

Review of the Volume “Depresia între știință și credință” [Depression between science and faith] by Petronela Polixenia Nistor

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Abstract: *This contribution is a review for the volume of university lecturer PhD. Petronela Polixenia Nistor, entitled “Depresia între știință și credință” [Depression between science and faith], which is published by the “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University Publishing House from Iași in 2015 and represents the research work carried out in order to obtain the PhD. degree in Orthodox Theology, within the Faculty “Dimitru Stăniloae” from Iași*

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The depression issue, even though old, is more actual than ever, becoming one of the most common mental disorder problems. The title of *21st century illness* is earned by its significant incidence in the last decade, with more than 280 million people worldwide suffering from depression (WHO, 2023a), the number doubling almost the number of diagnoses in this time frame. Also, 800 thousand suicides occur against the background of depression, which can affect anyone, regardless of the person's gender, age, education or socio-economic level. The causes of depression are multiple and varied, from the most concrete ones, as genetic vulnerability, acquired traumas, disabling diseases, failures encountered, to the most abstract ones, such as the lack of perspective or the loss of life meaning. Depression refers to a dysfunctional relationship between human and his life, as the individual is losing the meaning and joy of life, hides behind work, poor relationships, performance, without realizing and treating the symptoms properly. It is brought to out attention a form of *rejuvenation* of depression, that is affecting younger and younger people. Depression, anxiety and behavioral disorders are the most common conditions among adolescents between 10 and 19 years old (Copăceanu & Costache, 2022), and the first symptoms appear up to the age of 14 (WHO, 2023b).

The author approaches, using an unique way, a broad subject, on which numerous authors and specialists from various fields of activity and research branches have concentrated, trying to discern on it, from an interdisciplinary perspective: theological, anthropological, psychological, psychiatric, philosophical and cultural. Impressive by the magnitude of its approach and depth elaboration, the study situates at the intersection of two scientific branches: clinical medicine represented by clinical psychiatry and theological research represented by hermeneutics or the spiritual interpretation of depression. The work is structured in eleven chapters, each made up of several sub-chapters, spanning 488 pages, scientifically documented from the patristic and theological literature, as well as from the scientific-medical, national and international literature.

The first chapter of the paper addresses the etymological problem of the term depression, aiming, at the same time, at the conceptual delimitations of the associated terms, but also at a series of historical milestones in the evolution and understanding of the term. The text makes a series of conceptual delimitations in the use of the notions of melancholy, sadness and depression, which described what the medical science calls, today, depression. We understand that patristic and contemporary theology does not identify the related state with the term depression, preferring terms such as sadness, sorrow, akedia, depression, hopelessness, discouragement,

etc. Sadness, understood as a response to an unpleasant life event, can become a pathological condition if the intensity increases or the duration is prolonged. Depression is considered a pathological sadness. Contemporary priests and specialists with a spiritual way of life affirm the fact that depression includes in its meaning the passion of sadness and akedia. On the other hand, the feeling of sadness does not imply depression, but depression invariably implies the presence of sadness, with variable intensity, which influences the person's life, activity and functions.

In the second chapter, our attention is directed to the understanding of depression from a multidisciplinary perspective: psychiatric, psychoanalytic, psychological, philosophical and biblical. The psychiatric perspective reveals depression in confronting the natural events of life, perceived amplified by the subject, in the form of existential failures, which can lead to attempts or even acts of suicide. From a psychoanalytic point of view, the concept is relatively ambiguous, being associated with manic-depressive psychosis or mood changes, related to disinvestment of the entire activity. Psychology mainly refers to reactionary depressions, arising in relation to the difficulties of life, or to nervous depressions, generated by overwork or unhealthy eating. The issue of suicidal ideation is also debated, as being closely related to the depressive state of the person's life without God. Also, the knowledge of philosophical currents provides additional light to the dilemmas involved in the elucidation on the problem of depression. As I mentioned before, in the biblical text we do not find the debated term, but the Holy Scripture offers clarifying descriptions regarding the manifestation of the mental states of people with depression, the Book of Psalms being the book of truth discovering, made in terms of human search. The New Testament mentions few cases of depressed people, but with strong resonance on consciences.

