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POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY: AN ADVENTIST EVALUATION

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1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND:

Positive psychology is a recently emerged branch of psychology with the aim to catalyze a change in psychology from a preoccupation only with repairing the worst things in life to also building the best qualities in life. According to Seligman (2005), positive psychology is about positive subjective experience: well-being and satisfaction; flow, joy, the sensual pleasures, and happiness; and constructive cognitions about the future – optimism, hope and faith. At the individual level it is about positive personal traits – the capacity to love and vocation, courage, interpersonal skills, aesthetic sensibility, perseverance, forgiveness, originality, future mindedness, high talent, and wisdom.

As a recently emerged field, positive psychology touches on issues which are sometimes considered central themes in Christianity as pointed out by Gillespie and Zagano (2006). Paul writes in Galatians 5:22 about the fruits of the Spirit as love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Science as a secular field of study does not recognize the legitimacy of the religious experience, but rather studies the effects of religion. As this positive view of human nature is revealed through the scientific studies of positive psychology, so we, as Christian educators, need to see how our faith aligns with new knowledge, and how our faith could be affirmed as a valuable part of what makes life 'good'.

This paper will explore some aspects of the relationship between positive psychology and religion by analyzing research on the positive influence of religion and faith. Examining the concepts of truth, knowledge and faith, the intention is to come to a deeper understanding of how psychology, especially positive psychology can be

understood and used more effectively in the integration of faith and learning. How does positive psychology want you to become the person who is experiencing the 'good life'? Is this view at odds with the Christian's path to achieving a happy, satisfied life in Christ?

2. PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES:

This paper sets out to discover some of the beauty of goodness, optimism, flow and joy as it established our faith through science. It also sets out to examine some of the interactions between areas of science and psychology and religious belief and experience. Both psychology and religion advocate a specific path to happiness and wellness. Practitioners of religion are achieving happiness, and positive psychology is describing this happiness, flow, joy etcetera. How do both these systems of thought take you to that place of happiness? Is it possible to reconcile these two paths, or are they in opposition? Getting to the core of the ideas which inform positive psychology, this paper sets out to understand the core values and principles which underlie and inform positive psychology.

Psychology teachers might be able to present the Christian faith more fully and meaningfully by focusing on positive psychology as a way to introduce faith into the learning and living of students. Positive psychology provides a chance to even look at faith as a guiding factor in wellness and life satisfaction. Christ teaches the 'good life', and with the integration of faith and learning we can keep Christ the centre of this teaching.

The value in this study is to anticipate the influence of this new field of psychology for Christian educators. There is a fine line between teaching wellness and

life satisfaction devoid of underlying values, and teaching Christ as the centre of wellness and life satisfaction. This essay looks at the possibilities and the future of this new interest in positive human behaviour.

Here are three specific objectives which this paper will explore:

1. What values and ideas underlie positive psychology? If the Christian life is about happiness and joy, how does it relate to positive psychology?
2. What positive model of the 'good life' does the Bible provide?
3. What then is the value of positive psychology as it relates to affirming my faith?

3. WHAT LIES BENEATH?

Positive psychology is not much different from the ordinary study of psychology when it comes to the philosophical underpinnings and reasoning. Both originates from a certain school of thought and perpetuates these ideas through the paradigms and the focus being placed in the research. What makes the study of positive psychology maybe more relevant to the Christian is the fact that it touches on issues which are important to the Christian and his understanding of himself and God. For a very long time psychology has focused on the aspects of human behaviour which were negative, abnormal or pathological. In the Christian worldview these human behaviours would be seen as a result of sin and man's fall from grace. Positive psychology on the other hand deals with human behaviour that is as a result of good behaviour. The non-Christian and the Christian both want to be happy; they both want to live the best lives they possibly can.

3.1. Pre-suppositions

To better understand these issues it might be good to mention a few of the main philosophical assumption that set positive psychology and psychology as a whole apart from the Christian, and specifically the Adventist worldview.

