At the 'wound' of humanity: A humble (migrant) Roman Catholic and psychotherapeutic response to humanism in spiritual care

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ABSTRACT

This response engages three Humanist essays on spiritual care from the perspective of a migrant Roman Catholic practical theologian and clinician formed by relational psychotherapy, psychoanalysis, and passiology. Rather than receiving Humanism as either a rival to be overcome or a neutral common language to be uncritically adopted, I approach these essays as differentiated conversation partners in the shared work of attending to suffering, dignity, and the fragile task of humanization. I first consider how Humanist spiritual care integrates existential, critical, and person-centered psychological traditions through attention to finitude, fragility, contingency, systemic dehumanization, and relational accompaniment. I then identify points of convergence with Roman Catholic spiritual care, especially through the doctrines of *imago Dei*, incarnational and sacramental anthropology, Vatican II's dialogical openness, Catholic mysticism, and liberationist commitments to the poor and marginalized. At the same time, I name genuine tensions between naturalistic Humanism and Catholic claims concerning revelation, Incarnation, grace, and Mystery. Drawing on Levinas, Ricœur, and relational integration, I argue that these tensions need not collapse into opposition. Instead, they may deepen a differentiated dialogue in which Humanist, Catholic, and psychotherapeutic traditions mutually enrich one another without being reduced to a flattened lingua franca. The response concludes by proposing that pluralistic spiritual care is best served not by sterile common categories, but by a shared, humble, and capacious witness to the suffering Other.

KEYWORDS: humanism; spiritual care; Roman Catholicism; passiology; suffering; relational integration; psychoanalysis; liberation theology; sacramentality; Paul Ricœur; Emmanuel Levinas

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Introduction: Whom is Responding?

I am honored to join the rich dialogue on contemporary humanism and spiritual care. To locate myself, I write from my context as a (migrant) Roman Catholic, a practical theologian, and a clinician deeply formed by relational psychotherapy and psychoanalysis (Manalili & Sandage, in review). Grounded in an integrative framework that resists both clinical and theological reductionisms, this approach views psychological and theological perspectives as mutual conversation partners in the service of healing and liberation (Sandage & Manalili, 2026). Rather than treating knowledge systems as individual mastery or monopolies on truth, our stances operate from an attitude of intellectual (and therapeutic) humility that values shared discernment within a pluralistic, global community. I operate from the core axiom that spiritual care is fundamentally summoned by suffering, arriving through the “open wound of life in this world” (Moltmann, 1993, p. 49) and the raw “cry of the suffering Other” (Goodman & Manalili, 2024; Levinas, 1998). Thus, my responses to contemporary humanism are not one of defensive apologetics (neither for theological doctrines nor psychotherapeutic axioms) but a relational hermeneutic encounter prompted by a deep reverence for human dignity. As a migrant clinician sensitive to how frameworks of care must be continually decolonized from individualistic assumptions that ignore systemic oppression, I seek to explore how our respective traditions can mutually enrich one another toward a shared horizon of holistic human flourishing.

Integrating Humanistic Thought and Psychology in Spiritual Care

Indeed, contemporary humanism provides indispensable non-reductive maps that enrich attending to wounds in spiritual care (amidst our growing pluralistic range of those seeking care). Rather than functioning as adversarial positions, the models offered by Croft (2026), Schuhmann

et al. (2026), and Minnema et al. (2026) deepen our clinical attentiveness to suffering, structural context, and relational care. Even with their nuances and (dis)agreements, each offers enriching layers of the endless map of humanity that are far from being adversarial positions.

James Croft (2026) operationalizes philosopher Martin Hägglund’s concept of “secular faith” – an ultimate devotion to a life defined by finitude, fragility, and contingency. Through a harrowing case study of a traumatic death (i.e., a sudden murder of an autobody shop owner in Missouri), the question of theodicy is stopped in its tracks. Within his naturalistic humanistic perspective, life is finite. Death is our final doorway. And because suffering carries no intrinsic teleology, meaning-making must be an active collaborative human endeavor forged in the aftermath of existential ruin. Croft (2026) notes the following as important caregiving responses in the face of finitude, fragility, and contingency: treasuring finite time (rather than succumbing to despair), recommitting to fragile projects (in the midst of surrender), and reclaiming agency (in the face of helplessness). From this framework, our attending to the raw finitude of each sufferer’s cry… to collaboratively re-author a livable purpose from the shards of a broken world (even if there is no capital-P “Pupose”) is the task of the humanistic spiritual caregiver.