Chapters three and four have a predominantly technical-scientific content, addressing the epidemiology and forms of depression, as well as the etiology of depressive states from the point of view of clinical psychiatry. The optics of interpreting depressive sufferings is centered on the idea of plurideterminism and factorial heterogeneity. Taking this causes into account constitutes the premise of designing a plan for prophylaxis or combating their effects. Social, psychological and physical factors are specified as responsible factors in depressogenesis. Alongside to which the spiritual causes are also mentioned, all being in a continuous interaction.

The central chapter of the work, both from the point of view of the situation, but also of the scope and approach, the fifth one, is the meeting point between the psychiatric and the spiritual perspective on depression. It

accurately summarizes information related to a series of conditions correlated to depression, such as anxiety, anguish, asthenia, apathy, depressive syndrome, depressive or anxiety neurosis or melancholic or depressive-anxious psychosis. The problem of demonic possessions is also touched on in this chapter, the author showing much discernment and clarity in clarifying the demonic etiology in a depressive context, the specific features and especially the psychotherapy and pastoral care of the affected people.

The nosology and anthropology of depression are treated in the sixth and seventh chapters, both from a psychiatric and spiritual perspective. Clinical psychology and psychopathology are scientific perspectives from which the author analyzes the major symptoms that occur in depressive disorders, such as moral pain, psychomotor slowness, which is often the only clinical evidence, but also non-specific signs, generated by the encounter of mental suffering and defensive acts. The anthropological approach is corroborated with the perspective of anthropocultural evolutionary psychopathology, concluding in the outline of some signs, which include the global attitude of the subject, in relation to the self, to the world, and also to life. The diminishing psychic force is felt as a moral pain by the subject, as a loss of meaning and power to move forward, but also by an unpleasant feeling that leads to self-blame. Documentary research focuses on contemporary aspects of depression. It speaks of a pathology of the ego, a depression of solitude, a masked depression, a noogenic or blackmail depression, but also a depression of vocation. Existential or noogenic despair is explained through deprivation of the understanding of God nature, in a so-called existential emptiness state. The anthropological approach is made in the all humanity perspective, reaching a wide variety of individuals, leads us to the recognition of the depression as being universal human condition, endless and eternally young”.

The next chapter, the eighth one, has a profound spiritual content, extended considerations being made on depression as disease, passion or even sin. The interdisciplinary effort of understanding and explanation extends into the next chapter with the approach of depressive disorders from a culturological perspective. In this context, depression is presented to us as being aggressive predisposing, either externally oriented or, more often, internally. There is talk about a reverse murder, that illustrates the aggressive potential mentioned, as a form of self-aggressiveness. The author wishes to overcome the labeling barriers of depression, that is seen strictly as passion or result of sin and lack of faith in God, and extending it to understanding of God's indulgence to strengthening faith and deepening spiritual knowledge.

In the penultimate chapter, the problems of prophylaxis, psychotherapy, as well as the spiritual assistance of depressive disorders are addressed, while the last chapter outlines the coordinates of some meta-openings in the study of depression from the perspective of Orthodox spirituality. Orthodox psychotherapy is considered a viable solution for the exhortations to defeat the passions and acquire the virtues, under the direct guidance of an experienced spiritual father. The meaning of the disease is exposed not only in the biological problem, but also constituting *an existential metaphor*; thus, the disease does not mean only suffering, pain and isolation, but it is also a challenge for increasing the faith in God.

Through scientific argumentation, the author demonstrates that the state of depression or, as it is called in the patristic writings, *akedy*, is the expression of one of the most common forms of alteration of human psychism. In this respect, during the course of the paper, the possibility of collaboration between psychologists, psychiatrists and priests in the direction of help, mutual respect and exchange of experience in addressing the growth of healthy people bodily and soul, is evoked, with perspectives of prophylactic and therapeutic development.

Regarding the therapeutic process of depression, the limits of both medicine and theology are recognized. The therapy itself must become the person support in the process of achieving his ontological status. This way, the suggestion is directed towards the multimorphous approach of depression, the man as an unique being needing healing body and soul, which implies caring for the body, but especially, redefining his connection with God. We conclude, therefore, that the healing effort requires a fruitful collaboration between the doctor and the priest in order to restore human being to his original completeness and perfection.

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