

Christianity and Psychology: A Good Mix?

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After his waving hand was recognized, a theology student in Gary Collins' psychology class declared, "Paul didn't sit around with the Corinthians building rapport and showing empathy The apostle boldly confronted the Corinthians with their sin, quoted Scripture, and told them to shape up. Why do we need counseling when Paul, who is a good role model, did nothing of the sort?"¹

Is this a legitimate observation? Can or should psychology and Christianity mix? What is their relationship? These questions require a biblically based, rational reply. But first let's take a look at some recent and relevant developments in North America.

Since the 1970s there has been a surge of interest in the integration of religion and psychology, evidenced by the appearance of publications such as the *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, *The Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, *The Journal of Religion and Health*, and *The Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. Within the American Psychological Association, Division 36 has adopted the name "Psychologists Interested in Religious Issues." In California the Fuller Theological Seminary has developed a clinical psychology training program receiving full accreditation by the American Psychological Association. In Seventh-day Adventist circles, Loma Linda University has developed an accredited program in Marriage and Family Therapy (where I'm currently completing my training). Andrews University has offered courses in Pastoral and Educational Psycho-

logy for years. Other evangelical institutions are showing a similar trend.

The Search for Meaning

In Victor Frankl's words, people are in "search for meaning," and many are showing a growing interest in "wholeness." New Age philosophy has been trying to fill the gap left by institutionalized Christianity in the United States and in other parts of the world.

Our basic need for meaning is addressed by four main streams in contemporary psychology. This is how Christian psychologist David Augsburger, sees it:

Psychology as a *behavioral* science has been described as "objective, mechanistic, materialistic, behavioralistic, fatalistic, reductionistic." . . . The mechanistic . . . model sees humans as passive beings subject to the determinisms of environmental forces. The focus of the model is on adjustment, with mental illness seen as maladjustment. Psychology as a *humanistic* science defines itself as subjective, organismic, existential, intentional, responsible, inclusive. It sees humans as active deciding agents with authentic choice and a wide measure of freedom. *Psychoanalytic* psychology viewed humans as determined by instinctual drives, yet capable of choice and change; as controlled by unconscious processes, yet responsible to choose, decide, and act in movement toward rationality.

Psychology as a *systems approach* sees all these factors and more as correlated in a network of interrelated elements—such as behavior, self-system, family, community, culture.²

Paul Vitz, another Christian psychologist, voices his concern about the "selfism" evident in much of modern humanistic psychology, but he has hopes for a future psychology compatible with the Christian faith.³ Is his hope justified?

Isn't God Enough?

Some might say, "We have God's revelation in the Bible. God didn't tell us we would need a yearly update, a 'new and improved' version like the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* requires. If we have faith, shouldn't putting everything in God's hands be enough?"

Collins' reply to his student's observation is worth noting: He reminded his class that although Paul had been confrontive, he could be also very gentle, as when he "hugged and cried with the Ephesians at Miletus . . . , instructed the Galatians to bear each other's burdens and to restore people gently. . . , urged the Thessalonians to encourage the timid, help the weak, and 'be patient with everyone.'" He added, "Some people never hear preaching. Some hear but don't listen. Some listen but are too distraught, sick, anguished, disoriented or confused to understand . . . God can, and does, work through capable, sensitive counselors."⁴ Jesus' numerous individual en-

counters and "counseling sessions" are documented throughout the Gospels.

God is not as small as our minds imagine Him. He has been working with and continually "counseling" imperfect and culturally bound individuals. Jones and Butman point out that God's "common grace," like rain falling on just and unjust, is available to all.⁵ Calvin's determination is a reminder to us as we explore this question further: "We will be careful . . . not to reject or condemn truth wherever it appears."⁶ It is possible that truth also appears in psychology.

Adventist theologian Alden Thompson recently wrote that "revelation and reason are not in conflict" because "revelation's task is to point to the law of love; reason's task is to describe and understand how each writer has done so."⁷ Ellen G. White, cited by Thompson, wrote that the "Bible is written by inspired men, but it is not God's mode of thought and expression. It is that of humanity. God, as a writer, is not represented. . . . The writers of the Bible were God's penmen, not his pen."⁸ She also wrote that "God has permitted a flood of light to be poured upon the world in discoveries in science and art."⁹ The convergence of these thoughts is strong. Why should we then exclude psychology from this flood of light?

