

Surface Integration:

Current Interpretive Problems and a Suggested Hermeneutical Model for Approaching Christian

Psychology

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When encountering Christian psychological integration literature, it is difficult to ignore the lack of exegetical work that is often performed by scholars. When integrationists offer scriptural interpretations, there is often no identifiable *process* of interpretation. Such writers assume that the integration occurs from a relatively bias-free perception of scripture, and thus construe the texts as immediately accessible and relatively easy to interpret and apply to the reader's ethos. Although it is tempting to assume all scriptural texts were written for universal understanding and a common message, there are potentially pernicious consequences for failing to recognize both the authoritative *and* the social-historically embedded nature of scripture. In the following discussion I will attempt to elaborate (a) erroneous theoretical conclusions which can be made with modern approaches to Christian integration and the need for more attention to the hermeneutical process, and (b) the use of some hermeneutical constructs of the theorist H. G. Gadamer for provisional suggestions for changing the framework of integration in the direction of hermeneutics.

Premise of Discussion: Avoiding Cut-and-Paste

The reader may note that the title of this work is somewhat provocative; precisely what do I mean by surface integration? As I hope to elaborate throughout the course of this paper, "surface" is meant to imply the kind of hermeneutic that is often applied toward scriptural interpretation within Christian integration of psychology. Often the way our field thinks about finding biblical truth is via direct extrapolation of theology from scriptural sources to create doctrine and ethics, with little use of an acknowledged intermediary process. The key question

here is *how* the process of Christian integration is performed. Integrationists may endorse theologies which make the assumption that theological exegesis is both exclusive and universal. Scripture can be read “at face value,” understood to give a singular, universal meaning from the view of the reader, and this meaning can be employed in critiquing or creating Christian integrated psychology.

Immediately a system-wide problem is salient: what if I do not hold the same „Christian“ views as the integrationist on whom I am relying, but still adhere to a Christian ethos inside a Christian tradition? What if I am Catholic, and my reader is Lutheran? What if I write a text on therapy with spiritual gifts from a Pentecostal perspective, but my reader is Anabaptist? Certainly there are various interpretations of scripture throughout history, and such have been authoritative within their respective traditions. My present argument is that all humans interpret, and that we do so constantly; further, this process is inescapable. If this is made relevant to the field of integration, the essential paradigmatic problem is that of hermeneutics, the “interpretation of interpretation” (Westphal, 2009).

Rethinking the Integrative Process

There are *at least* two parts to what may be called the Christian psychology integration process; that of interpreting the breadth of the field of psychology (e.g., theory, conclusions made from empirical investigations, conclusions made by working with clients over time) and that of interpreting Christian scripture, tradition, and symbols. If one views the process of integration as operating at a minimum in both of these domains (psychological and theological), than at least two epistemological frameworks are being employed: those typically appropriated to theological disciplines, and those typically appropriated toward psychology. But what happens when integrationists assume the former is not even necessary?

A pertinent illustration is provided via an article by Eric Johnson as appears in a peer-reviewed integration journal. Although integrationists certainly hold a diversity of opinions, Johnson (1997) provides a representative position of many in the field; the subservience of the discipline of psychology to the authority of Christ. Johnson makes a case for employing a „hermeneutic of suspicion“ toward secular psychological theory that has been established apart from a Christian worldview. He argues human nature is to suppress truth and interpret according to our fallen state (see Romans 1.18). This argument is sound in recognizing that there is an unavoidable call to be critical in our interpretations of truth claims; however, Johnson applies this only toward secular psychology. He conspicuously eschews the equivalent notion when interpreting scripture; *e.g., scripture is face-valid, but other sources are not*. What is left is the implied paradigm that although psychological theory needs careful interpretation (via the use of scripture), scripture itself is by and large objective, understandable, and universally applicable.

Philosophical Hermeneutics as a Framework for the Integrative Process

Christian integrationists can tend to espouse a *modern* set of hermeneutics that assumes a one-to-one correspondence of meaning between what is written in the text and its interpretation. An alternative to this approach is a hermeneutics which is *postmodern*, in the sense that it allows multiple, potentially valid interpretations that are still just to the text. This is arguably a more „murky“ process, but elucidatory for these purposes are philosophical models of hermeneutics. H. G. Gadamer (2004), a hermeneutical theorist, provides several useful constructs that can be applied to the integrative process.

Gadamer states emphatically that there is more than one way that truth makes substantial claims on our understanding to transmit its ontology to our consciousness other than scientific empiricism. In other words, the empirical model does not have a monopoly on claiming truth,

since we ascertain truth from other sources as well. Although he could have chosen multiple venues for doing so, Gadamer used the genre of works of art and their conveyance of truth as an example of method-less epistemology. Notably, he argues against a modernistic stance by appealing to the multiplicity of interpretations of art *without* arbitrariness. On the contrary, Gadamer asserts that we cannot do injustice to the work by allowing “the interpretation of a piece of music or a drama the freedom to take the fixed „text“ as a basis for arbitrary, ad-lib effects” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 118).

