

Whose Psychology? Which Rationality? Christian Psychology within an Ideological  
Surround after Postmodernism

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### Abstract

As interpreted within an ideological surround model of the relationship between religion and science, Christian Psychology essentially works from the assumption that Christianity and contemporary psychology are incommensurable. This means that the two rest upon different ultimate standards and thus operate in terms of incommensurable though not wholly incompatible systems of rationality. The task of Christian Psychology is to narrate the problem of incommensurability by creating a Christian meta-perspective that embraces the potentials and avoids the liabilities of all the perspectives of Christians working in psychology. Empirical research based upon this meta-perspective will encourage operationalization of the tradition and analysis of the ideological dimensions of all social scientific investigations. The overall goal will be to nurture the dynamic growth of a Christian rationality that can be passed on to future generations of Christian psychologists.

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Christians who are psychologists must answer a centrally important question. Are Christianity and contemporary psychology incommensurable? Notice that this question in no way implies that the two might be incompatible (MacIntyre 1988, 1990). The excellent work of so many Christian psychologists already makes it clear that the two are quite compatible to some important degree. To be incommensurable simply means instead that Christianity and contemporary psychology might fail to share the same ultimate standard. Without a shared ultimate standard, the central claims of each cannot be judged definitively along a common metric of evaluation. Incommensurable perspectives, therefore, operate from essentially different systems of rationality. Assumptions in one are warranted if they can be appropriately related to an ultimate standard of evaluation that is unavailable in the other. So, the question about incommensurability leads to a perhaps more fundamental question. Do Christianity and contemporary psychology rest upon ultimately different systems of rationality?

As interpreted within an ideological surround model of the relationship between religion and science (Watson, 1993), Christian Psychology will argue that any adequate response to this question must have at least four elements. First, an adequate response must explain why incommensurability is in fact an unavoidable and critical problem for all Christians working in psychology. Second, it will need to explain why the problem of incommensurability may be so difficult for some Christians to see or, if seen, to admit. Third, if it is to be fully effective, any adequate response to this question must make sense within the current cultural context. That context is sometimes described as

“postmodern.” The argument of Christian Psychology is that postmodernism cannot be ignored, but that Christian psychologists will need to move beyond postmodernism toward more productive cultural possibilities. Finally, Christian Psychology will argue that any fully adequate response to this question must include a tentative model of how we might all work together to meet the challenges of incommensurability in the future.

### **Necessary Incommensurability**

First, Christian Psychology assumes that Christianity and psychology are necessarily incommensurable. For a psychology to be truly Christian, the final standard of evaluation must presumably be Christ. That standard is obviously unavailable within a secularized social science like psychology. For the secularized scientific disciplines of today, the usually implicit and sometimes explicit ultimate standard of evaluation is nature (see e.g., Cunningham, Riches, Lehman, & Hampton, *in press*). Empirical observations of nature are evaluated by holding them up to contemporary understandings of what nature represents. Nothing stands outside of nature to judge nature. Progress is made as scientific readings of the world dynamically clarify and are clarified by current readings of the “theology” of nature. For Christian psychologists, Christ stands outside of nature to judge nature. Progress is made as scientific readings of the world dynamically clarify and are clarified by current readings of the theology of Christ. Christian and secular psychologists, therefore, might agree. Incommensurability is a rather obvious and relatively noncontroversial empirical reality.

But, perhaps it is unfair to presume how others might view this issue. Arguments might exist for placing both Christ and the naturalistic assumptions of secular psychology under the evaluation of a shared higher standard. That standard could then make it

possible to judge both Christ and psychology along a common metric of evaluation. But such arguments will also need to explain how this approach can support the development of a truly Christian psychology, rather than a psychology of the proposed higher standard.

If such arguments exist, they should be listened to carefully and evaluated fairly.

Christian Psychology, nevertheless, remains skeptical. The likelihood seems remote that a psychology without Christ as its ultimate standard could still operate as a truly Christian psychology.

