

Reflections on the Relationship between Orthodox Christian Theology and Psychoanalysis: A Review Essay

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Abstract: At a time when mental health is generally deteriorating, editors Eudoxia Delli and Vasileios Thermos have opportunely produced a volume that closely examines the intersection of Orthodox Christian theology and contemporary psychoanalysis. This volume provides access for English-speaking readers to a vibrant conversation on this topic, as it currently occurs in the Greek context. This review essay considers the insights this volume provides, and the application of these insights to the life of the church. The volume is a valuable contribution that argues persuasively from a variety of perspectives that the church and psychoanalysis can and ought to enjoy a fruitful and beneficial partnership. The art of looking within is as important today as ever, but more so in our age of widespread mental health issues.

Keywords: mystical theology; Orthodox Christian theology; pastoral care; psychoanalysis

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Human nature is conscious and subconscious, personal and communal, immaterial and embodied, synchronic and diachronic.¹ This makes people immensely complex beings with immensely complex lives—both inner and outer—so much so that it may not be an exaggeration to say that our default state is one of befuddlement: Who am I really? Why did I do that? Where did that thought come from? Why do I feel this way? We struggle as we seek to live well and be authentic.

Soul and Psyche as a Surprise: Psychoanalysis and Orthodox Theology in Dialogue (henceforth, *Soul and Psyche* for short)² is an edited volume about two ways by which humanity has been grappling with this ubiquitous befuddlement: religious faith (Orthodox Christian faith, in this case) and modern psychoanalysis. Since a number of its authors mention the debt of psychoanalysis to Judeo-Christian foundations, I begin this article with a brief—and incomplete—account of the background to this volume, followed by an overview of the volume’s content. The bulk of the article describes and discusses key themes that run through the chapters. I conclude with some final remarks.

The founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, was famously interested in those subconscious patterns of thought that manifest their presence in unhealthy or pathological emotions, thought-patterns, and behaviours, often with devastating consequences for the patient and those around her. Nineteen centuries earlier, Paul spoke in Romans 7 of the *flesh* (σάρξ) in which nothing good dwells, but only *sin* (ἀμαρτία), striving against the “I” (ἐγώ) or “inner person” (ἔσω ἄνθρωπον) or “mind” (νοῦς). This led him to say:

εἰ δὲ ὁ οὐ θέλω τοῦτο ποιῶ, οὐκέτι ἐγὼ κατεργάζομαι αὐτὸ ἀλλὰ ἢ οἰκοῦσα ἐν ἐμοὶ ἀμαρτία. Now if I do what I will not to do, it

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- 1 See Panayiotis Nellas, *Deification in Christ: Orthodox Perspectives on the Nature of the Human Person*, trans. Norman Russell, Contemporary Greek Theologians 5 (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1987), 26–27, 29, 32, 163–164.
 - 2 Eudoxia Delli and Vasileios Thermos (eds), *Soul and Psyche as a Surprise: Psychoanalysis and Orthodox Theology in Dialogue* (Los Angeles, CA: St Sebastian Orthodox Press, 2021).

is no longer *I* who do it, but *sin* that dwells in me. (Romans 7:20; emphasis mine)

In his conclusion to this poignant passage, he lists three entities—“*I*,” “*mind*,” and “*flesh*”—of which two, the *mind* and the *flesh*, are in conflict, with the third, “*I*,” mediating between them (or rather, suppressing the one in order that the other might flourish):

Ἄρα οὖν αὐτὸς ἐγὼ τῷ μὲν νοῦ δουλεύω νόμῳ θεοῦ, τῇ δὲ σαρκὶ νόμῳ ἁμαρτίας. So then, *I myself* with the *mind* serve the law of God, but with the *flesh* the law of sin. (Romans 7:25; emphasis mine; I have shuffled the NKJV word structure to match the Greek).

The observant reader will notice the stark resemblance of this three-fold schema to the Freudian drama of the *Id-Ego-Superego*. However, the significance of the three aspects is quite distinct. While the Freudian *Id* behaves much like the self-centred Pauline *sarx* or *flesh*, and the *Ego* in both cases plays the mediating role, the Pauline *nous* is far more complex than the merely moralising Freudian *Superego*—it is the reflection of the divine nature of *Logos* and ultimately destined to union with God and to drawing the whole person, including *sarx* and *egō*, into that divine communion. Comparing the views of Paul and Freud, we see here both strong similarities and substantial differences. It is against this backdrop that the volume under consideration explores these kinds of interactions between psychoanalysis as it is practiced today and contemporary Orthodox Christian theology and pastoral practice.

