Faith and Psychology: Integration and Application

Leslie J. Francis

The Expository Times 2005 117: 58
DOI: 10.1177/0014524605059878

THE EXPOSITORY TIMES
Volume 117 Number 2

DOI: 10.1177/0014524605059878
http://EXT.sagepub.com

Faith and Psychology: Integration and Application

By REVD PROFESSOR LESLIE J. FRANCIS
Director of the Welsh National Centre for Religious Education
and Professor of Practical Theology, University of Wales, Bangor

This paper examines the relationship between faith and psychology, between theologians and psychologists, and argues that the emerging discipline of empirical theology provides a proper meeting ground for the two fields of intellectual enquiry.

Introduction

The debate between faith and psychology, between theologians and psychologists, is longstanding. The purpose of the present analysis is to suggest that academic tools developed by psychology can and should become part of the academic equipment properly employed within theology. The argument proceeds in five steps. Step one tries to find out what theologians really do and what constitutes the legitimate tools of their trade. Step two assesses whether the kind of tools shaped by psychologists have a legitimate place in the theologians' trade. Step three faces two common objections which render psychology suspect to some theologians. Step four introduces the notion of empirical theology as a way of doing theology, employing psychological methods in what I shall refer to as both an intradisciplinary and interdisciplinary manner. Step five spells out some of the applications of this approach for practical theology, concentrating specifically on the areas of preaching, congregational life, and clergy burnout.

What is a theologian?

Maurice Wiles began his classic book *What is Theology* by drawing an analogy with another 'ology', the discipline of geology.[1] Etymologically speaking, at least, the geologist is concerned with studying the *earth*. Simplistically speaking, at least, the subject matter of the geologists' trade is easy to identify. It is there to be seen and to be examined. The geologists' tools-in-trade are whatever comes to hand, so to speak, that enable the earth to be examined and analysed, that enable the phenomena to be described and the hypotheses to be tested. I, like Maurice Wiles, picture the geologist being at home with hammer and chisel. My colleague, the professor of geology, tells me that it is a little more sophisticated than that. Nonetheless, the simple point holds good that hammer and chisel were not first invented by geologists for the discipline of geology. They were borrowed and brought in from other fields, as it were. Here is an example of intradisciplinary activity.

For Maurice Wiles the discipline of theology is much less tangible, much more elusive than the discipline of geology. While the subject matter of concern to the geologist is *earth*, the subject matter of concern to the theologian is *God*. While earth can be put under the microscope, so to speak, it is altogether more problematic to treat God in the same way. At first glance, neither microscope, nor hammer and chisel, seem much use in examining matters of theological concern.

While etymologically speaking, the subject matter of theology is God, in practice theologians generally find themselves studying something somewhat different, but of considerable importance, namely the human experience of God. Christian theology, generally understood, is concerned with testing the coherence of the ways in which the experience of God is formulated, discussed, and communicated. The key notion in the Christian tradition concerns revelation, the way in which God is revealed and made known to men and women. What counts as revelation, however, is itself a highly debated issue, as is also the subjectivity of the recipients of revelation.

[1] M. Wiles, *What is Theology?* (Oxford University Press, 1976).

Different understandings of revelation may in themselves generate different branches of theology, and different branches of theology properly require different tools. A primary source of Christian revelation is seen to reside in the canon of scripture. The bible itself is well-established in the corridors of the departments of theology. The professor of biblical studies has no need to fight for a place on the faculty board. Yet, under closer examination, the tools employed by the biblical theologians are by no means unique to their trade. My colleagues who teach Old Testament Hebrew or New Testament Greek are no more than escapees from the department of ancient languages, now vested in sheep's clothing. My colleagues who examine the texts of the bible have at their disposal an enormous range of tools, all fashioned in other trades. Such tools have been adapted and applied in an intradisciplinary sense within theology itself. The mistake has occurred when theologians lose touch with the disciplines from which they have borrowed (or stolen) their tools and fail to send their tools back for regular maintenance, modification, and quality assurance.

The Bible, however, is only one source of revelation recognized within the broader Christian community. For many within the Trinitarian tradition, God the Father revealed in the Old Testament is identical with God the Son revealed in the New Testament. God the Father and God the Son, in their turn, are continuous with God the Holy Spirit continuing with revelation in and through the community of faith, the Church. Taking such perspectives seriously draws in the proper theological activity of historical theology and systematics, and draws in an even wider range of tools, tools borrowed widely from other disciplines (including particularly history and philosophy).

