



Heinz Kohut and Empathy: A Perspective from a Theology of the Cross

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IN RECENT DECADES, A GROWING NUMBER OF THEOLOGIANS, PASTORAL THEOLOGians, and pastors have eschewed the social sciences in general and psychology in particular.¹ Why have they done so? Perhaps because they believe that many pastoral theologians in the 1960s and 1970s were unable to resist the temptation “to allow psychological language to overwhelm or define religious tradition.”² After all, the goal of theology is to liberate us from all false gods—including the idolatries of the social sciences. So it may seem that psychology, in many ways the darling of the church in late-mid-twentieth century, is now receiving something of a needed

¹My thanks to my colleague, Susan Bond, who teaches homiletics and liturgics at Vanderbilt, for her comments on this paper.

²E. Brooks Holifield, *A History of Pastoral Care in America* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983).

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Heinz Kohut’s emphasis on empathy as a factor in healing can help inform a method of pastoral care grounded in the theology of the cross. Empathic ministry can take many forms, but it always seeks the well-being of the other.

scolding or experiencing a kind of comeuppance for its individualistic assumptions and elitist practice.

Yet, I believe that there still remain some plausible rationales for pastors and pastoral theologians to seek insight from the social sciences. Using the law/gospel dialectic, Carl Braaten has offered this one: “A theology of the gospel opens us to dialogue with the secular wisdom of the age, without surrendering our commitment to the lordship of Christ....Psychology is in the position to formulate the questions to which theology looks for answers in the gospel.”³

Building somewhat on Braaten’s method (which derives from Tillich’s method), I examine from the perspective of a theology of the cross the concept of empathy as proposed by the psychoanalytic theorist and practitioner Heinz Kohut. I describe first Kohut’s proposal that caregivers should (out of empathy) make their theories “helpmates, not masters,” and then his “relational” psychology—his notion that persons come to be who they are through their empathic interactions with others. Next, I discuss his proposal that empathy—the experience by those in need that they are understood by others—brings healing. From a theology of the cross, I conclude with observations on the relevance of Kohut for the practice of ministry.

I. HEINZ KOHUT: HIS METHOD AND ANTHROPOLOGY

A native of Vienna, Heinz Kohut (1913-1981) lived in that Austrian city until he emigrated to England in 1939, and then, in the following year, to Chicago. Kohut lived the remainder of his years in Chicago where he practiced psychoanalysis and lectured in psychiatry at the University of Chicago. His first major work, *The Analysis of the Self* (1971), appeared relatively late in his career. However, a number of works, some published posthumously, quickly followed in which the theory behind his extensive practice gradually unfolded and through which he established an important voice in modern psychology.

One may discern something about Kohut’s theory of caregiving by examining his analysis of a Miss F. The authors Howard and Margaret Baker summarize what took place between Kohut and Miss F. this way:

Miss F. greeted Kohut’s carefully thought-out traditional interpretations with fury and repeated comment, “You are ruining my analysis with these interpretations.” For a considerable time he understood her protestations as resistance and was confident about the accuracy of his understanding. Eventually, he realized that he had failed to put himself empathically in her position—imposing *his* theory on *her* situation.⁴

Kohut maintains that caring for others requires that one “resist the tempta-

³Carl Braaten: “A Theological Critique of Pastoral Care and Counseling,” in *Justification: The Article by Which the Church Stands or Falls* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 164.

⁴Howard S. Baker and Margaret N. Baker, “Heinz Kohut’s Self-Psychology: An Overview,” *American Journal of Psychiatry* 144/1 (1987) 1.

tion” of “tool and method pride” so that one’s theories may become one’s “help-mates...not masters” or one’s “guides, not Gods.” Kohut includes his own theory among those that may serve as “rigid mold(s)” into which the analyst may be tempted to fit the client.⁵ For Kohut, the truth of theory resides not in its correspondence to some body of psychological facts but to the degree to which it helps one to attend to the needs of one’s client. Kohut frequently warns practitioners, rich in any particular theory, against attending to the illusory truths of their theory at the expense of attending to their client’s needs. From the same case with Miss F., one may also discern something of the anthropology assumed in Kohut’s psychology: “He [Kohut] realized that Miss F. did not experience him as a separate person. Rather, she seemed to need some extension of herself, someone over whom she had a degree of control normally reserved for a part of one’s body like one’s hand.”⁶

