Alfred Adler’s Social Interest: A Pastoral Psychology[1]


I write as a theologian who encourages, with appropriate adaptation, the Individual Psychology (IP) of Alfred Adler as a pastoral tool for Christian practice. Although never formally trained in Adlerian psychology, I recognize through hindsight that I have employed the “common sense” approach to living reflected in Adlerian psychology in my pastoral practice over the last twenty years or so. Adler’s common sense approach to living is set out in his theory of Social Interest (SI). The German term for SI is Gemeinschaftsgefühl SI refers to a feeling of belonging, of being accepted within a community. Further, I argue that SI constitutes and distinguishes our human nature such that SI is more than mere civil association. SI reveals a transcendental understanding in its more developed stages (Alfred Adler Institute of San Francisco, 1997a). This transcendental understanding invites an individual to future spiritual development. On the web site of the Alfred Adler Institute of San Francisco, Stein and Edwards (1997) write: “Adler believed that the ultimate purpose of psychotherapy was to help people contribute to the social evolution of mankind. Müller added a spiritual element to this idea. He suggested that a human being’s mission in life was to work in partnership with God to complete an unfinished world (Müller 1992)”. Adler’s understanding of SI, appropriately adapted, is a highly effective tool at the “...level of preventive rather than corrective intervention” (Bishop 1989: 155).

From my experience, the classical approach to understanding meaning and purpose in human life (i.e., philosophy) as a tool to address life’s tasks in western society is often pastorally ineffective. To my mind, the classical understanding is out of context and renders our life in western society somewhat anxiety-ridden. Classical philosophy fails to work in the contemporary western pastoral approach. A contemporary psychology is needed to replace classical philosophy in pastoral counselling. In my pastoral counselling, I abandon classical understanding in favour of a holistic understanding. Holistic understanding, as a non-classical theory, claims that a living organism “... has a reality other and greater than the sum of its
constituent parts” (Funk & Wagnalls Canadian College Dictionary, 1989). Ellison and Smith (1991:35), state that “holistic conceptions of healthy personality and functioning are an integral part of the personality theories of Adler, Allport, Maslow, and Rogers ....” Adler’s holistic theory is “…intimately connected to humanistic philosophy of living (Alfred Adler Institute of San Francisco, 1997). It is this connection to philosophy that makes Adlerian IP a desirable pastoral tool.

Gladson and Lucas (1989) suggest that since Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung seem overworked with respect to psychological and religious themes, new ground might be explored in the psychologies of Viktor Frankl and Alfred Adler. I write to explore Adler’s notions and to encourage his way of thinking in pastoral practice. My conclusions are tentative and subject to refinement. In my approach, I hope to be faithful to Adler's pioneering intention and break new ground (O'Connell 1997: 114).

Adlerian SI reflects a holistic psychology [2]

Adler’s SI is friendly towards a religious thinking and through a holistic approach provides the Christian pastor with a new way of pastoral understanding. Alfred Adler, Jewish born, converted to Protestantism in later life but not out of religious conviction (Hoffman 1994). Even so, Hoffman notes that Adler collaborated with the Lutheran pastor, Ernest Jahn, in a religious work entitled, Religion and Individual Psychology. However, Adler himself remained independent and neutral “... as towards the efforts of Catholic or Protestant psychologists to combine [his] views with religious doctrine” (Hoffman 1994: 194). Many of Adler’s ideas are useful to a Christian pastoral understanding but psychologists are loathe to discuss them (Mosak & Dreikurs, 1967).

Roman Catholicism offers a particular pastoral context to practice this new way of pastoral understanding. Adler’s SI is shaped through participation in life and not merely by the observation of life. Therefore, it is an existential psychology. Roman Catholic philosophical thought has tended to officially oppose existential psychological thinking (Leo XIII, Aeterni Patris). This papal teaching has continued the tension in pastoral practice between some forms of psychological understanding and classical theology. Aeterni Patris is not intended for our time. Thus, applying its principles in the
contemporary western context fails because the encyclical was the Roman Church’s inverted response to “… a culture that needed to deal not with the startling discovery of the works of Aristotle, but with the rise of empirical science” (Liderbach 1997:41). According to Bishop (1989:151): “The church’s attitude toward and treatment of psychological issues has waxed and waned from acceptance to rejection since the time of Augustine.” Officially, Roman Catholic pastors are to follow ways of pastoral counselling (i.e., resolving psychological issues) with principles which are based on classical understanding. This is problematic since classical understanding is often not attuned to contemporary psychological experience. The solution is to seek new ways of pastoral understanding. Adler’s existential psychology is among those non-scholastic holistic interpretive systems acceptable within the contemporary Roman Catholic pastoral context. Some reasons for this I discuss below.

