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Naturalism, Theism, and the Risks of Professional Values Imposition in Psychotherapy with Theistic Clients

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The codes of ethics guiding the work of counselors and psychotherapists state that ethical practitioners pursue training in areas where they are at risk of imposing values. While training in the potential imposition of personal values is pervasive, training in the potential imposition of professional values is rare. Naturalism, the guiding worldview of science and psychology excludes theism, which is the guiding worldview of many people. Consequently, naturalism is a professional value that may be imposed on theistic clients in psychotherapy. The exclusion of theism from psychology and psychotherapy along with the naturalization of theistic experiences and concepts and the omission of theism from theistic theories that are imported into psychotherapy demonstrate how great the risk of imposing the professional value of naturalism in psychotherapy is. In light of that risk and given the lack of training in this area of need, several forms of theism that fall on a continuum from weak to strong theism are briefly reviewed as an initial step in educating counselors and psychotherapists about this important aspect of many clients. Also, to encourage careful and critical reflection, some of the challenges that accompany the common ways in which counselors and psychotherapists might include theism in their therapy is provided. Specific points of emphasis for therapists who are members of the church and work with theistic clients who are members of the church are addressed in the conclusion.

The American Counseling Association Code of Ethics (2014) states that ethical counselors and psychotherapists, “seek training in areas in which they are at risk of imposing their values onto clients, especially when the counselor’s values are inconsistent with the client’s goals or are discriminatory in nature” (section A.4.b.; see APA, 2017, Principle E, for a similar statement). Generally speaking, counselor values come in two forms: personal values and professional values (Packard, 2009). Personal values typically stem from the therapist’s upbringing, culture, and personal experiences and can include things like religious beliefs, political leanings, and gender role expectations. Professional values stem from the disciplines and institutions within which the therapist has been educated and trained and can include things like ontological assumptions (e.g., individualism), epistemological preferences (e.g., empiricism), and ethical positions (e.g., utilitarianism). In both cases, the values may be explicitly adopted, but they can also just as often be implicitly held (Jackson, Hansen, & Cook-Ly, 2013).

Training in the risk of personal value imposition in domains such as race, ethnicity, culture, gender and gender identity, sexual orientation, age, socioeconomic status, religion, and ability is abundantly available,
both in degree programs in which counselors and psychotherapists are initially trained and in continuing education classes that are offered across the country and at annual conventions of the ACA and APA. Training in the risk of professional value imposition is scarcer, in part because values stemming from the counselor’s or psychotherapist’s discipline and institution are often hidden (Slife, Reber, & Richardson, 2005). Consequently, professional values receive less attention in the literature and in training and education than personal values. Nevertheless, professional values constitute an important area in which the risk of value imposition exists. Increasingly, psychologists have uncovered forms of institutional and disciplinary bias in course and degree program curricula and materials (e.g., Peterson & Kroner, 2006), research studies (e.g., Roberts, Bareket-Shavit, Dollins, Goldie, & Mortenson, 2020), graduate education (Diggles, 2014), and more. Indigenous psychologists also point to cultural biases in psychology’s professional values concerning research design, instrumentation, and analysis, including within the scientific method itself (e.g., Sundararajan, 2019).

Is it possible that counselors and psychotherapists, given the training and education they have received in psychological theory, method, and practice, may be at risk of imposing professional values on their clients? An increasing number of psychotherapists believe it is possible and call for increased training and education for counselors and psychotherapists to address this ethical concern (Slife, 2011; Tjeltveit, 2004). One professional value central to psychological science and practice, and which has been critically examined as to its risk of biasing the discipline and institution of psychology in a number of significant ways, is naturalism (Armstrong, 2011; Slife & Reber, 2009; Bishop, 2007). This paper extends that critical examination to include counselors and psychotherapists, who might be at risk of imposing the professional value of naturalism on their clients, especially clients of faith. The professional value of naturalism will be described, its impact and imposition within the discipline of psychology will be reviewed, and the extension of those same forms of imposition to counseling and psychotherapy will be explicated. Then, given that ethical counselors and psychotherapists “seek training in areas in which they are at risk of imposing their values onto clients” (ACA, 2014, Sect. A.4.b), some preliminary education and training in the theistic worldview that is held by many clients of faith will be provided.

The Professional Value of Naturalism

The worldview of naturalism, which the historian of psychology, Thomas Leahey (2013) describes as “the central dogma of science” (p. 379) has been adopted by the discipline of psychology and by the institution of science (Plantinga, 2011). Naturalism is the idea that all events are explainable in terms of natural laws and processes. Naturalism has been historically divided into two components or aspects: ontological and methodological (Bishop, 2007). In its ontological form, naturalism is concerned with the question of what is real. For the ontological naturalist, the real is what is material, tangible, and operates according to natural laws. What is not real, for the ontological naturalist, is all that lies outside of this definition of the natural, or what is often referred to as the supernatural. Regarding the supernatural and ontological naturalism’s treatment of it, Decaro and MacArthur (2010) state that ontological naturalism cannot “countenance the supernatural, whether in the form of entities (such as God, spirits, entelechies, or Cartesian minds), events (such as miracles or magic), or epistemic faculties (such as mystical insight or spiritual intuition” (p. 3). For the ontological naturalist, such things simply are not considered to be real and therefore have no place in scientific explanation.

Recognizing the potential for value imposition in such a strong ontological position, a number of scientists and psychologists endorse instead the methodological or scientific form of naturalism. Methodological or scientific naturalism claims not to weigh in on the reality of things, like those just described, but instead confines itself only “to the search for natural causes to explain natural phenomena” (Jones, 2005, sect. 4, para. 2). The methodological naturalist believes that the scientific method is the best way to investigate reality and can be applied without weighing in on what that reality is (Bishop, 2007). Thus, methodological naturalists do not explicitly deny non- or super-natural realities, but only exclude explanations invoking such realities from their study.
As Jones (2005) put it most frankly, “while supernat-

atural explanations may be important and have merit, they are not part of science” (sect. 4, para. 2).

A number of philosophers of science have strongly argued that this methodological approach, in which God and “supernatural” things are bracketed rather than ontologically denied, creates a slippery slope in which methodological naturalism inevitably slides into ontological naturalism (e.g., Gantr & Williams, 2020; Zargar, Azadegan, & Nabavi, 2019). Schafers-

man (1997), for example, has examined the slip-

periness of the slope on which these two forms of naturalism are located and concludes that “the prac-
tice or adoption of methodological naturalism entails a logical and moral belief in ontological naturalism, so they are not logically decoupled” (sect. Method-

ological and Ontological Naturalism, para. 11). In a similar vein, Forrest (2000) notes that whether its practitioner intend for it to do so or not:

methodological naturalism has consistently chipped away at the plausibility of the existential claims made by supernaturalism by providing increasingly successful explanations of aspects of the world which religion has historically sought to explain, e.g., human origins. The threat faced by supernaturalism is not the threat of logical disproof, but the fact of having its explanations supplanted by scientific ones” (sect. Philosophi-

cal Naturalism’s Ontological Categories, para. 7).

Whether in its metaphysical or methodological form, then, naturalism has inescapable implications for the viability of any non-naturalistic worldviews.

An illustration of this slippery slope in action may be useful at this juncture. In 2007, the American Psychological Association Council of Representatives issued a Resolution on Religious, Religion-Based and/or Religion-Derived Prejudice. In that resolution the council makes a statement that is consistent with psychology’s methodological naturalism, which is that “psychology has no legitimate function in arbitrating matters of faith and theology” (para. 5). Thus, with regard to the truth claims of religions, including theistic religions, psychology is to exclude such ontological matters from its science and not judge their veracity. Such things, on this methodological naturalistic account, simply lie outside the purview of the discipline of scientific psychology.

Despite this resolution and methodological naturalism’s ostensible neutrality with regard to the ontological claims of religion, only a few years after it was published, one of the best known psychologists in the United States, a specialist on prejudice, bias, and morality, Jonathan Haidt, gave a presentation to a group of scientists titled, Enlightenment 2.0 Requires Morality 2.0, in which he began his talk with the following items on a PowerPoint slide: “Broad scientific consensus: 1) A world with gods should be measurably different. 2) We can’t be certain that no supernatural entities exist, but . . . 3) Our world does not look like a world with gods. 4) Historical, cosmological, & causal claims of religions mostly false. 5) Religion is a natural phenomenon; it can and should be studied with methods of science.” After Haidt quickly reviewed the items on the list, none with a single citation or shred of evidence offered as support, he summarized his argument by stating that “the factual claims of religion are by and large, if not altogether, false.” He then asked for agreement with his argument and seeing what appeared to be all the hands in the audience go up, he moved on with his talk, noting that anyone who did disagree with any item on the list could see him afterward at lunch, ostensibly to be put straight on their error.

