

# Teaching, Texts, and Values

DAVID G. MYERS

*Hope College*

**How should and do psychologists' values color their writing and research? As Christians, our ultimate allegiance to God frees us to fearlessly and rigorously pursue truth. Nevertheless, our values inevitably influence our emphases, ethics, interpretations, labels, and goals. They also fuel the passions that motivate our work. Finally, in at least seven distinct ways religious beliefs and values can be linked with psychological research and writing.**

Not long ago a college senior asked me if she could talk to me about being a Christian writer. If she wanted to write Christian fiction, how was she to go about it?

I told her that if she is truly and deeply a Christian, what she writes is going to be Christian, whether she mentions Jesus or not. And if she is not, in the most profound sense, Christian, then what she writes is not going to be Christian, no matter how many times she invokes the name of the Lord.

Madeline L'Engle  
*Walking on Water*, 1980

As an author of texts for introductory and social psychology, I am occasionally asked, as by one of the editors of this special issue, whether my personal values color my reporting. Sometimes the questioner, sharing my Christian identity, hopes for an affirmative answer. Other times, the questioner is suspicious of an affirmative answer.

If you were writing such books, how would you answer? Should authors integrate their personal values—whether feminist or reactionary, Democrat or Republican, theist or atheist—into their textbooks? Should they instead aim for value-free texts? Would your answer differ if queried about your classroom teaching?

## The Quest for Truth

My answer is, first, that all authors are obliged to tell the truth, as best they can discern it. Although I am a Christian, my aim is not to write parochial

textbooks, but faithfully to report the field and its human subject matter. Donald MacKay (1984) was driven by the same idea. The Christian psychologist's obligation, he argued, "is to 'tell it like it is,' knowing that the Author is at our elbow, a silent judge of the accuracy with which we claim to describe the world He has created" (p. 237).

As it happens, that aim is supported by my faith, which beckons me to love God with not just my heart but my mind. If God is indeed the ultimate author of whatever truth psychological science discovers, then I can accept that truth, however surprising or unsettling. Disciplined scholarly inquiry becomes not just my right but my religious duty, even as it was for Pascal, Newton, Bacon, and other founders of modern science. Speaking on my campus recently, Francis Collins, Director of the Human Genome Project, concluded his explanation of this biggest-ever science project by quoting Copernicus: "To know the mighty words of God; to comprehend His wisdom and majesty and power; to appreciate, in degree, the wonderful working of His Laws, surely all this must be a pleasing and acceptable mode of worship to the most High, to whom ignorance cannot be more grateful than knowledge."

Some postmodernists, Marxists, and fundamentalists resist such openness to scientific inquiry, noting that psychological science is so ideologically loaded that we should be wary of swallowing it uncritically. Being wary of hidden presuppositions, they would have us squeeze the discipline into the contours of feminist, Marxist, or Christian ideology. But surely the science-is-merely-ideology view is as naive as the scientists-merely-read-nature view. There is a real world out there, and checking our preconceptions against it restrains our error-prone intuition. No longer do many of us believe

- that sleepwalkers are acting out their dreams,
- that hypnosis or brain stimulation uncovers long-buried memories,
- that newborns are dumb to the world,
- that thanks to the supposed powers of parenting, children who share the same environment will share the same traits,

- that repeated traumatic experiences tend to be massively repressed, though accurately recoverable later in life, or
- that electroconvulsive therapy is a barbaric and ineffective treatment for unremitting depression.

Ergo, when beliefs collide with observation, beliefs sometimes change. As Agatha Christie's Miss Marple explained, "It wasn't what I expected. But facts are facts, and if one is proved to be wrong, one must just be humble about it and start again." Believing that human ideas are finite, we therefore humbly put our ideas to the test. We value objectivity, even while recognizing that, like righteousness, it will never be fully attained. Skeptical of an unrestrained subjectivism that dismisses evidence as nothing but collected biases, we welcome and report to our students the firstfruits of psychological science.

Reporting the truth as our science sees does, to be sure, sometimes land us in hot water. As I can testify, the consistent results of testing parapsychological claims of ESP, subliminal self-help tapes, past-life regression, firewalking, astrology, and out-of-body frequent flier programs are upsetting to many New Age spiritualists. The findings of research on the effects of pornography or single-parenting sometimes displease liberals. And the new research on sexual orientation, which more and more looks not to be a choice, has certainly displeased many conservatives. In each of these cases, my first obligation, as a Christian and as an academic, is to report the truth as fairly and honestly as I can.

