

Harm Reduction as an Exercise of Amipotence

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Abstract:

The criminalization of drug use has proven ineffective, often worsening recidivism and reinforcing stigma that hinders individuals from seeking treatment. In contrast, harm reduction prioritizes minimizing the negative consequences of drug use over enforcing abstinence. This paper explores how the principles of Open and Relational Theology (ORT), particularly the concept of Amipotence, resonate with harm reduction goals. It argues that both clergy and laypeople can draw on this theological framework to foster more compassionate, supportive responses to drug use within their communities.

The United States has been battling an evil that pays no regard to one's age, race, creed, gender, or orientation. This once underground epidemic has broken through the earth to devastate rural and urban communities alike. The opioid crisis in America, which saw a massive increase in overdose deaths throughout the 2010's, has claimed an average of over 100,000 lives each year for the last five years. With the introduction of contaminants in the unregulated drug supply like fentanyl, the danger is real for those who use drugs and for people with substance use disorder. The traditional framework of criminalizing people who use drugs has not worked, exacerbating issues like recidivism and stigma towards people who use drugs, making it harder for people to seek treatment.

Evil has been misappropriated against those who use drugs. Rather, this evil, what the Apostle Paul defines in Ephesians 6:12 as "principalities and the ruling forces who are masters of

the darkness of this world”, is the system that keeps perpetuating the cycle of misuse and devaluing people who use drugs. Systemic oppression of people who use drugs - seeing people as morally inferior ‘junkies’ - discounts the love God has for all of Their creation. The Accuser works throughout this system to limit the potential of these lives that have intrinsic value and meaning - souls deserving of love and care.

In response to the AIDS epidemic in the 1980’s, the United States’ focus shifted from abstinence models of handling drug use to that of harm reduction. In a harm reduction model, the goal is not necessarily abstinence, rather reducing harm associated with use. In the 1980s, organizations worked with at-risk groups to ensure access to clean needles and syringe exchange, to reduce the likelihood of transmission of HIV. This same model had been applied to substance use with great success. Harm reduction for substance use looks like syringe services, access to life-saving medications like naloxone, safe consumption sites, and large scale education. In the harm reduction model, we want people to know they have an ally while they use, they can be safer in their use, and, when they are ready, be able to seek out low barrier access to treatment.

Tom Oord’s model of Amipotence - that God’s primary attribute is that of love - is the most consistent model with the practice of harm reduction. Open and relational theology (ORT) affirms the following concepts: love is, by definition, uncontrolling, God’s power is expressed through relationships with God and with each other, through love, to encourage human flourishing, and finally, because of these limitations, God cannot act unilaterally against evil, but requires collaboration with humanity to bring healing, liberation, and redemption. I will argue in the following essay how these essential tenets of ORT, and Amipotence specifically, align with the goals of harm reduction, and how ministers and laypeople can use this philosophical and biblical framework to better serve their communities.

First, open and relational theology affirms the uncontrolling nature of love. We know this intuitively in our own lives - it's hard to say someone loves us if they force us to do something against our will, or have control over something important to our autonomy, like our finances. In an interpersonal relationship these would be considered markers of an unhealthy, and even potentially violent, relationship. In amipotence, the primacy of love forces us to remove these controlling attributes from a coherent picture of God. God cannot control Their creation from doing anything because true love cannot be coercive.

In a harm reduction model of working with people who use drugs, we cannot control their use. Chemical dependency and addiction cannot be dictated out of someone through forced abstinence. A person who uses drugs can only seek treatment when they are ready to take that step themselves. We've seen throughout our history the damage that has been done when restrictive and controlling measures have been used against people who use drugs. These penal consequences have led to the overpopulation of America's prison system, recidivism, and the increased likelihood of people who use drugs to overdose after forced abstinence.

Secondly, God as a relational being with Their creation, provides a more clear picture of the power of the Divine. God is a relational God - being moved by the plights of Their people, the pleas of the righteous and unrighteous alike, and acting to bring liberation through Their messengers. As Oord notes in his book, God does not move unilaterally in the Biblical story, rather through God's relationships with Their creation. It is the comradery and partnership of Divine and Creation that brings about human flourishing in the Biblical story.

