



Perceptions of Relevance and Conceptual Challenges of Studying Psychology among Theology Students

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1. Introduction

Psychology is a highly relevant discipline to theological and religious studies yet it is only given a minor role in most academic programmes and often it is not included at all. When psychology is a component of the theology curriculum, its content is typically psychoanalysis and pastoral psychology, both of which are associated with mental health and emotional problems in adult life. The Oxford course in the Psychology of Religion, offered to Theology (single honours) and Philosophy and Theology (joint honours) students, is distinct in that its content is broader, addressing religious development across life span and stressing the importance of empirical research and evidence in the study of human behaviour. The rationale of the course is to approach religion as a psychological rather than just cultural and social phenomenon, by providing an overview of the key religious topics (see below) in light of modern psychological methods and theories. In short, the aim of the course is to enable students to differentiate between psychology and

the other disciplines of religious studies notably anthropology, sociology, history and philosophy of religion.

The Psychology of Religion course consists of one term of lectures (eight) and one term of tutorials (eight) per student. The lectures cover topics such as origin of religious concepts in human development, different aspects of religious experience (e.g., prayer, conversion), moral development, and religious cognition across life span as well as psychology of religion applied to health and education. In connection with each topic, students receive guidance for further reading that includes modern empirical studies of different aspects of religious behaviour and experience, in addition to some of the classical titles from the history of psychology (James, Freud, Jung). In tutorials, students have a greater choice of topics which to research for their weekly essays on a specific question and subsequently discuss its content and style of argument. They attend tutorials either singly or in pairs and are free to schedule them at any point between their prelims and finals.

Psychology of Religion is a popular option for theology students¹ but it is not clear why, that is, what exactly motivates the students to select a paper that is outside their main discipline. For instance, is it a genuine interest in human religious nature, a pleasant diversion from their main discipline, or a strategic choice in order to broaden their educational skills and thereby secure better employability prospects? Furthermore, once they have chosen the paper, it is not clear whether the students perceive it as relevant to their study of theology and what its conceptual challenges are. Such queries are relevant especially in view of the empirically based content of the Oxford course.

Students' understanding of psychology as a science of human religious experience in the broadest sense is a question of interest for at least two reasons. First, the current science-religion debate leaves out psychology as a science of mental life and behaviour. Instead, the most commonly involved sciences are physical and biological, including neuroscience and neuro-physiology. Second, investigating students' understanding of how modern psychology works may provide hints for helping students interpret and apply research findings obtained by psychological methods in a more informed and critical manner to their work in theology. Finally, finding out about students' experiences with the current Psychology of Religion paper is relevant to any further integration between psychology and theology or religious studies. Given the popularity of psychology as such, on the one hand, and the potential relevance of scientific psychology to the science-religion debate, on the other, it is both desirable and likely that further links should be forged between psychology and theology at degree level.

In short, the current project was designed to examine the impact of teaching a predominantly science-based psychological content to humanities students, most of whom have no prior familiarity either with psychology or with scientific approaches as part of their degree studies. By virtue of choosing Psychology of Religion as one of their papers, Theology students place themselves in an interdisciplinary context; consequently, their experiences of studying psychology of religion may have wider implications for interdisciplinary issues in higher education.³ As we shall see from the experiences conveyed by the students, the question of integration across different disciplines is highly pertinent from the viewpoint of both teachers and students who are engaged in interdisciplinary education (e.g., Gasper, 2001; Klein, 1990; Squires et al., 1975). In order to interpret Theology 2 students' views of psychology correctly, they will be compared directly with a group of PPP⁴ students who likewise study on an interdisciplinary degree programme that includes philosophy.

2. Fieldwork

2.1. Participants

Forty students from the University of Oxford (20 students from the Faculty of Theology and 20 students from the Department of Experimental Psychology) participated in the project. Among the Theology group, 10 students were male and 10 female. The majority of students were in their early 20s, with the exception of two mature students. At the time of interviewing, nine students were studying for the joint Final Honours School (FHS) in Philosophy & Theology and 11 single FHS in Theology. Fourteen participants were finalists; four were in their second year, and two in their first year. Thirteen of the students had attended tutorials with me as their tutor (mostly singly), three students were

tutored by a theologian with a background in psychology, three were due to take the paper the following term, and one student who had intended to take the paper had subsequently changed her mind. Only one of the 20 Theology students had attended the core lectures one term prior to having tutorials, as I recommend. Nine students had attended at least several lectures one year after they had completed the tutorials, whilst six students did not attend any lectures but relied on their tutorials only. The information about students' attendance at the core lectures in Psychology of Religion will become relevant when we look at the challenges that they encounter in studying psychology.

