



## **Depression according to the holy fathers**

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### **Introduction**

*As I begin this presentation I would like reserve the right to revise and extend my remarks (as they say in congress). I say this because it is not my intention to add to or change anything having to do with our Holy Orthodox Faith. It's inevitable, however, that out of ignorance or lack of full knowledge, something may be said that will not be correct, and it is for this reason I know I may have to do just that - revise and extend my remarks. I know there's enough knowledge in this room to more than make up for any inadequacies I may demonstrate. Now, having said this, I will continue with the presentation.*

At first, this talk was going to be "An Analysis of the Foundations of Modern Psychology" - that's how I began to prepare it. Then the time would be have been taken to show how these foundations are not compatible with the teachings of Church or of Holy Scripture. This aspect of psychology - its foundations, will be discussed, but, only briefly, as we explore the theme of "Depression According to the Holy Fathers."

In preparing this talk I have referred to and, at times, quoted from the following:

- \* three volumes of the Philokalia
- \* "Orthodox Psychotherapy" by Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos
- \* "The Illness and Cure of the Soul" and "Orthodox Spirituality" by the same author
- \* Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers
- \* Anti-Nicene Fathers
- \* various books on psychology which are "secular" in origin

This topic is divided into three sections: first, I will talk about and critique psychology's foundations; second, we will define and take a general look at depression - its types and possible causes; and third, the definition and cure of depression in the fathers.

The Foundations of Modern Psychology

It may seem that what I am about to present has no relevance to the purpose of this talk - since we are mainly concerned with depression and its cure. It is worthwhile, however, to take the time to understand where our society is going, what (and who) is taking us there, and what is the prevailing "secular" (non-Orthodox) understanding of human nature. By knowing these things we, as pastors, can better understand our parishioners - their cares and concerns - as they make their way in a physically and spiritually hostile world - a world that is, itself, a leading cause of depression and also of despair. Furthermore, we will come to realize that psychological theory and method may actually contribute to the cause of some forms of depression and the spread of godlessness in our society.

Psychological theory has proven inadequate in its attempt to bring about an in-depth understanding of man. The reason for this is because psychology looks at human beings from a completely humanistic, relativistic, empirical, and evolutionary point of view; belief in God is not a requirement on the part of therapists. Truth is understood as being subjective, and it is believed, by some psychologists that man can be totally explained by that which is physical and material. Psychology has also faltered in the attempt to heal the pathological states sometimes found in the human condition. Some progress has been made, but the KEY to a CURE has remained elusive. The word "Psychology" means, loosely, "science of the soul." A CURE for man's soul will continue to remain out of reach to those who are not of the Church, because in order to cure the soul, one must understand the soul's makeup. In order to understand the soul's makeup, one must have access to correct knowledge about the soul. This knowledge can only be found in the Body of Christ. The Holy fathers agree, the true wellness of a person rests in the cure of his soul.

Now, unfortunately, some psychologists and therapies are beginning to recognize that man has a "spiritual" (self-consciousness) as well as a material aspect to his nature. It's unfortunate, because instead of turning to a true understanding of man's spiritual nature as defined by the People of God, the Orthodox Church, they are turning to Eastern religions and mysticism, the occult, and philosophies which are un-Godly. Naturally, only those religions and philosophies are chosen that bolster and uphold psychology's roots or base - its foundational errors.

Modern psychology draws its strength from two principle roots: philosophy and evolution. The new psychology/philosophy, now emerging, looks upon the human person as an evolving animal that's unwittingly participating in the evolution of life. Eventually that life will become the Divine. (Protozoa -> plant -> animal -> man -> ??).

I believe most of the problems in our society today stem from the incorrect understanding of human nature and human origins - attributed to a psychological system based on existential, humanistic, and empirical philosophies; and evolution. These are belief systems that cause men and women to 1), focus in on themselves as the source of a coming utopia 2), accept no absolutes and that truth is relative 3), teach that one man's opinion is as good as another's and 4), truth is only for a time.

When it comes to philosophy, (Philo = love, Sophia = wisdom), Holy Scripture and the Fathers of the Church distinguish between godless, worldly wisdom, and the wisdom of God. St. Paul, in Colossians, writes about philosophy:

*Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ. (Col. 2:8).*

St. Paul is writing about a philosophy that excludes Christ and is therefore of men and of the world. To exclude Christ in the pursuit of wisdom is to cause vain and deceitful feelings of superiority and importance. To be taught by men who exclude Christ is also to be led astray and become spoiled.

Let's take a brief, closer look at the philosophy which forms the base of psychology.

