

**THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION 101:  
THEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT IN  
PSYCHOTHERAPY**



**Chris O'Rear, M.Div., M.M.F.T.**

Licensed Clinical Pastoral Therapist

The Counseling Center at  
Belle Meade United Methodist Church  
Nashville, Tennessee  
[Chris@CounselingatBMUMC.com](mailto:Chris@CounselingatBMUMC.com)  
(615) 763-3236, Ext. 701

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**HOW DO WE ASSESS OUR CLIENT'S SITUATION  
OR PRESENTING PROBLEM?**

- Physiological
- Psychological
- Behavioral
- Sociological
- Spiritual



---

---

---

---

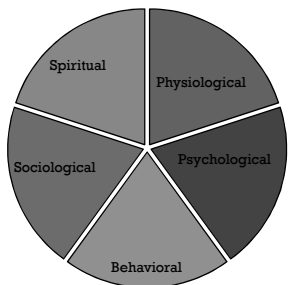
---

---

---

---

**THE FULL PICTURE**



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

*"IT IS NOT TO DENY THE PSYCHOLOGICAL, SOCIOLOGICAL, BIOLOGICAL, AND OTHER VIEWPOINTS ON UNDERSTANDING HUMAN NATURE. RATHER IT IS TO ASSERT THAT THE THEOLOGICAL LISTENING PERSPECTIVE AND A THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF... THE LIVING HUMAN DOCUMENT" IS VALID IN BOTH THE UNDERSTANDING OF AND THE COUNSELING OF PERSONS."*

Merle Jordan,  
"Taking on the  
Gods", p. 27

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## RELIGION & THEOLOGY

- Theological questions are the existential questions of meaning, purpose, sin, salvation and God that are part of the experience of being human
- Religion is a set of beliefs and practices that prescribes a way of answering and understanding the theological questions.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## PERSONAL AUTHENTICITY

Our ability to find contentment and to live fulfilling lives is related to our ability to fully integrate our beliefs with our outlook, actions and choices.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## OPERATIONAL VS. PROFESSED THEOLOGY

*“Operational Theology refers to the implicit religious story by which one is living, including unconscious material.”*

Merle Jordan  
*Taking on the Gods*



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## CONSTRUCT THEOLOGY

- Our personal theology creates a framework by which we seek to understand subsequent life experience.
- When we encounter experiences that exceed our traditional understanding we must find a way to make new meaning.



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## CERTITUDE VS. SELF-ASSURANCE

KILLEN & DEBEERS

### • Certitude

*Fall back to traditional teachings or positions of faith and try to find a way to explain the situation*

### • Self-Assurance

*Puts emphasis on the experience over that of tradition and requires a shift in beliefs.*



---

---

---

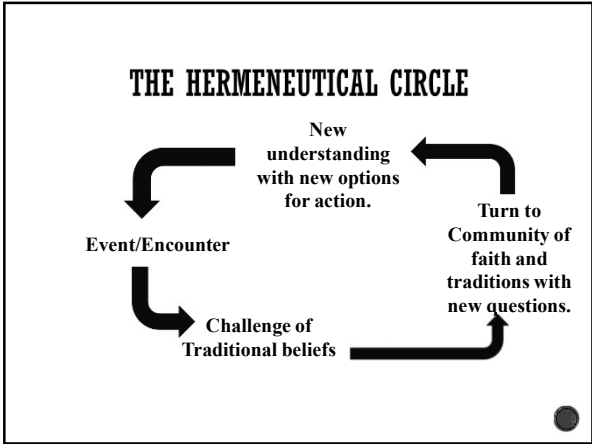
---

---

---

---

---




---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### AWARENESS OF THE HOLY

- Who or what is sacred?
- What is revered?
- Does the person ever experience awe or bliss?
- What is the object of ultimate concern?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### FAITH

- What is the professed faith?
- How does that faith affect outlook and action?
- Does that faith open up the world for the person or draw narrow boundaries that limit perspective and outlook?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## PROVIDENCE

- Where is God or is there a god?
- Can God be trusted?
- Why? Or Why me?
- Does the person experience the need for God or do they feel self-sufficient?
- Does God have a plan?
- Is the universe benevolent or cruel?



