

Is secular “psychotherapy” compatible with the principles and the anthropology of the Orthodox Church? (An interview with Dr Jean Claude Larchet)

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An interview with Dr Jean Claude Larchet(), University Professor who holds a doctorate in the Humanities, has studied Psychopathology, Philosophy and the Eastern Church Fathers and has also had clinical experience in psychiatric hospitals.*

This is a transcribed excerpt from “Radio-Paraga”, a program in the official radio station of the Church of Greece. It was broadcast on Sunday, 6 February 2000, under the title: “Is Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy a Science?”. The program was presented by father Konstantinos Stratigopoulos.

Fr K.S.: Thank you for being with us tonight. The subject of our broadcast is psychotherapy according to the Eastern Church Fathers versus secular “psychotherapy”. Since you are an expert in this field, we would like to ask you a few questions. In your opinion, is secular “psychotherapy” compatible with the principles and the anthropology of the Orthodox Church?

Mr Jean Claude Larchet: I think that we need to make a distinction. There are many types of secular “psychotherapy”, but some of them are more prevalent, I would say, especially psychoanalysis; and in the psychoanalytic movement we have Freudian psychoanalysis and Jungian psychoanalysis. As far as Freudian psychoanalysis is concerned, I would say that there is a fairly significant issue of incongruity with Christian anthropology. In the

first place, this is because Freud makes certain premises that suggest a vision of man as a being who denies God and his relationship with God; besides that, Freud has a totally materialistic concept of man and naturally, his perception of the shaping of human character with all its singularities is almost at odds with the Christian perspective.

Let me explain myself; Freud, for instance, believes that at the root of everything there are two major categories of forces, two drives, which are the sexual and the aggressive urges. In Freud's thought, man's whole psychological life can be explained by these two, which also include more sublimated, idealized impulses. For example, even the inclinations demonstrated by man in church life, in philosophical thought, in artistic creation, all the above tendencies are, according to Freud, forms of a certain form of employing, a certain kind of channelling the sexual energy and we obviously know that, contrary to that notion, **in the Orthodox Church sexuality is an energy that constitutes a diversion of what was initially a God-oriented energy; in other words, man was created by God with all of his functions oriented towards Him! From the moment man distanced himself from God and sinned, from that moment, his energy deviated in various ways, especially in sexuality, but also in malicious aggression.**

I would also like to say one more thing about aggression. In Freud's view, there is a primordial aggressiveness in human beings, that is directed against everyone else; but, **for Christianity, aggressiveness should normally be directed towards our fight against evil, our fight against sin, so when this aggressiveness turns against other people, it constitutes a form of perversion, a malicious orientation.** Of course here we already have an entirely different vision [of humanity].

From yet another perspective, there is one more principle in Freud's perception that is totally incompatible with Christianity. It is the fact that **Christian anthropology strongly insists on man's freedom, on the fact that man has a capacity for self-determination that he must use in cooperation with God's Grace in order to evolve.** By contrast, Freud thinks that man is already conditioned - in terms of his psychic structure, his psychological life - from the first years of his life and therefore is subject to drives that have been instilled in his subconscious, so that he is in a sense confined and unable to free himself on his own.

I would also like to say a few words, briefly, about other forms of “psychotherapy”. We have just mentioned Jungian “psychotherapy”, which is another, highly developed, form. Apparently Jung has a vision, slightly different from Freud’s, slightly more spiritual, but it is not a Christian spirituality. There is, for example, **great interest, among various mystic or esoteric movements, regarding Jungian psychology and very often we find this type of “psychotherapy” in connection with para-religions or beliefs that are alien to Christianity! So now in the West we are witnessing the development of psychotherapies which are closely linked to para-religious movements and very often this is a means used by some of those involved in such movements in order to lure people to them!**

Therefore, the problems we are facing, in my opinion, come down to the fact that **there is no form of psychotherapy that is really independent from anthropological interventions.** What I mean to say is that **behind every form of psychotherapy there is an implicit anthropology, i.e. a specific understanding of man, and often these “psychotherapies” are constructed outside Christianity and they are different precisely in terms of their anthropology; by employing such psychotherapies we run the risk, if you wish, of directing man’s psychic life towards models that do not fit in with the Christian faith.**

Fr K.S.: Can secular “psychotherapy” contribute to the therapeutic tradition of the Church?

