I imagine that some people reading this may be surprised to recognise your name as a past President of the BPS and perhaps see what you’re doing now as a theologian and priest as inconsistent with being a psychologist. What was your journey to where you are today?

I’ve had interests in both psychology and religion for a long time, although it took a while to bring them together. My interests in religion go back to when I was about 10 and I have been involved in the church ever since. My interest in psychology developed when I was a sixth-former and it was what I studied at university; I have stayed in psychology, one way or another, ever since.

I first started to work on the interface between the two while I was at the MRC Applied Psychology Unit [now the Cognition and Brain Sciences Unit], where in my spare time I wrote my book on *The Psychology of Religious Knowing* [Watts & Williams, 1988].

That was your first publication on religion. What motivated you to write that? I was very enthused, as I still am, about the importance of a cognitive approach to psychology, for all sorts of reasons, both scientific and philosophical. So I was particularly interested to think through what was involved in religion from a cognitive viewpoint. I was taking an insider’s view of religion, rather than an external, detached, scientific one, but using a cognitive lens to try to understand what was going on in religion.

There are others who have looked at religion and concluded that psychological science has explained religion away. How would you respond?

It’s partly that psychology and religion, on almost any topic, are answering different questions rather than giving competing answers for the same question. I do think that takes you a long way towards disposing of the sense of conflict. But there would be a charge coming from strong atheists that religion is completely irrational. My response would be that religion has a rationality of its own, though it’s not the same as scientific rationality. In *The Psychology of Religious Knowing* I discuss other rationalities to which religious knowing is somewhat similar, like aesthetic appreciation, or empathy. These are rationalities, but they differ from the scientific one.

So how do you see psychology and religion as relating to each other? As I see it, there are three main points of intersection. There is work to be done on the interface of theology and psychology, taking two different thought systems and bringing them into dialogue with one another; that is the main focus of my own work. A second approach is the psychological study of religion, where psychology is the tool of scientific investigation and religion is the object of investigation. Finally there is the practical application of psychology in religious settings.

Let’s take each of those three approaches in turn. How would you relate the approach of psychology and theology to vexing problems such as human nature?

There is an interesting dialogue about human nature. In scientific psychology there’s a tendency to see the physical aspects of human nature as fundamental, whereas religious thinking about human nature is currently emphasizing relationality over all. I don’t want to get into a debate about what is the fundamental aspect of human nature; I want to take a systemic approach to human beings, in which you see the physical and individual and social aspects of human nature as interrelated.

What benefits do you see for psychology and for theology from work on the psychology of religion? Psychology always benefits from work on applied topics, and religion is a rich and interesting field of application. There may also be ways in which religious practices, such as meditation, lead people to function in unusual ways that raise challenges for general psychology. Theology is best done in an inter-disciplinary way, in dialogue with other disciplines like psychology, literature, art history, whatever. It makes the discipline attractive and accessible to a much broader community of people.

Let’s turn to the second of the points of intersection, the studying of religion from the perspective of psychological science. Where do you think we are with that?

I think we’re at a stage where we have a rich body of empirical data. Much of that has been gathered together in *The Psychology of Religion: An Empirical Approach* [Hood et al., 2009], now in its fourth edition. It is a really impressive compendium of information about how religion functions in human beings, and is a remarkable achievement. Most of those data have been gathered over the last 20 or 30 years. What we don’t have is a coherent theoretical framework for putting it together. That makes it seem rather fragmented, and it doesn’t help scientific progress. So that’s one of the
main things that I would hope to see – a coherent theoretical framework.

Different people have advocated particular frameworks. For example, Ray Paloutzian and Crystal Park (2005) have argued for religion as a meaning system whereas Peter Hill and I (2008) have argued that applying established mid-level theories from elsewhere in psychology, such as attribution or attachment, would prove more fruitful than a meta-level theory. Do you have a model or level of model that you think would work?