Existentialism = (SÆ ren Kierkegaard) Relativistic. Subjective. No absolutes. The truth cannot be acquired objectively. "The thing is to find the truth which is true for me, to find an idea for which I can live and die."

Humanism = Probably causes more agony in our society than any other theory or belief. "In this century the label has been appropriated by those who reject all religious beliefs, insisting that we should be exclusively concerned with human welfare in this, allegedly, the only world. Its four doctrines are: 1), evolution 2),atheism 3), socialist one world view (New World Order and 4), self-centered man

Empiricism = (Aristotle) "This is the doctrine that all knowledge is derived from sensory experience. It teaches reliance on sensory observation and experiment as the only basis of knowledge. In other words, unless a subject can be seen, touched, tasted, smelled, or heard; or experimented with, or is manipulated; or can be measured or weighed and thus shown to have substance, it is considered as non-existent, not factual, not truly real, and therefore unknowable. (The senses, however, cannot be trusted [cloth story, grape story).

Evolution = A theory (fact) that the various types of animals and plants have their origin in other preexisting types and that distinguishing differences are due to modifications in successive generations. There are three types of evolution, 1), Theistic, 2), Atheistic, 3), Creationism.

These foundations (of psychology) are easily understood as being Godless. As such, psychology cannot cure the soul of man. Psychological modes and methods are merely the shell, the conduit (the branches), in which and through which the philosophy and the evolutionary theory (the roots) are promulgated. These errors permeate our schools at all levels, our places of work, our government, they creep into our families, and, sad to say, ever more increasingly into the Orthodox Church. (Will I find faith upon the earth?) In his epistle to the Romans (Romans 11:16) St. Paul writes:

. . . if the root be holy, so are the branches.

The implication here is that the opposite is also true:

If the root (philosophy/evolution) be unholy, so are the branches (the methods, and theories of psychology).

I believe it can be readily understood that psychology, divorced from the theology and faith

of the Orthodox Church; and given its roots, is not the answer to pathological states having their focus in, and their origination from, the human mind. The errors of psychology are promulgated throughout the world by psychologists, psychiatrists, and the educators who blindly follow them. The possible answer may be the integration of psychological method with Orthodox teaching about the human person.

### DEPRESSION: TYPES AND POSSIBLE CAUSES

I should like now to discuss depression in general its types and possible causes.

We have just heard, by the way, that psychology (as a therapeutic method) cannot cure man's soul because it lacks the true understanding of human nature as taught by the Church and as created by God. Furthermore, psychology does not yet understand that man is a non-evolved,

spiritual/material being. Psychology does, however, have much to say about what causes depression from a genetic-biological perspective. That is how we will discuss it in this section. And we know, from self- observation, the physical influences the spiritual dimension, and the spiritual influences the physical dimension.

Depression, can operate, independently, in both dimensions of human existence. Consequently, the cure the soul may not necessarily heal the depression caused by the body. And curing the bodily source of depression will not heal that affliction in the soul. It should be kept in mind that the depression caused by the body will, in most instances, require medical intervention. The problem facing us as pastors is determining which form of depression we are dealing with when one of our parishioners comes to us complaining of this affliction. Is it depression from a physical cause or depression from a spiritual cause?

There are many real causes of what we call "depression." There are also erroneous ideas about what causes depression. One such idea is that depression is the result of sin. Is there any truth to this? Yes there is; but sin is not the only cause. Look at Job, for example. God tested him, and he was in a miserable state. His friends asked him: "Is not thy wickedness great? And thine inequities infinite?" (Job 22:5) Job had already responded: "Miserable comforters are ye all" (16:2) Job had not sinned and God vindicated him in the end. He was, no doubt, "depressed" but not as the result of personal sin.

Separating the cause from depression is very important. The depression is the symptom, the cause is the problem (disease). We must seek to remove the cause.

Depression can be seen as one of three things or even a combination of these:

1. It can be a symptom of something. Influenza

or serious disease may have depression as a side effect.

2. It can be a reaction to life events, as in the death of a loved one, or being fired, or living

a sinful life, or being angry, or experiencing guilt (whether false guilt or deserved guilt). This is called "reactive depression." It occurs as a response to a certain life style or event. Cognition also plays a leading role in reactive depression.

3. It can be a disease in and of itself, such as when the body is suffering from some disorder. It may be hormonal, genetic, or physiological.

There are also certain risk factors that may lead to depression:

1. A person's sex. Women have a higher rate of depression than do men. (2:1).
2. Age. Surveys seem to indicate a higher rate of depression in younger adults (18 to 40).

This is a change from earlier in this Century when older adults were reported to be more depressed.

