

**FRASER WATTS**

## **Psychology, Religion & Theology – A Response to Malcolm Jeeves**

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Malcolm Jeeves has presented a very interesting sample of the rich harvest of empirical findings about religion that psychology has been garnering, and shown that the relationship between psychology and religion is sometimes in conflict, sometimes convergent. What I want to do in this response is to stand back from the details and try to offer a fuller conceptual framework that will help in understanding the interface between psychology and religion.

First, it is helpful to emphasise the distinction between theology and the study of religion. Theology is the rational reflection of religious traditions such as Christianity, and a core task of theology is reflection on the ‘doctrines’ of Christianity in relation to contemporary culture. In contrast, the study of religion developed in the latter part of the nineteenth century, and saw religion as a phenomenon to be studied in as detached, neutral and scientific a way as possible. This distinction between theology and religious studies is relevant here because each has a distinct relation to psychology; it leads us to distinguish the dialogue between theology and psychology from that of the psychological study of religion. It is clear that psychology is one of the disciplines studying religion scientifically. However, there is also a dialogue between theology and psychology,<sup>1</sup> which has a place within the broader dialogue between theology and the sciences.

Malcolm Jeeves’ lecture is mainly concerned with the dialogue between theology and psychology. Partly it is concerned with their different views about human nature in general, including issues such as mind-brain relations and the nature of morality; partly it is concerned with the dialogue between theology and psychology about religion itself, and here it draws on recent empirical work in the psychology of religion. I will comment separately on each of these, starting with the general dialogue between theology and psychology about human nature.

### **Perspectives on human nature**

Each science seems to interface with Christian doctrine rather selectively. For example, cosmology intersects chiefly with creation and eschatology. Psychology has its main interface with the theology of human nature, ‘theological anthropology’ as it is called. It is not that psychology intersects exclusively with theological anthropology. The discourse between psychology and theologi-

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1 Watts, F. *Theology and Psychology*, Aldershot: Ashgate (2002).

cal anthropology then serves as a sort of gateway through which psychology is able to interact with the rest of the doctrinal spectrum.

In a recent editorial in *Zygon*,<sup>2</sup> I argued that the dialogue between theology and the human sciences (such as psychology) has a particularly important place in the general dialogue between theology and the sciences. First, the methodology of the human sciences is closer to that of theology, which leads to a richer and more fruitful interface between the two disciplines. Psychology is a methodological hybrid, partly a natural science, partly an interpretative or hermeneutic discipline. It can therefore provide a methodological bridge between the detached methodology of the natural sciences and the interpretative methodology of theology. Second, the human sciences connect with a broad range of topics in Christian doctrine, such as soteriology and ecclesiology, whereas the dialogue between theology and the natural sciences seldom strays beyond creation and providence. Thirdly, because psychology includes the study of religion, there is a particularly interesting dialogue between psychology and theology about religion itself.

One important issue about human nature concerns the human constitution – the relationship between body and soul. There are important antecedents in the Hebraic thought of the Old Testament for seeing the human being as an ‘ensouled body’. Though some later Christian thought takes a more dualistic view of human nature that is not the view of the Old Testament. The New Testament view is more debatable, though Green<sup>3</sup> has put forward a convincing case that it also is not dualistic.

The important question for those concerned with the dialogue between neuroscience and theology is how far this biblical view can be reconciled with that of contemporary neuroscience. It is important here to make a distinction between the scientific data itself and the prevailing assumptions about how it should be interpreted, that is, the ‘metaphysics’ about human nature with which the data are intertwined. It seems hard to doubt that the prevailing assumptions of neuroscience are reductionist; it is assumed that the higher aspects of human nature, whether soul, mind or spirit, are to be explained in terms of the physical. However, it is much less clear that the scientific data necessitates such an interpretive framework.

As Jeeves points out, various non-reductionist solutions to the mind-body problem are being touted, the most prominent in the theology-and-science community being the non reductive physicalism of Nancy Murphy, and the emergentism of Philip Clayton. However, I have much sympathy with the alternative approach that Malcolm Jeeves himself takes on these matters, in terms of

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2 Watts, F. ‘Does primacy belong to the human sciences?’ *Zygon* (2007) Vol. 42, no. 2, 807 – 811.