Psychology with its roots in philosophy promotes the ideas of humanism very strongly. Habenicht (2000) provides a fairly comprehensive list of Seventh - day Adventist assumptions / presuppositions and the assumptions / pre-suppositions of psychology in general. Some of psychology's pre-suppositions are as follows according to Habenicht (2000):

1. The individual is the master or victim of fate. Determinism and free will are both used in psychology.
2. Human nature is either good or evil or even neutral.
3. There is tension between the parts and the whole.
4. Psychology is undecided on the issue of the mind-body relationship.
5. In a past versus present orientation – past is usually more important.
6. In tension between nature and nurture – nature is seen as a final verdict.
7. In subjectivity versus objectivity – thoughts are subjective, and behaviour is objective. Psychology generally favours the objective.

An Adventist point of view would look radically different from most of these pre-suppositions, with some fundamental additions to these. Let's first look at the ones described above with an Adventist correction:

1. Man is not master or a victim of fate. Man has free will. (Josh 24:15; John 7:17; Gen 1:27). Although, certain behavioural principles also contribute to shape man's behaviour, i.e. classical conditioning, God is still committed to free choice. The influence of behavioural conditioning does not negate choice. Behavioural conditioning can even be used to make choice easier. God used behavioural principles Himself when dealing with humans. We could use both free choice and behavioural conditioning to help people choose God's way.

2. The question on man's good or evil nature is well phrased by Ellen White in the book *Education* when she says:

"As through Christ every human being has life, so also through Him every soul receives some ray of divine light. Not only intellectual but spiritual power, a perception of right, a desire for goodness, exists in every heart. But against these principles there is struggling an antagonistic power. The result of the eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil is manifest in every man's experience. *There is in his nature a bent to evil*, a force which, unaided, he cannot resist. To withstand this force, to attain that ideal which in his inmost soul he accepts as alone worthy, he can find help in but one power. That power is Christ" (1968).

3. The whole is more than the parts. The whole truth gives meaning to the components of truth. Truth is not decided by putting together smaller pieces to make the whole. Truth is more than the smaller pieces—it is the whole. The whole actually gives meaning to its component parts. Likewise, God's view of human beings includes the totality of their experience (Ps 139; 1 Thess 5:23), all that they are, have been, and can become. An isolated experience

does not define the person, in God's eyes. Christ calls us to wholeness and unity in love (1 Cor 1:10; Phil 3:24 1:27; 2:2; Eph 4:1-6, 1 Cor 13).

4. Adventists believe there is an indivisible union between mind and body.

"The body, soul and spirit function in close cooperation, revealing an intensely sympathetic relationship between a person's spiritual, mental and physical faculties. Deficiencies in one area will hamper the other two" (Seventh-day Adventists Believe... 1988, p. 84).

5. As an Adventist Christian the present is important, because God has forgiven my past. Jesus also wipes away the past – “neither do I condemn you” – and focuses on the future – “go and sin no more” (John 18:11). God looks at the person as he is now, not as he was in the past (Acts 3:17-20; Rom 5:9; 1 Cor 12:27).
6. Your genes are not an excuse for your behaviour. With the power of Christ we can overcome anything, even our human tendencies. (Heb 2:17, 18; 4:14-16).
7. God favours the subjective. Our thoughts and our mental life and experience are very important. The right actions for the wrong internal reasons become wrong actions, too. The whole picture becomes wrong. Right actions for the right reasons—help the hungry because you are helping Me (Matt 15:1-9; 25:45)—are God's way toward wholeness. The Christian strives to know the mind of God, to think His thoughts and to translate those thoughts into every day actions (Rom 12:2; 1 Cor 2:6-8).

3.2 Positive psychology's emphasis

Positive psychology as a fairly new branch in psychology stresses a few pre-suppositions more clearly, or forcefully than psychology as a whole. Seligman (2002; p.125) says that almost all these assumptions about human nature, character etc, have almost disappeared from the psychology of the twentieth century. Based on a strong association with the Aristotelian model of human nature, Seligman (2002) renews the notion of good character as a core assumption of positive psychology. Seligman's (2002) point of view is that the individual has the capacity for both good and evil: "evolution has selected both sorts of traits, and any number of niches support morality, cooperation, altruism, and goodness, just as any number support murder, theft, self-seeking, and badness" (p. 211). Thus according to Jorgensen and Nafstad (2004; p.18) the major distinction between mainstream psychology and positive psychology is that mainstream psychology gives priority to negative behaviour and various forms of dysfunction. Positive psychology is thus articulating the presumption of the Aristotelian approach to human nature and development. This includes the view of the good person; the idea of the individual with a positive character, strengths, and given virtues; and the idea of the basic distinction between 'man as he happens to be' and 'man as he could be if he realized his essential nature'. For positive psychology, in congruence with the Aristotelian model, goodness and morality thus do not come from outside the person. They do not arise from cultural sources nor from the moral rules of society, but from the potentials of the human being him/herself. It is up to the individual to realize their own potential. This is at odds with the Adventist and Christian view that "...man

has fallen short of the glory of God..." (Rom 3:23), and that we receive the goodness of Christ and his righteousness as a gift from outside ourselves.

