2016 Proceedings: Religious Values

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Reynolds Symposium
2016 PROCEEDINGS

Religious Values:
Paving the Way to Global Christian Citizenship
Proceedings of the
Reynolds Symposium: September 16-17, 2016

Psychology and Social Work:
Where is God in the Social Sciences?

John W. McCoy, Reynolds Chair and Compiler

Southern Adventist University
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The first annual Reynolds Symposium, titled “The Next Generation: Will It Be Adventist? Mining [Qualitative] Data from the Adventist Connection Study” was held September 21, 2013, on the campus of Southern Adventist University, Collegedale, Tennessee. The Symposium was hosted and organized by the Reynolds Chair, under the oversight of Southern Adventist University’s School of Education and Psychology. The Reynolds Chair is a position established by Maurine Reynolds in honor of her parents, for the purpose of providing quality research and instruction in the area of religion and values at Southern Adventist University.

The second annual Reynolds Symposium was held September 19-20, 2014, again on the campus of Southern Adventist University. The theme was “Music and Art Instruction: Promotion of Religion and Values or Just an Added Value to Higher Education?”

The third annual Reynolds Symposium was held September 18-19, 2015 on the campus of Southern Adventist University. The theme was “Religious Values: Paving the Way to Global Christian Citizenship.” Featured academic departments were English, History, and Modern Languages. Opening this Symposium was the quartet from the music department, Ineffibilis.

The fourth annual Reynolds Symposium was held September 16-17, 2016 in the amphitheater of Hulsey Wellness Center at Southern Adventist University. The theme, “Where is God in the Social Sciences?” was explored by the psychology and social work departments. Music was provided through Scott Ball and Ken Parsons in the music department.

Social work has received both good and not so good reviews among conservative Christians. Some see it as enabling; others view it as helping people get back on their feet. Matthew 25 sets the foundation of social work and social justice by “helping the least of these”. Psychology has been hit particularly hard by the church because of early proponents such as Freud and B.F. Skinner, along with the use of hypnotism to treat patients. But this weekend we found out there are many psychological tenets in the Bible and Ellen White stated, “The true principals of psychology are found in the scriptures.” What is taking place in our classrooms at Southern Adventist University to respond to Jesus’ words in Matthew? This weekend attendees found out just what is happening across campus.

The Symposium began Friday evening with a duel presentation by husband and wife team of Tron and Kristie Wilder. Entitled “Psychology and Social Work as a Calling”, the couple presented similar yet somewhat divergent ideas relative to the calling.

Sabbath morning, we enjoyed the contemporary music of Aren Bruce and Friends who made their second appearance at the Reynolds Symposium. Following them, a string quartet provided classical selections that highlighted the wonderful talent we have at Southern, both contemporary and classical.

Following this, we heard from Lorri Merchant from the Social Work department. Lorri entitled her presentation “Immanuel, God is with Social Work”. At first, this might ruffle the feathers of the
psychology advocates but she approached it from a social justice standpoint. God truly is with the people whose profession touches others, simply adopting the message of “doing unto the least of these”.

Psychology would not be outdone, particularly with the title “Modern Psychology and the Bible: Strange Bed-Fellows?” Ruth Williams from the psychology department supported her talk with not only biblical references to psychology but supportive statements from Ellen White as well.

The Social Work Department, under the direction of Professor Corneliu Rusu, provided a spirited panel discussion with three students: one from psychology and two from social work, answering the same questions but from their unique perspectives. It was evident that these students selected their areas of study in order to better the lives of those with whom they plan to work.

Then it was up to Professor Doug Tilstra from the School of Education and Psychology to summarize the proceedings. One might wonder how Professor Tilstra would pull together two departments what could be somewhat competitive and how would he approach any possible tension. However, the common theme of Christian witness, addressing social justice, and living a life of service to others all show that God truly is in the social sciences.

I appreciate the history of the Reynolds Chair that Burt Coolidge brings each year to the Reynolds Symposium. His foresight and leadership in providing for the direction of the Reynolds Chair has been invaluable. I am thankful to Kristie Wilder and Ruth Williams, Chairs of the Social Work and Psychology departments, respectively. Many thanks also, for the tireless work of Zakeya Sisco for her work in putting together the collection of proceedings from each presenter. I am also thankful for the students who provided music on Friday and Sabbath morning and to Scott Ball and Ken Parsons of the music department for making this happen. Thank you to all who attended this annual event. I pray that you were blessed by what you experienced.

John W. McCoy, Ed.D.
Reynolds Chair
September, 2016.
"Tell us about your feeling of calling to the profession you have decided to embrace?"