Were this the only example of this slippery slope in psychology, it would not be worth mentioning, but a systematic review of the most popular psychology research methods texts used to teach psychologists how to conduct their studies shows that the slip from methodological to metaphysical naturalism is common, though rarely acknowledged (Reber, 2018). Thus, psychological naturalism, which states that human behavior and mental states “must be explained in terms that are compatible with the broader physicalistic view of nature provided by the natural sciences” (Stich, 1992, p. 246; also Fils, 2019), inevitably slips into a metaphysical/ontological naturalism that arbitrates matters of faith and theology and results in an pervasive implicit bias in the discipline (see Gantr, 2018; Gantr & Williams, 2020; Slife & Reber, 2009).

Psychology’s Imposition of Naturalism

Theism, like naturalism, is a worldview. Indeed, it is considered the other major worldview of Western
civilization (Smith, 2001). Unlike naturalism, theism assumes “that a God (or Gods) is actively and currently engaged with and makes a meaningful difference in the practical world” (Reber & Slife, 2013a, p. 6; see also Barbour, 1997 and Plantinga, 2011). On an ontological level, then, theism assumes that divine “present, ongoing, and difference-making activity” (ibid) is real. Methodologically, theism asserts that this divine activity can and should be included in a study of the world, including a scientific study of the psychological world (Reber, Slife, & Downs, 2012). In this sense, theism stands in direct and clear contrast with the naturalistic worldview, which, given the slippery slope already described, both denies and excludes God’s engagement in the world. Psychology, as a naturalistic science, then, is at risk of an implicit anti-theistic disciplinary prejudice, which could result in professional value imposition, both within the discipline of psychology and within psychotherapy and counseling specifically. I will review the evidence of this value imposition in psychology and psychotherapy below.

Psychology’s Exclusion of Theism

One of the obvious examples of the imposition of the value of naturalism within the discipline of psychology is what Maier (2004) labels “God’s exile from psychology” (p. 323). Maier has carefully examined the history of American psychology and he identifies a clear shift from its founding, in which psychology was described by G. Stanley Hall in 1885 as “Christian to its root and center” (cited in Slife & Reber, 2009, p. 70), to becoming within almost a single generation, almost completely secularized. He attributes this abrupt shift to a change in education. Maier finds that while the chief founders of psychology, James McCosh, G. Stanley Hall, and William James, among others, were theists who saw education and training in psychology as a necessary blend of theology and scientific courses, their students compartmentalized their theistic beliefs, stopped taking theology courses, and in true methodological naturalist fashion, banished theism from the psychology classroom and laboratory to the domain of the church.

This approach, in which God and God’s activity are compartmentalized and exiled, remains a key feature of the discipline, even in fields of psychology that study religion and spirituality. Indeed, the flagship APA journal whose primary focus is on such matters (Psychology of Religion and Spirituality) explicitly prohibits the publication of any articles that take a theistic approach. The founding editor of the journal stated in his introduction to the first edition of the journal that “papers that aim to use theological constructs as explanatory variables in psychological models are . . . inappropriate” (Piedmont, 2008, p. 1). The succeeding editor added her support, stating “I feel strongly that as a science, psychology should not and cannot admit into its domain non-empirical approaches such as theistic psychology” (Park, 2017, p. 72). Aside from the false claim that theistic approaches are non-empirical (see Reber, Slife, and Downs, 2012), both editors cite no justification for their exclusion. Given psychology’s resolution discussed above, one can safely assume that the editors would justify their exclusion of theism on the grounds of methodological naturalism, though as we have shown, a methodological exclusion of theism is not methodologically necessary or warranted (ibid). More likely, given the slippery slope previously discussed, these editors have implicit ontological commitments that lead them to arbitrate matters of faith and theism, despite the APA (2007) resolution that prohibits psychologists from doing so.

In any case, just over one hundred years after its founding, psychology overwhelmingly excludes God’s activity from its education, research, and publications. Consequently, a student in an introductory psychology class might find a few references to religion in their textbook, but they would likely find no mention of God or God’s activity at all (Slife & Reber, 2009). Students in research methods courses might find faith and God’s activity cursorily mentioned in their textbooks, but usually only as an example of an alternative epistemology to empirical science that is deemed inappropriate to psychological investigation despite the absence of evidence or the presence of a justification (Reber, 2018).

Psychology’s Operationalization/Transformation of Theism

Psychology’s exclusion of God and God’s activity from psychological research, textbooks, and journals limits any study of religious and spiritual phenomena
and experiences to naturalistic constructs, variables, and psychological models (Piedmont, 2008). The result of this naturalistic restriction is that theistic religious and spiritual phenomena and experiences are either excluded from psychological research or have to be operationalized and transformed into naturalistic phenomena and experiences, even when they center on God and God’s activity (see Gantt & Williams, 2020; Slife & Reber, 2012; Reber, 2006).

Research on people’s image of God, for example, cannot include an examination of participants’ experiences of God as a potential factor that could contribute to the development of their image of God even when the explicit focus of the study is the participants’ “relationship to God” (Cassibba, et al., 2008, p. 1755). This is not because those experiences cannot be gathered and examined just as readily as any other experiences people have had and could describe to a researcher, but only because the use of “theological constructs as explanatory variables in psychological models” (Piedmont, 2008, p. 1) has been deemed, without reason or justification, to be “inappropriate” (ibid; Park, 2017). The curious result of this restriction to only naturalistic variables and explanations is that the researchers replace theists’ experiences of God with naturalistic “proxy” variables, like frequency of church attendance, prayer, and other measures of “religiosity”. This is like trying to understand a person’s relationship with his or her marriage partner by counting how many times he or she eats dinner together with his or her spouse each week instead of asking the person about his or her experiences and relationship with his or her spouse directly.

Reviews of the psychological research on religious and spiritual experiences and phenomena, including God image, relationship with God, and faith (Reber, Slife, & Downs, 2012), and also miracles (Reber & Slife, 2013a), conversion and forgiveness (Slife, Reber, & Lefevor, 2012), and prayer and meditation (Slife & Reber, 2012), shows that the operationalization and transformation of these experiences and concepts into naturalistic proxy variables is almost universal. So too is the absence of a single theistic interpretation of the findings on any of these topics, even though for theists, including the theistic participants in the studies, these topics necessarily include an active, difference-making God. Nevertheless, the transformation of theistic factors and theistic interpretations into naturalistic factors and interpretations took place in every study reviewed, even though theistic experiences, constructs, and interpretations are as available and as empirically viable as naturalistic constructs and interpretations (Reber & Slife, 2013b). Moreover, the data gathered from a theistic approach to psychological research, as has been demonstrated in previous research (e.g., Reber, Slife, & Downs, 2012), are just as capable of quantitative and qualitative analysis and can produce tests of hypotheses, results, and theistic interpretations that are interesting, informative, and compelling, while also according with the experiences and interpretations of the people studied. Thus, it is not empiricism in general, or the scientific method specifically, that compels these naturalistic operationalizations, transformations, and interpretations, but rather the assumption of naturalism that pervades the discipline as an implicit anti-theistic bias (Slife & Reber, 2013b).

Psychology’s Omission of Theism from Theistic Theories

Given the pervasive exile of God and divine activity from psychology and in light of what we might refer to as the naturalization of theistic theories, experiences, concepts, and interpretations in psychological research, it should come as no surprise that the importation of theistic theories into psychology results in that theism being stripped away. If not surprising, the omission is still glaring, especially when the theory’s author is explicitly theistic and theism is clearly essential to their theory. Butera (2010), for example, claims that even the theism of Saint Thomas Aquinas, which is foundational to all of his thinking and is the primary focus of his work, is not necessary to a psychology based on Aquinas’s ideas. Aquinas’s psychology, Butera asserts is “philosophical,” not ‘theological,’ even though Aquinas was first and last a theologian, because the psychology he developed is able to stand on its own, independent of his theological commitments (p. 348).

Aside from the indelible alteration of Aquinas’s ideas that would ensue from the removal of the foundational assumption of theism from those ideas, why does Butera deem it necessary for Aquinas’s
psychology to stand on its own, independent of theological commitments? Do naturalistic theories need to stand alone independent of their naturalistic commitments? No, only theistic theories need their theism removed as they are imported into psychology so the theory can fit within the naturalistic worldview that psychology embraces. But can the theory even be ascribed to Aquinas after such a drastic omission?

The same questions arise with the importation of Martin Buber’s theistic philosophy into humanistic psychology (Slife & Reber, 2009). Martin Buber stated that:

If I myself should designate something as the ‘central portion of my life work,’ then it could not be anything individual, but only the one basic insight . . . that the I-Thou relation to God and the I-Thou relation to one’s fellow man are at bottom related to each other” (cited in Friedman, 1988, p. 429).