Some positive psychologist also use postmodern philosophers like Foucault to legitimize their shift of framework from the medical conceptual framework which is based on pathology, faults, and dysfunction to a framework focusing on positive aspects of human nature (Jorgensen & Nafstad, 2004; p17) which constitutes positive subjective experiences, positive individual traits, and civic virtues. (Seligman & Csikszentmihályi, 2000). Inherent in this postmodernist way are also constructivist and multicultural assumptions which are made by positive psychologists. For Mahoney (2005; p. 745) the central thesis of constructivism in positive psychology is that we participate in co-creating the universe that we experience and the realities to which we respond. Multiculturalism according to Jorgensen and Nafstad (2004: p.25) is an increasingly dominant and ethical imperative for psychological research and practice. It is at its core a moral movement that is intended to enhance the dignity, rights, and recognized worth of marginalized groups. From the Adventist perspective the whole postmodern movement harbours great danger for our worldview. Harris (2004) rightly points to the Christian idea of universal human nature and universal salvation as being directly at odds with the idea of multiculturalism.

A very pervasive assumption in psychology and according to Seligman in positive psychology is that positive psychology argues a Darwinian or evolutionary perspective. (Jorgensen & Nafstad, 2004; Seligman 2002). Fowler (2009) asserts the Adventist position clearly by saying:

The Adventist commitment to the doctrine of creation, as part of its worldview, leads to an authentic understanding of ecology and

history. Because God is the creator, the biblical revelation consistently maintains that in matter there is nothing intrinsically evil, and in nature there is nothing 'self-originating, self-operating, self-sustaining, or self-explanatory'. (p.2)

3.3 Affirmation of positive psychology

It might be reasonable to be wary of positive psychology after becoming more aware of the underlying assumptions. Positive psychology is, however, not all bad, just as mainstream psychology is not. As Christians we just need to be vigilant about the subtle ways in which a whole body of knowledge is presented. The question now remains: What is positive about positive psychology?

Like the fish that is unaware of the water in which it swims, people take for granted a certain amount of hope, love, enjoyment, and trust because these are the very conditions that allow them to go on living. These conditions are fundamental to existence, and if they are present, any number of objective obstacles can be faced with equanimity and even joy. Camus wrote that the foremost question of philosophy is why one should not commit suicide. One cannot answer that question just by curing depression; there must be positive reasons for living as well (Seligman & Csikszentmihályi, 2000; p.13). It seems reasonable and crucial to be able to study the 'good life' in all its facets, even from a Christian perspective. Most of the current research surrounding religion in positive psychology deals with the positive effects which it has on its adherents. In effect it is saying that any religion can have the same effect. In this paper I would like to briefly look at what God intended the 'good life' to be in the Garden of Eden, as a prompt to other psychologists to tackle this area of study,

because God intended us to be happy, and researching this will not diminish His influence on our happiness, but can only deepen it.

4. EDEN AND POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

Genesis 1 provides the Christian with the utopian world God intended for perfect human happiness. Happiness is possibly the single most prominent aspect of desire and pursuit for the human being. According to Csíkszentmihályi (1999; p. 821) happiness is the only intrinsic goal that people seek for its own sake, the bottom line of all desire. It would make sense that a look at Eden would provide a view of what humans desire most. Positive psychology, however, would seek the bottom line of happiness in all the places except the Word of God. What made Eden a happy place? I would like to propose some aspects which might have contributed to happiness and support it by current research.

