Article

Becoming Ourselves: Anthropological Musings for Christian Psychologists

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Abstract: A Christian narrative of the self provides a critique of a contemporary highly ennobled therapeutic and individualistic understanding of the self. Within a Christian anthropological narrative, the self is ennobled not in and of itself, but by virtue of its union with God. This leads theologians, both ancient and contemporary, to speak boldly about becoming fully human, and even more, becoming God. Herein, this Christian story of the self is explored, with implications for Christian psychology and its dialogue with other psychological perspectives.

1. Introduction

Just Be Yourself

There may not be a more fitting slogan for contemporary American culture, nor a more fitting summary of contemporary psychological wisdom. And there may not be a more contentious summary of Christian anthropology. Consider the 20th century monk and spiritual writer, Thomas Merton,,who decades ago wrote, "To be born again is not to become somebody else, but to become ourselves" ([1], p. 30). For the theologically-attuned, this may sound esoteric, at best, and theologically unorthodox, at worst, causing the skeptical reader to wonder whether or not this spiritual giant succumbed to the oft-berated secular humanist psychological thinking of his day.

Indeed, *being oneself* is precisely the problem, for some. It represents the darkest moment of cultural history, the logical and tragic end of Cartesian individualism, now dressed in the relativistic garb of postmodernism. Some sociologists agree. As Lasch argued, modernity ushered in an

unprecedented narcissism, exemplified in the triumph of the therapeutic, the deification of celebrities, hero worship and marketing, and much more [2]. More recently, Smith coined the phrase "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism" to describe the religion of America's youth, who have turned God into a cosmic ATM producing continual withdrawals to demanding consumers with a dizzying array of new and changing needs [3].

Indeed, if one hears Merton's challenge as the 'Just Be Yourself' slogan of a narcissistic culture, no wisdom will be found. However, Merton's sentiment suggests something more than meets the eye. In fact, Merton's anthropology is both theologically and psychologically robust, a far cry from the devolved anthropology of today's *be yourself* prophets. But how?

Merton's wisdom hearkens back to the rich, incarnational vision of the early church. A 2nd century bishop Clement of Alexandria might be accused of ties to New Age thinking if he lived today, writing, "His is beauty, the true beauty, for it is God; and that man becomes God, since God so wills. Heraclitus, then, rightly said, 'Men are gods, and gods are men.' For the Word Himself is the manifest mystery: God in man, and man God" [4]. To refer to human beings as "gods" strikes the contemporary Christian reader as idolatrous and arrogant, and yet was common parlance among the Patriarchs, while for the skeptical reader it may be a breath of fresh air.

Consider further the 4th century father Athanasius of Alexandria, whose work on the Incarnation of Christ remains the orthodox statement on Christ's humanity and divinity to this day. Athanasius wrote, "The Son of God became man so that man can become God" ([5], p. 93). Again, the thought that human beings could become 'God' might sound like that of some narcissistic Christian sect with ties to Oprah Winfrey.

Indeed, for Merton, Clement and Athanasius, to become *oneself* is, in fact, to become *Godself*, to experience union and communion with the only fully-human being who is both God and man. For all three, God dwelling in human beings is not only fundamental to orthodox faith, but fundamental to Christian anthropological identity. As such, a biblical vision for human flourishing rejects Platonic and dualistic anthropologies which divide body and soul, and in so doing de-value the importance of the self. This problematic anthropology devalues the self as fleshly, worldly, and sinful, while prizing spirit as immortal and everlasting. And further, a biblical vision rejects a therapeutic narcissism which defines the self and its flourishing apart from God. This problematic anthropology has no definition of self. Self is amorphous, floating, ever-changing, the product of one's most recent whim.

With all of this in mind, it is critically important to attempt a historic Christian understanding of *becoming ourselves*, especially as it weaves in and through contemporary psychological insights into selfhood and wholeness. After that, implications for Christian psychology will be examined.