Carl Rogers, who drew from Martin Buber’s philosophy in his understanding of relationships in the development of his person-centered psychology, left Buber’s foundational theistic principle out of that psychology. As Friedman (1994), the world’s foremost expert on Buber’s thinking described it, “Rogers clearly accepted Buber’s I-Thou relationship and made it his own without plumbing the depth of the philosophical anthropology...that Buber judges to be its necessary underpinnings” (p 46-65).

A similarly glaring omission of theism from an explicitly theistic philosophy can be found in the importation of Soren Kierkegaard’s existential philosophy into existential psychology. Speaking of his life’s work, Kierkegaard stated:

What I have wanted and want to achieve through my work, what I also regard as the most important, is first of all to make clear what is involved in being a Christian, to present the picture of a Christian in all its ideal, that is, true form, worked out to every true limit, submitting myself even before any other to be judged by this picture, whatever the judgement is . . .” (Kierkegaard, 1859/1998, p. 129).

Even a cursory reading of Kierkegaard’s works demonstrates clearly that for him being a Christian rests upon a theistic foundation. This is confirmed by those with expertise in Kierkegaard’s philosophy. Westphal (2015), for example, notes that Kierkegaard’s theism is unmistakable and is central to his work, stating that, “the self’s relation to the Other, in Kierkegaard, is mediated by God. Furthermore, God is the Thou who addresses me and who gives me an identity and vocation of which I am not the origin” (para. 1). Despite the many clear statements and even warnings about the necessity of Kierkegaard’s theism to his ideas, psychologists assert, without justification or explanation, that Kierkegaard’s theism can be left out, even as his philosophy is used to develop theory and conduct research. Rusak (2017) argues, for example, that “one can accept Kierkegaard’s use of religious archetypes in crafting a psychical metaphysics, irrespective of whether one forthrightly believes in Christian doctrine’s actuality or not” (para. 15). Lippitt (2016) notes that psychology has largely secularized Kierkegaard’s work and even recalls a colleague stating that, “Kierkegaard is a source of great insight provided ‘we ignore the religious stuff’” (p. 23).

The fact that these and other psychologists who use Kierkegaard’s philosophy, but remove its theistic elements, acknowledge that they are doing so speaks to their awareness that Kierkegaard was a theist and that his work assumed theism. However, as with Butera and Rogers, they provide no justification for their omission, no evidence that leaving Kierkegaard’s theism in the theory would be a problem, and they in no way account for the significant changes to the theory that result from the removal of its theistic foundation once it is imported into psychology. The justification, it would seem, is implicitly provided by the professional value of naturalism, which requires that theism be omitted, even without testing whether and to what extent the theory is capable of having a positive impact on psychological theory, research, and practice with its central theism left in. Like exclusion and transformation, the omission of theism from theistic theories, justified only by psychologist’s adoption of naturalism rather than by critical, empirical, or any other form of evaluation, is a form of disciplinary discrimination against the theistic worldview.

Psychotherapists’ Risk of Imposing Naturalism on Clients

To what extent might psychotherapy and counseling, which in many ways can be understood as the practice arm of psychological theorizing and research,
be susceptible to these same forms of disciplinary and institutional anti-theistic bias and discrimination? To examine this question, it may be helpful to first acknowledge that in the case of counseling and psychotherapy, there is an added level of complexity at play. As mentioned in the introduction, therapists and counselors must abide by their ethics codes and are expected to receive regular training and education in the risks of imposing their values on clients. Counselors and therapists have received a great deal of training in the risks of imposing their personal values on their clients, including personal religious values. Perhaps, they have been trained using a vignette like this one, which demonstrates potentially damaging ways in which a therapist’s personal religious values can be imposed on a client:

A Christian therapist is working with an atheist client who is suffering from a terminal illness. The therapist is concerned about the client’s salvation and sees this as a more important issue than their psychological health at this point of therapy. They seek consultation from a colleague who says, “At this point, you must follow God’s will, not your ethics code.” The therapist goes into the next session and shares about their faith, encouraging the client to accept Jesus as their savior (Hoffman, 2008, p. 23).

Having been well-trained to recognize such behavior as a clear violation of the ethics code and desiring to avoid even the slightest hint of personal value imposition, it is possible that many therapists steer clear of religion, spirituality, and faith altogether in working with their clients (Hathaway, Scott, & Garver, 2004). What they may not realize, however, is how their efforts to avoid the imposition of personal religious values might inadvertently contribute to professional value imposition, especially when training in the risks of the professional value imposition of naturalism in psychotherapy is rare. Consequently, therapists who avoid spiritual and religious issues in an attempt to steer clear of personal religious value imposition may not appreciate the degree to which they might exclude theism, naturalize theistic experiences and interpretations, and/or omit theism from theistic theories, in their work with their clients.

**Psychotherapists’ Risk of Excluding Theism**

Is it possible that some counselors and psychotherapists, in an effort to avoid personal religious value imposition, exile God and God’s activity from their therapy offices? And, if they do keep their own and their clients’ beliefs about religion and faith outside the door, what are the implications of that exclusion of God and God’s activity for clients of faith who often want their religious and spiritual beliefs and experiences to be part of therapy (Rose, Westefeld, & Ansely, 2001). Holmberg, Jensen, and Vetere (2020) addressed these questions in a mixed-method study of family therapists and their clients. They found that the clients in their sample overwhelmingly wanted there to be “room to speak” (p. 7) about spiritual matters in therapy. They wanted to be “met and acknowledged’ as a whole person, which included the spiritual and religious dimension of life” (p. 8). And they “described leaning on God in their crises, and felt that God could be included in their therapy, both as a contributor and as a relationship" (ibid).

Holmberg, Jensen, and Ulland (2017) note how these same therapy clients, whose beliefs and experiences are inherent to their identity and their understanding of their psychological issues and struggles, find a therapist’s unwillingness to include religion and spirituality in their work frustrating and unproductive. A research participant named “Julia” demonstrates this frustration well, noting that when she brought up what she describes as the “room” of her spirituality to her therapist, he would not enter the “room” and instead closed the door. The study authors quote directly from the interview transcript to capture Julia’s experience and frustration with the therapist’s exclusion of her spiritual “room”.

**Julia:** The therapist did not understand. He said, ‘So what?, and for me it was very strange. I felt that he couldn’t understand my Christian background, that even such a cruel man [her husband] is hard to leave, because it’s wrong in a way . . . And I felt, it was something about our connection, because this ‘room’ is so big in my life, and with the therapist, I needed to close the door. I could talk about everything else, there were thousands of things, but I felt it wasn’t fruitful to continue.

**Interviewer:** And this ‘room’ is, as you say, quite big?

**Julia:** For me it is very big, yes, it infiltrates everything; it infiltrates who I am as a person, and . . . I just felt that a door was closed, yes; he did not understand me at all. I felt I was a problem (p. 16).
It may be that Betty and Julia coincidentally encountered therapists who have the personal value that matters of God and God’s activity are to be kept out of therapy, but Holmberg, Jensen, & Vetere’s (2020) interviews of the psychotherapists suggest a more professional values-based norm toward this practice of exclusion:

It is of concern to us that some said if they talked to clients about this topic they would keep this secret, as they were afraid to become unpopular in the therapeutic establishment. One therapist said: ‘If you want to stay within the most recognised therapeutic environments, those who have the greatest authority, my feeling is that they do not talk much about this’ (T1, 1, 40-42). Some therapists had tried talking with other colleagues, but felt rejected and almost ignored. . . In this study, therapists found it easier to raise and respond to secular spirituality: values and meaning not connected to religion. Both clients and therapists found that religious perspectives were more marginalised (p. 12).

Psychotherapists’ Risk of Transforming Theism

Along with exclusion as a potential professional value imposition, might some counselors and therapists be at risk of imposing naturalism on their theistic clients by altering, re-framing, or explaining away their clients’ theistic experiences, concepts, and understandings? One therapist’s account of an event in his training as a clinical psychologist anecdotally suggests this possibility:

I still remember one of my supervisors laughing at a video of me working with one of my clients. The client was a good Christian woman from Indiana who honestly felt that her unhappiness stemmed from her spiritual struggles. My supervisor was perfectly clear, “Help her get out of that religious claptrap. Her sadness has nothing to do with God. It has solely to do with her lack of reinforcements or pleasures in her life.”

Now, as a doctoral student who was anxious to please, I’m ashamed to say, I carried my supervisor’s message back to this Christian woman. In fact, I was so good at selling this message that she eventually learned not to think of her happiness in relation to God at all. She learned to think of herself and her relationships as though God had nothing to do with her emotions and
the relevant events of her life.” After all, I recall her saying, “What you’re saying Brent has to be right because science has proven it.”