I think all of those are potentially fruitful approaches, and I think we need to try theoretical frameworks of different kinds, in a pragmatic spirit, to see what works. My own particular theoretical contribution has been formulated in terms of cognitive architecture, which is a very basic level of theorising but a flexible and versatile one. I mainly work with Phil Barnard's Interacting Cognitive Systems [Barnard & Teasdale, 1991], which has already been applied to a remarkably wide range of psychological phenomena, including psycholinguistics, human–computer interaction and depression. I am trying to apply it to religion. What we certainly don't want is what was attempted at a much earlier stage of the psychology of religion, which was the kind of simple theory that gives psychological reasons for why people become religious. That was a barren enterprise, partly because religious people are psychologically so diverse.

Much of psychology of religion has been concerned with individual differences, but the more recent cognitive science of religion endeavour has tried to focus on the universals within the human mind–brain that might predispose us towards religiosity. What are your reflections on this approach? In principle I'm entirely supportive of a cognitive approach to religion, although I think it's often pursued rather narrowly. We tend to confine ourselves at the moment to one possible cognitive science approach where there might be many. Also, one of the things that troubles me about much current work is that it is doctrinaire in its assumptions about religion and, for the most part, assumes that religious belief is simply a mistake. That seems to me an assumption that ought to be bracketed out of scientific work on religion. It isn't a question that science can settle one way or the other.

The third area of intersection between psychology and religion that you mentioned was an applied one. Pastoral psychology has been much the most important focus here, though in the book I wrote with some colleagues, Psychology for Christian Ministry [Watts et al., 2002] we argued that there are many other practical applications of psychology in the religious domain, such as an occupational psychology of clergy, an educational psychology of learning in church settings, and so on. I would like to see the development of psychologists who work professionally in religious settings. I think that could be enormously fruitful for the churches and other faith communities. I'm also keen to see existing kinds of professional psychologists, like clinical psychologists, becoming better equipped to work with faith and spirituality issues. The American Psychological Association is much further ahead with that and has developed a set of competencies that professional psychologists ought to have in the faith area. Similarly, the psychology part of the training of clergy is woefully inadequate, and I'm keen to see some developments there too.

Standing back from these three approaches, where does work on the interface of psychology and religion belong? In psychology departments or theology departments?

I'm pragmatic about that, and happy to see it flourish wherever it can. But, in the nature of things, I think work on the interface of psychology and theology is more likely to happen in theology departments, and work in the psychological study of religion is more likely to happen in psychology departments.

I agree that is probably how it should be. But it seems to me that most psychologists simply don't consider questions about religion. Perhaps this is because religion is not on their radar personally so it doesn't make it on their radar from a research perspective either?

It's surprising in a way that religion isn't a more high-profile topic in psychology, given how important religion is in life generally, especially from an international perspective. We're having this interview in northern Europe, and Europe is the exception – the one part of the world where religion is not a particularly dominant force. But in most other parts of the world it is hugely important. It is really very strange that psychology is not devoting more resources to exploring this phenomenon, which, whatever you think about it, is of huge cultural importance. I would like to see the psychology of religion (and non-religion) as a more vigorous area of academic psychology. I'm not sure that I would predict that things will get better, but I have an optimistic temperament and I'm doing my best.

You mentioned non-religion. How do you see psychology approaching that? The psychology of religion has recently broadened to include 'spirituality', and I would like to see it broaden to include the study of atheism and non-religion as well. Many psychologists probably think that religion deserves special study because it is prevalent but self-evidently untrue, whereas atheism doesn't deserve study in the same way because it is obviously correct. My view is that the psychology of religion and non-religion should bracket out truth questions, and simply try to understand what is going on psychologically. Atheism is, in many ways, like a religion, and raises a lot of interesting psychological questions.

How has it worked for you personally being a psychologist and a priest? It has been a very fruitful combination. I see religion as being at least as much about personal transformation as about truth claims, and transformation is very much a psychological matter. So, as a priest, I often find myself dealing with psychological issues, but doing so in context of a rich framework of belief and practice that gives resonance and efficacy that a narrowly psychological approach often lacks. I talk about many of the same things in the pulpit and in the lecture room, though in one I assume belief, and in the other I don't. It has been very enriching for me personally to operate in these two complementary contexts.


