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## Embodying Integration: A Fresh Look at Christianity in the Therapy Room

Jordan Holmes  
jordanholmes@refugetulsa.com

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A weakness of the book for this reviewer was voice that shifted, at times. For example, the section on science and faith took a humble, educational voice, leading the reader to potent discovery. The section on theologies from marginalized groups took a declaratory voice, by contrast, while presenting somewhat simplistic definitions of these theologies (perhaps in an effort to compress great swaths of material into small space). Leaps of application followed, with the implied assumption that the reader would leap likewise, creating potential awkwardness or confusion for readers who may have a different type or pace of discerning. Throughout, the voice waivered periodically between leading the reader to discovery and telling the reader what to think. The preference would be for the former throughout.

Callaway and Whitney have written an important contribution to the integration literature. Counseling faculty in graduate and undergraduate programs will enjoy using selected portions or the entire book to help educate their students and to spur further discussion.

**Annamarie S. Hamilton** is a Licensed Professional Counselor Candidate in Oklahoma and the Counseling Coordinator for the School of Counseling at Oral Roberts University, Tulsa, OK, USA

***Embodying Integration: A Fresh Look at Christianity in the Therapy Room.*** By Megan Anna Neff and Mark R. McMinn. Grand Rapids, MI: IVP Academic, 2020. 271 pp.

Freud stated, “When a man is free of religion, he has a better chance to live a normal and wholesome life.” The authors of *Embodying Integration* state that “psychology can be beneficial to the church and that spirituality has something to say about well-being” (p. 2). In *Embodying Integration*, Mark McMinn and Megan Anna Neff make a case for a counseling approach informed by a Christian perspective.

Since Freud first associated his antipathy toward Christianity, people of faith have attempted to bridge the perceived divide between psychology and theology. Those making these attempts may be called integrationists. *Embodying Integration* draws from the rich history of integration models while making new contributions to how psychology and theology inform each other.

One appealing aspect of the book is that a father and daughter wrote it: Mark McMinn, a seasoned integrator, and his daughter Megan Anna Neff, a counselor with additional training in theology at Princeton Theological Seminary. The tone of *Embodying Integration* is tender given the relationship between the authors.

Throughout the book, there are short asides entitled *Author Dialog* in which father and daughter discuss the subject material in a warm and conversational style. This allows the authors to embody the book's thesis: "integration as conversation" (p. 5).

The authors resist offering an integration model and instead ask, "What if integration was more a verb than a noun?" (p. 5). For the authors, integration is not a theory of counseling, or any particular intervention but rather the act of participating in a healing conversation with clients. The conversation itself is integration. It seems this approach has many benefits for those who seek to integrate Christian belief with the practice of counseling, although there is much it lacks.

One benefit is how the book takes life's complexity and uncertainty seriously. The book articulates a theology of suffering, which many Christian communities need. The book also acknowledges the reality that many Christian counselors face in today's political and social climate. Modern Christian counselors have various issues to sort through, which previous generations did not. Space is made for Christian counselors to grapple with today's issues as well as the problems of living.

Neff and McMinn outline a gentle conversation style with clients characterized by empathy, curiosity, and lament. Both authors overflow with genuine and sincere care and positive regard toward their clients. This posture, which both authors have toward their respective clients, is informed by the theology outlined throughout the text. And this theologically defined posture of the therapist is the thrust of the entire book.

Because of this, many readers will experience the book as more of a theology text than a counseling text. The book dives deep into the wisdom tradition of lament, various theodicies, the story of Jeremiah, a review of Ecclesiastes, ancient Near Eastern creation narratives, the *imago Dei*, theories of atonement, missiology, and soteriology. The authors also report the influence of open theism, liberation theology, feminist and womanist theory, Latinx theology, and "theology from below."

A criticism of the book is in its stated objective of offering no model for what Christian counseling is or does in the therapy room. Instead, it offers a theologically informed posture the Christian counselor takes toward the client in conversation. The author states, ". . . many students don't need apologetics anymore when it comes to integrating psychology and Christianity. They don't need models and views that tend to simplify complexity into categories. They are looking for conversation..." (p. 6). It may be the case that students need both models for understanding and implementing meaningful conversation. This approach would not oversimplify or invalidate lived experience.

This lack of a model or clearly defined approach to Christian counseling may leave some readers puzzled about exactly how Christian counseling differs from any other counseling style. The authors do well in utilizing Christian language to

give theological meaning to the counseling process. But, this gives meaning to the therapist's work, not the client's work. The author's resistance to answering the real-world questions of Christian counselors exacerbates this problem. The author discusses this with his students, "Shall we pray with our patients? Is it ok to refer to Scripture? Should we bring up church involvement? Is there ever a place for talking about theology in psychotherapy? Honestly, I think I have consistently frustrated these students with my lack of answers."

Again, the author states, "...getting into a theological dialog would not be helpful or ethical" (p. 166). This approach will confuse many Christian counselors who see no ethical dilemma in creating a safe place for clients to explore their deepest questions of spirituality and theology in Christian terms. Christian counselors do not impose beliefs, but they certainly do prompt clients to seriously consider their most deeply held beliefs about the world, themselves, their relationships, their purpose, their identity, and their faith. This prompting may sometimes include psychoeducation causing many clients to challenge, reframe, or replace irrational beliefs with more adaptive ones. But, the author, to the dismay of CBT (Cognitive Behavioral Therapy) therapists everywhere, takes issue with this approach as well, stating, "The point of counseling is not to correct wrong belief..." (p. 165) and "The task of the counselor is rarely the cognitive task of correcting theology..." (p. 166).

The book encourages conversation as integration everywhere, except in theological conversation. This is odd for a book about integration between psychology and Christianity. Most Christian counselors will agree that there is a place for appropriate faith-related self-disclosure where informed consent has been provided and where it meets the needs of the client. And certainly, there is an ethical way to provide theological psychoeducation when the client benefits from alternative lenses to see their lived experience.

*Embodying Integration* will be a helpful addition to the library of most Christian counselors. The therapist's posture toward the client, as outlined by the authors, and the eternal meaning of the therapist's work are helpful in the daily work of counseling. In addition, the book's final pages beautifully detail the work of the Holy Spirit embodied in the work of the therapist. However, what the book contributes in theological language and meaning for the therapist's experience of their work, it lacks in modeling what this work means for the client and exactly how the counselor is to work for the client's benefit.

In many ways, the battles early integrationists fought have been won. Nearly all models of psychotherapy make room for spirituality. It is taken for granted that a client's religious worldview will inform their lived experience. The authors explore what this means for the therapist and what it means for the client. Overall, the book is recommended as a theological work trying to understand the role of a

counselor from a Christian perspective. But, as a book outlining integration between psychology and Christianity, it seems the conversation must continue.

**Jordan Holmes** is a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist and LMFT Supervisor at Refuge Counseling in Tulsa, Oklahoma, USA.