throughout history we see Christians instrumental in starting hospitals, orphanages, food pantries, shelters, and so on. Of course, these altruistic endeavors stand in sharp contrast to the sometimes divisive and bitter acrimony spread in the name of religion—including the Christian religion—but the altruistic ideals are well supported in Christian theology.

Some of the respondents in our survey outlined various ways to repair or redeem the problem of sin, typically connecting the notions of sin and grace. Various dimensions of this were discussed, with the most prominent themes being the centrality of Jesus in receiving grace ($n = 16$) and our universal need for grace and forgiveness ($n = 10$). These can be viewed as particular and common perspectives on grace.

Particularity and Grace

The Christian faith includes specific truth claims that are often offensive in a pluralistic society (this is sometimes called the “scandal of particularity”). A Christian view stipulates that God's grace is fully revealed in the person and work of Jesus; this was emphasized by a number of respondents in our survey. For example,

Even though we are bent by it we are not definitively constrained. There is power for change toward our original design available in and through Christ's healing work and presence.

Jesus is the only one who can completely release a person from the guilt of sin.

In response to absolutistic faith claims such as these, some psychologists tend to urge clients toward more open, inclusive perspectives that they believe to be more health promoting (Ellis, 1962, 1971, 1980; Walls, 1980). They may work to free their clients from these narrow views of religion, to help them become tolerant and accepting of themselves. But for some clients in the Christian tradition, this loosening of particular truth claims may not be as helpful as the psychologist intends it to be and may even lead some clients away from the hope of grace. An old Puritan prayer demonstrates the intrinsic connection between a Christian's view of grace and particular truth claims regarding Jesus.

Gracious Lord,

Thy name is love, in love receive my prayer. My sins are more than the wide sea's sand, but where sin abounds, there is grace more abundant. Look to the cross of thy beloved Son, and view the preciousness of his atoning blood; Listen to his never-failing intercession, and whisper to my heart, “Thy sins are forgiven, be of good cheer, lie down in peace.” Grace cataracts from heaven and flows for ever, and mercy never wearies in bestowing benefits. (Bennett, 1975, p. 270)

Common Grace

Though most of our respondents linked grace with specific Christian beliefs, it is important to note that Christians also hold to a notion of common grace, meaning that God's goodness and redemptive presence are evident in all creation, even among those outside the Christian faith. Some respondents noted this. For example,

God is the one that forgives and heals. He can use a wide variety of methods. . . . He does not choose to work the same every time.

[Sin] is very deep, almost genetic, and thus is only dealt with by grace in its manifold forms.

Common grace should not be confused with universalist views of salvation, which suggest that God's saving grace extends to all humans regardless of their beliefs and actions. Common grace is not viewed as salvific (i.e., it does not provide an afterlife in heaven for all humans), but means that God's loving care for a broken creation is evident in all sorts of practical ways every day.

An important implication is that professional psychologists need not share particular Christian beliefs with their clients in order to be instruments of common grace.

After many years of providing psychotherapy and studying the scientific literature on its effectiveness, I am convinced that good therapy works because it is a place that emulates grace. It is a place of acceptance and mercy, a place where sin and the consequences of sin can be openly explored without the fear of judgment. This frees people to look honestly at themselves, to become more open in their other relationships, and to move forward into richer and deeper connections with those they love. . . . A place of grace needs to be a place of open exploration and acceptance, where both sin and the consequences of sin can be named and grieved. (McMinn, 2004, p. 49)

Importance for Psychologists

The final category of responses consisted of exhortative comments directed toward psychologists with the intent of reminding

or directing them to consider the Christian doctrine of sin in professional work. A total of 28 respondents made comments about considering sin in psychotherapy. For example,

I wish that psychologists understood that sin is inextricably interwoven into the fabric of human existence . . . and must be addressed in any attempt to help people deal with the wounds and struggles of life.

It is our biggest problem and has to be discussed as part of the solution.

I wish all of us—pastors and psychologists alike—were more realistic about sin: its pervasiveness, its blinding effect upon, its persistence in us. We need to communicate without apology that human beings are capable of enormous evil and of enormous good. Both sides of the truth need to come through.

