Towards an Integration of Science and Theology?

The Doctrine Committee of the Scottish Episcopal Church
7. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCE AND CHRISTIAN FAITH

by David G. Myers

Psychological scientists who are people of faith live with two assumptions:
1) There is a God.
2) It’s not us.

If, indeed, we humans have dignity but not deity—if we are finite, fallible creatures—then our surest conviction can be that some of our beliefs err. Thus, we had best hold our own untested beliefs tentatively and assess others’ beliefs with open-minded scepticism. Moreover, when appropriate, we can use observation and experimentation to winnow truth from error.

Such faith-based humility and scepticism helped fuel the beginnings of modern science. This science-supportive attitude—which is supported by my own ‘Reformed and ever-reforming’ Christian heritage—not only tolerates our participation in free-spirited scientific inquiry, it mandates it. The whole truth of God’s creation cannot be discovered by introspectively searching our own finite minds.

So, we submit our tentative ideas to the test. If they survive, so much the better for them. If they crash against a wall of evidence, so much the worse for them. So advised Moses (Deut. 18:22): ‘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.’

Such ever-reforming empiricism has many times changed my mind, leading me to believe that parenting practices have but modest effects on children’s later personalities and intelligence; that crude-seeming electroconvulsive therapy can often relieve intractable depression; that the automatic unconscious mind dwarfs the conscious mind; that traumatic experiences rarely get repressed; and that sexual orientation is a natural, enduring disposition (not a moral choice).

Faith-supported scientific inquiry also has led me to disbelieve certain spiritualist claims ranging from aura readings to out-of-body ‘frequent flyer programs.’ If, for example, aura-readers really can detect auras
above a person’s head, then they should be able to guess the person’s location while seated behind a screen. If, indeed, they can do so, then so much the better for their claims. If not (as seems the case), let’s consider the claim discounted.

For Christians, the consistent failures to confirm such paranormal claims confirm the distinction between deity and humanity. We assume we are not little gods with powers of omniscience (reading minds, foretelling the future), omnipresence (travelling out of body), and omnipotence (levitating objects or eradicating tumours with our mental powers). As Isaiah 44:6, 7 records, ‘I am God; there is none like me.’

So far, I have suggested that Christians in psychology feel called to explore God’s human creation with a spirit of humility. Believing, with John Calvin, that ‘in everything we deal with God,’ we also feel called to worship God with our minds—through disciplined scientific inquiry—as we search God’s world, seeking to discern its truths.

7.1. Psychology–Religion Intersections: An Overview

Beyond this, psychology and faith intersect in six additional ways.

1. When teaching, writing, researching, and practicing psychology, we reflect on our assumptions and values. As psychology’s Marxist, feminist, and Christian critics have observed, the discipline is not value-neutral. When first drafting my psychology textbooks, I posted on my office door C. S. Lewis’ reminder that ‘We do not need more Christian books; we need more books by Christians about everything with Christian values built in.’ When choosing to study and write about value-influenced topics such as evil, pride, prejudice, peace-making, sexuality and altruism, we subtly and inevitably express our values.

2. We apply psychological insights to the community of faith. For some psychologists, this implies a Christian influence on their counselling and practice, sometimes aided by seminary training programs for clinicians and pastoral counsellors. As a social psychologist, I have suggested how social influence principles
might assist the creation of memorable, persuasive homilies and more effective evangelism.

3. We study the psychology of religion. Psychologists have studied various universal human phenomena, including sleep, sex, anger, and hunger. Some 68 per cent of humans report that religion is ‘important in their daily lives’ (in a recent Gallup World Poll that my colleagues and I analysed). So why not also put religious belief and behaviour under the psychological microscope?

4. We compare psychological and religious understandings of human nature.

5. We observe the apparent effects of religion. Is religiosity associated with prejudice, altruism, or human flourishing?