Of the 20 PPP students, 12 were male and eight female, with a similar age distribution to that of their Theology counterparts, including one mature student. Nineteen were finalists and one student had just completed year two of her course. Seventeen students were studying psychology with philosophy and three with physiology.⁵ As for their familiarity with religion as an academic study, four PPP students were doing the Philosophy of Religion paper as one of their philosophy options (two of whom also did religious studies at A-level) and one studied religion as part of her first degree abroad.⁶

Participants were recruited for the project via their college e-mail addresses, by receiving a brief message that explained the purpose of the project and appealed to their good will for taking part before leaving Oxford in return for a small financial reward.

2.2. Design

The questions asked in each interview can be grouped according to their potential to elicit students' (a) reasons for choosing psychology and any prior familiarity with the subject, (b) perceptions of its relevance to theology, (c) conceptual challenges of empirical psychology for theology students, and (d) conceptions of psychology as a science and its usefulness in the study of religion as a human phenomenon. Whenever appropriate, Theology and PPP students' responses will be compared directly. The main interest of such a comparison is that PPP students do not have the option of studying psychology of religion, however, based on their choices of Philosophy of Religion as a paper, a number of them seem to be interested in religion as a subject of study.

2.3. Method

Data pertaining to each issue above were obtained by interviewing each participant. Although a questionnaire would have been a more economical procedure to use, the limitations of questionnaire as a method were judged to be a major constraint on the aims of the project. More specifically, questionnaires may yield ambiguous responses, which, unless followed up with further questions, would have to be eliminated from data analysis.

The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, that is, the same set of pre-planned questions was asked of all the participants albeit in a somewhat different sequence, deliberately allowing for flexibility and spontaneous flow in response to each question. The interviews were taped as well as recorded by pen and were subsequently fully transcribed. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes, as planned, and included some additional questions to those reported here. All the participants received a small fee for taking part in the project, which was paid from a grant awarded to me by the LTSN Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies Subject (PRS-LTSN) Mini-Project Fund.

Because of the relatively small size of the samples, interview data were analysed mainly qualitatively according to the category of response, restricting numerical analysis to only a few summaries in terms of frequencies or percentages and presented in tables (see below). Data pertaining to each section of the project will be reported separately for Theology and PPP students, followed by direct comparisons where relevant.

3. Results

3.1. Motives for studying psychology and prior familiarity with the subject

Students' responses to the question why they chose Psychology of Religion indicate that the majority of Theology students select the paper out of a general interest in people or in religious behaviour more specifically (Table 1). In addition, five students said that psychology was a good choice because its approach to religion was different from that found in their theological papers and as such brought 'a breath of fresh air' to their overall study.

Two students cited their scientific interests as a reason for including psychology in their degree programme whilst one elected to do psychology because it was going to be useful in his future pastoral work. Table 1: Motives for choosing to study psychology among Theology and PPP students

	Interest	Different	Science	Career	Chance	Other
Theology	12	5	2	1	-	-
PPP	4	-	4	1	2	9

Surprisingly, only four PPP students said that they had a specific interest in psychology; nine stated that their main interest was actually philosophy (Other) but, because there was no possibility of studying single honours philosophy at Oxford, they chose psychology as a good combination with philosophy. Four PPP students were interested in psychology as a science subject whilst two chose it almost accidentally, having discovered psychology as a degree discipline at the point of applying. Similar to the Theology group, one PPP student chose psychology with a view to his future employment prospects. Listed below are some of the typical examples of each group's reasons for choosing psychology (Theology examples: 6, 14; PPP examples: 15, 18).⁸

6 I guess it was just for a bit of variety, really, and because quite a lot of papers in theology are historical and biblical studies which I didn't find that interesting? As an option paper I wanted something that was a bit more thoughtful and, perhaps, related to questions that I have myself. So, I guess, the psychology of religion was? sort of answered questions about religion and its place in other people's lives. It answers quite a lot of questions that I have in theology. Like why people are religious and that applies to the question why people believe in different religions.

