

Mental Well-Being, Neuroscience, and Religion

with Gillian K. Straine and Mark Harris, "Mental Well-Being, Neuroscience, and Religion: Contributions from the Science and Religion Forum"; Fraser Watts, "Theology and Science of Mental Health and Well-Being"; Lindsay Bruce and Sarah Lane Ritchie, "The Physicalized Mind and the Gut-Brain Axis: Taking Mental Health Out of Our Heads"; Jaime Wright, "In the Beginning: The Role of Myth in Relating Religion, Brain Science, and Mental Well-Being"; William L. Atkins, "Empirical Mindfulness: Traditional Chinese Medicine and Mental Health in the Science and Religion Dialogue"; and Ben Ryan, "The Church and Mental Health: Theological and Practical Responses."

MENTAL WELL-BEING, NEUROSCIENCE, AND RELIGION: CONTRIBUTIONS FROM THE SCIENCE AND RELIGION FORUM

by Gillian K. Straine and Mark Harris

Abstract. The Science and Religion Forum (SRF) seeks to be the premier organization promoting the discussion between science and religion in the United Kingdom. Each year, the SRF holds a conference tackling a topical issue, and in 2017 focused on mental well-being, neuroscience, and religion. This article introduces the thematic section which is made up of five papers from that conference. As a new field within the science and religion academy, these articles are both wide-ranging and detailed. This introductory article locates this section within the academy and argues that its place is not only valid but vital, given the increase of mental health problems and the need for medicine, church, and society to answer this problem and present ways to help.

Keywords: mental well-being; neuroscience; Science and Religion Forum; theology

In September 2017, the Science and Religion Forum (SRF) met for its annual conference at Bishop Grosseteste University in Lincoln, England. The SRF had its inception in a series of discussions involving scientists, theologians, and clergy which took place in Oxford in the early 1970s. A key figure in the early discussions was Arthur Peacocke who was to become the Forum's first chairman, and later president. Today, SRF exists to promote

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discussion between scientific understanding and religious thought on issues at the interface of science and religion, and membership is open to people of any religion or none.

Two years previously, the Forum had celebrated its forty-year anniversary with a conference entitled *Forty Years of Science and Religion: Looking Back, Looking Forward* (Spurway and Hickman 2016). Although there was much to celebrate, there was also some ambivalence expressed about the distance the work of science and religion in the academy had covered, and its impact on society. Appropriately, the emphasis of the event was on the future possibilities for the field, especially concerning positive collaboration around the promotion of human ontology and the possibilities for the SRF being the platform for this essential work. In an invited plenary paper, Willem B. Drees stated:

What might scholars in “religion and science,” such as those meeting in the Science and Religion Forum, contribute today? Their particular intellectual niche, it seems to me, is to engage and nourish science, and the intellectual ambition that comes by engagement with science, also in domains such as history, anthropology, psychology, the study of religions and the like. Not by dismissing human existential questions, as the new atheism seems to do. . . . Rather, the aim should be to bring a genuine scientific orientation to the table in the human, individual and communal discourses about our existential orientations and moral responsibilities, encouraging a constructive and critical reflection on worldviews and values. (Drees 2016, 45f.)

The following year, the SRF responded to this challenge by engaging in a highly philosophical topic on the limits of science (Straine 2017) and then let the pendulum swing in the other direction in 2017 by inviting contributions on a more grounded topic: mental well-being, neuroscience, and religion. We are grateful for the opportunity to publish some of the papers from this conference in *Zygon*.

The subject is an important new area for the study of science and religion. It begins in the academic study of the human, and roots down into the church and into personal lives, traveling through vital areas of theology and philosophy and bringing them into conversation with praxis. As might be expected in new attempts at interdisciplinary engagement there were the usual difficulties such endeavors inevitably encounter.

The topic reflects a desire in the SRF to seek balance and new fields of engagement picking up on the signs that, after several decades of exploring traditional themes such as creation and divine action, a paradigm shift is beginning to take place in the dialogue between science and religion. The special questions surrounding the biological, mental, and theological significance of the human person have occupied center stage for the last few years, but researchers are beginning to look at even more subtle questions regarding human wholeness, identity, and health. The previous fascination

with the nature of human consciousness is therefore broadening out to include issues of mental welfare, along with the theological bearing of practices such as mindfulness.

