

## Article

# The Book of Job and Pastoral Intervention in Crisis

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**Abstract:** This article uses the Book of Job as a starting point for guidelines on how to help people traumatized by various crises find purpose and meaning in life without imposition of pre-judged solutions. Using a loose analogy between a theological discussion in the biblical book and the modern theories of existential psychotherapy, it makes a point of showing how both methods may fail if they are ossified into ideologies. The proposed solution is in making room for a divine intervention that is outside the scope of the pastor's or therapist's experience. In the Book of Job, it is Job's personal encounter with God. Psychotherapy may use the Lacanian notion of "the Other" to open up the client towards Transcendence. In times of trauma and crisis, people are vulnerable to all sorts of emotional and spiritual abuse. That is why the call for openness towards divine intervention must be cultivated within the limits of Christian spirituality.

**Keywords:** pastoral intervention; theology; psychology; philosophy

## 1. Introduction

We can differentiate between two tasks in the ways to help people caught in a catastrophe: the first is the immediate relief work that we could call "the Good Samaritan approach", while the second is the long-term pastoral-psychological restoration that we may term "the Book of Job approach". The first takes care of the imminent threats against the life and safety of the persons in crisis, while the second one deals with the lingering mental and spiritual consequences of the trauma. Both are essential for getting traumatized persons back to physical and psychological equilibrium.

Although theocentric in its theological origins, pastoral intervention is understandably anthropocentric in its application. Disasters and catastrophes call for compassion and move us to focus on the physical and psychological needs of the affected individuals. Paradoxically, the Book of Job in the situation of the protagonist's multi-level catastrophe says almost nothing about the physical or social intervention of his friends. Instead, it relates a long and heated theological discussion (transformed into poetry) that should explain the catastrophe and make Job fall in line with the worldview theories of his friends. Although in the end their arguments receive severe criticism from God himself, they certainly try to put God and his justice in the center of attention.

"The Book of Job approach" to pastoral intervention could be likened, with some imagination, to modern existential psychotherapy. Both deal with the problem of the meaning of life in crisis. "Existential psychotherapy is a dynamic approach to therapy which focuses on concerns that are rooted in the individual's existence" (Yalom 1980, p. 5). It places emphasis on the health of the client's consciousness and his/her experience of "being in the world". Although there is a general approach based on the philosophy of existentialism, experience shows that each case is different, "... unpredictable, unique, unforgettable, always unrepeatable, and often indescribable" (Laing 1970, p. 47). Job's experience is surely unrepeatable, but in this article, we are not going to discuss the historicity or authorship of the biblical book bearing his name but rather compare the human response to a catastrophe described there with the complaints of modern times



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and consider whether the help offered to Job has parallels in contemporary pastoral and therapeutic practice. The book is a few millennia old—how can it inform our modern times?

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. *Job's Complaints in Modern Times*

The Book of Job is a constant point of reference for almost any sort of trouble known to humankind. It has been asserted that “... every bridge collapse, earthquake, viral epidemic, and other inexplicable misery has been loaded onto the scaffolding of Job” (Long 1988, p. 5). Although the book may be one of the most ancient in the Bible, the human situation described in it sounds surprisingly modern. And it does not speak about Job's personal troubles only. Many passages describe the sufferings of various communities and diverse living conditions. The orphan, the widow, the oppressed, the poor, the destitute—they are pushed aside, they work at night, they sleep without blankets in winter, they are sold as lifeless things...

Let us take just two quotations from the Book of Job and compare them with passages from modern literature.

#### 2.1.1. Consequences of Social Engineering

Today, the term “social engineering” may be used to mean a problem of cybersecurity, social engineering being a form of hacking your website or wireless network. Here, I am using the expression in the sense that Paul Johnson used it in *Modern Times*, the idea “... that human beings can be shoved around like concrete” (Johnson 1991, p. 130).

Job 24:12 says: “From out of the city the dying groan, and the soul of the wounded cries for help; yet God charges no one with wrong”.

Compare this with a graphic description from Bolshevik Russia during the famine in 1921:

“The waiting room [Simbirsk railway station], the corridor, every foot thickly covered with people, sprawling, seated, crouched in every imaginable position. If one looks closely, he sees that these filthy rags are swarming with vermin. The typhus stricken grovel and shiver in their fever, their babies with them. Nursing babies have lost their voices and are no longer able to cry. Every day more than twenty dead are carried away, but it is not possible to remove all of them. Sometimes corpses remain among the living for more than five days...” (Figes 1997, p. 777).