Much psychoanalytic thought before Kohut portrayed persons as driven primarily by instinctual desires to attach to other persons in order to gratify those desires. Kohut offered a different portrayal. Persons other than oneself, or, in the rather unfortunate language of psychoanalysis, “objects,” may often function as if they were part of oneself. Kohut called this phenomenon “narcissism,” but again differed from orthodox Freudians in believing that narcissism could be both necessary and helpful. Though we may express our narcissistic needs in immature ways, we are nevertheless constituted by them to attach to others whom we admire, to others who admire us, and also to others with whom we experience a sense of kinship. Because these others (these “objects”) actually function in one’s psyche as if they were a part of oneself, Kohut called them “self-objects.” Accordingly the Bak-ers’s comment: “An old slogan of the American Dairy Association proclaims: ‘You never outgrow your need for milk.’ The same is true of empathically accurate self-objects. We always need them, although they undergo developmental maturing.”⁷ In Kohut’s schema, we are who we are because of the quality of these empathic relationships. A feminist theorist summarizes this aspect of Kohut’s psychology this way:

Thus self psychology provides a complete developmental scheme that is not oriented toward individuation or independence as its primary goal. Self psychology’s model of maturity stresses interdependence rather than independence.... Maturity is not something to be achieved in any simple linear progress, and among self-psychology’s goals are love for other people, empathy and creativity.⁸

⁵Heinz Kohut, *How Does Analysis Cure?* ed. Arnold Goldberg (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1984) 67.

⁶Baker and Baker, “Kohut’s Self-Psychology,” 2.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Judith Kegan Gardiner, “Self Psychology as Feminist Theory,” *Signs* 12/4 (1987) 772. Some feminist psychoanalysts, such as Judith Jordan, have amended Kohut’s notion of empathy so that the self may be both autonomous from and connected to others.

II. ANALYSIS AND OTHER FORMS OF CAREGIVING HEAL BY EMPATHY

But what is empathy? Kohut defines it as “vicarious introspection [and as]...the capacity to think and feel oneself into the inner life of another person. It is our lifelong ability to experience what another person experiences, though, usually and appropriately, to an attenuated degree.”⁹ Elsewhere he writes,

Empathy is not just a useful way by which we have access to the inner life of man [*sic*]—the idea itself of an inner life of man, and thus of a psychology of complex mental states, is unthinkable without our ability to know via vicarious introspection—my definition of empathy—what the inner life of man is, what we ourselves and what others think and feel.¹⁰

Kohut claims that empathy is not only the essential tool and method of observation in psychoanalysis but is the essential ingredient for human life.

From the beginning of life, it is empathy, the psychological extension of an understanding human environment, that protects the infant from the encroachment of the inorganic world. And it is human empathy, as we mirror and confirm the other and as the other confirms and mirrors us, that buttresses an enclave of human meaning of hate, love, triumph, and defeat within a universe of senseless spaces and crazily racing stars.¹¹

While empathy is the essence of what is good in human life, Kohut also maintains that it can also be used for the ill of others. A successful military commander, for example, must excel in its judicious exercise; thus, Robert E. Lee’s capacity to defeat a sizeable number of Union generals resided to a very large degree in his capacity to imagine what they might do in opposition to him. A clear example of how empathy may function not for the better but for the worse may be found in the character Brad in the chilling movie *In the Company of Men*; a cunning, ruthless businessman and womanizer, Brad uses his empathic insight to best and destroy various men and women for both his own gain and pleasure.

