WHEN GOD TRULY MATTERS: 
A THEISTIC APPROACH TO PSYCHOLOGY

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Abstract

Our study of the philosophy of social science has led us to realize that many psychologists, including ourselves, have participated in a kind of popular myth, sometimes known as the myth of neutrality. The primary feature of this myth is the supposition that the research findings and conceptual practices of secular psychology are essentially neutral to or compatible with various worldviews, including theism. We first attempt to dispel this myth. Instead of being bias-free or bias-minimized, the research and practice of psychologists presupposes certain assumptions or biases about the world. We explicate some of the more important assumptions of conventional methodology and practice and compare these assumptions to the theistic assumption of a currently and practically relevant God. We find that theistic conceptualizations are considerably different from secular conceptualizations, not only in their hypotheses about psychological events but also in their practical applications to psychological problems. These differences, we believe, suggest the need for a theistic approach to psychology as a complement to our currently secular approach to psychology. We describe how this is possible by pointing to several applied branches of this theistic approach, including other articles of this special journal issue, which relate to programs of research and approaches to practice.

Keywords: religion, philosophy of social science, naturalism, theism, methodology

As psychologists who are interested in science and religion, we have long been intrigued by what the inclusion of God might mean for psychology. In our early careers, we presumed like many other psychologists that psychological research and practice were essentially neutral to or compatible with this inclusion. In other words, we assumed that even though the data and practices of psychology were not originally formulated with God in mind, due to the secular nature of the discipline, the notion of a deity was nevertheless compatible with the information generated. After all, we reasoned, secular psychologists were dealing with the same world

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as the theist, so any objective data should apply to all concerned, theist and a-theist alike.

Our subsequent study of the philosophy of social science has since led us to realize that our initial assumptions were wrong. We now believe that we originally participated in a kind of popular myth, sometimes known as the *myth of neutrality* (e.g., Armstrong, 2011; Bernstein, 1983; Flashing, 2010; R. Bishop, 2007; S. Bishop, 1993). The primary feature of this myth is the supposition that the research findings and conceptual practices of secular psychology are essentially neutral to or compatible with various worldviews, including theism. This myth kept us from recognizing that even the research of psychologists presupposes certain assumptions about the world. These assumptions may remain hidden from the researcher, but they are always active in shaping the investigators’ interpretations of their findings. Psychological research, in this sense, does not map or describe the world in an unbiased manner; it *interprets* the world in light of the assumptions researchers presuppose. Indeed, we believe there is no methodology that avoids this interpretive element, so the assumptions informing or shaping any set of methods should be explicated and examined in relation to its findings.

In this paper, we first describe how we arrived at these current beliefs, including the reasons that lead us now to question the neutrality and transparency of our methods. We then explicate some of the more important assumptions of conventional methodology and compare these assumptions to the theistic assumption of a currently and practically relevant God. We find that theistic conceptualizations are considerably different from secular conceptualizations, not only in their hypotheses about psychological events but also in their practical applications to psychological problems. These differences, we believe, suggest the need for a theistic approach to psychology as a complement to our currently secular approach to psychology. We conclude by describing several applied branches of a theistic approach, including other articles of this special *Journal* issue that relate to programs of research and approaches to practice (Johnson & Watson, this issue; Nelson & Thomason, this issue; O’Grady, this issue; Reber, Slife, & Downs, this issue).

**The Myth of Neutrality**

As we are using the phrase here, the myth of neutrality means that methods, whether research or therapeutic, are thought to be neutral to or compat-