We can almost hear “the soul of the wounded” crying for help. There were no railway stations in Job's times, but the groaning of the dying and corpses lying unattended are unfortunately well documented in our times. These are also well-known pictures from Nazi concentration camps:

“The horrors mount and intensify as the film journeys to the camps at Buchenwald, Dachau, and Bergen-Belsen. The camera lingers upon naked, emaciated bodies strewn upon a barrack floor. Suddenly, one twitches, and we realize that unlike the other mounds of corpses, these people are, in fact, alive. It is a jarring moment, as what appears a ‘still’ turns into a moving image. ‘These are the survivors,’ comments the narrator laconically. The documentary concludes with the now-famous footage of British bulldozers pushing a veritable mountain of bodies into a mass grave. As the dead and dirt cascade down the deep pit, the narrator ends with the flat declaration ‘This was Bergen-Belsen.’ The horrific images render any additional verbal summary or commentary superfluous” (Douglas 1995, p. 471).

The traumatic problems created by social engineering in totalitarian systems are augmented by the omnipresence of the Orwellian “Big Brother”. But the fear of hidden, and not so hidden, manipulation is present in liberal democracies as well.

### 2.1.2. The Atomic Age

Job 7:5 says: “My flesh is clothed with worms and dirt; my skin hardens, then breaks out afresh”.

A scene from Hiroshima: A certain Mr. Tanimoto was helping survivors of the Hiroshima blast; “[he] reached down and took a woman by the hands, but her skin slipped off in huge, glove-like pieces” (Hersey 1946, p. 534).

Descriptions like these have become part of the Jungian collective psyche (Jung 1969b) of contemporary humanity. Through education, literature, documentaries, and popular media, these stories and gruesome pictures burn into the subconscious mind of the child and adult alike. When a new catastrophe or some crisis occurs, even if it is only on an individual scale, such subconscious knowledge multiplies its intensity.

Theology cannot escape the problem of dealing with the individual on the “global” scale. Each person has become a sort of sum of the troubles of humankind. One of its most conspicuous marks is the attack on the character of God. For modern humans, God is in the dock (Lewis 1994, pp. 240–44).

## 2.2. The Pastoral Intervention in the Book of Job

### 2.2.1. The Worldview of Job’s Interlocutors

Job’s friends are usually viewed in quite a negative way because they are remembered for their harsh words on Job’s address and their final condemnation by God himself. But in the course of their long discourses, they not only chide and accuse Job of all kinds of misdemeanor—they also give some sound theological advice. They err “only” because they do not allow for the possibility that Job is an innocent sufferer. As they learned about Job’s plight, they “. . . sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great” (Job 2:13). This must be added to their credit that they intuitively did what was much wiser than their subsequent talks—they kept silent. That way they avoided what Viktor Frankl considers to be the three sources of repression in religion: authoritarianism, rationalism, and anthropomorphism (Frankl 1988, p. 149). Unfortunately, later, in their speeches, they did just that.

But first, let us see that in their talk they said many very positive and useful things. Eliphaz says Job should commit his cause to God and not expect help from anywhere else (Job 5:8). Bildad’s advice is to repent and promise that God will then restore him (Job 8:5–7). Zophar insists that God in his infinite majesty is beyond human comprehension (Job 11:7). All of this is correct and true. The problem is that it does not address the key question of *why* Job must suffer.

They miss the point because they refuse to look farther than their ideology allows them. Although they pay lip service to transcendence when they refer to God’s incomprehensibility, in reality their thought system is closed, and their universe is fully explained. In the end, they did not speak “what is right” about God (Job 42:7–8). So, what was wrong? They ascribed to God justice (4:17), mercy (5:17), and power (25:2). Job himself agreed with them. What they refused to admit was the existence of the unknown. Although they acknowledge that God is beyond human understanding, in Job’s case they claim certainty about his being the cause of his troubles. We could call this epistemological monism, a theory that all truth needed for the explanation of the world is available to us in the rationally comprehensive data.

