

Academic Freedom at BYU from the Perspective of Someone Who Is Not a Latter-day Saint

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I am the odd duck of our panel. Not only am I a BYU faculty member who is *not* a Latter-day Saint, but I am also a psychologist. I say “odd duck” because psychologists are often considered a bit weird, and I would surely qualify. Still, I mostly want to call attention to my non-LDS status because I’d like to describe the incredible freedom and fertilization I’ve experienced at a predominantly LDS university. And I’ve been around the university “block,” so to speak, having served on the faculty of several major religious and secular universities. Here at BYU, I’ve enjoyed a freedom that I haven’t experienced elsewhere, even at many religious universities.

At most of the other universities, religion was understood as a subjective phenomenon, full of values and strong biases. This meant, in my discipline especially, that objective science was far better than religion, at least for advancing the knowledge of psychology. Science is thought to establish value-free and bias-free facts about the world, whereas religion starts with values and biases and thus is hampered in seeing the psychological world for what it really is.

I’ve since learned that this understanding of religion and science is a sophisticated myth. Science is just as value-laden and biased as religion; it just has different values and biases than religion, which is both its strength and its weakness. If science truly starts with values, what are they and how do they compare to Christian values? With a few rare exceptions, nobody discusses this in my discipline, yet psychologists are constantly persuading their clients to adhere to values that the psychologists themselves do not see as values.

As a quick example, you all know that scientists are supposed to be objective and open-minded, especially to new information. So, psychological counselors try to be open-minded in their counseling sessions, trying to be open to the information and values of their clients. The problem is that these counselors are not so open to their closed-minded clients, such as devoutly religious clients. If they *were* truly open, of course, they would be open to the “closed-minded” values of their clients.

What we see repeatedly in our studies, however, is that open-minded counselors are not open to values that don't fit their open-mindedness. In other words, their openness is a value, not a *nonvalue*. Indeed, not only will these counselors try to persuade their clients to become more open-minded (that is, to adopt the values of their counselors), but they will also consider their clients “abnormal” until they do. I've written about this very issue, calling psychological counselors “crypto-missionaries,” because they are unrecognized missionaries of their own unrecognized values.¹

I can provide examples that more directly pertain to science and scholarship in our later discussion; my point here is that the value-ladenness of both enterprises, science and religion, allowed me in my career to see that science wasn't inherently superior to religion for advancing psychological knowledge. Indeed, if I didn't agree with the often hidden values of science, I might not *want* to advance knowledge with scientific values. One of the advantages of Christianity, in my view, is that its values are relatively “up front,” whereas the values of science are, as I said, relatively hidden. This means, among other things, that religious values have been examined and scientific values have not. In fact, I just contributed to a special issue of a venerable psychology journal called *Counseling and Values*, where we did the unprecedented: we explicated and examined many of the values of social science.²

I say all this because these lessons about my discipline helped me to see that I didn't have to compartmentalize my Christian activities away from my disciplinary activities. I didn't have to adopt one set of beliefs and assumptions in my Christianity and then adopt another set of beliefs and assumptions in my psychology. BYU was, at the time, a beacon for encouraging me to avoid this compartmentalization. BYU gave me the support and permission, even as a non-Mormon, to explore the values that made the most sense to me. In the next presentation, Dr. Brinton will describe a *wonderful* example of how her Christian values guided her work with a young boy and his language impairment.

As another example of this Christian guidance, consider a fascinating program of studies that my colleague Patrick Steffen and I are currently conducting that illustrates the importance of a specifically Christian framework for research. Health psychologists, such as Dr. Steffen, have

long been baffled by what is sometimes known as the “Mexican paradox.” To understand this paradox, you need to know that it is a well-established fact that most people in the United States have a higher risk of heart problems than the people of many other countries, including Mexico. Also well-established is what happens when the people of these other countries immigrate to the U.S.—their risk of heart problems increases significantly the longer they live in our bustling environment.

One of the most interesting exceptions to this trend is a certain subset of Mexican immigrants who attend church regularly. Something about attending church buffers these particular immigrants from higher cardiac risk. What is it? As you might guess with a secular discipline like psychology, the first hypotheses had nothing to do with the religion of these churches. Health psychologists initially assumed that these immigrants were simply getting more social support or more structure than other immigrants—nothing uniquely to do with their religion or their relation to their God. Yet further research has not borne out these hypotheses. When these religious immigrants were compared to nonreligious immigrants who were themselves equally supported and structured, the regular church-attenders were *still* better protected from higher cardiac risk—hence, the Mexican paradox.

What Dr. Steffen and I proposed was a completely theological, or religious, explanation for this paradox. I don’t have time to go into the details here, but we made the case that a unique kind of community was happening in these churches that was not available elsewhere—not only a special kind of *agape* love but also a relationship with a Lord who actively loved them. We proposed this unprecedentedly religious rationale for a series of studies to investigate this and other hypotheses, and we were recently granted \$200,000 from the Duke Foundation to do so.

Needless to say, this kind of study is unheard of—not because the rationale doesn’t make sense, but because religion is not supposed to intrude into science. Religion, as you’ll recall, is considered too subjective for the objectivity of science. Consequently, most universities would absolutely discourage, if not prohibit, such an outlandish project; our particular Christian values would be viewed as subjective dogma, not sufficiently open-minded and value-free for science. Thank God BYU didn’t discourage us from this project. In fact, our administrators encouraged our explorations, and our data so far look as if we might be able to make a unique contribution to the psychological literature—a contribution only possible with the freedom available here at Brigham Young University.

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1. Brent D. Slife, Amy Fisher Smith, and Colin M. Burchfield, "Psychotherapists as Crypto-Missionaries: An Exemplar on the Crossroads of History, Theory, and Philosophy," in Darryl B. Hill and Michael J. Kral, eds., *About Psychology: Essays at the Crossroads of History, Theory, and Philosophy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003), 55-72.

2. Brent D. Slife, "A Primer of the Values Implicit in Counseling Research," *Counseling and Values* 53, no. 1 (2008): 8-21.