"Social work had always been an interest of mine since I first started college. However, after becoming a Christian and deciding to go to Southern, God actually brought me here thinking I was going to be a pastor in the traditional sense. It was through some divine interventions that I realized I had actually been called to go into social work. Once there was a moment, where I was sitting in English class there was a text being spoken about. It was the text in James that talks about pure religion is visiting the fatherless and the widows, and it was like a light went off in my head. It was a deciding moment for me to change majors, and it was here through this field I would fulfill my calling."

"As a psychologist/counselor in training, I do feel as though I have been called into this field. My experience in particular that led me to this revelation took place during my senior year of high school. One of my closest friends had a family member who was being detained at the detention center in downtown Miami. I decided to support her and her family through this transitional period by attending one of their visitation sessions. I stood in line amongst many family members and friends who were waiting to see their loved one for a 30-minute time slot.

As I waited, I began to engage myself in conversation with these individuals who were all linked through their emotional pain. One family, in particular, stood out to me the most. They could very well be the reason why I chose psychology and pursuing to emphasize in children.
This family consisted of three young children (i.e. 10, 7, and 3 years old). As I got to know them better, I noticed how these children were suffering psychologically. They witnessed officers kick down the doors of their safe home and taking their mother. They could not comprehend why their mother could not go back home with them and had to wear an orange jumpsuit or could not be affectionate towards them, or why she was crying when she saw them, etc. These children could have benefited from a psychological intervention to help them understand the complexities of their situation. Therefore, I took an interested in psychology to help both adults and children transition through the tough situations life tend to place us in."

(Cornel) "How was your faith affected by being part of your academic program?"

(Thomas) "It has been strengthening. Social work is a field where your beliefs will be put to the test and you have to decide what being a Christian social worker is and what that is going to look like in your life. It has been both a challenging and rewarding process."

(Thiffany) "I actually appreciated my time at Southern’s undergraduate psychology program, each class was open with not only with prayer but each worship thought clued in how Christ could be seen in the realm of psychology. For instance, Dr. Williams will give a worship thought on how statistics was found in the bible or Dr. Wilder would tie in how the construct being studied in social psychology was seen within the context of a biblical story or verse. As a psychology major our duty is to study human behavior. Within this context, not only did I learn more about the unique and complex design of the created but I also learned more about the Creator. How He has given us the power of reasoning and understanding to the complexities of how our mind and body works physiologically. Within this science God is recognized."

(Cornel) "Why there is so much suspicion in the church about psychology and other social sciences?"

(Thomas) "There is a legitimate fear that someone could go into the field of social sciences a Christian
and come out something else. There are theories in the social science that could be considered to go directly against what Christianity teaches; likewise, there are theories that tend to help legitimize a Christian worldview. It is up the Christian to decide how they will process this information and ultimately how it will affect them.”

(Thiffany) “In my experiences I have seen three prominent reasons for the church to have suspicion about psychology and other social sciences. The first is the notion of hypnosis and mind reading. When I tell others that I am a psychology major the first comment I receive is “Oh, so you must be able to read my mind?” This is not a talent or skill that I or any other psychologists/person possesses. Instead we make inferences based on your tone of voice, body language, physical appearance, etc. Yes, hypnosis is part of the history of psychology and may still be used today by trained professionals. However, hypnosis is not the essence of psychology, it is simply one method used to study human behavior that only a few psychologist use.

Secondly, the terms meditation and mindfulness tend to be negatively associated within the conservative Christian community. Many times meditation and mindfulness is illustrated as the opening of the mind which is considered dangerous and an open invitation for evil spirits to inhabit the mind. However, meditation and mindfulness is the practice of engaging in self-awareness and can include spiritual awareness. As Christians, we can meditate and use mindfulness practices in our daily prayer time and biblical scriptures search.

Lastly, as psychologists we are trained to help those who have been out-casted by society and even our own church without judgment. We are the hands and feet of Jesus in a world that condemn, persecute, and outcast those who need the most help, love, and understanding. In our churches it may be seen that if we counsel individuals from the homosexual community or women who have aborted their baby we automatically agree with
their way of living. However, this is not necessarily true. We are not in this field to impose our beliefs and values, instead we are here to support those who are in need. We may be the only form of Jesus they may ever see and it is our duty to treat them with dignity, respect, and love.”

(Cornel) “Is there a difference between the way SDA approaches social sciences and the Christian Right in the USA?”

(Thomas) “Yes, historically SDA will oppose any legislation that does not either protect the freedom of belief or legislation that appears to mingle church and state. It is in the legislation that we have to keep a watchful eye on.”

(Cornel) “As a Christian Psychologist/Social Worker working in a secular environment where one’s belief is the minority, how do we navigate working professionally while also upholding our beliefs? Is there a conflict?”