---

---

---

---

---

---

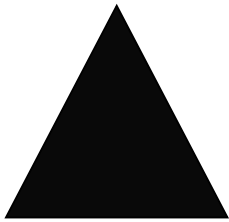
---

---

## WAYS OF MAKING MEANING: THE PROVIDENCE TRIANGLE

God is Loving

God is  
Omnipotent



Evil is Real



---

---

---

---

---

---

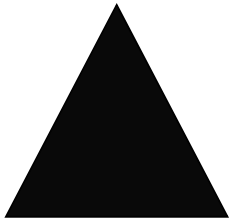
---

---

## THE PROVIDENCE TRIANGLE:

God is Loving

God is  
Omnipotent



**Evil is  
Real**



---

---

---

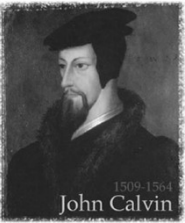
---

---

---

---

---



1509-1564  
John Calvin

*“...for nothing is more preposterous than to measure the incomprehensible judgment of God by our contracted minds.”*

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

*“Our need is never for an explanation that legitimizes [the claims of evil in the world]. Our need is for the clear understanding of God’s omnipresence that dispels the claims of evil, as light dissipates the terrors of the dark”*

*~Excerpt from “Questions & Answers on Christian Science”*

---

---

---

---

---

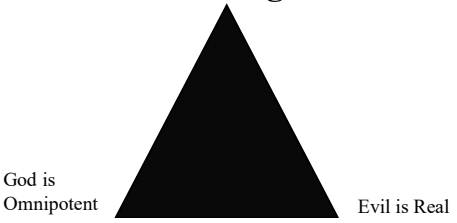
---

---

---

**THE PROVIDENCE TRIANGLE:**

**God is Loving**



God is Omnipotent      Evil is Real

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

*"The Deist needs none of those tricks and shows called miracles to confirm his faith, for what can be a greater miracle than the creation itself, and his own existence?"* Thomas Paine



---

---

---

---

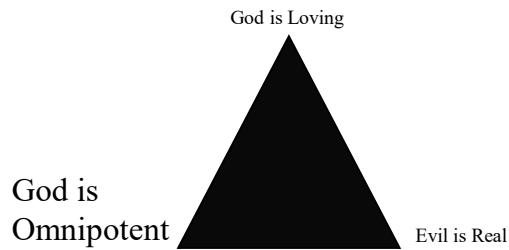
---

---

---

---

**THE PROVIDENCE TRIANGLE:**



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**OPEN THEOLOGY**

*"God knows the past and present...and knows the future as partly definite"*



John Sanders



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## GRACE & GRATITUDE

- Relates to both giving and receiving.
- Related to guilt & shame
- Involves humility



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## A NOTE ON "SIN"

- ἁμαρτία
- More than a list of prohibitions.
- Better understood as that which inhibits spiritual growth and connection to God, self, and others
- Psychotherapy as a process of overcoming "sin" and leading to greater depth and meaning in life



© iStock by Getty Images. Author's licensed under CC BY.



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## REPENTANCE

- Willingness to take responsibility for one's own actions
- Intention & action of going to a place of greater well-being
- Involves true remorse
- Requires courage



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---



## COMMUNION

- Connection with a community
- Community support & resources
- If not connected, by choice or rejection?



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## VOCATION

- Not necessarily about profession
- Related to sense of calling, meaning, purpose



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## ENTERING THE SPIRITUAL STORY

- Spiritual Genogram
- Listen for overt religious/spiritual words or ideas
- Engage a process of theological reflection
- Ask about spiritual practices
- Listen for personal or family rituals
- Don't assume common understanding.



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## THE DO'S & DON'TS

- Accept Your client where they are.
- Listen with a theological ear.
- Explore with humility.
- Seek to embody the best of your faith tradition, not teach it.
- Avoid seeking to make the client look like you, spiritually speaking.



---

---

---

---

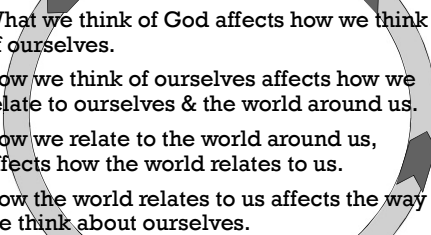
---

---

---

---

## MAKING MEANING

- 
- What we think of God affects how we think of ourselves.
  - How we think of ourselves affects how we relate to ourselves & the world around us.
  - How we relate to the world around us, affects how the world relates to us.
  - How the world relates to us affects the way we think about ourselves.



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## REFERENCES

- *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development & the Quest for Meaning*, James W. Fowler, Harper & Row Publishers, San Francisco, 1981.
- *The Living Human Document*, Charles Gerkin, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1984.
- *Encountering the Sacred in Psychotherapy: How to Talk with People about Their Spiritual Lives*, James Griffith & Melissa Griffith, Guilford Press, 2003.
- *Play the Ball Where the Monkey Drops It: Why We Suffer & How We Can Hope*, Gregory Knox Jones, Harper Collins, San Francisco, 2001.



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## REFERENCES

- *Taking on the Gods: The Task of the Pastoral Counselor*, Merle Jordan, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1986.
- *The Art of Theological Reflection*, Patricia O'Connell Killen & John DeBeer, Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, 2004.
- *When Religion Gets Sick*, Wayne Oates, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1970.
- *The Minister as Diagnostician: Person Problems In Pastoral Perspective*, Paul W. Pruyser, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1976.



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---