

Spiritual Counseling from Psychological and Theological Perspective

– A Comparative Study –

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Abstract

Introduction: *Spiritual counseling is a less known intervention field in Romanian society. Many of those who declare themselves orthodox-Christians do not seek nor find solutions for their existential problems within the relationship with the priest. On the other hand, there are persons who question the meaning of life or their purpose on this world, although they do not adhere to a religious cult. Psychological counseling is a short or long term intervention, which aims to prevent, remit or resolutely assist some personal problems (emotional, cognitive and behavioral) with a disorganizing individual, familial and socio-professional impact. Its topics are various, from educational ones to rehabilitation, recovery and social reintegration, from the ones concerning psycho-emotional and social support to the ones of adaptation and efficient communitarian integration.*

Objectives: *Human's spiritual dimension may be approached from a double perspective – psychological and theological. Therefore, it is useful to analyze the way future specialists relate to this field.*

Methods: *The research method consisted in a survey based on the subjective aspect of social reality, which aims to emphasize what people think, feel or appreciate. We used a questionnaire containing five open questions that implied writing down the answer freely. This questionnaire was self-applied and anonymous.*

Results: *We noticed that spiritual counseling is an activity of spiritual guiding, advising and training for both theology and psychology students. Also, the answers regarding the common points of the two reference fields – theology and psychology – offer an element of homogeneity to the entire research group.*

Conclusions: *The study shows that both theology and psychology aim at the human's wellbeing: psychology – psychological healing and optimization, theology – spiritual illness healing and redemption.*

Keywords: *spiritual, psychological, counseling, healing, existential, meaning*

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I. Introduction

This study aims at the following objectives: to identify the defining aspects of the spiritual counseling concept, as they are understood by students from the Faculty of Orthodox Theology and the Faculty of Psychology, to outline the psychological profile of the confessor-priest as he is perceived by the above mentioned students and to identify common aspects and differences between theological and psychological field.

II. Method

The research method consisted in a survey with a descriptive nature. This survey is based on the subjective aspect of social reality and it seeks to emphasize what people think, feel or appreciate.

The used instrument was a questionnaire containing five open questions that implied writing down the answer freely. This questionnaire was self-applied and anonymous.

The research sample consisted of 100 students: 50 students from the Faculty of Orthodox Theology, Pastoral Theology major (39 sophomores and 11 juniors-seniors) and 50 students from the Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences, Psychology major (juniors-seniors), University of Bucharest. By applying it simultaneously, we aimed to compare the obtained data from both majors. The age ranges of the investigated students were between: 22-29 years old (psychology) and 21-30 (theology).

The interpretation of results was achieved through the content analysis of the offered answers. To this end, we established a series of thematic categories for each type of answer in order to facilitate interpretation. Another used (quantitative type) technique was the sum of frequencies.

III. Results

The intercession of interpreting data consisted in synthesizing the received answers for each question. Therefore, when the answers had the same informative content even though they had another linguistic shape, we only chose one of them.

At the first question: What do you mean by spiritual counseling? the obtained answers lead us to the formulation of two perspectives, two meanings of the studied topic. The analysis was accomplished by synthesizing information according to two thematic categories: spiritual counseling as human activity and its goal.

First, we notice that spiritual counseling is an activity of spiritual guiding, advising and training for both theology and psychology students. It must be provided by a priest or someone with theological studies in the light of Christian teachings and it requires commitment (spiritual vibration). The other

students, with psychology major, think of spiritual counseling as an empirical psychotherapy, a way of helping people based on resources, accomplished by means of analysis and values clarification.

Therefore, we notice a first difference between the two studied subgroups, namely the way to relate to divinity. We would like to mention that this "cleavage" is rather present in psychology students.

Practical aspects of the activity of spiritual counseling are shared by both sides: moral support; assistance; help; guidance; reference point; healing; dialogue; permanent knowledge.

The final goal of this type of therapy can be synthesized in two directions. The first one emphasizes the necessity to overcome states of confusion, impasses, and life obstacles by discovering one's own values, beliefs, ideals (classic psychological counseling). The other perspective insists on personal evolution from the spiritual standpoint, seen as acquirement of Christian virtues, knowledge of God and guidance towards the redemption of the soul (spiritual counseling).