2. The Story of the Self

The Christian story, as told within both the Eastern and Western churches, begins in pristine and innocent goodness, with humanity created and formed in the image of its Creator. Theologians have found many ways to describe the significance of this image-bearing identity, but scholarly consensus suggests two main pathways for understanding what it means to be "made in God's image."

Grenz has written the most comprehensive defense of Social Trinitarianism, one way of understanding the *imago dei*. His view forwards a relational anthropology, identifying the human

capacity for relationality as rooted in God as Trinity [6]. Grenz cites the biblical book of Genesis as evidence of this:

> Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them (Gen. 1:26–27, NRSV).

In this understanding, God creates "humankind" in his image, creating "them" in his image as "male and female." The relational language is striking. God does not merely view Adam, as the first human, as image-bearer. He does not declare a particular gender as image-bearer. Rather, the community of God bears the image.

For Grenz, this does not eliminate the possibility that individual humans bear God's image, but places the primary weight of meaning on human-beings-in-relationship echoing God-in-relationship. To be an image-bearer is to be in community, in relationship, with God and with God's people. And thus, by inference, to become *oneself* is to be rightly attuned to this God-gifted relationality with God and with others.

Indeed, this idea becomes central to the teaching of Jesus as he summarizes the law and the prophets:

> 'Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?' He said to him, '"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.' (Matt. 22:36–40, NRSV)

For Jesus, the law became a matter of externality, not relationality. It had become a matter of hollow obedience, not a heart directed toward others in love. Jesus sums up the law, but this summary describes the flourishing human being. Indeed, to be oneself, for Jesus, is to be rightly directed in relationship toward God and neighbor.

While relationality is one way of describing what it means to be an image-bearer, missionality is a second primary way. This second approach is forwarded by J. Richard Middleton whose seminal work examines the ancient near eastern context of the *imago dei.* While he does not dismiss relationality as a significant marker for what it means to be an image-bearer, he sees royal dignity and missional purpose as even more fundamental to the original context. In Middleton's view, humans are "God's representatives and agents in the world, granted authorized power to share in God's rule or administration of the earth's resources or creatures" ([7], p. 27). Thus, he describes this posture as "functional" or "missional," highlighting humanity's royal role as God's vice-regents in ruling over and tending to creation.

Thus, for Middleton, to be oneself is to be rightly re-directed in one's purpose as a royal image-bearer, sent into mission on behalf of the King.

The story of the image-bearing self is incomplete, however, without humanity's fall from grace. The Fall, at the very least, is an abdication of humanity's image-bearing relationality and missionality. Humanity's banishment from the Garden symbolizes a loss of presence and connection to God. Here, one cannot become oneself because God is not present. Thus, the idolatry which ensues in the life of Israel is an attempt to re-constitute the self around a substitute 'presence', something which will

imitate the security of Israel's original union with God. The self Israel reconstructs is a false self, a fallen self, with fig leaves to cover shame and insecurity. Like a child deprived of the strong secure presence of a mother, Israel develops a false self ill-equipped to deal with the exigencies of life [8].

This story allows one who calls herself "Christian" to make some sense of both the beauty and brokenness of her life. Finley writes

> On the one hand there is the great truth that from the first moment of my existence the deepest dimension of my life is that I am made by God for union with himself. The deepest dimension of my identity as a human person is that I share in God's own life both now and in eternity in a relationship of untold intimacy. On the other hand, my own daily experience impresses upon me the painful truth that my heart has listened to the serpent instead of to God. There is something in me that puts on fig leaves of concealment, kills my brother, builds towers of confusion, and brings cosmic chaos upon the earth. There is something in me that loves darkness rather than light, that rejects God and thereby rejects my own deepest reality as a human person made in the image and likeness of God [9].

