

„BABEŞ—BOLYAI” UNIVERSITY

**The Faculty of Reformed Theology
The Ecumene Doctoral School**

Ph.D. Thesis

**Introduction to Christian Writing
Therapy. Autobiography with God
Summary**

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The ambition of the doctoral thesis bearing the same title is to develop the theoretical foundations of a Christian writing therapy. The core hypothesis is that integrating the scientifically proven methods of writing therapy into the system of pastoral psychology and applying them in line with Christian confession will yield a method that promotes a personal living of faith and thereby personal evangelization.

In Christian writing therapy, self-awareness activities take place simultaneously with activities aimed at the knowledge of God. This also implies that activities performed in the context of Christian writing therapy are at the same time responses to the spiritual needs of our time. Hence, we deemed it necessary to define the concept of spirituality – from everyday secular phenomena to the Christian idea of spirituality, giving prominence to the specific features of Protestant spirituality. Particular attention is paid to mysticism, as our focus is not confined to approaching God, but bearing witness to Him in writing also appears as a pivotal element of the new method of Christian writing therapy. Likewise, we have taken a practical perspective on how people of faith approach God, taking account both of the body of previous research on images of God and man unconsciously present in the faithful and of the possible ways to reveal the distorted images of God and man that might be lying underneath and to transform them into forces of healing.

Relevant aspects of spiritual guidance and spiritual care were considered too, given that our new method involves participants speaking about their everyday problems as well as their relationship with God. The secular world has come to make a distinction between these two concepts, but in Christian writing therapy, where we again try to live by God's standards, approaching God is also inherent in the answer to the psychological problems.

In the wake of the Taizé movement and other ecumenical efforts, prejudice against spiritual practices has been dispelled by now, so they can no longer be referred to as exclusively Catholic practices. In this context, we have looked into the traditions of the various spiritual practices and their contemporary, modernized conceptions.

The writing therapy already applied in psychology forms the basis of our new method. For a thorough understanding of the method, we considered it necessary to present the effects writing produces on the human body, as supported by clinical experiments such as blood analyses or brain research. These clearly demonstrate how writing is conducive to healing or how it harmonizes the body. Next, we presented research results revealing the healing narratives, also corroborated by clinical experiments. Also, when compiling the

series of practices and tasks aimed to promote stress relief and the processing of traumatic experiences, researchers of writing therapy made use of the results of narrative psychology, brain research, linguistics, and philology dealing with creative writing.

In relation to working with texts, we have clarified fundamental issues that arise in bibliotherapy and writing therapy such as the question of attitude towards therapeutic texts, criteria of text selection, conditions of understanding the text, or the specific forms of implementation of the therapy.

The various trends of writing therapy were presented: psychotherapeutic adaptation – a method based on a step-by-step approach that makes it possible for almost anyone to master the method of therapeutic writing as different from writing for purposes of recording information; reflective practice, where the participant and the therapist are each other's responsible partners; writing therapy practice based on fiction but with a therapeutic effect.

Special attention was dedicated to presenting the entire therapeutic process and its various phases from start to finish. The ideas of implicit but unknown addressee, the fictive listener or reader have also come under discussion, ideas that become focus lines in Christian therapeutic writing as well.

The concept of creative writing that has come to enjoy too much popularity (just as the term 'spirituality'), thus carrying more than one meaning, has also been elucidated. The thesis at hand does not treat this concept in a pedagogical or literary sense – in a therapeutic context, writing is creative when it is authentic. Certainly, in all our therapeutic activities, we strive for authenticity, which makes it unnecessary to mention this explicitly.

The roots of Christian writing therapy can be traced back all the way to Christian autobiographies, to Augustine's work titled *Confessions*. The author writes his *Confessions* in his search for God but all the while addressing God. This devout Christian attitude, incomprehensible to the analytical mind, serves as a model to our new method. On the one hand, we endeavour to have the participants in Christian writing therapy discover and apply in their writing this mode of expression that is also known from the Psalms. On the other hand, the aforementioned work of Augustine functioned as a reference for several well-known autobiographers up to the late 19th century, rendering it a benchmark for Christian biographical works and thus Christian therapeutic writing long before attaching special emphasis to it in my thesis.