4.1 Relationships

Genesis 2:18 says: "And the Lord God said: 'It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him.'" Humans are relational beings, and engaging in meaningful relationships contributes most to our happiness. Most people, when looking back at the end of life value their relationships more than any material passions. Adam also found that he longed for a companion, and thus we see the image of God also in our hunger for relationships. Many of the classified virtues and character strengths proposed by positive psychology research (see Seligman, Steen, Park and Peterson, 2005; p. 412) deals exclusively with aspects found in relationships. These include humanity as a virtue, and kindness, love and social intelligence as character

strengths. Carr (2004; p. 348) sums up the whole exhaustive text on happiness and human strengths in three points. The first of these points states that according to scientific research cultivating relationships which involve deep attachment and commitment is the first reliable way to find happiness. God also intended for relationships to be the human's first source of happiness; relationships with each other, a significant other, and with God.

There are two relational institutions that were created for man before the fall, to sustain him and help him survive after the fall. These are the Sabbath and marriage.

“There were two institutions founded in Eden that were not lost in the fall – the Sabbath and the marriage relation. These were carried by man beyond the gates of paradise” (White, 1884, par. 11).

Both of these institutions are relational. According to Bredenkamp and Shipton (2009; p. 5) marriage is the very close and intimate relationship between a man and a woman, and the Sabbath is the sign of a very close and intimate relationship between man and God. The Sabbath is both a sign of this relationship with God, and enhances this relationship by rest from labour, and communion with God. The perfection, fall, restoration sequence is not present in psychological theory, nor is the image of God. Through our relationship with God and our fellow man we find the deeper meaning to life, restoration to perfection. The Sabbath is created for us to commemorate creation, redemption, and as the promise and reminder of the hereafter, where God will be united with us on earth in the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:2-3).

4.2 Environment and Labour

Genesis 2:15 says: “Then the Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to tend and keep it.”

“God did not form man merely to contemplate His glorious works; therefore, He gave him hands for labour, as well as a mind and heart for contemplation. If the happiness of man consisted in doing nothing, the Creator would not have given Adam his appointed work. Man was to find happiness in labour, as well as in meditation” (White, 1953; p. 1082).

It is clear from the sources above that Adam and Eve found meaning in the labour of their hands. There has been numerous research endeavours in the area of finding happiness and meaning in vocation. Csíkszentmihályi (1992) has pioneered the concept of ‘flow’ to describe the action of a person being fully immersed in what he/she is doing, and feeling energized and focused with full involvement. Carr (2004; p. 348) mentions as his second main contributing factor to happiness: “Involve yourself in absorbing work and leisure activities in which you exercise your strengths, talents and interests.”

4.3 Education by God

Research has found small but significant correlations between education and subjective well-being (Diener, Suh, Lucas & Smith, 1999; p. 276). They also found that education deepens the importance of work in being busy. It would make sense that being educated directly by God would produce a great sense of well-being.

“He who taught Adam and Eve in Eden how to tend the garden, desires to instruct men today. There is wisdom for him who drives the plow and sows the seed. Before those who trust and obey Him, God will open ways of advance” (White, 1905; p. 200).

Being educated by God himself in the Garden of Eden, we also have the privilege of being educated by God's Word. Being educated in the ways of God also means that we understand the essence of salvation. We understand the bigger picture, and God reveals the future to us through His prophets. Carr's (2004) third main factor which contributes to happiness is to cultivate an optimistic, future-oriented perspective on life in which you expect the best and value the future more than the present. According to Seligman and Csikszentmihályi, (2000) unrealistically optimistic beliefs about the future can even protect people from illness. Christ has set us free, and we can look forward to the new life in Christ that waits us in eternity, unrealistically according to the world's standards.

4.4 Abiding in God's law

God's law was written on the hearts of his created beings, Adam and Eve. They rejoiced in showing their love through their obedience.

“The law of love being the foundation of the government of God, the happiness of all created beings depended upon their perfect accord with its great principles of righteousness. God desires from all His creatures the service of love--homage that springs from an intelligent appreciation of His character. He takes no pleasure in a forced allegiance, and to all He grants freedom of will, that they may render Him voluntary service” (White, 1915; p. 493).

Our happiness depends on our perfect accord with the principles of this righteous law, the law of love. The law of God is so perfect that it seems to incorporate almost all the virtues and character strengths reported in the classification system designed by Seligman (see Seligman, Steen, Park and Peterson, 2005; p. 412). Some of these

virtues include wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, transcendence, with most of the 24 characteristics relating to God's law in some way.

