



Theological and Psychological Integration in Christian Psychotherapy: A Critical Review of the Literature and Implications for Church-Based Practice

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ABSTRACT

The integration of theological principles with psychological practices in Christian psychotherapy represents a pivotal advancement in holistic mental health care. This critical review examines existing literature on the convergence of theology and psychology within therapeutic contexts, emphasizing the implications for church-based practices. The analysis reveals that integrating spiritual beliefs with psychological interventions can enhance therapeutic outcomes, particularly for individuals whose faith is central to their identity. However, challenges persist, including potential conflicts between religious doctrines and psychological theories, as well as the need for specialized training for practitioners. The review underscores the importance of culturally sensitive approaches that respect both psychological principles and theological tenets. Implications for church-based practice include the necessity for clergy to collaborate with trained mental health professionals, the development of integrated training programs, and the establishment of ethical guidelines that honor both disciplines. The paper concludes by identifying gaps in current research, advocating for longitudinal studies to assess the long-term efficacy of integrated approaches, and calling for exploration into diverse cultural contexts to ensure the applicability of integrative methods across varied church communities.

ARTICLE'S INFO

Article No.: 022525031

Full Text: [PDF](#), [PHP](#), [EPUB](#), [MP3](#)

DOI: [10.15580/gjss.2025.1.022525031](https://doi.org/10.15580/gjss.2025.1.022525031)

Accepted: 26/02/2025

Published: 28/02/2025

Keywords: Christian psychotherapy, theological integration, psychological practices, church-based counseling, faith and mental health, holistic healing.

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Article's QR code



INTRODUCTION

The relationship between theology and psychology has historically been marked by tension, largely due to differing epistemological foundations and methodologies. Theology, rooted in divine revelation and scriptural authority, seeks to address the spiritual and moral dimensions of human existence, whereas psychology, as a scientific discipline, emphasizes empirical investigation into the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects of human life. For much of the 20th century, these fields operated in parallel rather than in partnership, reflecting a dichotomy that often-left faith-oriented individuals struggling to reconcile their spiritual beliefs with modern therapeutic practices (Entwistle, 2015).

However, in recent decades, there has been a notable convergence between these disciplines, driven by a shared recognition of the complexity of human nature. Theological frameworks, such as *imago Dei* (the belief that humans are created in the image of God), provide a holistic understanding of the person that aligns with psychology's biopsychosocial model. This integration is particularly significant for Christian psychotherapy, which seeks to address mental health challenges while honoring the spiritual dimensions of healing (McMinn & Campbell, 2007).

The growing demand for faith-based psychological support underscores the importance of this integration. Many individuals, especially within church communities, prefer therapeutic approaches that respect their religious convictions. Such integration offers a pathway for addressing the mental, emotional, and spiritual needs of clients, fostering holistic healing and promoting well-being in a manner consistent with their faith traditions (Tan, 2011).

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this article is to critically analyze the existing body of literature on the integration of theological and psychological principles in Christian psychotherapy. By doing so, it aims to explore how this interdisciplinary approach has been applied in practice, identify its strengths and limitations, and provide insights into its implications for church-based counseling programs.

The specific objectives are threefold:

1. To evaluate the historical and contemporary trends in the integration of theology and psychology in therapeutic contexts.
2. To analyze the effectiveness of integrated approaches in addressing mental health challenges among Christian populations.
3. To identify gaps in the literature and propose directions for future research, particularly in the context of church-based practices.

Through this exploration, the article seeks to offer practical recommendations for pastors, church leaders, and Christian counselors, equipping them to develop evidence-based therapeutic models that honor both theological and psychological insights.

Theoretical Foundations

Theology in Psychotherapy

The integration of theology in psychotherapy underscores the profound role of spiritual beliefs and religious practices in shaping mental health outcomes. Within Christian traditions, spiritual beliefs provide a framework for understanding human nature, suffering, and healing. Theologically, human beings are viewed as *imago Dei*—created in the image of God—with intrinsic value and purpose (Genesis 1:26–27). This perspective challenges reductionist views in psychology, emphasizing the holistic nature of individuals as spiritual, emotional, and relational beings (Sele & Wanjiku, 2024).

