FAITH, HOPE AND CHARITY: AN ADLERIAN UNDERSTANDING


Abstract

Scripture and religious tradition identify three virtues ordered to the spiritual. These virtues are faith, hope and charity; they may be understood as an attitude of will that makes their possessor good and the work done good. Classical epistemology, which is often used to interpret the virtues, is deficient as an interpretive tool in the contemporary Western context. An alternative method to understand virtues is proposed, an humanitarian existential interpretation. Adler’s Individual Psychology provides a basis for a humanitarian understanding of the virtues.

I write as a theologian who has recently accepted, with appropriate adaptation, the Individual Psychology (IP) of Alfred Adler as a basis for pastoral counselling. Never formally trained in Adlerian psychology, I recognize today that I have employed the common-sense approach reflected in Adlerian psychology in my pastoral counselling over the last twenty years or so. Although I write from within a Roman Catholic context, I write not as a theologian in the service of the church, but as a theologian probing into a life style problem. Mine is a critical ecumenical theology, defined by Kung (1995, p. 215), “at the same time practical and pastoral, concerned with life, renewal and reform” [author’s emphasis]. The problem I address is the increasing unworkability of the classical formulation of the theological virtues in the contemporary Western context. Expressed in Adlerian terms, the problem is that the classical understanding of the theological virtues hinders, rather than promotes, social interest (SI). I write to explore rather than to inform and focus on the relationship between IP and contemporary theological understanding. The pastor (L. pascere, to feed) as counsellor and the counsellor as pastor share to some degree a common life style which seeks to promote SI. Thus, there may be something of benefit to both pastor and counsellor in this brief exploration.
Introduction

Alfred Adler, Jewish born, converted to Protestantism in later life but not out of religious conviction (Hoffman, 1994). Many of his ideas are useful within a Christian spiritual understanding but psychologists are loathe to discuss them (Mosak & Dreikurs, 1967). It is known that Adler remained independent and neutral “towards the efforts of Catholic or Protestant psychologists to combine [his] views with religious doctrine” (Hoffman, 1994, p. 194). Despite not being a supporter of organised religion, however, Hoffman (1994) notes that Adler himself collaborated with the Lutheran pastor, Ernest Jahn, in a religious work, *Religion and Individual Psychology*.

The question is: Can the general role of the pastor and the counsellor be favourably compared? Each seeks to help the individual achieve some degree of harmony in life. Each seeks to promote the welfare of the individual and community. The purpose of spiritual direction or pastoral psychology, as it is known, is the betterment of the individual. In theology and psychology, on an individual and collective basis, the well-being of the person is intended. Adler’s psychology of living recommends participating in life and not merely observing it. Hence, it is an existential psychology. In contrast, Roman Catholic philosophical thought has tended to officially oppose existential psychological thinking (Leo XIII, 1879). But Bernard Lonergan (1968) suggests that Catholic theology has to learn to draw on the new sciences of religion, psychology and sociology. contemporary Christian theological interpretation cannot rely on one philosophical structure but must necessarily participate in other ways of understanding (i.e., psychological). Vatican Council II applied this principle of alternative understanding to itself, the Church, the People of God: “By its nature and mission the Church is universal in that it is not committed to anyone culture or any political, economic or social system” (Flannery, 1975, p. 942).

Adler’s existential psychology provides the Christian pastor with an opportunity to draw upon new ways of thinking. Gladson and Lucas (1989) suggest that since Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung seem overworked with respect to psychology and religious themes, new ground might be explored in the psychologies of Viktor Frankl and Alfred Adler. Adler’s
existential psychology is among those interpretive non-scholastic systems that are becoming more suitable for Christian pastors and/or counsellors. Derrick de Kerckhove (1995) suggests that “the secret of inventing and innovating is lifting information from one context and placing it in another” (p. 35). In this exploration, I place psychological information in a pastoral context, introducing some aspects of Adler’s IP into understanding the theological virtues.

