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Confronting the Interface between the Gospel and Psychology

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*Confronting
the Interface
between
the Gospel
and
Psychology*

Teach ye diligently and my grace shall attend you, that you may be instructed more perfectly in theory, in principle, in doctrine, in the law of the gospel, in all things that pertain unto the kingdom of God, that are expedient for you to understand.

—D&C 88:78

While working at the counseling center at the University of Utah, one of us noted an interesting pattern. Potential clients would often present themselves at the front desk, and when asked if they had any preferences for the counselor they might see, many would reply either “I don’t care, as long as they’re Mormon” or “I don’t care, as long as they’re not Mormon.” While this pattern illustrates the tension that exists in Utah between the dominant Mormon culture and “non-Mormon” culture, more importantly for our purposes, it illustrates the fact that people care about the potential impact of counseling on their personal values and beliefs. They are wary of counselors whose belief systems may differ from their own.

Many Christians are confronted with the awkward interface between the gospel and psychology when they or someone they love considers seeing a counselor. Inevitably, they raise the question of the counselor’s religion. However, this concern rarely seems to lead to questions about the counselor’s theoretical perspectives, assumptions about human nature, or counseling techniques. Like the students at the University of Utah, most people seem to feel that if a counselor shares their religious beliefs, the counseling experience will be safe for them. Our contention is that just having a counselor who shares the same religious beliefs does not protect a client from the negative impacts of psychological philosophies on his or her religious beliefs. We believe that relatively few counselors have been able to successfully reconcile the fundamental assumptions of their religions with the fundamental assumptions of counseling theories.

There are several reasons why many counselors have difficulty reconciling psychology and the gospel. First, for many decades, mainstream professional psychology had an antireligion bias. This bias restricted even the discussion of religious values in the training of mental health professionals. Only recently has psychology, as a profession, begun to acknowledge this bias and become more open to issues of spirituality in human experience. Accordingly, many counselors completed their training without having an opportunity to address such issues in academic settings. Second, Christians in general and Latter-day Saints in particular have historically mistrusted the counseling profession. While some of this mistrust has certainly been justified, this bias has led many Latter-day Saint counselors to take one of two roads: either they have adopted a counseling approach that is more “religious advising” than

counseling, or they have developed an intellectual distance between their professional and religious views.

The reluctance to reconcile religion and counseling theories was made painfully obvious to one of us in a graduate counseling course at Brigham Young University. The professor presented the mainstream counseling theories, and the lecture led to some discussion of the philosophical underpinnings of the theories as they related to the gospel. Ultimately, as the class discussion highlighted the contradictions between the philosophical assumptions inherent in the gospel and the philosophies of the counseling theories, it became apparent that none of the theories was particularly compatible with the gospel. Someone in the class asked the professor how he reconciled these issues, given that he was a practicing psychologist. He replied simply, "When I go to church, I put on my church hat, and when I do counseling, I put on my psychologist hat." It is difficult to describe how discouraging this pat answer was to those of us hoping for some insights and practical advice on how to reconcile the two philosophies. We realized that this professor had simply abdicated the responsibility of developing a philosophy that accounted for both religious and professional beliefs.

Our sense is that such philosophical shallowness is common among mental health professionals, whether religious or not. In the secular world of graduate school at a public university, the other one of us had similarly frustrating experiences. He recorded his thoughts and feelings about his efforts to reconcile the gospel with his professional training:

I was raised in a religious mode. I still pursue my spiritual training and serve as an elder and teacher in my church. My ideas are based more in the scriptures than in "scientific" personality theory. Yet, I have invested great sums of money and time away from my family to pursue training as a behavioral scientist.

I have experienced frustration with the prevailing intellectual tradition. Whereas my colleagues answer questions by asking, "What do the data say?" (as though the data speak with a voice of their own), my first impulse is to ask, "What do the scriptures and the prophets say?" One frustration emerges when the scientific community is disparaging of my use of the scriptures as a base for exploration and interpretation of observations.

The type of questions I tend to ask is somewhat different than those of my colleagues as well. When I ask the most basic questions

of the behavioral sciences such as “What is the nature of humankind?” a myriad of corollary issues emerge. What is the nature of law? What is the nature of freedom? What is the nature of truth? What is the nature of good and evil? What is the nature of human responsibility? What is the nature of God? To ask any one of these questions is to ask them all. Another frustration is that the scientific community doesn’t deal openly with these issues. It is as though those types of questions are best left to philosophers and theologians.

I am aware of the mantra repeated in my classes that science is merely a mode of agreed-upon procedures which render data for examination. Behavioral scientists must then construct laws and interpret the data. Two problems emerge with that construction. First, even if science is independent, how can behavioral scientists construct laws and interpret data without first approximating answers to those larger questions? Second, how can an agreed-upon human procedure (science) not have implicitly woven into its fabric an *a priori* image of humans, law, freedom, good, evil, truth, responsibility, and God? If the assumptions and values woven into science are wrong and unexamined, and I am giving my life’s energies to this science, then I am at great risk of a life of meaningless and error-ridden toil. I have become like the alchemist’s apprentice who learns by hard years of service to his master to do nothing.

