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Integration of Theology and Psychology

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## Human Nature

Reinhold Niebuhr (1964) has an interesting description of human nature. Much of what Niebuhr said I agree with; while I am not sure it is the most accurate version of human nature it is the one I agree with the most out of the views I have read so far in my life. There are several things I would change or critique about Niebuhr's view. I am also not certain how well Niebuhr's ideas of sin match up with other cultural contexts. As Douglas (2012) stated,

> As womanist, *mujerista*, Asian, lesbian, and other feminist scholars have demonstrated, the contexts of white upper-middle-class and generally highly educated women can no more function as templates for the experiences of all women than Niebuhr's description of the human condition can function as a template for all persons. (p. 106)

Niebuhr views human beings as beings in a unique place in the universe. They are not deities, supernatural or immortal creatures, nor solely animals or fleshly creatures. Instead humans have elements of both the divine and the fleshly and exist inbetween the rest. One way Niebuhr describes this is that humans are mortal like the animals but unlike the animals because they are aware of their mortality. And although the awareness of mortality makes them similar to deities, they are unlike deities because they are powerless to conquer their mortality (Niebuhr, 1964). These two parts can be described as the imago Dei, the part of humanity made in the image of God and gives humans the abilities needed to have dominion over other creatures, and the nephesh chayyah, the creaturely part of humanity that contains all the needs and limitations of being an animal (1964).

Since humanity has both the imago Dei and the nephesh chayyah, one of the great challenges of being human is managing the balance between these two elements. There is tension between these two elements and each day humans must resolve this tension (Niebuhr, 1964).

This tension is one place I might differ from Niebuhr a little bit, or at least from others'

interpretations of Niebuhr. I see the tension as the balance between the imago Dei and nephesh

chayyah but others who have read Niebuhr view the tension and anxiety as result from the imago

Dei being the primary identity and the nephesh chayyah having to fit into that as a secondary

identity. The anxiety is about how much we lean into or hold onto each identity in each moment

of life. One image that comes to my mind is trying to drive a wagon with two wild horses – each

horse must be reigned in but they also must be reigned in to work as a team in order for the

wagon to go. Some moments one horse may need to be reigned in more than the other. We

cannot reign in the horses all on our own.

     As Niebuhr himself points out, this "anxiety is not sin" (1964, p. 183). He considered it to

be an "internal precondition of sin" (p. 182). I agree that this anxiety is not sin; it is the automatic

and constant result of the two elements God created in us and if it were sin then it would mean

God automatically created us as sinful, which would interfere with many of my beliefs and

reasonings. Another place I might differ from Niebuhr is that I think sin, all sin, comes from a

mistrust of God. I am not sure what Niebuhr would say about that idea as he seems to speak of

this at times in his book but he never focuses on that; for Niebuhr it goes from anxiety to pride or

sensuality and those two are the places where sin is formed (1964). Yet I see both those types of

sin being born out of mistrust, more specifically mistrust in God to resolve the tension between

our imago Dei and nephesh chayyah. God knows how to have that calm and perfect balance

between those two elements of humanity and he would help us achieve that if we would trust

him to, yet we do not and we try and take matters into our own hands to find peace and security

and sin has consequences for our lives. Each day we are faced with many opportunities to decide

whether we will trust God or not. For me, this is foundational about human nature.

One other facet of my view of human nature that I have not mentioned yet is the importance of my view of God. How I view myself and other people is tied into how I view our Creator. For space reasons, I am only going to mention one particular attribute of God that I think connects with human nature in a very strong way. This is the relational nature of God (Grenz, 2000). As Grenz (2000) said, "the doctrine of the Trinity declares that God is relational…but not only is the immanent Trinity relational, the triune God enters into relationship with the world he creates" (p. 78). As beings created in his image, this makes me think that we are also created to be relational. Not in the sense that every person will experience a marital or romantic relationship; but that we will all desire to experience community. This is important for human nature because it places our tension of imago Dei and nephesh chayyah in context – with other people in the same tension. Such a struggle and the sins that manifest in the struggle look different when we are isolated than when we are connected with others. We have to learn to not only trust God with our own lives and balances of imago Dei and nephesh chayyah but also with those of the people we love and trust him with our relationships.