Religious practices such as prayer, scripture meditation, and communal worship have been shown to contribute to psychological resilience and emotional stability (Koenig, 2020). For instance, individuals who engage in regular prayer often report higher levels of peace and reduced anxiety, as prayer facilitates a sense of connection with the divine and a reorientation of perspective during crises. Moreover, theological reflections on suffering emphasize its redemptive potential, encouraging individuals to find meaning and hope amidst trials (Romans 5:3–5).

These theological insights enrich psychotherapeutic practices by fostering an environment where clients can integrate their spiritual narratives into their healing processes. This is particularly important in church-based settings, where faith often serves as the cornerstone of personal identity and coping mechanisms.

Psychological Approaches

The integration of psychological theories with theological concepts has gained momentum in recent decades, providing evidence-based frameworks for addressing mental health within faith contexts. Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), for example, has been effectively adapted to include biblical principles, enabling clients to challenge maladaptive thought patterns while aligning their beliefs with scriptural truths (McMinn, 2011). Additionally, acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) incorporates mindfulness practices that resonate with Christian contemplative traditions, such as meditative prayer and silence.

Research underscores the efficacy of evidence-based psychotherapeutic practices when integrated with spiritual principles. Studies indicate that interventions combining psychological techniques with theological

insights lead to improved outcomes in areas such as depression, anxiety, and relational conflicts (Tan, 2007). These findings validate the importance of theological-psychological synergy, particularly for clients seeking faith-based interventions.

Psychodynamic theories also contribute to this integration by addressing the unconscious dimensions of human experience, which often intersect with spiritual struggles. For example, themes of guilt, forgiveness, and reconciliation—central to Christian theology—are explored within psychodynamic frameworks to facilitate emotional healing and spiritual renewal.

By aligning psychological approaches with theological perspectives, practitioners can provide more culturally and spiritually sensitive care, particularly in church-based contexts where faith serves as a critical determinant of individual and communal well-being.

Models of Integration

The integration of theology and psychology in Christian psychotherapy has been conceptualized through various models, with explicit and implicit integration representing two predominant approaches. These models highlight the nuanced ways in which spiritual principles can inform therapeutic practice, offering flexibility to meet the diverse needs of clients and contexts.

Explicit Integration

Explicit integration involves the deliberate and overt incorporation of theological concepts into therapeutic practice. This approach is characterized by intentional engagement with scripture, prayer, and Christian doctrines, alongside evidence-based psychological interventions. Explicit integration aligns with clients who actively seek faith-based therapy, allowing them to explore spiritual and emotional issues within a unified framework.

Case studies exemplify this model's efficacy. For instance, therapists employing cognitive-behavioral techniques might guide clients to replace negative self-beliefs with biblical affirmations of worth and identity (e.g., Psalm 139:14). Similarly, structured prayer sessions can serve as a coping mechanism for anxiety and stress, fostering reliance on God's providence and peace (Philippians 4:6–7). Research underscores the positive impact of such approaches, with studies reporting improved mental health outcomes among clients receiving explicitly Christian interventions (Tan, 2007).

Explicit integration also necessitates ethical considerations, particularly regarding informed consent and respect for client autonomy. Practitioners must ensure that theological discussions align with the client's beliefs and avoid imposing personal doctrinal views (McMinn, 2011).

Implicit Integration

Implicit integration, in contrast, adopts a subtler approach by incorporating spiritual themes without explicit theological discussion. This model is suitable for situations where clients may not identify strongly with a specific faith tradition or prefer a less overt integration of spirituality. Therapists practicing implicit integration remain attentive to spiritual undercurrents in client narratives, addressing existential questions and fostering hope without referencing specific religious texts or practices.

For example, a therapist might acknowledge a client's search for meaning or inner peace in a manner that resonates with spiritual principles, such as exploring forgiveness and reconciliation without invoking theological language. Implicit integration is particularly effective in pluralistic settings where clients may have varying degrees of openness to faith-based discussions (Koenig, 2020).