Expanding this existential reality to a socio-political canvas – Schuhmann, Wojtkowiak, and Jacobs (2026) articulate a “critical, entangled, and inclusive humanism.” This framework explicitly disrupts classical ‘humanisms’ that have historically been criticized as overly Westernized, androcentric, and Eurocentric. (Indeed, these paradigms that covertly snuck into mainstream psychological frameworks and theological anthropologies). In the critical dimension of their model, Schuhmann et al. (2026) even make nods to their approach in Fanon’s prophetic, decolonial call for a “new humanism.” By locating Fanon as an example of these critical voices, the authors remind spiritual caregivers that human suffering cannot be abstracted from the

material, historical realities of structural violence, racism, and institutional oppression. In short, to care for the person humanistically is also to confront systemic forces that dehumanize them. Furthermore, to build out the entangled and inclusive horizons of this worldview, the authors weave innovative philosophical additions into the contemporary spiritual care dialogue: Iris Murdoch’s ethics of unselfing and loving attention, Emmanuel Levinas’s radical alterity where the raw vulnerability of the Other places an absolute responsibility upon the clinician to stand in ethical solidarity, and Hannah Arendt’s political concepts of *plurality*—the interconnected web of distinct human identities—and *natality*, the intrinsic capacity to bring forth revolutionary new actions and narratives even within highly constricted or traumatized environments.

Finally, the concrete operationalization in Minnema, van Biemen, and Alma’s (2026) study of *humanistisch geestelijke verzorging* [HGV; humanistic spiritual care] offers interactions with the humanistic psychotherapy traditions. As the authors outline, traditional ‘humanistic spiritual care’ historically rooted its professional identity in providing a non-confessional, autonomous alternative to traditional religious chaplaincy. From the education and training, this positioned each caregiver not as a representative of divine authority from a religious tradition, but as a fellow human being who accompanies others in their search for meaning. To resist institutional dehumanization in this highly securitized context, these HGV-ers implement Carl Rogers’ person-centered framework, prioritizing Rogers’ three core conditions: *empathy*, *congruence*, and *unconditional positive regard*. (Indeed, even Bionion reverie offers a psychoanalytic framework for this type of containment and metabolizing). By offering openness to the varieties of human experiences (even beyond one’s religious and existential traditions), the HGV-ers co-created a safe relational container that honors the unrepeatable humanity of each

careseeker, even against the crushing weight of systemic surveillance – even within high-security counter-terrorism detention discourses (Minnema et al., 2026).

Even if the worldviews might differ slightly from each other… Woven together, the various humanistic frameworks converge beautifully with an existential psychology and an expansive anthropology – that remains open to attending to each sacred human wound.

Convergences with (Roman Catholic and Psychotherapeutic) Spiritual Care

These perspectives on humanistic spiritual care find several harmonies with Roman Catholic theological anthropology that prioritizes attending to the suffering of others. At the core of Catholic anthropology is our concept of *imago Dei* – the belief that each person is uniquely made in the image of the Divine (whether they fall into our belief system or not). Furthermore, the suffering figure of Jesus Christ—at once human and Divine in our theology—anchors liberationists, grounding an absolute commitment to human dignity and demanding a radical, prophetic identification with the poor and marginalized (Gutiérrez, 2023). Whether taken into streams of liberation psychologies (Martín-Baró, 1994) and spiritual contemplations of “wounded healer” (Nouwen, 1972), this prioritization of attending to the sufferer as human and sacred finds convergence with the three humanistic authors. Furthermore, (relatively) recent councils and documents provide important bridges for pluralistic dialogues. Emerging from the Second Vatican Councils from the ages of world wars… *Nostra Aetate* (1965a) calls Catholics into respectful engagement with other philosophical traditions; *Lumen Gentium* (1964) emphasizes an inclusive relational community that shares in inherent dignity rather than top-down hierarchy; and *Gaudium et Spes* (1965c) urges humble engagement with the anxieties of the modern world. By way of dialogue to better care for others, Schuhmann et al.’s (2026)

inclusive humanism and Minnema et al.’s (2026) Rogerian humanism offer practices quite aligned with these presented worldviews and priorities.

A second convergence appears in Catholic incarnational/sacramental worldviews. Rather than mind-body splits of Cartesian (and some psychological) frameworks, this takes seriously the material, embodied, and relational life of persons. There is no spirit, *ipsa* – to feed the hungry, to give water to drink, and to care for the existentially sick… is an embodied interaction. Amidst the “implacements” (Hall & Thoennes, 2006) that contextualize a person’s experience and “sedimentation” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012) of how past actions, each person is always already interacting with others in the material world (Sandage and Brown, 2018). Even the very rituals that aim to transmit tradition and meaning… require water, oil, bread, wine, touch, and community (O’Neill, 1983). Indeed, interpretations of the symbols may differ and open up various horizons of meaning. Yet, this sacramental imagination echoes aspects of entangled humanism: human life is not isolated, but always, already interdependent, physical, historical, communal, and ecological (Schuhmann et al., 2026).