The second question: When do you think a person needs spiritual counseling? revealed two straight attitudes in relation to this topic. The analysis of the answers aimed two indicators: during one's entire life and in certain moments.

In the presentation of research results, it can be noticed that each of the two groups of students divides in two subgroups according to the expressed opinions. The difference resides only in the number of the persons who chose a version or another.

Thus, 28 students from theology and 9 students from psychology (37% of the questioned persons) believe that a human being needs spiritual counseling during his entire life, in every moment of his existence. On the other hand, 22 students from theology and 41 students from psychology (63% of the questioned persons) think that a human needs this type of help only in certain moments of his existence: when he has to make important decisions, in captious situations, crises, confusion, hopelessness, overwhelming, in the case of events that shake his hierarchy of values (when losing a close person; an accident etc.), when he seeks himself, when he got too alienated from himself, when he lost his self-confidence and his trust in the divine force.

The following question: Can a psychologist be a spiritual counselor? (argue) emphasized, as well as above, a division of the studied sample in two groups according to the response indicators: yes or no.

Thus, the opinions formulated by Theology students equally divide their group: 25 of them give credit to psychologists as far as this activity is concerned and the other 25 students have a different opinion. When it comes to psychology students, the result expresses a higher

cohesion of opinions: 41 of the questioned subjects believe it is possible, while 9 of them are distrustful.

Regarding the overall research group, results highlight a percentage of 66% for the development of this activity by a psychologist. The arguments of this opinion are rather conditions that a psychologist should meet and they bring closer the opinions of the two groups of students: provided that his understanding upon religious, consciousness problems is at a high level; if in his therapy he asks for the help of God; if he is a good Christian; if his relationship with divinity and his perspective on the natural order in the world are clearly outlined; he should believe in spiritual virtues.

On the other hand, 33% of the questioned students consider that the final goal of this type of counseling exceeds the limits of psychology: only a person with grace, namely the priest, can be a spiritual counselor; only he can unify the human with God and offer spiritual treatment. He can, at most, guide him towards God in order to find him a goal, hope or support; he can only touch those sensitive points of the soul, but he cannot succeed in the case of those who are lost from the moral point of view.

The objective we have always aimed with the following question: Which are, in your opinion, the necessary psychological traits for a confessor-priest? was to outline the psychological profile of the confessor-priest, as he appears in students' perception and to detect the differences between the two groups with different majors. What we expect from those around us generally expresses our intimate needs so the obtained information can guide us when it comes to young people's personal needs in their relationship with the priest. When interpreting, we took into account the frequency with which one trait or another was mentioned in the given answers.

First, we noticed that most traits were common; some of them were almost equally ranked in these two final lists – understanding, patience, love, good listener, discernment, self-confidence (inner balance etc.).

By synthesizing the obtained data from the sample of 100 subjects, we obtained a personality profile made of the traits that gathered the highest frequency of election (graded between parentheses). Thus, the priest should firstly be understanding (41) and patient (33). Then he would need empathy (26), openness, understood as the absence of the tendency to judge (21) and tolerance (15). Other important qualities would be: love (14), gentleness (13), he should be a good listener (12), he should have experience in spiritual life (10), discernment (7), flexibility (7) and a hierarchy of values (moral character) (7).

The last question of this questionnaire: What are the common points and the differences between

theology and psychology according to your opinion? is meant to highlight, on the one hand, the students' degree of information about each major, but also opinions which are expressions of some mental representations related to that certain field.

The answers regarding the common points of the two reference fields – theology and psychology – offer an element of homogeneity to the entire research group. Most of the 100 students think the most important common points would be: fathoming the human being's depths and offering information about the features of the soul; trying to explain the profoundness of the existential problems and offering support for understanding these problems; they both aim to heal the soul; they are based on listening, communication and relationship; they have a humanistic ideal; they experience love for people; they guide and orientate; they resort to human's morality; they are centered on the soul; they have the mission to save the human being and to find the meaning of life.

As for the differences, Theology students think that in the relation between theological and psychological field, the first one exceeds the motivation for psychic health and it teaches how to get closer to God (it is knowledge and speech about God). The confessor-priest is invested with grace and he takes care of the part of the soul directed towards God. Instead, Psychology, aims at the individual performances and does not take God into account; it is a human science about the human psyche, it theorizes; its interest is focused on the logical part. The psychologist takes care of the laic part of the soul; it teaches humans to adopt behavioral masks and it is paid.

