

James M. Nelson

Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality

 Springer

Preface

Over a century ago, psychologists who were fascinated with religion began to study and write about it. Theologians and religious practitioners have responded to this literature, producing a fascinating dialogue that deals with our fundamental understandings about the human person and our place in the world. This book provides an introduction to the important conversations that have developed out of these interchanges.

The dialogue between psychology and religion is difficult to study for a number of reasons. First, it requires knowledge of both psychology and religion. People with a background in psychology often lack a solid understanding of the religious traditions they wish to study, and theologians may not be up to date on the latest developments in psychology. Second, it requires conceptual tools to organize the material and understand the basic problems involved in any attempt to connect the science of psychology with religion. These concepts can be found in many places, for instance in the writings of philosophers of science, but they are complex and often hard to follow for those without a proper theological and philosophical background. Finally, authors who write on the topic come to the study of psychology and religion from a variety of academic and personal backgrounds. This makes for wonderful diversity in conversations, but it makes understanding and mastery of the material quite difficult.

Given these problems, why should we try to understand this dialogue? Along with many other scholars, I believe that psychology and religion both have things to say to each other that are mutually beneficial. Psychology offers religion the resources of science to improve the accuracy of its self-understanding and the methods it uses to pursue desired goals. Religion offers psychology a vast store of accumulated wisdom on the nature of the human person and how a good life might be achieved. As each field hears what the other has to say, there is a response or critique, and these are of vital importance as well. For instance, theological responses to psychological theory and research provide valuable corrections that can help the field avoid mistakes and misunderstandings. Accordingly, this book is written from a *dialogical perspective*, looking at some of the important conversations and critiques that have been exchanged between psychologists, theologians and religious practitioners. The word “and” in the title of this book reflects this dialogical aim.

A dialogical approach to psychology and religion carries with it certain assumptions. First, psychology and religion are treated as equal conversation partners that are both worthy of respect. Thus, an attempt must be made to avoid privileging either field in our inquiry. Second, while dialogue produces many fascinating connections it does not produce a structure that fits both areas into a neat system. While psychology and religion have much to say to each other, they are different in their aims and methods, so that discontinuities between the fields will always be present.

While the book has a primary focus on Christianity—and I write from that perspective—Hinduism and especially Buddhism have also contributed greatly to the psychology and religion dialogue. Thus, major sections of the book also discuss information related to these two traditions. Unfortunately, some other major religions have not been well studied by psychologists, and so there is not a coherent body of dialogue available for discussion. Thus, there is very little discussion of Judaism in this book, and only a modest treatment of Islam. Hopefully, theory and research will progress in the future so that these important religious traditions will have a more central place in the conversation with psychology.

The Plan of This Book

The fields of psychology, religion, and spirituality have a vast, rich heritage that is beyond the scope of any single volume or set of volumes. Even the literature on the intersection between psychology and religion is enormous. Accordingly, in a book such as this, hard choices must be made about what to include and how it should be discussed. In general, I have tried to provide a bird's-eye view of the field, indicating important major issues and areas where dialogue is taking place. However, this is a textbook rather than an encyclopedia, so you will not find coverage of all the major writers or research related to psychology, religion and spirituality. Such an undertaking would be neither possible nor desirable in the confines of a single volume. Instead, it is important to be selective and focus on key figures or ideas as a way of introducing various points of view and issues of interest. In order to understand the current state of the dialogue, it is necessary to focus more on recent research findings and understandings of various issues, although older work is also considered when it is relevant to current debates. This includes discussion of research in the sociology and anthropology of religion that is of importance to psychology. Each chapter concludes with a discussion of a key issue or theme that emerges from the psychology and religion dialogue on that topic.

The material in the book falls into several sections. Part I deals with fundamentals in the psychology and religion dialogue. It is very helpful to consider this topic within the context of the larger conversation between science and religion. Thus, there is a chapter that introduces the philosophical concepts (e.g., naturalism, materialism) and historical information (e.g., positivist movements) needed to understand the science and religion relationship, particularly as it has worked itself out with reference to psychology. For those that are unfamiliar with the major religious traditions

addressed in the psychology and religion dialogue, a chapter with a brief review of Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity is also included.

