

# On Professing Psychological Science and Christian Faith

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“The Shaker adventure here is over. But ... the story of their life and labor remains to remind us of a way of life that sought dignity in work, tranquility in spirit, and excellence in all things.”

—The Shaker Village of Pleasant Hill, Kentucky

## Tell Us How You Came To Be a Christian Psychologist

I grew up in a loving, devout home in Seattle, the third of four children of an insurance-agent father and an at-home mother. My pilgrimage from boyhood to the present illustrates the unpredictable course of life.

- While working after school in the family business and becoming a state-licensed insurance salesperson at age 16, I never imagined I would end up a premed chemistry major in college.

- While working three summers as an orderly in Seattle’s county hospital, I never imagined that I would balk at sending in my half-completed medical school applications and, as a college senior, take my second course in psychology. (Having decided I wished to become a college professor, I was needing something to profess and thought psychology sounded interesting.)

- While leaving Presbyterian-affiliated Whitworth College to study “personality” at the University of Iowa, I never imagined that I would be told, on arrival, that “we really don’t have a program in personality here. So we’ve put you in social psychology.”

- While aiming toward a career in college teaching, I never imagined that I would dedicate a dozen years to doing social psychological research.

- While doing initial experiments on group risk-taking, I never imagined the research would evolve into studies of how groups intensify opinions in both laboratory and natural settings.

- While earning my lowest college grade—in English composition—and then working as a plodding researcher, I never imagined becoming a writer.

- While beginning to write occasional magazine as well as research articles, I never imagined, until getting an out-of-the-blue phone call from the McGraw-Hill psychology editor, writing a textbook.

- While writing texts for introductory and social psychology, and some books for the Christian academic market, I never imagined writing a trade book (on happiness) and then doing 150 media interviews.

- And while writing this essay I therefore cannot confidently imagine what the last third of my career will entail. I can only say that I continue to feel a calling—a strong

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sense of mission about seizing the opportunities I have been given to communicate psychology's humanly significant findings. I admire the Shaker sect's "zealous devotion to excellence" arising from their conviction that "Work was worship." The aim of my work: to merge rigorous science with a broad human perspective that engages both mind and heart. I hope to help people gain insight into, and appreciate the wonder of, important phenomena of their everyday lives—to sense that we are, indeed, "fearfully and wonderfully made."

What an adventure life is. We ride along with it, never knowing what's around the next bend. That, I tell students, is why a liberal education serves them well—"because your future is hard to predict: Your interests on entering college will likely change during college, and you will likely end up doing work you never imagined while in college. So, educate yourselves broadly, for an unpredictable future."

## How Do You Describe the Relationship Between Christianity and Psychology?

I see, and have trod, seven paths toward integrating psychology and faith.

1. *Believing that "in everything we deal with God" (Calvin) and feeling called to worship God with our minds, we search God's world, seeking to discern its truths.* For us, as for the 17th-century Christians who helped pioneer modern science, free inquiry—the disciplined search for God's truth—is not just our right, but our religious duty. We see nature as God's handiwork, not as a divine world alive with river goddesses and sun gods. Thus we do not *worship* nature, fearing its secrets; we *explore* it as the creation of a rational, law-giving God. For me, that meant a decade exploring how group discussion alters attitudes.

2. *In the ever-reforming spirit of humility, we put testable claims to the test.* Psychological science is a method of asking questions about behavior. Its method is akin to the empiricism advocated by Moses: "If a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the Lord has not spoken" (Deut. 18:22). If God is the author of all truth that psychological science discovers, then we can welcome its discoveries, even when they surprise or unsettle us. Believing that God's truth is revealed in both natural and biblical data, we seek to integrate them and to allow our scientific and theological understandings to challenge and inform each other.