6. We probe points of seeming tension between psychological science and faith. What do experiments on illusory thinking and tests of intercessory prayer suggest about the integrity of our prayers? What does research on sexual orientation and the human ‘need to belong’ imply for the church’s stance on same-sex relationships and ordination?

My own interests include these latter three points of intersection.

7.2. Human Nature in Psychological and Christian Perspective

As Malcolm Jeeves and I explain in Psychology Through the Eyes of Faith there are striking parallels between the image of humanness in psychological science and biblical and theological scholarship. Whether viewed through the lens of today’s science or ancient biblical wisdom, human nature looks much the same. Some examples:
**The Unity of Mind and Body**

- **Biblical and theological wisdom:** In Hebrew-Christian tradition, humans are embodied creatures, not immortal souls. We are bodies alive, and death is real. Afterlife is envisioned as a 'new creation,' a resurrected body.

- **Psychological science:** In keeping with this tradition (but not with New Age dualism), today's cognitive neuroscience is ever tightening the links between mind and brain. Our minds do not operate without a brain. The very idea of thinking without a body is akin to running without legs.

**Pride**

- **Biblical and theological wisdom:** In the Christian tradition, pride is the fundamental sin—the deadliest of the seven deadly sins.

- **Psychological science:** The well-documented counterpart to pride in today's psychological science is 'self-serving bias'—a powerful and often perilous tendency to perceive and present oneself as better than others.

**Rationality and Fallibility**

- **Biblical and theological wisdom:** According to biblical teaching, humans are made in the divine image, yet they are finite and error-prone.

- **Psychological science:** In recent psychological science, the emerging image of humanness similarly combines remarkable cognitive capacities and illusory thinking (as Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman explains in his magnum opus, *Thinking Fast and Slow*).
Behaviour and Belief

- **Biblical and theological wisdom**: Christian thinkers have often reminded us that faith predisposes action, yet it also grows through obedient action.

- **Psychological science**: Amen, say social psychologists: attitudes influence behaviour, and attitudes follow behaviour (as illustrated by racial attitudes changing after changed interracial behaviour, and by experiments in which people come to believe in their induced actions).

### 7.3. Religious Engagement and Human Flourishing

Medicine abused can kill people. Medicine wisely practiced enhances life. Is the same true of religion?

Religion abused kills. The insane courage that enabled the terror of 9/11, 2001 ‘came from religion,’ noted Richard Dawkins. But so has the motivation behind the founding of hospitals, hospices, universities, and civil rights movements. Understandably, evolutionist Stephen Jay Gould noted that much of his ‘fascination’ with religion lay ‘in the stunning historical paradox that organized religion has fostered, throughout western history, both the most unspeakable horrors and the most heartrending examples of human goodness.’

While acknowledging religion’s historic horrors and heroes, social scientists have explored religion’s links with volunteerism, non-materialistic values, and charitable giving. In survey after survey, people who are religiously engaged, or who say that religion is ‘important in their daily life,’ exhibit, on average, greater generosity with their time and money. In a Gallup World Poll, for example, religiously engaged people in Europe, the Americas, Africa, and Asia were about 50 per cent more likely to recall having donated to a charity in the last month.

Religious engagement also has been associated with longevity. Thanks partly to social support from faith communities, healthier living, and a greater sense of meaning and hope, epidemiology studies (which track lives through time) have consistently found that the
'religion factor' is roughly on a par with aerobic exercise and not-smoking as a predictor of life expectancy.

Is religious engagement similarly predictive of human happiness? The answer (now put on your thinking cap) differs dramatically by whether we compare places (such as more versus less religious countries or states) or individuals. (The same paradox occurs in politics: In the U.S., low-income states tend to favour Republican presidential candidates while low-income individuals tend to favour Democratic presidential candidates.)

