

Psychology and Faith

By David G. Myers

How do I, as a Christian psychologist, link my profession and faith? My efforts illustrate seven varieties of faith-learning integration by psychologists who seek to integrate their Christian faith with their research and teaching.

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 seventeenth-century Christians who helped initiate modern science, free inquiry is not just our right, but our religious duty. For me, that meant a decade of experiments exploring how group discussion molds and changes attitudes.

2) **In the ever-reforming spirit of humility, we put testable claims to the test.** Psychological research is, first of all, 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). 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, and out-of-body frequent-flyer programs? Responding to this paranormal tidal wave, some of us say, "Yo, New Agers: Shouldn'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."

Many of these New Age claims assume supernatural, even divine, powers within us. We are 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 positive 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" (Isa. 44:6, 7). In Judaism and Christianity, humans—loved by God—have dignity, but not deity.

3) **We inject Christian assumptions and values into our teaching, writing, research, and practice.** As psychology's Christian critics remind us, the discipline is not value-neutral. While drafting my textbooks for introductory and social psychology I therefore posted on my office door C. S. Lewis's further reminder that "we do not need more Christian books; we need more books by Christians about everything with Christian

values built in." That helps define my mission, especially when selecting and writing about value-laden topics such as evil, pride, prejudice, persuasion, peacemaking, sexuality, and altruism.

4) **We apply psychological insights to the life of the church.** Some merge Christian and psychological insights relevant to counseling, often aided by seminary training programs for pastoral counselors and clinical psychologists. As a social psychologist, I've 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 Christian descriptions of human nature.** Some of us enjoy mapping human nature from two directions, psychological and Christian. As when boring a tunnel from both ends, the excitement comes in discovering how close the two approaches are to connecting. Christians have therefore drawn upon the old personality theories, asking for example whether Freud's idea of our aggressive, narcissistic motivations complements Calvin's idea of original sin.

My own approach has been to relate Christian belief to psychological research. For example, massive bodies of psychological research suggest: 1) that self-serving bias is powerful and at times perilous, and that self-esteem and positive thinking pay dividends; 2) that we are both the creatures and the creators of our social worlds; and 3) that our cognitive capacities are awesome, and that to err is predictably human. Christians affirm similar ideas: 1) that pride is the fundamental sin, and that grace is a key to self-acceptance; 2) that God is in control, and that we are responsible; 3) that 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 they can also help us feel more comfortable with the paradoxes of truth. To ask whether pride or self-rejection is the problem, whether God 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—leap, sex, anger, hunger—why not put religious belief and behavior under the psychological microscope as well? As a social psychologist, I am struck by parallels between research on the interplay between attitudes and behavior and biblical-theological thinking about the interplay between faith and action. 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.

And so it happens with faith and action. Faith is a source of action—as demonstrated in the many biblical examples of people being transformed by a new-found faith. Yet it's also true, although less widely appreciated, that faith is a consequence of action. Full knowledge of God comes through doing the Word. Just as the subjects 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

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committed] 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 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? Having pondered this question in recent weeks as part of my writing of a forthcoming book on well-being and happiness, I pause here to go a bit deeper.

Well-being

As everyone knows, industrialized nations closely monitor their people's physical well-being, as measured in dollars, dwellings, diets, and death rates. During the last fifteen years, a little-known group of social scientists has been similarly monitoring subjective well-being. Many of their studies ask a straightforward question: "Taking all things together, how would you say things are these days—would you say you are very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?" And another: "How satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days? Are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied, or not at all satisfied?"

Despite biases introduced by one's desire to look good and by the vagaries of mood swings, these and other such questions have some validity. When re-questioned, people are reasonably consistent in their answers, and those who say they are very happy indeed look happier and are judged by their friends to

be happier than those who admit to being not very happy. Exploring people's answers to such questions therefore helps reveal things that do and don't make for happiness.

So, what makes for subjective well-being? Some things matter surprisingly little. Well-being is similarly available to those of any age, gender, race, location, education, and income. For example, though young collegians are much more likely today than twenty years ago to agree with materialistic values—to say "becoming well off financially" is a very important life goal—people with high incomes are actually only slightly happier than those with modest incomes. After a period of adjustment, even those who've won a state lottery hardly differ in their day-to-day well-being from those who've suffered a tragedy, such as a paralyzing accident. Believe it or not. Consider this: today in America, we have twice the personal buying power of thirty years ago. We have, therefore, much more of what money buys—more cars, more home computers, more VCRs, and more phone answering machines. But we're no happier. If anything, to judge from the rising rates of depression and suicide, we're more likely to be miserable.

What then does predict self-reported happiness and life satisfaction? On the short list of things known to matter are these: physical fitness; traits such as positive self-esteem, sense of personal control, optimism, and extraversion; close, supportive friendships and marriages; involving work and other activities that enhance our identity and absorb us into "flow." And, yes, faith.