When my client and I were finished, she no longer saw God as the source of her emotional healing. She no longer considered even the possibility that her spiritual struggles could be intertwined with her emotional struggles. At least for this part of her life, she was a Christian atheist, a Christian in other aspects of her life, but an atheist in her understanding of her emotions. I do think however, that if she had continued her therapy with me and my supervisor, I would have persuaded her little by little, one problem after another, to understand every part of her life as though God didn’t matter (Slife, 2013).

This example of transformation is striking, but not rare. On the contrary, many psychotherapy approaches that seek to integrate religion and spirituality into therapeutic work, operationalize and truncate clients’ and therapists’ theistic experiences and interpretations into psychological constructs and mechanisms that will work within the profession’s naturalistic worldview. Transformations and operationalizations include: “virtues” (Peteet, 2013), “basic human values” (Corey, n.d., p. 118), “religious content” (Abernethy & Lancia, 1998), “the dynamic human spirit” (Helminiak, 2001), a dimension of personality (Piedmont & Wilkins, 2013), an evolved meaning-making system (Paloutzian, 2017), and above all others, beliefs (Khoynezhad, Rajaei, & Sarvarazemy, 2012).

By focusing on and working with naturalized constructs, like religious beliefs or values, therapists might assume they are open to their clients’ theism. However, if religious beliefs or values are understood by the therapist only naturalistically, for example, as mental states that evolve to help people make and find meaning in their lives (Paloutzian & Mukai, 2017), then the therapist is not open to the possibility that God could be involved and actively participating in the formation of those beliefs. Paloutzian’s work on beliefs confirms this (e.g., Paloutzian & Mukai, 2017; Seitz, Paloutzian, & Angel, 2018). For Paloutzian and his colleagues theists’ beliefs about God are “a mental activity generated by neural circuits in the brain” (Seitz, Paloutzian, & Angel, 2017, p. 3).

On this account, clients’ religious beliefs are naturalistic even if the target of the beliefs is God or God’s activity and even if the believer describes experiencing God’s involvement in the development of the beliefs. In this way, the therapist transforms the theists’ theism into naturalism. Once transformed, the basic processes involved in theistic beliefs are understood to be the same as the basic processes involved in all other beliefs. As a result, as Maloney (1998) puts it in his somewhat dated but still apropos description of the psychological processes that underlie conversion, “the decision of a Muslim to become a Moonie is no different than the decision to change from using an electric typewriter to using a computer” (para. 5). Each “conversion” involves a process of change in belief system, but the nature of the belief systems involved is not relevant.

Once theism is naturalized in this way, therapists can work with religious and spiritual beliefs in the same way they work with other beliefs in their treatment. In Religious Cognitive-Emotional Therapy (RCET, Rajaei, 2010), for example, the therapist interprets the client’s theism in the same way the therapist would understand any other beliefs, as being more or less rational, supportive of health, or helpful in finding meaning. As a set of beliefs, RCET therapists can apply the same techniques to the treatment of theistic client’s beliefs as any other client’s beliefs to help them change or reframe any irrational or unhealthy beliefs into beliefs that promote mental health and wellbeing.

If a client tells their therapist that their emotional struggles are a consequence of God punishing them for past sins, the RCET therapist interprets that statement for the sake of treatment, not as a description of the client’s relationship with God or as a description of God’s activity in relation to the client’s righteousness, but as a problematic set of beliefs that need to be changed. Change for the RCET practitioner is about the valence of the belief, more so than the content. Negative beliefs, regardless of what they are about, need to be changed into positive beliefs, because a positive view of the world promotes mental health and wellbeing, as the RCET therapist understands it (Rajaei, 2010). So, the therapist works with the theistic client to reframe and adjust their negative belief about God and God’s punishment into a positive belief about God and God’s support. The excerpt below outlines the process by which this is done:
The RCET therapist identifies the clients negative and nihilistic beliefs about the world and existence and helps them to change these beliefs into positive and purposeful one's, so that the clients acquire a new insight of existence. . . The therapist makes clients aware of God's role. (God is the best patron with best characteristics that guides human beings). When people accept God as the unique creator, they will gain the safe and reliable force in the world and feel relief in their lives (Rajaei, 2010, p. 84-85).

Even though theistic clients may desire and feel “that God could be included in their therapy, both as a contributor and as a relationship” (Holmberg, Jensen, & Vetere, 2020, p. 8), the RCET therapist does not have to include these participative, relational features in their treatment. They could be added on for effect, but they are not necessary (Slife, Stevenson, & Wendt, 2010). For the RCET therapist, all that is needed is a reframing of their clients' beliefs about God and God's role from one that is negative, irrational, and unhealthy to one that is positive, rational, and promotes mental health. The risk of value imposition involved, however, as we saw with the anecdote above (Slife, 2013), is that these transformations of theism, as the client experiences and understands it, into naturalism, as the therapist understands it, might persuade clients that God does not really matter. That is, an operationalization of theism into a set of beliefs might teach the client to understand their relationship to God and God's activity as only a matter of their personal beliefs, beliefs which they can choose and change, as they might change from using a PC to a MAC computer. They can do all of this with the help of the therapist, but apparently not with the help of an actively engaged God.

Psychotherapists’ Risk of Omitting Theism from Theistic Theories

Do we see any evidence that counselors and psychotherapists omit theism from theistic theories in their therapeutic practice? I have already mentioned Butera’s (2010) assertion that Aquinas’s psychology can stand alone without attending to Aquinas’s theism, but I should note here that Butera’s ultimate purpose for importing Aquinas’s psychology into the discipline is to use it as a “theoretical framework” for understanding and treating emotional disorders using Cognitive Therapy (CT). Believing that he can separate Aquinas’s psychology from Aquinas’s theology without irrevocable consequence to that psychology in the psychotherapy context, Butera seeks to provide all CT practitioners with a secular theoretical foundation that will guide their application of CT.

Similarly, existential psychotherapists who utilize Kierkegaard’s theoretical concepts in their practice acknowledge Kierkegaard’s theism, but believe they can separate that theism off from their therapy and secularize Kierkegaard’s religious and spiritual concepts in developing and applying their therapeutic practices. Spivak (2004), for example writes that:

Kierkegaard’s writings range from the philosophical to the deeply religious. I have drawn from both streams of his thinking but have secularized his more religious concepts. I believe that his writings so powerfully portray a genius’ incisive observations of human struggle, that even when his religious intent is de-emphasized, the concepts that are distilled can greatly empower the process of psychotherapy and counseling (p. 2).

Wanting to be clear that he is not the first or only therapist to omit Kierkegaard’s theism, Spivak goes on to note that “the secularization and use of Kierkegaard’s works for psychotherapeutic theory and practice is not unique. Many psychotherapists including Guntrup (1969), Binswanger (1944), and Loewald (1980) utilized Kierkegaard’s writings to enhance their work” (p. 3).

Finally, like Carl Rogers, psychotherapists who have imported Martin Buber’s philosophy into psychotherapy (e.g., Scott, et al., 2009) have left Buber’s theism out. Even, Maurice Friedman (2002a), the foremost expert on Buber’s philosophy, developed a dialogical psychotherapy in which Buber’s central theistic relationality has been altered so that only the I-Thou relation between client and therapist is discussed:

By “dialogical psychotherapy,” we mean a therapy that is centered on the meeting between the therapist and his or her client or among family members as the central healing mode. . . Only when it is recognized that everything that takes place within therapy—free association, dreams, silence, pain, anguish—takes place within the context of the vital relationship between therapist and patient do we have what may properly be called dialogical psychotherapy (p. 11-12).
A significant problem in each of these cases, is that theologians and philosophers who have studied these thinkers’ work in great depth and detail, have noted that the importation of these thinkers’ ideas into psychotherapy with their theism removed, is not possible, or at least fundamentally alters the ideas and the practices that ensue from them. Philosophers Tietjen and Evans (2011), for example, have shown that therapists who wish to use Kierkegaard’s ideas cannot escape Kierkegaard’s theistic commitments: “If Kierkegaard offers contemporary therapists anything at all, it is quite clear that it is not value-free or neutral. Mental health is inextricably linked to spiritual health, and ultimately a client’s relationship with Christ cannot be dismissed as incidental to the healing process” (p. 282). Ventimiglia (2008) intimates the same concern with Buber’s work, noting that “Buber’s religious beliefs are basic to his system of dialogical psychotherapy. . . For Buber, God is at the heart of every human encounter. He is the ‘Eternal Thou’ that is experienced in every genuine meeting between two people” (p. 612).