3. Marital status. Separated and divorced persons show a higher incidence of depression than do those who never married or who are currently married. Rates are lower among married persons than among single persons.

4. Social class. Depressive symptoms are more common among those in the lower occupational, financial, or educational levels.

5. Genetic factors. There seems to be compelling evidence that heredity factors predispose a person to bipolar disorders (Manic-depressives).

6. Biological factors. There is growing acceptance that clinical depression can be triggered in a number of different places in the body. Physical illness almost certainly increases one's risk for depression - so does having a certain "high risk" physiology.

Before we leave this section on depression, - its types and possible causes, and before we look at the human person and depression from the standpoint of the Church and the Fathers, let's trace a resulting depression from a root cause.

One accepted major cause, mentioned earlier, is anger. Most anger begins with a "HURT" (some disappointment, an action or non-action on the part of someone). Instead of admitting the hurt the person mulls it over and becomes "ANGRY." Anger hides the hurt. The anger is not admitted, expressed, or dealt with. This may lead to "REVENGE." The revenge hides the hurt and the anger. Revenge leads to disruptive, violent actions that are not acceptable in our society. The revenge is then repressed. The repressed revenge can lead to 1), destructive action; or 2), Psychosomatic symptoms; or 3), depression. If the depression deepens, or is not alleviated, it can lead to despair and despondency.

This doesn't explain all depression but does explain some.

We can now understand a little better this malady called depression. And secular psychologists consider it a malady. From the point of view that it was not given to mankind by God, it is a malady. The Holy fathers say that all types of pathology arise as the result of separation from God. It is a highly complex disorder that can come from both good and evil

sources.

It was surprising to learn that the word "depression" (or even the word "depressed") is not found in Holy Scripture, and rarely found in the writings of the Holy Fathers. It is referred to and its symptoms are discussed, but depression, as such, does not seem to be the concern of the Church. The Fathers expected that every true Christian would be depressed. It is the source of the depression that concerns the Fathers, and to that which depression, not lighted by self-knowledge and trust in God, can lead.

St Gregory of Nyssa (From Glory to Glory) writes:

Our greatest protection is self-knowledge, and to avoid the delusion that we are seeing ourselves when we are in reality looking at something else. (not self-esteem).

The Holy Scriptures tell us that the source of all the maladies of mankind was the "fall." Adam and Eve (Zoe) were created and placed in a Garden of Delight. They were created in the image and the likeness of the God that created them. Adam and Eve lived in a near perfect relationship with each other and all the universe. When they contemplated each other, they saw God himself. They each saw a heart and a soul that were holy, pure and grace-filled; a will fixed on God's purposes; and a mind that shone with a brilliance, and an illumination that was surpassed only by God himself - and unencumbered by the intellect and the reasoning power. It was "the light of the knowledge and the glory of God."

When God breathed into Adam the breath of life, the energy of the Holy Spirit, Adam became a living soul. He was made of much more than the dust of the ground (which constituted his body;) he was also made of the Image and Likeness of God (without having any "divine spark" whatsoever) - he therefore possessed a spirit aspect. Living on the earth, he also lived in heaven, walking and communing with God. Then came the fall.

At this point it is important to know that the soul contains the body - the body does not contain or imprison the soul. The body is within the soul. The soul acts through the body. The fathers say that it is the soul that needs to be cured because of Adam and Eve's disobedience and self - ish act. To understand why this is so, we have to take a closer look at the soul's makeup.

The soul, according to the Fathers, has essence and energy (created by God). The essence of the soul is the heart. The energy of the soul is the mind (or the nous). The mind, or the nous, is also the "eye of the heart;" the mind's natural "resting place" is in the heart, at its very core. The nous operates through the thoughts.

Unfortunately, the word "nous" can be very confusing. In the biblical/patristic tradition the nous can define the heart, the soul, or the mind. However, men like Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos, are doing much to unravel the confusion and the sometimes-cloudy definitions that one encounters when trying to understand the true nature of man according to the Fathers.

So, to avoid confusion, the soul is defined as the spiritual element of man's existence; the heart as the essence of the soul; and the nous (mind) as the energy of the soul which operates through the thoughts, and exists at the heart's very center as the "eye of the

heart." The Fathers teach that man is an "unconfused union" of body and soul. They also teach that the center of this union is the heart.

The natural state of man then, when first created by God, was that he enjoyed the vision of God (theoria); his mind (nous) was illumined with the unceasing knowledge of God; and his mind was also united to his heart - at its very center. It was the heart's "eye." Separated from reason, it could concern itself with the thing of God.