That it focuses on *Orthodox* Christianity makes this collection of contributions unusual. In a way, this Eastern Christian tradition is more comfortable with symbolism, imagery, and metaphor, such as those associated with psychoanalysis, than it is with prose and proposition. No wonder a number of authors argue (quite plausibly) that psychoanalysis is the wayward daughter of Christian spirituality, mysticism, and symbolism—core principles in Orthodox Christianity.

In the West, the Christian exploration of human complexity was propelled forward by Augustine's introspective and insightful *Confessions*, but in the past century and a half or so interest in our hidden inner workings—over time, socially, and in relation to our environment—has experienced an explosion in the breadth and depth of this kind of inquiry. One of the most interesting and controversial ways of exploring human interiority is psychoanalysis, broadly defined as a theoretical model of how our psyche functions (and malfunctions), together with a clinical approach based on that model. It was pioneered (or at least popularised) by Sigmund Freud. Iris Murdoch wrote,

What seems to me, for these purposes, true and important in Freudian theory is as follows. He sees the psyche as an egocentric system of quasi-mechanical energy, largely determined by its own individual history, whose natural attachments are sexual, ambiguous, and hard for the subject to understand or control. Introspection reveals only the deep tissue of ambivalent motive, and fantasy is a stronger force than reason. Objectivity and unselfishness are not natural to human beings. Of course Freud is saying these things in the context of a scientific therapy which aims not at making people good but at making them workable.³

Thus, psychoanalysis *in the wild*, so to speak, has a substantially different purpose to Christian pastoral care, not to mention different assumptions and methodology. *Soul and Psyche* is an exercise in bridging the gap, bringing the two worlds into dialogue with each other, exploring the territories they can and cannot occupy together, and pointing to fruitful directions in which this exercise might proceed in the future.

This collection of essays arises from a vibrant discussion currently ongoing in Greece. The editors, Eudoxia Delli and Vasileios Thermos, have to date convened eight conferences on the topic, and this volume represents proceedings of the most recent of these—held within the project “Science and Orthodoxy around the World” (Nation-

3 Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature* (Penguin, 1998), 341.

al Hellenic Research Foundation, Athens). While there is an ample literature in Greek on this discussion (including a dedicated journal, *Psychis Dromi*), this volume may well be the first substantial publication on Orthodox views on psychoanalysis in English. It reflects a change in the landscape. Up until recently, conservative Greek Christians have tended to oppose psychoanalysis, while those who embrace the rational approach of psychoanalysis have tended to be antagonistic to the church. However, over the past twenty years, these two extremes have been shrinking and a new cooperative and convergent approach has become dominant (at least in academic circles).

As the incidence of emotional dysfunction continues to grow in our increasingly complex and confusing world, and clergy and lay pastoral workers become increasingly aware of their limitations in dealing with it effectively, it becomes more urgent to bring psychoanalysis and faith into conversation. The essays collected in this volume also reflect a more recent trend in the international psychoanalytic community to restore a sense of the importance and value of religion in psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis is becoming less intrinsically secular and atheistic—surely a healthy trend, if for no other reason than that religion continues to play a crucial role in the lives of the vast majority of people on earth today. In this article, I offer a review from the perspective of a retired physician, a philosopher, and an Orthodox parish priest; someone who has a passing acquaintance with the field of psychoanalysis but is neither an expert nor a practitioner in the field.⁴

Overview of the Volume

As well as a useful “Introduction” and “Epilogue,” the book is comprised of eleven chapters in five parts: “Mapping the Domain”; “Epistemological Explorations”; “Shared Conceptual Journeys”; “Common Clinical

4 Readers seeking the views of someone closer to the field will find it in Gallagher’s recent excellent review of this and four other books on the topic. Brandon Gallagher, “Psychological Truth Leads to Theological Truth: Recent Works on Theology and Psychoanalysis,” *Journal of Orthodox Christian Studies* 5:2 (2022): 273–282, esp. 279–280.