Current research on Augustine in the fields of history, theology, philosophy, and classical philology does not contradict this model, a significant body of studies even corroborating it. A separate chapter has been dedicated to discussing this matter. All the same, these consistencies are not essential in terms of pastoral psychology.

Further basic analogies can be revealed between Christian spirituality and writing therapy. Such an analogy can be found between the spiritual man's search for truth and a man making every effort to tell his story as accurately as possible. In this situation, the participant needs to enter into a dialogue with his/her own text put down in the course of the therapeutic writing and must make further inquiries into the information unveiled herein by asking him-/herself questions, even in writing if need be. By means of rewriting and redrafting, we are getting ever closer to what we need to express, thereby performing an act of self-education at the same time.

Other fundamental analogies between Christian spirituality and writing therapy are: focusing on the process of writing and the experiences that emerge during this process instead of being geared towards the product/outcome; the question and awareness of the implicit and explicit addressee: who am I writing/speaking to?; according to whose/what value system do I think/act? A Christian man addresses God and obeys His laws.

As has been pointed out in the introduction to this thesis, the aim is not to have participants in the Christian writing therapy activities put down Christian autobiographies embracing their entire lifetime as Augustine did. What we wish to attain here is to raise awareness about the Augustinian attitude and practise it in/through writing. This can take place in short self-reflective narratives as well. And practising it can help us in our Christian spiritual endeavours.

The 21st-century confession-writing, God-seeking Christian now lives in a society where the general scenario is based on secularism, and people live constantly under such an absurd amount of technological stimulation that practising self-reflection is almost bordering on self-discipline. Consequently, in Christian therapeutic writing, just as in writing therapy, it is adopting a gradual approach that can take one forward: starting from short exercises and small achievements and advancing towards narratives of several pages long. A combination of these 'miniatures' can ultimately make up an entire autobiography; however, stock-taking is not something to be pursued here, but reflection on personal

experiences, bringing together Christian worldview and one's personal life journey, and thereby the strengthening of faith, are the primary objectives.

The activity is structured so as to assist participants in realizing the specialized nature of therapeutic writing and working their way from the profane towards the sacred. The goal is for participants to exchange their focus on our secularized world for God's blessing presence, at least while the activity lasts, and to reflect upon themselves, their lives, and God from this perspective, to make use of this vantage point in their addressing God, just as David did in the Psalms or Augustine in his *Confessions*. A novelty brought by the thesis at hand is a special multiple-step writing exercise that prepares the ground for all of this.

The method of Christian writing therapy is centred on the theological conception and on raising awareness about the good news, as well as on giving all this a healing and life-affirming character in its practical activities. Seen in this light, it can be naturally integrated into the context of pastoral psychology or even into the activities of personal evangelization.

If we are to place Christian writing therapy among the current therapeutic trends, then we must mention the biographical method, which makes use of the tasks foreseen in writing therapy, an approach that can be effectively used in the Christian biographical method too. Additionally, bibliotherapy and autogenic training also involve writing exercises. The concept of spiritual attitude as a healing attitude is not proper to Christian writing therapy alone, as it also appears in the Minnesota Model of addiction treatment. The power of this multi-professional treatment model is seen by many experts in spiritual sensitization.

We have formulated specific principles for the application of Christian writing therapy, which, working in synchrony with the rules of writing therapy, ensure the specific character of Christian writing therapy.

The terms writing therapy and therapeutic writing can be misleading for their inclusion of the word 'therapy', as they point to activities that are essentially trainings in self-awareness structured around a specific topic and are not to be understood as sessions of psychotherapy. Nevertheless, as Hungarian terminology tends to be in line with the original English-language phrase (writing therapy), we refer to it as therapy instead of the more expedient self-awareness group activity. The basic ethical rules relevant for these

activities are quite similar to the fundamental principles adopted in psychotherapeutic sessions, i.e. the facilitator puts all his/her professional experience to work to be of assistance to the participants while taking good care not to do any harm and not to cross the limits of his/her competencies. Besides, the facilitator has an obligation of confidentiality, and s/he must communicate to the group members the ethical standards they are required to adhere to when interacting with each other.