Pertinent questions then lie in what new ways of conceptualizing a work may be thought to exhibit multiple interpretations as valid. Gadamer uses several metaphors that appear particularly useful for these purposes; the following sections will elaborate some suggestions for the integrative process which include interpretation as *performing* and *translating*.

Interpretive Integration: Hermeneutics as Interpreting Performance

Conforming to a certain tradition of performing art, and maintaining integrity to that tradition is paramount for any serious evaluation. One salient example (which Gadamer takes as a form of performance art) is what he calls a *picture* (note that he is not referring to a photograph), such as a painting or a sculpture. A given picture, versus the concept of a *copy*, is to hold the object itself in a different light that might not be perceptible otherwise.

Consider, for example, pointillism; an early modern form of painting which involves miniscule splotches of solid-colored paint organized in such a way as to construct a whole image. When viewed at close range, the points seem like scattered paint, or perhaps confetti. At longer distances, one can usually quite easily discern the artist’s rendition of his or her subject, such as a person. Were this a photograph of the same person, which is a copy, one would not ascertain the whole of the meaning of a pointillist portrayal; it would be seen as a photograph, a literality. A

picture, as Gadamer uses it, may have a plurality of meaning associated with it- it could be that one would see the Reductionistic-like framework of the contours of the subject's face, or perhaps the depth of the subject's complexion. Such things would not be possible to view *in the world*, but only through the medium of art.

It would be ludicrous to interpret the meaning of the painting, as say, a critique of medieval fencing practices or the elaborate use of landscape color; neither of these are portrayed in the picture. Nevertheless, multiple interpretations *are* possible. Could this conceptualization be drawn into scriptural interpretation? And would this be faithful to the text and traditions of Christian faith?

If we consider scripture as an art form, this does not necessitate its interpretations as capricious. Insofar as it is useful for communication, scripture has indeed be used in ways that cannot be described as other than some form of art, meant to bestow meaning to parishioners in forms such as liturgy and meditation. Certainly the meaning conveyed in these worshipful uses of scripture belie that the method conveys truth not typically seen in an individual reading, or the *method would not be used*.

This paradigm, in Gadamer's thinking, represents an expansion of the picture's ontology for every individual presentation because the relationship between the presentation and the subject acts in a way to bring a fuller understanding of what is attempting to be portrayed. But can we view scripture as resubmitting itself for fuller meaning to our eyes than those of our forbearers?

At this point it is essential to remember that individuals inside of scripture have done exactly this with the text already. Without going into detail, let us consider the Pauline New Testament church, which at first understood the church as a thoroughly Jewish community and

the continuation of Judaism; however, through communal and divine reconsideration, former scriptures were reinterpreted to attain a larger meaning to include non-Jews (see Romans 10. 5-13). It is important to note the early scripture was interpreted differently by the original audience, but by no means did Paul espouse that the former interpretation was inherently incorrect and that now he was correcting it; rather, new revelation begat a fuller interpretation.

Interpretive Integration: Hermeneutics as Translating Language

The concept of language translation is certainly a familiar staple of theological discourse, and has especially been relevant for pedagogy within the church regarding „the meaning“ of scripture, since biblical text was recorded in languages of antiquity. The problem of translation using modern paradigm becomes essentially one of „decoding,“ and completely (and conveniently) avoids any reference to cultural or temporal location and distance- the text says what it says; we just need to decipher the language to know its meaning.

Gadamer provides an expanded view of translation, however. To him, the concept of translation is inescapably interpretive; there is no golden ciphering key that allows us to uncover the elusive treasure of absolute knowledge. He states,

[T]he translator must translate the meaning to be understood into the context in which the other speaker lives. This does not, of course, mean that he is at liberty to falsify the meaning of what the other person says. Rather, the meaning must be preserved, but since it must be understood within a new language world, it must establish its validity within it in a new way. Thus every translation is at the same time an interpretation. (Gadamer, 2004, p. 386)

Translation is thus not only interpretive, but also a careful treatment of the language will not allow arbitrary interpretation. How could this be useful for thinking about integration?

We can draw this notion further than merely lexical translation and utilize it in considering ethos itself: are we not, as believers in our own given times, cultures, also responsible to translate prior meanings of ethos and ethic relevant to how we live? Should we make assumptions on the basis of how former communities have (responsibly) handled moral and pedagogical issues that arose in that context? These prior interpretations cannot be ignored, but certainly unquestioning acceptance is somewhat of an abjurement to our situated callings in our present state of history.

Conclusion

It is noteworthy that my expositions for approaching Christian psychology are quite elemental and raw in their ability to practically have an effect upon any true integrative method. I concede that these suggestions are limited in elaboration of any formal model of integrative theory, but such exemplifies the inherent lack of adequate address by the field to date. Getting past surface interpretations and atrophic theology is essential in the growth of an understanding of what it means to take the divine seriously in the work of psychology and clinical practice. Arguably, the creation of new paradigms may be a long and difficult process; nevertheless, the work must begin.

References

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