

## The Science of Spiritual Medicine

### *Humanistic and Orthodox Psychotherapy*

#### **Illness of the Soul**

The above analysis, which indicates what the holy Fathers mean by a healthy soul, also helps us to understand what is meant by the illness of the soul according to the teaching of the Fathers. When someone's soul is dominated by passions, which are mainly the unnatural impulses of the powers of the soul, and when he is unable to see God as Light, he is spiritually ill.

Basically, modern psychology, psychoanalysis and psychotherapy regard inner conflict, or even repressed experiences and traumas from the past, which are stored in the so-called subconscious and cause various disturbances, as an illness. For example, Freud divided the human soul-psyche into three parts. The first is the conscious mind, which includes everything a person experiences at any given moment. The second part is the subconscious, which comprises of everything that a person has experienced in the past and is not thinking about at present, but which he can recall to his conscious mind whenever he wishes. The third part is the unconscious, in which various events, actions and experiences remain which a person lived through in the past, but which he has repressed in the depths of his soul-psyche, in his unconscious. Although repressed, however, these things are active and want to return to the conscious mind. Everything that is forgotten or repressed in the unconscious creates problems in the soul-psyche, but when they come into the conscious mind, the person becomes calm and is healed. The psychoanalyst or psychotherapist helps in this process, using a special method of psychoanalysis.

The holy Fathers, however, teach that the illness of the soul is not just a matter of repressed experiences that create inner conflicts, but the corruption of the powers of the soul, particularly the deadening and darkening of the nous. The nous does not see God or have communion with Him, and, when it becomes sick it gives rise to all sorts of unhealthy states. All the natural faculties of the soul are damaged and in this way the passions develop.

Father John Romanides, referring to noetic prayer and man's nous, which when purified has unceasing remembrance of God, makes the following characteristic points:

“This whole subject under discussion is connected with the discovery by Europeans for Europeans, through Sigmund Freud and his psychoanalyst followers, of man's subconscious, and with the realisation that man is more than just a mind. There are hidden aspects and experiences of man's understanding that, under pressure from prevailing ethical and other rules and traditions of good behaviour, have been forgotten by the mind, but are latent in the subconscious and unavoidably influence his judgments, justifications and actions.

The subconscious as understood by psychoanalysts, however, is seen as resulting from an abnormal psychological condition, to be cured, at least initially, by revealing and uncovering what is concealed. The impression given is that the subconscious, as psychiatrists see it, actually consists of these hidden and forgotten, guiding, natural or implanted tendencies, rather than being a faculty of the soul distinct from the rational faculty.

Contrary to the view of contemporary psychoanalysis, in the Orthodox Tradition the nous becomes entangled with the rational faculty and the passions when it is in an abnormal or fallen state. It is, however, clearly distinct from the rational fac-

ulty when it functions as was intended by the energy and grace of God, and when the abnormalities concealed in human nature are revealed and healed. Psychiatrists believe that the subconscious, as a hidden collection of repressed natural tendencies contrary to moral and social principles, which caused them to be suppressed and forgotten, ought to be eliminated by setting these repressed natural tendencies free. In other words, psychoanalysis knows nothing about the distinction between the rational faculty and the nous, or the transformation of self-love into love free from self-interest through the illumination of the nous by means of noetic prayer.”

Illness, according to the holy Fathers, is the deadening, death and darkening of the nous. In this state man’s nous malfunctions. It is confused and misidentified with the rational faculty, the passions and its environment. This anomaly is the cause of all so-called psychological problems. Contemporary secular psychologists and psychoanalysts do not have an accurate knowledge of this state and are therefore unable to understand people’s real problems.

According to St Symeon the New Theologian, unless man’s soul is activated by the All-Holy Spirit, which is the soul of our soul and the nous of our nous, it is dead. He writes, “As it is impossible for our body, whether or not it is ill, to move or even live without a soul, so the soul, whether it sins or not, is dead and completely incapable of living eternal life without the Holy Spirit...”

This passage of St Symeon’s is highly significant. It clearly shows that the soul is sick when the Holy Spirit is absent. There is also another important point. Even though someone may not sin, without the Holy Spirit he is dead or ailing. Thus in the Orthodox Tradition, even if someone is psychologically

balanced and has no internal conflicts, without the Holy Spirit he is nevertheless ill and dead. According to St Symeon the New Theologian, it is not just those with psychological conflicts who are ill, but principally those who have the devil living within them, “who is the evil treasure.” It is not simple thoughts and memories from the past, which the mind was unable to classify or which it has forgotten and repressed, but the presence of the evil spirit, the presence of a personal being, which creates all this abnormality.