Most curiously, Friedman, asserts in his theological and philosophical publications that the relationship with God is central to Buber’s thinking, is the source of transformation, and cannot be separated from our relationships with each other, as this example illustrates:

The fundamental beliefs of Buber’s I-Thou philosophy are the reality of the I-Thou relation into which no deception can penetrate, the reality of the meeting between God and man which transforms man’s being, and the reality of the turning which puts a limit to man’s movement away from God (Friedman, 2002b, p. 87).

However, in his psychological publications where he reviews his dialogical psychotherapy based on Buber’s work, he makes no mention of our relationship to God and its transformative impact on our being at all:

Buber’s ‘I-Thou’ philosophy is concerned with the difference between mere existence and authentic existence, between being barely human and being more fully human, between remaining fragmented and bringing the conflicting parts of oneself into an active unity, between partial and fuller relationships with others (Friedman, 2002a, p. 9).

It would seem that Friedman, perhaps with the guidance of journal editors and peer reviewers, is aware of psychology’s professional commitment to naturalism and, as a result, leaves the theism that is central to Buber’s work completely out of his psychological publications. The odd consequence of that omission is an education and training in a dialogical psychotherapy that is based on Buber’s work, but leaves “the reality of the meeting between God and Man which transforms man’s being” (Friedman, 2002b, p. 87) out of the therapeutic process, a process which, for Buber, requires God’s participation.

These omissions of theism from theistic theories in the practice of psychotherapy does not allow theistic clients access to the transformative and healing core of the theory. In all three of these cases, but especially in Kierkegaard and Buber’s work, these thinkers dedicated their lives to understanding how a person’s relationship with God is necessary to and can bring about transformative and healing mental and spiritual outcomes, including relief from depression, anxiety, and social isolation. To deprive a client of faith access to these theistic insights and relational engagements because the therapist knowingly or unknowingly endorses the professional value of naturalism risks an unethical imposition that could stand in the way of improved health and wellbeing.

Training in Theism

If, as these illustrations discussed above suggest, there is at least the risk of imposing the professional value of naturalism on clients in psychotherapy and counseling, and if that imposition might result in the exclusion, transformation, or omission of theism in the practice of psychotherapy and counseling, then as the code of ethics asserts, ethical counselors will seek training in this area of risk. This would seem to be especially important given that anywhere from 53% to 77% of clients want to discuss religious and spiritual issues with their therapist and 72% of clients would prefer to work with a therapist who respects and integrates the client’s faith into the therapy work (Pearce, 2015). Unfortunately, even among psychotherapists and counselors who do want to be more inclusive of their client’s faiths in their work, many do not feel sufficiently trained (Vogel, et al., 2013) and competent to do so (Hathaway, Scott, & Garver, 2004). In light of these feelings and given the high risk of professional
value imposition just reviewed, regular and meaningful training in theism is critically needed and should be actively pursued by psychotherapists and counselors. This paper introduces some of the key features of theism as an initial educational step toward the development of a more comprehensive training program in this area of significant need.

The Theism Continuum

Theism, like naturalism (Dixon, 2008) or any other worldview is not a monolith. Theists can differ widely on their assumptions and experiences concerning the nature of God’s activity in the world. One theist might experience and understand God as directly and personally involved in every aspect of their life, while another might describe God’s activity in their life as limited to rare miracles. Theistic theologians and philosophers differ in their experience and understanding of God’s involvement in the world as well, including the three exemplar philosophers discussed previously in this article. Aquinas, for example, views God as directly inaccessible and unknowable. For Aquinas, it is only through the via negativa or negative way (i.e., by knowing what God is not), that we gain an indirect sense of what God is. As such, Aquinas:

distances from our world all discussion of real divine relation by stating quite baldly, there is no real relation in God to the creature. Creatures, that is, may experience a real relationship of dependence on and need of God, but God experiences no such relationship to his creatures (Mackey, 1983, p. 182).

Buber’s theism, by contrast, is direct, personal, and relational. In his words, God:

enters into a direct relation with us men in creative, revealing, and redeeming acts, and thus makes it possible for us to enter into a direct relation with him. This ground and meaning of our existence constitutes a mutuality, arising again and again, such as can subsist only between persons” (Buber, 1958, p. 135).

Kierkegaard (1846/1992), like Buber, embraces a relational theism in which God is personal and directly involved in our lives, such that “the God-relationship of the individual human being is the main point” (p. 77). It is “what makes a human being a human being” (p. 244). However, Kierkegaard not only writes about God’s involvement in our lives as a matter of his theorizing, but as his direct experience of God’s difference-making participation in his writing. Kierkegaard states that God not only provided the help and assistance he needed to write each day, but that God also “directed things behind the scenes, when K was not yet conscious of the full meaning of his written words” (Moser & McCreary, 2010, p. 128) and “had curbed me in every respect” (Kierkegaard, 1859/1998, p. 87). As a result of God’s ongoing participation in the writing process, Kierkegaard can state with confidence that God “finds favor” (p. 24) in the works produced and that “it is truly pleasing to God that the truth is served in this way” (p. 60).

Just as our three exemplar theistic philosophers differ in their ideas and experiences of God’s activity in the world, therapists should expect differences among their clients (as well as differences among theistic therapists). Furthermore, they should be prepared for their clients to have a less explicit and less well-defined articulation of their theistic position than theologians and philosophers who have dedicated much of their lives to thinking about these things. Nevertheless, theistic clients will bring to therapy experiences and ideas about God’s activity in the world that matter to the way they live and understand their lives, and it behooves the ethical therapist, who is sensitive to the risk of imposing their personal and professional values and perspectives on their clients, to engage clients in a discussion, first about whether they are theists and second, to what degree they view God as actively involved in their lives. In order to do this effectively, ethical therapists will seek to gain an understanding of the common forms of theism and will benefit from learning to identify where these forms fall on the continuum of God’s activity in the world (fig. 1). They will also examine their own position on these matters and share that position with the client as they discuss how therapy might proceed.

Before examining the common forms of theism, it is important to define the poles of the theism continuum. The terms used to designate these poles, “weak” and “strong” theism do not speak to God’s strength or to the strength of a person’s faith. They also do not designate a moral position, as if one pole is good and the other bad. They simply designate the conceptualized level of God’s activity or involvement in the world. If God is experienced and assumed to be
involved in everything that happens in the world at all times and in all spaces, then the theism is strong. If God is assumed to be only involved in certain, rare times and places, then the theism is weak.

One way to understand the distinction between weak and strong forms of theism is in terms of limitations. In weak theism some form of a priori spatial and/or temporal limits on God’s activity are assumed to be necessary (Slife, Stevenson, & Wendt, 2010). These limits are often put in place to reconcile theism with naturalism. A number of 18th century scientists, for example, limited God’s activity in the workings of nature to the creation period or to occasional miraculous moments of intervention, like the parting of the Red Sea. Aside from these unusual times of direct involvement and intervention, these scientists asserted that natural causes and processes operate without interruption or alteration by a divine source (Dixon, 2008).

Strong theistic approaches, on the other hand, would require that no a priori spatial, temporal, or any other form of limitation is placed on God’s activity. As Slife, Stevenson, and Wendt (2010) describe it, for a strong theist “God’s activity would be seen as potentially unlimited at any given time and at any given place, including the here and now of the psychotherapy session” (p. 166). The only restriction on that potentiality would be any self-limitations that God would choose, not some set of necessary a priori restrictions. God may choose, for example, to limit or “bind” himself through specific promises or covenants made with an individual (Helaman 10:5-10) or group of people (D&C 82:10).

The poles of the theism continuum could as easily be labeled “limited” and “unlimited” as they are weak and strong, but given the predominate use of weak and strong theism in the literature, this article will use those more common terms as well. The figure above indicates where on the theism continuum, with weak theism on the left and strong theism on the right, the most common forms of theism fall. Five of these common forms of theism fall on the left half of the continuum and as such can be regarded as representing varying levels of weak theism. The other five fall on the right half of the spectrum and can be understood as representing varying levels of strong theism. Each of the five weak forms of theism, ranging from the weakest of the weak to the strongest of the weak, will be reviewed first, followed by the forms of strong theism, ranging from the strongest of the strong to the weakest of the strong.

**Weak Theism**

**Deism and Dualism.** These two forms of theism are located on the far-left side of the continuum because both place major limitations on God’s activity. Deism is the idea that at the time of creation God was directly, intentionally, and actively engaged in the world, but once the creation period was complete God stepped away from the universe to allow it to run according to natural laws autonomously (i.e., without divine intervention). The quote below captures the essence of this
According to deism, we can know by the natural light of reason that the universe is created and governed by a supreme intelligence; however, although this supreme being has a plan for creation from the beginning, the being does not interfere with creation; the deist typically rejects miracles and reliance on special revelation as a source of religious doctrine and belief, in favor of the natural light of reason. Thus, a deist typically rejects the divinity of Christ, as repugnant to reason; the deist typically demotes the figure of Jesus from agent of miraculous redemption to extraordinary moral teacher. Deism is the form of religion fitted to the new discoveries in natural science, according to which the cosmos displays an intricate machine-like order; the deists suppose that the supposition of God is necessary as the source or author of this order (Bristow, 2017, section 2.3, para. 4).

