Brains, Mind and Faith

Malcolm Jeeves - Psychologist

Professor Malcolm A. Jeeves, CBE, MA, PhD, FBPsS, FRSE.
Born 1926. Educated Stamford School and St John’s College, Cambridge.
Hon Research Professor of Psychology, St Andrew’s University since 1993.
Professor of Psychology, 1969-93 (Vice-Principal 1988-85),
Director, Medical Research Council Cognitive Neuroscience Research Group, 1984-89.
Previously Professor of Psychology, Adelaide University, 1959-69.
Vice-President, Royal Society of Edinburgh, 1990-93. Member, Science and Engineering
Research Council, 1985-89.
Medical Research Council, 1984-88.
Honorary Sheriff, Fife, from 1986.
Formerly President IVF (Australia) and UCCF (UK).

It’s not always easy to be a psychologist and a Christian. Some aspects of psychological theory in
general and the psychology of religion in particular make one wary of accepting beliefs at their face
value. They can also alert one to motives for beliefs other than, or in addition to, those ostensibly given.
Wishful thinking, for example, is always ready to influence beliefs of many kinds, not just religious ones.
And as psychologists, we can certainly marshal an impressive catalogue of psychological mechanisms
to ‘explain away’ someone else’s beliefs or justify our own.

Some of the most widely published psychological accounts of how and why religious beliefs arise in the
first place (like William Sargant’s ‘brain washing’), and how they function for us (like Sigmund Freud’s
‘escape mechanisms’), have sufficient credibility to provide ready-made rationalisations for being
sceptical about some of the more extravagant claims made in the name of religion. As a consequence
I have become doubtful about taking testimonies at their face value and correspondingly hesitant
when asked to give my own. It is sad to recall eloquent and moving professions of personal Christian
commitment based on apparently convincing personal experiences, only to discover later that some of
those concerned will now have nothing to do with the Christian faith. This cautions me never to forget
how vulnerable may be my own faith—and yet the same thought brings home even more convincingly,
after nearly fifty years as a Christian, how unchanging and unfailing is God’s love, and how boundless
is his grace—his totally unmerited care and kindness to me. And that for me is the heart of the
matter—God’s unfailing and unchanging love. Having brought me to personal faith in him in my teens, God has
made himself more and more real down the years, whether as a young infantry officer in Germany in the
1940s, or through university as an undergraduate and research student at Cambridge, or throughout a
university career as Professor of Psychology, first in Australia, and now at St Andrews in Scotland. Over
the years it is his care above all which stands out.

Some continuing puzzles

Wishful thinking and all that

The impact of psychology on Christian faith differs in some respects from that of other sciences. It raises
questions about the very nature and function of religious—including Christian—beliefs, before one ever
gets to the content of specific beliefs, such as the nature of man. Are religious beliefs, of whatever kind,
it asks, nothing but wish-fulfillments or escape mechanisms? Why do people need religious beliefs? How
do they function?

Psychologists have studied almost every aspect of the religious life—conversion, prayer, spiritual growth,
church membership. And there is much to learn and to make us uncomfortable as the psychological spotlight is turned on our beliefs and behaviour. But nothing emerges that should surprise us, assuming we have taken seriously the unflattering picture of ourselves so graphically and eloquently portrayed in Scripture. On the one hand, we are in some profound sense made in the image of God, our Father Creator; and yet we are never, never allowed to forget that we are of the earth, earthy. There are dramatic reminders of this in the lives of the great heroes of the faith, who so often sink to depths of disobedience matched only by the heights of their spiritual experience and sacrificial obedience.

Psychologising about what religious beliefs do for the individual or the group has a history that stretches at least as far back as the Day of Pentecost. Then the behaviour of the first Christians was attributed to the effect of wine. For Freud, religious belief was illusory; it was simply wishful thinking. If you want to avoid taking Christianity or any other religion seriously, Freud can help you. Even though on close inspection both his data and his arguments are dubious, they still possess enough truth for all of us to pause and ask whether we may not at times be exploiting our religious beliefs. Who of us is free from the tendency to indulge in just a little wishful thinking about what we might receive or achieve through our religious beliefs, our prayers, our religious practices?