Paths”; and “A Landscape of Fruitful Encounters.” Footnotes and references provide a broad and rich resource to anyone seeking to explore these issues and contexts further. A very useful select bibliography of Orthodox and non-Orthodox authors, and comprehensive Scripture, Subject, and Name indices complete the tome. The editors provide a useful list of theological terms and their sense in current Orthodox usage in relation to the modern world: *theosis*; theological anthropology; patristic; *nepsis*; ontology, *logoi*; and apophaticism.⁵ No such glossary of psychoanalytical terms is provided, possibly on the assumption that readers will already be familiar with these.

Readers outside these two fields will find much of interest in a volume that deals, after all, with matters that are universal in human experience. However, many of the essays collected here use the rather technical concepts and language of Continental philosophy which will seem odd and somewhat opaque to readers unused to that tradition. Here is an example, the opening paragraph of Jevremović’s chapter: “Human personality is a paradoxical outcome of the (ontogenic) process of *colonization of emptiness*. This emptiness is *protohuman* and *not-yet-personal*. Being a personality implies becoming *the colony of the Other*.”⁶ It is helpful to keep this in mind when one comes across a bald and confident statement such as the following: “Human desire is not a biological phenomenon.”⁷ It is beyond doubt that there is a biological or physiological component to human desire that involves defined locations in the brain, certain neurotransmitters, and so on. But in the language of Continental philosophy, raising such an objection is far too coarse and unimaginative, and misses the point the author is making here: that within the current psychoanalytical paradigm, the biological plays only a small role. Rather, desire may be understood (and therapy applied) as something that arises from the relationship between the self and “the Other,” and always gives rise to conflict. That said, readers unfamiliar with this style of writing should not be put off by this as

5 Eudoxia Delli and Vasileios Thermos, “Introduction,” 20–23.

6 Petar Jevremović, “Orthodox Theology and Psychoanalysis Facing the Other,” 177.

7 Jevremović, “Orthodox Theology and Psychoanalysis,” 179.

most of the book is quite comprehensible to those inexperienced in the Continental tradition.

On this note, in what follows I describe some of the key themes of the volume.

The Relationship between Psychoanalysis and Orthodox Theology

First, the contributions gathered in this volume have much to say on the relationship between psychoanalysis and the Christian faith—including the prevalent *antagonistic* perception that spurred this contemporary Hellenic discourse in the first place. In my own pastoral experience, I have met Orthodox Christians whose attitude to any kind of modern psychology might be more at home at a Scientology centre,⁸ denoting a deep mistrust coupled with scorn. Psychoanalysis, with its overtones of weird Freudian theories that reduce the complexity of the human mind down to basic physiological drives is held in particular disregard. This attitude has various causes. Emmanouilidis amusingly ponders whether a kind of omnipotence complex in some priests might lie behind their resentment of psychologists seeing members of their flock.⁹ As Bishop Maxim points out, there are grave misunderstandings on both sides.¹⁰ Not only are there sceptics of psychology in the church—psychologists often misunderstand Orthodox Christianity, if they have an idea of its existence at all, thinking that Christian thought is exhausted by the dichotomy of Catholic and Protestant. But, we discover throughout this volume, Orthodox Christianity offers unique insights.

In the bishop's words, the value of this volume, then, consists in that "the authors display a remarkable ability to penetrate critically yet constructively the thought of both the Church Fathers and that of mod-

8 Scientology is a controversial modern organisation that denounces psychiatry and psychology, and bans its members from using them.

9 Konstantinos Emmanouilidis, "Clinical Implications in the Work of Clergy—Spiritual Fathers and Psychiatrists—Psychoanalysis," 126.

10 Bishop Maxim Vasiljević, "Foreword," 8.

ern psychologists.”¹¹ The authors explore this relationship with considerable balance and insight. Harris lists five reasons (though he calls them “consequences”) for the tension between psychoanalysis and religion: psychoanalysis is not “religious” in nature; displays religious dogmatism and devotion to the mind; has Freud’s atheism at its origin; is often self-centred; and has no ontological base.¹² In their introduction, the editors, Delli and Thermos, discuss some similarities and differences between psychoanalysis and Christian pastoral approaches,¹³ while in her chapter Delli also offers her own overview of commonalities and differences.¹⁴ Furthermore, Christopolou discusses interesting parallels between psychoanalytic concepts and Christian pastoral care (e.g., the silence of God and the silence of the therapist),¹⁵ while Muse offers an insightful comparison between the purpose and practice of the two fields.¹⁶