3 Green, J.B. ‘Bodies – That is, human lives: A re-examination of human nature in the Bible’, in Brown, W.S., Murphy, N. & Malony, H.N. *Whatever Happened to the Soul? Scientific and Theological Portraits of Human Nature*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press (1998), pp.149-174.

dual-aspect monism. Jeeves proposes an ‘irreducible intrinsic independence’ between the mental and physical by which he means that neither can be reduced to the other. He suggests that there is an important duality to be recognised between them, but not one of substance dualism. Jeeves evidently sees nothing in neuroscientific data that is incompatible with dual-aspect monism. The conclusion I draw from this is that the neuroscience data are compatible with a variety of metaphysical assumptions about human nature, and do not necessitate the physical reductionism that prevails among neuroscientists. The mutual interdependence between the mental and physical that Jeeves proposes reminds me, in some ways, of the two-way reductionism proposed by Michael Arbib and Mary Hesse<sup>4</sup> in their Gifford lectures.

The trouble with emergentism, from a theological point of view, as Philip Clayton points out with admirable honesty in the final chapter of his book on mind and emergence<sup>5</sup> is that, while it may be possible to harmonise an emergentist view of the human mind with theological anthropology, it is not possible to take an emergentist view of the mind of God within any remotely orthodox Christian theology. It is a limited gain to find an approach to mind-body questions that can be reconciled with the theological and anthropological, if it has to be abandoned when we come to the doctrine of God. I have a growing suspicion that Malcolm Jeeves’ dual-aspect monism can be reconciled with systematic theology in a more satisfactory and comprehensive way than either non-reductive physicalism or emergentism.

I also want to support what Jeeves says about the distinctive aspects of human altruism, and to set that in the general context of issues about human distinctiveness. It is very difficult to take a balanced view of what is distinctive about human nature. Those with theological motivations are inclined to take a strong view of human distinctiveness. On the other hand, atheists tend to minimise human distinctiveness, and to emphasise continuity between humans and other animals. However, if you scratch below the surface there are more complex debates going on among secular thinkers than those initial generalisations would suggest. Herbert Spencer, in the nineteenth century, saw human ethics as a product of evolution, but the agnostic Thomas Huxley argued against that position. There are comparable debates in twentieth century sociology about evolution and culture, with E O Wilson wanting to see all human cultural phenomena as determined by evolution, whereas Richard Dawkins, in *The Selfish Gene*, quietly abandons Wilson’s position, clearly sensing that it is a lost cause, and invents the idea of memes to fill the gap.

I wish that we could escape the pull of religious or atheistic motivation on questions of human distinctiveness, and I suggest two propositions on which I

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4 Arbib, M.A. & Hesse, M.B. *The Construction of Reality*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1986).

5 Clayton, P. *Mind and Emergence: From Quantum to Consciousness*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2006).

hope it may be possible to secure general agreement, regardless of religious viewpoint. One is that all the higher aspects of human beings, their 'soul' qualities, have antecedents in higher animals. The second is that many of these qualities are developed to a much greater degree in humans than other animals, so that they become qualitatively different. I have no doubt that Jeeves is right to emphasise both the evolutionary antecedents of human altruism and also that human altruism is qualitatively different from that found in animals. As Jeeves emphasises, understanding morality is something that requires a balanced and integrative view of the bodily, personal and social aspects of human nature. Social neuroscience is an important step in this direction.

### **Perspectives on religion**

I turn now to the dialogue between theology and psychology about religion itself. It is worth noting that theology is rather ambivalent about 'religion'. Jesus, as presented in the synoptic Gospels, is iconoclastic about the religion of his day. In the twentieth century theologians such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer have been unenthusiastic about many aspects of religion and have welcomed the dawn of what they saw as 'religionless Christianity'. There has been a noticeable shift in public attitudes, away from religion and towards a more free-floating spirituality. The psychology of religion has begun to make an effort to broaden its scope to include the psychology of spirituality as well.