Arguments like Freud’s, however, turn out to be two-edged swords. The Dutch philosopher, Riimke, combined Freud’s assumptions with what was known of Freud’s early life, and showed how on his own theory Freud should seek to get rid of the idea of a Father God and of religion. That kind of psychologising can never help decide whether the great events of redemption history happened or what they meant. Nothing in Freud’s writings can tell us whether there was a people of Israel, a Moses or a David, an exodus from Egypt, a man Jesus Christ or whether he rose from the dead, or indeed whether there was a small frightened band of first believers who turned the world upside down. None of those things can be settled by psychologising, using Freud’s brand or any other. To find that out we must ask what and where is the relevant evidence claimed to support those beliefs. Then we must go and study it for ourselves and be open to meeting the ‘One Who Is’ if he reveals himself.

Man: scientific and Christian

Psychology and its associated discipline of neuroscience raises searching questions about human nature. For example, almost every advance in neuropsychology and neuroscience over the last twenty years has seemed to tighten the link between mental life and brain processes. And yet it still seems natural for us as Christians to talk about having a ‘soul’, which, in some undefined way, inhabits our body and departs at physical death. How is that possible in view of the way that psychology and neuroscience emphasise our psychophysical unity? The common pew-dwellers’ view of man implies a soul or mind inhabiting a body. How do we resolve this conflict?

Evidence for the tightening of the mind/brain link comes from several directions, and, in particular, from studying how mental life changes when the brain is damaged. Thus a patient may complain that whereas he has no difficulty recognising motor cars or household objects, he can no longer recognise faces, even his own and those of his close relatives. Using modern imaging techniques it emerges that such a patient invariably has damage to particular parts of his brain. Further work, using the techniques of single-cell recording in the brains of alert and awake animals, has identified particular columns of cells which seem to fire only when presented with a particular face. Thus the tightness of the mind/brain link becomes more impressive with every advance in neuroscience.

It is impertinent, if not risky, for a mere psychologist to hold forth on a Christian view of man, a topic on which there are countless volumes of theological writings. But if I am to say anything about some of the puzzles raised by psychology and neuroscience I must first say what I see as the salient features of the biblical account. They are as follows. First, a timeless view, saying relevant and important things throughout history, prescientific and scientific alike. That alone should warn against misconstruing it or its vocabulary by endowing it, in the late twentieth century, with a precision never intended. Second, the Bible emphasises our relation to God; it is not concerned with a scientific analysis of human beings.
Third, what the Bible has to say about man is given so that ordinary men and women can live daily to the glory of God; it does not offer information to help construct twentieth-century psychological models of humankind. Fourth, the language of the Bible is not the language of any particular ancient or modern experimental science. The Bible does not talk about species, but about people; it is not biological but biographical. It is not interested in the physiological, biochemical or psychological properties of human beings (in the late twentieth-century sense), but in the actions of men and women in history. Fifth, the Bible is a library of books; as such, different writers give different emphases to common themes and thus enrich the whole.

With these guidelines we discover a broad-based picture of man in Scripture. It highlights his physical make-up: he must remember he is of the earth, earthy. He has a capacity for mental life and he is able to make moral decisions, including an appreciation of the spiritual dimension to life. When these aspects work harmoniously together they help maintain a personal relationship with God and with other people. And the relationship with God is an enduring one. It will continue through the transition of physical death and guarantees an identifiable embodiment in a glorified body after physical death and decay. Today we know ourselves and each other through our psycho-physical embodiment; in some mysterious and profound sense— we shall, so our Christian faith assures us, continue to know and be known in a new and glorified embodiment ‘in that day’.

Attempts to try to ‘fit’ the latest psychological model of man to the biblical picture, however well meaning, are not to be encouraged. Not only do they misunderstand what the scientific models are about, they also reveal a misunderstanding of the purposes of the Christian teaching about man. Scientific models of man, by their nature, remain silent on questions of good and evil, sin, redemption, and eternal life—issues which are central to the Christian view of man.