Religion and Well-being

In some respects, the links between religion and mental health are impressive—more so than many social scientists suspect. In the United States, religious people (often defined as those who attend church regularly) are much less likely to become delinquent, to abuse drugs and alcohol, to divorce or be unhappily married, or to commit suicide. Religiously active people even tend to be physically healthier and to live longer, possibly due to their healthier smoking-eating-drinking habits.

With other mental health indicators, the results are mixed. Religious people are somewhat less likely to feel in control of their fate, but they also are less likely to become depressed and be diagnosed as suffering a psychological disorder such as schizophrenia.

Across North America and Europe, survey after survey further reveals that religious people report higher levels of happiness and satisfaction with life. The Gallup Organization interviewed a cross-section of Americans comparing those low in "spiritual commitment" with highly spiritual people (who consistently agree with statements such as "God loves me even though I may not always please him" and "My

religious faith is the most important influence in my life"). Their striking finding: the highly spiritual were twice as likely to say they were "very happy."

Other surveys, too, reveal high levels of well-being among religiously active people. Two large-scale results: a 1982 survey of nine thousand Europeans found that among the "very happy" were 16 percent of atheists, 19 percent of "not religious" people, and 25 percent of those who said they were religious. In a 1980s survey of representative samples of 166,000 people in fourteen nations, those "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with life included 77 percent of those who never attend church, 82 percent of those who attend occasionally, and 86 percent of those who attend weekly.

Many studies focused specifically on the link between religiousness and well-being among the elderly. In their statistical digest of the accumulated research, Morris Okun and William Stock at Arizona State University found that the two best predictors of well-being among older persons were health and religiousness. Elderly people are happier and more satisfied with life if religiously committed and active.

Other studies inspected the connection between faith and coping with a crisis. Once again, the link is positive. Compared to religiously inactive widows, recently widowed women who worship at their churches or synagogues report more joy in their lives. Compared to irreligious mothers of retarded children, those with a deep religious faith are less vulnerable to depression.

I hasten to add two reminders. First, the link between faith and well-being is not by itself grounds for religious belief. The key issue for belief should be truth: if biblical claims are untrue, though comforting, what honest person would want to believe them? If true, though discomfiting, what honest person would want to disbelieve?

Second, both the research findings and human history tell us that faith is hardly a guarantee of bliss. We need look no farther than the heroes of faith to see that no one is promised "good adjustment" and freedom from negative emotion. No matter how much faith we have, our emotions will be subject to our genetic predispositions and biochemical quirks, our loved ones will be vulnerable to setbacks and tragedies, our mortality rate will be 100 percent. As theologian Reinhold Niebuhr cautioned, any faith system founded on a hope of special protection from natural forces and human passions "is bound to suffer disillusionment."

What Faith Offers

Although faith does not promise immunity from suffering nor escape from stress, it is, as we've seen, linked with enhanced joy and a strengthened walk through valleys of darkness. How so? Why do researchers find these positive links among faith,

mental health, and happiness? Here are my hunches, some backed by research:

Where two or three are gathered. Evidence accumulates that we pay a price for our culture's self-reliant individualism. When facing failure or rejection, the self-driven individual takes on personal responsibility for problems. Sometimes the consequence is depression. In biblical communities, and among the fellowshiping faithful today, there is a sense of connectedness, belonging, mutuality, being part of a people, bearing one another's burdens, being upheld by the ties that bind. People who enjoy that sort of stress-buffering support are less vulnerable to both physical and emotional disorder.

Something worth living and dying for. The nineteenth-century Polish poet Cyprian Norwid wrote, "To be what is called happy, one should have (1) something to live on; (2) something to live for; and (3) something to die for. The lack of one of these results in drama. The lack of two results in tragedy." Studies confirm that an important ingredient of well-being is the sense of meaning and purpose that many people find in their faith. Rabbi Harold Kushner speaks for many when he writes, "My religious faith...satisfies... the most fundamental human need of all. That is the need to know that somehow we matter, that our lives mean something, count as something more than just a momentary blip in the universe."

The good news. At no point does today's pop psychology seem farther from biblical thought than in its recipe for self-worth. "Go for it!" the modern wisdom urges us. Reach for the stars. Believe the best about yourself. Don't let your perceived limitations hem you in. Dream the impossible dream.

There are, as I noted above, emotional benefits to the positive thinking that defines high self-esteem and optimism. Yet for those struggling to attain self-worth, there is an alternative, more ancient route to self-acceptance. Relinquish the struggle. You who labor and are laden with cares, come and find rest in the paradoxical way spoken of in the Sermon on the Mount.

