

**COGNITIVE ASPECTS OF HUMAN
TRANSFORMATION
IN CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE**

(Critique of Albert Ellis's Rational-Emotive Therapy)

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RISTO IMEY
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INTRODUCTION

In a recent survey of clinical and counseling psychologists, R. Warren & G.D. Zgourides, have concluded that the cognitively-oriented therapy and/or rational-emotive therapy (RET) "represent one of the strongest, if not the strongest theoretical emphases today".¹ They pointed out that this system of therapy was the predominant orientation and one of the most influential. Indeed, the survey is seen to reinforce the notion that RET approaches have gained prominence as a potential method of therapy in helping people through the counseling process.

Albert Ellis, the founding father of RET, pioneered the advancement of cognitively-oriented therapy in the 1950s, and it became the forerunner in the emergence of the modern cognitive-behaviour therapy.² RET, subsequently not only evolved as the first of modern cognitive interventions to gain widespread clinical acceptance, but also became the pioneer of the

¹ . R. Warren & G.D. Zgourides, Anxiety Disorders : A Rational-Emotive Perspective (New York : Pergamum Press, 1991) p.10.

² . Donald K. Freedheim (ed), History of Psychotherapy (Washington : American Psychology Association, 1992) p.659; See also, S.D. Hollon & A.T. Beck, "Cognitive and Cognitive Behavioral Therapies" in Allen E. Bergin & S.L. Gorfield (ed), Handbook of Psychotherapy and Behaviour Change (New York-Chichester-Brisbane-Singapore : John Wiley, 1994)p.429.

"development of strategies designed to change existing beliefs".³ Ellis traced the origin of the discovery about his theory back to the writings of the Stoic philosopher, Epictetus (ca. AD 55-ca.135) who once maintained that "people are disturbed not by things, but by the view which they take of them".⁴ This way of looking at events captures a major theme in RET that "changing a person's belief and transforming the human mind to become more rational",⁵ will eliminate emotional and psychological disturbances. In this theoretical framework, the role of therapists is to teach their clients to examine the rationality of their beliefs, and to help them "identify and actively dispute their irrational beliefs".⁶

From the Christian perspective, rational-emotive therapy presents a paradox:⁷

On the one hand, its theory appears to have great potential for work with Christian clients. The central goal of RET, for instance, is to help people "to think more rationally, to feel more appropriately, and to act more

³ . S.D. Hollon & A.T. Beck, *Ibid*, p.429

⁴ . R.E. Enfield, "Rational-Emotive Behaviour Therapy" in Raymon J. Corsini (ed), Encyclopedia of psychology Vol.3 (New York-Chichester-Brisbane-Toronto-Singapore : John Wiley & Sons, 1994) p.279 ; See also, C.H. Petterson, Theories of Counseling & Psychotherapy (New York : Harper & Collins, 1986) p.4; J. Tood & A.C. Bohart, Foundation of Clinical and Counseling Psychology (New York : Harper & Collins, 1994) p.363.

⁵ . Hollon & Beck, *Op Cit*, p.429.

⁶ . C.H. Petterson, *Op Cit*, p.4 See also, Hollon & Beck, *Op Cit*, p.429.

⁷ . P.J. Watson, et al, "Rational-Emotive and Religious Understanding of Perfectionism and other Irrationalities" Journal of Psychology and Christianity 1994, Vol.13, No.4, p.356-371.

functionally", in order to achieve "their goals of living longer and happily".⁸ This goal is obvious when we look at the "RET-ABC model of psychopathology",⁹ so that, the main task of the RET therapist is to replace "the pathogenic irrationalities" with the "healthy-promoting rationality"¹⁰ On this point, RET is viewed as giving human rationality an appropriately prominent place among human capabilities. For those who agree that right beliefs are important,¹¹ such an approach to helping people must seem to be full of promise. In fact, some biblical passages also emphasize the cognitive dimension of life in which people are urged to change their belief (Isa. 1:18), to learn from the Scripture (2 Tim.3:15), to think positively on certain things (Phil.4:8), and to have the mind of Christ in their hearts (1 Cor. 2:16). One of the biblical verses that is most often cited by Christian therapists favourable to RET is Proverbs 23:7-"as a man thinks in his heart, so is he". Indeed, rationality is described in theological perspective as one of the core human characteristics that is consistent with the Image of God in humanity.¹²

⁸ . S.L. Jones, "Rational-Emotive Therapy in Christian Perspective", Journal of Psychology and Theology, 1989, Vol.17, No.2, p.114

⁹ . The ABC theory of Rational-Emotive Therapy will be explored with a careful and conceptual evaluation from the Christian perspective in chapter two of this thesis.

¹⁰ . P.J. Watson, et al, *Op Cit*, p.357.