The need for multiple levels of investigation

I work in the sub-discipline of neuropsychology and the thing that impresses me most is that in order to do justice to the complexity of even the simplest aspects of mind, we need to study simultaneously and concurrently several different levels. We take for granted a hierarchy of levels. We work at the biophysical level, the biochemical level, the level of single-cell functioning, the level of groups of cells functioning together. We work at the level of systems within the brain, we work in terms of neural nets, we work in terms of psychological categories. And it is stupid to spend time searching for gaps in the explanation given at one level in order to fit in an explanation at another level. The way to an integrated understanding of man is not to hunt for gaps in any particular scientific picture so that we can fit in other entities, whether it be the soul or whatever, but to explore how the accounts at the different levels are related. It is not that we translate what is happening at one level into what is happening at another. The descriptions we give at the different levels are complementary, not identical or independent.

A reductionist approach insists that ultimately our scientific account must be in terms of physical forces between molecules, and leads us to deny freedom of choice, the most common of all experiences. Accounts at other levels by physiologists, psychologists or theologians are seen as merely temporary expedients, acceptable only until a full account is available at the molecular level. Everything else ultimately will become superfluous.

Such an approach, with its underlying presuppositions, is now generally recognised as being both philosophically misguided and scientifically unproductive. Roger Sperry, a Nobel prize-winner in brain science, wrote recently, ‘The consciousness revolution of the 1970s can be seen to represent a renunciation by a major scientific discipline of the reductionist “quantum mechanics philosophy” which had previously dominated scientific thinking.’ The philosopher, Michael Polanyi, has pointed out that explanations in terms of molecules only have, by their nature, no concepts even for the function of the parts being described.

In this regard the familiar example of a computer solving mathematical problems is helpful. We may describe the activity of a computer in terms of molecules, the motions of physical particles or in terms of
integrated circuits, but the mathematician would energetically assert that such accounts do not convey the understanding that he, the mathematician, has of the computer’s essential activity from his point of view. Thus it is possible for an explanation to be complete in its own terms but not to render superfluous another explanation given at a different level. I find computer analogies of this kind most helpful in trying to relate mind talk and brain talk, both of which are essential in cognitive neuroscience research.

**Faith: help or hindrance?**

From time to time events or people have a disproportionate effect on one’s thinking. For me such an occasion was in the early 1950s when I heard Professor R. Hooykaas, of the Free University of Amsterdam, lecture in Cambridge on ‘Philosophia Libera: Christian Faith and the Freedom of Science’. Later expanded into his bestselling book, Religion and the Rise of Science, Hooykaas’ lecture put the present debates between science and faith in a firm historical context, showing in an exciting and convincing way the true freedom that is both the birthright of every Christian and also that which frees me as a scientist to pursue my career with enthusiasm and energy. He pointed out how the early scientists discarded rationalistic pretensions. Reason was not their goal; it could be used to criticise as well as to erect deductive systems. They realised that science does not lead to absolute truth, but is essentially the result of applying a particular methodological approach to studying what Hooykaas called ‘divine revelation manifest in nature’. Openness to follow the evidence where it leads was a hallmark of the great scientists of the past. It should also be characteristic of every Christian committed to evidence rather than popular or transient interpretations based on rationalistic prejudices; that very liberating attitude remains for me an intrinsic part of the Christian faith.

There are, however, times when one’s Christian faith may not seem a help and can be quite unsettling in producing real puzzles. For example, there is the enduring mismatch between what we profess and what we actually do and are. The apostle Peter, despite his protestations of loyalty ‘even unto death’, was soon denying any association with his Lord; Thomas, despite his beliefs, was at times full of doubt; the early disciples, despite the reality of their experience and their readiness to suffer, found that they were still human and could all too readily fall into quarrelling among themselves; Paul complained that ‘I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want...but the evil I do not want is what I do’ (Rom 7:15, 19).