While Finley tells the story of the self through a biblical matrix, a Christian psychologist remains attuned to the scientific data, as well. And the psychological data suggests that the psychic process underlying this is more complex, though not antithetical to a Christian rendition of the self's story. The self born into the world is frail and fragile, and not even the best efforts of a healthy, well-attuned mother can set a child on a course for perfect selfhood. The false self (or false selves) is an inevitability, as children struggle to navigate the imperfect world and the complex social milieu in which they live [10].

A Christian psychologist recognizes, also, that a fuller story of the self cannot be understood without attention given both to the person and her social milieu. Loder writes, "Normal human development is an emergent reality, a resultant of the interaction between a personality and its environment ([11], p. 18). To be sure, our false selves are socially constructed within our complex social environments [12]. Benner writes, "At some point in childhood we all make the powerful discovery that we can manipulate the truth about ourselves" ([13], p. 78). One cannot approach an understanding of oneself apart from a careful consideration of the self's contextual story, including family-of-origin, culture and subculture, and more.

However, equally careful attention must be paid to the human psyche, a complex contextual landscape all its own. Theologians and philosophers have long discussed the self's multiplicity as a way of accounting for the variety of human experience, while psychologists today account for the inner processes in which subpersonalities develop [14]. Psychologists describe in various ways the psychic coping processes which contribute to both significant pathologies (Dissociative Identity Disorder, fugue states, schizophrenia, and more) and ordinary everyday experiences of feeling disconnected, or not feeling 'oneself.' These insights, in fact, cohere with a Christian story of the self.

Scripture itself notes that the Fall produces in humanity a "divided heart" (Hosea 10:2, NRSV). The Apostle Paul seems to understand the divided heart as a manifestation of the Fall. Without an awareness of psychological insights which would arrive centuries later, Paul does seem to indicate that the Fall wreaks havoc on the self, creating an inner war between the multiple selves. In Romans 7, Paul writes:

> [17]But in fact it is no longer I (*the true self*) that do it, but sin that dwells within me. [18]For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh (*or false self*). I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. [19]For I

do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. [20] Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me (Rom. 7:17–20, NRSV, italics are mine).

According to Christian theology, sin creates a state in which another self altogether rules and reigns, creating warring factions within the human heart, rendering the heart unable to live wholly for God [15]. This psychological tension, however, points to an even more profound eschatological tension between flesh and spirit. It is no longer "I" precisely because this "I" is our new self, where Christ dwells. It is our real life hidden in Christ (as Paul says in Colossians 3). New Testament scholar Herman Ridderbos explains this eschatological tension well, writing:

> "Flesh" and "Spirit" represent two modes of existence, on the one hand that of the old age which is characterized and determined by the flesh, on the other that of the new creation which is of the Spirit of God. It is in this sense that the difference is also to be taken between the first Adam as 'living soul', *i.e.*, flesh, and the second as life-giving Spirit. The contrast is therefore of a redemptive-historical nature: it qualifies the world and the mode of existence before Christ as flesh, that is, as the creaturely in its weakness; on the other hand, the dispensation that has taken effect with Christ as that of the Spirit, *i.e.*, of power, imperishableness and glory ([16], p. 54).

For the Christian psychologist, therefore, becoming 'oneself' is not *merely* a psychic reality, a product of separation and individuation resulting in an independent ego. A Christian approach would suggest that people need to enter into a redemptive relationship with the God who constitutes the true self in a process of maturation and growth which unseats the false self (and selves) from its position of identity-forming power. This is described by Paul as the renewing of the image of God, as he writes, "you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!" (Colossians 3:9–11, NRSV). This self-renewal project, as Paul notes, has implications not merely for the individual, but for the entire community. It renews human relationality and missionality.

And yet, the self-aware Christian is familiar with the inner divisions and unruly community which exists within, a divisive community which requires the indwelling of God, himself, for renewal. Smith writes:

> As soon as I start a dialogue with my self the reality of self as a kind of society becomes apparent at once… I experience more selves when I become aware of inner conflict around decisions… The Holy Spirit of God dwells in your heart and is no stranger to the diversity and conflict there. The Spirit dwells with and among and between all the selves of your self… There is no secret place where the Spirit has no access, nor any inner person excluded from the Spirit's presence… The Spirit will bring the selves of the self into a unity around the center of the indwelling Christ ([17], p. 35).