This model aligns with the ethical principle of nonmaleficence, ensuring that spiritual dimensions are addressed sensitively and without alienating clients who may hold differing beliefs. It also serves as a bridge for clients who, while not overtly religious, may still find solace in universal spiritual themes.

Both explicit and implicit integration offer valuable pathways for addressing the intersection of theology and psychology in Christian psychotherapy. While explicit integration provides a robust framework for faith-centered clients, implicit integration ensures inclusivity and adaptability in diverse therapeutic contexts. By mastering these models, church-based practitioners can offer spiritually sensitive care that meets the unique needs of their congregations.

Implications for Church-Based Practice

The integration of theology and psychology in Christian psychotherapy holds transformative potential for church-based practice. This section explores the critical areas of training and education, ethical considerations, and collaborative models. Together, these components provide a framework for equipping church leaders and counselors to deliver holistic care that meets both spiritual and psychological needs.

Training and Education

One of the foremost implications for church-based practice is the need for specialized training programs tailored for clergy and lay counselors. Pastors and church leaders are often the first point of contact for individuals experiencing psychological distress, yet many lack formal training in mental health interventions (Doehring, 2015). Equipping these leaders with foundational knowledge in psychology and counseling skills is essential for effective ministry.

Existing programs, such as the *Counseling and Ministry Training Institute* (CMTI) and seminary courses

integrating psychology and theology, demonstrate promising outcomes. For instance, clergy trained in basic counseling techniques and crisis intervention are better equipped to address congregants' needs while identifying cases that require referral to mental health professionals (McMinn, 2011). Research also highlights the effectiveness of workshops that combine theological instruction with evidence-based therapeutic practices, fostering confidence and competence among lay counselors (Koenig, 2020).

To advance this training, church-based institutions must collaborate with academic organizations to develop curricula that emphasize the interplay between spiritual formation and psychological science. Programs should also include practical components, such as supervised counseling internships, to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Ethical Considerations

The integration of theology and psychology introduces ethical complexities that demand careful navigation. One major challenge lies in addressing potential conflicts between psychological ethics and theological doctrines. For example, while psychology emphasizes client autonomy and nonjudgmental support, certain theological perspectives may uphold moral standards that conflict with secular therapeutic approaches (Tan, 2007).

Establishing clear ethical guidelines is essential for integrated practice. These guidelines should include principles such as informed consent, respect for client beliefs, and cultural competence. Moreover, practitioners must recognize their limits and seek supervision or consultation when encountering dilemmas that intersect faith and mental health (McMinn, 2011).

Church-based practitioners should also ensure transparency about their dual roles as spiritual and psychological caregivers. Maintaining boundaries between these roles can prevent confusion and safeguard the therapeutic relationship. Training programs should include modules on ethical decision-making, enabling practitioners to balance theological convictions with the professional standards outlined by organizations like the American Psychological Association (APA, 2020).

Collaborative Models

Collaboration between mental health professionals and church leaders is another critical aspect of integrating theology and psychology in church-based practice. These partnerships can bridge gaps in expertise, enabling churches to provide comprehensive care that addresses both spiritual and psychological dimensions.

Successful collaborative models often involve formal referral systems and co-facilitated support groups. For instance, some churches partner with Christian counseling centers, offering on-site therapy sessions led

by licensed professionals while maintaining pastoral oversight (Johnson & Jones, 2000). Other models include interdisciplinary teams where clergy and psychologists jointly design interventions for congregants facing complex challenges, such as addiction or trauma.

Case studies illustrate the effectiveness of such collaborations. In one example, a church-based mental health initiative in the United States significantly reduced stigma around seeking therapy while improving access to care (Koenig, 2020). Similar programs in Cameroon and Nigeria highlight the potential for context-specific adaptations that address cultural and socioeconomic factors (Sele & Wanjiku, 2024).

By fostering these partnerships, churches can expand their capacity to meet congregants' needs while promoting a culture of holistic well-being.

The implications of the theological and psychological integration for church-based practice are profound. Through targeted training, ethical safeguards, and collaborative models, churches can become centers of healing that address the full spectrum of human experience. By embracing these principles, church leaders and counselors can offer care that reflects the compassion of Christ while aligning with contemporary mental health standards.