Mr Jean Claude Larchet: Actually, in my books I have elaborated on this, as well, and it may seem strange, but I have developed the opposite idea, i.e. the notion that, on the contrary, it is the Church that has something to offer to secular “psychotherapy”. In the end, secular “psychotherapy” often seems too inadequate in its understanding of man; in other words, it conceives man in a purely psychological and purely social frame of reference, but not at all in a spiritual context. Undoubtedly, in Christian anthropology the psychic life is not truly autonomous, since it is partly associated with the life of the body and very often depends on the state of the body. The Fathers of the Church have often mentioned this; in some cases we encounter mental illnesses or mental disorders which are associated with physical disorders and which we have to treat with organic means, with the use of medications.

But, on the other hand, mental disorders are, in many cases, associated with spiritual maladies! We should, therefore, make a clear distinction between conditions that fall under the mental or the spiritual category of ailments and make sure we do not confuse the two. In the Orthodox Church we justifiably have a tradition of healing spiritual maladies. **The Church Fathers have considerably developed this approach by studying the passions, the way they operate and their negative impact in human life; they have also demonstrated that almost all passions engender significant disorders in man's psyche. For example, in the lives of saints we can see that anger is the cause of many mental illnesses or that the passion of sadness creates anxiety and anguish; acedia (spiritual apathy, sloth) is a source of depression and debility, whereas the passion of fear gives rise to neurotic phobias.** So I'm thinking that there are, within the traditional patristic heritage of the Orthodox Church, and especially in the prolific teachings of the Church Fathers, there are many elements that we can use in order to understand the disorders of the human psyche, tend to them and heal them, contrary to the analyses suggested by modern psychotherapies. When we read "The Ladder" by St John Climacus, when we read the books by Evagrius Ponticus, we find a very elegant, very subtle and exceedingly profound analysis of the operation of the human psyche. And they can be extremely beneficial to us, but unfortunately this patristic heritage has often been largely forgotten.

Fr K.S.: What does the Orthodox Tradition offer to the treatment of mental illnesses?

Mr Jean Claude Larchet: It is exactly here, I think, that we can find a wonderfully rich body of teachings which are, nevertheless, somewhat forgotten. I believe that it is precisely through the study of ascetic texts that we can attain an awareness of how our psychic life operates, both in its healthy and afflicted state, in a way that is entirely consistent with Christian anthropology.

Fr K.S.: Can secular anthropology heal the soul?

Mr Jean Claude Larchet: Listen! We need to make a distinction between two elements in the soul; we need to

discern between the mental and the spiritual. If the question is whether it can heal spiritual maladies, then the obvious answer is that no, it can't. However, I would say that occasionally secular "psychotherapies" can provide some relief from mental illnesses. But **there is no "psychotherapy" that can truly heal the soul.** The evidence, if you wish, is in the fact that these psychotherapies are manifold and diverse. If there was really even **one** among them that could heal, then it would have managed to become prevalent, it could have eclipsed the others. The fact that we are constantly looking for new methods of psychotherapy shows that we have not found a satisfactory form of therapy. At least some psychotherapies allow for the alleviation of certain types of psychic suffering resulting from mental disorders. But I would say that we can also, in our current practice, provide some sort of relief thanks to the ministry of listening. I believe that priests, through the practice of hearing confessions, if they devote time to listen to their parishioners who come to confess, if they listen to them with love and also with a compassionate, sympathetic disposition and aided by praying, they can reach as good as, if not better results than those of "psychotherapy". I would say that Christianity, the Church, offers much more, because when a patient goes to a "psychotherapist", the "psychotherapist" listens to him and the patient often confides secrets of his innermost life, his difficulties, etc., thus finding some relief, but **the Church offers more than lending an ear to our distress; it offers charitable love, God's forgiveness, and therefore the dissolution of certain root issues, the suppression of certain causes of psychic pain to the extent that some mental disorders are associated with sins and passions.**

Fr K.S.: Are the methods of secular "psychotherapy" in accordance with the therapeutic work of the Church?