As faithful skeptics, we may therefore put Christian claims to the test. Does faith produce—as is sometimes claimed—healing? success? joy? Lay out the fleece and see. And how credible are New Age claims of crystal power, reincarnation, channeling, fortune-telling, aura readings, numerology, near-death experiences, and out-of-body frequent-flyer programs? Responding to this paranormal tidal wave, some of us say, "Yo, New Agers: Oughtn't we put testable claims to the test? If they work—if, say, aura-readers really can detect the location of people behind a screen from the auras above their heads—then so much the better for the claims. If they don't, let's not be afraid to call the claims goofy."<sup>2</sup>

3. *We inject Christian assumptions and values into our teaching, writing, research, and practice.* As psychology's feminist, Marxist, and Christian critics have reminded us, the discipline is not value-neutral. Some of us Christians, therefore, have sought to expose psychology's hidden assumptions and the values that subtly leak into its theories, vocabulary, and methods. As I elsewhere explain (Myers, 1995), our values also energize and direct us. Such is true as I select and

write about value-laden topics such as evil, pride, prejudice, persuasion, peace-making, sexuality and altruism.

4. *We apply psychological insights to the life of the church.* Some have merged Christian and psychological ideas pertinent to counseling, often as part of seminary programs for pastoral counselors and clinicians. As a social psychologist, I have pursued a different course, by suggesting how principles of human influence might be applied in creating memorable, persuasive sermons and effective evangelism and outreach.

5. *We relate psychological and Judeo-Christian descriptions of human nature.* Some of us enjoy mapping human nature from two directions, psychological and biblical. As when boring a tunnel from both ends, the excitement comes in discovering how close the two approaches are to connecting. Christians in decades past have therefore drawn upon the old personality theories. For example, they have asked whether Freud's idea of aggressive, narcissistic motivations complements Calvin's idea of original sin.

A newer approach, one that I find more fruitful, relates Christian belief to contemporary research. For example, massive bodies of psychological research suggest that

- self-serving bias is powerful and at times perilous, and that self-esteem and positive thinking pay some dividends,
- we are both the creatures and the creators of our social worlds, and
- our cognitive capacities are awesome, and that to err is predictably human.

Christians affirm parallel ideas—that:

- pride is the fundamental sin, and that grace is a key to self-acceptance,
- God is in control, and that we are responsible, and
- we are made in the image of God, and that we are finite creatures.

In both dialectical form and content, the parallels of these and other propositions are noteworthy. Because faith always seeks understanding in the language of the day, such psychological findings can enliven ancient Christian wisdom. Perhaps these propositions can also help us feel more comfortable with the paradoxes of truth. To ask whether pride or self-rejection is the problem, whether God is or we are responsible, whether humans are wise or foolish, is like asking which blade of a pair of scissors is more necessary.

6. *We study determinants of religious experience.* Having studied other universal phenomena—sleep, sex, anger, hunger—why not put religious belief and behavior under the psychological microscope as well? An example: I have been struck by parallels between research on the attitude-behavior interplay and theological thinking about the faith-action interplay. Here again, researchers offer us complementary principles: attitudes influence behavior, yes, but attitudes also follow behavior. Countless studies show that we're as likely to act ourselves into a way of thinking as to think ourselves into action. Behavior and attitude, like chicken and egg, generate one another in an endless spiral.

So, too, with faith and action. Faith is a source of action—as demonstrated in the many biblical examples of people being transformed by a newfound faith. Yet it's also true, though less widely appreciated, that faith follows action. Full knowledge of God comes through doing the Word. Just as participants in social psychological experiments become more deeply committed to something for which they have suffered or witnessed, so also is faith “born of obedience” (Calvin). If you lack faith, advised Pascal, “follow the way by which [the commitment] began; by acting as if

they believed, taking the holy water, having masses said, etc. Even this will naturally make you believe.” In his *Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1963, p. 69) summed up this chicken and egg dialectic: “Only he who believes is obedient, and only he who is obedient believes.”

7. Finally, we study the effects of religious experience. Does faith make a discernible difference in people’s lives? Are self-described Christians noticeably different in their attitudes, emotions or behaviors? (For state-of-the-art answers, see Paloutzian & Kirkpatrick, 1995.) In *The Pursuit of Happiness: Who Is Happy and Why?* (Myers, 1992) I explore links between faith and personal well-being. We now have reasonably consistent evidence that people of faith report greater happiness, enjoy more life satisfaction in later life, and cope better with the traumas of disability, divorce, unemployment or bereavement. We also have some ideas why this is.