(Thomas) “Being honest and straightforward about your beliefs and boundaries could help to relieve the possible tension that could arise. Self-awareness is crucial to understanding your place inside the larger scheme of things. At times, you might have to be comfortable being the only person in the room that believes the way that you do, and that is ok. Examine your thoughts and beliefs carefully and choose where you work prayerfully and wisely. Transparency and honesty are always the key to navigation.”

(Thiffany) “I believe that my beliefs are what have shaped me to be a good psychologist/counselor in training by providing me with the building blocks to build my character. I strongly believe in the statement, “actions speak louder than words.” There may not be a need for me to preach about God verbally in the workplace. But rather my actions will prompt others to engage in conversation with me about how different my actions may be compared to the normal standards. Therefore, I believe that there should not be a conflict in the workforce
surrounded by beliefs so long as we continue to show the characteristics of Christ to our co-workers and clients.”

* Carolita Claus was unable to provide her manuscript for publishing.
Due to the perceived secular nature of the fields of Psychology and Social Work, many Christians have dismissed these disciplines as humanistic endeavors, espousing a belief that they are somehow in conflict with Biblical principles (Looy, 2013). This thinking is likely based on interpretations of Biblical scriptures such as 1 Corinthians 2:14, which states “The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God” (New International Version), 1 Corinthians 3:19, “the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God’s sight”, and John 2:25, which affirms that Jesus “did not need human testimony about [humans], for He knew what was in them.” Some interpret these texts to indicate that Christians do not need human disciplines in order to address the struggles of humanity.

Still, many Christian universities offer programs in Psychology and Social Work and many students pursue degrees in those fields. Some Christian students who have chosen to major in Psychology or Social Work may at times experience cognitive dissonance because of the secular nature of these fields. In fact, this was the experience of one student at Southern Adventist University (SAU) many years ago. He came in his Research Design & Statistics class and declared that he was changing his major from Psychology to English after a conversation with his mother in which she indicated that Psychology was “of the devil.” Similarly, years after graduating and working in the field, one Psychology graduate from SAU had the experience of speaking with some of his friends who were
working in church ministry declare that psychologists and social workers were in the business of doing "soul work" and that this work should be left only to Pastors, Chaplains, and Bible Workers.

For those who have grown up in a Christian home and have attended church regularly, the concept of helping others is not only taught, it is expected. This can be defined many different ways – to help the elderly in church; to help the outcast at school; to help mom with chores; to help missionaries by sending them money; to help in whatever ways one can. Like so many raised in Christian homes, each of these and various other deeds were instilled at a young age, forming a philosophical (and biblical) basis of loving others as Christ loved. For social workers and psychologists, career and calling often intersect, with students choosing these majors because they want to serve their fellow man in one of the helping professions. However, due to the perceptions of these fields, some may feel a certain dissonance similar to the student described above about whether or not God would call his people to work in one of these professions.

Often times, students pursuing an education at a Christian university struggle to understand the relationship between their calling and the perception that serving clients well requires a bifurcation of their professional and religious identities. Students choose to attend faith-based programs with the expectation that they will receive a distinctively Christian education as well as an environment in which to nurture and develop the calling of God on their lives. A starting place for developing students' commitment to practices that nurture moral development and excellence is the exploration of students' individual callings into careers in social work and psychology. Perhaps the experiences of students studying in a faith-based social work program can best illustrate how their faith-based value systems influence the decision to enter helping professions like social work and psychology. What follows are some quotes from Social Work majors at Southern Adventist University that addresses this issue:

I have to consider that all my years of attending Adventist schools and churches has influenced my outlook on the world, and what I see as our role on this planet. I believe that I will best be
able to serve my neighbor by being a Christian social worker. I have discovered my purpose at
Southern is to be educated in the art of helping others. I feel that with the morals and values
espoused in the Adventist faith combined with what I am learning in my social work training,
that I can become an effective and competent practitioner.

At this time, I am not sure how God will be using me as a Christian social worker, but I do
believe that I have been called to this role as a social worker and so I have faith that he has a plan
for me.

I believe my faith played a major role in my decision to become a social worker. For as long as I
can remember I struggled with what I was supposed to do with my life; with what I was
supposed to “be.” I knew I wanted to help people, and I deeply believed that God had something
specific for me to do, but I couldn’t settle on anything. I discovered that I was already doing
social work, but didn’t know that’s what it was called. I believe God is going to use me and my
faith to give hope and encouragement to individuals, along with necessary resources.

Above has been presented two competing ideas, each which comes from sincere perspective. On
one hand, some Christians indicate that Social Work & Psychology are humanistic endeavors that are
devoid of God. On the other hand, many students pursuing degrees in these fields indicate that they feel
called by God to go into those very professions. So, which is it? Does God in fact “call” individuals to
pursue work in the fields of Psychology and Social Work? Next, we will seek to explore this question by
examining the following:

1) What exactly is meant by the term “Calling”?