Clearly, therefore, Kohut’s notion of empathy differs from Carl Rogers’s understanding of it as the unconditional positive regard a caregiver has for a help-seeker. For Kohut, “niceness” is not the essence of empathy. Yet, Kohut’s having expanded the boundaries of empathy—his notion that we may enter into the inner life of others by many means—results in expanded boundaries of how we may care. For example, Kohut responded to a client who sped his car down a crowded Chicago expressway “like a bat out of hell” only to arrive at his scheduled appointment 25 minutes late as follows:

I said to him in seemingly utter seriousness that I was going to give him the deepest interpretation he had so far received in his analysis. I could see his utter sur-

⁹Kohut, *How Does Analysis Cure?* 82.

¹⁰Heinz Kohut, “Epilogue,” in *The Restoration of the Self* (New York: International Universities, 1977) 306.

¹¹Heinz Kohut, “The Future of Psychoanalysis,” in *The Search for the Self: Selected Writings of Heinz Kohut, 1950-1978*, ed. and introd. by Paul Ornstein, 2 vols. (New York: International Universities, 1978) 2:682.

prise at this announcement; it was totally different from anything I had ever said to him before. Then, after several seconds of silence, I said very firmly and with total seriousness: “You are a complete idiot.” There was another second or so of silence, and then the patient burst into a warm and friendly laughter and relaxed visibly on the couch. I then...express[ed] my concern...that first things came first: if he killed or injured himself in an accident, we certainly could not analyze his motivations.¹²

Kohut seems to relish recounting cases like this one in which the course of caring is not clear or smooth. He does so because he believes that that course is not one of continuous progress but instead a series of steps forward and backward. Accordingly, he notes “that however correct an analyst’s theories are, and however open-minded he is in applying them, he cannot avoid erring many times in his understanding of the [client] and in the explanations he offers to him.”¹³ Caring, therefore, occurs through a process of “optimal frustration” in which the analyst makes “unavoidable, yet only temporary and thus non-traumatic, empathic failures—that is, ‘optimal failures.’” However, analysis is not ended by such failures if the analyst

takes note of the [client’s] retreat, nondefensively acknowledges them after he has recognized them (often with the help of the [client]) and then gives the [client] a noncensorious interpretation of the dynamics of his retreat.¹⁴

Elsewhere, Kohut reflects on how one analyst could offer a client an understanding of his situation, which Kohut judged to be obviously inaccurate, and yet contributed to that client’s well-being. Kohut asks rhetorically, “How could this have occurred? How could an erroneous interpretation have brought about a result that was not merely psychotherapeutic...but genuinely analytic?”¹⁵ Kohut believed that, given the remark, the patient felt understood by the therapist. That is to say, despite the analyst’s error, the client experienced empathy from the analyst.

Kohut expanded his notion of empathic caring to include any practice by which another person experiences care. With an expanded notion of what constitutes empathic practice, one may discern, therefore, examples of that practice where, in theory, it is less likely to be manifest. For example, in his work *Psychotherapy versus Behavior Therapy*, R. Bruce Sloane reviews a study in which therapists who practiced the allegedly mechanical and routinized behavioral therapy were often rated by clients as being more empathic and warm than those who practiced the theoretically more empathic traditional psychotherapy.¹⁶ Sloan’s finding reminds me of my own experience as a former clinician on a large in-patient unit for treating depressed persons, where half of them participated in the more struc-

¹²Kohut, *How Does Analysis Cure?* 74-75.

¹³*Ibid.*, 69.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 66.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 102.

¹⁶R. Bruce Sloan et al., *Psychotherapy versus Behavior Therapy* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1975).

tured Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (C.B.T.) Group for Depression and half participated in the more theoretically empathic Inter-Personal Therapy (I.P.T.) Group for Depression. I was impressed periodically that about equal numbers from each group informally reported that they felt “cared for” through the process of those therapies, even though, given the theoretical orientations of those therapies, I had expected to hear more such comments from those in the I.P.T. group and fewer from those in the C.B.T. group. Reflecting on these reports, I have wondered if some depressed persons found the C.B.T. group to be empathic precisely because it responded to their need for structure in their depressed state.

III. A PERSPECTIVE ON KOHUT FROM A THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS

1. *Justification*

In the previous section, I sketched some of the fundamental principles contained in Kohut’s notion of empathy. Now I will examine some of those principles from the perspective of a theology of the cross. Of course, this theological perspective is not the only one that might be brought to bear on Kohut. There are others that may and have been offered.¹⁷ However, I choose this perspective because I believe that doing so elucidates some unique ways in which Kohut’s psychology may be employed in the practice of ministry.