This comparative approach is not the only method at work. In his chapter, Harris describes the reception of psychoanalysis across Christian denominations, an often stormy tale.¹⁷ This kind of tension between faith and the prevailing science of the time is nothing new in Christian history. In the late second century, Tertullian decries those who dabble in philosophy with the now-famous catchphrase, “What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church?”¹⁸ And he has had many heirs through-

11 Bishop Maxim, “Foreword,” 7.

12 Steven-John Harris, “Truth is a Two-Edged Sword: A Brief History of Psychoanalysis and Christianity,” 34–35.

13 Delli and Thermos, “Introduction,” 13.

14 Eudoxia Delli, “The Interdisciplinary Encounter of Orthodox Theology and Psychoanalysis as a Key Aspect of the Dialogue Between Orthodoxy and Sciences: Initial Thoughts Based on the First Mapping of the Field,” 58.

15 Vassiliki Piyi Christopoulou, “Frustration and Deprivation as the Cornerstone of Progress in the Context of Psychoanalytic Treatment as well as in Pastoral Care and Orthodox Theology,” 159–160.

16 Stephen Muse, “Shame and Overcoming the Mechanisms of Defense in Response to Sin and Trauma: Reflections on Psychoanalysis and Orthodox Christianity as ‘Cures of Love,’” 150–151.

17 Harris, “Truth is a Two-Edged Sword,” 27ff.

18 Tertullian, *The Prescription Against Heretics* 7, in *Latin Christianity*, Ante-Nicene Fathers 3, ed. A. C. Coxe, trans. P. Holmes (Edinburgh and Grand Rapids, MI: T&T Clark and Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1885), 246.

out Christian history. But there is another school of thought that would disagree with Tertullian et al.:

An equally important, and ultimately more widespread, attitude toward philosophy was expressed by Justin Martyr (105–65), Clement of Alexandria (150–215), and Origen (185–254). Philosophy is a preparation for the gospel ... It is important to notice, however, that while these doctrines make a positive evaluation of Greek philosophy possible, they also imply philosophy’s inferiority to revelation. The loan hypothesis implies that the truths found in philosophy are fragmented and mixed with error ... Even so, philosophy isn’t just a preparation for the gospel. Both Clement and Origen believe that our blessedness consists in knowing or understanding the Good, and that philosophy can be employed to deepen our understanding of the truths of scripture in which that Good reveals itself. The seminal treatment of this theme is Augustine’s. Revelation is a safer and surer guide to truth than philosophy ... Augustine’s attitudes toward philosophy are echoed by Anselm and dominate the Christian Middle Ages. Modern Christian attitudes toward philosophy are, on the whole, variants of those seminally expressed by Tertullian and Augustine. Closer inspection reveals that the two views are not always as sharply opposed as at first appears.¹⁹

The contributors to *Soul and Psyche* adopt the cooperative spirit of Justin, Clement, and Origen, together with their discernment and awareness of the limitations and errors of “secular” sciences. This balanced approach is beautifully illustrated by the editors, who point out that “psychoanalysis and Orthodox theology are not of the same view about human beings, as the former is a discipline that emerged out of a *materialistic* context, while the latter believes in and studies divine-human realities.”²⁰ But they then go on to observe, “psychoanalysis now explicitly

19 W. L. Wainwright, “Christianity,” in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd edn, ed. C. Taliaferro, P. Draper, and P. L. Quinn (Blackwell, 2010), 59–66, esp. 63–64.

20 Delli and Thermos, “Introduction,” 13.

admits that *healthy religious faith* exists, undoing Freud's insistence that religion is a sign of immaturity; this is undoubtedly great progress."²¹

Of some interest are the rather speculative discourses on the influence of Christianity upon both the principles and the methodology of psychoanalysis. For instance, Kyriazis' chapter explores the Christian roots of psychoanalysis;²² Loudovikos discusses various authors who assert that the modern theory and practice of psychoanalysis is built upon the assumptions of the Judeo-Christian concepts of the soul and its journey;²³ and Tympas asserts that, given that patristic anthropology and psychoanalysis both drew on the same sources—Christian scripture and Greek philosophy, albeit with very different ontological foundations—going back to these common roots should highlight the commonalities between them, a project he attempts in his chapter.²⁴ Harris looks at the other side of the coin—why did psychoanalysis attempt to explain religion away?²⁵ In turn, Alexandridis offers a fairly balanced analysis of Freud's theories on the psychoanalytic roots of religious belief.²⁶