The common simile for deism is God as the perfect watchmaker, who set all things in order, wound the watch up, and then let the watch run its intended course without any additional tinkering.

Dualism, like Deism, separates God and God’s activity from the world we live in, but does so spatially. For the dualist there are two worlds or realms, the realm in which God dwells, which is divine and metaphysical, colloquially referred to as heaven, and the realm in which we dwell, the earth, which is human and physical (Dixon, 2008). Given their unique natures (e.g., God and heaven’s perfection vs. Human and Earthly imperfection) these two worlds cannot and do not directly interact or affect each other. They run alongside or parallel to each other. For theologians who embrace dualism this means that Jesus Christ was not and could not be “literally divine” (McCabe, 1985, p. 471) and that “God did not literally suffer in Jesus” when he was nailed to the cross. Instead, God “surveys the suffering of Jesus and the rest of mankind” from his wholly transcendent heavenly purview and perhaps knows “a kind of mental anguish at the follies and sins of creatures” (ibid).

The ontological and metaphysical forms of naturalism described in the first part of this article are both dualistic in that they separate the natural world and its processes, events, and causes, from what they describe as the supernatural world. Of course, for the ontological naturalist, the supernatural realm is a fiction and is not a real world. For the methodological naturalist, it could be real, but it cannot be studied or understood using the scientific method, nor does it have any necessary bearing on the operations of the natural world. In this sense, dualism results in the same outcome as deism, which is that God and God’s activity are not part of the world we currently live (Slife & Reber, 2009).

Although Deism mostly came and went as a form of religion during the Enlightenment, remnants of this weak form of theism continue to inform the way many theists see the world. Dualism, on the other hand, which has been around since the time of the pre-Socratics, is very much alive and well today, both within naturalistic science and scientific psychology, as well as among the laity and some theologians. Given its compatibility with naturalism, many therapists of faith also likely embrace some form of deistic and/or dualistic theism.

In light of its ubiquity, therapists should expect to encounter clients who, when asked about God and God’s activity in the world, would say that they believe God exists and they believe we are created by God. At the same time, they also believe that God created us with our minds and our capacity for reason and empirical science so we would manage and make sense of this life and work out our psychological issues on our own. In such cases, therapy with theistic clients of a deistic or dualistic type would likely proceed with little change from the therapeutic approach used with non-theists or atheists, except that the client’s religion and spirituality might be included as a source of some of the client’s beliefs. These beliefs, like any other beliefs, could be examined in terms of their irrationality and negativity and could be treated using principles and techniques like those described by RCET or other CBT approaches to therapy. It is likely that a client who endorses a deistic and/or dualistic form of theism would have little if any concerns with therapy of this type and would probably support it.

Sacred Places and Sacred Times. Continuing with temporal and spatial limitations on God and God’s activity, there are forms of weak theism that allow for God’s involvement in this world, but only at times and in locations that are unique for their holiness. As such, these forms of theism are found somewhat closer to
the center of the theism continuum. For sacred space theists, there are specific places that are endowed with a special sacredness that allows for God’s involvement in our lives at that place. Within the Jewish faith tradition, Mount Sinai, the tabernacle which housed the ark of the covenant, and eventually the Holy of Holies within Solomon’s temple, were places of a uniquely hallowed designation where a prophet could receive revelation from God in a way that might not be possible otherwise. In Christianity, the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, who was in Bethlehem, Nazareth, Jerusalem, Gethsemane, and Golgotha made these locations sacred places where God walked among men and taught them, healed them, and redeemed them. And, for Muslim theists, Mecca, where Muhammad was born and the Dome of the Rock covering the place where Muhammad’s ascent to heaven began are holy places where God’s presence is manifested.

Many theists take pilgrimages to these holy sites seeking revelation, guidance, and purification from divinity that cannot be achieved in everyday places. Eliade (1980) illuminates the theistic conception and experience of sacred space:

Within the sacred precincts the profane world is transcended. On the most archaic levels of culture this possibility of transcendence is expressed by various images of an opening; here, in the sacred enclosure, communication with the gods is made possible; hence there must be a door to the world above, by which the gods can descend to earth and man can symbolically ascend to heaven. We shall soon see that this was the case in many religions; properly speaking, the temple constitutes an opening in the upward direction and ensures communication with the world of the gods. Every sacred space implies a hierophany, an irruption of the sacred that results in detaching a territory from the surrounding cosmic milieu and making it qualitatively different (p. 25-26).

Sacred times are also viewed and experienced by many theists as unique periods in which God is active in the world. Passover, Ramadan, and both the coming of Christ and the anticipated second coming of Christ are sacred times for many theists for they signify events in which God’s presence and activity was and is made manifest on earth. Similarly, the holy days and festivals that honor these sacred events, like Christmas and Hanukkah, are thought by many theists to be time periods that bring heaven closer to earth than would otherwise be possible. Eliade (1987) speaks of the way in which festivals commemorating sacred events can “reactualize” that sacredness and God’s activity in it. Sacred time, he writes:

Is the time that was created and sanctified by the gods at the period of their gesta, of which the festival is precisely a reactualization. In other words the participants in the festival meet in it the first appearance of sacred time, as it appeared ab origine, in illo tempore. . . By creating the various realities that today constitute the world, the gods also founded sacred time, for the time contemporary with a creation was necessarily sanctified by the presence and activity of the gods (p. 69-70).

Therapy clients who endorse a sacred space/sacred time theism differ from deistic and dualistic theists in that for them God is involved in our world in a difference-making way, albeit only in those places and times that are sacred and holy. All other places and times are profane, meaning they operate as they always do, following natural laws and processes regardless of God’s existence and activity. For these theists, religion and spirituality, then, constitutes more than a set of beliefs or the workings of the rational mind that God has given human beings in our creation. Religion and spirituality include experiences that have occurred in holy places and within sacred times in which God was present and participatory in a meaningful way. It may also mean that they see their path to health and well-being as one that needs to include visits or even pilgrimages to sacred places and participation in sacred events and festivals where the client can commune with God and receive guidance, comfort, and support. Therapists working with clients of this stripe would want and need to be prepared to appreciate, encourage, and integrate visits to sacred sites, like churches, temples, and synagogues, as well as participation in sacred holy days, rituals, and festivals into their work with clients alongside their more naturalistic techniques and practices in order to treat the whole person in a way that does not discriminate against their clients’ sacred place and sacred time theism.

“God of the Gaps”. Somewhat closer to the center of the continuum, God of the Gaps theism emerged initially as an Enlightenment theology that tried to explain phenomena that scientists could not account...
for within their Deistic conception of the world. Plantinga (1997) outlines the precepts of this original conception:

Natural science investigates and lays out the structure of this cosmic machine, in particular by trying to discover and lay bare [natural] laws, and to explain the phenomena in terms of them. There seem to be some phenomena, however, that resist a naturalistic explanation — so far, at any rate. We should therefore postulate a deity in terms of whose actions we can explain these things that current science cannot. Newton’s suggestion that God periodically adjusts the orbits of the planets is often cited as just such an example of God-of-the-gaps theology. The following, therefore, are the essential points of God-of-the-gaps theology. First, the world is a vast machine that is almost entirely self-sufficient; divine activity in nature is limited to those phenomena for which there is no scientific, i.e., mechanical and naturalistic explanation. Second, the existence of God is a kind of large-scale hypothesis postulated to explain what cannot be explained otherwise, i.e., naturalistically. Third, there is the apologetic emphasis: the best or one of the best reasons for believing that there is such a person as God is the fact that there are phenomena that natural science cannot (so far) explain naturalistically (para. 2).

Though both strong theists, like Plantinga, and many naturalists have refuted God of the Gaps as a coherent and persuasive theology, some contemporary theists do invoke God’s activity to explain personal life events and experiences that science cannot or has not yet explained. For example, when medical professionals and the scientific instruments and tests they employ fail to explain how a loved one seemingly miraculously healed from a life-threatening injury or disease following faithful prayers or blessings given on their behalf, family and friends will often reference God’s intervention. When a person hears an audible voice instruct them to turn down one street instead of another and they find out that a horrible car accident occurred on the street not taken, science cannot explain the voice and its direction to the driver, but the activity of God does explain the protective voice for the theist. Given that for a number of these theists there are more than a few Gaps that God fills and God does so on somewhat regular occasion, this form of theism falls closer to the center of the theism continuum.