In short, for Christian Psychology, the most likely conclusion seems clear. Christianity and contemporary psychology are founded upon different ultimate standards. They, therefore, operate as incommensurable, though not necessarily as wholly incompatible systems of rationality.

### **Difficulties Seeing Incommensurability**

Second, Christian Psychology suspects that other Christian approaches to psychology insufficiently address the challenge of incommensurability. Conflicts about the role of psychology in Christianity often seem to focus on whether or not the two can be compatible. But again, that is the wrong question. Incommensurability, not incompatibility, is the problem. It also may be a problem that is difficult for some Christians to see.

MacIntyre (1988, 1990) has made the issue of incommensurability a central concern in his philosophy. Most of us, he suggests, live within the conceptual framework of a single perspective. When this is so, “the problem of understanding the position of the other will appear as a problem of translation: how can we render *their* beliefs, arguments, and theses into *our* terms” (Macintyre, 1990, p. 111). Such individuals will not see

incommensurability as even a potential problem. Their confident assumption will be that all propositions of another perspective can be expressed within their own language of understanding.

A scientific worldview may suggest, for example, that all religious assertions can be translated as either rational or irrational relative to current understandings of nature as the final standard. A Christian worldview may instead claim that all scientific assertions can be translated as either faithful or sinful relative to one or another current Christian understanding of the Bible. Those who see a high correspondence between the rational and the faithful and between the irrational and the sinful will assume that Christianity and psychology are largely compatible. Those who instead claim that the rational often corresponds to the sinful and the irrational to the faithful will describe the two as largely incompatible. Less polarized positions are of course possible. Most importantly, however, this focus on the degree of compatibility makes it virtually impossible to see incommensurability as even a potential problem.

But even when Christians could see the potential difficulty, they may be tempted to ignore it. To take the problem of incommensurability seriously might seem to require an unacceptable surrender to relativism. Incommensurability does, after all, suggest the existence of isolated rationalities that are incapable of meaningful dialog with and critique of other rationalities. MacIntyre (1990) argues, however, that relativism is not a necessary consequence of incommensurability. Progress in addressing the problems of incommensurability requires people who are fluent in the rationalities of multiple perspectives. Such individuals will understand from the outset that one perspective cannot rationally defeat the other, because the two forms of understanding are calibrated

to incommensurable standards of evaluation. Such individuals will try instead to use one perspective to out-narrate all other positions that see translation as the only solution to conflicts between perspectives. Relativism can be avoided. The productive response to incommensurability is not to use reason, but rather narration.

Christian Psychology can, therefore, be conceptualized as an ongoing project to narrate the problem of incommensurability that necessarily confronts Christians who work in psychology. Christian Psychology needs to tell a story that refuses to ignore the challenges of incommensurability, that avoids the dangers of relativism, and that suggests how psychology might function with Christ as the ultimate standard. That story will also need to narrate our current cultural context and then attempt to narrate our future so that we can all begin to understand how to collaborate in expanding the reach of Christian rationality.

### **Narrating the Cultural Context**

A focus on incommensurability obviously presupposes that scientific forms of rationality must have limits. Again, incommensurability simply means that the ultimate standards of secular science do not and cannot be those of Christianity and vice versa. Each, in other words, operates within the boundary conditions or limits of its own standards. Those convinced of the full adequacy of the sciences to judge even Christianity will want to reject this kind of thinking. This rejection will at least implicitly reflect a modernist faith in the sciences that is increasingly challenged by the influential arguments of postmodernism (see e.g., Erickson, 2001; Smith, 2006). The postmodern belief is that all scientific observations are based upon non-empirical, theory-laden pre-judgments. Hence, science like religion rests upon normative values and, therefore, can

never be fully objective. Scientific “faith” in nature as the ultimate standard is, for example, a normative judgment. This increasingly postmodern cultural context has at least four implications for efforts to address the problem of incommensurability.