2) What is the vocation of Psychologists and Social Workers?
3) Would God “Call” Christians to be Social Workers or Psychologists?

What is Calling

Biblical texts that address “calling” are limited neither to church nor to choosing a path of paid employment. There are several places in God’s Word where the concept of God offering a “call” to Christians is prevalent. And, while we typically describe God’s calling in terms of His guidance to jobs, occupations, or tasks, the concept of calling is larger than work. God calls people to become united in Himself in every aspect of life.

Although not all social workers and psychologists would describe their vocational calling in terms of a dramatic personal experience, a common theme is that the call is perceived as something that originates beyond the self and occurs as a matter of discovery (Freeman, 2007; Hugen, 2002; Johnson, 2002). Whether the call is experienced as a defining moment or a subtle process, in solitude or community, what makes the call compelling is its “otherness.” Johnson (2002) explains, “We don’t possess the call, the call possesses us” (p. 115). In short, calling is not to a field of practice or a place, but instead to a journey through life – a path. The path requires trust in the One who calls and leads step by step, whether we are aware of that leading along the way or simply follow where the path seems to lead.

There are several places in God’s Word where the concept of God offering a “call” to Christians is prevalent. Although it is true that God’s calling is typically referred to in terms of His guidance for human pursuit of jobs, occupations, or tasks, the concept of calling goes deeper than any one aspect of life. God calls people to become united in Himself in every aspect of life. We will explore three areas in which God’s calling to humanity can be understood.

The Call to Participate in Christ’s Redemptive Work

In the Bible, the word “call” is mostly used to refer to God’s initiative to bring people to Christ and to participate in his redemptive work in the world. This sense of calling is especially prominent in
the letters of Paul, even when the word “call” isn’t actually used (See: Romans 1:6, Romans 8:28, 1
Timothy 2:4, 2 Corinthians 5:17-20, Colossians 3:1). This sort of calling goes deeper than the kinds of
“vocational” calling that are typically referenced by those seeking career guidance, and is therefore
somewhat more substantial. This is the call to follow Jesus. It is the call to a restored relationship
between God and His people. Encompassing a person’s entire being and doing, it reminds us that the
particular kind of work we are called to do is secondary to the call to belong to Christ and to participate
in his redemption of the world. With this in mind, Christians recognize their role in the redemption of
humanity in all that they do, including their vocation. Christ’s redemptive work is not limited to the
church or evangelism, but instead can occur in the workplace through justice, healing, reconciliation,
compassion, kindness, humility, and patience (Colossians 3:12).

The Call to Work

Before discussing God’s guidance to a specific kind of work, it is important to recognize God’s
calling of his people to work in general. God created man to work and commands His people to do so
(Genesis 2:15,19-20; Exodus 20:9). This is evident even at creation when God created Adam in his
image and identified himself as a worker (Genesis 1:27-28). He places Adam and Eve in the garden for
the purpose of working it, and later calls all people to work to the degree they are able (See: 2 Thess.
3:10; Revelation 21:24-26; and Isaiah 65:21-22). It is clear throughout scripture that God has “called”
humanity to be workers by indicating that they were both created and commanded to work. Still, it is
often difficult for individuals to discern the particular work God may be calling them to.

The Call to a Particular Vocation

As can be seen, Christians are called to belong to Christ and to participate in his redemptive
work on Earth. Additionally, it is clear that humans have been created to work and are commanded to do
so to the extent that they are able. While we may deduce that a particular vocational calling may not be
God’s highest concern, it is nonetheless important. While a clear, unmistakable “calling” by God to a
particular task, profession, or type of work is extremely rare in both scripture and in life, God’s leading
in one’s life can be discerned. Paying attention to the voice of God through Bible study, prayer, and individual reflection are helpful ways to discern his call. Through the Holy Spirit, God empowers people for the life and work that they are best suited for. Scripture points out the He provides guidance for both the kind of work people should do and how to do that work (1 Cor. 12:7-10). Next, we will look at three considerations for discerning God’s vocational guidance.

**Look to the Needs of Those Around You**

Those looking to discern God’s vocational calling in their life should first give consideration to the needs of the world and those around them. The single strongest indicator of what God wants an individual to do is likely their awareness of what needs to get done to make the world more like what was intended at creation (See: Proverbs 13:22, 1 Timothy 5:8, Proverbs 14:21, Luke 3:10-11, Proverbs 11:25, and Jeremiah 29:5-7) This doesn’t necessarily mean everyone must take on huge, global problems, but simply that we must all act to accomplish in the world what needs to be done. Earning a living to support oneself and their family is one example mentioned in the Bible. God has given everyone the ability to recognize something of what the world needs. He seems to expect us to notice it and get to work, rather than waiting for a special call from Him.

