

# Review of eric johnson's 'psychology and christianity'



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**Review of Eric Johnson's ' *Psychology and Christianity: Five Views* '**

TITLE: *Psychology & Christianity: Five Views*

EDITOR: Eric L. Johnson

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CONTRIBUTIONS BY: David G. Myers, Stanton L. Jones, Robert C. Roberts & Watson P. J., John H. Coe & Todd W. Hall, David Powlison

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**Introduction**

This book discusses five views on the relationship between Psychology and Christianity. The five views, put forward by seven contributors, include: A Levels-of-Explanation View, An Integration View, A Christian Psychology View, A Transformational Psychology View and A Biblical Counseling View. Each view is also mirrored by proponents of other approaches. The editor provides an insight through the preface and the introductory and concluding chapters. In the preface, he clearly puts the background to the book and its coverage in perspective.

**Chapter 1: A Brief History of Christians in Psychology**

In this 39-page chapter, Johnson gives the history of the debate on psychology and Christianity and summarises the five approaches. He traces biblical psychology to creation. Johnson rationalises that, from the beginning of creation to His continuous orderly guide, God presents a rationality that can be verified. He argues that the history of Christianity has shown science as a cardinal gift from God. He further talks about late modernism witnessing Darwin's perverse theory of evolution with psychological developments replacing biblical study and philosophical reflection. Johnson also discusses the church's intellectual crisis and the responses of Christians to the new psychology and finally highlights the five approaches of the book.

**Chapter 2: A-Levels-of-Explanation View**

Myers begins his 30-page exposition by looking at differing definitions of psychology over time and replies inquisitive critics that psychological science and Christian faith blend well. He argues that one's perspective depends on what one wants to talk about and that religious and scientific levels of explanation and analysis are often complimentary. He sees no contradiction of explanations at different levels and states that psychological science, hidden values and spiritual awe are complimentary. He also argues that our values, ideas and predictions guide research thereby exposing the reality. He claims that people of faith have no problem with psychological inquiry and that a connecting link exists between the two. Myers tabulates "Seven Ways to Relate Faith and Psychology" with examples (p. 57). He states that several of psychologists' conclusions concerning attitudes, behaviour and situations are drawn from religious ideas. He states that psychology challenges us

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sometimes to examine some cherished ideas and consult the Scripture as in research on erroneous thinking and new information about sexual orientation. Myers concludes that psychology and faith share the same ideals of humility and scepticism. He summarises the several links between psychology and faith and warns that psychological science should not be seen as the final word but rather keep alive the “ ever reforming Reformation spirit” (p. 75).

Other writers agree that Myers’ piece has a bias for good science but there are also criticisms of his view. Jones, for example, faults Myers’ approach for failure to specify which beliefs will shape the work and for offering nothing compelling from science itself. Watson too sees Myers’ definition of psychology as suspect and his essay as mere Christians’ interpretation of various scientific findings. Coe and Hall claim that Myers’ approach provides only complimentary views with no proper articulation to critique and that it is merely descriptive and not prescriptive. Lastly, Powlison states that Myers’ example of rationality is ambiguous and that his treatment of self esteem and self-affirmation is futile.

### **Chapter 3: An Integration View**

In his 28-page essay, Jones looks at the integration of Christianity and psychology as the employment of “ God’s true Word” (p. 115) and the elements include biblical truth, methodical science and argumentation, psychological learning and Christianity. He talks about engaging psychotherapy theories critically and constructively. He examines several studies and argues for the need to frame the understanding of the client in

counselling and psychotherapy in terms of the Christian understanding of Jesus. He advises that there should be careful reflection on the Bible to understand better what it says about sexuality and homosexuality for future research. He concludes by defining integration as “ the discipline and profession of psychology with a commitment to having one’s Christian convictions shape every aspect of one’s work” (p. 125).

Myer notes the similarity between him and Jones in using science to interpret the Bible. He faults Jones, however, for overstating the extent to which biblical truths are as stable as empirical evidence. Roberts sees Jones as integrating two dissimilar concepts – psychology and Christianity and making one thing out of two things very strange to each other. He advocates that Christianity and psychology should be seen as one. Furthermore, Coe and Hall criticise Jones’ failure to adequately criticise a wrong view of science which excludes the study of faith and values. Lastly, Powlison, criticises Jones for restricting the impact of Christianity to narrowly religious topics and for failing to mention details of human experience.

#### **Chapter 4: A Christian Psychology View**

In their 30-page essay, Robert and Watson state how one psychology assumes several dimensions that are similar to many psychologies. They call for the retrieval of the long tradition of Christian psychology as a first step with the Bible having a special place. They say that the sermon contains psychology because it conceptualises “ personal well-being” and the broad themes of character traits and attitudes and preaches against psychopathology topics like divorce and hatred. They further look at Jesus’

sermon in Matthew 5 as containing virtues qualified to be psychological themes. Their second step concerns empirical research within the Christian tradition on human beings like in contemporary psychology. Thereafter, they write on Operationalising the Christian Tradition by using socio-scientific methods. They also call for future comparative empirical investigations that will conform to world views. Finally, they see the prospects of Christian Psychology as promising.

Myers agrees with Roberts and Watson's psychology from broader perspective. He, however, sees their call for a distinct Christian Psychology as misdirected and irrelevant. Jones praises this work too but sees a problem in Christian psychology being treated as a singular entity. Coe and Hall criticise the view for failing to affirm what Christianity itself affirms and for its two-step approach for empirical work. Finally Powlison sees a similarity between Christian psychology and his own brand of Biblical counselling and raises some similar research questions that may arise from both approaches. He, however, "felt jarred by Roberts and Watson's use of the word trait to describe the quality of flourishing humanness" (p. 197).