Although Job’s friends do not develop their arguments like philosophers do, nevertheless, we can trace philosophical starting points of their thinking. As “[p]hilosophical discourse has as its rule to discover its rule” (Lyotard 1988, p. 60), so theological discourse has to do the same.

Eliphaz invokes the authority of experience, dreams, nocturnal visions, and the spiritual origin of his assertions. The mysterious world of spiritual beings is connected here with the world’s dreams and visions; today we would say with the world of the subconscious or unconscious (Job 4:12–16). Eliphaz’ authority is empirical and spiritual experience (Job 4:8; 5:3). His rule is to proceed from elementary experience to the explanation of the whole

by the commonly used method of induction. Eliphaz' ultimate source of authority is both spiritual and natural reality; we could say it is the being.

Bildad's authority is the sayings of the fathers. He counsels Job to "inquire of bygone ages and consider what the fathers have searched out" (Job 8:8). He challenges the speakers first to understand words and only then to speak ("Consider, and then we will speak!" Job 18:2). Historically, this type of thinking based on tradition highly values authorities of ancient times. Its "raw material" is a sentence. This system of thought is based on dogmas or axioms that are playing the role of revealed truths that are impossible to doubt. For Bildad, the ultimate source of authority is great personages of the past. We can term it as the self with its defining axioms and dogmas.

Zophar shows elements of philosophical rationalism. His arguments are based on wisdom, prudence (Job 11:6), and understanding (Job 20:3). His method is to analyze ideas. While Eliphaz analyzes experience and Bildad relies on dogmas, Zophar studies ideas as they appear to his mind. Zophar's authority is ideas not as unchanging dogmas that have come from ancient times but ideas as they appeal to reason. For Zophar, the final arbiter of truth is the human mind.

These three approaches to the explanation of reality are still with us today. They have been neatly arranged in the so-called "Platonic triangle", consisting of the three main cusps: idea, being, and self (Czichos 2021, p. 14).

Saying this certainly does not mean that we can interpret Job's friends as some kind of modern philosophers. The important thing is that they hold to certain sources of authority in a similar way to how modern thinkers do. The important thing is that they all come up with the same solution to Job's problem—namely his condemnation. So, although they began very appropriately (keeping quiet) and addressed the key problem (worldview), they continued in a way we would call ideological today. They adjusted reality to their worldview. Let us see whether we can call their approach ideological.

### 2.2.2. Worldview and Ideology

We called the approach of Job's friends ideological. Can theology, especially theodicy, be ideological? Here we have to make clear what we mean by the term "ideology". Its origin is in the French philosophy of the 18th century. Philosophers who denied relations between ideas and things and treated philosophy as merely a system of ideas called themselves idéologues. In this way, ideology was more or less severed from reality, and its persuading power became its main *raison d'être*. Later, ideology has been variously defined as "... a representation of the real, but necessarily a false one" (Eagleton 1994, p. 143). It is a value system that can be described as a "... concatenation of subjective meaning" (Taylor 1985, p. 46). Ideologies "... contain unverified and unverifiable propositions" (Seliger 1976, p. 13), but they are necessary patterns that help us read "... facts, events, occurrences, actions ..." (Freeden 2003, p. 3). The word in its negative sense became especially popular in Marxism. For Marx, ideology was a breach with reality creating what he described as "false consciousness". This means that the real driving force of ideology is unknown to those who create it or are under its influence (Mehring 1913, p. 386). Ricoeur in a similar way says that "[i]deology ... designates initially some distorting, dissimulating processes by which an individual or a group expresses its situation but without knowing or recognizing it" (Ricoeur 1986, p. 1). So to believe an ideology is to be a victim of distorted reality.

Ideology may also be viewed as a system of thought imposed on people by an authority—political, religious, or cultural. We are used to viewing ideology as a primarily political phenomenon, but any worldview that is enforced on the human mind with threats—physical or psychological—has the attributes of ideology.

## 3. Results: The Book of Job and Existential Psychotherapy

The parallel between the Book of Job and existential psychotherapy is in their use of worldview. They both work on the way a person looks at life. Existential therapy helps

humans “... ask some of those more basic questions about life” (Schneider and Galvin 2009, p. 423). It is “... a form of therapeutic practice that is based, primarily or wholly, on the assumptions associated with the existential school of thought” (Cooper 2017, p. 11). As the name says, it is therapy based on the philosophy of existentialism.

