

Sufficiently Sapiential Soul-Care: A Working Paper in Therapeutic Theology

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Abstract: *This article examines what is required for the work of soul-care to be sufficiently sapiential. Sapiential knowledge is understood as the practical wisdom that comes from God's self-knowledge that he reveals in and through creation to his creatures: namely, human beings. I propose that in order for soul care to take place in a sufficiently wise manner, there are several subjects that need to be considered, properly ordered, and appropriately applied. First, it is incumbent upon the sufficiently sapiential soul care provider to understand the socio-epistemic contexts in which they work and in which the people they work with exist. Accordingly, this essay discusses what it means to live, move, and have our being in a secular age. Second, sufficiently sapiential soul care involves understanding humanity holistically. In order to be sufficiently sapiential, then, soul care providers take into consideration all relevant facets of human functioning and flourishing when attempting to make sense of what people in their care need from them, from others, and from God. Finally, a proposal is made for what a sufficiently sapiential case conceptualization entails for someone who has endured complex traumatic experiences that have impacted their life in various ways. The essay concludes with an invitation for collaborative work with Christians across the spectrum of counseling and soul care in order to see more people within and outside of the Church not just function but perhaps also flourish.*

Key Words: *counseling, practical wisdom, soul care, theology, therapy*

My initial argument is a simple one: the object of theology is God and the aim of theology is to understand all things in relation to God. This lays the groundwork for showing that Christians can make the knowledge of God and his relationship to all things understandable, articulable, and even therapeutic without bending the nature and task of theology so far that it becomes anthropology or sociology masquerading as proper theology. To narrow the focus a little further, I will discuss three major topics: (1) the subjective elements of divine revelation, (2) the inherent systematicity of theology by virtue of its object, and (3) how both of these together can lay a foundation for approaching psychology and therapy from

a theological perspective because of theology's inherently systematic register when done with God as its object of study. The article progresses into a practical discussion of how we can make theological sense of trauma in a therapeutic way and how this is a component of being sufficiently sapiential. Finally, the paper concludes with a call for continued collaborative work in providing care and counsel for all.

A Preface Concerning Counseling in our Secular Age

In *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor argues that our typical understanding of what it means for society to be secular is at best incomplete or at worst just plain wrong.¹ Taylor approaches the subject of secularism as a complex movement that cannot be simply understood as a separation of church and state or as a triumph of science over faith. The situation is far more complex and Occam has no razor to apply. If Christians are going to grapple with and live out their faith and convictions within a secular context, they need to know precisely what this means—cheap definitions will lead to cheapened engagement with rival theories of human nature and human flourishing.

Inhabiting the Supernova of Our Secular Age

The explosion of different views of human flourishing that we see all around us today is what Taylor calls the “Nova Effect,” which is meant to conjure up images of a star going supernova and “spawning an ever-widening variety of moral/spiritual options, across the span of the thinkable and perhaps even beyond.”² When situated in the middle of this supernova, people feel pulled between the poles of faith and doubt, transcendence and immanence, despair and hope. Living in a so-called secular age involves more than mere intellectual doubts, it involves emotional *distress*; distress that Christian counselors can help alleviate with competent counsel and care that is gospel-grounded, clinically informed, and sufficiently sapiential.

Significant to Taylor's vision of what it means to live in a secular age are specific distinctions regarding what secularism entails and embraces. Briefly, Taylor's Taxonomy of secularism involves three categories:

Secular One: Medieval Ministry

In Medieval life, the secular was not inherently against the sacred. Instead, the secular referred to more earthly, material concerns whereas the sacred dealt more with religious devotion and

¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2007).

² Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 299.

obligation. The terms were not (and currently are not) mutually exclusive, however, as one can still find “secular priests” in the Catholic Church, for example.