As McGrath has noted, Luther’s theology of the cross presupposes his doctrine of justification.¹⁸ Accordingly, in order to consider Kohut from a theology of the cross, one may begin by looking at that doctrine. Jenson has maintained that the anthropology assumed in that doctrine portrays human beings to be constituted by the quality of their relationships with one another:

The doctrine of justification by faith alone implies that human reality is not a substance given prior to all community. Rather, humanity happens in the event of communication, in the speaking and hearing of the word. The word—the actual, ordinary human word—is the active initiation of human reality. What I am is not defined in advance by some set of timelessly possessed attributes; it is being defined in the history of address and response in and by which you and I live together....The doctrine of justification will be secure only when the ontology so sketched is worked out.¹⁹

In order to work out this ontology, Jenson later even more pointedly criticizes a scholastic understanding of persons as independent “substances” who remain those substances whatever accidents might befall them.²⁰

To say it simply, in this ontology, how we are with others shapes who we are.

¹⁷For example, Chris R. Schlauch, *Faithful Companionship: How Pastoral Counseling Heals* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1995); Russel Haitch, “How Tillich and Kohut Both Find Courage in Faith,” *Pastoral Psychology* 44 (1995) 83-97.

¹⁸Alistair E. McGrath, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1985) 25.

¹⁹Eric C. Gritsch and Robert E. Jenson, *Lutheranism: The Theological Movement and Its Confessional Writings* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) 68.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 65-66.

Accordingly, many scholars have viewed much of early Lutheranism as “anti-psychological”; in this scheme, humanity does not have an essence like angels or apples, does not have a structured soul about which some account (“logos” of “psyche”) may be offered. Yet Kohut’s psychology is consonant with this “anti-psychology.” In an analogous manner, Kohut challenged the notion that we are bundles of psychic structures and instincts contained in flesh-colored cages and proposed, instead, that who we are is a function of our empathic relationships.

Another principle contained in the doctrine of justification is the unconditional promise of the gospel: “The Reformation’s first and last assertion was that any talk of Jesus and God and human life that does not transcend all conditions is a perversion of the gospel and will be at best irrelevant in the lives of hearers and at worst destructive.”²¹ Out of love, we often make promises to others, but out of either our finitude or sin, we may not be able to keep them.

“Because I love you,” I say to my daughter, “I will further your ambitions.” The trouble is that this promise and the rest of our promises are implicitly conditional; for by every promise I commit my future, and my future is not altogether mine to commit. Death can always take it from me and turn my promises into the law just when they are most needed. “The gospel” is the Reformation label for that promise which, if true at all, is unconditional: the promise made in the name of one who has already satisfied the condition of death and therefore has all the future as his gift.²²

The corollary for practice to the gospel promise may be summed up in Luther’s infamous adage, “*pecca fortiter*,” or “sin boldly.” In a public lecture, Jane Strohl mused that persons who took this adage to heart might be encouraged to say to one another such things as, “That was a very splendid mistake that you made,” or “That was quite a wonderful whopper.” In this schema, grace and hope may abound even in the presence of sin and death.

Are there any correspondences between this understanding of a free and justified humanity with Kohut’s anthropology? I believe that there are several. Even with their beliefs that, out of either narcissism or sin, we are limited in our capacity to care for others, both Luther and Kohut claim that we still may do so.²³ Luther claimed that, like the woodsman who chops down trees in order to make firewood for others and a living for himself, our axes are often somewhat blunted and that, to do a better job, we should sharpen our equipment; in any case, God has provided us with various tools to do the job. In an analogous fashion, Kohut calls on caregivers to sharpen their skills at caring, to increase the scope and effectiveness of their empathy through training; in any case, he believes that most persons have the equipment to be empathic. Thus, both Kohut and Luther attest to our capacity to

²¹Ibid., 42.

²²Ibid., 44.

