

"Spirituality, Health and Human
Flourishing:
Meaning? Measurement?
Implications?"



*The Role of Practical
Theology*

Dissonance!

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Disability*

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**The Practical Theologian as a
*critical friend***

- If researchers are serious about studying spirituality, religion and health, we need to develop *critical friendships* with theologians

Practical Theology

- Practical Theology is critical, theological reflection on the practices of the church as they interact with the practices of the world, with a view to ensuring and enabling faithful practice.



Buckets and Waterfalls

What is Prayer?: A solemn and humble conversation with God

- Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.
Your Kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins,
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours.
Now and for ever. Amen



'Mechanism' of Religion and Prayer

Is There a Biology of Hope?

Positive emotions



Decreased activation of sympathetic nervous system and
hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis



Psychological effects (less anxiety)

Physiological effects (lower BP, HR, oxygen
consumption)

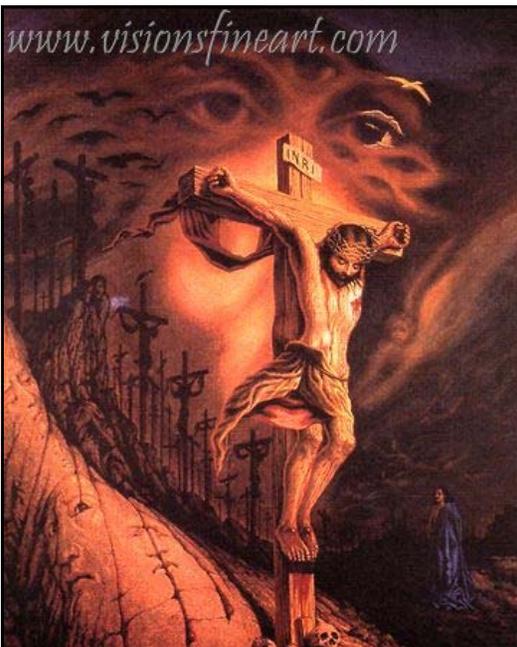


Better health



What is research for?

- Increasing professional knowledge?
- Establishing the credibility of a field of enquiry in the opinion of experts in other fields?
- Improving clinical practice and developing a clearer understanding of patients needs?
- Generating income?
- Contemplation and Mission



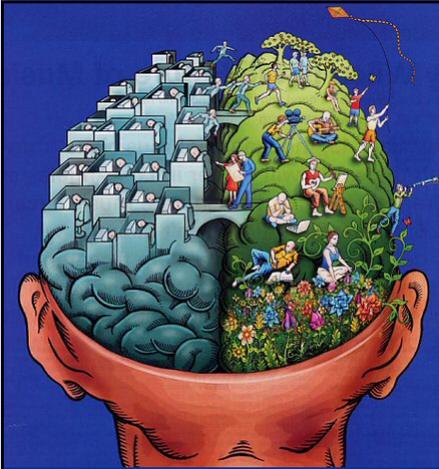
- What we think research is for will determine what we look at, how we look at it and ultimately, what we think we see.

For sources of dissonance within current approaches to research into spirituality and health

1. The positivistic mood of enquiry
2. Implicit theological assumptions.
3. The genericization of spirituality and religion
4. The question of what is being measured.

A positivistic mood of enquiry

Positivism is a philosophy that states that the only authentic knowledge is scientific knowledge, and that such knowledge can only come from positive affirmation of theories through strict scientific method.



A positivistic mood

- The suggestion is not so much that researchers embrace positivism as a formal philosophy. It is more that there is a 'positivistic mood' that surrounds the research into religion and health which allows us to see some things but also prevents us from seeing other things.

Studying Religion without God?

- Do you pray about which method should be used?
- Do you ask the God for guidance as you analyse your results?



Do you reflect on God as part of your analysis?

Do you assume your work is done within *Creation* or within the *World*?