Interdisciplinarity

This book is therefore an instance of the kind of *interdisciplinarity* that is fast becoming not only desirable, but virtually essential in many fields of inquiry. As Thermos has written elsewhere, “the future of the sciences lies at their borders, not within their respective inlands.”²⁷ This kind of cooperation does not happen easily, but requires intention,

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- 21 Delli and Thermos, “Introduction,” 13.
 22 Dimitrios Kyriazis, “Influences of Christian Thought in Psychoanalytic Theory and Practice,” 83ff.
 23 Nikolaos Loudovikos, “Theology and the Discovery of the Unconscious: Preliminary Remarks,” 165ff.
 24 Grigorios-Chrysostom Tympas, “Discussing Epistemology and Methodology for Bridging the Gap Between Patristic Anthropology and Psychoanalytic Thought,” 61.
 25 Harris, “Truth is a Two-Edged Sword,” 38–40.
 26 Athanasios Alexandridis, “The Creation of the Religious into the Psychic Space,” 42–45.
 27 Vasileios Thermos, “A Review of the Workshop: Psychoanalysis and Orthodox Theology (2018)” (unpublished, kindly provided by the author).

perseverance, and a willingness to work through past prejudices and foster mutual respect and cooperation. Elsewhere, Choi and Richards aptly point out that “for interdisciplinary projects to be successful, participants must come to understand sufficiently well the fields of knowledge involved to make collaboration possible, and for this to happen knowledge has to be shared.”²⁸ It is precisely this kind of knowledge and sharing that runs through the whole volume under consideration.

In disciplines such as philosophy, interdisciplinarity has recently extended to include Eastern philosophies and religions, and of course, both Catholicism and Protestantism have long histories of intersecting faith with secular arts and sciences, although that interaction has waned significantly in modern times. What has been remarkably rare thus far is for Eastern Christian theology to be invited to the interdisciplinary table, at least in the anglophone world. I believe this to be a substantial loss to both parties.

Eastern Christianity is certainly no exception to the universal pastoral dictum that one must always serve the *whole* person: spirit, mind, heart, and body. Any programmes of spiritual care that ignore the principles of psychological care or mental health are liable to disaster. Psychoanalysis, as the authors here point out, provides a valuable service by focusing our attention on the often neglected *subconscious* aspect of human life that covertly influences so much of our thought and behaviour, therefore our relationships with God and people. In this vein, Delli discusses “four cores” of this interaction: the Orthodox priest as healer; the need for an authentically Christian anthropology that is nuanced and informed by modern scientific insights; awareness of the limitations of Enlightenment anthropocentrism; and identifying and bracketing out certain traditional cultural aspects of Christian thought that have become unhelpful today.²⁹ In turn, Kyriazis offers a fascinating discussion of the translation of standard Freudian concepts

28 S. Choi and K. Richards, *Interdisciplinary Discourse: Communicating Across Disciplines* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 105.

29 Delli, “The Interdisciplinary Encounter,” 54–55.

by Bion (and others, such as Jacques Lacan) into the language of Plato, Meister Eckhart, and Orthodox patristic theology.³⁰

Human Nature (Theological Anthropology)

Another central topic discussed throughout this volume is theological anthropology. Our collective conception of what it is to be human in the modern world continues to evolve. Much modern psychotherapy assumes, whether implicitly or explicitly, a materialist and reductionist anthropology: human beings are just clever biological machines, and psychotherapy is about bringing their malfunctions into the open and finding ways to restore them to normal function. But the authors in this book make a strong case that psychotherapy is by no means *intrinsically* reductionist. Accordingly, they demonstrate its (mostly) smooth accommodation to the Orthodox Christian spiritual tradition.