14 Because I wanted a change from the Biblical papers and, also, I wanted a more practical paper.

15 PPP caught my attention because I thought it was really a great combination. I was very interested in doing philosophy, anyway?.

18 I've always been interested in science, especially biology, but also very interested in philosophy. The combination of biology and philosophy is obviously psychology.

The two groups are also similar with regard to their prior familiarity with psychology as a discipline. As Table 2 indicates, 12 Theology and 16 PPP students had no prior familiarity with the discipline of psychology (i.e., had not studied it before) whilst eight Theology and four PPP students have done some psychology before coming to Oxford. This includes A-level courses, a major in psychology completed abroad or, simply, having read some mainstream psychological texts.

Table 2: Prior familiarity with psychology as a discipline among Theology and PPP students

	None	Some

Theology	12	8
PPP	16	4

For the majority of students in both groups, Freud and Jung were the most representative names of the discipline before studying psychology at degree level. If we take into account that many Theology students also study philosophy as part of their degree, the difference between the two groups regarding their motives for studying psychology is even smaller.

3.2. Relevance of psychology to theology

Data reported in this section pertain to Theology students only.⁹ Participants were asked for their views on (a) how the two disciplines fitted together, and (b) whether psychology was relevant to their study of theology. The two questions elicited consistent responses per student and can be reported jointly. The majority (17) saw the two disciplines as directly related and dealing with common questions and concerns albeit in a different way. Moreover, in the opinion of five (out of 17) students cited below, psychology and theology are in need of further and deeper integration.

1 I don't think it's where it belongs, but I think it's where it has to be at present, given the nature of Philosophy & Theology. Where do you think it belongs??Honestly, I think it belongs as a compulsory paper and it should be in there as well as the others. I find it absolutely essential, almost practical, and? a practical and scientific balance almost to the rest of my studies. I think th at anyone who goes into the church should do Psychology of Religion paper. And I think it is brilliant for every theology student because it takes a very different look at what we are studying.

2 There should be a course called PPT (Psychology, Philosophy & Theology). It would be fantastic to have that kind of course. Psychology is about human behaviour and religious belief is a form of behaviour, so that's why they are related. But you need the philosophical component also.

10 Psychology ought to make a big difference to theology but the present structures don't allow it. There are many people who think that theology is quite different and should not be mixed with the social sciences. John Millbank (author of Theology and Social Theory) is against looking at theology from other disciplines.

11 I think it's an area that needs to be expanded. There isn't a great deal of overlap between psychology of religion and theology papers. There is more scope for overlap. Can you give me some examples??Psychology of morality and the ethics of Bonhoeffer, it would be interesting to see wh at psychology has to say about that. It does seem that both psychology and theology are approaching the same thing but from different angles, and it's difficult to think of them as two separate entities but it's also difficult to give specific examples of how they can interact. I know that you can't apply psychology to two thousand years ago but the conversion topic derives from Christianity and the NT.

12 I think they are both necessary. For example, if there is a definite trend for everyone to personify sacred things, then you need the psychological tests, the data, which just the scientific aspects of psychology can provide. And perhaps the theological school isn't as rigorous in collecting that data ? if it does it at all.

In contrast to the views endorsing direct and meaningful links between psychology and theology, two students perceive them as independent and in no need of a closer dialogue, whilst one stated that psychology was

fundamentally opposed to religion:

9 I always put psychology more with sceptics ? the people who want to prove something is not true or show that prayer isn't really talking to God. That always seems to be if you watch something on TV or read about psychologists ? it's always a philosopher or a theologian (who) said that prayer is really talking to God but a psychologist came along and said, No, it's not that. I always see psychologists interfering where they really shouldn't be. With certain aspects of faith, like prayer, I almost think it's not an issue that can be tested. Because even if you do show that something happens to people when they pray or could be conditioned by society or something, it still means ? . Religiously, it still means a lot to that person.

Overall, students' responses to the relevance question ranged from highly relevant in specific ways (e.g., for pastors) to marginally and generally relevant, no more than any other discipline that educates one's thinking. Amidst clear views regarding the possible relationship between psychology and theology, there were sporadic instances of a confounded understanding concerning the role of each discipline in the study of religion. For example, psychological issues (e.g., differentiating religious belief and emotion) are sometimes seen as a subject of theological and philosophical enquiry rather than of empirical research, as the following two examples show.