Given the opportunity, we suspect that psychologists would also have advice to give Christian leaders about how to best care for souls (*psyches*), but the point of our survey was to learn from Christian leaders about their views of sin.

Psychology and the Christian faith are different fields, each holding unique vocabularies, anthropologies, and worldviews. Just as some of the explanatory concepts of psychology may be uncomfortable to the Christian leaders who provided their opinions in this study, so also some of the ideas of Christian leaders are likely to be uncomfortable for psychologists. Most psychologists do not spend time thinking about Christian notions of sin and grace in formulating a diagnosis or treatment plan, for example. Similarly, Christian leaders are unlikely to spend time thinking about theories of psychopathology or to conceptualize parishioners' difficulties from cognitive-behavioral, psychodynamic, or other psychotherapy orientations.

Despite the differences in the two fields, it is fascinating to see some signs of rapprochement, evidenced by growing interest in the psychological study of religious topics, burgeoning interest in spirituality among psychologists, growth in religiously oriented doctoral programs in clinical psychology, and increasing interest in clergy-psychologist collaboration (McMinn & Domínguez, 2005). Though it is important for both Christian ministry and psychology to maintain their distinctions (i.e., Christian ministry should not *become* psychology, nor vice versa), some increased dialog will enhance the care being provided by both fields.

Implications

In conclusion, several implications for professional psychology are worth noting. First, psychologists who provide psychotherapy might consider putting some statement of religious or spiritual values in the initial psychotherapy contract that clients review and sign. One of us (McMinn) has used such a statement for many years and it often leads to meaningful conversations about faith, even among clients who hold disparate religious views or have no religious faith. Here is an example of such a statement.

My approach to psychotherapy is shaped by my Christian worldview. Though I have no expectation that you share my beliefs, you have a right to know them. Christianity teaches that we are created to be in relationship with God and one another, but because of the brokenness of our world our frustrated longings for relationship often result in various problems. In this sense, psychological problems—like all problems in our world—ultimately stem from our human brokenness.

However, we cannot settle for simplistic connections between personal choices and psychological symptoms. Many aspects of our fallen world contribute to psychological problems, including historical, cultural, biological, psychosocial, personal, and emotional factors.

Building from a foundation of a Christian worldview, my psychotherapy style is further shaped by the strategies of cognitive therapy. In cognitive therapy we carefully examine your personal history and current circumstances in order to find and revise faulty thinking patterns, assumptions, and beliefs that contribute to your symptoms. Both your personal values and mine will affect the ways your beliefs are evaluated. You are free to question me about my value assumptions at any time.

Though this example comes from an explicitly religious psychologist, it may also be appropriate for psychologists of no religious faith or for those who believe faith should not be a topic of psychotherapy to disclose something about their worldview at the beginning of psychotherapy. This helps the client know something about the expectations regarding religious conversation.

Second, it is important to distinguish between professional psychology and pastoral care. The foundations for psychotherapy are psychological theory and science, even for those who are explicitly religious in their interventions. There may be times when spiritual methods such as discussions of sin and grace, guided imagery, consulting with clergy, referring to scripture, and prayer are useful in psychotherapy (McMinn, 1996; Tan, 1996), but the professional psychologist should be able to articulate the rationale for these procedures within the context of a psychological treatment plan. There may be a dual rationale—one spiritual and one psychological—but the psychological rationale is mandatory. For example, those who bill insurance companies for a session of psychotherapy should indeed be providing psychotherapy for the client, even if spiritual techniques are being included in the session. In contrast, pastoral care has no such constraints. Some who provide pastoral care may base their work in psychological theory and others may base it exclusively on spiritual practices (e.g., healing prayer) or theological tenets (e.g., biblical counseling). These are legitimate choices, time-honored through many centuries, even if they are not acceptable choices for professional psychologists. There may be a day when spiritual techniques such as healing prayer are established psychological interventions, supported with both theory and science, but that day has not yet arrived and so professional psychologists need to exercise caution, using spiritual methods within the context of psychological research and practice standards.

