

Comparing Wesley's Doctrine of Sanctification to the Concept of Cohesive Self in Self Psychology

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Intro

The doctrine of sanctification in Wesleyan theology has many similarities in its nature and characteristics to the restoration of the self and core concepts in self psychology. By comparing core concepts from the two scholarships, six common characteristics will be presented in both self psychology and Wesleyan doctrine of sanctification.

Six Common Characteristics

First common characteristic is that both self psychology and Wesleyan theology has *open-ended nature*. The nature can be found in the concept of fragile self in self psychology and that of human being in Wesleyan theology. Wesleyan theology presents the concept of human being who stays in bondage to sin before humans take in the prevenient grace. Humans bound by sin lost their freedom which was originally given from God when they were created. Since the fall to sin, humans who have the marred or corrupted *moral, political, and natural* image of God lost their faculties that God endowed for them with the images in the Creation.

The state of the fallen human beings can be compared to the fragile self which undergoes traumatic empathic failures of selfobject. The fragile self experiences narcissistic rage and manifestations with the broken *narcissistic equilibrium*.

However, both concepts are not predetermined in its fate. Both the fragile self and fallen human beings in bondage of sin can always have possibility to become a healthier being. Their end is not determined yet. It has potentiality to be transformed into a mature state.

The second common characteristic they share is that they are *both relational and experiential*. The concept from each scholarship that appears relational and experiential is selfobject and God. As stated earlier, self is in lifelong need of selfobject. Without selfobject, self can neither build and maintain healthy psychic structure nor restore the self when it is fragmented and fragile. Whenever self is threatened or in an inadequate state of something, selfobject with empathy needs to function as a part of the self. Thus, the relationship of self-selfobject directly influences the developmental process of the self. Even though infant failed to construct healthy self in its appropriate stage, by re-experiencing optimal selfobject empathy in relationship, the fragile self can be transformed into cohesive self.

Wesley's concept of prevenient grace demonstrates the prerequisite need of God for humans. He strongly believed that only through God's prevenient grace, human can be saved. Human's dependence upon God's grace should be the nature of the relationship of human beings to God. Without God, human cannot exist nor restore her/his marred

image of God and faculties. Human should remain in the relationship with God to be sanctified. Human's developmental process of sanctification cannot happen without God's grace and intervention. As the self cannot start its restoration of the fragmented state without selfobject, human being also cannot initiate its salvation process or sanctification process without God. God is the one who initiate the process, offering the prevenient grace to human. Thus, only by experiencing God's grace, human can be matured and sanctified.

The third trait is that both need *empowerment from outside resources*. The relevant notions for the empowerment are empathy and grace. Empathy is the core element to form a cohesive self. Primary caregiver's empathy for infant is psychological nutrient that helps to build infant's psychic structure. The caregiver's mirroring and affirming the infant, and willingly being merged by the infant decides whether the infant can develop its bipolar self and attain ideals, ambitions, and principles or not.

The notion of prevenient grace in Wesleyan theology is also a necessary resource for human being to be transformed from the fallen and sinful state into being sanctified. Binding to sin after the fall is a *terminal disease* that human beings cannot be cured with their dismantled faculties. God's grace is needed. Only with the universally and irresistibly given grace of God, a human can choose whether she/he would willingly be freed from sin and recover the image of God.

The fourth characteristic is that both have *an internalizing principle* in it. In self psychology, the concept of transmuting internalization is a necessary process for the self to form a cohesive self. If selfobject is able to provide empathic environment for the self, even when the self is under the disappointing and threatening circumstances, the constant and steady empathy can be internalized and finally *transmuting internalization* occurs inside the self. Constructing new and healthier psychic structure inside the self, the self can maintain psychic equilibrium by itself even when the self is apart from the selfobject. Once firm and steady psychic structure is established inside the self, the self can have strength to overcome challenging and threatening situations.