**Sin and Dysfunction**

When we do not trust God, Niebuhr described the sinful actions as belonging in two categories, one of which seemed to be more likely or take more precedence than the other. These two categories are pride and sensuality (Niebuhr, 1964). I follow Niebuhr's train of thought here and while I cannot conclusively say that all possible sins fall into these two categories I can say that I think most fit into at least one of them. The sins of pride happen when we attempt to relieve the anxiety by becoming a god and over-emphasizing our imago Dei and doing our best to ignore, deny, or limit our nephesh chayyah (1964); these sins can be seen in seeking money, power, knowledge, virtue or religion, etc. (1964). Niebuhr divides sins of pride into three

categories but I am not sure that doing so is especially helpful or necessary. He also seems to think this is the more likely, dare I even say more natural, path for sin to follow and that the other category is an alternative or lesser sin. Sins of sensuality occur when people lean too much into their nephesh chayyah and attempt to relieve anxiety by trying not to think about their limitations by enjoying life to the fullest in a more physical or visceral way (1964). Sensual sins would include gluttony, illegal substances, sexual sins, etc. (1964). In my opinion, both categories are just as likely to occur and people probably commit sins in both categories at some point in their lives if not simultaneously.

I will say I embrace at least some of the feminist critiques of Niebuhr. Saiving's criticism that men were more likely to sin with pride because of their drive to completeness and power while women were underdeveloped in such things for much of history and would be more likely to sin in sensuality (Stone, 2012) makes sense to me when I look at cultures and history. If women were not viewed as equals, not even viewed as fully human at times, it seems logical that they would have a harder time leaning into their imago Dei and being prideful. However, cultural understandings of pride would be important to consider here as one complaint frequently raised against women who tried to hold influence or become educated was that they were being prideful. Or perhaps their pride showed up in different ways, such as pride in their security because of the husband they married or the number of children or sons they were able to bear.

I would hesitate to say women are more likely to be slaves to sensual sins, though this was also a common view throughout history and was displayed by the need to keep women from seducing men. I agree with Stone (2012) that both men and women are apt "in moments of decision within our limited human freedom we may act either to renounce that freedom and become less than a free human being or exaggerate that freedom and act like little gods" (p. 92-

93). Perhaps pride has looked different for cultures and genders throughout time. One thing I had trouble distinguishing from Niebuhr's book was his view of women in general. There were statements throughout the book that made me wonder if he thought of women as secondary or lesser but I was never certain if that was his thought, if he was relaying how they have been seen by cultures and religions, or if I was misunderstanding. If he has a lower view of women, that is definitely a place I would disagree with him on and would likely adjust how such a view impacts his interpretation of human nature and sin. He also had some perplexing remarks about sex being sinful, such as "the climax of sexual union is also a climax of creativity and sinfulness" (1964, p. 236). Again, I would differ from him if this is his actual view on sex and that may cause me to interpret or categorize some sins differently than Niebuhr.

One other thing to note about sin is that I think there is a distinction between sin and dysfunction. There are many definitions of sin but one summary of them is that sin is often used in religious, moral, and social circles to signify wrongdoing against a deity and/or person(s). Similarly dysfunction has been defined in a variety of ways by different clinicians and researchers; I would describe dysfunction as difficulties experienced by families and individuals that can create long-lasting patterns, effects, and challenges for each member in the present and the future. Since I do not think any person is perfect, I also do not think any family is perfect and therefore every family has some level of dysfunction. My personal bias is that dysfunction, while it sounds negative, is not always a bad thing and must be fixed; rather it is about how the family deals with it and changes their experience with it. This is tied into its distinction from sin; it is not wrong for a family to have dysfunction. As a result of the fall, we live in a broken creation and many relationships were broken when sin entered humanity's world; problems were caused immediately for Adam and Eve's relationship as they sorted out blame for what had happened.