**Understand Your Specific Skills and Gifts**

The second consideration for those seeking discernment of God’s calling is the particular skills and gifts that one possesses. Scripture says that God gives people gifts for accomplishing the work he wants them to do, and it names some of the gifts and skills that God impart: “We have gifts that differ, according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness” (Romans 12:6-8). When Paul discusses the gifts of the Spirit, he is usually referring to their use in the church. However, if all work done by Christians is done for the Lord, then we can infer that the Spirit’s gifts are also given for use in the workplace. Gifts and skills therefore provide an element of guidance for discerning God’s guidance.
Realize Your Passion

Finally, scripture indicates that the truest and deepest desires of humanity are also important to God. Christians sometimes expect that if God calls them to some job, it will be something they hate. Otherwise, why would God have to call them to it? One morbid Christian fantasy is to think of one country you would hate living in, and then suppose that God is calling you to be a missionary there. Yet, the best missionaries have a great desire for the place and people they serve. Besides, who says God wants you to be a missionary? If God is guiding you towards some kind of job or profession, it is more likely that you may find a deep desire for it in your heart.

Still, it is often quite difficult for some individuals to get in touch with their truest desires or deepest passions. Often, our motivations are clouded by our sinful nature and the brokenness of the world so our apparent desires seem far from the true desires that God would implant in the depths of our heart. Therefore, we must do more than to simply say “do what makes you happy.” Often times, work that would fulfill our greatest desires may at first seem undesirable and may require great sacrifice. Oftentimes, important work involves sacrifice. And, while we may sacrifice temporary happiness, we will receive great joy when we realize that we delight in seeing God work through us. As the writer and theologian Frederick Buechner wrote: “The place God calls you to is where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet” (1993, p. 118).

God’s Calling to Psychology and Social Work

Now that it is somewhat clear that God does give a “call” to his people to do work, even work that is outside of the ministry, and that He calls individuals both to work towards the redemption and healing of humanity as well as to particular vocations, we must explore whether God would call a Christian into the work of a Psychologist or a Social Worker. In seeking to understand this, first it would be important to identify what the fields of psychology and social work entail.

While the field of psychology is quite broad and often difficult to define succinctly, The American Psychological Association gives the following definition:
Psychology is the study of the mind and behavior. The discipline embraces all aspects of the human experience — from the functions of the brain to the actions of nations, from child development to care for the aged. In every conceivable setting from scientific research centers to mental healthcare services, “the understanding of behavior” is the enterprise of psychologists. (APA, 2015).

Working under this definition, it seems like a logical conclusion that the study of psychology need not be in defiance of God’s will for his people. On the contrary, since God is creator of humanity (Isaiah 45:12), it makes sense that He would call humans into the understanding of His greatest creation. Ellen White, in her writings on the subject of psychology, seems to add to this understanding. In her book Mind, Character, and Personality, White declares “the true principles of psychology are found in the Holy Scriptures (p. 10).” White further states that “He who created the mind and ordained its laws, provided for its development in accordance with them” (1903, p. 41).

Social work is defined as a helping profession; the main goal of social work is to improve a society’s overall well-being, especially for the most vulnerable populations. (USC College of Social Work, 2017). Given this definition, it is easy to see how Christians could feel “called” to the vocation of a social worker. In fact, when the field of social work was in its infancy, many who were pursuing the vocation referred to the impact of their spirituality on their call to the field (Hugen, 2002). In his address to the National Conference of Social work in 1920, the first president of the National Association of Social Workers Owen Lovejoy discussed the spiritual foundations of the work of social workers. Stating that all social workers have a philosophy of life, a faith, a “basic enthusiasm,” and that those who act on this faith can choose to:

regard this as a sacred ministry and claim their commission as the ancient prophet claimed his when he said: ‘The Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings to the meek, to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, the opening of prison to them that are bound, to give a garland for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of
heaviness.' Certainly this is not a slight task to which we are called, but the expression of a joyful faith carried with cheerfulness to those in the world most in need of it... a field of service based on the conviction that men are warranted in working for something corresponding a divine order "on earth as it is in heaven" (p. 209).

So, while there may be tensions between the values of the social work profession and the values of religious faith, many Christians find the social work profession to be a good avenue for living out their Christian duty to serve others. In fact, when considering that the roots of social work are largely grounded in religious faith (Devine, 1939), it is difficult to understand why anyone would question whether social work is a profession in which God would call His people to serve. Accordingly, Lovejoy concluded his presidential address at that first gathering of the National Association of Social Workers by declaring that the usefulness of social workers could be found in the following litany.

