

**Psychology Religion and the EPs**  
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Psychology was the most important empirical discipline at the beginning of the EPs, as is evident from the report of the inaugural conference held in April 1951. The conference began more philosophically with sections on *The Nature of Religious Belief* and *Metaphysics and Science*, and the report also contains a long paper by Margaret written after the conference on the 'Religious Paradox'. After that, the conference report has various sections in which there are contributions by both empirical scientists and theologians.

Of the 12 people who give substantive papers, four are empirical scientists, and three of them are psychologists (Robert Thouless, Michael Argyle and David Russell). The other empirical scientist, Edward Armstrong, is an ornithologist, but his paper represents the discipline of ethology that was then emerging, and which is close to psychology. It is a striking preponderance of psychology, or 'psycho-biology' to borrow the term Margaret uses.

Why is the emphasis on psychology? The explanation comes largely in a long paper by Margaret in the section on *Ascetical Theology and the Psychology of Mysticism*. The preponderance of psychology is no accident; it arises directly from Margaret's wish to develop what she calls an empiricised theology.

Her paper is preceded by one by Victor Ranford, a priest from Kelham. She is polite about it, but not entirely complimentary. She thinks he doesn't get down to specifics, and she disposes of his concept of 'revealed' theology. However, there is one key point with which she very much agrees, that mystical theology is not a separate branch of theology, or some kind of icing on the cake. Dogmatic theology is built on mystical theology, not vice-versa. That is what opens the way for Margaret's programme of empiricised theology.

It is a big, bold programme as you would expect from Margaret, and she sets it out in five sections of her long paper. I support her constructive proposals, but think she exaggerates their theological importance.

She identifies two areas where she thinks there could be a potentially fruitful matching of concepts from theology and psychobiology, concerned with ascetical development and ascetical groups. I think she is right about those, but actually I wouldn't be so specific, and think that there is more broadly a good potential mapping of ascetical theology onto psychobiology. However, for clarity, I would subdivide this into ascetical practices and mystical experiences.

One reason for emphasising that distinction (which Ranford made at the 1951 conference) is that I think the connection between them may be weaker than Margaret imagined. There is good reason to think that extreme or ascetical practices give rise to altered, peak, mystical or transpersonal experiences. But extreme quasi-ascetical practices can be found in various kinds of secular

context, such as extreme sports or certain kinds of sexual practice. I don't think they always produce religious kinds of mystical experience. I suspect they only do so when ascetic-type practices are undertaken in a religious context and with religious intentions. That is one reason why I don't think the psychobiology of mysticism is of as much theological interest as Margaret supposed. Robert Thouless raised a similar concern in his paper immediately following Margaret at the 1951 conference.

I am here proposing something like Schachter's well-known two-factor theory of emotion, that psychobiological processes determine emotional intensity but that context determines which emotions are experienced. I think we are actually making good headway with the psychobiology of ascetic practices. One important strand is Robin Dunbar's interpretation of shamanic trans dancing. I am currently collaborating with him, and will try set out an integrated psychobiology of asceticism in the book I am just starting to write.

But I think the next stage in Margaret's programme for a comprehensive empiricised theology is even more suspect. She starts from the assumption that she shares with Ranford that ascetical theology is the foundation for all theology, and that all dogmatic theology can be derived from ascetical theology.

I am sceptical of the idea that what theologians are doing is systemising ascetical experience. Nancey Murphy put forward a similar position in her 1993 book on *Theology in the Age of Scientific Reasoning*, and I have never found it convincing. I am wary of foundationalism in all its forms, as it goes with forms of reductionism I dislike more. It also empties theology of too much descriptive content, and confuses theology with doctrine. It also fails to capture what theologians actually do; I just don't find them discussing whether doctrinal systems are faithful to mystical experience.

However, along the way, Margaret provides a helpful categorisation of the various kinds of material to be found in theology. It is indeed very varied, as varied as Biblical material; and she is right that sorting out what we are dealing with in theology is a crucial step in mapping it on to psychobiology.

Though I think Margaret misrepresents what theologians actually do, I think there is a serious case for rethinking how theologians *should* go about their work, in the light of our growing understanding of the psychobiology of cognition. One of the important developments of recent years has been to understand just how embodied human cognition is. I think that has important implications for how we might re-fashion theological work. I have recently re-read an exciting chapter on this (still in press) by James W Jones of Rutgers. It would make a valuable contribution to the EP project.

Psychology remains important in the current, continuing work of the EPs, and is represented by both Isabel Clarke and myself. I hope it may be helpful to unpack why psychology was so important in the early days, even if some parts of the early reasons for it are more convincing than others.