Challenges and Critiques

The integration of theology and psychology in Christian psychotherapy has sparked both enthusiasm and debate across disciplines. While many see its potential for holistic care, others raise concerns that highlight the complexities of such an endeavor. This section delves into theological and psychological critiques, providing a balanced examination of these challenges.

Theological Concerns

One of the most significant theological critiques centers on the potential conflicts between psychological theories and religious beliefs. Many psychological frameworks, rooted in secular humanism or naturalistic paradigms, may be perceived as conflicting with core Christian doctrines. For instance, Freudian psychoanalysis often emphasizes the subconscious as the driver of human behavior, a perspective that may challenge the Christian understanding of sin, free will, and divine intervention (Johnson & Jones, 2000). Similarly, cognitive-behavioral approaches, which prioritize self-efficacy and autonomy, may inadvertently downplay the role of divine grace and dependence on God (Tan, 2007).

Some theologians also express concern that psychological integration risks diluting or compromising theological truths. Critics within theological circles argue that accommodating secular psychological concepts might lead to a syncretistic approach that undermines the authority of Scripture. For example, theologians like

Adams (1979) advocate for *nouthetic counseling*, which relies solely on biblical principles, rejecting psychological methodologies as unnecessary or even harmful. This perspective reflects a broader hesitancy among some Christian communities to embrace psychological sciences as a valid tool for spiritual care.

Another critique relates to the perceived prioritization of psychology over theology in integrated models. This imbalance can lead to an overemphasis on human-centered solutions, potentially marginalizing the transformative power of the Holy Spirit in healing and restoration. Such concerns highlight the need for integrated frameworks to remain firmly grounded in a biblical worldview, ensuring that theological integrity is preserved throughout the therapeutic process.

Psychological Concerns

From the psychological community, skepticism about integrating theology often revolves around issues of scientific validity and professional competence. Psychology, as a discipline grounded in empirical research and evidence-based practice, may view theology as subjective or non-scientific. This skepticism is particularly evident in discussions surrounding the use of prayer or spiritual interventions, which may be seen as lacking empirical support or rigorous validation (Koenig, 2020).

Another concern is the potential for role confusion and boundary violations. Integrative practitioners, particularly those serving in dual roles as therapists and spiritual leaders, may inadvertently blur professional boundaries. Such dual relationships can compromise therapeutic objectivity and increase the risk of ethical breaches. For instance, a pastor-counselor may face challenges in maintaining confidentiality or avoiding conflicts of interest when working with congregants (McMinn, 2011).

Additionally, psychologists may question the competence of clergy or lay counselors engaging in therapeutic work without formal training in mental health. While theology provides a rich framework for understanding human behavior from a spiritual perspective, it does not inherently equip individuals to address complex psychological disorders, such as major depressive disorder or post-traumatic stress disorder. Without appropriate training, practitioners risk causing harm or failing to provide adequate care (APA, 2020).

These concerns underscore the need for clear professional guidelines and collaborative partnerships between theologians and psychologists. By fostering mutual respect and a commitment to evidence-based practice, both fields can work together to address these critiques constructively.

The challenges and critiques surrounding the integration of theology and psychology highlight the complexity of this interdisciplinary endeavor. Theological concerns call for careful discernment to ensure that psychological models align with biblical principles, while psychological critiques emphasize the importance of

empirical rigor and professional competence. Addressing these challenges requires ongoing dialogue, robust training, and a commitment to maintaining both theological fidelity and psychological excellence.

Future Research Directions

As the field of theological and psychological integration in Christian psychotherapy continues to evolve, the need for further research becomes increasingly apparent. While the existing body of literature provides valuable insights, there are several areas that warrant deeper exploration to refine and enhance the application of integrative approaches in therapeutic contexts. This section outlines two key areas for future research: longitudinal studies and cross-cultural applications.