Many key figures in the psychology of religion have emphasised the religion of the individual as something essentially private. William James, for example, begins his definition of religious experience by talking about it as the 'experience of individual men in their solitude'. There is no necessity for the psychology of religion to adopt this individualising perspective, but in practice a good deal of the psychology of religion has done so. Religion is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon that includes beliefs, experiences, practices (public and private) and moral and social behaviour. The psychological study of religion needs to take a broad view of religious life that includes biological, individual and social aspects of human nature.

The recent wave of research on the brain and religion has been almost entirely American. A helpful volume edited by Patrick McNamara<sup>6</sup> takes stock of what has been achieved so far. It is an area of research that I believe will ultimately produce interesting and important findings. However, like Malcolm Jeeves, I am sceptical – perhaps even more so than him – about what has been achieved so far. Brain scanning technology has been crucial to recent advances in neuroscience. However, it has severe limitations. Scanning research is usually restricted to very small sample sizes, from which secure generalisations

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6 McNamara, P. 'Where God and Science Meet: How Brain and Evolutionary Studies Alter Our Understanding of Religion', *The Neurology of Religious Experience*, Westport Conn: Praeger (2006) Vol. 2.

cannot be made, given the enormous differences between people in religiousness. Also, the forms of religious experience and activity that can be studied by scanning techniques are highly restricted. They don't allow us to build anything approaching a broad-based psychology of religious life, but just focus on a few specialised activities such as meditation. Religious life is so complex and multifaceted that it seems likely that most areas of the brain will be involved in some way or other. So, the proper question is not where religion is located in the brain, but rather how different aspects of religious life and experience can be mapped on to different areas of the brain.

The methodological problems are huge. Though we will probably eventually make headway with them, it will be a slow and difficult business, and there should not be too much excitement about early findings. My own scientific instinct would be to concentrate first on the cognitive systems involved in religion before looking for their neural basis. To try to go straight from religion to the brain, without mediation through cognitive psychology, has only a slim chance of paying off.

Very different conclusions have been drawn from the growing evidence linking particular parts of the brain and forms of religious activity. For some, knowing the role of the brain in religion permits reductionist conclusions. The assumption is that if religion can be explained in terms of neural activity, no other explanation is necessary. However, that conclusion can only be justified if Ockham's razor is applied in a simplistic way. The search for simple, elegant explanations seems to be a useful guide to the truth in the physical sciences. However, in the human sciences, where explanations are almost always complex and multi-faceted, Ockham's razor is decidedly unhelpful. There is a huge gulf between *determining* the role of the brain in religion, and *demonstrating* that no other factors are relevant. The latter is, of course, impossible to establish. So, the neuropsychology of religion does nothing whatsoever to settle the question of whether and how God is involved.

Others have used research findings on the brain and religion to establish a new kind of religionism; Andrew Newberg, for example, remarks that his data showed that his subject's mystical experiences were 'biologically, observably, and scientifically real'.<sup>7</sup> Of course, the biological data confirm that something was really happening, but that is a modest claim; they do not demonstrate the validity of religion experience. Knowing the role of the brain in religion no more establishes the reality of religious experience than it proves the reductionist's claim that religious experience is nothing more than an epiphenomenon of neural activity. In a similar way, I suspect that William James, when he embarked on research for his *Varieties of Religious Experience*, imagined that he could provide scientific support for religion by studying religion scientifi-

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7 Newberg, A., d'Aquili, E.G. & Rause, V. *Why God won't go away: brain science and the biology of belief*, New York: Ballantine Books (2001), p. 7.

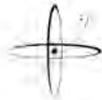
cally. In the end, he seems to have recognised that he had not succeeded in doing so.

The psychological study of religion has often offered a critical perspective on religion. I suggest that is something that religious people should welcome. Religious experience and activity is very mixed, some healthy and some unhealthy, some authentic but some inauthentic. Theology, as I have already said, is far from having an uncritical enthusiasm for religion. A discriminating approach is called for, and the critical perspective of psychology can help with that. For example, Freud suggested that people's concepts of God can be a human projection, and subsequent research has supported that view. I don't draw from that the reductionist conclusion that God is nothing more than a projection of the human mind, but I welcome having my attention drawn to how concepts of God can be constrained and distorted by psychological processes. If psychology can help us to become more properly discriminating about religion, as I believe it can, it can make a very important contribution in the contemporary world.

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