First, postmodern critiques make it clear that science like Christianity is therefore ideological (Watson, 1993). As defined by MacIntyre (1978), ideologies are somewhat non-empirical, normative, and sociological systems of belief. Christianity assumes that God created the universe. Science argues that the universe began with the Big Bang. All kinds of empirical observations can be organized around each assumption, but neither God nor the Big Bang can be definitively confirmed nor falsified scientifically. These somewhat non-empirical assumptions will then have normative consequences. An ideology “does not merely tell us how the world is and how we are to act, but is concerned with the bearing of the one upon the other” (MacIntyre, 1978, p. 6). Christian and scientific pursuits of the “truth,” for example, will necessarily reflect methods that are consistent with their very different non-empirical assumptions. All of this has sociological implications as well. As MacIntyre (1978) points out, “There is a Christian account of why Christians are Christians and the heathens are not” (p. 6). Science too will have accounts of who is a “believer” within the scientific community and who is a “heathen.” In short, any adequate approach to the problem of incommensurability will begin with an understanding that both Christianity and secular psychology necessarily operate within different ideological surrounds. Formal attention to the influence of these differing ideological surrounds will, therefore, be essential.

Second, many Christians psychologists will want to move beyond postmodernism. Postmodern critiques can seem to trap Christians in an untenable

situation. A historically naïve pre-modern reading of Christianity cannot easily address the realities of an increasingly pluralistic and scientific world. A full embrace of modernist rationality seems ill suited to solve the unavoidable problems of incommensurability. Postmodernism seems to accurately describe the contemporary cultural context, but also points toward a disturbing relativism. If everything is ideological, then presumably nothing and everything can be “true” at the same time. None of this seems to be acceptable.

In response to this situation, Christians have begun to call for the development of a “postpostmodernism.” Erickson (2001) writes, for example, “We must work toward a postpostmodernism, not simply ignoring the phenomenon of postmodernism, and reverting back to a prepostmodernism, but also not halting with postmodernism” (p. 293). What would a Christian post-postmodernism look like? Greer (2003) emphasizes that “in the post-postmodern paradigm, absolute truth has a name: Jesus Christ” (p. 217). In other words, Christian psychologists can embrace the problem of incommensurability as an opportunity. They can begin with the assumption that Christ supplies the absolute ultimate standard for a psychology and then develop the potentials of a different rationality based upon that standard.

Post-postmodern Christian psychologists will, therefore, understand that a relativity of perspectives is an undeniable empirical reality of the contemporary cultural context. They will also know, however, that relativity as an empirical reality does not dictate relativism as a normative standard. Relativism as a norm must be overcome. This cannot occur through use of a scientifically objective rationality. A wholly “objective”

scientific rationality simply cannot exist. The task instead will be to challenge relativism with an increasingly compelling Christian narration of psychology and rationality.

Third, a post-postmodern response to incommensurability will require the social construction of what might be called a meta-perspective. In other words, Christians in psychology will need to create a perspective of understanding that is developed at a higher level of abstraction. The need for a meta-perspective was in fact suggested by the philosopher who stood at the origins of postmodernism, Friedrich Nietzsche (1887/1967). While passionately criticizing Christianity, Nietzsche also rejected the claim that science could ever be fully “objective.” Science, he argued instead, invariably reflects perspectives motivated by diverse “subjective” interests. Hence, a scientific view on any particular issue is invariably limited by its interests. For Nietzsche, the solution to this problem is what he called a “future objectivity.” In the future, “objectivity” will require openness to diverse “interests” and the use of “a variety of perspectives and affective interpretations in the service of knowledge” (Nietzsche, 1887/1967, p. 119). In the service of Christian knowledge, a post-postmodern approach to psychology will need to socially construct a meta-perspective that uses “future objectivity” to bring all relevant perspectives into conformity with a rationality that takes Christ as the ultimate standard.

Finally, therefore, a Christian Psychology will want to collaborate with all Christians in psychology to narrate a future in which the problem of incommensurability is embraced as an opportunity. That narration will attempt to construct a future objectivity that includes three most important elements: Christ as the ultimate standard, a meta-perspective that evaluates the potential contributions of all Christian psychologists

relative to that ultimate standard, and the various perspectives that psychologists use in the service of Christian and other knowledge.