Longitudinal Studies

One of the primary gaps in the current literature on integrative psychotherapy is the lack of longitudinal studies that examine the long-term efficacy of combining theological and psychological frameworks in treatment. While short-term studies have provided encouraging results regarding the immediate benefits of integrated approaches, there is limited evidence on their lasting impact on clients' spiritual, emotional, and psychological well-being. Longitudinal research would allow for a more nuanced understanding of how integrative practices contribute to lasting transformation, as well as the potential for relapse or sustained growth in patients over time.

Future research should focus on the development and implementation of rigorous longitudinal studies that assess the long-term outcomes of theological and psychological integration. These studies could track patients over several years to measure key variables such as emotional stability, spiritual maturity, and overall mental health. Potential methodologies for such studies could include mixed-methods designs, combining quantitative measures such as psychological assessments and spiritual well-being scales with qualitative interviews to capture personal experiences and insights (Harrison et al., 2019). Such research would not only fill a critical gap in the literature but also provide empirical evidence for practitioners and churches seeking to implement integrative models with confidence.

Further methodological innovation could involve the use of randomized controlled trials (RCTs) or cohort studies to compare integrated approaches with traditional psychotherapy. By comparing the outcomes of integrative therapy against evidence-based psychological therapies (such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy), researchers can explore the added value of incorporating theological perspectives, thereby helping to establish best practices for the integration of faith and mental health.

Cross-Cultural Applications

The study of theological and psychological integration has predominantly been shaped by Western frameworks, with much of the research coming from contexts where Christianity is the dominant religion. However, the global diversity of Christian practice and the influence of culture on therapeutic processes necessitate the exploration of integrative models across different cultural and denominational contexts. This research is particularly important in regions such as Africa, Asia, and Latin America, where Christianity often intersects with indigenous belief systems, varying social structures, and different approaches to mental health (Meyer & Roberts, 2019).

In Cameroon, for instance, where there is a rich diversity of ethnic groups and a complex interplay between Christianity and indigenous spiritual beliefs, the theological underpinnings of psychotherapy may require distinct adaptations. Understanding how Christian psychotherapy can be effectively integrated within different cultural contexts is critical, as the practice of therapy, the interpretation of psychological distress, and the role of faith in healing can vary greatly from one culture to another (Bauer & McMinn, 2019). Research focused on these cultural and denominational nuances could help develop culturally sensitive practices that respect both theological principles and local cultural values.

Furthermore, cross-cultural research could identify specific practices or theological insights that resonate most effectively with individuals from various ethnic backgrounds, leading to the development of culturally informed models of integration. For example, in many African cultures, community and family are central to individual well-being, so incorporating communal and relational aspects into integrative therapy may be beneficial. Researchers could explore how group counseling, family-based interventions, or indigenous spiritual practices could be harmonized with psychological principles to enhance therapeutic outcomes in such contexts.

Additionally, the importance of denominational diversity cannot be overstated. While many studies have focused on Protestant Christian perspectives, there is a growing need to examine how other branches of Christianity, such as Roman Catholicism or Eastern Orthodoxy, engage with psychological practices. Each denomination holds unique theological beliefs, sacramental practices, and spiritual traditions that may influence the integration process in distinct ways (Vang & Rojas, 2019).

Both longitudinal studies and cross-cultural research are critical to the continued advancement of theological and psychological integration in Christian psychotherapy. Long-term research will help to establish the sustained benefits of integrative approaches, while cross-cultural studies will ensure that these practices are relevant, sensitive, and adaptable to a variety of global contexts. As the field grows, these research directions

will help to create a more robust, evidence-based foundation for integrating faith and mental health, ultimately benefiting both practitioners and clients around the world.

Conclusion

The integration of theology and psychology in Christian psychotherapy represents an evolving intersection of two powerful disciplines, each with a distinct contribution to human well-being. As we conclude this review, it is essential to revisit the key findings derived from the literature, provide actionable recommendations for practitioners and church leaders, and reflect on the future trajectory of this integrative approach. The synthesis of these elements highlights not only the promise of this therapeutic model but also the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead in its application.