Contemporary God of the Gaps theists, then, are very comfortable relying upon science for explanations of many of the phenomena and events that take place in the world. They trust in medicine, technology, and scientific research for many, if not most aspects of their lives. As such, theistic clients of this type would be comfortable with science-based therapeutic practices and treatments for much of their therapy. At the same time, they have experienced God’s involvement in their lives in areas where science may be lacking or does not apply, areas like miracles, personal revelation, material blessings that come to the obedient and faithful (e.g., from paying tithing), and so on. In a therapeutic context, clients who embrace this form of theism might want to work with a therapist who is open to talking about these events and experiences and is willing to do so in terms of a God who is involved in certain aspects of the clients’ lives. They may also desire or even expect that in addition to using therapeutic techniques and practices that have received scientific support and are helpful for many aspects of their treatment, the therapist would be open to and might even involve the activity of God in understanding and treating features of the clients’ disorders and issues where scientific explanation and treatment fall short.

**Strong Theism**

A defining feature of weak theism is that the limitations placed on God and God’s activity in the world stem from naturalism and science. In the case of strong theism, there are either no limitations placed on God at all or the limitations are self-imposed by God, but no limitations come from the natural world or scientists’ study of it. Two forms of strong theism that place no limitations on God and God’s activity will first be reviewed followed by a description of two forms of strong theism in which God’s activity is self-limited.

**Supernaturalism.** Located on the extreme right side of the continuum, supernaturalism represents the theological position that there are no natural or consistent causes. Instead, God directly causes everything that exists and happens in every moment and does so solely according to His will. This form of theism, which is sometimes associated with pantheism and extreme forms of theistic determinism, has ancient origins across many early religions and cultures. It was
directly challenged by proponents of the philosophy of naturalism, which emerged primarily at the time of the Renaissance and became fully realized in the Scientific Revolution. Naturalists' chief concern with supernaturalism is that “because in every occurrence only divine will matters, [supernaturalism] precludes any human understanding of cosmic functioning” (Helminiak, 2013, p. 44). Nothing can be explained, even the consistent and replicable speed at which a ball rolls down an incline plane, beyond “God wills it so”.

This form of theism is widely refuted by naturalists and theologians alike, largely because it restricts our understanding of the world and compromises free-will, yet threads of it can be found among some theists who attribute everything that happens in the world and to them personally to God’s will. Therapists who encounter clients who embrace this form of theism will find that they give all credit to God for who they are, what they have experienced, and what they will become. Also, since God is the agent of their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, then any change in their psychology, including change resulting from the therapist’s practices and techniques, will come from God and will only occur if God happens to will it. In this sense, the therapist too is caused by God, as is the theorist who developed the therapeutic approach initially, as is the effectiveness of the techniques associated with the approach. God’s hand is actively and directly bringing about the efficacy of all these things.

Occasionalism. Just to the left of supernaturalism on the theism continuum is occasionalism. Occasionalism, like supernaturalism, holds the position that there are no natural laws and God is the direct cause of all things. However, God has made a covenant to maintain regularities and order in nature by intervening at every point in time. As Plantinga (2001) describes it, “God is already and always intimately acting in nature which depends from moment to moment . . . upon divine activity” (Plantinga, 2001, p. 350). Consequently, Plantinga (2016) argues, every time I have the will to raise my arm, God takes the occasion of my willing it to raise it, for only God can cause such a thing to happen:

The only causal power is divine causal power. God causes every change that occurs. God is the only real cause. Sometimes, however, there is a correlation between certain events and God’s causing some other event; for example, there is a more or less constant correlation between my willing to raise my arm and my arm’s rising. That is because God ordinarily takes my willing to raise my arm as the occasion for causing my arm to rise (p. 136).

This “more or less constant correlation” that God allows and facilitates makes possible regularities in the world that make explanation and prediction possible and still allows for human agency (though Plantinga himself is unclear on how our will is not also caused by God). Occasionalists then, like Supernaturalists, give all credit to God for all that is and all that they do and become, but they also appreciate God’s promise to act consistently and constantly, for the most part in predictable and understandable ways. Theistic clients of this type would be less likely to describe God as capricious than the supernaturalist and would demonstrate less of a superstitious theism. The therapy process, from the occasionalist perspective, consists of a series of more or less constantly correlated human willing/ God acting events that are all brought to fruition by God. As such, God is fully present and intimately involved in every aspect of therapy and its outcomes, for good or ill, just as God is active in all mental disorders and issues, and in every occasion for health and wellbeing. Occasionalism, then, is a thoroughgoing theism in which God acts consistently and constantly in the lives of clients and therapists and in their work together.

Concurrence. The forms of theism that are right of center on the theism continuum all involve a level of God’s self-limitation that is not found in occasionalism and supernaturalism. In concurrence theism, for example, God is the primary cause of all things, but he allows human beings to be secondary causes (i.e., to make decisions; Vicens, n.d.). Sprout (n.d.) describes concurrence through the example of Job:

In essence, concurrence says that two or more parties can act in the same event and produce a given outcome without all parties having the same intent. Job’s life is a good illustration of concurrence. Satan intended to discredit Job, and by extension, to discredit God. The intent of the Chaldeans and Sabeans was to enrich themselves. Our Lord’s intent was to vindicate Job’s faith. Each of these players was necessarily involved in Job’s suffering, but at different levels and with different motivations (para. 3).
Concurrent theism is a popular form of theism today as it supports many theists’ belief in and experience of moral agency and accountability, but it also acknowledges a very involved and purposeful God who wants human beings to grow and learn from their choices and mistakes while still guiding us toward the outcomes He has designed for us. Therapists who encounter concurrent theists as clients and have a conversation with them about God and God’s activity in therapy will likely find that they give God ultimate credit for their lives and their circumstances. At the same time, they also genuinely believe that their choices and the choices of others matter and have contributed to who they are and to the issues and concerns that have led them to seek therapy—all for the greater good of realizing God’s will. Not unlike the example of Job above, the concurrent theistic client would see such things as parental neglect or even abuse in their childhood as bad choices made by parents that nevertheless work within God’s plan for the client. The client, like Job, will desire to make choices about how to interpret, live with, and heal from that history in ways that align with God’s will, and a therapist who understands that desire can be helpful in that process, for the therapist too makes choices about treatment that, from the client’s perspective are ultimately concurrent with the activity of God, whether the therapist intends that concurrence or not.

**Process Theism and Open Theism.** These two forms of theism both embrace the idea that God self-limits, each to varying degrees, for the sake of having a full and meaningful relationship with his children. In process theism:

it is an essential attribute of God to be fully involved in and affected by temporal processes. This idea contrasts neatly with traditional forms of theism that hold God to be or at least conceived as being, in all respects non-temporal (eternal), unchanging (immutable,) and unaffected by the world (impassible). Process theism does not deny that God is in some respects eternal, immutable, and impassible, but it contradicts the classical view by insisting that God is in some respects temporal, mutable, and passible (Viney, 2018, para. 1).

Open theism increases the level of God’s self-limitation to such a degree that there is genuine give and take with God, God allows himself to be surprised by us, and we can choose to go against God’s will. As Rissler (n.d.) describes it:

Because God loves us and desires that we freely choose to reciprocate His love, He has made His knowledge of, and plans for, the future conditional upon our actions. Though omniscient, God does not know what we will freely do in the future. Though omnipotent, He has chosen to invite us to freely collaborate with Him in governing and developing His creation, thereby also allowing us the freedom to thwart His hopes for us. (para. 1)

The distinguishing feature of both of these forms of theism is human self-determination, which God allows for and makes genuine by limiting his determination and to some extent his foreknowledge. Therapy clients who embrace these forms of theism experience their relationship with God as mutual and open to the possibility that the human side can persuade the God side of the relationship in some ways. They see God as involved in every aspect of their lives, but not in a determinative way, as much as in an open, responsive, and collaborative way. These clients may not only want to discuss this open and responsive relationship with their therapist, but they would likely also want the therapist to participate in this relationship, collaborating with the client and with God as active participants working together in the treatment process.

**Including Theism in Psychotherapy**

This review of the various forms of theism located along the theism continuum is not intended to be exhaustive. Nor does it suggest that theists find themselves located once and for all on a given point on the continuum. As with other aspects of human being, theism is contextual and fluid and can shift and change, especially in times of crisis and suffering, which are often the times in which people seek out therapy. In light of this, the theism continuum should be considered a guide or signpost to help therapists prepare for and navigate their initial and ongoing discussions with theistic clients. It also offers therapists of faith some points for reflection on their own theism and the opportunity to think carefully and critically about how they generally relate theism to naturalism within their therapeutic approach and how they might need to adjust their typical approach when working...
with clients who embrace a form of theism that differs from their own.