### **Narrating the Future: A Tentative Model**

An ideal narration of the future must, therefore include the important contributions of all perspectives that Christians use in their work as psychologists. More specifically, further development of Christian rationality as it relates to psychology will require the social construction of a meta-perspective that is capable of evaluating Christian perspectives that represent three very different forms of intellectual endeavor: the etic, the emic, and the dialogic.

In anthropology, etic research perspectives involve a study of human communities using the “outside,” relatively more objective methods of science (e.g., Headland, Pike, & Harris, 1990). Postmodern critiques make it clear that etic research can never be wholly objective. Etic research programs, nevertheless, maintain a useful distance from issues that can make it possible to see things more broadly than is sometimes possible within the too-close perspectives of persons living within the community itself. Individuals within a Christian community, in other words, may become so enmeshed within one or another approach to a question that they are unable to see the full possibilities of their own Christian rationality.

Etic perspectives, therefore, have the obvious advantage of using powerful scientific methodologies to empirically clarify Christian concerns. To some degree, the Levels of Explanation approach to Christianity and psychology may illustrate the etic approach (e.g., Myers, 2010). As described by Johnson (2010), “proponents of this approach maintain that all levels of reality are important (the physical, chemical,

biological, psychological, social and theological), that each dimension or level of reality is accessible to study by methods that are appropriate to it that have been developed by the corresponding discipline, and that the boundaries of each discipline, therefore, should not be blurred” (p. 33). Levels of Explanation research thus makes it possible to use the vast array of etic, scientific “methods that are appropriate” to clarify the concerns of Christian Psychology. At the same time, however, an etic perspective could promote a colonization of Christian communities by scientific value systems. This is so because somewhat non-empirical assumptions based upon nature as the ultimate standard can lead to very different normative conclusions than those reflecting somewhat non-empirical assumptions based upon Christ as the ultimate standard. In short, the etic perspective has clarification as its advantage and colonization as its potential disadvantage.

In anthropology, emic research perspectives involve the study of communities using the “inside,” less “objective” perspectives of the community itself. For Christians working in the service of knowledge, emic research programs seek to express forms of psychological understanding that are possible within the faith itself. The Bible and the available texts and traditions of interpretation will be at the center of methodologies designed to enhance the articulation and actualization of Christian community. At the same time, however, Christian emic research programs could be so deeply embedded within theologically conditioned and overly narrow perspectives on the faith that they could encourage retreat into increasingly isolated and besieged ghettos of interpretation. To some degree, the Biblical Counseling perspective, with its emphasis on relying upon the Bible and its skepticism about the role of scientific research, may illustrate the emic

perspective (e.g., Powlison, 2010). In short, the emic perspective has actualization as its advantage and ghettoization as its potential disadvantage.

For Christians working in psychology, etic and emic research programs will be necessary, but not sufficient. Etic scientific and emic Christian perspectives must be brought into conversation. Dialogic research programs pursue this essential task. Such research programs explicitly explore the possibilities of translating scientific psychological insights into the language of Christianity, and vice versa. Dialogic research could, nevertheless, produce what might be described as a “dysinterpretation” of the conversational possibilities. Dysinterpretations would presumably have at least some conceptual and empirical foundations of support, and so could not be called simple misinterpretations. Dysinterpretations would instead reflect deviations from normatively ideal translations, in other words deviations from the ultimate standard defined by Christ. Two possibilities seem most obvious. One deviation could tend toward an etic colonization of the faith, whereas the other could encourage an emic ghettoization. To some degree, the Integration approach to psychology and Christianity may illustrate the dialogic perspective (e.g., Jones, 2010). In short, dialogic research programs have translation as their advantage and dysinterpretation as their potential disadvantage.

### **Questions for the Narration of Christian Psychology**

This conceptual framework now makes it possible for Christian Psychology to begin narrating the future by answering three important questions. Those questions will address concerns about how Christians in psychology can embrace the problem of incommensurability by socially constructing the rationality of their own meta-perspective.