Existentialism is a philosophy that is very elusive to define. It may be simply described as “... the philosophy that makes life possible” (Panza and Gale 2008, p. 9). But at a closer look, it is also a philosophy that has “... no clearly defined set of qualities that all the existentialists have in common” (Kaufmann 2015, p. 35). At the same time, it is possible to assert that “... there is no philosophy which is not Existentialist” (Mounier 1948, p. 2). Taking Kierkegaard and Sartre as the commonly acknowledged defining existential philosophers, we may say that subjectivity and individual responsibility are the two main pillars on which existentialist thought stands (Kierkegaard 1992, p. 189; Sartre 1957, p. 553). Therefore, we will take these as the crucial ideas salient to the methods of existential therapy we are discussing in the pastoral crisis intervention. The problems that are dealt with in existential psychotherapy can be listed as follows: death, freedom, isolation, meaninglessness (Yalom 1980, pp. vii–ix). All of these problems are present in the Book of Job. Existential therapy deals with them by stressing the subjectivity and responsibility of the client. In practice, this means making personal and responsible decisions in facing the existential problems of death, bondage, loneliness, and lack of meaning.

From this follows that existential therapy would be much more accommodating towards Job’s feelings than his three or four friends were. The phenomenological method of existential philosophy was taken from Husserl’s philosophy under the watchword “back to the things themselves” (Husserl 2001, p. 168). This has to be done through authentic intuitions (*Anschauungen*) that keep their meanings constant. According to Heidegger, the phenomenological method “... does not characterize the what of the objects of philosophical research as subject-matter but rather the how of that research” (Heidegger 2001, p. 50). And as it discloses Being as the *transcendens*, the result is transcendental knowledge. “Phenomenological truth... is *veritas transcendentalis*” (Heidegger 2001, p. 62). In its therapeutic use, “... the phenomenological method is focused on rich description of how the world appears to people rather than drawing on theories which move beyond experience itself” (Langdridge 2013, p. 2). The most important thing is a precise description or the given. To describe is more essential than to explain or analyze. Phenomenology aims at the direct description of experience and does not search for the origin or cause of an experience. This method goes beyond psychology alone. “Experience anticipates a philosophy and philosophy is merely an elucidated experience” (Merleau-Ponty 2005, p. 56). Such openness to varied interpretations of a patient’s experience has therapeutic properties in itself. It does not impose ready-made theories on the case and allows the client/patient to make sense, helping him/her think creatively about the situation. The problem, as we shall see later, may be the lack of openness of existentialist philosophy to religious transcendence and the fact that it may acquire properties of an ideology.

We can see that the phenomenological method far exceeds what Job’s friends tried to accomplish with their explanations and advice in his crisis. They refused to take seriously Job’s subjective (we could say “phenomenological”) intuition and applied to his case their pre-formulated and unadjusted theories. In this way, their theories have acquired an ideological dimension, i.e., they were detached from the real experience of the person they were trying to help. Now the question is whether existential therapy with its remarkable phenomenological method can acquire such negative dimensions as well.

### 3.1. From Method to Ideology

To proceed further, we need to examine existentialist philosophy from the viewpoint of religious faith. As we have seen, existentialists differ substantially in their approach to religion. While Kierkegaard can be viewed as a Christian theologian, Heidegger is for all practical purposes an atheist. Merleau-Ponty insists that “... one bypasses philosophy



when one defines it as atheism" (Merleau-Ponty 1988, p. 46). His point is that philosophy is neither theistic nor atheistic. It simply does not know about gods.

Now the crucial question is whether such a method can be used in pastoral intervention based on a biblical approach to human problems. The answer is a simple "No". Does this mean that the method has to be abandoned? My suggestion is that we should get help from Lacanian psychoanalysis. Existentialism and psychoanalysis overlap, especially in Sartre's philosophy (see Edwards 2023).