## **How Have Christianity and Psychology Changed To Become More or Less Compatible?**

Psychology’s one-time “three forces” have each faded—psychoanalytic theory, behaviorism, and humanistic psychology. Christians who have identified psychology with one of these three old “schools” and seen contradictions with biblical assumptions can relax. Apart from the chapters on learning, personality theory, and psychotherapy, there is little in any 1990’s introductory psychology text that could be described as psychoanalytic, behavioristic, or humanistic. The heroes of those movements are dead and gone, their hopes for a new psychology mostly unfulfilled. To be sure, academic psychology retains the empiricism that characterized behaviorism. But few psychologists today believe that we should study overt behavior with little reference to internal biological and mental processes. The names of the games today are *neuroscience* and *cognition*. Minding is our business.

At the methodological level, psychological science has emerged from the anti-psychology assaults (by conservative Christians, among others) stronger than ever. As one of those who report the discipline’s finest achievements, I am time and again struck by the human significance of reliable new findings that:

- link cognition to brain: states,
- identify genetic influences on many important traits,
- reveal the competencies of human infants,
- plot how the mind grows with maturity,
- divulge (contrary to all child-rearing theories) how little personality similarity typically exists between siblings reared together,
- expose the mechanisms by which we construct true and false memories,
- show how stress and negative emotions affect the immune system,
- specify the cognitive and neurochemical mechanisms underlying depression and other psychological disorders,
- uncover the illusory thinking mechanisms by which people form mistaken beliefs, and
- illuminate how our sense of self guides our information processing.

(Those concerned that psychology is reductionistic and unappreciative of the self as agent may be reassured to know that in 1993 *Psychological Abstracts* offered 5,396 article and book summaries mentioning “self”—quadruple the number in 1970.)

It is true, as Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen (1985, 1988a, b) and others have cogent-

ly asserted, that scientific objectivity gets tainted by ideology. (We even have a spate of new experiments on “confirmation bias,” “the overconfidence phenomenon,” “belief perseverance,” “schema-driven processing,” “framing,” “heuristics,” and memory construction, to emphasize the point.) And it certainly is true that many important questions cannot be framed empirically. Because of its biases and limits, psychological science is, to paraphrase Winston Churchill’s description of democracy, the worst method of learning about behavior and mental processes—except for all the others.

The forward march of psychological science is in many ways now providing evidence congenial not only to the Christian understanding of human nature, but also to Christian values. Many Christians welcome evidence showing that accumulating material wealth does not reliably increase happiness; that cohabitation and frequent premarital sex are associated with increased risk of future divorce; that children of two-parent families suffer fewer school and behavior problems (even after adjusting for parental race, income, and education); and that massive exposure to erotica alters perceptions of sexual reality, diminishes the perceived attractiveness of one’s partner, increases men’s perceiving women in sexual terms, and, under some conditions, increases men’s willingness to aggress against women.

But sometimes new research challenges cherished Christian ideas. This is most strikingly evident with the new research on sexual orientation (Cole, 1995; Looy, 1995; Myers, 1995). Although controversy and ambiguity persist, two conclusions are emerging:

1. *Today’s greater tolerance seems not to have amplified homosexuality.* Homosexuals are a smaller minority than earlier believed—2 or 3 percent of the population in more than a dozen representative, confidential surveys in North America and Europe—and their numbers appear not to have grown with their coming out or with the passage of gay rights laws.

2. *Sexual orientation appears not to be a choice.* Homosexual people, like heterosexual people, generally cannot recall a time when they *chose* to be so.

So why are some people gay, others straight? The available research does not reveal any parental or psychological influences on sexual orientation (we have no clues to offer parents who might wish to influence the sexual orientation of their children). Although the evidence is tentative—this is an ongoing 1990’s story—biological factors involving genes, prenatal hormones, and brain differences are looking important. Moreover, a recent review of research on clinical and religious efforts to help people change their sexual orientation could find “no evidence indicating that such treatments are effective” (Haldeman, 1994).

So, how should Christians respond to these findings? We can note possible biases: some of the research and reviewing comes from people obviously sympathetic to the gay community. But in the ever-reforming spirit of humility, perhaps we should also be open to the research revelations. As ecological findings drove biblical scholars to reread the biblical mandates concerning our stewardship of the earth and its creatures, so the psychological findings have driven some biblical scholars and Christian ethicists to revisit the Bible’s teachings about homosexual behavior (Smedes, 1994). The biblical writers’ mentions of homosexual behavior merely seven times include some lines of the Leviticus purity code (which contains many behavioral rules from which most Christians believe Jesus liberates us), some sentences in Corinthians and Timothy (which some biblical Greek scholars say referred to men exploiting boys), and a more critical (though still debated) passage in Romans. Although Jesus affirmed marriage, he spoke no recorded words

about homosexual behavior (though he had much to say about the poor and powerless). Clearly, this was not a huge issue for the biblical writers, who, like others of their eras, had no concept of natural sexual orientation.