The Life Style Problem; An Epistemological Dichotomy

In the West, the prevailing philosophical structure for interpreting the theological virtues, faith, hope, and charity, is classical philosophy. From a counselling perspective, the unsatisfactory aspect of this traditional approach is the dichotomy between subject and object, that is, the split between the knower and the known, the one and the many. This dichotomy between subject and object, which is a Platonic legacy, does not promote SI. Since SI is not a way of knowing, any theory of SI based on this distinction inhibits SI. This is a detriment since one must be socially interested, not simply know about SI. In the contemporary Western context, this dichotomy does not help in formulating a cohesive pattern or movement to cope with life’s difficulties. Holism, on the other hand, the philosophical theory that a living organism has a reality other than and greater than the sum of its constitutive parts, promotes SI. In short, a classical philosophy is not sufficiently holistic.

In order to promote SI, I propose an understanding of the theological virtues which presupposes an ontological unity (an holistic understanding) and rejects the classical dichotomy. Further, in order to promote SI, I suggest that Wuellner’s (1966) classical epistemological definitions of faith, hope and charity in his *A Dictionary of Scholastic Philosophy* need to be recast in existential terms. Wuellner (1966) defines the theological virtue of faith as being “the supernatural assent by which the intellect...clings to revealed truths because of the authority of God revealing” (p. 103); the theological virtue of hope as “the act of deliberately expecting to attain with divine help a future good related to man’s supreme good” (p. 125); and the theological virtue of charity as “the habitual love of someone for the sake of God...because God loves His own goodness
which He wills men to share in created likeness of it” (p. 49). Alternative existential definitions are developed below.

It needs to be recognized that the legacy of Platonic epistemology is not false. Rather, the pastor and counsellor should recognize that as a genuine promoter of SI classical philosophy is no longer adequate for Western culture. To promote SI a Platonic epistemological understanding ought to be replaced by an ontological existential understanding.

A Life Style Solution; An Ontological Unity

Marcel (1965) in his existentialist diary writes that “the growing consciousness of our need for ontology is surely one of the most striking features of present-day thought” (p. 38). I suggest our need for an ontological understanding can be somewhat satisfied through Adler’s IP.

Methods of interpretation that do not have roots in classical philosophy nonetheless are legitimate interpretive tools. Oriental and Native American ways of thinking could be used. These means of interpretation are psychological methods of existential understanding. During the Reformation, existential psychological interpretation and thinking were friendly towards the Church (Muller, 1992). Such friendliness towards Christian existential thinking was pioneered by Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855). It is continued in Adlerian thought.

IP assists us in moving from knowing about faith, hope and charity, an epistemological philosophical concept, to being in faith, hope and charity, an existential psychological concept. To be or not to be is the more properly holistic approach than to know or not to know. Through a holistic (ontological) life style self-esteem and a sense of being at home in the world will be increased. Through a dichotomous or fragmented life style self-esteem and a sense of being at home in the world will not be increased.

We have, living existentially, the capacity to determine what we will become, that is, to give objective purpose to our striving. Since we can be other than what we presently are, the future is literally in our hands as we make decisions that shape our environment which in turn shapes us (De
Kerckhove 1995). This understanding is significant for the promotion of SI in the contemporary world. In Adlerian thought to be, or better, being socially interested (an holistic understanding) is preferable to, to know or knowing.

Notions arising out of Adler’s IP are becoming more acceptable within the contemporary Western context. However, Rahner and Vorgrimler (1973) warn that ontological interpretation has its limitations and “makes no claim at all to be the sole and absolute explanation of human life” (p. 324). Yet, Adler’s IP presents a workable holistic notion to the contemporary life style problem of understanding faith, hope and charity.

**Being Faithful Promotes Social Interest**

Unlike Wuellner’s (1966) understanding of faith, whereby the intellect clings to truth, the Adlerian way of understanding faith is that one is faithful to the truth. Being faithful is a relational concept, not an epistemological concept. Being faithful involves being faithful to others, responding to others, the divine included, and to oneself. Further, being faithful is the psychological response process of an individual living in community. Adler (1964) recognises this communal response when he writes of “the possibilities of psychological joining with others” (p. 278). Being faithful is a fundamental spiritual attitude which strengthens community. Further, as being faithful leads to an appreciation of other individuals, it also leads to the appreciation of that which is divine in the individual (Slavik, 1994).

In the West, the idea of divinity is incarnated (concretised) in the Christian cultural image of God (Müller, 1992). The cultural image of God is presently problematic. Dewart (1989) observes that Western culture is sufficiently empirically minded to find it difficult to affirm that a divine reality really exists but our consciousness allows that perhaps it does. Notwithstanding this problem, in the Christian tradition, a personal faith relationship is claimed with one Jesus of Nazareth. Further, Jesus’s approach to life, and his faithful relationship with others, is a primary example of what Adler intends by SI.