God is Father,
Man is brother,
Life is a mission and not a career;
Dominion is service,
Its scepter is gladness,
The least is the greatest,
Saving is dying,
Giving is living,
Life is eternal and love is its crown. (p. 211)

Conclusion

Today, as it was historically, religiously motivated persons and groups find their faith propelling them into actions of concern for others, especially the poor and the vulnerable in society. Christian social workers and psychologists have affirmed in a variety of ways their shared belief that the faith dimension of life leads to a transcendence of individualism, and to a commitment to others – to careers
motivated by a calling to a life of service.

Christian students who seek to understand God’s “calling” in their life and are considering whether or not He would call them into the professions of psychology or social work should seek the wisdom and guidance of those who have asked these questions before. As one Christian psychology professor noted: “As I read through a stack of essays, one caught my eye. My student concluded her work with a strong statement: ‘After a whole semester of studies in psychology, I conclude that it is impossible to be a psychologist and a Christian at the same time.’ After I recovered from my shock, I responded: ‘If this is the case, then I cannot exist, because I am a Christian and a psychologist.’

The understanding of “calling” in one’s life as it relates to the career pursuits of social work or psychology can be contextualized from a biblical basis. The third chapter of Exodus records the story of Moses tending to sheep in the wilderness. There, he saw a bush on fire but it did not seem to be burning up – it was aflame but not burned. So, he walked over to investigate. It was in this instance that God called Moses, saying to Moses, “I am sending you” (Exodus 3:10). Christian social workers and psychologists can continue tending to their sheep – taking care of the business of their professional lives – or we can see this holy fire and turn aside, like Moses, and hear God’s call (Garland, 2012).
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Modern Psychology and the Bible – Strange Bed-Fellows?

Dr. Ruth Williams, Ph.D.
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Where is God in the Social Sciences? A very compelling question that demands a well-thought out answer. Modern psychology can be considered as having “a short past” but “a long history” when compared to the other sciences. In its developmental prepubescence, the discipline has been misunderstood, badly used, over-used, and then oft times neglected by many Christians in general, and Seventh-day Adventists, in particular. Those who take the position that having the word God and social sciences in the same sentence represent one of the direst forms of modern blasphemy. I can remember as an eager and delighted graduating senior at Oakwood University, my mother’s consternation when she arrived on campus for my graduation, that a well-meaning, but poorly instructed fellow parent chided her for actually having a daughter who dared to study psychology – for “Psychology is of the devil”, the lady opined. The purpose of this paper is to address this question and present with confidence and evidence that indeed God is everywhere all over the social sciences in general, and that modern psychology and the Bible can and do make a happy meeting of the minds. In no way are the two “strange bed-fellows.”

There are several passages from the writings of Ellen G. White (1873) that give pause to those concerned about the place of psychology in Christianity. She posits that “to deal with minds is the nicest work in which men ever engaged” (Mind, Character and Personality, p. 3). In 1902 she contended that “the true principles of psychology are found in the Holy Scriptures. Man knows not his own value. He acts according to his unconverted temperament of character, because he does not look unto Jesus, the Author and Finisher of his faith. He who comes to Jesus, he who believes on Him and
makes him his Example, realizes the meaning of the words, ‘To them gave he power to becomes the sons of God’” (p.10).

In the book, *Education*, White (1903) argued for the position of God in human disciplines. She wrote, “We can trace the line of the world’s teachers as far back as human records extend; but the Light was before them. As the moon and the stars of our solar system shine by the reflected light of the sun, *so, as far as their teaching is true*, do the world’s great thinkers reflect the Sun of Righteousness. Every gleam of thought, every flash of the intellect, is from the light of the world (pp. 13-14).

The story of psychology begins at the very beginning: Creation. When God said, “Let us make human beings in Our Image...in the image of God, He created them: male and female” (Genesis 1: 26, 26). Psychology is the study of human behavior and mental processes. Human beings came upon earth’s scene of existence with attendant marriage, relationships, the Fall, the first human family, sibling rivalry, domestic violence, death, brokenness...sin. The human race grew and so did its problems and potential: living, loving, behaving, procreating, hoping, despairing, dying. There in the annals of dysfunction, death, joy, and second chances...a better Day dawned with the coming of the Messiah. Then Jesus came and “the Word became flesh and lived with us...” (John 1:14). Human and divine, a strange blending of psychology with the eternal in the Person of Jesus. The apostle Paul may have grasped something of this strange but wonderful blending when he admonished the Philippians and us to “let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:5).