Secular Two: Subtraction Stories

Taylor argues that the most common version of secularism relies on subtraction stories, which tell a tale of “human beings having lost, or sloughed off, or liberated themselves, from certain earlier, confining horizons, or illusions, or limitations of knowledge.” This understanding of secularization is less about the *addition* of new thoughts or new beliefs and more about the *uncovering* of “underlying features of human nature which were there all along, but had been impeded by what is now set aside.”³

Secular Three: Changes in Conditions of Belief & the Rise of New Social Imaginaries

More constructively, Taylor argues that secularism is a change in “the conditions of belief” that are the result of “a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace.”⁴

Taylor speaks of society becoming “disenchanted” and shifting the location of meaning from the *external* world and *into* the mind. This shift leads to the loss of the “idea that God was planning a transformation of human beings which would take them beyond the limitations which inhere in their present condition.”⁵ Once transcendence is lost and collapses into the immanent frame, humanity becomes alone in the world and must devise their own way out of the despair of their current state with no God to help them should they be unable to do so.

From here we can move into the major premise of this article: what it means for theology to be systematic and what it means for us to be sufficiently sapiential in our practices.

The Case for Therapeutic Theology

The Object and Aims of Theology

In his *Prolegomena*, Bavinck pays significant attention to the subjective

³ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 22.

⁴ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3.

⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 224.

elements of revelation (which is conceived as the human experience of God making himself known to creation). When Bavinck talks about the subjective element of revelation, he has in mind “the illumination of the Logos (John 1:9), or of the Spirit of God, in intellect, conscience, heart, and mind of human beings, such that they can understand God’s general revelation in nature and history.”⁶ Furthermore, those who “live in the light of the gospel, by the Spirit of God” are able to “recognize and know the special revelation that comes to them in Christ and more specifically in Scripture as the special revelation of God.”⁷ This dynamic of subjective and objective revelation provides a balanced approach to the conversation concerning knowledge, sufficiency, and the like. Rather than subjective or natural revelation being something foreign or detrimental to the task of soul care, all of God’s revelation can play a part in helping people heal when we understand that all true knowledge is a reflection of God’s knowledge. Pairing this view of revelation with Taylor’s view of secularism involving “a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others” means that Christians can maintain a seat at the table of public discourse concerning mental health and mental illness rather than intentionality removing themselves from the discussion.⁸

The Breadth of Theological Systematicity⁹

Theology as a field of study is one that necessarily reflects the object that is in view; namely *and named* God. It is God’s rationality that makes theology inherently systematic by virtue of God being its object. Anna Williams states that “the systematicity of theology is a direct consequence of its subject matter.... Theology mirrors, or perhaps we might say, partakes of, the character of its divine subject.”¹⁰ For Williams, systematicity is not the mere man-made ordering of doctrines in relation to each other. Rather, systematicity arises from the object of theology and is an overflow of the rationality of God and the comprehensive knowledge he has of creation. This is the sapiential knowledge that is sought after by theologians seeking to mirror God to all of creation.

⁶ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Volume 1: Prolegomena*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 350.

⁷ Bavinck, *Prolegomena*, 350.

⁸ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3.

⁹ I have explored this idea in further detail in Alex R. Wendel, “Trauma-Informed Theology or Theologically Informed Trauma? Traumatic Experiences and Theological Method,” *Journal of Reformed Theology* 16.1–2 (2022): 3–26.

¹⁰ A. N. Williams, “What Is Systematic Theology?,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 11.1 (2009): 48.

If we understand that theology is inherently systematic by virtue of its object, we have grounds to argue that theology has something to say about every subject. Furthermore, we have grounds to argue that every subject—falling as it does within the domain of God’s creation—can be brought into theological discourse. Therapy does not need to be brought into theology because theology already has grounds to speak about it. Williams states this idea clearly saying that “if all that is not the Trinity is necessarily related to the Trinity, then the scope of Christian Theology cannot be less than comprehensive, and in virtue of their common relation to the Trinity, created things are necessarily related to each other in some way, just as God is related to them.”¹¹ More pointedly, “nothing created can be off limits, inasmuch as its creaturely status entails relation to its creator, and nothing uncreated can be off limits, inasmuch as the uncreated is that with which theology is most fundamentally concerned.”¹²

Because theology has God as its object, theology is intrinsically systematic in its breadth and depth. As such, psychology and therapy do not need to be *forced* into the discussion of theology because they are subsumed into the purview of theology naturally when God and his relation to all things are maintained as the object and aim of theology.

