Review of *Healing Souls: Psychotherapy in the Latter-day Saint Community* by Eric G. Swedin

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Book Review


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In 1975, Elder Vaughn J. Featherstone was the first General Authority to address the then-fledgling Association of Mormon Counselors and Psychotherapists. Dr. Eric Swedin’s comprehensive historical review (Swedin, 2003) of psychology and counseling within the LDS community takes its title (see p. 58) from a notable phrase in Elder Featherstone’s landmark address — “you are healing souls” (1975, p. 41).

This is an impressive scholarly work, drawing extensively from the files of noted LDS psychologists and the LDS Church Historical Department library archives. It comprehensively details the work of LDS behavioral scientists and mental health clinicians as they have struggled to “become more of a link and bridge between revealed truth and the world of scholarship” (Maxwell, 1976, p. 70).

This carefully-researched book most clearly demonstrates such a “link and bridge.”

Themes

There are three key themes in this book. First, comparing the values inherent in psychology with those of religion — because modern psychology performs the same basic functions for individuals that religion traditionally has. A second theme is how modern psychology has substantially affected the overall LDS community and culture. A third theme is the specific integration of modern psychology into the modern Latter-day Saint healing of souls — and how this differs from other such integrations in modern culture.

Swedin states (p. 4) that he articulates these themes, not by creating intellectual categories or theories, but by following the method of “descriptive survey” outlined by William James (1902), emphasizing the belief that “a large acquaintance with particulars often makes us wiser than the possession of abstract formulas” (1902, xvii). Indeed, Swedin reports a wide array of such particulars from the field in order to meet this goal.

Synopsis

Initial chapters discuss the cultural progression from religion as traditional psychology, through religious objections to modern psychology, to eventual integration of theology and psychology in the Protestant tradition. This is compared with the initial sharp contrast between the LDS perspective and modern psychology, which progressed to a more integrative stance after World War II, as demonstrated by the establishment of LDS Social Services, the LDS Personal Guidance Association, the Society for the Study of Mormon Life, the Association of Mormon Counselors & Psychotherapists, and the Institute for Studies in Values and Human Behavior (a joint project of Brigham Young University and LDS Social Services). Parts of this discussion, particularly the genesis of AMCAP, were previously published in the AMCAP Journal (Swedin, 2000).

The significant work of Allen E. Bergin and others (see, for example, Richards & Bergin, 2004) within the...
Institute at BYU is reviewed in depth, detailing their courageous efforts to increase psychology’s acceptance of spirituality and efforts toward articulating a complete theory of human behavior based on LDS beliefs. Swedin summarily praises Bergin as “a man of faith and science, a voice crying out for a greater spiritual understanding in the practice of psychotherapy” (p. 89).

Although the theoretical goal of a complete theory based on LDS beliefs was not realized, modern psychology has certainly “not gained ascendance over traditional religious doctrines in the LDS community” (p. 2). Nevertheless, as Swedin demonstrates, the LDS community has “adopted professional psychotherapy as an essential ingredient in the cure of souls. Traditional priesthood-based counseling has grown more sophisticated, with LDS Social Services and private practitioners providing professional therapy for the more serious cases” – with the specific approach to counseling currently advocated in the church’s handbook for bishops and stake presidents being “strongly reminiscent of the philosophy in Carl Rogers’ client-centered therapy” (p. 113).

In addition, “a large number of psychological self-help books are being published for the LDS audience . . . there are also a variety of gospel-oriented therapies and popular motivational psychologies current in the LDS community” (p. 113). Swedin compares and reviews a number of these works, including those by R. Lanier Britsch & Terrance D. Olson, Martha & John Beck, Stephen R. Covey, Clyde A. Parker & L. Alan Westover, Genevieve De Hoyos, Richard L. Bednar & Scott R. Peterson, Joe J. Christensen, Daniel K. Judd, and C. Terry Warner. Building on an insightful summary of ethnopsychiatry (chapter 5), Swedin compares such gospel-oriented therapies and priesthood-based counseling in an insightful discussion of How Does Psychotherapy Heal.