1st Reason:

The first reason for pastors to accept SI as a counselling tool is Adler’s novel understanding of individuality. His understanding fits with contemporary western understanding. In IP, “individuality” is not to be confused with “individualism.” The latter is concerned with a distinct theory or doctrinal system which suggests a classical way of thinking; whereas the former is concerned with one’s state, condition or quality of life which suggests a phenomenological and holistic way of thinking. O’Connell suggests a variant understanding and speaks of Adler’s psychology as promoting the “individuated” person rather than the “individual” person. He states that “individuated psychology is in need of a deep eternal Self as well as broad social concerns” (O’Connell 1997:114). This deep eternal Self and its broad social concerns suggest a holistic approach to the Christian pastor.

2nd Reason:

Classical understanding is not all effective pastoral tool since it does not correspond to contemporary experience. Its principles are rooted in a world that no longer exists experientially. Adlerian understanding does correspond to contemporary experience and this is the second reason why I accept Adlerian thinking. Contemporary western Christians do not live in a classical world. Classical philosophy is often of little value to individuals in
coping with their day to day life tasks. I am not the first, nor indeed the last, to recognize that classical philosophy is no longer adequate for the contemporary context. I offer the following example.

In an attempt to show that classical understanding was indeed adequate for contemporary understanding William James wrote *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. What resulted, however, was the realization on his part that psychology was better suited than philosophy to religious understanding in modern times. James concludes: "Philosophy in this sphere [of religious understanding] is thus a secondary function, unable to warrant faith's veracity.... In all sad sincerity, I think we must conclude that the attempt to demonstrate by purely intellectual processes the truth of the deliverances of direct religious experience is absolutely hopeless" (James 1908:455).

James and Adler overlap in certain aspects in their holistic understanding. Religious belief for James, results in demonstrable characteristics which constitute the life style of an individual. He describes each characteristic as a "state of assurance". He lists them as: 1) "the loss of all the worry, the sense that all is ultimately well," 2) "the sense of perceiving truths not known before," and 3) "the objective change which the world often appears to undergo" (James 1908:248). He admits that these states, arising from experience, are difficult to understand by one lacking the experience. Adler recognizes these same states in a healthy individual given to increasing SI. Both thinkers accept a holistic understanding in which the individual is greater than the immediate conscious experience of the self. In the "state of assurance" James finds that we can achieve union with something greater than ourselves. Within this union, we find great peace. Adler understands this to be a purpose of religion. It is one of the things religion does best for the individual from Adler's point of view.

Adler explicates his holistic understanding in *Social Interest: A Challenge to Mankind*. "The best conception hitherto gained for the elevation of humanity is the idea of God.... The primal energy which was so effective in establishing *regulative religious goals* was none other than that of social feeling" [my italics] (Adler 1943: 272/273). Regulative religious goals are but an early Adlerian understanding of a holistic pastoral psychology. By way of understanding regulative religious goals the pastor guides parishioners to
a new and healthy understanding in life. This is a preventative approach to life’s tasks.

Within contemporary western theological understanding we may say that “psychology respects grace” meaning that pastoral psychology can reveal a graced understanding, an understanding greater than mere humanistic psychology can reveal. Thus, theologians speak of “graced understanding.” Müller’s (1992) work, *You shall be a blessing: Main traits of a religious humanism*, sheds some light on graced understanding. In this work, Müller opens Adler’s IP to a transcendental interpretation.

3rd Reason:

In secular (humanist) psychologies religious understanding of life is seen to require corrective intervention. [3] This is not so in Adlerian understanding. This is my third reason for accepting his thinking. The pastors struggle is to account in contemporary psychological terms for religious understanding (Bishop 1989). All too often, in the dominant secular culture of the West, to account for a religious understanding of life in psychological terms is seen as something negative, as a crisis to be overcome or solved in one’s life.