In fairness to the naysayers and opponents of the concept that God can indeed be found in modern psychology, one must admit that if there are *true* principles of psychology, it is thus implied that there must also be *false* principles of psychology. It is the goal then, of the Christian psychologist and educator to study, live out, and teach these true principles of psychology as are found in the Holy Scriptures. The following table samples a meager portion of the extent that many of the principles espoused in modern psychology lines up with the Word of God, and thus, to that extent, modern psychology is true.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Psychology Principles</th>
<th>Biblical Principles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Importance of Social Support and Community</td>
<td>Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching (Hebrews 10:25, NIV).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Words Have Enormous Power</td>
<td>Words kill, words give life; they're either poison or fruit—you choose (Proverbs 18:21, MSG).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Act the Way You Want to Feel!</td>
<td>A merry heart maketh a cheerful countenance: but by sorrow of the heart the spirit is broken (Proverbs 15:13, KJV).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Environments Are Critical</td>
<td>It is better to dwell in the wilderness, than with a contentious and angry woman. (Proverbs 21:17, KJV).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Childhood Is Very Important</td>
<td>Direct your children onto the right path, and when they are older, they will not leave it (Proverbs 22:6, NLT).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidentiality Is Paramount</td>
<td>A gossip betrays a confidence; so avoid a man who talks too much (Proverbs 20:19, NIV).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Centrality of the Ego</td>
<td>Those who trust their own insight are foolish, but anyone who walks in wisdom is safe (Proverbs 28:26, NLT).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It Does Matter What Others Think about You</td>
<td>A good name is more desirable than great riches; to be esteemed is better than silver or gold (Proverbs 22:1, NIV).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Importance of Discipline</td>
<td>The rod and reproof give wisdom, but a child left undisciplined brings his mother to shame (Proverbs 29:15, AMP).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Power of Repetition and Habit</td>
<td>Discipline your son, and he will give you peace; he will bring delight to your soul (Proverbs 29:17, NIV).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What You Think You Are!</td>
<td>As a dog returneth to his vomit, so a fool returneth to his folly (Proverbs 26:11, KJV).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-disclosure Is Healthy</td>
<td>As water reflects a face, so a man’s heart reflects the man (Proverbs 27:19, NIV).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Power of Choice</td>
<td>He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy (Proverbs 28:13, KJV).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Intimate Relationship between the Brain and Behavior</td>
<td>I've brought you today to the crossroads of blessing and curse (Deuteronomy 11:26, MSG).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior Modification Is Possible</td>
<td>For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he (Proverbs 23:7, KJV).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Power of Forgiveness</td>
<td>Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong (Isaiah 1:16, NIV).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Power of Prayer</td>
<td>When Job prayed for his friends, the Lord restored his fortunes (Job 42:10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The effectual, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. (James 5:16)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
In recent years, a simple perusal of the research literature yielded scientific findings that support and corroborate the Bible of such topics as the far-reaching impact of anger (Davidson & Mostofsky, 2010; Hussuan & Sharma, 2014), the power of gratitude (Aghababaei & Tabik 2013: Satici, Uysal, & Akin, 2014), and the undeniable health benefits of forgiveness (Davis, Hook, Worthington, & Hill, 2013; Fehr, R, Gelfand, M. J. &Nag, 2010). Just looking at the years from 2005 to the present, more than 28,000 articles have appeared in peer-reviewed journals that attest to the truth of God’s Word: “Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath! Fret not yourself; it tends only to evil” (Psalms 37:8).

“Whoever is slow to anger has great understanding, but he who has a hasty temper exalts folly” (Proverbs 14:29).

On gratitude: “Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

“Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits” (Psalm 103:2).

“This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it” (Psalm 118:24).

Modern psychological science has revealed that mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual health is intimately related to the managing of emotional states and the focus on the positive for abundant living and healthy relationships.

In 1883, John Whitter penned this hymn that today might well be seen as the Christian Psychologist’s Prayer:

“Dear Lord and Father of mankind
Forgive our foolish ways;
Re-clothe us in our rightful mind,
In purer lives Thy service find,
In deeper reverence, praise...
Drop Thy still dews of quietness,
Till our strivings cease;
Take from our souls the strain and stress,
And let our ordered lives confess
The beauty of Thy peace.”
Is God present in the social sciences? Of course, undoubtedly, His footprints are all over the human experience, “touched by our infirmities,” yearning for our love, rooting for our salvation, abundant life now, and eternal life with Him!
References


SUMMARY OF SYMPOSIUM

Doug Tilstra, Ph.D.
Professor of Outdoor Education
Southern Adventist University

Where is God in the Social Sciences? Everywhere! This cryptic question and more cryptic answer may indeed be the most complete summary of the 2016 Reynolds Chair Symposium. Dr. Ruth Williams offered this summary in both the opening and closing remarks of her presentation. However, in fairness to the remainder of the symposium presenters and to Dr. Williams herself, I offer a bit broader summary.