### **Chapter 5: A Transformational Psychology View**

In their 46-page essay, Coe and Hall look at transformational psychology as a model which tries to mould "traditional way of thinking of psychology in relation to Christianity" scientifically (p. 199). They discuss the history of psychology and engaging in psychology in the spirit. They also discuss the practitioners doing one single psychology but with a complex study of reality in faith and those doing psychology as descriptive and prescriptive science.

They thereafter address the issue of existential and theoretical framework as it relates to the person, the process and the product of practising psychology in conformity with God. They explore five levels of transformational psychology on theories, research and training which are depicted in their figure 3 labelled `Contours of a transformational model of psychology` (p. 222). They conclude by emphasising that focus of transformational psychology is on the person and process, and affirm that the implications are compelling.

Myers recommends Coe and Hall's ambitious effort to psychological scientists. He, however, queries their assumptions and dissents from " their effort to transform " psychology" into religion" (p. 228). Jones criticises their individualism and sees their call for freedom from past thinking about Christian psychology as likely to lead to the argument as to which psychologist is spiritually mature or transformed. Roberts criticises the writers for saying little about the subject of Christian psychology and the character of the psychologist. Finally, Powlison commends them for their comprehensive goals but faults their reliance on the monastic and labels the form of Christianity brought into psychology as problematic.

### **Chapter 6: A Biblical Counseling View**

This 29-page chapter is by Powlison who sees at the heart of Christianity a coordinated understanding of the basis of work by people. He reveals that God sets the agenda of human blossoming through counselling and says Christians' understanding is bound to differ from that of other psychologies. He states that Christ's revelation creates a unique idea of the relationship

between counsellor and counselee as well as difference in methodology and counselling location. He argues further that Christian psychology and psychotherapy do not appear in the Bible automatically and that wisdom from biblical counselling is ongoing. Furthermore, Powlison looks at the numerous dimensions underlying the Christian view and implications for helping people. He examines three themes of Nicene Creed and affirms that “ God is the maker of all that is”, that He is judge of both the dead and the living and that Jesus “ came down for us and for our salvation” (pp. 247-248). He states that Christian faith and psychology are related by reasons of psychology incorporating the feelings, thoughts and experiences of people, supplying systematic observations and descriptions of how people work and giving explanations about human behaviour. He also sketches out how biblical understanding and practice address realities about people’s problems using a thirty-eight year old uncoordinated father of two, Clyde, a medical doctor whose wife and parents also have diverse problems, as a case study. He states that we can make a sense of Clyde’s problem of adjusted disorder and emotions (p. 266) by resorting to Christian faith and Jesus’ teachings on heart, faith and love. In conclusion, he foresees his hypothetical Clyde, through the counselling process, taking on the culture of change.

Myers sees no serious discussion of the mainstream psychology in Powlison’s view. He queries the effectiveness of biblical counselling but leaves the judgement to others. Jones queries Powlison’s focus on the Nicene fundamentals which do not articulate Christian psychology. He also objects to the counselling offered to Clyde, arguing that, where resources of the faith



and the church are inadequate, they should be supplemented with resources from psychological sciences, (integration), and not replaced as suggested by Powlison. Watson praises biblical counselling for adopting revelation from Jesus in its commitment to counselling practice. He faults Powlison's approach, however, for suggesting that Christian psychologists should only do counselling while they can work on other forms of human endeavours. Coe and Hall see the genuineness of Powlison's work to relate psychology to Christianity. They, nonetheless, criticise biblical counselling for failing to present a peculiar version of science. They also query Powlison's use of mainly the quantitative and descriptive methods while ignoring the prescriptive method that talks about values, characters etc. (p. 287).

### **Chapter 7: Gaining Understanding Through Five Views**

In this 22-page chapter, Johnson assists the reader to appreciate the "multiperspective" nature of the book (p. 292). He acknowledges some contradictions in the five views but warns the readers to wait and read all so as to appreciate the valid insights of each of the positions. Furthermore, Johnson encourages understanding of psychology and counselling by participating in the book's dialogue. Moreover, he advises on having critical ability for understanding. Finally, he encourages us to read this book in order to engage with others in the formulation of a new understanding.

### **Conclusion**

This book is a huge success by all standards. First, Johnson's elaboration of the perspectives of the book in his preface and the first chapter of the book serve as a good introduction and a quick guide to the reading and

understanding of the book. Second, all the lead authors of the five approaches have also tried hard to articulate their views and their contributions bear an imprint of lofty scholarly presentation. Third, the co-contributors to each of the five approaches assist the reader to see the interdependence of the five chapters on one another. Fourth, the co-contributors to each chapter also discuss the perceived weaknesses of each approach thus assisting the reader to have a balanced view of the whole book and to form an impression about each of the approaches. Fifth, the references to each of the seven chapters are appropriately put at the end of each chapter thereby encouraging easy crosschecking of facts. Besides, the references have a uniform style - the APA style.

One noticeable weakness common to most of the writers is the tendency to exclude Jesus Christ, the basis of Christian belief, from their works. Another weakness is the difference in style exhibited by the writers, especially the supportive writers of each chapter. While some of them have headings and sub-headings for their works others do not. Some of the supportive essays failed to reference their supportive essays.

These flaws, however, become inconsequential in view of the book's sterling qualities. The objective of the book to give an opportunity for Christians to dialogue publicly about the value of psychology and the problems in psychological study and counselling practice has also been largely fulfilled. Based on these outstanding qualities, I wish to recommend this book to practitioners in psychology and Christian theology and indeed the general reading public.

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