4.5 God revealed

True happiness comes with the Truth and obedience to the Truth. We tend to look for knowledge apart from Truth/God because just like Eve was offered superior knowledge through sin, we find sin an attractive diversion.

“True happiness does not consist in the possession of wealth or position, but in the possession of a pure, clean heart, cleansed by obedience to the truth. . . . To everyone is given the opportunity to carry out the principles of heaven. The forgiving of injuries, not the avenging of them, is an exhibition of that wisdom which is true goodness. Christlike love for the men through whom the Lord has wrought is a manifestation of real transformation of character. (White, 1955; p.153)

Seligman maintains: “Any science that does not use character as a basic idea, or at least explain character and choice away successfully will never be accepted as a useful account of human behaviour” (Jorgensen & Nafstad, 2004; p. 17-18). A Christ-like character is the Christian's goal. Mirroring the life and love of Jesus, and revealing Jesus to other through our characters is the life's work worthy of true happiness.

5. AFFIRMING MY FAITH

As we have seen, positive psychology provides much insight into the human's behavior in the realm of the 'good life'. It further provides significant insight into some of the effects and implications of religion. From a purely scientific perspective these insights might only be interesting as any other effect being studied. For the Christian, however, these findings support and confirm the faith which Christians know to be true. True

religion is also not just an idea, or a belief, but a life lived. As White (1930) says: "Pure and undefiled religion is not a sentiment, but the doing of works of mercy and love. This religion is necessary to health and happiness" (p. 142).

Freud's argument that religion is psychological wish fulfilment offends many people's religious sensibilities as explained by Myers and Jeeves (2003). Research in psychology has fortunately moved on from those rudimentary ideas, and moved towards investigating, instead. In a study by Carlo and Hardy (2005) religiosity was a significant positive predictor of kindness, as well as compliant, anonymous and altruistic pro-social behaviour. Another study reported by Diener, Suh, Lucas and Smith (1999; p. 289) found that religion is associated with mental health benefits, especially when religiosity is measured by actual religious behaviour. Religious certainty, strength of one's relationship with the divine, prayer experience and devotional and participatory aspects of religiosity all correlated positively with mental health benefits. Religion may increase feelings of efficacy, control, and security and may therefore provide greater benefit for the cognitive aspects of subjective well-being. Peterson and Park (2004; p. 438) states that having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of the universe; knowing where you fit within the larger scheme; having beliefs about the meaning of life that shape, conduct and provide comfort all contribute to a happy satisfied life.

Zimbardo and Boyd (2008) provide some stimulating new research on time and the influence of time perspective on human behaviour in their new book called *The Time Paradox – The new psychology of time*. Zimbardo and Boyd (2008; p. 161) proposes that a person's view of life after death has a significant influence on how they cope and

experience life. Calling it the transcendental future, this time perspective provides a different attitude to cope with the present, and especially death. When Zimbardo and Boyd (2008; p. 175-177) compares the different religions of the world, and the differences in their time perspectives, we find that the Protestant Christian tends to be the only one who scores high on the positive-past perspective, very low on the negative-past, and fatalistic-present perspective, and by far the highest on the future time perspective. These findings might serve to emphasise some of the value inherent in the Christians worldview. What does this mean? It means that the Christian is able to look to his future salvation and reward, but at the same time be content with his life in Christ when looking at his past.

Religion is not, as Freud surmised, 'corrosive to happiness', by creating an "obsessional neurosis" that entails guilt, repressed sexuality, and suppressed emotions. It is actually more associated with joy. Myers (2000; p. 63) confirms that accumulating evidence reveals that in general an active religiosity is associated with several mental health criteria. Less delinquency, drug and alcohol abuse, divorce and suicide lead to longer life and physical health.

6. CONCLUSION

Very often modern science relates wonderful information to humanity. Most often this information is in harmony with God's word at some level. The pre-suppositions just need to be clear, and be understood. Positive psychology is one of the new fields providing very useful, exciting information about human happiness and joy. As Christians we know real joy is found in eternal things, yet these truths need to be understood correctly. Too many Christians tend to make blanket statements about psychology without understanding the finer nuances of what motivates human beings. If we understood better, we might be able to enrich our Christian experience as well. Yes, positive psychology without underlying Christian values might just be interesting information, but used effectively it can inform and teach us much about our own faith and relationship with our Creator.

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