Empiricism

- The primary authority for truth lies in observation or sensory experience.
- Sense experience is the only source of knowledge
- Only that which falls upon the retina can be deemed factual.

Operationalism:

Translating the transcendent into the immanent

- The problem is that when spirituality is translated solely into the empirical, the resulting findings may have little to do with the original ideas before translation, particularly if the ideas conflict with the philosophy of research method in the first place.
- Prayer studies: why prayer “doesn’t work!”

The Superempirical

- Latent forces or energies possibly tapped by religious involvement or spiritual practice and that are believed to influence the body and possibly the course of illness.
- The existence and function of such energies have not yet been empirically verified to the consensus satisfaction of mainstream science, but they could be. Such forces are ultimately naturalistic.

Jeff Levin 'How prayer heals: A theoretical model.'

Philosophical Materialism

- Materialism is the notion that the ultimate nature of reality is material.
- This obviously creates problems for things spiritual!
- In order to “measure spirituality,” you need to turn it into something material.



Turning mysteries into puzzles

- The problem is that much of our research can, in principle, be carried out without any necessary reference to a transcendent Creator God who may have quite different criterion for health and well-being.



Implicit theological assumptions

The Nature of Revelation

- The authenticity of a person's theological position is determined by its physical or psychological correlates.
- The solution to religious struggles is assumed to be *psychological* rather than theological.
- The psalms of lament (the social shape of suffering)

The danger of self blame

A physiological equivalent of the
prosperity gospel

Methodological Atheism?

- The literature is speckled with scientists and psychologists stating that it is not their task to comment on the authenticity of belief systems or ultimate values *as if* the fact that they are real or unreal did not matter to the research process.
- Peter Berger suggested that the term "*methodological atheism*" be used to describe theologians and historians who study religion as a human creation without declaring whether individual religious beliefs are actually true.

Methodological Deism

- Natural science methods never require that investigators pray (or generally consult God or revelation) before designing or conducting a study. This requirement is omitted because God's current activities are presumed to be irrelevant to designing and conducting an effective investigation (though God's created order might be considered relevant to the results of the investigation)
- Brent D. Slife 'Are the methods of psychology compatible with Theism?



The Via Negativa

- God is constantly defined within the literature by what God is not!
 - Immaterial
 - Distant
 - Not active in the world
 - Somehow bound to the natural
- How useful to the faithful of any religious tradition is research based on a theological premise that God is quite different from the ways “I believe God to be?”

Mysterium Dei

Generecization

The assumption that all forms of belief are physiologically equivalent

Physiological Ecumenism!

- “the conclusion that equal physiological outcomes are evidence for the equal standing of all religious and spiritual perspectives seems a curiously reductive form of ecumenism.”
- Andrew Lustig ‘Prescribing prayer? ‘say the rosary & call me in the morning.’

What if one religion
“works” better than an
other?

What is this research for?

The question of precisely what is being measured

Health and human flourishing?

Changing the subject

1. We are not measuring spirituality or religion but the operationalisation of the unique spiritual experiences of unique individuals.
2. We have chosen to take these experiences of transcendence and to translate them into material concepts that we can then measure and quantify.
3. In so doing we, in a sense, dispossess the individual of their original narrative.
4. The meanings, values, structures and intentions of the originator of the data are no longer considered to be relevant.

- We then assume that our conceptual understandings of health and well-being are appropriate to gauge the level of health and well-being/human flourishing of the individuals we are examining, *quite apart from* the particular understandings of the individuals concerned.