²³I believe that Kohut and Luther have significant differences about the degree to and manner in which what the former calls “narcissism” and the latter calls “sin” impede our capacity to care.

be with others despite the limits of our capacity to do so. Furthermore, both suggest that one may see one's limits and failures as places where the promise of new possibilities may be found.

2. *A Theology of the Cross*

Having examined Kohut through some of the precepts of the doctrine of justification, I will now do so by comparing the epistemology found in both a theology of the cross and Kohut. In his work *The Crucified God*, Jürgen Moltmann claims that the theology of the cross introduces a "new principle of theological epistemology....Luther does not consider theological theory in itself, its subject-matter and its method, but theory in connection with its use by human beings."²⁴ In a recent work, Mary Solberg claims that a theology of the cross "shares with feminist epistemologies the conviction that, to the degree that relatively undistorted and ethically defensible knowing matters, the place of the least favored—at the foot of the cross, in all its contemporary forms—is a better place to start than any place of domination."²⁵ She comments further,

An epistemology of the cross owes its view of the created world to faith's conviction of the transformative solidarity of God with the world. In enabling a clearer view of reality, in helping us recognize our implication in that reality, and in equipping us to participate, within and through God's transformative solidarity, to affirm human dignity within that reality, an epistemology of the cross both expresses and sustains its essential accountability.²⁶

Both Moltmann and Solberg, therefore, conceive of a theology of the cross as a self-critical enterprise. Luther himself warned that the theology of glory—pride in the theory of theology—lurked behind every theological claim. In an analogous fashion, Kohut warned that "tool and method pride," making one's theory of care a "God, not a guide," may lead caregivers to put the supposed truth of their theory ahead of the needs of a client. Luther claimed that, out of sin, persons persist in using other people, places, and things as props for their existence. In an analogous manner, Kohut noted that while narcissism may take on healthy manifestations, it takes on a particularly harmful form in the tool-and-method pride of caregivers who do not adjust their theory in light of the needs of those seeking help.

IV. SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR MINISTRY

I conclude by commenting on a few implications of the correspondences between Kohut's psychology and a theology of the cross for the practice of ministry.

1. Out of empathy, out of a theology of the cross, pastors may wish to ask if they are engaging in caring forms of ministry, and, therefore, may decide to direct

²⁴Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) 208.

²⁵Mary M. Solberg, *Compelling Knowledge: Toward a Feminist Epistemology of the Cross* (Albany: SUNY, 1997) 118.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 125.

more of their time and talents and that of their congregations toward such ministry. The typical forms of such ministry are pastoral counseling (under supervision) and various forms of pastoral care (e.g., visitation of the needy, visitation of members, the building up of lay ministries).

Many texts in pastoral theology portray pastoral counseling and care as inherently more empathic than other ministries. From the perspective of an empathic theology of the cross, however, one may question whether this is so; for just as Kohut suggests that empathic caring may assume many forms, so theologians of the cross propose that God often appears “under the form of opposites” where one might least expect to find God. Accordingly, I suggest that pastors may engage in empathic ministry in a variety of ways: by preaching, by administering the sacraments, by eating “s’mores” on youth retreats, by setting up tables for coffee hour, by getting someone other than the pastor to set up tables for coffee hour.

I suggest that all the above activities and countless others may be forms of empathic ministry. On the other hand, I suggest that those who consider expanding their ministry to pastoral counseling or other specialized forms of pastoral care may wish to ask to what degree they seek to do so in order to care for others and to what degree they seek to do so in order to satisfy their own ideal of caring ministry. (Of course, it is possible to attend both to one’s own narcissistic need to excel in a specialized ministry and to care for others in need.)

2. Robert Jenson contends that the purpose of gospel is to free us from various forms of bondage. Sometimes, however, language “about” the gospel is not language “of” the gospel and therefore does not liberate those who hear it. An example would be approaching a stranger on the street and saying to him or her, “God loves you for Jesus’ sake”; in doing so, one would most likely not be proclaiming the gospel but hassling a person.²⁷ The knack of pastoring is to use gospel language empathically so that it brings good news.