A Christian telling of a story of the self is incomplete without the reality that its renewal is dependent on the indwelling Christ. And yet, human beings do not cease to be themselves when Christ dwells within. To the contrary, to be in complete union with Christ is to be oneself, renewed in the image of God.

This re-told story of the self weaves a Christian anthropological narrative through the rich psychological wisdom of human development, seeking to retain the fundamental integrity of the Christian narrative in the process. This re-told story has implications for Christian psychology as it moves forward with its unique contribution to both the church and the academy.

3. Implications for Christian Psychology

This Christian anthropological narrative offers the Christian psychologist a way of understanding the human self which neither falls into the pit of modern, therapeutic narcissism or the pit of reactionary Christian Platonism. There are at least three major implications of the preceding discussion for the work of Christian psychology and pastoral care.

First, Christian psychologists are challenged with reading contemporary insights into the multiplicity of the psyche in and through the biblical narrative. Given the voluminous data from psychological research on the self's multiplicity, a Christian psychology is challenged to understand and tell the story of "becoming oneself" fully attuned to the harmonies of biblical and psychological data.

The tension of human multiplicity was suggested long ago by Jung, who writes, "The persona is a complicated system of relations between individual consciousness and society, fittingly enough a kind of mask, designed on the one hand to make a definite impression upon others, and, on the other, to conceal the true nature of the individual" ([18], p. 192). Since then, research on human multiplicity, subpersonalities, and inner 'warfare' paints a convincing picture of a shattered self requiring help, healing, and wholeness [19].

The Christian psychologist would rightly trace this picture of a shattered self in need of restoration back to Scripture. As previously stated, the Christian story can be told with this inner division in mind, traced back to humanity's fall from grace (see Gen. 3). It can be seen in the Pharisee, whose public persona may be a shining example of obedience, but whose inner heart may be dark and unclean (see Matthew 23). This phenomenon of inner division is called "hypocrisy" by Jesus, a word which would have conjured images of the play actors of his day who wore masks for their theatrical identity [20]. Two thousand years later, psychologist Carl Gustav Jung would call this mask the "persona," the false self which masks one's dark "shadow" side.

Dixon argues the most well-developed early Christian anthropology owes a great debt to St. Augustine, whose musings on the "shattered and gathered" self paved the way for more sophisticated philosophical and theological insights on human nature [21]. Indeed, Augustine's very important chapter on memory and story reflects a kind of pre-therapeutic invitation to a kind of self-knowledge which produces wholeness [22]. Christian psychology must take Augustine's work into the 21st century, with particular application to clinical practice.

Second, Christian psychology can and must address the important reality that *both* self-denial and self-discovery are critical to maturation and to becoming 'oneself'. Within the framework of a biblical story of the self, this process requires that the Christian psychologist define maturation well. This is a point of tension, perhaps, between the Christian psychologist and others. For example, the influential psychology and personality disorder expert Masterson argues that personality disorders must be seen in and through the complex personal story of each human being who enters a world filled with relational disappointment [10]. Whatever true 'self' a person enters the world with is soon hidden under the cloak of a false self, an elaborately and unconsciously constructed relational style and persona which acts in a compensatory way. For Masterson, therapy is the uncovering of the true self. So ends Masterson's story of the self.

While Masterson's proposal is noble, the self in his model is not situated with the biblical Story. Here again, Christian psychologists have the opportunity to reframe the conversation. Finding oneself,

for Christians, necessarily involves dying to self. Indeed, self-denial is a crucial teaching in Jesus and in Pauline theology (see Matt. 16:24; Mark 8:35; John 12:24; Gal. 2:20).