First, what must Christians in psychology do in order to construct their Christian meta-perspective? The answer should now be clear in very general terms. With Christ as their ultimate standard of evaluation, Christians in psychology will need to develop concepts and methodologies that are useful in promoting clarification, actualization, and translation while simultaneously avoiding colonization, ghettoization, and dysinterpretation.

Second, which Christians in psychology will need to construct this meta-perspective? The answer is that all Christians in psychology will need to contribute. The Levels of Interpretation, Biblical Counseling, Integration, and all other views will each need to create knowledge that is useful in fulfilling the positive potentials of each perspective. In addition, however, advocates of these views will also need to express arguments that rise above their own perspective and make points about their discoveries at the higher level of a Christian meta-perspective.

Finally, what is the role of Christian Psychology in all this? Christian Psychology will embrace the task of developing the Christian meta-perspective as a formal responsibility. Progress in this task will be obvious in the creation of an increasingly sophisticated and uniquely Christian rationality about psychology. That rationality will need to work within two contexts. Within the Christian community itself, Christian Psychology will want to develop conceptual and methodological innovations that are useful in promoting clarification, actualization, and translation and in avoiding colonization, ghettoization, and dysinterpretation. However, Christian Psychology will also understand the importance of working outside the Christian community. To limit Christian rationality within the boundaries of its own community would promote an

unacceptable cultural ghettoization of Christian perspectives. In opposition to that possibility, Christian Psychology would hope to articulate an ever more compelling Christian rationality that could enter into increasingly productive conversations with all other rationalities that influence the discipline of psychology and the wider world.

### **Conceptual and Methodological Innovations**

As it narrates the problem of incommensurability, Christian Psychology will be interested not only in the insights that are available from etic, emic, and dialogic research programs. A perhaps more basic goal will be to develop concepts and methodologies that are useful in building up the communal meta-perspective of all Christians who work in psychology. With Christ as the ultimate standard, Christian Psychology will use the Bible and Christian texts and traditions of interpretation to define an increasingly dynamic and sophisticated Christian rationality. A “theology of clarification,” for example, may be essential in helping the Christian community know how to obtain the full and faithful benefits of the Levels of Explanation perspective. Theological evaluations of the potential problems of ghettoization may be essential in actualizing the promise of, for example, Biblical Counseling. Dysinterpretation as a possible danger of the Integration perspective is likely to be a complex phenomenon that will require the careful analysis of a sophisticated Christian rationality.

Empirical research will be essential as well. The Christian Psychology research program will assume that science like religion operates within an ideological surround. This means that science will not have access to an unambiguous “objectivity” that is unavailable to religion. Both science and religion will instead have incommensurable, though not necessarily incompatible, forms of objectivity. Each form of objectivity will

operate within its own normatively defined ideological surround. Awareness of that fact will have two most important implications for Christian Psychology.

### **Operationalizing the Tradition**

First, Christian Psychology will seek to encourage the development of measures and procedures that directly express the rationality of a Christian ideological surround. In other words, Christian Psychology will identify operationalization of the Christian tradition as a centrally important research objective.

Traditional Christianity assumes, for example, that achievement of better psychological functioning requires awareness of personal sinfulness. Beliefs about Sin Scales have attempted to express four dimensions of this awareness (Watson, Morris, Loy, Hamrick, & Grizzle, 2007). The Self-Improvement Scale is reflected in the claim, “My beliefs about sin have helped me work on my weaknesses.” Illustrating Perfectionism Avoidance is the statement, “Knowledge of my personal sinfulness has lifted the burden from my shoulders of trying to be perfect.” An example of Healthy Humility is the belief, “My awareness of sin helps me maintain an appropriate humility.” Self-Reflective Functioning includes such statements as, “My beliefs about sin have made it possible for me to be more objective about myself.”

