

Commonalities Between Client-Centered Therapy and How God's Grace Works: Finding a Path to Client-Centered Christian Spiritual Counseling

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Abstract

There are striking similarities between the way Carl Rogers (1957, 1959, 1961) conceived of the counselor-provided conditions in client-centered therapy leading to client change, and how Christian theological writers such as Edward Schillebeeckx (1968/2005, 1979, 1980, 1987, 1991) and spiritual writers like Anthony DeMello (1990) describe the divine–human relationship and how this leads to change for human beings. Given these similarities, the author posits that Christian spiritual counseling should proceed in the same manner as client-centered therapy. Doing so allows the spiritual counseling relationship to mirror the God–human relationship as it empowers personal and spiritual growth for humanity.

Introduction

This article explores the commonalities between how client-centered (CC) therapy achieves its purpose of being a constructive therapeutic relationship for client change (Rogers, 1957, 1959, 1961) and how God’s grace works from a Christian theological viewpoint (Schillebeeckx, 1980, 1991). To do this, one must appreciate how a specific understanding of God and God’s way of relating to creation is

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Author’s Note: You will notice that I deviate from traditional citation process when I cite books by including page numbers when I am paraphrasing. Providing the page numbers facilitates the reader’s ability to find this information within these voluminous texts. Special thanks to Alex DeMarco who provided invaluable copy/theological editing.

conceived (Schillebeeckx, 1968/2005, 1979, 1980, 1987, 1991), as well as how spiritual change can be posited (DeMello, 1990). Once this is elucidated, the striking similarities between how change is achieved in CC therapy and how God's grace works leads to the conclusion that Christian spiritual counseling should be conducted in the same fashion as CC therapy. Doing so allows the Christian spiritual counseling relationship to mirror the relationship between God and human beings.

Pertinent Concepts from Client-Centered Theory and Therapy

In Carl Rogers' (1959) CC theory, there is a sole drive that propels all life processes; he referred to this as the *actualizing tendency*. The actualizing tendency is defined as "the inherent tendency of the organism to develop all its capacities in ways which serve to maintain or enhance the organism" (Rogers, 1959, p. 196). This finds expression in two main ways within a human being: The individual's sense of their bodily or organismic experience *and* the way they view themselves psychologically, referred to as the self-system (Rogers, 1959). "If the self and the total experience of the organism are relatively congruent, then the actualizing tendency remains relatively unified. If self and experience are incongruent, then the general tendency to actualize the organism may work at cross purposes with the ... tendency to actualize the self" (Rogers, 1959, pp. 196–197). Rogers (1959) states such incongruences within the person can lead to psychological maladjustment. While incongruences result from denied or distorted experiences, they can also arise from adopting or internalizing the expectations of others that are "at odds" with the experience of an individual. When this happens, maladjustment is said to be caused by internalizing the "conditions of worth" that others hold for a person (Rogers, 1959).

When a client experiencing incongruence (i.e., maladjustment) comes to a CC therapist for help, the counselor provides conditions within the relationship which Rogers (1957) asserts to have a therapeutic effect. These conditions entail the counselor's being *congruent*, that is they must be accurately aware of their experience in the relationship with the client (Rogers, 1957). The counselor strives to experience *unconditional positive regard* for their client; meaning, they seek to accept "each aspect of the client's experience as being a

part of that client ... [This] means that there are no *conditions* of acceptance, no feeling of ‘I like you only *if* you are thus and so’” (Rogers, 1957, p. 98). And, the counselor seeks to experience “an accurate, *empathic understanding* of the client’s awareness of [their] ... experience [or internal frame of reference]” (Rogers, 1957, p. 99). This means a therapist strives to “sense the client’s private world as if it were [the therapist’s] own” (Rogers, 1957, p. 99). If the counselor is able to provide these conditions, a “process of constructive personality change will follow” (Rogers, 1957, p. 96). This occurs because the unconditional environment provided by a CC therapist counteracts the conditional aspects of a client’s experience, thereby allowing them to accurately perceive and correct incongruences within the totality of their lived experience (Rogers, 1959).