Drs. Tron and Kristie Wilder provided a unique combined perspective from their respective specialties of Psychology and Social Work. They used the lens of “calling” to address the question, “Where is God in the Social Sciences?” After citing several stories of students who expressed dismay and even contempt for what they perceived as the godless and humanistic tint of Social Science, Drs. Wilder and Wilder offered an alternative view. They told their own stories of faith intertwined with desire to serve humanity and the eventual sense of God’s call to serve humanity through the avenues of Psychology and Social Work. They also gave a brief historical and scriptural survey of “calling” and “vocation”, concluding that nothing could be more central to the heart of God than tending to the needs of the most vulnerable people (social work) or seeking to understand human behavior in order to benefit people (psychology). Thus, Drs. Wilder and Wilder answered the question, “Where is God in the Social Sciences?” with “God is in the Social Sciences directing His followers to understand and serve the vulnerable.”

Lori Merchant* spoke again on behalf of professional social workers and drew upon two descriptions of Jesus to illustrate—The Good Shepherd and Immanuel, God with Us. Merchant noted
that Social Work’s mission is to enhance the well-being of people and society. She also noted that the six core values of Social Work are: 1) Service, 2) Social Justice, 3) Dignity and worth of the individual, 4) Importance of human relationships, 5) Integrity, and 6) Competence. Jesus, who is Immanuel, God With Us, demonstrated all these core values in His ministry to the most vulnerable, in His meeting of basic human needs, His miracles of healing, His many times of providing food or drink, His calming of fears, and many other demonstrations of love for humanity. Jesus was indeed God With Us. Merchant then stated that Jesus’ followers are called to be the “hands and feet” of Jesus today, continuing His mission—and that Social Work is one of the most powerful ways of fulfilling that mission. She drew upon the Biblical metaphor of Jesus as The Good Shepherd who provides basic needs, tenderly cares for the sheep, comforts, watches, seeks, and even risks His life for the sheep. Merchant closed with a personal professional story of an alcohol-addicted and vulnerable dying woman named Marie. Her closing challenge was, “The world is filled with ‘Maries’. Who will accept the privilege of caring for them?”

Ruth Williams, as already noted, gave a cryptic answer to the question, “Where is God in the Social Sciences?” She began with a scriptural overview of the story of humanity from creation to re-creation, noting that the Old Testament depicts human kind at its worst (especially in family dysfunction, violence, abuse, and more) while the New Testament depicts God entering humanity in the person of Jesus to bring healing to the brokenness of humanity. Williams noted typical Christian fears of the “demonic influences of modern psychology”, and acknowledged the need for caution and discernment, especially of any attempt to substitute divinity with humanity. She then traced the history of the modern study of Psychology, which has led to today’s 54 branches of Psychology. Sampling a dozen or more of those 54, Williams gave specific examples from Southern’s Psychology Department to illustrate how God is at work in each of those areas to uplift and rebuild broken human lives. She closed with an illustration drawn from Ellen White’s book, Education, about heavenly bodies that shine only by
the reflected light of the sun. In the same way, in so far as pioneers in psychology reflect “genuine Son-
light”, they are indeed speaking God’s truth and revealing that God is, in fact, “Everywhere!” in the
Social Sciences.

The symposium closed with a panel of students (Carolita Claus, Thomas Eidell, Thiffany
Rambana) responding to a handful of questions. To the question, “Why did you choose to study
Psychology or Social Work?” various responses included the ideas of obedience to scriptural calls to
care for vulnerable, exposure to pitiful needs of others, wakened conscience after mission work, and a
broken heart for unmet pain. The question, “What happened to your faith during the course of your
studies in this field?” elicited comments about sharpened faith, a growth process that is still unfolding,
and a deep need to learn more about loving the unlovable. “What are the perceived fears and tensions
between the Bible and Social Sciences?” may have been the question that struck the heart of why this
symposium even needed to ask the question it did. The panel members offered a variety of thought-
provoking ideas in response. Here is a sampling: If you work “taboo people” you might become like
them. There is fear that individuals might inappropriately make themselves vulnerable to therapists who
might lead them away from God. Fear of adopting an anti-Christian worldview. Negative connotations
associated with Freud. Anxiety about issues such as abortion or same-sex attraction, and the fear that a
social worker is “on their side”. Contempt for some of the socially marginalized people that Social
Workers serve. Concern that Social Workers are not working for the “highest good” (eternal salvation)
of their clients. As the panel considered each of these fears and hesitations, they also noted examples
from Jesus’ life that illustrated similar experiences and negative comments leveled again Jesus.

Where is God in the Social Sciences? Indeed, Everywhere. The presenters at the 2016 Reynolds
Chair Symposium answered consistently and with compelling detail and helpful examples.

*Lori Merchant was unable to provide her manuscript for publishing.