Mr Jean Claude Larchet: I'd like to stress the fact that there is a fairly significant difference between the way secular "psychotherapy" works and the way we can be healed inside the Church. Let me also add something concerning the difference between psychoanalysis and what takes place in the Church and has sometimes been compared with psychoanalysis - namely, the mystery of confession.

The psychoanalytic principle is based on talking about the past, on relating it in every minute detail and discovering

the situations that could have been the source of mental disorders. The aim, eventually, is to become conscious of and express things that may have been forgotten and could have been linked with the origin of illnesses. But the patient or the person who is undergoing psychoanalysis ultimately has to comprehend this situation without being offered the means for finding a meaning in it, or, even better, for overcoming the situation in any way - other than by accepting it.

Inside the Church there is a very big difference, because confession is not only a return to the past, but also the revelation of one's real psychological state to his spiritual father, whereby the latter will be able to give specific help so that the person who confesses can, in his turn, find a way to fight against his mental state and eventually be released from it. But confession is not merely a psychological exercise; it is a practice that needs to be interconnected with ascetic living as a whole - particularly with praying and participating in the Church's sacramental life through which we receive what can actually help us: God's Grace. In "psychotherapy" we encounter man-made means of treatment and very often we do not have the strength to face the state of our inner life that is revealed through "psychoanalysis". However, in the context of the Church we receive the help and discerning guidance of our spiritual father on the one hand, and the help of Divine Grace on the other.

I would also like to stress the fact that psychoanalysis poses certain risks, because some people are actually faced with difficult situations they experienced in the past, situations that they are made to recall and become aware of, but are unable to handle or even bear. Meanwhile, the psychoanalyst can offer them no means, no way to overcome such situations; in fact, psychoanalytic sessions sometimes result in tragedy: there have been frequent cases of suicide or, instead of therapy, we often see a change for the worse and further deterioration in the patient's state; that's precisely because "psychotherapy" lacks this idea, or this reality, of man benefiting from a powerful external source of help, which is what happens in the Church.

On the other hand, I would also like to add one more thing, if I may. There is danger, indeed, in recalling our old passions in detail. The Church Fathers advise us to confess our passions, to recount before God the sins we have committed - not just be aware of them - and of course to be able to confess all of our difficulties, as well. But the Fathers

advise us against and discourage re-living in detail whatever in our past didn't end well, whatever bears a connection with our sins. That's precisely because confession is not a recollection with which the patient is subsequently stuck, but something that we confess before God in order to receive His forgiveness. And forgiveness means exactly the elimination of all pathological effects, even of the very source of the illness or disorders connected - when there is a connection - with sin; in other words, God's forgiveness really offers a therapy that secular "psychotherapy" essentially doesn't.

Fr K.S.: Professor Larchet, we are very grateful for your contribution and for everything you have told us. Thank you very much. Goodnight.



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Mr Jean Claude Larchet was born in North-East France in 1949. He is Doctor of Philosophy and Doctor of Theology in the University of Strasbourg, as well as the author of fifteen books and numerous articles on theology and on the spirituality of the Church Fathers, which have been translated into twelve languages. He is considered as one of the leading Orthodox patrologists and an important voice of Orthodox Christianity in Europe. He lives and works as a professor in France and is the executive editor, in two French publishing houses, of a series of books on contemporary spiritual figures of the Orthodox Church, including the Elder Joseph the Hesychast, the Elder Paisios, the Elder Efraim Katounakiotis, the Elder Charalambos, the Elder Porphyrios, Starets Sergei (the latter has also been translated into Greek) et al.

He is also the author of the book: "Therapy of Spiritual Illnesses - An Introduction to the Ascetic Tradition of the Orthodox Church" («Thérapeutique des maladies spirituelles: Une introduction à la tradition ascétique de l'Église orthodoxe»), Paris 2000.

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