If it is true that psychoanalysis arises in "... moments of puzzlement or intellectual trauma ..." (Smith and Kerrigan 1983, pp. ix–x), we can turn to it in moments of existential crisis. Lacanian psychoanalysis can provide us with a notion that will bridge the gap between the modern secular psyche and the biblical faith in God. The bridge is his idea of the "Other" (with capital "O", "l'Autre" in French) as he says "... the unconscious is the Other's discourse" (Lacan 2006, p. 10). For Lacan, the "Other" is surely not the transcendent (not "god"), and he refers to the heterology of Georges Bataille. Heterology attempts the paradoxical quest to describe that what is "... resolutely placed outside the reach of scientific knowledge" (Bataille 2004, p. 97). For Bataille, the absolute heterogeneity of different classes of human experience means that there are types of experience that are not accessible to human language. Lacan places such experience within the psychoanalytic description of the human non-symbolizable reality. This is clearly in conflict with the epistemological monism mentioned above. And in turn, this idea of the non-symbolizable reality in psychoanalytic theory suggests a relation to so-called negative theology. For example, Julia Kristeva's idea of "mystic atheism" sees an analogy between depressive silences of disbelief and a mystical experience of the divine of the nameless abyss (Kristeva 2001, p. 37).

Negative theology has been helpfully described as "... a historical name for the impossible experience of the other as absolutely other ..." (Bradley 2004, p. 8). In the milieu of today's almost omnipresent "scientific" methodological atheism, it is a way to point to transcendence and avoid uncomfortable words smacking of religion at the same time.

The problem is that both the psychoanalytic "Other" and the "Abyss" of negative theology are to be reached so to say "from below". It is human thinking/activity that should make the access to it possible. But as is often the case in therapeutic practice, the proffered metacognitive framework for deeper understanding of traumatic experience is not effective or of very little help. In such situations, it is easy to hold to the therapeutic theory and blame the lack of progress on the client. And this is the point where the problem of ideology arises.

### 3.2. The Failure of Ideologies

Job's friends failed because despite their professed belief in the transcendent God their universe was closed, and their worldview did not allow unanswered questions. The friends of Job came with systematic attacks on Job's self-understanding. Each of them had an explanation that was based on a different "ideological" (to give it a contemporary name) foundation but led to the same conclusion: Job's crisis had to be his own fault. For Job as "a client in crisis", that was not a valid answer and no way out of his life conundrum.

Modern existentialist therapy may fail to help because despite the proclaimed openness of its phenomenological method (see above) to transcendental knowledge, it can be hopelessly closed to religious transcendence of the "truth as encounter" (Brunner 1964). Brunner says that this is "... a concept of truth unknown to philosophy and science" (Brunner 1964, p. 7). In contemporary therapeutic methods influenced by a modern secularist worldview, we can discern the following essential ideas/ideologies: anthropocentrism, individualism, scientism, and secularism. I think we have a very good example of an interpretation within the limits of these in the work of Carl Jung Answer to Job (Jung 1969a, p. 355ff). Psychological reductionism, as the expression suggests, reduces all problems to their psychic or somatic source (Šoltésová 2013, p. 24). All elements of human experience

must be explicable within the tacitly accepted naturalistic worldview. The friends of Job failed because despite their many good and correct pieces of advice, they did not make space for Transcendence. Existential therapy may fail if it remains ideologically limited by a naturalistic worldview.

### 3.3. *The Ineffable Encounter*

Job, refusing to succumb to the pressure of his friends, repeatedly called on God to answer his questions. But he did not get an explanation. He got an encounter with God instead. There, something happened that the book bearing his name does not really explicate. It does not try to say the unsayable but describes Job's response as deep humiliation and speechlessness (Job 40:32–5; 42:1–6). He famously contrasts his former and his new experience and compares the difference to the gap between hearing and seeing (Job 42:5).

The psychologist-philosopher William James in *Varieties of Religious Experience* says: "In Job, . . . God reminds us that man is not the measure of his creation. The world is immense, constructed on no plan or theory which the intellect of man can grasp. It is transcendent everywhere" (James 2002, p. 64; quoting Shapcott 1885, p. 196). Later in the book, he presents several testimonies of people who experienced an ineffable encounter with the divine. Their attempts at description fall between the two poles that Rudolf Otto calls *mysterium tremendum* and *mysterium fascinans* (Otto 1924, pp. 12ff, 42ff). The encounter with the divine is both terrifying and powerfully attracting.