Harm reduction relies on cooperation with the community. People with lived experience with substance use know how best to serve their community - what services are needed, how to reduce harm associated with use, and how to best distribute these resources. The uncontrolling

posture of love does not allow for a harm reductionist to make unilateral decisions. Harm reduction centers the experiences and voices of those who use drugs and listens intently. This partnership leads to safer practices, safer supplies, and saved lives.

Finally, the problem of evil is tackled, and maybe best accounted for, through amipotence. God's primary action is love, and love cannot control, therefore God cannot control the actions or outcomes of our free will. Evil is the outcome of a creation with free will acting outside of the cooperation of God. To rephrase this idea positively, all that is good in the world is the product of Divine and Mortal cooperation. Love works, or 'woos', throughout the world every moment of every day, but it is the responsibility of the individual and society to choose to participate in the work of Love.

Programs that are designed to reduce harm in communities of people who use drugs are only as successful as we make them. The stigma around people who use drugs needs to be broken down and removed on both an individual and societal level before healing can begin. It is a loving act to meet people in the place, space, and time they are in, in order to best serve their immediate needs. This love ought to woo someone who uses drugs to see us as an ally in their life. The participation of harm reductionists with the community who uses drugs is a clear parallel to amipotent cooperation of God with Their Creation.

The best philosophy, theology, and biblical exegesis is only as powerful as the practice it inspires. Having the clearest picture of God is only helpful when Christian leaders and laypeople use their lens to enact good in the community. There is more that is required of us as the Church than to know what is right - we need to put into practice our belief in the power of God to work in the world through us to straighten our bent world. An amitpotent God can help the Church have a coherent philosophy to model our orthopraxy.

As ministers and laypeople, it is important to be able to provide sound counseling to people who use drugs and their families. There are a variety of treatment options and services for people who use drugs, and it's important to be able to guide people who use drugs in how they should navigate the options. Popular programs like Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Narcotics Anonymous (NA) have been valuable for countless people looking for recovery and maintaining sobriety, but there are core concepts that can be reframed in an amipotence lens.

These programs see substance use as black and white. Someone is either 'using' or 'sober'. If someone relapses, they are no longer considered in recovery, but have 'fallen off the wagon'. Rather than reaffirming this distinction, possibly furthering stigma against the person, clergy should consider counseling in the framework of love. Amipotence - the power of love - would call us as ministers of Jesus' teachings to see them as loved by God and encourage them to continue to participate in that Universal Love.

Abstinence-only recovery models like NA remove the power of the individual to make changes in their own lives. These programs teach people that they are powerless to change their situation and must turn their lives over to God and have Them change them unilaterally. These are not necessarily bad claims, but rather can be misleading, misused, and ultimately dangerous for those who struggle with recovery. Amipotence reframes the power from a unilateral Deity to a participatory God. The person who uses drugs has to be a part of the transformational power of Love in their own life. Love, by definition, cannot override a person's free will.

However, despite the criticism above, there are components of abstinence-only recovery models that should be affirmed through the lens of amipotence. Asking for forgiveness, personal discipline, and service to others fall well within the framework of an Open and Relational God that functions in amipotence. Ministers and family can help the person through these sections of

a program that would be leading them into joining with God in Their love to create a better community. Asking for forgiveness allows the person in recovery to acknowledge their lack of participation in Love and ask to be reunited by it. In the reconnection with Love, this person can then start to take responsibility for their actions and seek to stay in the flow of Love. As the person who uses drugs continues in their recovery process, they can be the next beacon of God in their community, allying with others who are on the same journey.

This is not an easy task, but love is not easy. The amipotent God cannot take away chemical dependency, addiction, or the hurt that is associated with substance use. Love is relational, and relationships are complicated. The amipotent God loves relationally as we love our family, friends, and enemies as they find their way through substance use. Amipotence calls us to love unconditionally and not through coercion or control. We cannot force someone to be abstinent, but rather be an ally through their journey - suffer with them when they suffer, encourage them when they are in need, and rejoice as they find their way home.

About The Author:

Brad Thibodeaux is a graduate student at Northwind Theological Seminary and co-investigator at the University of Rhode Island providing education on the opioid crisis and harm reduction supplies throughout New England. He writes at Patheos under “The Prodigal Empire” and moonlights as a rockstar in wedding and event bands throughout the Northeast.