Another source of revelation acknowledged by many is encompassed by the notion of natural theology. If the theology of creation is taken seriously, it is hard to ignore the potential for learning about the creator from respectful study of the creation. Many biblical writers (including the Psalmist and St Paul, to note but two examples) opened their eyes and discerned the hand of the creator behind and beyond the creation itself. Now if the theology of creation is taken seriously and the potential of natural revelation is positively evaluated, perhaps it is not too fanciful to maintain that even our friendly geologist may be examining with hammer and chisel data that are of considerable significance to some proper and serious theologians. (This certainly proved to be the case in the nineteenth-century debate between science and religion over the doctrine of creation). Now if geologists are allowed access to the theological academy, how about letting psychologists in as well?

What is a psychologist?

If etymology suggests that God provides the subject matter for theologians, it leads us to suspect that the mind provides the subject matter for psychologists. In many ways, the mind can be as elusive as God. Just as different branches of theology (say biblical, historical, systematic) are pursued in different ways, each with its own distinctive and peculiar tools-in-trade, so psychology is a multifaceted discipline.

I plan to illustrate the debate between theology and psychology by drawing on one particular facet of this multifaceted discipline, namely personality psychology. But even this field is too large and too diverse to be treated as a single coherent area. Within such a large field I plan to focus on the tradition known as personality and individual differences, the psychometric assessment of personality. It is a tradition shaped in the United Kingdom by pioneers like Hans Eysenck[2] (who speaks of three major dimensions of personality) and in the United States of America by pioneers like Raymond Cattell[3] (who speaks of sixteen key personality factors). It is a tradition largely influenced today by the Big Five Factor model.[4] It is a tradition popularized among many churches by the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator.[5]

Clearly the concept of personality is complex.[6] In essence it is an attempt to make sense of what may seem at first glance to be the randomness of human behaviour and human preference. But suppose that

[2] H. J. Eysenck and M. W. Eysenck, *Personality and Individual Differences: a natural science approach* (Plenum Press, 1985).

[3] R. B. Cattell, H. W. Eber and M. M. Tatsuoka, *Handbook for the Sixteen Personality Factor Questionnaire (16PF)* (Institute for Personality and Ability Testing, 1970).

[4] P. T. Costa and R. R. McCrae, *The NEO Personality Inventory* (Psychological Assessment Resources, 1985).

[5] I. B. Myers and M. H. McCaulley, *Manual: a guide to the development and use of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator* (Consulting Psychologists Press, 1985).

[6] See, for example, R. Hogan, J. Johnson and S. Briggs (eds.), *Handbook of Personality Psychology* (Academic Press, 1997); D. C. Funder, *The Personality Puzzle* (W. W. Norton, 1997).

there really are basic individual differences like introversion and extraversion which shape in a very real way who we are and who we become, is not this important information about being human? Suppose we were to discover that extraverts (those who learn best working in groups and through talking with other people) do better at primary school than introverts (those who learn best working alone and needing quiet for concentration), and suppose that such findings were connected with the way in which primary schools are designed to favour an extravert way of learning. Is not that important information about deep-rooted discrimination? Individual differences giving rise to ageism, sexism, and racism may be but the tip of the iceberg.

The real rationale for theologians to take personality psychology seriously, however, comes once again from the doctrine of creation. The doctrine of creation claims not only that God created the universe (in one way or another, since the doctrine of creation needs to be sharply separated from the teaching of creationism), but that men and women were created in God's own image. According to a doctrine of creation grounded in Genesis 1:27:[7]

> God created humankind in his image,
> in the image of God he created them;
> male and female he created them.

Now this precise doctrinal formulation is of key concern to the personality psychologist for two reasons.

The first reason is that the doctrine of creation suggests that real theological insight can be generated into the nature of the creator by examining the human creature created in the very image of the creator. Three other classic Christian doctrines need to be brought into play, however, to assess and to qualify such a claim. The doctrine of the fall reminds us that, while created in the image of God, men and women live and grow with that image marred by sin. The doctrine of the incarnation reminds us that in Christ the image can be seen unsullied by sin. The doctrine of salvation reminds us that, through God's grace, we are being fashioned into the fullness of Christ. Clearly psychological data on human personality needs to be properly filtered through wider theological critique before new insights can be claimed into the nature of God.