To encourage that careful and critical reflection a brief overview of some of the challenges that accompany the common ways in which counselors and psychotherapists might include theism in therapy is provided. As figure 2 indicates, some of these inclusions of theism in therapy are weak in that they assume an add-on God who is limited by natural laws and processes and is therefore not a necessary factor in the therapy treatment. Other forms of inclusion of theism in therapy are strong because an altering God is assumed to be necessary to the treatment and unlimited in his activity in the therapy.

Compartmental Theism
Therapists who embrace a weak form of theism (e.g., dualism) may be prone to compartmentalizing theism. Slife, Stevenson, and Wendt (2010) describe this approach:

These therapists may consider themselves to be strong theists personally, perhaps disclosing their religious affiliation and/or theistic beliefs in order to attract or build rapport with theistic clients. However, their professional theories and explanations do not reflect strong theism as a core philosophy, and, in fact, are often identical to secular and naturalistic approaches (p. 170).

Some clinicians refer to the compartmentalization of their theism from their psychotherapy in terms of wearing “two hats” (Landau, 2017). They will wear their theism hat to learn about their client’s faith and speak in their same religious language. They may even talk of their own theism and acknowledge that God’s activity is an important part of mental health and wellbeing. Then, when they engage in the practice of their therapy and treat the client’s presenting concerns, they will take off their theism hat and put on their naturalism hat, because when it comes to therapeutic efficacy, “God’s influence is unnecessary to the mechanism of client change” (Slife, Stevenson, & Wendt, 2010, p. 170). Of course, “God Talk” can be added-on to help the client “relax and relate” (ibid), but as Lovinger (1996) describes it, “psychotherapy with religious clients is not essentially different from nonreligious clients” (p. 353).

Compartmentalized theism does include God in psychotherapy to some degree and would encourage sensitivity and respect for the client’s theism in some ways, but it does not include theism in the psychotherapy process itself. This may not be an issue for some theistic clients, who may share a compartmentalized sense of their theism with the therapist, but for theistic clients who embrace a stronger theism, compartmentalized theism would be at odds with their understanding and experience of God and God’s activity.

Peripheral Theism
Many therapists see the value of religious practices and activities, such as prayer and forgiveness, in promoting mental health and wellbeing, and some therapists practice these activities themselves. Despite their theistic origins and depending on the therapist’s
Compartmentalization tendencies, these practices and activities can be:

- conceptualized either as requiring an active God or as working through more conventional psychological mechanisms, and thus not requiring an active God. In peripheral theism, therapy strategies may include and even focus on these peripheral aspects, but their relation to or need of an active God is not part of their understanding or significance (Slife, Stevenson, & Wendt, 2010, p. 170).

In peripheral theism, then, the therapist includes theistic practices and activities in the therapy process, but ignores or separates off the theistic components of the practice that for theists are necessary. Consequently, rather than forgiveness requiring God’s grace to soften the heart of a wounded or offended person, forgiveness is understood only as “a sequential process of ceased resentment followed by understanding, empathy, and altruism” (Krejci, 2004, p. 96). God’s activity is moved to the periphery and as such becomes unnecessary to the implementation and efficacy of the practice in the psychotherapy process. The therapist can add on theistic language and reference God’s grace and other activities in the application of the practice, but only because the client desires it, not because God’s activity is necessary for change. Thus, as Liccione (2017) states with regard to the use of forgiveness in therapy as a peripheral aspect of theism, “one of its advantages is that it can be applied with or without a theological context.” (Liccione, 2017, para. 8). Not so for the strongly theistic client who experiences God’s grace moving through them as a necessary condition for forgiveness.

Inconsistent Theism

Some therapists may believe that some aspects of therapy require and relate to an active God, while other aspects do not. Slife, Stevenson, and Wendt (2010) describe inconsistent theism as:

an attempt to combine—within the context of therapy—the incompatible assumptions of naturalism and theism, resulting in a dualistic form of weak theism where God’s activity is limited to a certain realm or set of factors. The theistic components of therapy are thus inconsistent with the naturalistic components (p. 171).

Inconsistent theism is closer to strong theism than compartmentalized and peripheral theism, but limitations are still placed on God and God’s activity, and they are usually put in place by the therapist for naturalistic reasons.

Inconsistent theistic therapists might include theistic interventions and practices in areas that appear more obviously spiritual to them (e.g., seeking forgiveness), but exclude theistic interventions and practices from areas that they perceive to be more naturalistic (e.g., drug therapy). Such an approach would be incompatible with strong forms of theism that place no limitations on God’s activity and are embraced by many theistic clients. As a result, psychotherapists approaching theism inconsistently might intentionally or unintentionally teach their clients that “the spiritual portion of therapy, in which God’s activity is clearly needed, could be viewed as an add-on to the naturalistic theories and methods that are presumably seen as neutral to God’s activity” (Slife, Stevenson, & Wendt, 2010, p. 172).

Thoroughgoing Theism

For counselors and psychotherapists who assume a thoroughgoing theism, “God is seen to be already present in the world and is potentially involved at all times and in all places” (Slife, Stevenson, & Wendt, 2010, p. 168), including the therapy office. This could mean that God is seen as the sufficient cause of everything that happens in therapy, as in supernaturalism and occasionalism. Or, rather, God is a necessary condition for what happens in therapy, along with other psychological and contextual conditions, including the client and the therapist’s free-will, as in open and process theism. In any case, “God’s activity is conceptualized to be the center of therapeutic change” (ibid). This negates the possibility of compartmentalization or inconsistent theism and means “prayer and other peripheral aspects have a unique meaning from their relation to a God who is already present and functionally active” (p. 167). For the thoroughgoing theistic therapist, “God’s necessary activity is clearly reflected at all levels of theory, method, and practice” (ibid).

Strongly theistic clients would find the inclusion of God’s involvement in every aspect of therapy supportive of their thoroughgoing theistic worldview and
would work very well with therapists who also embrace this form of theism. Clients who embrace weak forms of theism, on the other hand, would not share the thoroughgoing theistic therapist’s perspective that “God’s influence is conceptualized all the way down” (Slife, Stevenson, & Wendt, 2010, p. 168) and would likely prefer some form of compartmentalization of theism in the therapy process. As with the other risks of a mismatch between the therapist’s conceptualization of theism and that of the client’s, it will be essential for therapists to have initial and ongoing conversations about their clients’ position on theism and naturalism and to carefully and critically examine any potential risks of their personal and professional values, including in this case strong theistic values, being imposed on the theistic clients they treat.

**Conclusion**

Theistic clients who are members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are as likely to vary across the theism continuum as other religious and spiritual individuals. Thus, therapists who are also church members should not presume that their church member clients’ theism is uniform or matches their own. It may be true that “members believe God speaks to them, answers their questions and responds to their needs” (Oswald, n.d., slide 2), and that God’s direct revelation to individuals “may come in a variety of ways, such as “pure intelligence flowing into you ... sudden strokes of ideas”, or even as “a small number of Mormons report that they have had a vision” (Koltko, 1991, p. 15). Still, a number of theistic members place temporal and/or spatial limits on the conditions under which that revelation takes place. Some conceptualize and compartmentalize the natural aspects of life and their psychology as separate from the theistic aspects. Others see God as ultimately responsible for everything that happens to this world and to them, even if they have a secondary free-will that works concurrently with God’s primary purposes. And, at least a few members of the church conceptualize God’s activity as self-limited to accommodate for human self-direction, even to such a degree that God can be surprised by our decisions and actions or perhaps even change His mind in response to our persuasive entreaties.

Being members of the same church does not obviate the risk of value imposition in the area of theism. It could, given potential presumptions of similarity by therapists actually encourage value imposition, including the professional value of naturalism. Thus, it is especially important that therapists who are members of the church receive training in theism, carefully and critically evaluate their own theistic position, and engage their clients, including especially clients who are members of the church, in initial and ongoing dialog about their theism so they can provide therapy in a sensitive, respectful, and ethical manner.

**References**


Author's Bio

JEFFREY S. REBER, Ph.D., LPC, is professor of psychology at the University of West Georgia, a fellow of the American Psychological Association, a licensed professional counselor, and the founder of Relational Counseling and Consulting Services. He is a leader in the field of theistic psychology, which treats our relationship with God as fundamental to our being, our relationships with others, and our morality. Dr. Reber is the author of Are We Special? The Truth and the Lie about God’s Chosen People and The Paradox of Perfection: How Embracing our Imperfection Perfects Us, as well as more than 30 articles and book chapters that are informed by his uniquely theistic relational perspective. He has given dozens of presentations and workshops on theistic psychology across the continent and he has successfully implemented his unique approach to relationships in the classroom, in organizational administration and leadership, in his psychotherapy practice, and in marriage and family relations courses. Dr. Reber’s books specialize in treating growing societal issues and concerns, like narcissism and perfectionism, from a relational perspective that interfaces faith and psychology.