6 I guess you don't really have any empirical evidence about religion but only about people. Religion is so subjective.

4 I think with theology you quickly come to the conclusion that you can't reach God through reason, so it has to be faith, and that's quite interesting from a psychological point of view. You see that there is a connection with philosophy of religion but it's not made for you.

The simplest explanation of any such misconceptions among the Theology students is their non-attendance at the introductory lectures where methodological points are repeatedly addressed and the nature of empirical psychology highlighted as distinct from the non-empirical disciplines studying religion. It is a common trend among Theology students not to attend lectures on the grounds that they can cover the syllabus by reading. In other words, they transfer their attitude to lectures in the arts subjects to psychology, without realising that accessing information in psychology presupposes some familiarity with its research methods. A few of the typical explanations for not attending lectures are cited below.

3 No ? To be honest, I don't find that they are helpful. Lots of time they cover the stuff that you can read about. I prefer to hear about people's own work ?

No. That was mainly my fault. It's an awful excuse, but it's quite far away.

13 I always put my non-lecture commitments first because ? generally ? I am happy in the library reading.

By contrast, PPP students regard lectures as an important source of information and learning in psychology, as the following example illustrates.

15 Psychology lectures are essentially compulsory ? absolutely necessary, but philosophy not at all.

It is of interest to mention that PPP students were equally prone to hold confounded notions about the roles of psychology and theology, which became obvious at different points during the interviews. In the case of PPP students, however, the more likely explanation of their misconceptions is the lack of any educational input about

religion.

3.3. Conceptual challenges of psychology for theology students

Three questions tapped the challenges of studying psychology as part of a theology curriculum. First, Theology students were asked to say what they found to be difficult in psychology. Next, and as an indirect way of approaching the same issue, they were also asked what, if anything, was easy in psychology. Finally, in order to determine whether their views of psychology have changed as a result of the course, i.e., whether and how the challenges were overcome, the students were asked what they thought of psychology now, after the course. These questions were put to the 16 Theology students who had completed the course.

3.3.1. Difficult aspects of studying psychology

Not surprisingly, the most common difficulties for Theology students consisted of the understanding of tables, statistics, technical terms, and the lack of background knowledge of science in general.

2 I avoided them (tables); I read only the theory.

16 Trying to think from the viewpoint of a scientist ? Data, evidence ? Very different from the other papers ? Lots of technical terms to get to grips ?

It wasn't so much difficult, it was new, and you? you sort of start from a different position so you have to kind of think before you start. You are just not used to things like methods and evidence and that kind of stuff. You don't really talk much about that in your normal theological papers. It's more ideas than facts and evidence. So it took a bit of getting used to.

On the whole, Theology students do not find psychology to be conceptually difficult; rather, they appear to be frustrated by the lack of experience with research methods.

2 The core paper has been beneficial to me in that it has given me an insight into how psychology tackles religion. But I have a gap on the research side.

5 We should do some tiny research? (There is) not enough feel that it is a science, just reading about it. Would this not increase the amount of technical detail that theology students would have to learn??But it's the same in theology. In order to study certain papers I have to learn Greek or Hebrew or Latin, if I want to do Patristics.

12 There wasn't that much that was too hard ? Conceptually, I think, it was a bit easier than something like Buddhism or the Nature of Religion, which were a couple of papers I did recently. But in terms of workload, it's roughly the same.

15 I've never done psychology ? having to learn all the language ? I don't know. It's not like reading a book ? but it's not abstract, it's very certain. I found that difficult. Also, no practical experience in psychology? How would that help??Perhaps being involved in some research.

Reading articles from psychological journals was frequently mentioned as being comparatively difficult albeit, in many cases, an enjoyable challenge, as the example below suggests.

13 At first, a daunting range ? when I look at my first essay. But the best thing about psychology is the short chunk given to read, not a whole book like in theology. It's a really good

way of getting a broad perspective in a short time.

An important source of frustration for a number of students has been the perceived lack of connection between psychology and theology when such connections appear obvious. The following two students make the point rather eloquently.