Systematicity & Sapiencia

To be sufficiently sapiential is to know not just that “all truth is God’s truth,” but to know *why* this is the case in the first place as a first principle of theology. In recognizing the systematicity of theology, we are also able to recognize its sapiential register. Taylor’s understanding of what it means to live in a secular age provides Christians with a strategic place within the broader discussion of mental health. Because there is no *real* divide between the so-called secular and the sacred, there is actually *more* room for integrative collaboration across disciplines, not less. Because all claims to truth are open for discussion in a truly “secular society,” Christians are not removed from (and shouldn’t remove themselves from) public discourse. If Christian counselors assume and tacitly endorse an understanding of what it means for society to be secular that simply means a separation of church and state (or even church *against* the state), then they miss the opportunity to speak truth to and provide counsel for people feeling stuck in the Nova. The final question explored has to do with what Christians have to contribute to the discussion of mental health not just within the church but within the world also.

¹¹ A. N. Williams, *The Architecture of Theology: Structure, System, and Ratio* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 4.

¹² Williams, “What Is Systematic Theology?” 46.

Trauma-Informed Theology or Theologically Informed Trauma?¹³

Trauma is a reality faced by many people, and the church needs adequate responses if we are going to be able to meet the needs of what Diane Langberg has called the mission field of the twenty-first century: trauma.¹⁴

The Hole in Our Soul Care

In *The Logic of the Body: Retrieving Theological Psychology*, Matthew LaPine comments that, unfortunately, “there is a path out of the church that runs through the counselor’s office.”¹⁵ As a Christian and a counselor, I have seen this to be true, and I wish that it were not the case. One of the reasons for this departure from the church and into a counselor’s office has to do with some Christian counselors’ incomplete or underdeveloped theological anthropology that fails to recognize the importance of the body in soul care.

To be sufficiently sapiential in our practice of counseling means we need to acknowledge the importance of the body as a qualifier of our emotions, beliefs, and behaviors.¹⁶ LaPine argues that we risk becoming “emotional voluntarists” when we think that “we are responsible for emotions as intrusive mental states that show what we truly believe. Moreover, the illicit desire or false belief may be overcome by applying the Gospel through voluntary mental work.”¹⁷ In short, if you want to *feel* better, you need to *think* differently. In this emotionally voluntaristic perspective, there is no path towards understanding and changing emotion that passes through or even detours the body.

With an emaciated theological psychology and anthropology, it is easy to fall into the trap of emotional voluntarism which leads to people inevitably feeling not just *trapped* in their emotions but *guilty* because of them as well. If we understand ourselves as embodied beings with the capacity for upward causation of emotion coming from the body, we can better understand how to utilize the plasticity that God has created us with to work *with* our emotions rather than always *against* them. Our embodied

¹³ See Wendel, “Trauma-Informed Theology,” for further depth to this discussion.

¹⁴ Diane Langberg, *Suffering and the Heart of God: How Trauma Destroys and Christ Restores* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2015).

¹⁵ Matthew LaPine, *The Logic of the Body: Retrieving Theological Psychology* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2021), 36.

¹⁶ For more on how the “body qualifies” our lives, see LaPine, *The Logic of the Body*, 4–40.