Stott provides an important theological clarification for those who might misunderstand self-denial:

> What we are (our self or personal identity) is partly the result of the Creation (the image of God), and partly the result of the fall (the image defaced). The self we are to deny, disown, and crucify is our fallen self, everything within us that is incompatible with Jesus Christ (hence Christ's command, 'let him deny himself and follow me'). The self we are to affirm and value is our created self, everything within us that is compatible with Jesus Christ (hence his statement that if we lose ourselves by self-denial we shall find ourselves). True self-denial (the denial of our false, fallen self) is not the road to self-destruction, but the road to self-discovery ([23], p. 275).

Christian psychologists, while deeply indebted to their counterparts who do not embrace the Christian narrative, must 'show their cards' with regard to the telos of counseling and care, acknowledging that maturation cannot be understood apart from an orthodox Christian view of the atonement.

Finally, Christian psychology has much to offer from a historical perspective with regard to self-examination as an ordained pathway toward maturation. Self-knowledge is a crucial aspect of the Christian's journey toward maturation, a theological reality fundamental not only within biblical teaching but reflected in orthodox theological teaching throughout church history [24]. Indeed, one of the classic works on self-examination argues while it is critical for proper humility, prayer, and mission, one cannot even be a Christian if he does not know himself [25]. Christian psychology recognizes that examining oneself was not an invention of modern psychoanalytic theorists, but a rich and vital part of its tradition. It is also the necessary pre-cursor to becoming 'oneself' within the Christian tradition.

Indeed, Christian tradition acknowledges that self-knowledge is the first step on the path to union with Christ, which brings wholeness and renewed selfhood. It is the path to becoming *oneself*. St. Augustine proclaimed "*Noverim me, noverim te*"—"Let me know myself, and let me know you, O God" ([22], p. 89). And the unique role of the Christian psychologist is to work with men and women who are struggling on the road of self-examination, inviting them into this rich interplay of self-knowledge and union with God. Therapists are called to the unique and extraordinary work of self-discovery, not for the sake of self-discovery, but for the sake of becoming *oneself* in God. Thus, the *telos* of Christian psychology, once again, is different than psychological frameworks, though the means may be similar.

4. Conclusions

A Christian psychological framework suggests that as men and women become one with and through God in Christ, they become more and more conformed to image of God's Son (see Rom. 8:29). In God's image, human beings are able to live out their relationality and missionality authentically. Indeed, it is only in Christ and by the Spirit that human beings can become the selves they are designed and created to be by God. Christians, of all people, ought to affirm the popular motto—*Just be yourself!*—if, indeed, this self is ennobled with a larger sense of identity and purpose.

While it is crucial for Christians to see their selfhood narrated uniquely, it is just as crucial that Christians engage in conversation with their peers who do not embrace a Christian anthropological narrative. There is much to learn from one another. However, a significant contribution of Christian psychology is its conviction that 'self' cannot be understood in a vacuum, that a larger story which gives the self a sense of identity and purpose is needed. A Christian psychological perspective sees the former as the narcissistic and individualistic self of a hyper-therapeutic contemporary culture, while the latter provides a compelling vision invested with meaning and purpose.

Psychologists, Christian or not, can agree that there is a certain vacancy to the more popular, therapeutic version of the self. A profitable dialogue could include a discussion of the nature of self, the nature of human freedom, the tension between human pathology and nobility, and the larger *telos* of human existence. Christian psychology's appreciation of the scientific data, as well as its embrace of psychological wisdom, demonstrates a willingness to engage openly.

When he wrote "To be born again is not to become somebody else, but to become ourselves," Merton [1] presented an idea that begs the question—*what does it mean to become ourselves?* Amidst a cacophony of varied narratives, Christian psychology presents a compelling, time-tested story of its own. And its story intersects at various points with the insights of many who would not claim Christian faith. It is a story worth considering, if only for the sake of meaningful dialogue on the nature of the self.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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