In Christian writing therapy, which a priori declares itself as Christian, self-knowledge does not work without a knowledge of God. It should be stressed that Christian writing therapy does not promise transcendental experiences but self-reflection. Participants place themselves in the foreground of God's spirit, but their turning inwards is not yet a guarantee of divine experience, as that can only take place by a gift of grace.

Given that pastoral psychology cannot remain on a purely theoretical level, we have developed a number of pilot projects with the appropriate professional justifications attached to them. Volunteers have been involved in testing these pilot projects, and the results together with the conclusions were included in our thesis.

Based on follow-up questionnaires and in-depth interviews made with participants of the activity, results are conclusive regarding the role of Christian writing therapy in helping to relieve everyday stress and address our traumas but first of all in assisting our search for God and clarifying matters of faith. Our secondary aim was to serve up Christian writing therapy as a future practical tool for our participants. In this respect, it came to me as a surprising result that some of the participants expressed their wish to do Christian writing therapy as a common group activity, i.e. in a community, in the future too, as experiencing God's blessing presence becomes truly intense in a community setting. On the other hand, group members who reported to have a preference for writing on their own even before engaging in our activities were enriched with new self-awareness exercises.

By establishing the theoretical foundation of the new method and putting it into practice through launching pilot projects, we intended to provide an applicable model. The new method is now ready to be applied on condition that the helping professional has relevant group management skills and experiences.

The practice of writing therapy mobilizing inner resources has never been encountered before in the spiritual realm and in a Christian setting. Hence, it can be

considered a novelty even though in some countries where writing therapy has gained more popularity, there might be various local attempts.

Christian writing therapy cannot replace a life of piety, nor can it systematically pass on the faith and the knowledge required by it, but it can enable us to lead a more conscious spiritual life.

At this stage of the research, Christian writing therapy can be used to address people who accept Christianity in the first place and are in a search for God. As part of the further development work regarding Christian writing therapy, it is my view that great emphasis should be attached to a method geared towards addressing Christians outside the Church. Linked up with devotional traditions, Christian writing therapy can develop self-awareness skills and provide a cathartic experience for people seeking Christ just as any other service; except that in our case service means serving. That is, however, a serving that does not concern participants but the facilitator of writing therapy as a preacher of the Gospel.

A major challenge of the present research is posed by its interdisciplinary nature. Pastoral psychology is a discipline of theology due to its insider perspective and individual interpretation of reality. Yet, in the course of my research, I will not act as a theologian when I listen to participants' confessions. Although I am required to be familiar with the traditional as well as modern understanding of spirituality, I cannot turn with dogmatic pretentiousness towards the casual manifestations or statements that appear in therapeutic conversations or the related follow-up reports. I cannot call a man approaching God to account for not having perfectly 'sterile' feelings. It may be even the case that a certain participant has indeed feelings and experiences entirely pure and Christian but cannot express them in adequate terms and in an unambiguous manner.

Augustine's *Confessions* and its unconventional or content-related information are interpreted according to the logic of each and every discipline, but as a pastoral psychologist making use of the relevant scientific research results, I need to consistently adhere to my own perspective, the one represented by pastoral psychology.

Christian writing therapy reacts upon the entire practice of pastoral psychology, and it can help it tremendously since, as pastoral counsellors, we can also learn lessons from these conversations that reflect seeking connection between 21st-century man and God.

The novelty of the thesis at hand lies in the method of Christian writing therapy, which creates a link between modern psychology and Christian traditions of spirituality.

According to our plans, it is our intention to further enhance this new method through developing additional special activities and processing the lessons learned from the related experiences. Christian writing therapy comes as a timely response to the spiritual needs of today's Christian individuals. However, its versatility makes its scope of application extendable to other areas of use.

Key words: writing therapy for Christians, Christian spirituality, applied theology, pastoral psychology, autobiography, expressive writing, reflective practice

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