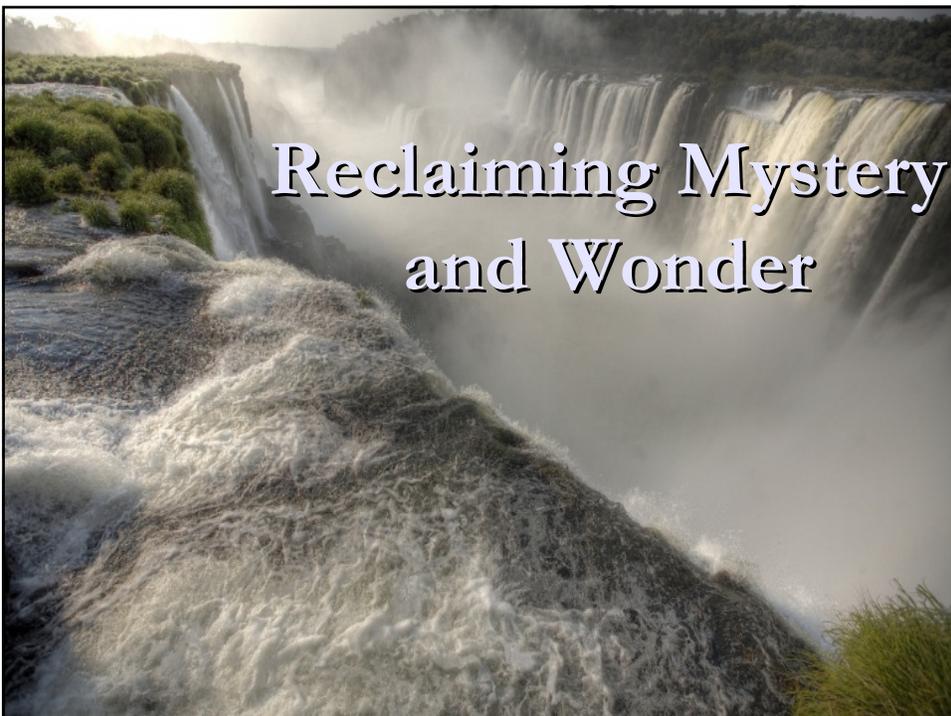


- But, human flourishing for religious believers is not determined primarily by health.
- The vast majority of research into the efficacy of religion has focused on psychological, social, or physical health criteria. The primary criterion for religious believers is spiritual.



Loving God in all things and at all times

- Well being within religious traditions is not gauged by the *absence* of illness, anxiety or distress, but by the *presence* of *God-in-relationship*.



A view from the inside

- I would recommend that the scientific study of religion return to a perspective on the phenomenon “from within,” that is, to viewing it in terms of the meanings intended by the religious consciousness.

■ Peter Berger

A possible way forward:

- It would be excellent...if the sociological study of religion were carried out by two sets of researchers, by outsiders who rely on empathy and by insiders who are participants by faith, each set correcting the blind spots of the other.
- Gregory B Baum ‘Remarks of a theologian in dialogue with sociology.’

Researching Religion/Religious Research?

- **Anyone who believes that sitting in church makes you a Christian must also believe that sitting in a garage makes you a car!**
- (Richard Sloane)
- Research done in collaboration with theologians and practitioners from specific religious traditions.

Even a saint must eat!: Coming closer and standing back!



- We need to find ways of avoiding *the medicalization of religion for the goals of modernity.*
- The spiritual is embodied within the material, yet the material requires the spiritual to provide its ultimate meaning.
- Religion is both a transcendent and a temporal experience. If we fail to grasp both elements we cannot claim to have understood the phenomenon.
- Religion and health research that takes seriously both religion and health is necessarily multidimensional in its methods and approaches.

Human action consists of behaviour plus the meaning actors assign to it. Since behaviour is external, it can be studied with methods similar to those used in the natural sciences.

(Max Weber)

But *meaning* and *lived experience* is internal and requires a different methodological approach.

(John Swinton!)

Meaning and particularity:

The significance of the ideographic and the qualitative

- Ideographic knowledge
- How did this congregation come into existence in the first place?
- What kind of formation brought people to this place?
- Where might God be in this process

The Practical Theologian as a *critical friend*



- If researchers are serious about studying spirituality, religion and health, we need to develop critical friendships with theologians.
- Interdisciplinary research teams that take theology seriously at a critical/analytical level may be a way forward.