Much pastoral theology has been written about how, through empathy, pastors may communicate the love of God—some version of the gospel—to those in need. However, pastors, informed by an empathic theology of the cross, may also refrain from using the language of faith with some people. From my experience, I have in mind primarily two very different groups: (1) the Jewish people for whom collectively direct proclamation of the gospel has typically functioned to their detriment, and (2) those clients in pastoral counseling, who, though they have intentionally sought out pastoral counseling, do not wish to talk or hear about religion. For these people and for some others the language of faith may not be good news. The theology of the cross teaches that God in Christ exists only for human well-being, not for God’s own sake. Correspondingly, the language of faith shaped by this theology exists to be spoken only for the needs of others, not for the need of pastors to fulfill the call of their office by speaking it.

²⁷Gerhard Forde, notes from class lecture, Luther Seminary, 1987.

In his semi-historical novel, *Silence*, Shusaku Endo suggested how, out of an empathic theology of the cross, one may be called to forgo proclamation of the gospel for the sake of others. In his account, the missionary priest Rodrigues publically forswears his faith because, by doing so, the lives of his converted Japanese flock will be spared. Had he not done so, the ruling authorities would have executed his flock. By stepping on a cross in front of his captors, not only does Rodrigues lose his ministry, he also loses the glorious martyrdom which he, out of his theology of glory, had sought. His public act will also likely result in the scattering of his flock. Nevertheless, as he forswears what he has esteemed by stepping on the cross, he is assured by the crucified God that such forswearing is the will of that God because it brings life. And in this story, “death” ends in resurrection. The empathic care of the priest—his response to the needs of his flock—results in their continued physical, and even spiritual, life.²⁸

3. Mary Solberg asserts that the epistemology of the cross directs one’s attention toward caring for those suffering from social oppression. Does Kohut’s theory and practice of care have any relevance or meaning for those who suffer under powers and principalities and for those who care for them? Elizabeth Walker attempts to answer this question for some African-American women for whom she, an African-American pastoral counselor, cares.²⁹

I propose that Heinz Kohut’s theory of empathy is culturally sensitive. Kohut developed self psychology from within a patriarchal framework to account for the phenomena of narcissism, and to develop a theoretical frame for responding to pathology of the self...Although his control clinical population was white middle-class males of western culture, I propose that his theory of empathic introspection may be adequate for building pastoral counseling theory for some African-American women in western culture.³⁰

Walker connects the needs of many African-American women to the history of their abuse by others and consequent neglect of themselves. She believes that Kohut’s theory may be used to help these women heal: “Self psychology theory has therefore the potential to respond to the personal experiences, historical, and socio-cultural reality of some African-American women clients for the development of a model of pastoral counseling ministry for this population.”³¹ Among the many illustrative cases Walker provides is that of a sixty-three-year-old African-American woman who described herself as “dutiful” to God and to everyone else but herself. Walker suggests that this woman was able to connect with her own suffering because she experienced herself to be connected with Walker: “Exploring her fragile self, she was able to talk about her need to sit with an African-American

²⁸Shusaku Endo, *Silence* (Tokyo: Sophia University, 1969).

²⁹Elizabeth J. Walker, *A Model for Pastoral Counseling with African-American Women* (Th.D. diss., Interdenominational Theological Center, 2000).

³⁰*Ibid.*, 3.

³¹*Ibid.*, 83.

woman pastoral counselor who knew what it may be like to grow up African-American female in an environment where among other personal difficulties, the pain of racial oppression must be reckoned with.”³² Walker’s empathic relationship with this woman was also a source of healing.

She said when she came to therapy she was aware that she was like someone who had been asleep all her life, and she was made aware of that reality because she felt awake in the therapy relationship with me....Based on my understanding of Kohut’s self-psychology, I theorize that the client’s experience of being awake or of experiencing Grace is brought on by the therapist’s empathic introspection.³³

Walker does not intend to answer definitively whether Kohut’s theory and practice are useful for counseling with all persons. In a similar manner, my intent in this short essay has not been to explore exhaustively all of the implications of Kohut for pastoral ministry but only to suggest a few of them. ⊕

³²Ibid., 10.

³³Ibid.