A common theme that threads through the chapters is that psychotherapeutic practice is at its heart another manifestation of traditional Christian spiritual growth. Here are just three examples. Kyriazis points out that both Christian life and psychotherapy aim at uncovering “absolute Truth” and thereby reversing the tendency to “psychic death” that besets us.³¹ Christopoulou, in turn, connects the parallel roles of deprivation in both Christian ascetic practice and psychotherapeutic progress.³² Finally, Loudovikos sketches psychotherapy’s fundamentally theological character as a practice in search of the fullness of human nature, holistically embracing both the conscious and the subconscious.³³ However, this is not to be taken as a complete identification between the two fields. The differences between them are also highlighted and discussed. Thus, Tympas points out that while the strategy of psychoanalysis is to reorganise pathological thought-patterns into healthier ones, Christian practice reorients the person to-

30 Kyriazis, “Influences of Christian Thought,” 96–99.

31 Kyriazis, “Influences of Christian Thought,” 100–101.

32 Christopoulou, “Frustration and Deprivation,” 155ff.

33 Loudovikos, “Theology and the Discovery of the Unconscious,” 165ff.

wards the divine presence and will. Christianity thus includes certain ontological commitments absent from psychotherapy.³⁴

Apophatic or Mystical Theology

One last fascinating theme that may be less familiar to some Western readers is the apophatic and/or mystical approach that plays a central role in much Eastern Christian theology.³⁵ Mystical theology is understood in Christianity as a way of approaching God that fully respects divine essential incomprehensibility and transcendence beyond the capacity of any created minds. Thus, apophaticism and negative theology—the preference for stating what God is *not*, rather than limiting God by stating what God *is*—is the natural language of mystical theology. To give a classical example, Evagrius Ponticus shows that “God cannot be comprehended by the mind. For if he falls into being comprehended, he is certainly not God.”³⁶

This topic arises both explicitly and implicitly in many of the chapters collected within the volume under consideration. Delli highlights the “mystical turn” in psychoanalysis due to Donald Winnicott and Wilfrid Bion (both of whose ideas are further discussed in a number of chapters), and provides core references to this trend in a footnote.³⁷ Emmanouilidis, in turn, points out the important difference between the goal of the scientific method, which is knowledge, and of mystical theology, which is participation in the ultimate, ineffable reality.³⁸ Both he and the other authors who touch upon the topic focus more on similarities and connections that are, in practice, discernible between psychoanalysis and mystical theology. Emmanouilidis him-

34 Tympas, “Discussing Epistemology,” 63–73.

35 Differences between East and West on this topic have at times been drawn quite sharply, but opinion seems to be coming around to seeing these more as differences in emphasis rather than differences in substance. See, for example, the contributions gathered by G. Demacopoulos and A. Papanikolaou (eds) in vol. *Orthodox Constructions of the West* (Fordham University Press, 2013).

36 Evagrius Ponticus, *On Eight Thoughts*, PG 40:1275C (my translation).

37 Delli, “The Interdisciplinary Encounter,” 57.

38 Emmanouilidis, “Clinical Implications,” 123ff.

self goes on to explore the “mystical turn” taken by Bion as part of his very readable and practical discussion of how psychoanalysis can enrich Christian pastoral care.

Furthermore, Alexandridis points out that both psychological and mystical experience share a *paradoxical* nature.³⁹ Almost by definition, he continues, mystical experiences involve the paradoxical concurrence of opposites. The experiencer is both fully oneself and ecstatic (“beside oneself”). The same goes for the object of experience: God is experienced as both immanent and ineffable—“You were deeper within me than my innermost depths and higher than my highest parts.”⁴⁰ And those who experience trauma also experience this coincidence of opposites:

I return to our patients. In some of them a very early traumatic experience has elements of an involuntary mystical experience. What else is a mystical experience if not the ability to assume all positions, to be both dead and alive, gripped by passion and apathy, alone and with God, sane and insane, in order to be inhabited by that which is impossible to conceive through thinking?⁴¹

Having read this volume, I am indeed struck by how closely certain strands of psychoanalysis follow the patterns of mystical theology.⁴² This may be in part due to influences, whether overt or covert, of the older tradition on the more recent science. Kyriazis argues that Bion was clearly influenced by the mysticism of St John of the Cross.⁴³ Reflecting perhaps conscious paths of influence, Loudovikos, following Suzanne Kirschner, considers psychoanalysis a secular iteration of

39 Alexandridis, “The Creation of the Religious,” 47.

40 Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions* 3.6.11, in *St Augustine: Confessions*, The Fathers of the Church 21, trans. V. J. Bourke (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1953), 62.

41 Alexandridis, “The Creation of the Religious,” 47.

42 Apophaticism and mystical theology are not exclusive to Christianity of course, although references to non-Christian traditions rarely appear in this volume. Plato is mentioned a few times, and Plotinus once, although he fails to earn an Index entry.