1 Through the whole paper, most of the psychologists I read, they seem almost quite pleasantly baffled about theology. I got the feeling that perhaps a module on theology for the psychologists would be helpful in their studies. Because there were some conclusions that were drawn and some discussions, which, I didn't feel, were quite subtle. Although they had valuable insights, their research was only ever scratching the surface of theology and I felt there was a lot more (?) but to do that, you need a better understanding of what theology is.

10 (There is) no connection between psychology and theology; psychology never cites theology, a discipline of several centuries (standing). Theology also has explanations but psychology pays no attention. In psychology, it may not be accepted that one can study something that has no conclusion. Perhaps it was just my limited reading, but I often felt that theological terms were being taken for granted, but on second examination the terms were being taken in out-dated ways.

3.3.2. Easy aspects of studying psychology

What Theology students find easy about studying psychology are the relatively compact readings (journal articles), a focused approach, its familiar subject matter (people), Freud and Jung literature and, for two students, its methodological clarity.

1 I found that the reading was more focused and condensed than in theology? Like once having to read a 4-page article! That never happens in theology, never less than 20-30 pages. I felt I made a lot of progress through my reading? And, in some ways, it was also quite easy because I chose to do it; it was my option out of interest. So, in that respect, there was always something about it which was more enjoyable than the others, the compulsory papers.

6 I guess the fact that it is studying people so you can always relate to something. The subject matter is not alien, basically.

10 Freud and Jung, the language is familiar. Cognitive psychology is also easy; it's about using models. Theology also uses models.

5 That's a difficult question. I really enjoy science and wanted initially to study science but then became very interested in philosophy. So, when I enjoy something, it's easy. The choice of topics within psychology made it even easier.

13 Oh, it's a very interesting contrast to the rest. It gave me a chance to find out about the scientific approaches? wonderfully, much more rigorous, a real breath of fresh air.

Whilst PPP students were not asked this question in the same context, they repeatedly conveyed that psychology was conceptually a great deal easier for them than philosophy.

3.3.3. Perceptions of psychology after studying it

As an additional way of finding out about the challenging aspects of psychology for Theology students, they were asked what they thought of the subject after the course as opposed to before starting it. Students' changing conceptions of a subject indicate whether or not learning and understanding has taken place (e.g., Biggs, 1999; Ramsden, 1992). One of the main course aims appears to have been achieved, namely, all the interviewed students did become aware of the empirical character of psychology and its different way of thinking about certain familiar phenomena (examples 1, 4, 16). Another significant change in the understanding of psychology among the majority of students is the perception of it as distinct from psychoanalysis (examples 10, 12). As pointed out earlier, the majority of both Theology and PPP students anticipate studying Freud and psychoanalysis, as part of their course and, Theology students in particular, are little prepared what to expect in the paper.

1 The biggest thing I found was the research and the studies. Not just asking what these statistics tell us but can we trust these statistics. There is so much that I found quite surprising, its scope? religious experience, prayer, conversion, mysticism? It studied a lot more and a lot more widely than I thought it would and, as a Christian, I don't want to believe in something that is all in my head, as it were. I accepted that psychological explanations are very different. Coming from a charismatic background and to find, for example, that worship services are one of (?) triggers, enabled me to understand the possible influence of music on the brain? I mean to understand the effect of religious stimuli; it gave me a better ground to ask whether what I experience was the effect of God or just me.

4 I think it shows you a different approach. And it reminds you that there is a different, more scientific way of looking at things than one does in philosophy and theology.

16 Much more scientific than I had expected.

10 I would avoid PA, which is too laden with assumptions? Freud and Jung are kind of theologies in their own right. Big gain for me is to see how people think using models, as in cognitive psychology. People interpret the world by using a mental schema and how religion can be thought about?. Social psychology is very reductionist. It gives you lots of statistics and figures and no meaningful interpretation.

12 I was surprised at how empirical it was. I thought it would be less so? when you are combining the two topics, psychology and theology, so that surprised me. And, also, I was kind of expecting more of psychoanalysis? I was expecting that to play a large part of the course. Is it a disappointment that it didn't?? Not really? We did two topics? two major essays on it? In fact, now I am surprised that it did take up such a large part of the course (laughs).

Although the material presented so far sufficiently indicates that Theology students do perceive psychology as a science, the next stage of the report looks at this question more specifically by comparing directly the views of Theology and PPP students.