Are There Risks?

The study of psychology, like that of any discipline involving the pursuit of knowledge, requires a degree of caution. Stephen Evans notes that neutrality, objectivity, and a value-free science are myths.¹⁰ The ideal of a value-free psychology simply leads to moral nihilism. Jones and Butman specifically note some reasons for caution in the study of psychology.¹¹

1. "Many of the major proponents of secular approaches to psychotherapy were (or are) non-

Christian thinkers," often hostile to religion and Christianity or subtly ignoring their relevance altogether.

(Atheistic Freud viewed religious ideas as "illusions, fulfillments of the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind,"¹² yet research has shown that "no people or tribe has ever been discovered without any traces of religion. Religion has always existed. Both historically and geographically religion is ubiquitous."¹³)

2. As Emil Brunner suggested, sin biases and distorts moral behavior and thoughts. Therefore, the closer we get to studying the core issues of existence, the greater the distorted effects of sin appear.

3. There are "some very seductive elements of the profession of psychotherapy that can ensnare the immature or unwise Christian" such as the intoxicating effects of power.

The danger is real. That's why frequent and private conversations with God as well as involvement in a local church can provide a concrete counterbalance to our far-reaching psychological theories.

In Ellen G. White's lifetime (1827-1915), modern psychology was in its infancy, yet she wrote with insight about basic psychological principles¹⁴ such as (a) the controlling function of the brain over the body, (b) the vital role of parent-child relationship (even pre-natal) in character formation, (c) the danger of repressing affective processes in childhood, (d) the strong impact of one-on-one helping relationships, (e) the need for self-esteem and self-respect, (f) heredity and social learning, i.e. nature and (not vs.) nurture, (g) healthy religion, and many other key topics.¹⁵

She warned that "the sciences which treat of the human mind are very much exalted. They are good in their place; but they are seized upon by Satan as his powerful agents to deceive and destroy

souls."¹⁶ Most of the "scientific" publications of Ellen G. White's time advertised works on phrenology, psychology, mesmerism, and clairvoyance, all together.¹⁷ She saw that lack of distinction as confusing and misleading. It is her discernment, not her originality, that is striking.

Guidelines for Integration

The term *integration* implies a connection between things that may not naturally mix, but Jones and Butman believe that "faith and scholarship naturally and inevitably interrelate," provided that we do not fuse what should remain two distinct conceptual disciplines.¹⁸ They adopt the "Christianizer-of-science" approach. This involves the explicit incorporation of religiously based concepts as the control beliefs that shape the perceptions of facts, theories and methods in social science (as do Evans and Van Leeuwen). For them, "the work of the church has suffered from those who promote either hastily 'baptized' versions of secular models or superficial renderings of 'biblical' models of psychology."¹⁹ They present a theory-building stage that provides a framework for the incorporation of insights gained by critical evaluation. Their suggested methodology for a Christian appraisal of a psychological-psychotherapeutic theory or modality is as follows:²⁰

1. Search for the philosophical assumptions. What are this theory's basic presuppositions about human nature?

2. Investigate the compatibility of the personality theory with Christian truth. Does it cover all human dimensions?

3. Make sure the abnormality model takes into account the core concepts of accountability, responsibility, and sinfulness, and that it doesn't pathologize faith.

4. Make note of the implicit or explicit notions of normality, ma-

turity, wellness, holiness, wholeness, etcetera.

5. Probe whether the methods of change are ethically and morally sound. Is the role of *agape* love and the Holy Spirit taken into account?

6. Verify the demonstrated effectiveness of the approach through research.

A Christian approach to psychology should take into consideration the whole person. M. Boivin writes that "a hebraic model . . . is a far more holistic approach" than dividing people into "dimensions such as soul, spirit, and body."²¹ He suggests that a comprehensive, scientifically inspired psychological model should recognize the biblical notion of fallenness of the human species and the fact that individuals are predisposed, in differing degrees, to appetites and behavioral tendencies that tend to be destructive.