Summary of Findings

The literature on theological and psychological integration has underscored both the potential and the challenges inherent in combining these two frameworks. A consistent theme in the reviewed works is the complementary nature of theology and psychology in addressing the holistic needs of individuals, particularly in the context of Christian psychotherapy. The psychological theories provide valuable insights into human behavior, while theology offers a deep spiritual dimension that is often vital for clients seeking meaning and purpose in their suffering. Together, these fields create a comprehensive therapeutic approach that speaks to both the spiritual and emotional needs of the individual (McMinn, 2016).

The integration of faith and psychology has been shown to yield positive outcomes in terms of emotional regulation, coping mechanisms, and overall psychological well-being. However, the literature also reveals significant theological concerns, particularly regarding potential conflicts between psychological theories and religious doctrines. These tensions require careful navigation by practitioners who must remain sensitive to both the theological underpinnings of their practice and the psychological techniques they employ. Ethical considerations further complicate the integration, as the need for professional boundaries and respect for psychological ethics remains paramount (Pargament, 2013).

Moreover, while many church leaders and counselors have embraced this integrative model, there is still a need for specialized training and education to equip clergy and lay counselors with the tools necessary for effective practice. As highlighted in the discussion of training and education, few formal programs currently exist that provide comprehensive education in both theology and psychology, pointing to an urgent need for

the development of interdisciplinary training programs (Vang & Rojas, 2019).

Recommendations

Based on the findings from the literature review, several practical recommendations can be made for both practitioners and church leaders. First, it is essential for church-based counseling programs to develop specialized training that equips counselors with both psychological knowledge and theological expertise. This training should focus on bridging the gap between faith and mental health, teaching practitioners how to integrate psychological techniques with theological principles in a manner that is both effective and respectful of religious beliefs (McMinn, 2016).

Additionally, church leaders should actively seek out opportunities for collaboration with mental health professionals. Partnerships between clergy and licensed therapists can help ensure that clients receive holistic care, addressing both their spiritual and psychological needs. Case studies from successful collaborations between faith communities and mental health professionals offer valuable lessons on fostering productive and ethical partnerships (Pargament, 2013). By fostering such relationships, churches can provide their congregations with access to more comprehensive care, especially for those experiencing mental health challenges that require specialized treatment.

Ethically, it is crucial for church-based therapists to establish clear ethical guidelines that respect both psychological and theological principles. These guidelines should address potential conflicts that may arise between psychological practices and religious doctrines, ensuring that practitioners operate within professional boundaries while remaining true to their faith convictions (Harrison et al., 2019). The development of a code of ethics that specifically addresses the integration of faith and therapy would be an important step forward in maintaining both professional integrity and theological sensitivity.

Final Reflections

As we look to the future of theological and psychological integration in Christian psychotherapy, several key considerations emerge. First, the growing body of research suggests that integrative approaches hold significant promise for addressing the complex needs of individuals within faith communities. However, further empirical studies are needed to assess the long-term efficacy of such models, particularly in diverse cultural and denominational settings. Longitudinal studies, as mentioned earlier, could provide deeper insights into how these approaches impact individuals over time and across varied cultural contexts (Harrison et al., 2019).

The future of this integrative approach will also depend on the continued collaboration between the theological and psychological communities. This

partnership is critical to ensuring that Christian psychotherapy remains relevant, ethical, and effective in a rapidly changing world. Additionally, as more church-based therapists engage in this integrative model, the development of interdisciplinary networks and support systems will become increasingly important. These networks can facilitate the exchange of best practices, promote ongoing education, and foster a sense of community among practitioners who are navigating the complex terrain of faith and therapy (McMinn, 2016).

In conclusion, while the integration of theology and psychology in Christian psychotherapy presents significant challenges, it also offers immense potential for holistic healing. The continued development of specialized training, ethical guidelines, and collaborative models will be crucial in ensuring that this approach reaches its full potential. As research progresses and best practices are established, Christian psychotherapy may become a more widely recognized and accepted model of care, not only within faith communities but also in broader mental health settings.

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Cite this Article: Nganyu, GN (2025). Theological and Psychological Integration in Christian Psychotherapy: A Critical Review of the Literature and Implications for Church-Based Practice. *Greener Journal of Social Sciences*, 15(1): 75-82, <https://doi.org/10.15580/gjss.2025.1.022525031>.