43 Kyriazis, “Influences of Christian Thought,” 94–95.

Christian mystical theology, where Romanticism replaces God with nature and soul with the individual mind.⁴⁴ Jevremović agrees, stating that “psychoanalysis could be seen as a form of secular apophaticism.”⁴⁵ Somewhat more controversially, Kyriazis even goes so far as to say that there has been so much convergence between the two recently, that “I therefore consider that there is no need for any sacred psychoanalysis or for any spiritual or mystical psychoanalysis.”⁴⁶ I find this claim a little hard to accept, especially in light of the differences between the two fields described in the rest of the volume.

Lest the reader think this book consists in nothing other than academics wrangling over minutiae, I wish to point out that very real and practical insights permeate most of the chapters. For example, Tympas points out that:

Modern society as a collective body, involves different requirements for adaptation and thus subjects (post)modern individuals into conditions and pathologies that cannot be tackled with ascetic or other spiritual means alone, as it seemed to be the case in the early Christian era ... Depression, for instance, cannot be explained only as a result of a “spiritual void” or an absence of God in the life of the patient, but could be equally attributed to other social and personal parameters, aspects of upbringing, insecurities, lack of social interaction, and so forth.⁴⁷

A particularly blunt diagnosis of problems in the culture of both contemporary psychoanalysis and Orthodox theology makes for lively reading in Jevremović’s chapter⁴⁸ and affords a very realistic balance to the more hopeful note struck by other authors. And in the “Introduction” we read that the value of psychoanalysis for Julia Kristeva is that it is a reminder to us of the dangers of overly confident, overly dogmatic religion (or science, for that matter). Just as psychoanalysis deals with

44 Loudovikos, “Theology and the Discovery of the Unconscious,” 169–171.

45 Jevremović, “Orthodox Theology and Psychoanalysis,” 187.

46 Kyriazis, “Influences of Christian Thought,” 101.

47 Tympas, “Discussing Epistemology,” 78–79.

48 Jevremović, “Orthodox Theology and Psychoanalysis,” 180–185.

the deep and mysterious depths of the human self, true theology deals with the deep and mysterious depths of the divine. Delli and Thermos comment, somewhat psychoanalytically:

... her hint is that those Christians who bear many certainties can become dangerous. Unfortunately, cradle Orthodox congregations suffer from an endemic overdose of certainties, which they invest in collective identity formation. In other words, certainties combined with adherence to local aesthetics have shaped the phenomenon of “cultural Orthodoxy,” which hinders access to the very core of the Christian message; it definitely needs the encounter in order to be analyzed and diminished.⁴⁹

I dare say that Orthodox Christians are not unique among Christian traditions—nor religious traditions more generally—in earning this diagnosis.

Conclusion

Not being educated in this field, when I began reading this book, I had a vague narrative in my head: psychotherapy began with Freud, who developed some valuable methods, but sometimes employed them in somewhat fantastical or misguided ways. Over the years, his “classical” psychotherapy has evolved in various directions that remedied his excesses and strengthened aspects that are clinically effective. On finishing the book, that simple picture has been greatly deepened and broadened from a distinctly Orthodox Christian perspective, and there were even a few “surprises” as intimated by the title. Those deeply involved in the world of psychoanalysis will no doubt find opinions with which they disagree within its pages, but for a reader like me, with only a passing familiarity with that world, I found much food for thought and reflection on the pastoral side of my daily life.

Thermos begins his “Epilogue” with this quote from Lila Kalinich:

49 Delli and Thermos, “Introduction,” 23.

This is our world, our society, our culture, therapeutic or not. God gave us Freud; and for some reason, however obscure, He made Freud the major proponent of spiritual tools to which the Church originally laid claim. So Freud is ours, and ours too is Psychoanalysis.⁵⁰

Minor gripes aside (e.g., the somewhat opaque language in certain chapters) this book is a veritable treasure trove for anyone interested in the intersection between a modern secular science and an ancient (yet vibrant) Christian tradition. Here will the reader find not only ample food for thought and inspiration for therapeutic and pastoral practice, but also a comprehensive database of further sources to explore. And it provides an admirable model of how faith and science can be brought into richly fruitful dialogue, to the mutual benefit of both.

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50 Thermos, "Epilogue," 189.