Use of these scales made it possible to demonstrate that Beliefs about Sin in fact measure psychological health in largely Christian samples (Watson et al., 2007). Specifically, these four scales correlated with greater self-esteem and lower levels of narcissism, depression, and anxiety. Simultaneous use of these measures to predict mental health also produced unexpected results. Self-Improvement proved to be centrally important in defining the mental health benefits of Beliefs about Sin. Indeed, Healthy

Humility turned out to be unhealthy when statistical procedures simultaneously accounted for the influence of Self-Improvement. This latter result seemed especially important in spotlighting the essential contribution of empirical research in understanding how Christian rationality operates today. When working with clients, Christian therapists and Biblical Counselors presumably would need to be aware of the possible importance of Self-Improvement and of the potential vulnerabilities of an unmitigated Healthy Humility. Such knowledge would not be easily available except through the use of social scientific procedures.

And of course, the Christian assumption is that the ultimate solution for the problem of sin lies in God's grace. Operationalizing the tradition, therefore, clearly requires the creation of another scale for assessing personal beliefs in and experience of God's grace. Such an instrument was recently developed (Sisemore et al., 2010), and its use along with the Beliefs in Sin Scales made it possible to empirically explore theologically sophisticated questions about relationships among sin, grace, and psychological well-being (Watson, Chen, & Sisemore, 2010).

Operationalizing the tradition would be only one aspect of a Christian Psychology research program. Again, the ideological nature of research has a second important implication for Christian Psychology. New methodologies need to examine the incommensurable rationalities of Christianity and contemporary psychology. Five procedures have been developed for that purpose thus far: direct rational analysis, empirical translation schemes, correlational marker procedures, comparative rationality analysis, and statistical controls for ideology.

### **Direct Rational Analysis**

Direct rational analysis may be especially useful in documenting a potential secular psychological bias against Christian rationality (Watson, Hood, & Morris, 1988). A scale reflecting a nonreligious existential ideology measures whether someone tends to maintain an unhealthy existential avoidance of the harsher realities of life. Those realities include meaninglessness, suffering, and death. Correlational evidence in fact demonstrates that this scale can predict both sincere Christian commitments and anxiety. Such data could, therefore, seem to point toward a linkage of Christian commitments with an anxious refusal to confront harsh existential realities.

However, this scale associates “existential avoidance” with an affirmation that “God exists” and with the belief that it is “quite certain what happens after death.” Instead of merely measuring existential avoidance, these questions within a Christian ideological surround may instead reveal the somewhat non-empirical and anti-religious assumptions of an existentialist ideological surround. This is so because most orthodox Christians presumably would regard belief in God and certainty about what happens after death as reflecting a healthy confrontation with the harsh realities of life.

A direct rational analysis of all statements within this scale, therefore, suggested that some items contradicted Christian faith and essentially defined an “anti-Christian” subscale. Other items appeared to be unobjectionable within a Christian ideological surround and hence could be described as a “Christian-neutral” subscale. A reanalysis of the data using these subscales revealed that the association of sincere Christian faith with “existential avoidance” was limited solely to the anti-Christian items. The Christian neutral subscale explained the linkage of existential avoidance with anxiety. As a consequence, the initial finding of a correlation between existential avoidance and sincere

Christian commitments merely demonstrated that the original scale was biased against Christian beliefs in God and the afterlife. In other words, the original scale had the potential to colonize Christian commitments in terms of an existentialist ideological surround.

### **Empirical Translation Schemes**

Christians over recent decades have appropriately emphasized contrasts between Christian and secular humanistic understandings of psychological well-being. Such arguments move easily and plausibly toward the suggestion that humanistic self-actualization is wholly incompatible with Christian forms of mental health. But is humanistic self-actualization only more incommensurable than incompatible with Christianity? Empirical translation schemes helped answer that question (Watson, Milliron, Morris, & Hood, 1995; also see Watson 2008a, b).

In this procedure, each statement of a humanistic self-actualization scale was restated in a number of hypothetically comparable expressions of Christian self-actualization. In largely Christian samples, an empirically defensible translation became evident if a potential Christian translation correlated positively with the original humanistic statement of self-actualization. One humanistic expression of self-actualization said, for example, “I can like people without having to approve of them.” A successful Christian translation asserted, instead, “Christ’s love for sinners has taught me to love people regardless of their background and lifestyle.” A Christian Self-Actualization Scale made up of successful translations predicted higher levels of Christian commitment and turned out to be more useful than the humanistic scale in assessing Christian psychological adjustment.