A third convergence to our humanisms appears in the mystical and liberative streams of Catholic tradition, where deep respect for interiority flows into agentic systemic action. Catholic mysticism invites transformations in attention, as seen in St. Ignatius of Loyola’s (2014) practice of finding God in all things, St. Teresa of Ávila’s (2007) relational interiority, and St. John of the Cross’s (2019) apophatic purification from fixed concepts of truth. (Similar to concepts of “lack” in Lacanian psychoanalysis, mystical frameworks are more open to the tensions of unknowing – and having a gnawing hunger at our core). These contemplative stances animate modern witnesses like Dorothy Day (1997) and Thomas Merton (2007), who paired silence with radical social justice, and Raimon Panikkar (1993), who championed pluralistic cosmotheandric

dialogue. As noted before, liberation theology and liberation psychology insist that truth-seeking and spiritual accompaniment are inseparable from structural justice, active solidarity, and the cry of the poor (Gutiérrez, 2023; Martín-Baró, 1989). These stances strongly converge with critical humanism’s acknowledgement of lived socio-political systems (Schuhmann et al., 2026) and invitation to attend to each unique person’s way of inhabiting their silences and making meaning amidst finitude, fragility, and contingency (Croft, 2026).

Tensions Between These and Humanistic Spiritual Care

While these convergences are real, profound epistemological and ontological tensions exist. Roman Catholicism rests on divine revelation, the incarnation of divinity into humanity, and the mystery of grace, whereas a strictly naturalistic humanism like Croft’s (2026) rejects any supernatural guarantor or providential structure. From this purely secular standpoint, Catholic metaphysical claims can appear mythological or pastorally risky if they impose meaning too quickly. As Emmanuel Levinas (1998) instructs, the suffering of the Other must never be made ‘useful’ at the behest of the caregiver – before worldviews (or doctrines attempt to) speak, the raw cry must be heard and received without overinterpretations (Goodman & Manalili, 2024; Manalili, 2026). Additionally, a parallel historical tension exists with psychotherapy, as classical psychoanalysis dismissed religion as an illusion or defensive sublimation (Freud, 1961). Indeed, psychoanalysis has shifted from a detached one-person model toward relational, intersubjective, and post-Cartesian traditions that expand clinical listening toward trauma, embodiment, ethics, and systemic context (Manalili & Sandage, in review; Orange, 2011; Stolorow, 2011). From my own (migrant) Catholic perspective, these need not be avenues of intellectual closure. Reframed through this relational lens, Catholic tenets need not operate as weapons of dogmatic certitude

but as invitations to experience “Mystery” (Rahner, 1966; von Balthasar, 2000). Mystery not as a cognitive puzzle to solve or something that can exhaust meaning… but experiences that are infinitely solvable and able to be made meaningful from multiple angles. For example, the salient symbol of the crucified Christ does not need to explain suffering… but an invitation to enter into the sacredness of each human wound as having a plurality of meanings. However, for the humanistic spiritual caregiver… we are invited into the plurality of different symbols of each unique person whom we attend to (Minnema et al., 2026).

Mutual Enrichment… and a “Lingua Franca”?

I am cautious about describing “humanism” with a “lingua franca” for spiritual care, yet I remain hopeful for these dialogues. A shared language indeed helps in our communication, but a flattened common tongue can reduce thick traditions into generalized clinical categories (as we’ve seen in the field of psychology, extricating religious and cultural symbols). Spiritual care needs a common ground, but also differences. For relationality and unity to unfold, difference and diversity must be a precursor (otherwise, it merely dissolves into sameness). Therefore, my hope is not to dissolve humanism, Catholic, Abrahamic, Eastern, secular, psychotherapeutic, or other languages into neutralizing vocabulary. My hope is towards relational differentiation: traditions renaming themselves while becoming more accountable to one another and to the suffering person before us (Sadange & Brown, 2018).

Here, Paul Ricœur may be helpful as a hybrid scholar. For him, symbols do not foreclose meaning; they open persons through experience into the meanings therein (like Mystery). As Paul Ricœur (1967) famously asserted, “the symbol gives rise to thought,” meaning that religious frameworks do not offer intellectual dogmas… but living, inexhaustible symbols that carry a

structural “surplus of meaning” to help unpack the infinite depth of human experience (Ricœur, 1976). Certain humanistic language of dignity, agency, finitude, and humanization may help Catholic spiritual caregivers resist premature theological closure. Certain Catholic frameworks of sacramentality, mystery, lament, communion, and cruciform solidarity may help humanistic spiritual caregivers see why religious symbols can be life-giving rather than merely regressive.

This is where I see the most promising mutual enrichment. My hope is that our dialogues can deepen our shared practices of humility, differentiation, and witness. By choosing the path of relational differentiation (or a diversity and plurality of tongues that can speak in a “lingua franca” as our three pieces and several authors do), this interdisciplinary cross-pollination hopes that we may better witness to the open wound of the suffering Other. As we do so… hopefully, we do not offer sterile categories, but a communal, capacious attending capable of helping refigure a world that can be inhabited again.

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