¹⁷ LaPine, *The Logic of the Body*, 25.

anthropology is also not foreign to Scripture in the first place. Long before Polyvagal Theory or clinical research into somatic interventions, the authors of Scripture were highlighting the importance of the body to spiritual health. This embodiment can be seen pointedly in many psalms including references to the body. Just one example is seen in Psalm 22 which speaks of bones being disjointed and the heart being melted (Ps 22:14). Understanding that the body qualifies emotion, belief, and behavior helps to clarify how and why the body keeps the score of trauma. As LaPine concludes, “we need a theological anthropology that sees a mother rocking her baby as a deeply spiritual act that knits shalom into the brain and nervous system of the child.”¹⁸

A Trinitarian Treatment of Complex Trauma

As a reflection of the true Comforter, Christians are called to provide comfort for those in any affliction with the same comfort by which we ourselves have been comforted (2 Cor 1:4). Bavinck has stated this well and it is worth quoting him at length:

Correspondence between a religion and the moral needs of human beings are of great significance. The satisfaction of the human heart and conscience are the seal and crown of religion. *A religion that has no consolation to offer in times of mourning and sorrow, in life and in death, cannot be true religion ... a religion that has nothing to say at sickbeds and deathbeds, that cannot fortify the doubting ones, not raise up those who are bowed down, is not worthy of the name [of religion].* The contrast often made between truth and consolation does not belong in religion. A truth that contains no comfort, which does not connect with the religious-ethical life of human beings, ceases by that token to be a religious truth. Just as medical science in all its specialties is oriented to the healing of the sick, so in religion people have a right to look for peace and salvation.¹⁹

If the church is not going to be a place of refuge and restoration for those who have endured traumatic experiences, then those individuals will have to look elsewhere in their contexts or cultures.

Timothy Keller notes that western, secular culture is one of the worst in history at helping people face terrible evil and adversity because “in the secular view, this material world is all there is. And so the meaning of life is to have the freedom to choose the life that makes you most happy.

¹⁸ LaPine, *The Logic of the Body*, 307.

¹⁹ Bavinck, *Prolegomena*, 552 (italics added).

However ... suffering can have no meaningful part. It is a complete interruption of your life story.”²⁰ Because of this shortcoming, Keller concludes that secular culture is forced to “smuggle in resources from other views of life ... even though their beliefs about the nature of the universe do not line up with those resources.”²¹ Ashley Jamison has demonstrated evidence regarding this relationship between faith and suffering noting that understanding suffering to be a random event or being due to karma-like retribution is statistically correlated with higher difficulties in emotional regulation.²² Christians do not need to smuggle in piecemealed truisms and decontextualized verses of religious texts to communicate answers to the question of suffering and to provide comfort to people. Rather, because the systematicity of theology is a reflection on the knowledge of God, Christians are able to point to the God of *all* comfort as the source of *all* counsel and care.

Towards a Therapeutic Trinitarian Theology of Trauma

God is worthy of praise because he is inherently glorious, not *just* because of his glorious acts in creation. David Kelsey reminds us that God’s glory is intrinsic to himself and that “God’s ‘worth for us’ is not the basis of the praise of God ... because it is response first of all to God for God’s own sake, the response to God for ‘who’ and ‘what’ God intrinsically is.”²³ God’s intrinsic glory is relevant to understanding the potential for theology to be therapeutic because it is only by drawing near to *this* glorious God that humanity is able to be made new, to heal, and to flourish regardless of what trauma has befallen them.

The Safety of the Father

Psalm 57:1 opens by saying “be gracious to me, God, be gracious to me, for I take refuge in you. I will seek refuge in the shadow of your wings until danger passes over me” (CSB). God provides safety to his people when they seek refuge in him.²⁴ For trauma survivors, safety is one of the

²⁰ Timothy Keller, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering* (New York: Penguin, 2013), 13, 16.

²¹ Keller, *Walking with God*, 17.

²² Ashley R. Jamison, “The Impact of Views of Suffering on Trauma and Emotional Regulation” (Ph.D. diss., New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 2019), 67.

²³ David Kelsey, *Human Anguish and God’s Power* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 21.

²⁴ At the risk of calling out C. S. Lewis, the notion that God is good but perhaps not safe is a little misguided, and we should probably avoid developing our doctrine of God from a beaver.

realities and feelings most missing from their lives. Accordingly, safety is one of the most important features of recovering and healing from traumatic experiences. In most trauma counseling models that rely on a “sequenced” approach, establishing safety is the first step of treatment. Understanding and establishing safety with God is the most powerful experience of safety people can have. In therapeutic terms, the most important relationship that one needs to feel safe in is with God.