Edward Schillebeeckx’s View of God and God’s Relation to Creation

Roman Catholic priest and theologian Edward Schillebeeckx’s (1914–2009) conception of God is rooted in human experience. For Christians, Judeo–Christian history is the source material for understanding God. In the history of the Jewish people, moments of liberation have been interpreted as being supported by God. Christians interpret the liberation that comes from the way of life espoused by Jesus of Nazareth as being rooted in God’s desire for people to be freed from all the forces that oppress them (Schillebeeckx, 1991, pp. 8–10, 121–123). It is precisely in this way that we encounter God. Our experience of God is *always* mediated through historical, worldly events as well as inner human experiences (Schillebeeckx, 1980, pp. 809–817; Schillebeeckx, 1991, p. 70).

Precisely because we have no unmediated experience of God, Schillebeeckx states we are forced to acknowledge something about God. Namely, God cannot be apprehended with any specificity, and therefore God is beyond all created reality. Yet, at the same time, we experience God as somehow present within us. This double experience allows Schillebeeckx to state that God transcends all reality and is simultaneously immanent or present within all that exists. In fact, we can only relate to God because of God’s immanent presence within us; the aspects of God’s existence that transcend created reality are beyond our relational grasp (Schillebeeckx, 1979, p. 627;

Schillebeeckx, 1991, pp. 57, 74–77). Because our God experience involves interpretations of both our inner experience and historical events (Schillebeeckx, 1980, p. 809, 1991, p. 70), Schillebeeckx (1968/2005) is able to say that God interpenetrates *all* created reality (pp. 127–129). He therefore concludes that God transcends as well as interpenetrates all creation, while remaining intimately available to us inwardly and through worldly events vis-à-vis faith-based interpretations of experience (Schillebeeckx, 1968/2005, pp. 127–129; Schillebeeckx, 1979, p. 627).

Schillebeeckx (1991) is aware that defining God from human experience is potentially fraught with problems, for in doing so we are using human characteristics to describe something that is totally other than human; but we simply have no other means for describing God (pp. 57, 74–77). A perfect example of this difficult state of affairs is how human beings may only liberate others from oppression by “doing things” to help them (p. 231); but God works differently. God liberates from *within* the person by empowering them to actualize their freedom (p. 90). Christians interpret the freedom they experience to effectuate their lives for happiness as coming from God. This inner freedom allows one to be outwardly free to care for others, which is the defining hallmark of the way of life espoused by Jesus of Nazareth. In the New Testament, we see these characteristics of God—willing freedom and liberation—exemplified in the life of Jesus. This is why Christians understand Jesus to be the human revelation of the invisible God (Schillebeeckx, 1991, pp. 7, 31–32, 90, 121–123).

Whereas human beings may fail to choose the good when confronted with a choice between good and evil, we know from the always compassionately lived life of Jesus—where he *consistently* championed the good and sought to heal every evil afflicting those he encountered—that God *only* acts for good, never for evil (Schillebeeckx, 1980, pp. 725–730; Schillebeeckx, 1991, pp. 121–122). Observing this about Jesus, Schillebeeckx says that God has no encumbrances (i.e., possesses absolute freedom) to effectuate the divine nature as unconditional love and pure positivity. In other words, God does not make decisions *between* good and evil; God freely and absolutely exercises the positivity of the divine nature without *any* temptation toward evil whatsoever (Schillebeeckx, 1980, p. 727; Schillebeeckx, 1987, pp. 104–105).

Schillebeeckx (1991) also states that we can use observation of the world around us to say something about how God relates to creation. We can assuredly say God *respects the freedom of creation*, because we notice “in nature there is chance and determinism; in the world of human activity there is the possibility of free choices” (Schillebeeckx, 1991, p. 91). If this were not so, “we and our history would be merely a puppet show in which God holds the strings” (Schillebeeckx, 1991, p. 91). If God can be said to respect the freedom of creation, what can we say about God’s activity within it?