Parts II and III cover basic areas in the psychology and religion dialogue as it has evolved over the past century. Part II also provides an overview of approaches to the topic that are likely to be central in the future, such as the perspectives provided by neuroscience and postmodernism. Part III summarizes material related to the important area of human development, and suggests how new advances in narrative psychology may help us to understand the process of spiritual growth.

Part IV deals with the practical applications of the psychology and religion dialogue. Religion and psychology share a concern with the quality of human existence. They hope to offer guidance to people seeking to find meaningful, fulfilled and even happy lives. Thus, a final goal of this book is to harness theory and empirical research in the service of practical applications. How can we in the 21st century build positive communities? In what ways can we help individuals deal with challenges and develop richly satisfying lives? The concluding chapters of this book will attempt to begin sketching out answers to these questions.

A difficult problem is how to handle terminology and references, which for this topic must come from a number of fields. For the most part, references utilize the system developed by the American Psychological Association, although this is not always ideal when referring to philosophical or theological works. Multiple author citations have been abbreviated somewhat in the text, although the full citation can still be found in the reference list. A glossary is included at the end of the book that provides quick definitions of terms as they are typically used by psychologists, theologians, and religious studies scholars.

The primary task of a book such as this is to present ideas that have been influential in the dialogue between psychology and religion. Once we have these ideas in front of us, the next critical task is to evaluate the value of these ideas and the evidence that supports them. This is important, as the ideas of many influential figures in the dialogue (e.g. Freud, Fromm) have little or no evidence to support them, while other less-known ideas appear on examination to be very attractive. However, evaluation is not easily done. A systematic critique of theories requires agreement on how they should be evaluated and a body of theoretical discussion or evidence relevant to the task. Unfortunately, one or both of these things is often missing in the science and religion dialogue. Scholars in different fields such as social psychology and religious studies often disagree on what constitutes evidence in support of a position. For instance, scientists often insist upon the presence of empirical data to support a theory, while a theologian might argue that other kinds of evidence are more relevant and persuasive. There is also much variability in the quantity and quality of critique directed at different positions. Some theories—even good ones—have been the target of extensive critiques, while others have received little criticism even when there is little data to support them. So while evaluative sections have been included in situations where there has been a lot of scholarly discussion about the worth of a particular theory or position, it has not always been possible to offer an extensive critique of every theory. Absence of a critique does not mean a position is “proven” and presence of a critique does not mean a view has

no value. Much remains to be done to evaluate the worth of the many strands in the psychology and religion dialogue.

The Community Behind the Book, with Thanks

Any writer is indebted to many people both past and present. One of the most painful parts of writing the book has been the need to cover rich systems of thought and lifetimes of study by many fine people in a few sentences. Thus, both thanks and apologies are due to colleagues. Hopefully this book will motivate the reader to pick up and read the original sources and authors involved in the psychology and religion dialogue.

Many of my students have contributed to this book in important ways. John Unrath did some of the background research for Chapter 12, and Mark Burek contributed some suggestions on Chapter 13. Kathryn Alfrey, Lisa Daube, Katie Patrick, Marla Tiebert, and Kathy Berg did much of the typing, editing and cross-checking of the reference list, a significant job in a book of this type. Julie Hamaide, Erin Westerman, and Jennifer Zimmer read large portions of the text and commented on them from a student point of view, suggesting improvement to make the book more user friendly. They also worked with Chrystal Frey and Anthony Nelson in helping to assemble the glossary. Catherine Renken and Megan Berning assisted in the production of the index. Several of my psychology and religion classes at Valparaiso University and in China have also endured earlier versions of the chapters in this book and made helpful suggestions.

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Finally, I must acknowledge my faith community and my family, especially my wife Jeanne and children Anthony and Teresa, who warmly supported me during the incessant reading and periodic writing that went into this book.

Indiana, USA

James M. Nelson

Disclaimer

Although this book treats a number of important personal and mental health issues, it is not intended as a volume to provide spiritual or psychological guidance to people in distress. Individuals struggling with these problems should seek help from qualified religious and psychological professionals.

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