At the fall, the nous became darkened and separated from Adam's heart. The mind became identified with the reason and the intellect. Since the mind operates through the thoughts(it is not the thoughts) they began to act in the reason. Because of this, bodily corruption; enslavement to the passions; confused thinking and thoughts resulting from imaginings, fantasies, stimulation of the senses, and a malfunctioning reason, caused a frightening disease - separation from God and physical and spiritual death. The soul needs to be cured. When our savior, Jesus Christ, came, conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the ever-virgin theotokos, He brought the cure - the Church as hospital, and the sacraments and the true ascetic life as remedies.

It can now be easily understood why man suffers from such maladies as depression and also how these maladies can be cured. Man must remove the nous from its unnatural association with the reason and bring it back to its first love, the heart, where it can once again be the center, the "eye."

The nous must be illumined and thereby healed. The reason for this is found in an Old Testament Hebrew word that is translated "mind." The word is KALYAW and it is used for "interior self," "mind," "kidney," "reins." In other words, the nous, like a kidney, is a filter. It guards the heart from any outward pollution that may come into it; and it guards the thoughts and actions from the defilements that arise from within the heart. And like the reins on a horse, the nous directs the human condition to conform to the things of God.

Another word the scriptures use for "mind" is spirit.

Our spirit is the "life source," the "power source," the "energy source" of our lives. Our spirit resides at the core of our being. For the non-Christian, the human spirit has no other source of energy but itself. For the baptized, sacrament receiving, ascetic living Orthodox Christian, a connection has been established with another source of energy - the Holy Spirit. This Holy Spirit energy imparts everlasting life.

I am speaking now, of course, of man in the fallen state. The original function of the mind was the unceasing remembrance and contemplation of the knowledge and the glory God as He was revealed to the heart. The reason, being of the brain, took care of all those other things that were necessary for the human being to live in the material world.

We do not have the time to go into depth about methods of curing the nous, perhaps someone could be persuaded to do that someday, but, suffice to say, that as a man begins to cure his mind, even before illumination, he becomes the "social man par excellence." That is, "He is no longer defiant, he becomes the health of his community, his thoughts are no longer confused and confusing, he does not seek inordinate pleasures or fulfillment." He is immune to despair and despondency that springs from hopelessness, and his

passions and emotions are beginning to come under control.

To this end we must constantly "renew our minds." God's life must show forth - not our own. In Romans 12:2 we read:

Be not conformed to this world, but be Ye transformed by the renewing of your Mind (nous), so that you may prove what is the good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.

Among the Holy Fathers, there is a distinction made between depression that comes from living a sinful life, and a depression that occurs and deepens the closer one gets to God.

In the first instance, knowingly living in such a way that goes counter to the way God wants us to live, there is set up in the conscience an element of conflict and self recrimination. This conflict and self recrimination causes an agitation that vibrates through the mind and into the heart. We then rightly reproach ourselves for the lack of firm intention and true repentance, and we become ashamed at our mode of living. The sadness that results, causes us to think, act, and react in a subdued manner in the presence of men and a Holy God. We then are called "depressed." Our joy, peace, holiness etc., are not able to be expressed. This type of depression moves us to turn from sin to holiness by way of purification (which is the first step in a three-step process of purification, illumination, and theosis). The Fathers teach that the Spiritual Father, the sacraments and the ascetic life provide the cure. In the meantime, we continually acquire greater self-knowledge and a deeper love for a merciful and long-suffering God.

Some Orthodox Christians, however, fail to alleviate this conflict, recrimination, and shame to such a degree, that they despair of ever being able to overcome them or to receive God's forgiveness because of them. They see the situation as hopeless. Even after repentance and forgiveness they cannot believe that God, or their fellow man, can associate with one so depraved. In other words, they have lost their trust in God. The result is despair and despondency. The cure for these afflictions is the same as for the depression just described. However, the Spiritual Father must understand human nature as did the Holy Fathers, and he must be a careful and sensitive counselor.

Yet, in the teachings of the Fathers, one type of that which we may call depression will always remain (especially as we advance in the spiritual life). Listen to the words of Elder Silouan: (Elder Silouan, Moscow, 1994, P. 316).

When the soul is full of God's love, it is from immeasurable joy that it grieves and tearfully prays that the whole world would come to know its master and heavenly Father, neither knowing peace, nor wanting it, until all enjoy the grace of His love.

The Fathers make a distinction between depression, and despair and despondency that are caused by hopelessness. In the Holy Fathers, depression (sorrow) comes from either not living the way we know we should, or as the result of drawing closer to God and being confronted with our unworthiness and the realization that the majority of mankind is far from Him...