This account describes the experience of many students as they face psychology’s fundamental philosophical and theoretical problems. As we have mentioned, those considering seeing a counselor or referring someone for counseling have similar frustrations if they consider the problems inherent in the theories of potential counselors.

The Association of Mormon Counselors and Psychotherapists (AMCAP) published a text by Richard Williams entitled “The Restoration and the ‘Turning of Things Upside Down’: What Is Required of an LDS Perspective?” In this address, he articulated an argument for radically reconsidering our assumptions about applied psychology:

There is perhaps no set of scriptural passages closer to the center of our restored religion than those found in Isaiah 29 that deal with the “marvellous work [and] . . . [the] wonder” that is about to come forth among the children of men (Isa. 29:13–14). These same passages, part of the message of the First Vision, are also

found in 2 Nephi 27. In the 2 Nephi version, beginning in verse 24 we read:

*Turning
Freud
Upside
Down*

And again it shall come to pass that the Lord shall say unto him that shall read the words that shall be delivered him: Forasmuch as this people draw near unto me with their mouth, and with their lips do honor me, but have removed their hearts far from me, and their fear towards me is taught by the precepts of men—Therefore, I will proceed to do a marvelous work among this people, yea a marvelous work and a wonder, for the wisdom of their wise and learned shall perish, and the understanding of their prudent shall be hid.

The next verse talks about the response of the world to this marvelous work and wonder. Here we find the grounding of the vision I am trying to articulate:

And wo unto them that seek deep to hide their counsel from the Lord! [These are, I believe, the people opposed to the Restoration, those whose lives are not informed and animated by the Restoration.] And their works are in the dark; and they say: Who seeth us, and who knoweth us? And they also say: Surely your *turning of things upside down* shall be esteemed as the potter's clay. (v. 27, italics added)

Potter's clay, in scriptural terms, is worthless. It seems that from the perspective of those not participating in the Restoration, it (the Restoration) turns things upside down. From their perspective, surely something that "turns things upside down" is not going to amount to much. It simply cannot be true; it cannot last. This "turning of things upside down" is an image worth contemplating. It is a very powerful metaphor. A turning of things upside down is not a mere course correction. It is no minor adjustment. Turning things upside down is not a process of refining. Certainly, turning things upside down requires more than just adding another dimension to the wisdom of the world. I submit that we must assume that "turning things upside down" does just that: it turns the wisdom of the world on its head.

Williams argued that the Apostasy permeated all aspects of intellectual life. He demonstrated how modern and postmodern constructions of psychology lead to nihilism. He argued that the Restoration of the gospel was and is the remedy for the philosophical errors of traditional metaphysics. The major implication of his text is the need to build a psychotherapy from the foundation of the Restoration. Williams's text rekindled our hopes that psychotherapists could eventually practice from a philosophical base that is consistent with the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. He stated:

I think it absolutely crucial that people informed and enlightened by the restored gospel of Jesus Christ stand firm against an increasingly forceful and turbulent secular mainstream. This is even more important for those of us engaged in a profession that undertakes to recommend or even prescribe to others how to live more effective and meaningful lives and provide those whom we teach or serve the means to improve their lives. There is no insight nor any understanding comparable to the restored gospel in providing meaning, focus, direction, and value to the enterprise of helping people live meaningfully and effectively.

In keeping with our hopes, the purposes of this volume are (1) to shake the foundations of our assumptions or, as Richard Williams proposed, to “turn things upside down” and (2) to begin to provide some of the alternative foundations that will guide our explanations of how counseling works. Authors were asked to respond to a basic question with their best understanding of the gospel. They were also asked to speak, as much as possible, to the implications for counseling interventions—not just the theoretical and philosophical issues.

The authors’ responses are divided into five parts corresponding to the questions we are raising about the nature of these fundamental concerns: law (part 1), suffering (part 2), agency (part 3), truth (part 4), the human being, and change (both in part 5). The book concludes with Aaron Jackson’s discussion of four paradoxes and four critical questions that became evident in the work of the contributing authors. He calls for further scholarship to resolve the paradoxes and answer the questions.

Some readers may find it useful to read the concluding chapter before reading all the other chapters. Doing so will give the reader some background questions to entertain while reading these chapters. Other readers may prefer to read the subsequent chapters cold—without our bias—and then compare their reaction to ours. In either case, we trust the reader to approach the text with an appropriate mix of faith and skepticism.

Reference

Williams, R. (1998). The Restoration and “turning of things upside down”: What is required of an LDS perspective? *AMCAP Journal*, 23, 1–30.