There are things that happen to people that cannot always be accounted for by sin and science does not always offer the best explanation; yet families still have to deal with these things, such as mental illness or tragic accidents. A family with a bipolar parent is likely to have dysfunction; it is not sinful for the parent to be bipolar nor for the family to have to deal with the vast reactions and consequences of having a bipolar family member but some of the behaviors of the bipolar parent, or any family member, may be sinful, such as the bipolar parent being sexually promiscuous with other people during a manic episode. The same would be true of a family that loses a young child to cancer. Sin and dysfunction often co-exist but they are not the same.

I think Niebuhr's categories of sin also can be used in understanding how other people view human nature, specifically whether or not they have a high view or a low view of human nature. Those who have an extremely low view of human nature emphasize the nephesh chayyah and ignore the imago Dei; people are just animals and are driven by instincts but trainable. Those with an extremely high view of human nature emphasize the imago Dei and ignore the nephesh chayyah and believe humanity is the ultimate authority and power with all the control and everything is centered around humanity. Personally I say that I have a higher view of human nature but I am still a cynic at heart and so I do not have a really high view, more of a middle ground. What keeps me from having a low view though is the imago Dei. By ignoring the imago Dei one ignores the idea of hope and restoration that we can have through God and also places blame on God for our fallen state because he made us this way. Whether I am a therapist or a minister, if I only had a low view of human nature, it would not make sense for me to be in a helping profession because it does not seem like I would believe my work to be worthwhile since I would not think people could change or be better than what they have been. Yet I know the

hope does not exist in us but in God so I try not to emphasize the imago Dei over the nephesh chayyah too much.

**Integration**

One thing I debated in writing this paper was how to discuss my views on integration. As someone who is doing a dual-track degree and plans on using my therapy knowledge and skill set in a ministry setting, integration seems to be inherent to what I will be doing. You might even say it is the reason I am spending three years of my life in school right now. However my goal is not to actually do therapy as a minister; I am more than happy to refer people to licensed professionals and strongly believe in the need for both therapists and ministers to refer to each other when problems are outside their scope of practice. But there are many thoughts and theories from therapy that I want to apply to ministry and think could be useful there. I do not intend to just cherry pick these ideas but create a foundation for ministry from these theories. These models are emotionally focused therapy (EFT), internal family systems therapy (IFS), and narrative therapy. There are other things but these are the only ones I will really talk about here.

EFT is a model based in attachment theory, experiential theory, and systems theory (Johnson et al., 2005). Seeing how systems theory has already begun to be applied to youth ministry, although much more could be done with it, I am just going to talk about the other two. Attachment theory is about relationships with primary caregivers as a child and eventually with romantic partners as adults (2005). Children form attachment styles during childhood which are secure, anxious, or avoidant and Johnson et al. (2005) worked to see how these attachment styles were carried out in adult love relationships. There are two things I am curious about with attachment theory in ministry. One is attachment styles and relationship with God; how does

one's attachment style affect a relationship with God and how does a relationship with God affect one's attachment style. The second thing is what these attachment styles look like in adolescents and understanding what parents or involved adults can do to impact attachment styles with adolescents or engage more effectively with them. In EFT, experience is emphasized because "experiential approaches take the position that we are formed and transformed by our relationships with others" (Johnson et al., 2005, p. 29). EFT therapists work with couples to create new emotional experiences in session and these new emotional experiences allow for each person to see himself or herself differently, as well as see his or her partner differently, and that will create new ways of interacting between them (2005). Given that churches are full of emotional spiritual experiences, such as summer camps and the spiritual highs associated with summer for youth groups, I am curious how those emotional experiences can be built upon to create lasting change. I heard a lot when I was growing up that spiritual highs would always fade and by a week or two into the school year everyone would be back to their same old behaviors. I always felt like there had to be a way to make those experiences more useful; the spiritual high does not have to stay but the changes it brings in an adolescent's life can and I wonder if EFT has something that could be useful in doing that.