[7] New Revised Standard Version.

The second reason is that the doctrine of creation asserts the divine intentionality of individual differences. If men and women were created in the image of God, individual differences were affirmed and valued right from the outset. If sex differences are part of God's divine plan, perhaps other individual differences are equally central to the divine plan, and perhaps the personality psychologist is, after all, dealing with data that are of primary theological concern.

Confronting suspicion

There are two common objections to the proposal that personality psychology has a part to play in proper theological enquiry.

The first objection is based on the view that the scientific classification of individuals (according to personality dimensions, personality factors, and psychological types) degrades and undervalues human individuality. The problem is that this objection misunderstands the level at which personality psychology is operating, and undervalues what is already known and valued about the regular patterns of laws in God's creation. Jesus the parable-teller, by contrast, relied heavily on the recognition of regular patterns in creation and told his followers that the Kingdom of God follows the same pattern. Thus, the laws of natural growth are seen so transparently in the parable of the sower.[8] The sociological laws of group behaviour are seen so transparently in the parable of the guests at the wedding feast.[9] The psychological laws of individual difference are seen so transparently in the parable of the lost son (or better, the two sons).[10] (In Jungian terms the younger son powerfully models extraverted intuition with thinking, while the older son powerfully models introverted sensing with feeling. No wonder the two sons lived in such different worlds.)

The second objection is based on the view that personality theory is deterministic, while the Christian gospel proclaims openness to change and to transformation. This objection confuses the two properly discrete notions of personality and character. Personality refers to the deep level of individual differences which represents the God-given nature of who we are: that element within ourselves that

[8] Mark 4:1-9.
[9] Luke 14:7-11.
[10] Luke 15:11–32.

is largely genetically shaped and not open to radical recasting. It is not acceptable for the gospel of change to preach that women should repent and become men in order to be saved. In enlightened theology women and men are equally accepted, crafted in the image of God. Nor is it acceptable for the gospel of change to preach that people of colour should repent and become white in order to be saved. In enlightened theology all ethnicities are equally accepted, crafted in the image of God. Nor is it acceptable for the gospel of change to preach that introverts should repent and become extraverts in order to be saved. In enlightened theology all personality types are equally accepted, crafted in the image of God.

Jesus, I like to believe, modelled such acceptance of introversion and extraversion when he accepted hospitality at the hands of the contrasting sisters, Mary and Martha. His objection came when Martha pestered him to criticize Mary for failing to be an extravert like herself.[11] The Lucan account of Jesus saying that Mary has 'chosen the better place' may (and I would argue should) be interpreted to mean that Mary has chosen what is appropriate or better *for her*, rather than as authority for the contemplative strand within the Christian tradition to be elevated above the social-engagement strand. After all, it seems clear from the Lucan account that Jesus accepted and rewarded not only the introverted contemplative attention offered by Mary, but also the extraverted social hospitality offered by Martha. Jesus chose to visit, to be welcomed, to be fed and to be entertained, as well as to be appointed conductor of the contemplative retreat.

Now character is a completely different matter. It is character that Paul discusses when he speaks of the fruits of the spirit[12] and when he provides that enticing list of the sins of the flesh.[13] It is character that Jesus describes when he contrasts the Pharisee and the tax collector, both of whom went up to the temple to pray.[14] Far from modelling a deep-seated difference in personality (say introversion and extraversion), the Pharisee and the tax collector model more superficial, but no less significant, differences in character (say pride and humility). The differences in character are more superficial only in the sense that they are closer to the surface of the human psyche, they are shaped by the individual actor (consciously or unconsciously), they carry moral valency, embody moral responsibility, and are subject to radical change. In this encounter Jesus was clear that he affirmed the one approach to life and rejected the other out of hand. Only one of the two men went home standing in the right relationship with God. The other, by implication and by comparison, was challenged to repent, to reformulate his worldview and to reconstruct his character.

The gospel of change, I conclude, is concerned with the remodelling of the flawed character, but with respect for the God-given individual differences in personality.