In view of the emerging evidence and biblical scholarship, what advice can we give? Should we all welcome God's acceptance "just as I am?" Can we accept our own and others' sexual orientation without excusing promiscuity, exploitation, or self-destructive behavior? Should we seek "grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed?" Should we regard homosexual orientation like left-handedness (a normal and acceptable biological variation)—or like diabetes, alcoholism, or schizophrenia (biologically influenced, but not considered desirable or normal)? Can we affirm that sexuality is most meaningfully love-uniting and renewing in the context of a monogamous, lifelong commitment? These issues, I predict, will be at the forefront of the psychology-Christianity debate throughout the rest of this decade. Christian psychologists will differ, as my esteemed friend Stan Jones (1993) and I do on this issue, yet share an underlying commitment to discerning Scripture, being open to ongoing natural revelations, and listening to one another.

### **What Future Directions Should Christian Psychologists Consider?**

Although my current interests focus on America's social recession—the decline of marriage, family, and children's well-being since 1960 and the associated increase in various social pathologies—I detoured into sexual orientation research to illustrate the challenging mission of Christians in psychological science: *to reconcile belief and observation*. Sensitive to how values and ideologies cloud one's view of reality, we will be wary of absolutizing human interpretations of either natural or biblical data. And we will strive to clean our spectacles through rigorous scientific and biblical scholarship.

Like righteousness, objectivity may be an unattainable ideal, noted the late Donald MacKay (1984), but that is no ground for dismissing it. Worshipping the God of all truth frees—even *compels*—us to hold our presuppositions tentatively, and to exhibit the openness modeled by Agatha Christie's Miss Marple: "If one is proved to be wrong, one must just be humble about it and start again." If the biological explanation of sexual orientation—the current scientific growth stock—should collapse, then so much the worse for my tentative acceptance of it. If it should prove fruitful, then so much the worse for the presumption that sexual orientation is a willful choice. Regardless, the challenge for us all is to steer between the extremes of being co-opted by a value-laden psychology that pretends neutrality, or by an arrogant subjectivism that prefers one's own dogma to hard-wrought evidence. (Christian mental health professionals who are open to being challenged by hard-wrought evidence may wish to read Robyn Dawes' *House of Cards: Psychology and Psychotherapy Built on Myth*, Free Press, 1994.)

In the future I also hope we will see more Christian scholars not just as helping professionals, and not just as spectators in the stands, but down on the psychological science playing field. We benefit from having some folks in the stands, surveying and reflecting on the game below. They offer a perspective that those down on the playing field, caught up in the moment-to-moment play, may miss. But let there also be Christians who, by getting in the game—by being leaven in the loaf—provide their witness to the larger intellectual community. As C. S. Lewis once declared, "We do not need more Christian books; we need more books by Chris-

tians about everything with Christian values built in.” Or as philosopher Nicholas Woltersdorff (1984) urged in this journal a dozen years ago, we should occupy the academy “as a Christian who sees the world in the light of the gospel, but occupy it also as a psychologist, not as one who surveys the scene from outside and now and then makes some clucking noises, but as one who participates in the nitty-gritty of actual psychological explorations.”

## Notes

1. Parts of this article are adapted from “Psychology and faith,” *Perspectives*, November 1990, pp. 4-7, and from “A quarter century professing psychology: Lessons I have learned,” *Contemporary Social Psychology*, 1992, 16, 44-49.
2. Many of these New Age claims assume supernatural, even divine, powers within us. We are seen as little gods, with latent powers of omniscience (reading minds and foreknowing the future), omnipresence (traveling out of body), and omnipotence (levitating objects or eradicating tumors and other evils through our mental powers). What a contrast between such self-deification and the religion of the prophet Isaiah, who believed that we humans are finite creatures of the One who declared: “I am God; there is none like me (Isaiah 44:6, 7). In Judaism and Christianity, humans have dignity, but not deity.

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