¹¹ . R. F. Hurding, Roots & Shoots (London-Sydney-Auckland-Toronto : Hodder & Stoughton, 1985) p.187.

¹² . S.L. Jones, " RET in Christian.....", *Op Cit*, p.112.

On the other hand, however, in some of his clarifications of RET, Ellis repeatedly argued that traditional religious beliefs serve as "pathogenic irrationalities", and that the "rigid adherence to orthodox articles of faith can sabotage mental health".¹³ Such dogmatic belief systems, according to Ellis, "supposedly cause individuals to embrace irrationalities that then produce emotional disturbances".¹⁴ As a person who described himself as a nonbeliever and historically stood on the anti-religious position,¹⁵ Ellis also complained that :

people who adhere to the teachings of absolutistic and perfectionistic religious groups will tend to be more frequently and more intensely disturbed than those who follow more flexible, less dogmatic religion.¹⁶

For the Christian faith, this aspect of Ellis's rational-emotive therapy (RET) theory seems wholly unacceptable. This tension, therefore, makes it quite improbable for a truly Christian approach to counseling to be fully identified with Albert Ellis's RET. Thus, this thesis will try to explore its paradox and tension. The attempt to make Albert Ellis's RET as an object of this thesis

¹³ . A. Ellis, "My Response to "Don't Throw the Therapeutic Baby Out with the Holy Water": Helpful and hurtful Elements of Religion", Journal of Psychology and Christianity, 1994, Vol.13, No.4, p.323-324; See also, P. J. Watson, et al, Op cit, p.356.

¹⁴ . Albert Ellis, "My Response.....", Ibid, p.324; See also, W. B. Johnson, "Christian Rational-Emotive Therapy" Journal of Psychology and Christianity, 1994, Vol.13, No.4, p.254.

¹⁵ . P.J. Watson, et al, Op Cit, p.255; See also, R.F. Hurding, Op Cit, p.182

¹⁶ . P.J. Watson, et al, Ibid, p.256.

emerged from a deep impression by the notion that its theory not only has gained a remarkable recognition, but also because it has relied upon "an optimistic view of humankind".¹⁷ This notion is to be taken as a challenge for the Christian counselor to develop a theologically sound principle for Christian counseling.

In this thesis, therefore, RET's understanding of cognitive restructuring in the human mind will be examined critically, and the anthropological issues raised in its theory will be briefly analyzed. In comparison, the theological understanding of human transformation, of human reconciliation, and of human sanctification, will be taken as the basis for exploring and examining the theoretical framework of RET.

The subject matter of this study is rooted in the literary works of Albert Ellis and other related works on RET's theory with a focus on the cognitive restructuring process in the human mind. To concentrate on its process is possible, precisely because its ultimate goal is "to implement some philosophical changes in the way people view their world".¹⁸

The discussion in this thesis will attempt to evaluate the nature of human transformation in its theoretical framework. It means the study in

¹⁷ . A.E. Ivey & L.S. Downing, Counseling and Psychotherapy (New York Prentice-Hall Inc, 1980) p.296

¹⁸ . Mark R. Mc Minn & Cathie J. Lebold, "Collaborative Efforts in Cognitive Therapy with Religious Clients, Journal of Psychology and Theology, 1989, Vol.17, No.2, p.106

this thesis will not examine all of the writings about rational-emotive therapy (RET) theory. The recent developments and contemporary issues in its movement will be analyzed only as far as they relate to the cognitive aspect of human transformation.

The fundamental thesis here is that the philosophical and theoretical foundation of RET and its views of human nature and transformation seem too narrow and limited. Thus, the main concern of this study is how to reflect some aspects of its views of human nature and transformation, and try to develop a new biblical application of its outcome from the perspective of Christian theology.

In this undertaking, library¹⁹ research is the main method. This thesis is structured in four steps.

Firstly, the historical background and the developments of Albert Ellis's RET will be explored. This will include a brief overview and analysis of the relevant development of cognitively-oriented therapy as a system of the psychotherapy and counseling movement.

Secondly, the basic theory and practice of RET especially its view of cognitive transformation will be presented in chapter two. This chapter will be devoted to the exploration of RET's philosophical and psychological

¹⁹ . The primary sources are collected at Library of Trinity Theological College and the Library of National University of Singapore (NUS). The secondary sources are gathered from the Library of Counseling & Care Centre, Singapore and the American Library Resource Centre, Singapore.

concepts of personality and mental health, including a conceptual evaluation of Ellis's concept of belief system and/or religious belief related to Christian faith.

Thirdly, the theological concept of cognitive restructuring processes in the human mind will be discussed in chapter three. The discussion aims to use a Christian theology of human transformation, of human reconciliation, and of human sanctification to critique RET's theoretical conception of human nature and human transformation.

The final portion of this thesis will contain the concluding remarks of the research study by summing up the discussions and putting forward the practical implications.