The psychiatrist Louis Moench has insightfully pointed out “the line between religious thought or behavior and mental disorder is sometimes [quite] thin” (1985, p. 64) – and because of religion’s central position in people’s lives, religion “often becomes the matrix upon which psychopathology finds its expression” (1985, p. 72; see also Klaf & Hamilton, 1961). Chapter 6 addresses psychopathology specific to LDS culture and situations commonly encountered by therapists who treat Latter-day Saints, discussing relevant publications by K-Lynn Paul, Richard Heaps & Karen Walker, Marybeth Raynes, Jeffrey Johnson, Marlene Payne, Eric Stephen & Judith Smith, Robert Rees, Richard Cummings, and Elder Dallin H. Oaks.

Chapter 6 also cites insightful comments regarding appropriate roles for the faithful psychotherapist regarding priesthood blessings. Also discussed is the intriguing question of interpreting mental disorders as demonic possession, reviewing statements and/or research by Carlfred Broderick, William Hyde, Wesley Craig, and John & Helen Watkins. Swedin concludes (p. 130) that this “special case of pathology” (i.e., demonic possession) illustrates some of the significant difficulties confronting the formulation of a comprehensive LDS-based theory of psychology.

Chapter 7 reviews the changing roles of women – comparing feminism, traditional gender roles, depression and modern psychotherapy – by examining the influence of the LDS church Correlation Department, the proposed Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), the Mormon History Association, and such publications as Exponent II, Sunstone, and Dialogue. Relevant works by Helen Andelin, Sonia Johnson, Sherrie Johnson, Rochey & Robert Burgoyne, Louise Dgn, Deborah Christensen, President Gordon B. Hinkley and President Ezra Taft Benson are summarized. Swedin concludes that the believing church member is encouraged to utilize scholarship and intellectual inquiry as “tools to gain knowledge” – but that “spiritual inquiry should always be the prime tool” (p. 136).

Sexuality is a topic central to the practice of psychotherapy. Chapter 8 reviews the history and complexities of attitudes toward chastity, birth control, abortion, homosexuality, and sex abuse in the LDS community. Swedin notes that although the creation of a formal LDS philosophy of sexuality has not been attained, the general gospel assumption is that “sexuality has always been considered a positive good” (p. 155) – and, because Latter-day Saints who gain the highest kingdom of heaven continue to procreate (D&C 132:19), thus sexuality is considered godly, and parenthood divine: “In the LDS community, spirituality is found in motherhood and fatherhood” (p. 155). Among other authors,4 relevant writings of various LDS mental health professionals are reviewed: Lowell Bennion, Lester Bush Jr., Kenneth Cannon, Victor L. Brown Jr., D. Corydon Hammond & Robert Stahmann, Marybeth Raynes, and Carlfred Broderick – along with key statements by Presidents Spencer W. Kimball, George Q. Cannon, Brigham Young, and Joseph F. Smith. The compatible views of historian John C. Burnham (p.153) and sociologist Edwin M. Schur (pp. 160-161) are also cited.
Views of homosexuality and sex abuse within the LDS community are insightfully and respectfully reviewed, with an emphasis on Clyde A. Parker’s [AMCAP President, 1987-88] call for “compassion rather than judgment” (1987, p. 1). An enlightening summary of the writings of Elizabeth R. Moberly and Thomas & Ann Pritt reviews the essentials of reparative theory (pp. 168-172), which Swedin points out (p. 177) has great potential to increase understanding. Relevant church publications and other authors are reviewed: Robert Blattner, Max McBride, Don Harryman, Robert Card, Elizabeth C. James, P. Scott Richards, A. Dean Byrd, David Matheson, Anne Horton & Kent Harrison, Elder Dallin H. Oaks, President Gordon B. Hinckley and Elder Richard C. Scott.