Consider these findings: harvesting Gallup World Poll data, I found a striking negative correlation across 152 countries between national religiosity and national well-being. Secular countries such as Denmark are happier places than highly religious countries such as Pakistan or Nigeria. Within the United States, I have also found that secular states, such as Oregon and Vermont, exhibit greater human flourishing than do highly religious states such as Alabama and Mississippi. In the less religious states, people live longer, smoke less, commit less crime, have lower teen pregnancy rates—and the list goes on.

Yet survey data from the U.S. and many other countries reveal (though especially in more religious countries) a positive correlation between religiosity and happiness across individuals. Moreover, actively religious individuals live longer, smoke less, commit less crime, have lower teen pregnancy rates—and the list, again, goes on.

Princeton economist Angus Deaton and psychologist Arthur Stone have also been struck by this religious engagement paradox. They ask, 'Why might there be this sharp contradiction between religious people being happy and healthy, and religious places being anything but?'

These are the sorts of findings that excite behavioural science sleuths. Surely there must be some confounding variables. With religiosity, one such variable is income—which is lower in highly religious countries and states. Control for status factors such as income (as Louis Tay did for and with Ed Diener and myself), the negative correlation between religiosity and well-being disappears and even reverses to a slightly positive correlation. Likewise, low-income states differ from high-income states in many ways.
I believe the most important story is found where life is lived—at the level of the individual, where religious engagement predicts human flourishing. Nevertheless, there are practical uses for these data. If you want to make religious engagement look bad, use the aggregate, macro-level data. If you want to make religious engagement look good, use the individual data.

7.4. Prayer Experiments

Amid these striking parallels between big biblical and psychological ideas and the evidence of the benefits of religious engagement, there have been two points of tension. One concerns prayer. Some studies identify thinking errors (such as ‘illusory correlation’ and ‘the illusion of control’) that underlie superstitious thinking in realms such as gambling, stock investing, and beliefs about supposed extrasensory perceptions. These tendencies to believe that one thing causes another when they really are only coincidentally correlated, and to assume that we are controlling events that are actually beyond our control, could easily lead people to perceive their prayers as effective, whether they are or not.

So are intercessory prayers effective? Is prayed-for rain more likely to fall on parched Earth? Are people more likely to sail through cardiac bypass surgery if many people are praying for them (i.e., is prayer a medical antidote)? As I explain in A Friendly Letter to Skeptics and Atheists, a series of actual experiments that tested a magical understanding of prayer consistently indicated No (as I had publicly predicted). If it is heretical to think too little of the power of our prayers, it is at least equally heretical to think of God as a celestial Santa Claus. My conclusion as a result of the medical prayer tests:

Do we err in searching for a ‘God effect’ that is a slight subtraction to, for example, the number of stillbirths or coronary deaths? In the historical Christian understanding, God is not a distant genie who we call forth with our prayers, but rather the creator and sustainer of all that is. Thus, when the Pharisees pressed Jesus for some criteria by which they could validate the kingdom of God, Jesus answered, ‘The
kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed. . . . For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.'

The Lord's Prayer, the model prayer for Christians that I pray daily, does not attempt to control a God who withholds care unless cajoled. Rather, by affirming God's nature and our human dependence even for daily bread, it prepares us to receive what God is already providing. One can approach God as a small child might talk with a benevolent parent who knows the child's needs but also cherishes the relationship. Through prayer, people of faith express their praise and gratitude, confess their wrongdoing, voice their heart's concerns and desires, open themselves to the Spirit, and seek the peace and grace to live as God's own people.

7.5. Sexual Orientation

No issue divides Christians, including those in the worldwide Anglican Communion, more than their differing understandings of sexual orientation and their attitudes and policies vis à vis marriage and ordination of those with same-sex attractions and a gay or lesbian identity.

Some of my writings, including What God Has Joined Together: The Christian Case for Gay Marriage (with Letha Dawson Scanzoni), have sought to bridge the divide between traditionalists (who want to support and renew marriage) and progressives (who believe that sexual orientation is not a choice and is best lived out within the context of a committed partnership). My bottom line, as a marriage-supporting social scientist, is that a) sexual orientation is a natural, enduring disposition, and b) the world would be a happier and healthier place if love, sex, and marriage routinely went together.