In the answers given by Psychology students, we found the following (most frequent) aspects: Theology is only concerned with the relationship with God and less concerned with personal and interpersonal relationships; it is characterized by conservatism, rigor, strict rituals, restrictions and it is centered on dogma; it is based on and it develops guilt; it is oriented towards controlling masses; the confessor-priest has the role of an advisor. On the other hand, psychology is concerned with human's inner resources; it takes the human for who he/she is; it is based on the power of the ego and it stimulates individualism; however, the psychologist is limited because he lacks spiritual practice and he is paid for his services.

Another category of answers revealed that both theology and psychology aim at human's adaptation, but in different contexts, by using different spaces and work methods and by having a specific way to regard human. There is also the opinion that they complete each other, they use each other and they should work together for the human's psychological and spiritual healing.

IV. Conclusions

As a final conclusion of this research, we believe that most students possess an accurate knowledge on the studied topics. There were many consonances between the opinions of theology and psychology students.

Spiritual counseling is a known activity for a great part of the studied group. Confusion was only present among psychology students because many of them took spiritual counseling for psychological counseling without taking into account human's spiritual dimension, without seeing him/her in a continuous relationship to God.

Out of the questioned students, 67% believe a psychologist can also be a spiritual counselor, but only under certain circumstances (generally, if he is a good Christian and asks for God's help).

A major difference was registered regarding the aspects differentiating the two fields. Psychology students' answers were slightly contradictory: theology is characterized by the lack of interest in personal and interpersonal relationships, but it is oriented towards controlling masses. The explanation could reside in the fact that Theology students have psychology subjects in their curriculum, while psychology students can only possess this knowledge from their personal lives (more precisely if there is a connection with the Church and interest in religious literature).

This fact may suggest the necessity for a proper information of psychology students (open classes, discussion meetings between the students of the two faculties) and for the enhancement of communication between the two fields of human activity, considering that among the questioned students there are persons who believe that theology and psychology complete and use each other and that they should work together for the human's psychological and spiritual healing.

Assumptions such as "I don't believe in psychologists" or "educated persons go to the psychologist, the others go to the priest" were exceptions; therefore, I believe the necessary condition for a more thorough dialogue exists.

The psychologist seeks to help his patient adapt better to the requirements of the external environment by resorting to his internal resources, in the pursuit of the balance in the relationship with himself (the way he is and the way he wishes he were), as well as in the relationships with those around him (the way he is and the way the others wish he were). The psychologist belongs to a certain "orientation" that influences the intervention intercession, the concepts used in the description of the disease and the work methods. The cause of the illness is most of the times discovered in the

patient's past; it represents the echo of a traumatizing experience. By active listening, reformulating, asking questions, the psychotherapist supports the patient in the process of becoming aware of his inner experiences, helps him clarify himself and make decisions according to his life values. Everything is accomplished according to an ethical and deontological code; the person must be protected by potential abuses. All these aspects reflect the anthropocentric nature of psychological assistance.

The confessor-priest aims to deify the human and the first condition in achieving this goal is to heal spiritual diseases. He investigates the way in which the Christian is affected, he can distinguish between God's grace and the devil's energies by helping the human get rid of the mind's darkness. The relationship between the confessor-priest and his spiritual son is full of spirituality. The confessor-priest is a mediator between Christ and his spiritual son. It is worth mentioning that the confessor-priest himself is transformed in this relationship. Due to these aspects, spiritual guidance proves its theocentric nature.

These aspects demonstrate that both theology and psychology aim at the human's wellbeing: psychology – psychological healing and optimization, theology – spiritual illness healing and redemption. Although the spiritual dimension includes all the other dimensions, being the highest state of life that humans can know, the knowledge accumulated by psychology can be a real support for the priest in his relationship with Christians. In the case in which a person with severe psychic disorders (that endanger his life and require hospitalization or medication) ends up at the priest, the collaboration with the psychologist and the psychiatrist works for the wellbeing of the affected one. Moreover, the solutions for the "social" healing of the humanity affected by violence and criminality, addictions (drugs, alcohol, internet etc.), spiritual alienation, human trafficking, extreme poverty (children living in the streets, homeless adults) can be looked for, found and practiced through common efforts on behalf of both priests and psychologists.

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