Conclusion

So, is psychology in conflict with Christianity? Don Browning observes that "most theologians simply have argued that theology and psychology are disciplines that pose and answer different kinds of questions. It is not that they deal with different kinds of reality, for instance the psychological and the spiritual."²² He, as well as Jeeves, Meyers, Tillich, and Niebhuur, conclude that "psychology can only conflict with theology when psychology in some way ceases to be properly scientific (however this is defined) and drifts over into normative language of either an ethical or metaphysical kind."²³

Additional indications of theories that are likely to be closer to the truth than others are suggested by Del Ratzsch, a Christian philosopher of science.²⁴ These theories will: (a) speak of patterns instead of coincidences (the notion of simplicity); (b) cover large stretches of reality instead of restricted patches; (c) reveal new

and uncover old but previously hidden patterns; (d) be self-contained, but capable of meshing with each other.

We need full awareness to avoid idolatry, wherever it's found—whether in worshiping the law, an institution, the brilliant mind of a scholar or the supposed objectivity of "science."

I've attempted to present a picture of some of the challenges posed by the discipline of psychology to the Christian student and psychologist. Psychology is a valid and necessary area for Christian action and involvement. It is also



a discipline whose assumptions require careful consideration in the light of Scripture and the guidance that has been given us.

I hope you'll be challenged and encouraged to pursue the goal of integration throughout your academic and professional experience, focusing on the biblical holistic perspective. Your search for intergration will lead to a sharpening of your discernment of God's love for fallen humanity. I also pray that in the process, you'll get more fully in touch with the image of God in you.

NOTES

1. Gary Collins, *Can You Trust Psychology?* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1988), p. 21.

2. D. W. Augsburger, *Personal Counseling Across Cultures* (Philadel-

phia: The Westminster Press, 1986), p. 105. Emphases are mine.

3. Paul C. Vitz, *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1977).

4. Collins, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-25.

5. S. L. Jones and R. E. Butman, *Modern Psychotherapies: A Comprehensive Christian Appraisal* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1991), pp. 25-28.

6. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.2.15, quoted in Jones and Butman, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

7. Alden Thompson, *Inspiration* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1991), p. 263.

8. Ellen G. White, Manuscript 24, 1886, quoted by Thompson in *ibid.*, p. 28.

9. E. G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1911), p. 522.

10. C. Stephen Evans, *Wisdom and Humanness in Psychology: Prospects for a Christian Approach* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1989), p. 78.

11. Jones and Butman, *op. cit.*, pp. 25-28.

12. S. Freud, "Die Zukunft einer Illusion" in *Studienausgabe*, 9:159 (*The Future of an Illusion*, in S.E. 21 [1961]:30).

13. Hans Kung, *Freud and the Problem of God* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), pp. 72, 73.

14. See the "Foreword" to the compilation of Ellen G. White's writings on psychology-related topics, *Mind, Character, and Personality: Guidelines to Mental and Spiritual Health* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publishing Association, 1977), vols. 1, 2 (abbreviated *MCP*).

15. All quotations should be read in the original context. The numbers refer to pages in *MCP*: (a) 3, 60, 785, (b) 131-141, 610, (c) 607, (d) 82, 763, 764, 766, 768, 772, (e) 255, 258, 260, 688, 693, (f) 355, (g) 286, 537, 782, 800, 802.

16. Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times* (November 6, 1884). Included in *Selected Messages* (Washington,

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D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1958), book 2, p. 352.

17. See notes in *MCP*, pp. 711, 720-721.

18. Jones and Butman, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

19. Jones and Butman, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 30-36.

21. M. J. Boivin, "The Hebraic Model of the Person: Toward a Unified Psychological Science," in *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 19:2 (1991), pp. 157-165.

22. Don Browning, *Religious Thought and Modern Psychologies: A Critical Conversation in the Theology of Culture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), p. 13.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

24. Del Ratzsch, *Philosophy of Science: The Natural Sciences in Christian Perspective* (Downer's Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1986), p. 124.

FOR FURTHER READING

R. Anderson, *Christians Who Counsel: The Vocation of Wholistic Therapy* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1990).

A. Holmes, *Contours of a World View* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1983).

James P. Moreland, *Christianity and the Nature of Science: A Philosophical Investigation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1989).

Mary S. Van Leeuwen, *The Person in Psychology: A Contemporary Christian Appraisal* (Leicester, England, and Grand Rapids, Mich.: InterVarsity Press and William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985).

N. Wolterstorff, *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1984, 2nd ed.).

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