Chapter 9 comprises an investigation of the selfish emphasis in modern psychology – a discussion which continues in current AMCAP dialogue (see Smith & Draper, 2003). In critiquing the modern narcissistic therapeutic ideology, Swedin draws on the work of Bernie Zilbergeld, Christopher Lasch, Philip Rieff, Robert N. Bellah, John Burnham, Paul Vitz, Michael & Lise Wallach, Sigmund Freud, Erich Fromm, Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow and others. Swedin points out “none of these therapists wanted to promote selfishness per se, but ... the teachings of these theorists, flawed by a limited understanding of human motivations, have led to further selfishness” (p. 192). Because of the focus on individualism, much of the modern therapeutic ethos, then, is counter to the LDS focus on “collective [i.e., family-based] rather than individual” salvation: “The preoccupation with the self that so strongly characterizes the therapeutic ethos finds no resonance with the principles of family salvation” (p. 195). Swedin clarifies the relationship of selfish theories within the LDS psychotherapy community by drawing on the writings of Peter L. Berger, Elder Neal A. Maxwell, President Ezra Taft Benson, Robert L. Millert, Erich Fromm, Michael & Lise Wallach, Genevieve De Hoyos, C. Terry Warner, Victor L. Brown Jr. and Allen E. Bergin – concluding that “the modern cure of souls in the LDS community has implemented the rejection of selfish in its therapies” (p. 198). Indeed, “the determined commitment of the Latter-day Saints to their religious traditions provided the community with the strength to accept and reject the aspects of the modern psychologies that they found desirable or distasteful” (p. 198).

Value to AMCAP membership

This book is a key contribution to the field. Its succinct summaries of various LDS-based theories and critics are presented objectively and clearly. Every LDS behavioral scientist, counselor, and psychotherapist could benefit from reading this important book. Indeed, the final summarizing essay of the book, “Conclusion: Contemporary Lives,” should be required reading for all students of LDS behavioral science and mental health.

Limitations

Although this book masterfully addresses significant pre-1990 contributions, only brief mention is made of the more recent developments within AMCAP and the LDS therapeutic community. It would, for example, be instructive to clarify how the important work of the past decade is based on the foundations laid by the earlier work.

Additional analyses of the significant strength and breadth of recent work – and the resulting influence both within the general LDS community and on the national scene – would be a most welcome addition, although it might very well prove to be so large an undertaking as to require an entire additional volume. But this, too, would be very welcome.

Conclusion

Swedin, then, does not present an exhaustive history, but rather a significant historical overview of many LDS psychological works as they pertain to relevant gospel doctrine. However, no more comprehensive analysis brings together so many diverse historical details of LDS psychology as does this book. The bibliography list, alone, provides a significant compilation of works relevant to LDS psychology, and will prove invaluable to future researchers.

The conclusions of this book are best summarized by Swedin’s telling statement: “the efforts of professional LDS psychotherapists ... have created a situation in which psychology is not only accepted but has redefined the cure of souls in the LDS community” (p. 3).

But most of all, it’s a very enjoyable book, easily readable and pleasant to peruse.
References

Ellsworth, H.S. (1979, August). Answer to I Have a Question: “Is it our understanding that we are to propagate children as long and as frequently as the human body will permit? Is there not any kind of gospel family planning?” Ensign, 23.


The discussion of birth control is reference to an Ensign article by a gynecologist, who was also a member of the Salt Lake temple presidency, that stated:

the [specific] method of spacing children — discounting possible medical or physical effects — makes little difference. Abstinence, of course, is also a form of contraception, and like any other method it has side effects, some of which are harmful to the marriage relationship ... prophets past and present have never stipulated that bearing children was the sole function of the marriage relationship. Prophets have taught [see 1 Cor. 7:4-5 JST; Kimball, 1975, p. 4] that physical intimacy is a strong force in strengthening the love bond in marriage, enhancing and reinforcing marital unity. Indeed, it is the rightful gift of God to the married. (Ellsworth, 1979, p. 23)