The conference also reflects signs that collaboration over a practical issue is an important new way of doing science and religion (Fuller 2016). Dealing with the “applied” is vital: we don’t live in our heads. Therefore, the 2017 conference was run in collaboration with the Guild of Health and St. Raphael, an ecumenical organization which promotes the healing ministry of the Christian faith and has a long-established relationship with both medicine and psychological services.¹

This thematic section includes five articles which cover aspects of this broad field. From traditional Chinese medicine to the politics of mental health and the church, we believe that this selection offers both depth and breadth in this field which, by definition, covers many facets of thought, practice, and tradition; because once one decides to involve the human, one must also engage with politics, interfaith issues, and, that most tricky area, theodicy and human experience.

The SRF thematic section begins with an article by Fraser Watts on mental health and well-being in which he argues that theological insight can augment treatment. He discusses theological perspectives on depression, the relationship between psychosis and religion, ending with a case study to show both the challenges and complementary nature of a theological approach in the treatment and understanding of mental health. Lindsay Bruce and Sarah Lane Ritchie ground their article in the physical, to examine current research surrounding the gut microbiome and its relationship to mental illness and mental health. They end with a discussion of how science and religion might incorporate this type of research into its methodology and subject matter. Jaime Wright takes us in a different and unique direction, broadening out the theme to include the study of story, narrative, and myth within the consideration of mental health by the science and religion academy. She includes not only the role of myths in religion, the neurobiological basis of myth, and the theories of narrative psychology, but also her own experience. An alternative experience of medicine and health is tackled by William Atkins’ article on the role of Chinese traditional medicine in the understanding of mindfulness and treatment for mental health problems. We end this set of articles with something completely different: the politics of church and mental health care services within the context of the United Kingdom. In his article, Ben Ryan writes about key practical responses to mental health problems, incorporating vital theological questions about sin, responsibility, and redemption.

A key theme that emerges in the articles, particularly in Bruce and Ritchie, Watts, and Wright, is the need to engage in the borderlands between the physical and mental. This might make for challenging reading, especially for those who adopt the position of physicalism, believing that

human consciousness is wholly defined by biology. For some, a recurring question in the conference was “What does it mean to talk about my subjective human experience—in whatever our state of mental health—in terms of my neurochemistry, and eventually of the physics of electrons?” Yet for others and indeed for some of the speakers, this question was bypassed and refreshing new angles were covered with speakers, when engaging with our conference theme, quite naturally speaking about the physical alongside the spiritual and the mental without recourse to some of the philosophical and theological debates in the hinterland.

When this is allowed and put alongside the plentiful evidence that, if the mind and its health are dependent on the physical, then it’s also the richest and most complex physical reality we know of, and, far from the science explaining it away, the science is leading us into ever more wonderful mysteries of the mind. So if Descartes solved his own worries about this issue with the solution that “I think therefore I am,” in this conference we broadened that statement out to “I think, I suffer, I hurt, I doubt, I rejoice, I praise, therefore I am.”

Compassion came up a great deal at the conference, more than is represented in this section. But it is interesting to note that these papers led the participants to move from theory to praxis on a personal level. The theme allowed us time to reflect on the stories of those who suffer from mental health problems, and to ask questions about cause and effect, the meaning of connection, whether as an integrated human being or as part of a community, and the use of language to explain and soothe. Compassion, to suffer with, has a deep theological tradition and led us into ethical questions, with Gillian Straine summing up at the end of the conference with the following words: “What does this mean for us as a community of researchers? We are the epistemologically privileged but lest we slip into Gnosticism, there is a call to action.”

As with all such conferences, especially when new ground is covered, people left wanting more. This is a key limit area of the science and religion conversation that is sparsely furnished. Neuroscience, which can be interpreted as the interplay of the physical and mental, strongly rejecting dualistic models of the mind and body, raises important theological concerns. There is an urgency, given the rise of mental health problems, to develop a theological anthropology which draws on neuroscience and mental health studies such that the church and those who seek to help are empowered in a role to add to this important national issue and debate. But this work needs to be done with proper caution and reverence for scientific methodology and a demand for rigor in these conversations. There is a danger that our theology is flattered into the more fuzzy end of the well-being popular market, and so there is a need, indeed a responsibility, that good theology is communicated from the academy to the pews, if you like, to those hungry to understand mental health from the perspective of

their faith. This section represents the work of SRF at the beginning of this important conversation.

NOTE

1. <http://www.gohealth.org.uk>

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