From an examination of the world around us, we see that God does not *directly* intervene within the world or our lives (Schillebeeckx, 1979, p. 627). Instead, Schillebeeckx (1991) asserts, “the action of God in world history is ... always the divine activation of worldly, historical and human powers and possibilities” (p. 83); this is called God’s grace. Grace empowers the natural processes of life, but it does so without controlling them. In other words, God’s grace operates *in* worldly and human actions (Schillebeeckx, 1980, pp. 810–817); it cannot be identified as something separate from naturally occurring phenomena (Schillebeeckx, 1991, p. 234). Given this, are we to also conceive of God as being at work in *all* worldly and human actions and/or decisions?

No. God’s grace only empowers worldly and human actions/decisions which bring forth the good in life (Schillebeeckx, 1980, pp. 791, 808–814); grace does not empower destructive life processes (pp. 726–730). Therefore, we can always count on God’s immanent presence within us to faithfully act *in* all our choices and actions *for the good* (p. 808), never in our harmful actions or decisions (Schillebeeckx, 1980, p. 791).

Anthony DeMello’s Insights: How People Change from a Spiritual Perspective

Roman Catholic priest and psychotherapist Anthony DeMello (1931–1987) wrote a very insightful book on spiritual change. In this book, DeMello (1990) advises us to simply *observe* ourselves (p. 56). Through observation, you begin to *understand* yourself; you do not need to do anything beyond this (p. 90). DeMello says that when you try to change you run head-on into the problem of your attachments. You want something for yourself and you become “attached” to that

desire (pp. 137–140). The more you pursue that desire for change, the more you “rail against” something in your life; and the more you do that, the more power the situation gains over you. DeMello advises that we stop fighting whatever we want to change. Instead, we should simply *understand* it (DeMello, 1990, p. 147). But how does one do that?

We accomplish this by being *aware* of what is happening in our lives. When we do not push ourselves to change, but simply pay attention or give awareness to ourselves, change becomes possible (DeMello, 1990, pp. 166–168). There is no technique one can teach for doing this (pp. 35–37), but DeMello does offer some basic assistance: Pay attention to your environment, what you are thinking or feeling. Do not try to change whatever you are thinking or feeling—just notice those things (pp. 45–46). You will begin to gain insights about what is going on, i.e., how you are *attached* to something and how attachments cause suffering (pp. 46–50). Once you are aware of what is going on in your life, change happens naturally without you attempting to make it happen. The more you *try* to change, the more arduous and unsuccessful the process will be (DeMello, 1990, pp. 166–168).

Bringing Schillebeeckx and DeMello Together on Change Process

The foundation has been laid for us to unite the theological and spiritual with counseling. But before we can do that, we must bring together some of the ideas of Schillebeeckx and DeMello. In particular, we must address why we human beings may experience God’s grace as “challenging” us in the spiritual change process, and why we likely have such experiences.

Schillebeeckx (1991) states that human beings may experience God’s grace as challenging them (p. 90) to live in life-enhancing ways (Schillebeeckx, 1980, p. 791). To understand how this experience comes about within us, we must recall DeMello’s (1990) insights on how spiritual change happens. When we pay attention or are aware of what is going on within us, insights come; we begin to see things for what they are within our lives and we begin to see what causes our suffering (DeMello, 1990, pp. 45–50). Even though such revelatory processes are a product of our inner experience, we can certainly state

this “challenging” awareness involves God’s grace if, as Schillebeeckx (1980) contends, the process is life-enhancing (p. 791).

Although Schillebeeckx never explicitly reveals how the inner process of spiritual change happens, his writings seem to affirm DeMello’s (1990) understanding that this happens within a situation of unconditionality (pp. 45–50, 166–168). For example, Schillebeeckx (1991) states God is not invested in our choosing one path over another as we seek to overcome all that hampers our lives (pp. 230–231); God simply wants us to thrive and flourish (Schillebeeckx, 1987, pp. 104–105). Even though the divine has no pre-determined plan for how that should happen (Schillebeeckx, 1991, p. 91), engaging with God in prayer *somehow* allows us to see the things that need to change in our lives (Schillebeeckx, 1980, p. 817).