Third, just as psychologists need to learn about ethnicity, gender issues, and sexual orientation, it is also important to learn the basic vocabulary of the major world religions. It is heartening to see publications in mainstream APA journals describing fundamental premises of various religions (e.g., Ali, Liu, & Humedian, 2004). In addition to reading, religiously informed continuing education can be helpful. So can participating in APA convention activities sponsored by the Psychology of Religion division (Division 36). Obtaining supervision from a psychologist with religious expertise may be helpful at times, also. Perhaps the most useful idea of all is to invite clergy into psychological staff meetings or other continuing education venues in order to learn more about religious perspectives on professional issues. This not only helps inform psychologists of key theological constructs, it also helps establish a collaborative relationship between psychologists and clergy that

will likely lead to professional referrals. Clergy are often overwhelmed with ministry demands and feel unsure about how to help some parishioners, yet many are reticent to refer to psychologists (Meylink & Gorsuch, 1988). As a first step for psychologists interested in collaborating with Christian clergy, it is essential that the psychologist become familiar with and respect the essential values and beliefs of the faith (McMinn, Aikins, & Lish, 2003).

Fourth, professional psychologists should not be too quick to dismiss their clients' discussions of sin. **Pargament (1997) distinguishes between positive religious coping, which involves turning to a loving God and congregational support in times of trouble, and negative religious coping, which entails being discontented with God and viewing bad things as God's punishment.** When clients begin speaking of sin, it may be quite natural to assume they are using negative religious coping and to help disabuse them of their destructive views. However, from a Christian worldview, the doctrine of sin is entirely interrelated with the doctrine of grace. **A client who speaks of sin may be working toward a place of experiencing grace from a loving God (positive religious coping), and it is important not to disrupt this process prematurely.**

The challenge is to find balance. Some clients may wallow in sin and fail to appropriate the doctrine of grace. In these situations the psychologist can help clients consider ways of expressing appropriate regret for harmful behavior, making restitution when possible, and then moving forward with an awareness of God's gracious forgiveness. For example,

I am not completely familiar with your faith, but from what I understand, Christianity is about the forgiveness of sins. I'm not hearing much about forgiveness in what you're saying.

Many Christian congregations are also willing to extend grace and forgiveness to those with profound regrets about past choices. Psychologists can encourage involvement in religious communities, which often helps a person experience both grace and social support.

Other times clients may use grace as an excuse for ongoing offenses without considering the gravity of their misconduct. This is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer—a German theologian who was executed for participating in a plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler—called cheap grace (Bonhoeffer, 1959, p. 45). Here the job of the professional psychologist may involve promoting self-awareness and a deeper sorrow for one's misdeeds. For example,

I hear you saying that your partner should just forgive you and get over this, but I'm not hearing much sorrow about what you did.



The goal is not to produce shame, which is self-focused and destructive, but a sense of remorse, which is other-focused and can be psychologically constructive (Tangney & Dearing, 2003).

Fifth, in order to help clients work through their questions about sin and struggle, it may be helpful to distinguish between sin as a state and an act. Those struggling with depression may be prone to see all their problems as related to personal sin, which reflects a misunderstanding of Christian theology. Sin also refers to a general state of brokenness in the world which is pervasive and need not produce feelings of personal guilt. When a Christian client resists medication for depression, stating that the symptoms reflect a spiritual problem rather than a biological one, an astute therapist can help the client consider the implications of the Christian notion

of total depravity. Every part of creation, including biological functioning, is damaged by sin. Shame and guilt are not the proper responses to the human state of sin, but an antidepressant medication may be.

Sixth, it may be difficult at times for Christian clients to trust that a non-Christian professional psychologist understands enough Christian theology to guide the client toward an experience of grace. For example, if a Christian client feels profound regret for a past action and the psychologist encourages the client to make amends as much as possible and then relax into an awareness of God's grace, the client may feel suspicious of the psychologist's perspective because the client and therapist do not share the same faith. In times such as these, it can be quite helpful to collaborate with the client's priest or pastor (McMinn et al., 2003). Encouraging the client to consult with the clergyperson, or getting authorization to talk with the clergyperson directly, may help the intervention move forward.

The Christian doctrine of sin has not received much attention in the psychology literature, not even in the psychology of religion literature. The survey study reported here provides a glimpse into what Christian leaders would like psychologists to know about the doctrine of sin. Much of their advice may be worth heeding for the sake of providing competent psychological services to Christian clients.

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