First, set aside vanity. Become as unpretentious as a small child. Face your spiritual poverty and emptiness. Recognize that no human will ever love you the way you want to be loved because, wrote Mignon McLaughlin, "no one has ever loved anyone the way everyone wants to be loved." "Christian religion," said C. S. Lewis, "is, in the long run, a thing of unspeakable comfort. But it does not begin in comfort; it begins in [dismay], and it is no use at all to try to go on to that comfort without first going through that dismay."

To say okay, I'll never be a great public speaker, or the top person in my company, or a great athlete may be temporarily depressing but permanently freeing. We become freed from daily living with the guilt of things unaccomplished, from needing to place blame

on ourselves or others. We become freed to focus our energy on things we can do something about. The twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous begin with step one: admit that you are helpless, hopeless, powerless. Stand up each meeting and acknowledge, "My name is Joe, and I am an alcoholic." The march forward begins with first a step back.

Then, second, comes the acceptance. The whole of Christianity really boils down to a simple, if unlikely, statement of good news: the universe has a Creator whose extraordinary love for each of us compelled this being to assume a human form and experience suffering and victory over death, thereby assuring us that we matter, that we are accepted, that we can live with hope. The radical implication: No longer is there

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any need to define our self-worth solely by our achievements, material well-being, or social approval. To find self-acceptance we needn't be or do anything. We need only be ultimately and unconditionally accepted.

Losing and finding one's life. This grace—this "unconditional positive regard" as we today might say—in turn provides a model for human relationships. In the living out of grace, we also discover meaning beyond the self. All four Gospel writers record Jesus' teaching that to find life we must be willing to lose our lives. To find meaning we must discover something bigger than ourselves and serve it.

Malcolm Muggeridge visited Mother Teresa in Calcutta after interviewing her for the BBC. "The thing I noticed about you and the hundreds of sisters who now form your team is that you all look so happy. Is it a put-on? "Oh no," she replied, "not at all. Nothing makes you happier than when you really reach out in mercy to someone who is badly hurt."

As if to test Mother Teresa's idea, psychologist Bernard Rimland did a little experiment that you can repeat. He asked 216 students to list the initials of ten people they knew best, yielding a grand list of some 2,000 people. Then he asked them to indicate whether each person seemed happy or not happy. Finally, he asked them to go over each name again, indicating if the person seemed selfish (devoted mostly to his or her own welfare) or unselfish (willing to be inconvenienced for others). The striking result: 70 percent of those judged unselfish seemed happy; 95 percent of those judged selfish seemed unhappy. What a paradox, said the surprised Rimland: "Selfish people are, by definition, those whose activities are devoted to

bringing themselves happiness. Yet, at least as judged by others, these selfish people are far less likely to be happy than those whose efforts are devoted to making others happy." Nathaniel Hawthorne might have been less surprised. "Happiness in this world, when it comes, comes incidentally," he wrote. "Make it the object of pursuit, and it is never attained."

But is the greater well-being enjoyed by spiritually committed people really a product of a greater altruism? We've noted links between religion and well-being and between altruism and well-being. Can we close the circle by linking religion and altruism? The visible extremes don't decide the issue. Mother Teresa makes it seem so, and the biblical idea of the sacred worth and essential equality of all human lives provides the spiritual ground for humanitarian values; but some other religious personalities, such as televangelist Jim Bakker with his luxurious mansions and gold-plated bathroom fixtures, have not impressed us with their altruism. As Madeline L'Engle lamented, "Christians have given Christianity a bad name."

Painstaking research sheds light, with a curious pair of findings. When confronted with minor emergencies, as when hearing someone in the next room fall off a ladder, highly religious people are not more responsive. When making intentional choices about long-term altruism, the differences become real. Sam Levenson joked that "when it comes to giving, some people stop at nothing," but this is seldom so among church and synagogue members, who give away much more of their money than do the unchurched. They also give away more of themselves. Among the 12 percent of Americans whom George Gallup in 1984 classified as "highly spiritually committed," 46 percent said they were presently working among the poor, the infirm, or the elderly—many more than the 22 percent among those highly uncommitted.

An eternal perspective. Writing from a college whose symbol is the anchor of hope, it is fitting that I conclude with Samuel Johnson's reminder that "hope is itself a species of happiness, and, perhaps, the chief happiness which this world affords." Biblical hope confronts evil and suffering and sees beyond them to a new heaven and new earth. Viewing life with this eternal perspective reminds us that human life is worth preserving. It provides our back-to-the-present vision for human peace, justice, and love, and it puts our current aggravations and anxieties in perspective. If I can believe that my long-term destiny is in God's loving hands, then I can cope with whatever awaits me from now until death. The surface waters may be churning, but the deep waters are at peace.

Although faith need not entail the good life, it does enrich our lives with social support, meaning, ultimate acceptance, a focus beyond the self, and a hope-filled enlarged perspective on the day's stresses. For such reasons C. S. Lewis could say, "Joy is the serious business of heaven." †