It has seemed to me that recently we have, at times, become so infected by ever more extravagant claims from advertisers and the media that something similar has infected our Christian thought and actions, though without any biblical warrant. In some Christian circles excessive, and unbiblical claims are made for what your faith ‘can do for you’. Being a Christian becomes a free ticket to a combined heavenly supermarket and magic show.

At times I have found myself in church on a Sunday morning singing hymns which affirm the reality of our trust in God. But standing on the pavement outside when the service is over I hear some of those who were singing with me with such tremendous enthusiasm, conviction and perhaps accompanying bodily movements, speaking as if all that belonged only to inside the church. Somehow they are living in two worlds; somehow the singing of the words of the hymns does not escape into the world outside. There is, as I have already said, nothing new in this. But the contrast becomes stark because of the exaggerated claims. Why mimic the world and its pretentious exaggerations? Our God was incarnate. He was tired, lonely, at times bewildered, so why shouldn’t we be? What can we do, I ask myself, to bring out persistently and emphatically the underlying theme of Scripture that this is one world, our Father’s world, not two worlds. Here surely some of the things written by psychologists, both unbelieving and believing, about how religious beliefs and religious practices can become ‘wishful thinking’ receives unsolicited support. We all have a long way to go to learn the reality of true discipleship. We fool no one but ourselves by making exaggerated, unsubstantiated claims for our faith.
Faith and science—a mutual benefit

The lecture by Professor Hooykaas I mentioned earlier contained a quotation from a seventeenth-century scientist, Nathaniel Carpenter. He wrote, ‘I am free, I am bound by nobody’s word, except to those inspired by God; if I oppose these in the least degree, I beseech God to forgive me my audacity of judgement, as I have been moved not so much by longing for some opinion of my own as by my love for the freedom of science.’ I still find Carpenter’s words helpful.

The task of properly relating what we discover about the creation through science with what we learn about it in Scripture is a continuing one. And we are, according to Scripture, an intrinsic part of the physical creation, ‘of the earth, earthy’, ‘from dust to dust’. We come neither to our science nor to the interpretation of the Bible free from presuppositions. Every perspective has its own preconceptions. Psychological research has confirmed over and over again what we know from our common experience, that the particular perspective we adopt influences what we see and how we react. To be aware of the ever-present influence of our presuppositions can help in part to free us from bondage to them.

I think the influence of presuppositions is particularly evident when Christians disagree over what the Bible is saying. If we come to Scripture with presuppositions from our scientific endeavours, we shall probably misread what we find; Scripture was written long before science, as we know it today, was ever thought of. Even so, down the centuries the same words have spoken clearly and powerfully to each generation. If, in our search to understand man and his nature, we recognise the difference between what is written for our learning in Scripture and what we discover in our scientific research, we shall be well set to avoid fruitless conflicts. But I suspect that we shall continue to witness attempts to read late twentieth-century scientific views of man into the words of Scripture. If only we could accept Scripture for what it is and let it speak for itself, we could gain so much and avoid so many unnecessary time-consuming and energy-draining debates and conflicts.

Looking at the scientific horizon in my own research I can see how puzzles about the relation between mind and brain will continue to fascinate and engross us for years to come. This means that we shall need to go on thinking through what we learn from our science about the tightening link between mind and brain and this will make it even more important, I believe, to recognise increasingly the Hebrew-Christian emphasis on psychophysical or somatopsysical unity. I am enthusiastic about my science and I believe that developments within psychology and neuroscience will lead on to discoveries which can be applied to the alleviation, and perhaps in some cases cure of the suffering that occurs when the brain, the physical substrate of the mind, is malfunctioning or diseased. Together with my humanist colleagues and those of other religious persuasions I, as a Christian, can work enthusiastically with the added assurance that in so doing I am obeying my Father’s command to subdue and be a good steward of the created order which includes man himself, made ‘of the dust of the earth’ but mysteriously also made ‘in the image of God’.