To a great degree this understanding of corrective intervention is a legacy of Freud’s influence in *The Future of the Illusion*. An alternative understanding given by Sorenson (1990) counters Freud’s negative position. In Sorenson’s view the struggle to express a religious understanding of life in psychological terms is understood as a positive experience, that is to say, as preventive intervention, not corrective intervention. Preventive intervention comprises part of the normal stages of growth and development of each individual (McMinn & Lebold 1989). Preventive intervention, based on an Adlerian understanding constitutes a holistic understanding.

**Adlerian SI reflects holistic pastoral psychology**

The purpose of pastoral psychology is to address important life tasks for the betterment of the individual. In attempting to achieve this purpose, SI and pastoral psychology overlap and are complementary. What needs to be distinguished is the way in which each assists the individual to a healthy and fulfilling life. Or, as Adler phrases it: “We approach the problem from a
different angle but the goal is the same-to increase interest in others” (Adler 1931: 12). Alfred Adler’s system of psychological understanding stressing the importance of an individual is positive nurturing within the environment. A purpose of pastoral psychology is positive nurturing. Initially, Adler’s thinking was intended to enable those who were emotionally disabled. Stein and Edwards (1997) explain: “The goal of therapy is to increase the feeling of community, promote a feeling of equality, and replace egocentric self-protection, self-enhancement, and self-indulgence with self-transcending, courageous, social contribution.” For personal (individual) well-being, emotions which in Adlerian thinking fuel behaviour are to be properly understood and regulated. In this way, an individual attains health and becomes useful within a society (community).

SI consists of basic orientations which are pastorally sympathetic to a Christian perspective on life. Two of these orientations may briefly be summarized as follows: 1) all important life problems are social, that is. they beset the individual in a social context; 2) health is attained by the individual in a set of harmonious social relationships. These notions set a psychological context for a Christian pastoral understanding in the modern world. Since Adler’s SI is easily understood religiously and theologically, it is readily recognizable as an appropriate pastoral tool for the benefit of the Christian community. As such SI opens the way to preventive intervention rather than corrective intervention within pastoral counselling.

Health and well-being are fundamental to the Christian life and can be, to a great extent, attained through harmonious social relationships. The Christian life style, an attitude seeking health and preventing illness (physical and spiritual), must be lived out in community. This explains why Christians often understand their churches and fellowship groups as communities of health and well-being. In the past, the pastoral way of thinking has tended to view health and well-being within a classical perspective. The classical understanding is no doubt due to the persistent reliance on classical Greek thinking typified by Plato and Aristotle. In this realm of thought reality is considered fixed and unchanging, and lived experience is somehow a shadow of reality. Adler criticises this static way of thinking: “The human spirit is only too well accustomed to reduce everything that is in flux to a form, to consider it not as movement but as frozen movement—movement that has become form” (Adler 1943:269). While this
is an acceptable interpretation in a classical school of thought, it is not an acceptable interpretation within Christian theology or Christian psychology rooted in contemporary experience. A static interpretation does not reflect contemporary experience. What reflects contemporary experience is a holistic pastoral psychology which incorporates Alfred Adler’s SI.

By way of conclusion

From a pastoral point of view, Alfred Adler’s SI as preventive intervention may be effectively incorporated into Christian praxis. Adler’s contribution to pastoral theology is through his SI which enables an individual to achieve a fulfilled and integrated life within a social context (community). For Christians, the social context is the church, the believing community.

REFERENCES


NOTES

[1] I understand this term within an exclusively Christian context, in that a pastor “...is one of the gifts to the church (Eph. 4: 11).” (Douglas, Elwell & Toon 1989).

[2] I understand “holism” as pertaining to recognizing one’s relationship/connectedness with the entire cosmos: whereas “wholism,” I understand as pertaining to the operation of an integral unit within a whole. See Frost (1997:68).

[3] A historian of American political thought, Gregory S. Butler, notes a shift in this understanding. He writes: “Over the past several decades, our understanding of modernity has been profoundly changed. This change has
occurred as a result of a body of critical scholarship that challenges the widely-held notion that the modern world is characterized primarily by the triumph of secular rationalism and the steadily declining influence of religion and spirituality" (Butler 1997:37). Further, Michael McAteer, writing in the newspaper of the Anglican Church of Canada, quotes Gregory Baum: “We are witnessing a worldwide return of religion to the public sphere, both on the right and on the left” (McAteer 1997:10).