

Allen E. Bergin*

Letter to Editors

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Thank you for the invitation to answer questions about my 1980 article. It is a pleasure to be reminded of that special episode in my career. Here are some thoughts in reply that I hope will be helpful to your readers.

During the 1970's, the mental health and social science disciplines were being challenged to rethink their views on religion and spirituality by forward-looking individuals and groups, as noted in the list of references in my 1980 article.¹ What precipitated my particular essay was my feeling of frustration and annoyance with the academic mental health "establishment" which opposed this development. They made it clear to the public and professional world that their own work was based on science and objectivism. They were not happy with the idea of "regressing" toward outdated, subjective and non-empirical intrusions into their secular modes of inquiry and practice. This professional mainstream considered such new movements to be a retreat from the hard-earned credibility gained over many decades in their "soft" sciences by being very "hard-nosed" and like "real" sciences.

I had a different perspective. My early background had been in physical science and mathematics, which I had pursued as a student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and, in a joint program between MIT and Reed College in Oregon (1952-54). However, I slowly migrated from that focus into psychological science and then, because of some religious experiences, into an interest in combining spiritual and scientific perspectives. My subsequent transfer to a church-sponsored school, Brigham Young University, made this begin to grow more fully (1954-57). However, because of professional aspirations and opportunities, a long interlude occurred. I spent the next 15 years at Stanford University, the University of Wisconsin, and Columbia University. This time was wonderful in many respects, but my spiritual and religious interests gained little traction and considerable opposition in those settings.

So it was fortunate that I was recruited back to Brigham Young University in the 1970's, given a nice position and a "Values Institute" to work within. I was thus encouraged to meld my scientific and religious interests; and I had a new sense of freedom to harmonize the spiritual and the psychological. As I began to speak out about this, I was opposed by some of my own faculty colleagues and by a wide array of leaders in the mental health disciplines. Because, by then, I had an established reputation as an expert in psychological research, I could speak out with some authority against those who tried to undermine and deride investigation into the mental health benefits of religious and spiritual involvements. I must admit that, as a senior figure in my field, I felt considerable annoyance, even irritation, that the old and flimsy "anti-religious" arguments were again being tossed forth in arrogant and cavalier terms.

One day, subduing my negative emotions I simply sat down and wrote out a treatise setting forth a case for religious values in the mental health domain, firmly, clearly and with a touch of challenge to the "establishment." I felt happy about this, integrated in bringing together an array of deep interests, and somewhat declarative or challenging to those who might not like it. It also allowed me to break out of a "boxed-in" feeling I felt surrounded by in a field dominated by agnostic and atheistic philosophies.

I submitted the article to what I considered to be the best journal in clinical psychology. After some debate, it was published; and the rest is history. I was inundated with requests for reprints, invitations to

1 Bergin, "Psychotherapy and Religious Values".

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speak and debate, and to accept positions elsewhere, according to some reviewers, it became a “citation classic”.

Although some critics spoke out against this perspective, to my astonishment, their views were drowned-out by leading figures in the mental disciplines who, despite some personal reservations about religion, applauded the paper and openly declared that they could envision a place for spiritual phenomena in psychosocial science and practice.

It is particularly gratifying today, more than 30 years later, to observe the new levels of collaboration between professional scientific organizations and religious or spiritual movements of many kinds. I see this as mostly good, but I am also aware of overzealous excesses or undisciplined movements that quote our kind of work in behalf their self-promoting and superficial efforts. I am one who still endorses the value of research as an essential companion to religious inspiration and clerical practices. A worthy example would be the work being done under the rubric of “Forgiveness Therapy” as exemplified by Robert Enright and Richard Fitzgibbons,² and the “Handbook of Forgiveness” edited by Everett L. Worthington.³

In my own case, I, and collaborators conducted many empirical studies of religious themes in mental/emotional distresses and their treatments. I am particularly grateful to professor Scott Richards at Brigham Young University who has taken the lead in considerable clinical researches and in the publishing of a series of books in which we collaborated, with him as lead author. These have all been published by the American Psychological Association – which, considering past history, has truly been a modern “miracle.”

References

- Bergin, Allen E. “Psychotherapy and Religious Values.” *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 48 (1980), 95-105.
 Enright, Robert D. and Fitzgibbons Robert P. *Forgiveness Therapy: An Empirical Guide for Resolving Anger and Restoring Hope*. American Psychological Association 2014.
 Worthington, Everett L. Jr. (ed.). *Handbook of Forgiveness*. Routledge 2015.

² Enright and Fitzgibbons, *Forgiveness Therapy*.

³ Worthington, *Handbook of Forgiveness*.