Self-actualization when calibrated to Christ as the ultimate standard, therefore, proved to be an even more predictive and thus valid measure of Christian psychological well-being. In other words, humanistic articulations of self-actualization were not wholly incompatible, but rather only incommensurable with Christian commitments. Such data demonstrate that an extreme emic rejection of self-actualization could promote a ghettoization of Christian perspectives. Also worth emphasizing is the fact that this humanistic scale was at least somewhat successful in predicting Christian mental health. Researchers could, therefore, legitimately use this particular secular humanistic scale to measure the self-actualization of Christians. The empirical translation scheme results, nevertheless, demonstrated that to do so could lead to a dysinterpretation of Christian self-functioning. Data based upon this secular scale could encourage a dysinterpretation, not because they were wholly wrong in suggesting the possibility of Christian self-actualization, but rather because they were insufficiently calibrated to Christ as the ultimate standard and would thus yield less robust empirical findings.

### **Correlational Marker Procedures**

A further analysis of the self-actualization issue used a different secular humanistic scale along with a correlational marker procedure (Watson, Morris, & Hood, 1989). This research strategy rests upon use of a psychological scale that has well established credentials as a valid measure of Christian commitment. In other words, such a scale would display what might be called “tradition validity” because it successfully assesses whether research participants sincerely try to follow the assumptions of their own Christian rationality. This instrument, therefore, could serve as a “marker” of traditional Christian commitments.

In a largely Christian sample, one study correlated a tradition valid measure of religious commitment with each of 150 separate items from this different humanistic self-actualization scale. Some humanistic items correlated positively with the tradition valid scale, and thus could be “marked” as “pro-Christian.” One “pro-Christian” statement said, “I do not have feelings of resentment about things that are past.” Christian and humanistic ideological surrounds, therefore, seemed to agree that “feelings of resentment” interfere with self-actualization. Other humanistic items correlated negatively with the religious commitment scale, and thus served as markers of “anti-Christian” belief. Illustrating these “anti-Christian” assertions was the claim that “people need not repent their wrongdoings.” Hence, “repentance” was a feature of Christian, but not humanistic self-actualization. In correlations with other measures, “pro-Christian” statements more likely predicted adjustment, whereas “anti-Christian” items pointed toward poorer psychological functioning. Most notable, however, was the finding that “pro-Christian” and “anti-Christian” items correlated negatively with each other. This outcome violated basic psychometric standards of scale development, which require a strong positive relationship among all items within a scale.

So was this 150-item humanistic self-actualization scale compatible or incompatible with Christian commitments? The paradoxical answer was yes. This scale was both compatible and incompatible, as might be expected of a measure that was incommensurable with Christ as the ultimate standard. Inclusion of both “pro-Christian” and “anti-Christian” items within a single instrument produced a scale that was largely irrelevant to Christian understandings of self-actualization. An ideologically naïve use of this measure could, therefore, lead to the misleading conclusion that Christians fail to

achieve the mental health benefits of self-actualization. Such a conclusion could promote a colonization of Christian beliefs by a humanistic ideological surround. Within the objectives of an Integration research program, such data could also support a dystinterpretation of Christian self-functioning. Advocates of the emic perspective could also applaud such results as proof that self-actualization has no real place in Christianity, thereby encouraging a ghettoization of Christian beliefs. Correlational marker procedures made it possible to empirically evaluate all of these possibilities within a Christian ideological surround (also see, Watson & Morris, 2008).

### **Comparative Rationality Analysis**

Comparative rationality analysis is a procedure that asks Christians to respond to a psychological scale twice (Watson, 2010). First, they react to questionnaire items under standard conditions, responding to all items as intended by the creators of the scale. Then, they respond to these very same items once again, but this time by evaluating whether each is consistent or inconsistent with personal religious commitments. Based on these assessments, items can be defined empirically as “pro-Christian” or as “anti-Christian.” This means that the scale taken under standard instructions can then be rescored in a different way expressing the assumptions of a Christian rather than a non-Christian ideological surround.