We come across an interesting way of dealing with such incommunicable experience in the life of Blaise Pascal. A mathematical and literary genius, he was also a profound theologian. When he died, in his jacket, there was found a piece of paper sown into the inner coating containing an account of an event dated 23 November 1654. The now famous words written on it are: "From about half past ten in the evening until half past mid-night.—Fire—'God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob', not of philosophers and scholars.—Certainty, certainty, heartfelt joy, peace . . ." (Groothuis 2003, p. 12). Pascal did not publish "The Memorial", but to help his memory he did put it down in writing. The words he uses do not explain (his words not intended for philosophers or scholars) but catch in a sort of poetical language the immediate experience of the moment.

It is true that in pastoral intervention we cannot expect that all or even the majority of our clients/patients will experience this sort of "Pascalian" encounter. But the point is that in every case we should be open to Transcendence and help the patient open up toward the divine initiative in healing their trauma.

### 3.4. *From Ideologies to Transcendence*

It is generally true that any system of thought, even if originally based in truth, can become an ideology if it becomes self-serving and disconnected from reality. What we propose as a remedy is openness to Transcendence. "Without the openness to Transcendence, society will turn its vision and values into a fixed ideology . . ." (Baum 2015, p. 93). Here, a word of caution is in order. We have used Lacanian psychoanalysis and his notion of "the Other" as a starting point for overcoming ideology and its closedness to the unexpected and ineffable. And although the Lacanian "Other" does not denote transcendence or god, in Lacan's words it gives space to an "unconscious God" (Lacan 1998, p. 59). Lacan announced this idea in 1964 when the theory that modernization necessarily leads to secularization was still very popular. The failure of that theory has been described by the eminent sociologist Peter Berger (Berger 1999). Towards the end of the 20th century, the popular mind, instead of becoming more and more secularized, turned massively to spirituality. With it came in not only critique of technocracy and religious and social institutions but also deception, brainwashing, and coercion. Pop culture offers a belief in alternative history with aliens visiting Earth in the ancient past and to be worshiped today as gods. Eastern religions offer meditation, yoga, Zen, and many other methods of how to open up to spiritual reality.

Now, in pastoral care spirituality is a very important gate to recovery from trauma. But the counsellor needs to be well acquainted with cults and sects that may abuse the

new openness of the person in crisis. The pastor/counsellor must know not only the key ideas of the cults and new religions that may threaten his/her client but also methods that he/she should avoid. (No provider of spiritual help is immune from the temptation to manipulate or dominate the mind of the client.) The theological foundation for Christian support in crisis is a worldview based on the Bible (Hanes 2022). The faith-framework must not become too dogmatic (the way Job's friends spoke), but, at the same time, it must provide a safety zone against abuse from sectarian or cultic sources. The openness to "the Other" that is so important to get beyond prefabricated answers must not mean vulnerability to emotional and spiritual deception. Christian pastoral intervention, while open to the divine freedom of action, also protects clients by the guidelines of the New Testament religion (McGrath 2003).

In therapy, to discuss stories of divine encounters in other people's lives is not always advisable. Stories of success may fail if they create too concrete or too impatient expectations (Fulford 1999, p. 8). It depends on the pastor's/therapist's discretion whether and how to use them. Remember, the client/patient should be led to subjective responsibility in his/her waiting for the divine encounter. And the genuine encounter will depend on divine initiative.

#### 4. Conclusions

People in crisis need both immediate help and later long-term treatment. Immediate help is directed toward their physical or acute emotional needs, while later treatment deals with the emotional and spiritual issues related to the crisis. The Book of Job is an example of a prolonged discussion on the theme of the meaning of suffering. Job's friends, although they use different starting points for their arguments, all come up with the same result—Job's condemnation. Their views have become ideologies imposed on Job's unique situation.

Similar things may happen to existential therapy. Although its method, based on existentialist philosophy, has been designed to allow for the unpredictable, it may become hampered by the worldview of naturalism. We may overcome the naturalistic impasse using the Lacanian idea of "the Other". This lends itself to various interpretations, but in my opinion, it also opens up a possibility for Christian encounter with God.

Openness towards the ineffable and unexpected brings with it the dangers of deception and abuse. The pastor/therapist needs a working acquaintance with the world of contemporary cults and new religions to be able to protect the client/patient from the dangers of deception and abuse. But to achieve a solution, we need to wait for divine initiative.

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