Empirical theology

The main case which I have argued so far is that tools shaped by psychologists in general (and by personality psychologists in particular) have a proper place in the theologians' tool kit. The case could be allowed to rest at the level of an intradisciplinary activity according to which theologians feel empowered to borrow (or steal) the tools of the psychologist in the pursuit of their own trade. Clearly other branches of theology provide well established precedents over many generations. This model of theology taking into itself theories and methods from the social sciences has been well-argued by Hans van der Ven's pioneering developments in empirical theology in the Catholic University of Nijmegen.[15]

There are, however, dangers in this approach. There are too many examples of theologians employing psychology in ways in which psychologists themselves would fail to recognize their own discipline. Examples at least worth including in this debate might embrace ways in which psychologists have responded to clinical theology, faith development, and some church-related use of Myers-Briggs.

If theologians simply approach psychology from the imperialist perspective of an intradisciplinary approach, only half the dialogue has been considered. In contrast with van der Ven's approach in the Catholic University of Nijmegen, Francis and his colleagues in the University of Wales,

[11] Luke 10:38–42.
[12] Galatians 5:22–23.
[13] Galatians 5:19–21.
[14] Luke 18:9–14.
[15] J. A. van der Ven, *Practical Theology: an empirical approach* (Kok Pharos, 1993); J. A. van der Ven, *Education for Reflective Ministry* (Peeters, 1998).

Bangor insist that empirical theology is pursued not only in an *intra*disciplinary manner, but also in an *inter*disciplinary manner.[16] We do that by subjecting much of our research to the peer-critique of publishing in journals of psychology as well as (or instead of) journals of theology. Developments in empirical theology need also to shape developments in main-line social science research.

Practical application

Once accepted as a proper part of the theologian's tool kit, personality psychology can influence a number of developments in practical theology as well as in other branches of theology. The research team in the practical theology unit at University of Wales, Bangor are currently involved in three pioneering initiatives concerned with preaching, congregational life, and clergy burnout.

Contemporary theories of preaching speak in terms of the hermeneutical dialogue between the text (or the world of the text) and the listener (or the world of the listener).[17] One side of this hermeneutical dialogue, the text of scripture, is clearly informed by the work of biblical theologians. The other side of this hermeneutical dialogue, the subjectivity of the preacher, needs to be equally informed by the work of psychological theology. The Bangor team have proposed one potentially influential theory to address this challenge, characterized as the SIFT method of preaching.[18] Using the Jungian model of psychological type preferences the SIFT method of preaching draws on the four psychological functions of the human mind termed sensing (S), intuition (I), feeling (F), and thinking (T). The SIFT method of preaching addresses the passage of scripture by the four functions of sensing, intuition, feeling, and thinking in turn. The sensing function examines the detail of the passage, the context and the environment. The intuitive function draws imaginative links between the passage of scripture and areas of life or contemporary issues. The feeling function focuses on the human story within, behind, and beyond the passage. The thinking function tackles the issues of theology, truth, and logic raised by the passage.[19]

Contemporary research on congregational life has given considerable attention to church leaving and the motivation to disengage from congregational life.[20] Research in this tradition has drawn attention to the way in which some individuals feel excluded from their congregation because their own psychological preferences are so fundamentally different from the dominant psychological preferences of the congregation as a whole. For example, it may be understandable why the introvert churchgoer fails to feel really at home in the extravert congregation. Building on this theory the Bangor team has set out to establish the psychological profile of church congregations and to examine the satisfaction with congregational life expressed by individuals of varying psychological preferences.[21] The research should lead to greater insight into congregational dynamics and to pastoral strategies which can deal with the reality of what is happening in congregations.

Clergy burnout seems to be a growing problem in many denominations. Clergy burnout is reflected in sickness, in time off work, in early retirement, in marriage breakdown, and in pastoral problems within the parish.[22] The Bangor team has developed and refined measures of clergy burnout, conducted large scale surveys, and begun to model the comparative influence of personal and contextual variables on predicting or precipitating burnout.[23]

[16] M. J. Cartledge, 'Empirical theology: inter- or intra-disciplinary?', *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, vol. 20 (1999), pp. 98–104.

[17] D. Day, J. Astley and L. J. Francis, *A Reader on Preaching: making connections* (Ashgate, 2004).

[18] L. J. Francis, 'Psychological type and biblical hermeneutics: SIFT method of preaching', *Rural Theology*, vol. 1 (2003), pp. 13–23.

