

Integration of my psychology and my Christianity?

A personal story of intersectional identity*

by Dr Martyn Baker

About thirty years ago, I remember thinking I had lapsed into something of a closet Christian in my work. Not fond of raising my head above the parapet, but felt I had to do something about it. I also felt I was the only Christian psychologist in the UK (you may be smiling, but I really did).

Imagine my surprise, when: I read a book by Fraser Watts, who I knew was big in the British Psychological Society, and notice that the Preface was signed off something like, “*Fraser Watts, St Swithins Day 1986*” – I was curious. A colleague confirmed that Watts was indeed an ordained priest as was another well-known psychologist who he worked with at The Maudsley. Soon afterwards, a poster mysteriously appeared on a departmental noticeboard, for a day conference of the *Network of Christians in Psychology* (now BACIP). I promptly booked and went, and discovered more Christian psychologists. (One especially, who I had not seen since research assistant days, but had become a Christian in the intervening years.) The conference talks came in a decided second behind the simple encouragement of being there.

From the mid-1990s, I was researching or supervising several sets of qualitative data on religious and spiritual (R/S) issues for psychological therapists and clients. In addition to my growing association with this research and BACIP, another part of asserting ‘Christian visibility’ in the workplace might be in submitting for publication articles on R/S issues in a clinical setting.

Several years later, having left university and the NHS, I finally used the launch of *Christian Psychological Services London*



(CPSL, 2013) to more fully ‘hold myself out’ as a Christian clinical psychologist, working part-time for a Christian counselling charity, and then privately. It was at this point that a long-held personal ambition revived – to try to describe the activity of a Christian psychological therapist, without too much bible jargon, and based not upon aspirational ‘oughts’ or ‘shoulds’, nor upon illustrative case studies, but upon a straightforward account of what I actually do. However, after numerous unsatisfactory attempts to write this down, I gave up! Concepts seemed to elude me, and descriptive versions were folksy and unconvincing, fluffy and insubstantial.

Below, is the version I have ended up with, based on the articles mentioned above, but perhaps more personal than I had envisaged., I have asked myself: “How have the qualitative research findings that I worked on, affected or reflected my experience of professional practice within CPSL over the last eight years?”

[1] Some of the results of a study of Christian psycho-dynamic counsellors’ experiences of training and practice (Martinez & Baker,

2000) produced quite a reaction in me, that I still remember some twenty years later. In comparison to my own personal impetus towards fuller expression of Christian faith in a work setting, the first analytic category, “*Then and Now*”, encompassed the experience of a majority of participants, where their pre-training had been more and expressively Christianity, but during training and post-qualification this had diminished, gradually becoming less or not at all visible. I remember at the time, half-vowing to myself that this was not going to be my story! Another category “*Information versus Intuition*” showed that generally it was left to guesswork how clients became aware of their therapist’s R/S affiliation. Whereas for me, I felt this information should be as openly available as qualification and training, voice accent or surname. Since most CPSL clients are Christians, my reactions to both of the categories above accentuate the tricky professional issue of dual relationships. I sense myself to be simultaneously the client’s brother, just as much as their therapist – both real, neither to be explicated as, for example, part of the personal unconscious. I experience a merged identity.

[2] This was a personal construct investigation of Christians’ anticipations of the imagined assistance they think they might receive for emotional difficulties, if it were to come from a church helper (vicar, housegroup leader, etc), or from a professional helper (such as psychologist, secular counsellor, community psychiatric nurse) (Mitchell & Baker, 2000). The above issue of dual relationships grew more complex for me. Participants’ expectations seemed to be of polar opposites. Ideas of warmth, thoroughness and trust with the first group contrasted with

feelings of coldness, superficiality and suspicion with the other. Stereotypes they might be, but suppose I feel the client reacts to me as these two extremes embodied in one person, it could be potentially volatile as I experience a polarised identity.

In fairness, most of the time I find myself negotiating a wiggly line of integration, of middle ground between the merged sense of self, and the polarised sense of self. However, occasionally my identity switches involuntarily from one extreme or the other. One time, I polarised straight into a completely 'professional' response to a non-Christian CPSL client's request for in-session prayer: I said that that is more of a priestly function, not part of what I offer. Another time, without notice I switched over to the merged extreme – a moment of sudden I-Thou encounter as I listened deeply to a Christian client who was sure that he was bound for hell; I exclaimed, "if you're not in heaven, then I don't want to be there!" Being well schooled in professional practice, I asked myself "Am I losing it? Is it time to hang my boots up? Or is there somewhere a superordinate concept of which 'merged' and 'polarised' are both exemplars?"

[3] Researching the workplace values of Christian NHS clinical psychologists (Baker & Wang, 2004), a noticeable extent of contradictory experience was reported, quite often within the transcripts of one participant's data. Rather than conclude they were suffering from impaired cognitive ability or labile emotions (a more regular set of colleagues you could not have asked for), we concluded that when they spoke freely, they were reporting shifting senses of self; a kaleidoscope of experience.

At the time, I construed the differences in the data – originally understood as contradictions – as indicating linear change in participants' experience of their professional self over the course of, say, a working week, or day. It

ought to be possible to measure their experience within one time block, followed by measuring the levels of a further time block, etc. (I even drew out from the very rich data, verbatim phrases of different levels of experience to calibrate the degree of change on particular value dimensions. Fully intending to study further the histograms thus produced, I... never got round to it.)

So, how does all this have implications for my experience of myself working as a Christian therapist in CPSL? Well, it was not until more recently (for example, Diamond & Gillis, 2006; Kort, 2019) that I envisaged the notion of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2008) as conceptualising a continuous perpetual motion in the sense of self of the therapist, not just of the client. 'Intersectional identity' might be a way of re-thinking what I had been thinking of as changeableness and instability.

Of course! No wonder, the intersection junctions of my journey along the Christian highway and my travel along the Therapist auto-route – without traffic lights, roundabouts or motorway interchanges – will almost necessarily arouse my experience of... (I was just about to say, *professional instability*... but I didn't).

Thank you for reading! If you have developed any ideas along similar lines, I would be pleased to hear from you. It may be time for me to call it a day, professional practice wise, but that doesn't stop the need to continue thinking.

*This article is adapted from a presentation within the *Faith in psychotherapy?* conference given by Christian Psychological Services London, hosted online by the British Association of Christians in Psychology, Saturday 20th March 2021.

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