In probing the issue of being faithful further, the question I arises: To what kind of divinity (God) are we faithful? In Adlerian thought, divinity is not
conceived as a pre-existent being (this notion is inherited from classical thinking). Rather, divinity is conceived through a process of differentiation of the self from the non-self during the development of human conscious expression. In this process “there is the individual decision, most often made non-consciously, to believe in God or not” (Mosak & Dreikurs, 1967, p. 17). Differentiation does not make divinity exist. The human mind striving within the existential situation becomes aware of another mind outside itself which it recognises as divine. The idea of divinity arises from participating in a self-conscious life. Our relationship with divinity affectionately influences our interest in SI.

In Adlerian thought, the divine does not precede the notion of SI. That which is divine, conceived as a being who has loved us first, would be rejected in IP. Rather, in Adlerian thinking that which is divine and the notion of SI must be understood co-terminally. Further, one necessarily relates to the other. Only relationships can be understood, not objects. Adler’s term for this relationship is Gemeinschaftsgefühl. An Adlerian psychology is open to assist a pastor/counsellor in relating to truth with an improved response to God’s initiative. In attempting this, pastors/counsellors aim to improve the health and well-being of an individual by working within the life context. Further, Slavik and Croake (1994) note that Gemeinschaftsgefühl is not a measurable concept. Nor is divinity a measurable concept. In Adlerian thinking, being faithful cannot be conceived as possessing an object but must be conceived as a relationship between the individual and another (the divine included). This understanding promotes SI. The goal of SI, theologically expressed as incarnating the spiritual, discloses one’s being faithful not to a reified object but to an attitude in which one relates to another, the divine included, and relates to oneself. Ferré (1967) suggests that God is better depicted as a subject disclosed in an existential context of faith rather than depicted as an object of faith. SI, or striving to incarnate the spiritual subject, currently is not sufficiently developed to provide the conditions for a perfect community of faith, that is, a full concretising (incarnating) of the idea of that which is divine. Rather, we live in hope of establishing a fully developed community of faith. The community of faith, at present, is only partially developed. Thus, being faithful means living in community with a fundamental spiritual attitude which must be content with something less while hoping for something more.
Being Hopeful Promotes Social Interest

For Wuellner (1966), hope is the act of expecting to attain a future good (goal), whereas, an Adlerian view necessarily incorporates the notion of present well-being along with expectation of a future goal. Adler (1964) writes: "Our concretization of the idea of perfection, the highest image of greatness and superiority, which has always been very natural for man's thinking and feeling, is the contemplation of a deity. To strive towards God, to be in Him, to follow His call, to be one with Him – from this goal of striving (not of a drive), there follow attitude, thinking, and feeling. (p. 275)

By striving towards God, Adler means to assign a purposeful, transcendent meaning to life. Hope gives meaning and purpose to human life. Further, hope prevents an unhealthy attitude from dominating an individual. This meaning and purpose given to human life by hope is revealed through the promotion of SI. Hope is directed to its future goal. The future orientation of hope is what enjoins the pastor and Adlerian counsellor to engage in SI. Our striving for SI is recognised theologically by Christians as living in hope. The promise anticipated in the future inspires us in the present and directs our striving for immediate SI. Thus, the future is experienced in the present. We live “as if” the future were present. No ontological dichotomy exists in this way of understanding. Striving for SI in hope we are led to seek improvements in the present while directing our efforts to the future betterment of the individual and the community. Brink (1977) suggests that Adler linked hope and social interest so closely that “once the faith in the future is gone, it becomes very difficult to maintain social interest and obtain successful compensation” (p. 147). As SI increases (or, for the Christian, as life lived in the spirit increases), so hopefulness increases (Muller, 1992).

Those who live in hope, a fundamental spiritual attitude, encourage each other, strengthen each other and affirm one another against hardships and seeming meaninglessness of the present moment. An Adlerian understanding of hope, while directed to the future, encourages us to make improvements in the present thus promoting SI. In short, making improvements in the present is the expression of SI. Being hopeful, existentially speaking, offers no certainty but offers venture. Being hopeful
reveals a spiritual meaning and purpose to life that is future directed but enacted in the present. This in turn encourages us to practice charity.