In Wesleyan doctrine of sanctification, the counterpart of *transmuting internalization* is *faith*. God's grace should be internalized through faith into human. Faith is a gift from God for human when human willingly takes God's grace and wants to know and love God. To make God's grace, the transforming power, enliven in human life and make human be saved, God's grace should be deeply rooted, or in other term, internalized, in human's heart and mind through *faith*. As a result of internalization of both empathy and grace, the self and human can be transformed into a mature state of it. Fifth common feature is that both have a *prolonged and gradual* as well as *developmental healing process*. For self psychology, by *working-through process* through empathic interaction with analyst, the patient gradually becomes cured and attains the cohesion of the self. As stated in the earlier section, the working-through process is supposed to happen step by step with "manageable disruption in the bond" of analyst and patient. It is a long journey for restoring the fragile self. Nevertheless, as long as the disruption is manageable and effective, the self can be gradually developed.

In the doctrine of sanctification, it is the *four sequent stages of grace* that is prolonged, gradual and developmental, which are *prevenient, convicting, justifying, and sanctifying grace*. These four significant stages of grace can happen sequentially. For Wesley, the *entire sanctification*, in which *Christian perfection* is possible, cannot be

given spontaneously but only be attained by gradual process of accepting and enlivening grace in one's life through interaction with God in the intimate relationship. In Wesleyan theology, even though a human is justified and regenerated with faith, she/he is not yet in a full-grown state until she/he gets to the state of *Christian Perfection*. Wesley's notion of sanctification follows developmental steps, just like the process of human development from baby to a grown person. In this sense, the doctrine of sanctification is very much *prolonged, gradual, and developmental*.

The last shared characteristic of both is that they have *a holistic sense of healing*. In other words, the concept of healing or recovering has transforming nature. The completely restored state is a cohesive self in self psychology and the state of Christian Perfection in John Wesley's theology.

These two have a commonality. All people are under God's grace and can come to faith through the grace of God and can have existential freedom in the relationship with God when they achieve the state of *Christian Perfection*. It is possible for believers to attain *entire sanctification*, in other words, *Christian Perfection*. It can be possible only by God's transforming grace through faith.

Perfection in this notion is not a state of sinlessness. Philip Watson writes.¹

Christian perfection is perfection in love – the love of God and one's neighbor. To be perfect is to have the mind that was in Christ, to walk as Christ walked, or to display the kind of love that St. Paul describes in 1 Cor. 13. It is in such terms as these that Wesley most characteristically speaks of Christian Perfection or entire sanctification. At the same time, he is sure that anyone who has so been made perfect, will naturally be free from all sin both outward and inward; for how could any evil thoughts or tempers remain in one who had the mind of Christ? Even original sin itself is rooted out in the entirely sanctified – Christian perfection does not mean infallibility in the use of reason; nor does it mean freedom from ignorance or freedom from temptation.

John Wesley's theology does not focus simply on forgiveness. Rather, it focuses on healing wholeness of human beings by restoring the marred and distorted image of God. In other words, as self psychology focuses on transformation of the fragmented self into a cohesive self, Wesleyan theology focuses more on true healing than mere forgiveness of human sin and right behavior. The purpose is not only the symptom relief of sinfulness of human beings, but also the restoration of the original disposition endowed from the image of God.

For Kohut, once the self has transmuting internalization with the help of empathic environments which a selfobject provides, the purpose of the therapy is not merely to relieve narcissistic rage and manifestation but to transform psychic fragile structure the self has into more cohesive structure for the self. The healing process continues until the self finally gets to the state of equilibrium, which can be only attained when the self holistically restores cohesiveness in itself.

When holistic healing occurs, the fruits of healing naturally manifest. For cohesive self, it is wisdom, humor, joy, love, and empathy. For entirely sanctified

¹ Philip Watson, "Wesley and Luther on Christian Perfection" In: *Ecumenical Review* (1963):Vol.15, No.3: 294-5.

Christian, the fruits are freedom from sin, joy, the capacity to know God and God's love and will, capacity to love, and holistic recovery of the image of God.