To expand that nutshell synopsis just a bit, psychological science now has substantial evidence supporting some undergirding conclusions:

- All humans have a deep 'need to belong'—to connect with others in close, intimate, enduring relationships.
- As one important example of such relationships, marriage contributes to flourishing lives—to healthier and happier adults, and to children who thrive when co-parented by two parents who love each other and together love their children.

- Toxic forces, especially radical individualism and the media modelling of impulsive sexuality, are corroding marriage and the health of communities.

- Sexual orientation is a natural (largely biologically influenced) disposition, most clearly so for men. Scientists have discovered a host of gay-straight differences, including differing brain centres, fingerprint patterns, and prenatal influences.

- Sexual orientation is also an enduring disposition, which is seldom reversed by willpower, reparative therapy, or and 'ex-gay' ministry.

But 'what about the Bible?' Out of 31,103 Bible verses, only seven speak directly of same-sex behaviour—and often in the context of idolatry, promiscuity, adultery, child exploitation, or violence. Moreover, the Bible has nothing to say about an enduring sexual orientation (a modern concept) or about loving, long-term same-sex partnerships. A Christian case for gay marriage arises from the human need to belong, from the biblical mandate for justice for everyone, from the benefits of a culture-wide norm of monogamy, and from a refutation of popular arguments against gay marriage.

The conservative religious position against same-sex partnerships is having an apparent counter-evangelism effect. As Harvard researcher Robert Putnam and Notre Dame sociologist David Campbell have noted (from U.S. data), 'The association between religion and politics (and especially religion's intolerance of homosexuality)' is 'the single strongest factor' in alienating young people from the church. A recent Ford Foundation-funded U.S. national survey for the Public Religion Research Institute confirmed their conclusion: 'Among millennials who no longer identify with their childhood religion, nearly one-third say that negative teachings about, or treatment of, gay and lesbian people was either a somewhat important (17 per cent) or very important (14 per cent) factor in their disaffiliation from religion.'
Attitudes about sexual orientation are rapidly becoming more accepting of gay rights and relationships. Moreover, there is a large generation gap, with most older adults opposing gay marriage and most younger adults supporting it. Given that the forces driving the attitude changes are likely to continue, and given generational succession, it appears that the culture war over gay marriage and gay ordination will gradually be resolved in the years to come, much as were previous culture wars over minority and women's basic rights. As this happens, perhaps the winsomeness of Christian faith can be renewed for younger adults.

7.6. Synopsis

- Faith-rooted humility mandates the ever-reforming empirical spirit that helped give birth to modern science and which survives in our efforts to love God with our minds by exploring the human creation.

- Psychological science and religious faith have many points of contact, as psychologists reflect on their underlying assumptions and values, apply psychological findings to the faith community, study the psychology of religion, connect their respective wisdom about human nature, study the associations of religious engagement with human flourishing, and explore points of possible tension between psychological science and personal faith.

- Psychological and biblical understandings of human nature are strikingly congenial. Both affirm a unity of body and mind, the powers and perils of pride, the capacities and limits of human thinking, and the interplay of belief and behaviour.

- Research indicates positive associations (across individuals) between religious engagement and human flourishing, as indicated by generosity, longevity, and happiness.

- Studies of illusory thinking and intercessory prayer, and of sexual orientation, challenge the church to affirm and practice its ever-reforming heritage in a spirit of humility and love.
David G. Myers is Professor of Psychology at Hope College in Holland, Michigan (USA). His scientific writings, supported by National Science Foundation grants and fellowships, have appeared in three dozen academic periodicals. He has also digested psychological research for the public through articles in four dozen magazines and seventeen books, including general interest books and textbooks for introductory and social psychology.