[19] L. J. Francis and P. Atkins, *Exploring Luke's Gospel: a guide to the gospel readings in the Revised Common Lectionary* (Mowbray, 2000); *Exploring Matthew's Gospel: a guide to the gospel readings in the Revised Common Lectionary* (Mowbray, 2001); *Exploring Mark's Gospel: an aid for readers and preachers using year B of the Revised Common Lectionary* (Continuum, 2002).

[20] P. Richter and L. J. Francis, *Gone but not Forgotten: church leaving and returning* (Darton, Longman & Todd, 1998).

[21] C. Craig, L. J. Francis, J. Bailey and M. Robbins, 'Psychological types in Church in Wales congregations', *The Psychologist in Wales*, vol. 15 (2003), pp. 18–21; L. J. Francis, B Duncan, C. L. Craig and G. Luffman, 'Type patterns among Anglican congregations in England', *Journal of Adult Theological Education*, vol. 1 (2004), pp. 66–77.

[22] P. Kaldor and R. Bullpitt, *Burnout in Church Leaders* (Openbook, 2001).

[23] L. J. Francis and C. F. J. Rutledge, 'Are rural clergy in the Church of England under greater stress? a study in empirical theology', *Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion*, vol. 11 (2000), pp. 173–91.

More securely grounded information about the precursors of burnout should lead to the development of appropriate interventions designed to lower the overall level of burnout among the clergy.

Conclusion

This paper begun with the intention to re-examine the relationship between faith and psychology, between theologians and psychologists. Then an argument has been advanced in five steps to propose an integration between the two disciplines. The argument has been advanced from the side of theology to maintain that theologians cannot afford to ignore the academic tools of enquiry developed by psychologists which are capable of generating new insights into subject matter of core theological concern. At its best, the argument may be seen as promoting proper interdisciplinary collaboration as well as intradisciplinary development. At its worst, it may be seen as yet another example of theological imperialism.

This paper was first presented as the 2004 Golden Lecture arranged by the Haberdashers' Company at the Priory Church of St Bartholomew the Great, London.

THE LIFE AFTER DEATH – CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDINGS

William J. La Due, *The Trinity Guide to Eschatology* (New York/London: Continuum, 2004. £14.99. pp. 166 (including bibliography and index). ISBN 0–8264–1608–X).

La Due provides an up-to-date accessible overview of the variety of our Christian understanding of life after death (eschatology). Starting with a survey of the biblical and historical data up to the nineteenth century La Due then summarizes the work of twenty-one recent New Testament scholars and systematic theologians prominent in the field, including Bultmann, Tillich, Rahner, Küng, Pannenberg, Moltmann, Hick, Cone, Ruether, and Elizabeth Johnson. The lay-out of the book is clear and easy to engage with. The initial chapter on the Biblical and Historical Background is followed by chapters on twentieth-century thought under the headings: Classic Protestant Approaches to Eschatology, Traditional Catholic Presentations of Eschatology, Other Recent Complementary Visions of Eschatology, Contemporary Protestant Directions in Eschatology, Three divergent voices (Macquarrie, Suchocki, and Hick) and finally Orthodox, Liberationist and Feminist Theologians.

For anyone who wants to understand more about this key aspect of Christian faith, La Due's book is to be highly recommended. The breadth of coverage that La Due provides is impressive yet without overwhelming the reader, and an interested adult reader with no prior knowledge in the subject will be able to engage with the material as effectively as a theological student already familiar with the contours of the subject. This due in great part to La Due's command and adeptness with the material and his ability to seamlessly convey the various scholars positions, questions, and usefully their own academic context and backgrounds. La Due offers a balanced and evenhanded survey of the subject that is both readable and scholarly.

Two useful features of the book are the references provided at the end of each chapter and La Due's brief section of 'observations' at the end of each chapter. These observations provide a clear summary of the key points to consider from the surveyed contributions. Reading these observations in sequence provides a useful 'lie of the land' of the book and in this, if you choose, a helpful overview to then engage with the main content itself.

What comes over reading this book is the range of responses and questions raised in the attempts through the centuries of attempting to articulate a Christian understanding of the last things. This is the great strength of the book that it opens up the discussion and the various, and at times often conflicting answers, without attempting to force any particular 'answer' on the reader. What this allows the reader is the ability and freedom to read, reflect and take further his or her own thoughts on the subject, substantially informed by historical and current theological reflection.

CHRIS BARR
New College, University of Edinburgh