

# Psychological Science Meets the World of Faith

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My contributions to the psychology-religion dialogue reflect my interests as a liberal arts professor who enjoys relating psychological science to other fields, including religion. In some essays and trade books I have danced on the psychology-religion boundary by:

- relating big ideas about human nature found in psychological science and in religious literatures;
- reporting on links among religiosity, prejudice, altruism, and well-being; and
- explaining to people of faith the informative and sometimes challenging insights of psychological science.

Like most people of faith, I start with two axioms: 1) there is a God, and 2) it's not me and it's not you. If, indeed, humans are finite and fallible creatures—with dignity but not deity—then some of our beliefs are sure to err. We had therefore best hold our own untested beliefs tentatively, assess others' beliefs with open-minded skepticism, and, when appropriate, use observation and experimentation to winnow error from truth.

Historians of science report that faith-based humility and skepticism helped fuel the beginnings of modern science. As part of a religious tradition that calls itself “ever-reforming,” this science-supportive attitude not only tolerates my participation in free-spirited scientific inquiry, it mandates such. The whole truth cannot be found merely by searching our own minds. So, we also test our ideas. If they survive, so much the better for them; if not, so much the worse.

Within psychology, this ever-reforming process has many times changed my mind, leading me now to understand, for example, that newborns have some striking capabilities, that electroconvulsive therapy often alleviates intractable depression, that America's economic growth has not improved our morale, that the automatic unconscious mind dwarfs the conscious mind, that traumatic experiences rarely get repressed, that most folks don't suffer low self-esteem, and that sexual orientation is a natural disposition.

## Human Nature

Early in my career I was struck by some parallels between the human image in psychological science and in biblical and theological scholarship. Here are some parallels that British cognitive neuroscientist, Malcolm Jeeves, and I explored in *Psychology Through the Eyes of Faith*.

Human Attribute	Psychological Wisdom	Theological Wisdom
The Self	Self-serving bias is powerful and at times perilous, yet	Self serving pride is the fundamental sin, yet

	self-esteem, optimism, and personal control pay dividends.	accepting divine love enables self-acceptance.
<b>Freedom</b>	We are both the creatures and the creators of our social worlds; persons and situations both matter.	Ultimate control lies beyond us, yet we are responsible creatures.
<b>Rationality</b>	Our cognitive capacities are awesome, yet to err is predictably human.	We are made in the divine image, yet we are finite and error-prone.
<b>Belief and Behavior</b>	Attitudes influence behavior, and attitudes follow behavior.	Faith predisposes action, yet also grows through action.
Figure 1		

Psychological science suggests that brains and minds intertwine; we are whole, embodied persons. (Contrary to the assumption of some spiritualists, our minds seem not to operate apart from the brain that manifests mind.) Many scholars agree that in the biblical understanding people are not disembodied immortal souls (that was a Platonist idea); rather, dust to dust, we are mortal, embodied creatures whose hope of enduring existence is said to be rooted in a “new creation,” not in our essential nature. Psychological science and theological scholarship also, in their differing languages, assert some paradoxical wisdom (See Figure 1).

### Religion, Altruism, and Well-Being

Medicine, twisted, can kill people. More often, medicine enhances life. Can the same be said of religion?

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.” The “insane courage” that enabled the horror of 9/11 “came from religion,” noted Richard Dawkins. But so has the driving energy behind the founding of hospitals, universities, and civil rights campaigns. Religion, in its varied forms long ago noted by Gordon Allport, has helped inspire both the KKK and MLK. The horrors and heroes aside, researchers have noted (as I documented in *The Pursuit of Happiness* and *The American Paradox*) religion’s links with volunteerism, non-materialistic values, and charitable giving.

I have also reported correlations between faith and “subjective well-being.” For example, in National Opinion Research Center surveys of some 42,000 Americans since 1972, 26 percent of those never attending religious services have reported being “very happy,” as have 47 percent of those participating in services more than weekly. An active faith, it seems, connects us with others, engenders meaning and purpose beyond self, and (no surprise to terror-management researchers) sustains our hope that, in the end, the very end, all shall be well. Social support and faith-related health practices, especially not smoking, also help explain the epidemiological phenomenon of greater longevity among actively religious people.

### Psychology’s Wisdom

In many ways, people of faith have found psychology’s insights and critical analyses supportive of their understanding of human nature and their assumption that religion is sometimes toxic but also, in its healthier forms, conducive to altruism, happiness, and health. Moreover, psychological science offers principles that can be applied to the construction of memorable and persuasive messages, to the tasks of reconciliation and peacemaking, and to helping relationships for those who are marrying, separating, or grieving.

But science can also challenge people of faith to reform their thinking. Darwinian biology and evolutionary psychology have offered such challenges. So, too, has research on illusory thinking, the mechanisms of which could easily lead people to superstitious beliefs in the power of their prayers to change distant events. In essays available at [davidmyers.org](http://davidmyers.org), I suggest why psychological research and theological reflection both lead me to predict null effects from prayer experiments that seek to manipulate God to heal randomly designated heart surgery patients. (The biggest of these, conducted by Herbert Benson, reportedly will have its embargoed results published near the end of 2005.)

More controversial is the accumulating evidence that our sexual orientation is something we did not choose and cannot change, which research suggests is more clearly so for males, with their lesser “erotic plasticity.” Letha Dawson Scanzoni and I report on this research in *What God has Joined Together? A Christian Case for Gay Marriage*, a new book written for the faith community. Our aim is to help bridge the divide between marriage-supporting and gay-supporting people of faith, by showing why both sides have important things to say and why biblical wisdom can be understood as supporting everyone’s right to seal love with commitment.

Ergo, as a liberal arts scholar I have enjoyed relating psychology’s perspective on human nature to the wisdom found in other fields. I have reported on religion’s associations with intolerance, and also with compassion and well-being. And I have sought to “give psychology away” by informing people of faith about interesting, useful, and sometimes challenging insights from psychological science.