To someone who discounts the natural revelations of science, or who sees faith and science as antagonists, science-reporting may sound like selling one's soul, or serving as the sorcerer's apprentice. But faith not only supports our participation in science, it makes us mindful of its limits. Thus, I aim to communicate both the powers and limits of psychological science. "Bear in mind psychology's limits," I remind students:

Don't expect psychology to answer the ultimate questions posed by Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy (1904): "Why should I live? Why should I do anything? Is there in life any purpose which the inevitable death that awaits me does not undo and destroy?" Instead, expect that psychology will help you understand why people think, feel, and act as they do. Then you should find the study of psychology both fascinating and useful. (Myers, 1995, p. 5)

## Authors Assume Certain Values

Postmodernists and religionists are nevertheless justified in reminding us that values inevitably guide our research and reporting. As experiments on confirmation bias, belief perseverance, mental set, and the overconfidence phenomenon demonstrate, *belief guides perception*. Moreover, whether hidden or explicit, our values leak through our choice of topics, our examples and emphases, and our labeling of phenomena. Reflecting our culture's individualistic values, American psychology places a premium on maximizing the independent self (as opposed to the interdependent self valued in Asian cultures).

Consider the values hidden in our terminology: Should we congratulate socially responsive people for their "social sensitivity" or disparage them for their tractable "conformity"? Without throwing scientific rigor out with the bath water, psychology's value-ladenness is something we can rightly expose in our teaching.

Neither psychological science nor the reporting of it is dispassionate. Our preconceived ideas and values—our schemas—guide our theory development, our interpretations, our topics-of-choice, and our language. In questing for truth, we follow our hunches, our biases, our voices within.

Thus, when accused of writing as a Christian I plead guilty, for authors cannot leave their values at home. In deciding what to report and how to report it, our own sympathies subtly steer us, this way or that. Psychology texts are a pleasure to write precisely because they marry not only science with journalism, but facts with values. Although authors must be wary of using their texts as platforms for promoting a religious or political ideology, their values will leak through.

My values leak through my effort to cultivate a sense of wonder, an attitude that respects the human creature and regards it with awe. My values also leak through my decisions to give significant attention to topics such as cultural diversity, gender and racial prejudice, altruism, violence, individualism, peacemaking, pride, evil, and sex and human values. Had I evaded these topics I would still be making value-laden decisions. The choices authors and teachers face do not permit absolute neutrality.

## Our Values Energize Us

We need not apologize for having deeply held convictions and values, for our values are what fuel

and direct our efforts. What drives me to keep producing new editions is a passion for communicating things more important than the correct definition of negative reinforcement. What greater life mission could one hope for than to do one's part to replace unrestrained intuition with critical thinking, judgmentalism with compassion, and illusion with understanding? As I initially wrote these texts, I kept on my door a quote from C. S. Lewis: "We do not need more Christian books; we need more books by Christians about everything with Christian values built in."

As I explained to one of my editors last year (after being chastised for providing information on the social-cultural recession and its links to rising individualism and the decline of family), I wholeheartedly agree that textbooks are not op-ed columns. But ...

I can't give you, because no author can give you, a value-free psychology text. Often, I suspect, you won't notice my embedded values (when they agree with yours and with those of academia). But they'll be there. And it is because they are inevitably there in this value-laden field that I find a continuing sense of mission in my work for you.... Even if I aggravate you at times and need reigning in, I don't think you'd want to eviscerate the passions that drive me to write.

### Religion as a Psychological Subject

Religion, like culture, influences the teaching and profession of psychology as it shapes the values that subtly influence our emphases, ethics, interpretations, labels, and goals. Religion additionally connects with psychology as one of its subject matters. In Table 1, I suggest some ways in which religion supports or connects with psychology. As the table's last lines suggest, one connection is to make religion a dependent variable—by studying the psychology of religion. Having studied other universal phenomena—sleep, sex, anger, hunger—why not put religious belief and behavior under the microscope as well?

We can also make religion an independent variable. Does faith make a discernible difference in people's lives? Are self-described Christians or Jews or Muslims noticeably different in their attitudes, emotions, or behaviors? Are they more or less prejudiced? altruistic? happy?