3.4. Scientific psychology and religion

This part of the project was designed to investigate students' conceptions of psychology as a science, on the one hand, and the applicability of psychological research methods to the study of religion, on the other. The comparison between Theology and PPP students is appropriate for the following reasons. First, whilst the two groups have a similar level of prior familiarity with psychology as a discipline, they differ markedly with regard to their prior background in science in general. To illustrate, Theology students do not typically take science subjects at A-level (although a few in the current sample have done), whereas PPP students typically take at least two, but usually more, sciences. Secondly, the pattern of prior familiarity with religion as a discipline among the students within each of the

two groups is almost a reverse of that for science. For example, the majority of Theology students have studied religion at A-level whilst significantly fewer PPP students took A-level religious studies. Finally, Theology students have all chosen Psychology of Religion as one of their optional papers whereas none of the PPP students has studied psychology of religion either formally or informally. Accordingly, the question of interest in this comparison is whether the two groups arrive at a different conception of psychology as a science and to what extent they think that religion as a human phenomenon can be studied by scientific psychology.

3.4.1. Psychology as a science

Theology students. Of the 19 respondents¹¹, eight seem to view psychology as sufficiently scientific on account of its methodological rigour (examples 1, 7, 11, 12) whilst the remaining 11 are aware of its constraints as a science (example 6). Three of those 11 had attended seminars in philosophical psychology and concluded that psychology was still closer to philosophy than to science (example 5).

1 I would say that psychology is a science. And I'd say that, especially in contrast with philosophy and theology, partly because it has so much interest in the situations in the world? it takes its evidence from how people behave and what they do? And there is a lot of discussion about proper methodology and whether the criteria for reaching a conclusion are valid. And the studies? studies are a big thing. Because in philosophy and theology you get a bit of armchair psychology? that's as far as it goes, whereas psychology is much more concerned about how people actually (?) and also the consequences of the changes on them. I think those are the hallmarks of a science.

7 I suppose, if you take a science to be an approach, or a kind of methodological way of looking at things, may be to that extent ?. Yeah, it is ? Empirical data.

11 Well ? Scientific to me in terms of the methods that are undertaken; otherwise you wouldn't present its results in a table or give you a statistic that psychology would. It's a different approach because it's using experiments, whereas theology isn't. Psychology is purely scientific.

12 I think it's totally science.

6 It is, if you look at its methods, backed up by evidence. (But) Limitations are that you are always? you always rely on people's testimony. It all depends how honest the individual can be.

5 It depends on who teaches psychology... how close they are to philosophy.

PPP students. Of the 19 respondents, all have agreed that the Oxford course is either very scientific or quite scientific but that in many other universities psychology can be rather different because it would often include Freud and psychoanalysis (examples 1, 5, 20). Most of the students also agree that certain areas of psychology are at present more scientific than others but progress continues to be made and all areas of psychology should eventually become fully scientific (example 12). Interestingly, PPP students seem to differ in their judgement whether psychology can ever become a hard science, even when it uses well-designed research methods (example 19).

1 In this university, very, in the sense that it is experimentally orientated. It has a solid methodological background, not Freud and Jung? It is disproving or supporting various theories with experimental evidence? Also, the biological aspects, and those are scientific. In other psychology courses? in other universities, they focus on the less experimental aspects such as Freud or Jung or folk theories.

5 Oh, definitely. The main thing about sciences is the approach to drawing conclusions, and the psychological approach is experimental and in that it is experimental, it is scientific. I suppose other people say that with psychology you have to make too many inferences and the (?) too complicated to understand with experiments but, I think, you can use those exact same arguments on something like the structure of the universe, which is a science as well.

20 The approach here in Oxford is very scientific. It is very methodological, it is very data oriented? I feel that my education beforehand was like a philosophical approach, there was much more theory, not so much about scientific experiments.

12 It can be very scientific; that's a good thing. I don't think (that) anything is beyond the reach of being studied scientifically, absolutely, but some things are very difficult to get at, at the moment, but will eventually? Like very abstract things are quite hard to analyse. But it will change in the future, by and by.

19 Yes, but not a hard-core science, which I consider physics and chemistry to be. That doesn't mean it's not hard, just that it's not so?(?).