For example, one measure of “irrational beliefs” based upon a secular system of psychotherapy assumes that mental health requires full independence and that any belief in the necessity of depending upon others promotes psychopathology (Watson, Morris, Hood, & Folbrecht, 1990). According to this scale, for example, it is irrational to claim that “people need a source of strength outside themselves.” Another supposed

irrationality says, “I try to consult an authority on important decisions.” Unsurprisingly, Christians evaluated these beliefs as being rational rather than irrational, in conformity with their commitment to depend upon God. At the same time, however, Christian and psychotherapeutic assumptions agreed that it was rational to believe that “I like to stand on my own two feet.” Once again, a scale based upon an ideological surround of contemporary psychology proved to be both incompatible and compatible with Christian beliefs, and hence was incommensurable.

Analysis of the Christian evaluations of dependency and other so-called irrationalities made it possible to define an overall Christian system of rationality (Watson, 2010). Most therapeutic-based assessments of irrationality were ideologically compatible with Christian beliefs, but some were not. Quantitative comparisons between the Christian and psychotherapeutic scorings of irrationality once again revealed that Christian rationality was relatively more valid than the therapeutic rationality when used with Christians. Overall, these data revealed that the psychotherapeutic evaluation of dependency had a potential to colonize Christian commitments and that a naïve use of these irrationality scales could at best encourage a dysinterpretation of Christian rationality.

### **Statistical Control for Ideology**

Finally, statistical control procedures can examine the relationship between Christian commitments and psychological functioning after statistically accounting for possible conflicts between ideological surrounds. In one project, numerous measures of Christian commitment were correlated with an array of scales assessing self-esteem, self-acceptance, and self-actualization (Watson, Morris, & Hood, 1987). Christian

commitments were more likely to predict unhealthy than healthy self-functioning, although most relationships proved to be nonsignificant.

In this study, efforts were also made to assess self-actualization in humanistic terms that were clearly anti-Christian and to assess Christian beliefs about sin and guilt that were clearly anti-humanistic. Statistical procedures then made it possible to subtract out the influences of anti-Christian and anti-humanistic language on the observed relationships. The result was that Christian commitments became overwhelmingly linked with healthier self-functioning. Definitive interpretation of these results is complex and will likely require additional research. Nevertheless, this outcome demonstrated the importance of understanding how ideological surrounds can condition supposedly “objective” empirical assessments of Christian psychological functioning. Depending upon perspective, a failure to remain sensitive to the problem of incommensurability could promote conclusions about the relationship between Christianity and self-functioning that could encourage colonization, dysinterpretation, or ghettoization.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, Christian Psychology can be conceptualized as an attempt to narrate the answer to a centrally important question. Are Christianity and contemporary psychology incommensurable? When understood within the ideological surround model of the relationship between religion and science, Christian Psychology argues that the empirically obvious and presumably noncontroversial answer must be yes. The ultimate standard of Christianity is Christ. The ultimate standard of secular psychological science is not. In the absence of a shared common ultimate standard of evaluation, the two must be incommensurable by definition.

To say that Christianity and psychology are incommensurable in no way means that they will be fully incompatible. Relative to the incommensurable rationality of contemporary psychology, Christian rationality will include a vast array of compatible, incompatible, and unrelated ideological assumptions. Incommensurability, therefore, presents us not only with a challenge, but also with an opportunity. We should all work together, embracing both science and our faith to clarify, actualize, and translate the implications of our Christian commitments.

We should also collaborate in the social construction of a meta-perspective. This meta-perspective should help us avoid the problems of colonization, ghettoization, and dysinterpretation. It will also encourage us to develop the conceptual and methodological innovations of a “future objectivity” that we can use in the service of Christian knowledge. All of us have essential contributions to make. Our goal should be to nurture the dynamic growth of a Christian rationality that we can pass on to future generations of Christian psychologists.

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