And we can ask how insights into human nature gleaned from psychological research connect with religious understandings. When tunneling into human nature from two directions, psychological and biblical, how closely do the two ends meet? In

my teaching, and at times briefly in my texts, I lay out the parallels. For example, massive bodies of research suggest that

- self-serving bias is powerful and at times perilous, yet self-esteem, optimism, and personal control pay dividends,
- we are both the creatures and the creators of our social worlds,
- our cognitive capacities are awesome, yet to err is predictably human,
- attitudes influence behavior and follow behavior.

For Christians, these conclusions have a familiar ring. Centuries of biblical and theological scholarship assert that

- pride is the fundamental sin, yet grace is a key to self-acceptance,
- God is ultimately in control, yet we are responsible,
- we are made in the divine image, yet we are finite and fallible,
- faith predisposes action, yet also grows through action.

In both dialectical form and content, the parallels here and elsewhere are striking. Because faith always seeks understanding in the language of the day, such psychological findings can enliven ancient biblical wisdom. Perhaps they can also help us feel more comfortable with the seeming paradoxes of truth. To ask whether pride or self-rejection is the fundamental problem, whether God or humans are responsible, whether humans are wise or foolish, and whether faith or action comes first, is like asking which blade of a pair of scissors is more necessary.

### REFERENCES

- MacKay, D. M. (1984, December). Letter. *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation*.
- Myers, D. G. (1996). *Social psychology* (5th ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Myers, D. G. (1993). *The pursuit of happiness: Who is happy—and why*. New York: Avon.
- Myers, D. G. (1995). *Psychology* (4th ed.). New York: Worth Publishers.
- Myers, D. G., & Jeeves, M. A. (1987). *Psychology through the eyes of faith*. New York: HarperCollins.

### AUTHOR

MYERS, DAVID G. Address: Hope College, Holland, MI 49422-9000. Title: John Dirk Werkman Professor of Psychology. Degree: PhD, Psychology, University of Iowa. Specialization: Social psychology.

Table 1

*Seven Ways to Relate Psychology and Religion*

INTEGRATION STRATEGY	PERSONAL EXAMPLES
1. <i>Faith motivates science</i> : Believing that "in everything we deal with God" (Calvin), and aiming to "worship God with our minds," we can rigorously search God's world, seeking to discern its truths, while recognizing the limits of science.	1. Experiments on "group polarization" (exploring how group discussion changes and strengthens attitudes) 2. Reviewing studies of subjective well-being (Who is happy?)
2. <i>Faith mandates skeptical scrutiny</i> : In the ever-reforming spirit of humility, we put testable claims to the test. This is the empiricism advocated by Moses: "If a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the Lord has not spoken" (Deut. 18:22).	1. Scrutinizing claims of the efficacy of intercessory prayer and faith healing 2. Reporting tests of New Age claims of reincarnation, channeling, fortune-telling, aura readings, telepathy, clairvoyance, astrology (and their implications of human godlike powers)
3. <i>Being true to one's deepest convictions and values</i> . Like everyone, we infuse certain assumptions and values into our teaching, writing, research, and practice.	Writings for Christian and secular audiences (e.g., Myers, 1993, 1995, 1996; Myers & Jeeves, 1987)
4. <i>Giving psychology to the church</i> . We can also apply psychology's insights to the church's life. For some, this means merging Christian and psychological insights pertinent to counseling and clinical practice.	Showing how social influence and memory principles might be applied in creating memorable, persuasive sermons and in effective evangelism.
5. <i>Relating psychological and religious descriptions of human nature</i> . We can map human nature from two directions, asking how well psychological and biblical understandings correlate.	Relating psychological research (in biological, developmental, cognitive, and social psychology) to Christian belief.
6. <i>Studying determinants of religious experience</i> . The psychology of religion can explore influences on spirituality, religious commitment, charismatic behavior, etc. Who believes—and why?	Exploring parallels between the following: 1. research on the interplay between attitudes and behavior. 2. biblical-theological thinking about the interplay between faith and action.
7. <i>Studying religion's effects</i> . Is faith a predictor of people's attitudes? emotions? behavior?	Summarizing links between faith and joy (religious commitment and self-reported life satisfaction and happiness).