So, the conceptions of psychology as a science do not seem to be vastly different between PPP students and those studying Theology but who have completed the core paper in Psychology of Religion. Whilst there is a wide range of views within each group, PPP students tend to use stricter criteria when judging the scientific status of psychology than their Theology counterparts, which is even more clearly stated in their responses to the next question.

3.4.2. Religion as a topic for scientific psychology

Theology students. Whether or not religion can be studied by scientific methods, depends not only on the students' conceptions of psychology as a science but also on their implicit definitions of religion. Exploratory rather than systematic questions about the latter revealed that many students adopt a definition of religion that reflects the diversity of views in the literature.

Nine students answered ?Yes? when asked if religion could be studied by psychology (example 2), one answered ?No? (example 4), whilst the remaining ten said that psychological methods could be applied to religion ?up to a point? (examples 8, 9, 14, 19, 20).¹²

2 I think that psychology helps to enlighten the implications of religious belief. It definitely can. Philosophy can't answer religious questions.

I think religion does fall apart under science and reason but I think that's?a lot of Christians probably accept that you cannot reach that conclusion through reason and scientifically but you have to?

8 Up to a point? there are certain things that, I think, science can't ever prove or show, and are just matters of faith. It's the same in philosophy: you can reason up to a point and eventually? I think it's Kant, isn't it, who made a difference between faith and reason; there is a gulf between them and you have to choose what to go for.

9 I think religion can, because religion is man-made. I don't think that faith can. People try to do experiments to see if? experiments like Buddhist monks going into meditation if their brain waves change. I don't think that's faith. I think faith is a belief in something that even if all the doctrines are taken away, and there is no Bible and no place to worship, there would still be a belief that there is something higher than you.... that after death you don't just die and rot away. It is given to you by

God rather than by someone telling you to believe.

14 The more human aspects of it can, but religion is also of a very particular type, and as such, science cannot throw much light on it. And, also, religion is a very personal thing and as such stands outside science. I think that religious belief is different from most other emotions and understandings of the human mind. They kind of correlate with something that is beyond studying?

19 Certain aspects of it can? the more historical or sociological, but if you are talking about God, by definition it's impossible. In order to study things scientifically, we must observe them. But when we are talking about God, God is up there and we are down here, and there is no reason that, because we talk to Him today and He talks to us or answers us, why that will happen tomorrow. Like with human relationships but even more difficult. It's not repeated to order? you cannot study it scientifically.

20 I think up to a point, yes. I think it can be studied scientifically, objectively, in that you can make observations? you can look at patterns of behaviour, look at history, but I think it is very difficult to quantify people's behaviour, and I think that's the problem with psychology and sociology as well and why they think what they think. You might find clues so you can see some things that may have led them to think of behaviour in a certain way but you just can't know what's inside a person's head.

The last category of response (?up to a point?) is of interest because it demonstrates both the subtleties of understanding among the students (e.g., genuine methodological concerns) and, also, their misconceptions about the nature of the psychological approach. Among the misconceptions is the notion that psychology may be in a position to say something about God; that personal aspects of religion are beyond the reach of psychology; and that psychology can tackle only the historical and sociological aspects of religion. Such responses undoubtedly reflect confusion between psychological and theological aspects of religion.

PPP students. The question whether religion can be studied by scientific psychology yielded extremely interesting, and often extensive, responses among PPP students. All twenty students agreed at some point in the interview that religion could and should be studied by psychology, however, the majority of them thought that psychology of religion was a branch of social psychology and that only the social aspects of religious behaviour and experience could be studied by psychological methods (examples 1, 7). Only upon being shown the topics included in the Psychology of Religion syllabus, did PPP students admit that religion had cognitive aspects also. But they were still of the view that philosophy was the best framework within which to study mental representations (thoughts), including religious, whereas psychology was concerned with biological bases of behaviour. Several were manifestly aware of the possible links between the brain and certain religious experiences (example 17), including a student who suggested that it would be interesting for psychology to study the 'God-spots' in the brain. Not surprisingly, religion was also seen as an aspect of Psychological Disorders.

Although the PPP students' understanding of psychology as capable of studying religious thought is disappointingly limited, a number of them readily saw that psychological methods were entirely appropriate in the study of religion as an aspect of human thought (examples 3, 12, 19).