This must come about because, as Schillebeeckx (1987) indicates, God’s love for us is unconditional (p. 104). If it is unconditional, the person should not experience God as controlling or directing their inner process. In fact, this is precisely how we saw Schillebeeckx depict the relationship between God and human beings in the preceding paragraph; and, this coheres with Schillebeeckx’s (1980) assertions that God’s grace does not control life processes (pp. 810–817). Even so, Schillebeeckx (1991) does leave the “door open” for God to spontaneously urge humanity toward the good in life, yet always allowing for us to refuse the invitation (pp. 90–91). Thus, we may say that the interactive process between God and human beings happens without divine manipulation (p. 91), for even when God spontaneously prompts us toward the good, we are free to refuse. The divine certainly respects our freedom (Schillebeeckx, 1991, pp. 90–91).

Therefore, if we bring together Schillebeeckx’s views on God’s way of relating to us and DeMello’s understanding of how we change, the process of spiritual change that is revealed is paradoxical: God not controlling or directing our inner process is exactly what allows us to change! Engaging with God’s unconditional love allows us to become aware of the issues that need changing in our lives. Whether the “challenge” we experience comes from our awareness process as we deliberately engage with God, or whether we interpret the experience as coming from the divine spontaneously makes no difference. For God’s grace can be said to be involved, as Schillebeeckx (1980) states, in *all* processes that are life-enhancing (p. 791).

How Does This Apply to Christian Spiritual Counseling?

All of what has been stated above regarding God and God's relation to creation as well as to change in the spiritual life has striking corollaries with CC theory and therapy. In Rogers' (1959) theory, the actualizing tendency has only growth-promoting or life-maintaining properties. As Schillebeeckx (1980) asserts, God's grace is similar. It empowers the good or only what enhances life (pp. 791, 808-815). CC therapists provide conditions in counseling that one can also predicate of God. According to Rogers (1957), a counselor seeks to understand their client's inner experience or internal frame of reference. Because God is ever-present within us (Schillebeeckx, 1991, p. 57), the divine can be said to be "more intimate in me than I am ... with myself" (p. 90); as such, we may assert that God understands our inner experience given God's depth of intimacy within us. Rogers (1957) states counselors strive to have unconditional positive regard for clients. God, as pure positivity (Schillebeeckx, 1980, p. 727) and unconditional love (Schillebeeckx, 1987, pp. 104–105), may certainly be said to possess this attitude toward humanity. And, lastly, CC counselors endeavor to be congruent or aware of their inner reactions to clients in the counseling relationship (Rogers, 1957). God, who possesses absolute freedom, is entirely unencumbered by inner conflicts (Schillebeeckx, 1987, pp. 104–105; Schillebeeckx, 1991, p. 101). This implies that God is perfectly aware of everything that happens within the divine life (i.e., is congruent) as God relates to human beings. Thus, we see that God relates to us in a strikingly similar way to how CC therapists endeavor to relate to their clients, and, both relationships engender similar growth promoting tendencies for humanity.

Given all this, and in keeping with Rogers' (1957) assertion that personality change will ensue for clients when counselors provide the conditions of CC therapy, it only stands to reason that Christian spiritual counseling—when grounded in a view of God and God's relationship to humanity similar to the one outlined above—should be conducted in the same manner as CC therapy. This is posited not only because Rogers (1957) asserted that the therapist-provided conditions are responsible for *all* successful counseling, but also because Christian spiritual counselors should attempt to mirror the divine–human relationship as much as possible in terms of creating a climate

whereby unconditionality allows for client change. Just as Rogers (1961) states the climate of CC counseling promotes the client's right to self-determination (pp. 170–171), so too should spiritual counselors seek to protect their clients' freedom. This is important because, as DeMello (1990) asserts, the process of spiritual self-discovery and change comes from inner awareness of one's process (pp. 45-50, 166-168), *not* from the direct guidance of a spiritual counselor. Moreover, Christian spiritual counseling should honor the freedom of the client because, as Schillebeeckx (1991) notes, God respects human freedom (p. 91). All of this supports the conclusion that Christian spiritual counselors should provide the right interpersonal environment within counseling—the same that characterizes CC therapy—which allows for self-discovery and change to occur. If a Christian spiritual counselor and client are endeavoring to work this way, it is only logical to assume that God's grace will be at work *in* the inner process of the client, just as the actualizing tendency is at work *in* the client's process within CC therapy.

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