**Being Charitable Promotes Social Interest**

An Adlerian understanding of charity is one of being charitable, not giving charity. This contrasts with Wuellner’s (1966) understanding in which we are charitable for the sake of God’s goodness shared with us. Or, we are charitable because God is charitable. In Adlerian thought, charity is not understood as self-sacrifice for others but as a development of our abilities to promote SI. Being charitable results in a relationship with others and is directed to the good of the community. Interpreting Alfred Adler, Kurt Adler notes that “anything one does for oneself is automatically done also for others” (Slavik, 1995, p. 3).

Traditionally, the commands to love and not to kill are attributed to a transcendent source. However, Adler understands them as evolving innately in the human being. Surely the commands, “Thou shalt not kill” and “Love thy neighbour,” can hardly ever disappear from knowledge and feeling as the supreme court of appeal. These and other norms of human social life, which are undoubtedly the products of evolution are as native to humanity as breathing and the up-right gait, can be embodied in the conception of an ideal human community, regarded here as the impulse and goal of evolution. (Adler, 1943, p. 37) A concept with which Adler struggles, and in fact comes to reject, is that being charitable is not merely an extension to others of our natural self-concern. Interestingly, “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Matthew 7:12), cannot be accepted as an Adlerian formulation since this decision may be restricted to the present moment. The Adlerian formulation of charity is more open-ended than that. Being charitable involves our innate social concern for others which deliberately considers the benefit of future generations. Being charitable means extending one’s life in the promotion of SI, not simply not harming others. In short, the goal of charity lies beyond the present moment, the individual life or the generation.

Interpreting Adler, Muller (1992, p. 53) states that “life received from no one, also serves no one.” His Adlerian formulation of charity is supported by Marcel (1965) who writes: “At the heart of charity is presence in the
sense of the absolute gift of ones-self, a gift which implies no impoverishment of the giver” (p. 69). Interestingly, Frost (1996) claims that: “life is a process which seems to defy entropy, the second law of thermodynamics. It holds that all centres of energy will dissipate in the long run…. [However,) life is a monument of gathering momentum and increasing its centres of energy ongoingly. Vitalists delight in such insights” (p. 114).

The gift of giving of ourselves does not deplete us; rather, it enriches our lives. Being charitable cannot be a selfish act. Being charitable of necessity requires that individuals become involved with their immediate community and the larger community. In acting charitably, individuals promote SI and enter a new way of living, or better, a new way of being (Müller, 1992). Theologically, Moffatt (1929) makes the same observation in a specifically Christian context: “The hope of the Kingdom was that such inward relationships to God would then become the law of human life; but, while Jesus was no mere futurist, he lived under the apocalyptic hope in such a way as to believe in the urgency of the new law for those who were the nucleus of the new order” (p. 109). O'Connell (1997) puts the same notion this way: “Sentimentally, we adore Jesus. But we refuse to model the Kingdom values (spirit, soul, wisdom) he proclaimed and would die for again, again, and again” (p. 108).

**Conclusion**

I have attempted an understanding of the attitudes of faith, hope and charity in the light of Adler’s humanitarian psychology. In an Adlerian understanding these spiritual attitudes promote SI. An egocentric attitude, the opposite to a spiritual attitude, impedes SI (O'Connell, 1997). Into Müller’s (1992) table of spiritual attitudes versus egocentric attitudes (Table 1) I insert the theological virtues and indicate their place within an Adlerian scheme. Pastors and counsellors following this scheme can conceive faith as an attitude of commitment to SI. Thus, we may understand being faithful as healthy spiritual creativity developing a better community and a better individual. We can conceive being hopeful as an attitude of commitment to SI. Being hopeful finds its realisation today, not only in focusing on some future possible idealised world, but also in present existence and in the promotion of SI. We can conceive being
charitable also as an attitude of commitment to SI. Being charitable is the striving to develop SI among individuals living in community. Theologically, in the Christian context, being charitable can be understood as a gift received from a divine other.

From an Adlerian perspective, faith, hope and charity are tools of re-evaluation and re-direction of the life style that allow exploration of new insights and personal values. This understanding can be recommended pastorally to ministers and counsellors. Practising the theological virtues brings about a loss of worry or anxiety; brings about a perception of truth not known before; and brings about an apparent change in the objective appearance of the world (James, 1908).

REFERENCES


**FURTHER READING**