1 There are aspects of religion which can be studied scientifically? cultural aspects, or seeing how religion develops within the individual but there is something that cannot be studied empirically, that is beyond the rational domain.

7 You can study the experiences that religion invokes and try to reduce that to a physiological level, for example, brainwaves. But for how religion changes behaviour, I think that a sociological

approach is far more fitting.

17 It seems as plausible to think that it would be possible to approach it empirically, but I wonder whether we are in a position to do so yet, given that we have absolutely no idea about how reasoning or complex representations, beliefs, are represented in the brain. We just don't know how that stuff works. So? we wouldn't be able to form interesting models, I wouldn't have thought.

3 I think it could be; it would provide a nice twang with philosophy of religion. Religion suffers because people don't give it enough thought. It would be fascinating to understand the psychology of it. It's really interesting. I'd love to read some papers on it.

12 Moral development without religion has been studied, so why not with religion? religion is a major part of great many people's lives.

19 Definitely? why people believe, and how people can believe so much to devote their whole lives to religion. I think that that is extremely relevant.

What is paradoxical about PPP students' conception of scientific psychology is that it appears to be fundamentally unaware of the ongoing science-religion debate, where different sciences grapple to understand a number of, essentially psychological, questions (e.g., origin and the nature of religious mental states).

4. Discussion

The investigation reported here deals with a topic that involves a relatively small group of Theology students (20); nevertheless, its findings are of interest to all degree programmes involving theology or religious studies that include some teaching of psychology. The findings of this investigation are equally relevant to psychology degree programmes, although those implications will be considered in a separate report.

Contrary to the general trend of teaching the 'traditional' psychology of religion topics in theology departments, namely, psychoanalysis, pastoral, and social psychology, the data obtained in the current project provide clear evidence that theology students perceive scientific psychology as both relevant to their studies and interesting. From the viewpoint of the perceived relevance of psychology to theology, it is understandable that many students would like to see a greater component of psychology as part of their theology degree and would prefer a more integrated interdisciplinary input from the two disciplines. Integration does not only mean establishing the links between two disciplines but also understanding what the unbridgeable differences are (Gasper, 2001). In this regard, teaching of scientific psychology to theology students makes a greater interdisciplinary contribution to their education than the more literary psychological approaches.

There are two reasons why mainly scientific psychology rather than just psychoanalysis and pastoral psychology should be taught in introductory courses for theology students. First, psychoanalysis, pastoral and health psychology generally are applied areas and, to be useful, they require a prior grasp of psychological research method and theory in order to appreciate realistically their findings. Secondly, the science-religion debate would be broadened by increasing students' awareness of psychology as a science of mental life. Put simply, psychology could be seen as the most relevant of the sciences to theology students.

Although Theology students appear to have a more correct understanding than their PPP counterparts regarding the contribution that psychology can make to the study of religion, both groups of students often confound religion as a psychological topic with religion as a theological topic. Put differently, the comparison with PPP students shows that misconceptions about religion as a psychological variable are not limited to humanities students. Consequently,

opportunities should be provided for psychology students to acquire a basic understanding of religion as a human phenomenon in order to broaden their research interests. The fact that seven out of 32 PPP students (22%) choose the Philosophy of Religion paper suggests an interest in religion, contrary to the stereotypes about an incompatibility between scientific and religious interests.

The main benefit of teaching psychology of religion to psychology students would be filling a gap in their understanding of the history of psychology. It could be argued that, as far as their understanding of religion goes, PPP students' conception of psychology is closer to that of Wundt, who defined psychology as a study of sensory processes, than of William James, who saw psychology as the science of mental life. In other words, James had a clear vision of psychology of religion as a branch of natural science and a methodologically demanding subject.

The main practical problem in teaching mainstream psychology to theology students would be the lack of psychology staff with sufficient interests in theology so as to make relevant links between the two disciplines. This problem, however, is not insurmountable. Introducing the option of some theological education to psychology courses would soon rectify the deficit. Furthermore, even the teaching of general introductory psychology, rather than psychology of religion, could be useful to theology students as it might stimulate their own insights and creative links between the two disciplines.

In summary, although psychology is perceived as a very different paper from their theological papers, most students do not find it conceptually difficult and would prefer to study it in greater depth as part of their theology degree.

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