The sickness of the soul signifies something completely different in the writings of the Fathers from its meaning in modern psychology and psychotherapy.

### **Healing the Soul**

Having considered the health and illness of the soul, we can also look at how the healing of the soul is understood in the Orthodox Tradition.

Healing the soul means first and foremost reviving and illuminating the nous. It is not merely a matter of discovering suppressed experiences. St Diadochos of Photiki writes, “Only the Holy Spirit can purify the nous.” Only when He Who is powerful comes into the soul can He set it free.

The nous is revived through the energy of divine grace, but also with man’s co-operation: God acts and man collaborates. We shall now look at some ways of healing the nous, which are different from the methods indicated by modern psychotherapy.

It was first mentioned in a previous chapter that Barlaam asserted that sanctity and perfection could not be found “without logical distinctions, reasoning and analysis.” St Gregory Palamas responded that this view was “a heresy of the Stoics and Pythagoreans”. We are healed, on the contrary, when our nous is made “free of conceit and evil” by means of diligent repentance

and intense asceticism. Barlaam was obviously influenced by the psychological view of Augustine.

St Gregory the Theologian reproaches those who try to heal their souls by taking medicines. Someone suffering from an illness of the nervous system can certainly take medication, on the advice of a specialist, to help the body, but he cannot heal the illness of the nous in this way. What ordinary medicine can bring the Holy Spirit into our soul? The only saving medicine is the grace of Christ. St Gregory says, “Why do you seek for drugs which will do no good?...Heal yourself before it becomes urgent; have pity upon yourself, the only true healer of your disease; apply to yourself the truly saving medicine.” The saving and necessary medicine for the soul’s illness is Christ: “If you receive all the Word, you will bring upon your own soul all the healing powers of Christ, by which separately each one [of the sick people mentioned in the Gospel] was healed.”

St Symeon the New Theologian addresses the same issue. I have already mentioned his teaching that the soul cannot be healed by medicines, but only by the action of divine grace. Here I shall describe some ways in which, according to the teaching of St Symeon the New Theologian, the nous deadened by sin can be healed.

God, he says, is fire, and in those in whom this fire is kindled, “It rises up into a great flame and reaches to the heavens, and it does not allow the one thus set alight to be idle or rest at all.” This action of the fire takes place “with perception and awareness and, in the beginning, unbearable pain.” However, once the soul has been cleansed from the passions, “it becomes food and drink, illumination and uninterrupted joy within us, and, by participation, makes us light ourselves.” Those who have received this fire of divine grace “have not only been completely

delivered from all illnesses of the soul, but have also freed many others, whose souls were sick and ailing, from the devil's nets, healed them and presented them as gifts to Christ the Lord." They learnt every sort of knowledge and skill from this fire. It is only when God's grace catches fire in our heart that we are delivered from all our soul's diseases.

Even more importantly, once we have been healed we are able to heal others. How can we cure people unless we have learnt the science and art of healing from the effect of the fire on our own soul? Only true repentance, through confession and tears, purifies the wound and the scar that the sting of death has made in the heart. "Then it casts out and kills the worm nestling in it, and restores the wound to complete healing and perfect health." These wounds are cured by those who strive with repentance, confession and tears, whereas the others "actually take pleasure in these wounds." This all-embracing penitence comes about through the action of the Holy Spirit in those living within the Church. Those who lack such repentance preserve their soul's wounds instead of curing them. Only profound repentance turns all psychological problems into spiritual states and heals our soul. Thus St Symeon turns to God and seeks healing from Him:

"I went far away, Lover of Mankind, and dwelt in the wilderness

And hid from You, my sweet Lord;

I was benighted by the cares of this life

And suffered many stings and blows as a result.

I return bearing many wounds in my soul,

And cry out in my pain and the distress of my heart:

Have mercy, have pity on me, a transgressor."

When we say that the fire of divine grace sets a person

free and heals his diseased nous, we mean someone who is within the Orthodox Church and receives guidance from a deified spiritual father. Spiritual fathers have passed through all these stages and therefore have power to heal. Our faith in the possibility of being healed, along with the knowledge of the Priest who is healing us, can bring us to life. St Gregory the Theologian says clearly, “For since in order for healing to take place there is need of both faith in the patient and power in the healer, when one of the two is missing the other is impossible.” At the same time he emphasises that, “Healing is not reasonable in the case of those who would afterwards be injured by unbelief.” That is why a healing Priest, who has an accurate knowledge of spiritual illness, knows what spiritual health is and how to lead someone towards it, can help to heal sick souls.