God’s providential care for humanity is revealed in Scripture and demonstrated throughout history. Scott Harrower says that “God’s providence, the incarnation of God the Son, Jesus’ victories over horror makers, and his resurrection all historically demonstrate God’s concern and powerful care towards his images. These are important objective events that secure a worldview post-trauma.”²⁵ Christians are not left needing to speculate about how God provides for his beloved creatures because God has demonstrated that he is trustworthy and safe. It is this safety that enables worldview recovery for people who have experienced trauma and allows them to not view the world as without order and chaotic. God has long since calmed the chaotic seas (Gen 1:2; Matt 8:26). From a place of safety and security, people who have experienced life-altering trauma are able to approach and appreciate the safety of God.

The Suffering of the Son

The Incarnation and subsequent suffering of Christ on the cross served to both enable humanity to draw near to God and to have God draw near to humanity. Hebrews 4:15–16 traces this out saying that “we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who was tempted in every way that we are, yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (CSB). In the Incarnation, Christ suffered and died to bring people back into union with God and to be able to sympathize with humanity through his suffering. Christ’s suffering can bring people who have endured trauma nearer to God in salvation and God nearer to them in comfort. Rather than simply displaying *empathy* with humanity, Jesus enables *victory* over death and the promise that death will be ultimately defeated.

The Sanctifying Power of the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is involved in bringing people nearer to God by the

²⁵ Scott Harrower, *God of All Comfort: A Trinitarian Response to the Horrors of the World* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019), 138.

Spirit’s role in illumination and is involved in bringing God nearer to people by his restorative and sanctifying power. In Bavinck’s view, the Spirit was initially “mainly the author of extraordinary gifts and powers, but from the beginning he also called into being in the church diverse virtues of faith and patience, *comfort* and *joy*.”²⁶ As believers who have endured trauma undergo the process of sanctification and learn to imitate Christ, they are not left to do it alone or without the possibility of the Spirit’s indwelling comfort and joy. They are not left to progress in their Christ-likeness alone because they partake in the fellowship of the Triune God’s love as well as partake in fellowship with other believers in the Church.

A Mosaic of Care:

Collaborative Christian Care and Counseling in Our Secular Age

When Christians articulate an account of humanity, of God, and of the gospel that is beautiful, good, and true, they push back against worldviews that seek to distort, demean, and diminish what it means to be human and what it means for God to be a creator, comforter, redeemer, and healer. Christian counselors must be involved in deciding which views of humanity will shape our own counseling practices, our own professional cultures, and broader society as a whole. Christian counselors are on the front lines of being able to bear witness to the truth of who God is, who God says people are, and what God intends for his most beloved creation. Because of this great need to demonstrate the dignity of people and their dire need for God, there is an apologetic register to Christian counseling, especially in the “secular” or licensed arenas. Rather than pursuing a conflictual stance with regard to “secular counseling” there is a need for Christians to inhabit and help to shape the broader world of counseling.

However, the reality of the real world means that there is a great need for church-based counselors to continue to help those in need of compassionate care and counsel that might not otherwise seek out care elsewhere or that have struggles that are more spiritual in nature. Christians across the spectrum of counseling and care need to remain sapiential in their practice of caring for those in need of Christ’s care. Licensed counselors need to remain grounded in the truth of Scripture and be conversant with theological literature on a variety of topics such as anthropology, pneumatology, and soteriology. The church-based counselor needs to rec-

²⁶ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Volume 4: Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 236 (italics added).

ognize that being practically wise in their care and counsel involves recognizing the relevant “clinical” research and evidence-based practices that are used to treat individuals with the assortment of afflictions people will face. Finally, being sufficiently sapiential in our practice of counseling also means we all need to recognize our limits and collaborate with others when we find ourselves overwhelmed and underwater. In the end, it is Jesus who calms the storms, pulls us out, and holds us all together.