IFS is one of my favorite therapy models. IFS takes systems theory and applies it inside individuals by understanding the varying emotions, behaviors, thoughts, and roles a person plays as different parts of himself or herself (Davis, 2008). These parts may be managers, who attempt to keep things functioning for the person on a regular basis, firefighters, who rescue the person when things get too intense, or exiles, who are frequently protected and hidden (2008). Ideally in control of all these parts is the Self who works to get the parts to be a team and function harmoniously (2008). I think IFS has a lot of potential in a spiritual understanding. I think it also

allows for my view of human nature with the imago Dei and the nephesh chayyah both being able to be represented. I think adolescents feel a lot of inner turmoil about what to do and who to be and they do not always know how to make sense of that turmoil or find peace about it. I think they also tend to get labeled by what they do but I believe that is not the only thing that defines them. I think a parts understanding could be helpful in allowing them to explore their identities more fully and allowing them to live in tension while they make sense of things.

Narrative therapy places a lot of emphasis on stories and externalizing problems (Freedman & Combs, 1996). People and their problems are not one and the same and it can be extremely relieving and hopeful to realize that and begin to conceptualize how things could be different (1996). Narrative therapy has a lot of postmodern tenets (1996) that I would want to be careful about applying to ministry. At the same time though it might be a good way to introduce adolescents to the importance of thinking for themselves about their beliefs and faith and getting them to think critically and engage in a spiritual life. Adolescents also love to tell stories and helping them view all aspects of their lives as a story that connects to the story of God and the story of the rest of the church may be helpful.

As far as the integrative approaches laid out by Entwistle (2004), honestly I am not a huge fan of his models. Reading the book, each model is separate and makes sense, but as you start to look for ways to practically apply them, I feel the lines of Entwistle's models get blurred and it is hard to know where you are in all of it. I know I do not think theology and psychology have to be enemies and I know I think they can collaborate at times and in ways and that integration is possible. But I do not think integration is always necessary and I think it has to be done very carefully. Integration does not always have to be an equal balance of theology and psychology. I think there is a lot of risk involved in integrating them and it should not be done

without discussion and guidance of others. This may sound hypocritical given that I am integrating them but this is not something I am doing lightly or without years of thought and discussion and I know I will continue to reflect and evaluate how I integrate these things when I am in ministry.

There was an interesting article I read by Adams (2004) about applying family systems ideas to the Wesleyan quadrilateral. Adams's point was to discuss how each aspect of the quadrilateral could incorporate in ideas from family systems, especially for Christian clinicians and clergy who work with families who want to emphasize spirituality (2004). In some ways, this made a lot of sense to me but it also sparked a related but different thought. At the beginning, Adams discussed what he defined as collective temper, or the idea of "a whole that equals more than the sum of its parts" (2004, p. 149). He intended to apply this basic family systems concept to understanding families but I was thinking about how it can be applied to the Wesleyan quadrilateral. Those four quadrants are important aspects of each Christian's and each church's spirituality. Yet a person's spiritual life is so much more than just those four pieces. When the quadrants come together, it is not a simple math equation to understand a person's spirituality. There is mystery and life and excitement that may not be there without the other parts but that cannot be explained just by those four things.

For me, while psychology and theology can work together to enrich people's lives, I do not think psychology will ever be able to fully encompass or understand theology and spirituality. I guess at the end of the day I agree with Porter (2010) that often times we claim theology and psychology to be equal but internally one wins out just a little bit more than others and this can be seen when the two fields seem to contradict each other and we have to decide how to move forward.

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