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# Spiritual Formation Training in Christian Psychology Doctoral Programs: Introduction to Special Issue

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This article introduces a special issue on spiritual formation training in Christian psychology doctoral programs. The importance of spiritual formation in the integration of psychology and Christianity is discussed, with a focus on the person of the psychotherapist. Student-faculty collaboration was valued throughout the preparation of the special issue, from the initial idea to peer reviewing and final editing. Finally, themes observed in the various articles are summarized and continued dialog is encouraged.

Two decades ago I (McMinn) was the first new faculty member hired for the new doctoral program in clinical psychology at Wheaton College. The existing psychology faculty had done a masterful job planning the program over a period of many years, and in 1993 the first cohort of 18 students and I joined the community. In an effort to know what our students were learning about the integration of psychology and Christianity I sat in on their first semester class—an introduction to spiritual formation taught by Dr. James Wilhoit. That class changed my life.

At the time I had spent almost a decade thinking, teaching, and writing about the integration of psychology and Christianity, but it turned out I knew very little about my own spiritual yearnings and the disciplines that help one encounter God's grace. But in 1993, in the aftermath of a move from the Pacific Northwest to the Midwest, and amidst an extended family crisis that still is too painful to put into written words, I learned the transformative and healing power of Christian spirituality.

Through that class and the spiritual journeying that ensued, I became convinced that the prevailing dialog about the integration of psychology and Christianity was quite cerebral, at least at that time, and needed more emphasis on the experiential nature of spiritual formation. I fumbled around with ideas and words and eventually published a book on the subject (McMinn, 1996). However, two things have been unsettling since publishing the book. First, while it

seemed clear at the time that Christian psychologists had overemphasized the cognitive dimensions of integration, and underemphasized the experiential dimensions, the trend seems to be reversing itself in recent decades. In the process of becoming more attuned to spiritual experience, I often wonder if we have left behind the important work of understanding Christian theology and how it forms a distinctive worldview that can guide our research, theory, and practice as Christians in psychology (Johnson, 2007; McMinn, 2011). When spiritual formation is divorced from essential theological roots, it easily erodes to some vague notion of personal exploration reminiscent of the "inner child" rhetoric of the 1980s. Second, I have become increasingly aware that not everyone responds to courses in spiritual formation the way I did. What served as a winsome invitation to God's grace for me seems to be experienced in various ways by students I have spoken with over the years. For some it leads to deepened encounter with God, but for others it seems to be a distraction from the intellectual work of learning psychology and theology, or a series of fluffy assignments that have no place in academia. It begs the question of how doctoral students in clinical psychology experience academic attempts to promote their spiritual formation.

After 13 years at Wheaton I ventured back to the Pacific Northwest where I have continued teaching in a doctoral program designed to facilitate the integration of psychology and Christianity while supporting spiritual formation of students. A number of similar programs exist, including those represented in this special issue: Azusa Pacific University, Fuller Theological Seminary, George Fox University,

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Regent University, Rosemead School of Psychology at Biola University, and Wheaton College. These programs, sometimes dubbed explicitly religious doctoral programs (Johnson & McMinn, 2003), have established effective working relationships that have enabled multisite studies resulting in other special issues of *The Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, including issues on research training (McMinn & Hill, 2004) and clinical training (McMinn & Hill, 2011). With this special issue, we turn our attention to spiritual formation training at explicitly religious doctoral programs.

### **Spiritual Formation and the Person of the Psychotherapist**

It seems that few students enter graduate training in clinical psychology with a full understanding of what awaits them. Academic rigors, developing clinical competencies, and conducting research are perhaps a few of the expected experiences that lie ahead. For me (Goetsch), one of the least expected components was the journey of internal transformation that would unfold. Not only are students in clinical psychology gaining technical skills, but they are often encouraged to engage a process that can unsettle, redefine, and broaden their very sense of self. In the midst of this transformation, keeping hold of spiritual and religious roots can be a confusing and emotionally loaded task.

I remember reading Langberg's (2006) article on the developmental effects of psychotherapy. The main theme she discusses in her article is that, as psychotherapists, we are unavoidably shaped by what happens in the psychotherapy room. Her article had the organizing effect of giving voice to the profound but previously unarticulated experiences I was having as a developing clinician. The internal demands of therapy may seem self-evident to more experienced clinicians, but as a third year graduate student, I was struggling to make sense out of some of the painful, broken, and at times outright evil parts of the human experience I was engaging in therapy. I had grown in my conviction that a good therapist is not abstracted from the therapeutic encounter, but steadfastly remains attuned and connected to the client. Although I had faced difficult situations and seen pain in the world, I found myself inviting an intimacy with the woundedness of others that I had not previously known. A key part of graduate training in clinical psychology, and the

developmental process therein, must be to guide students' ability to effectively manage and integrate these experiences.

With the taxing nature of clinical development and the personal implications of therapeutic work in mind, spiritual formation in clinical training has come to play two very significant roles in my development. First, it serves to ground the often-tumultuous developmental shifts taking place. A friend of mine once compared his theological tradition to the headlights on a car that was barreling down a dark highway at night. At times when graduate school has felt like a darkened highway, the lights of my religious community have remained a steady presence.

Further, the impact of spiritual formation goes beyond self-care. The principles of spiritual formation often occupy a significant place in clinical work as well. Regardless of our theoretical orientation, therapy often presses up against some of our deepest personal convictions. Thus, as articulated in a transformational view of integrating Christianity and psychology (Coe & Hall, 2010), the specific characteristics of the person of the therapist are meaningful for the therapeutic action. The ability to find genuine care for our clients undergirds the development of rapport in the therapeutic relationship. For me, both an embodied Christian understanding of God's work to bring about His kingdom and a holistic view of the image of God in his creation (McMinn & Campbell, 2007) buoy my commitment to therapy and shape how I engage the therapeutic process. Spiritual formation provides space to clarify and deepen a commitment to core values present in the therapeutic encounter. My sense is that my experiences are not unique, and in many ways, I am articulating a bit of what is said by my fellow students in the following articles. I hope these perspectives inspire and encourage the readers.

### **A Collaborative Faculty-Student Effort**

As may be clear by now, this special issue emerged out of a conversation I (McMinn) had with an advanced doctoral student (Goetsch). The idea was Brian's, emerging from his interest in the person of the psychotherapist, and it immediately struck me as a good one. With the support of Dr. Peter Hill, editor of *Journal of Psychology & Christianity*, we contacted program directors at eight explicitly Christian doctoral programs in psychology and six agreed to participate. Each program has provided a narrative of how they conceptualize and experience spiritual formation training in

their programs. In addition, we have included an article describing two multisite empirical studies of spiritual formation among students at explicitly religious doctoral programs.

From the initial idea to the final journal pages, we have emphasized collaboration between faculty and students. We asked each program to consider student and alumni views as well as faculty perspectives, and most have included students or alumni as co-authors. The peer review process involved a team of both faculty and doctoral student reviewers. Brian and I have collaborated on planning the issue and reviewing the submissions. It turns out that having a former English literature major from Wheaton College helps quite a lot when co-editing a special issue.

Having multiple authors and perspectives requires the reader to discern shifts from one voice to another, as is the case in this introduction. Although these shifts may be disorienting at times, the compensating virtue is that multiple perspectives can be considered. Previous research conducted with explicitly religious doctoral programs suggests that faculty have more optimistic views of training than students or alumni (McMinn, Barse, Heyne, & Staley, 2011; McMinn, Hill, & Griffin, 2004). This is not limited to religious programs, as Vogel, McMinn, Peterson, and Gathercoal (2013) recently observed a similar phenomenon among a general sample of APA accredited doctoral programs. Our efforts to include students and alumni in this issue were designed, in part, to balance the more optimistic views offered by faculty with student perspectives. Still, we observe a good deal of optimism from the student authors in most of the articles in the pages that follow. This could be related to the students selected to participate in the articles, of course, but it is also likely that many students in explicitly religious doctoral programs experience a deep and genuine excitement about the spiritual formation that occurs in their program.

### **Themes to Observe**

Those reading this special issue will likely observe a number of themes in the articles that follow. First, it is clear that graduate school is difficult. The rigors of doctoral studies can feel overwhelming, because of both academic rigor and the sometimes-painful personal exploration required for effective clinical training in psychology. Many of the student and alumni narratives speak to the arduous nature of graduate school.

Second, various student narratives emphasize the importance of spiritual development as a protective factor when faced with the stress of graduate school. Some students find great solace and hope in the deepening nature of their faith. The narratives offered by these students are inspiring, serving as a reminder of how important spiritual formation can be during intense years of study.

Third, despite these inspiring narratives, external markers of spiritual involvement show a degree of decline from the beginning of an academic year to the end. The two multisite empirical studies reported by Fisk and colleagues show declining church attendance, decreased awareness of God, and decreased importance of religion. One of the two empirical studies suggests that the first year of doctoral study may be a critical window for spiritual development.

Fourth, it is clear that each program represented is intentional about spiritual formation efforts. This is seen in the curriculum design, mentoring relationships, and other professional growth opportunities promoted outside the classroom. We leave it to the readers to discern the degree of success reflected in each program. A humbling reality is that students in the program that Brian and I represent are not particularly enthusiastic about the spiritual formation training they receive. This may be related to our choice to report a systematic program evaluation rather than the narrative approach chosen by most programs, but it may also reflect a real difference between programs. Perhaps it was this gnawing realization that all is not well that intrigued us enough to propose a special issue on the topic.

Special issues such as this are not designed to provide the definitive answer to the topic at hand. Rather, our goal is to promote awareness and dialog. This already seems to be happening as several of the faculty involved in this special issue are planning ways to continue the conversation at annual meetings of the Christian Association for Psychological Studies (CAPS). It seems clear that spiritual formation is vitally important for many students in Christian doctoral programs. It is less clear how formation is best encouraged, and how effective current efforts have been. Our hope is that this special issue will foster conversation, renew vision, and prompt ongoing self-study regarding spiritual development in explicitly religious doctoral programs in clinical psychology.

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