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The Person in Psychology and Christianity ***A Faith-Based Critique of Five Theories of Social Development***

April 5, 2022 | \$30, 250 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-2872-2

In this accessible integration of psychology and theology, Marjorie Lindner Gunnoe offers a comprehensive understanding of personhood from both perspectives, examining the intersection of biblical perspectives with established theories of social development as proposed by Erik Erikson, B. F. Skinner, Evolutionary Psychology, and more.

Integrating Psychological Frameworks

This book examines the intersection of Christian theology and theories of social development proposed by Erik Erikson, John Bowlby, B. F. Skinner, Albert Bandura, and Evolutionary Psychology. These theories were selected because nine standard developmental textbooks identified them as foundational to the study of social development. In their introductory chapters, all nine summarize psychoanalytic theory (Freud and Erikson). Eight introduce behavioral theory (Skinner) and social cognitive theory (Bandura). One textbook refers to psychanalytic, behavioral, and social cognitive as the “grand theories” of developmental psychology.

Attachment theory (Bowlby and Ainsworth) and an evolutionary perspective are also ubiquitous in the textbooks surveyed. Attachment theory is often presented as an ethological theory, but also as a standalone theory, an extension of Freudian theory, and a precursor to evolutionary developmental psychology (EDP). Evolutionary presentations vary a good deal. Four textbooks explicitly distinguish EDP from evolutionary psychology (EP), but five do not. This distinction is important because EP and EDP disagree on some important aspects of personhood. For psychologists who study social development, the three grand theories and ethology/evolution are the standard *psychological* “lenses for looking at the lifespan.”

Christian developmentalists also look through *theological* lenses, seeking to synthesize the knowledge that God has revealed through the Bible (often called special revelation) with the knowledge that God has revealed in the patterns of creation (often called general revelation; see Rom 1:20). To do this in a God-honoring way, we must first identify the seeming compatibilities between our faith and our academic discipline. We can then build on these compatibilities and describe development more comprehensively than those looking only through the separate lenses of theology or psychology.

We must also identify seeming incompatibilities. Some incompatibilities require us to reject a psychological claim outright. Other times, a biblical claim that initially seems incompatible with contemporary science may help us distinguish the theological truth God is communicating from the context in which it was first communicated. For example, the author of the book of Joshua claims that the sun stood still, permitting the Israelites to win an important battle (Josh 10). Although Christians in the prescientific world interpreted this claim to mean that the sun revolved around the earth, most contemporary Christians believe that the earth revolves around the sun. Looking through the lenses of both theology and astronomy, we can appreciate both the miracle being reported and the need for the author to report the miracle in a way that made sense to a prescientific audience who assumed a geocentric universe. In a similar way, looking through the lenses of both theology and psychology permits us to refine our descriptions of personhood.

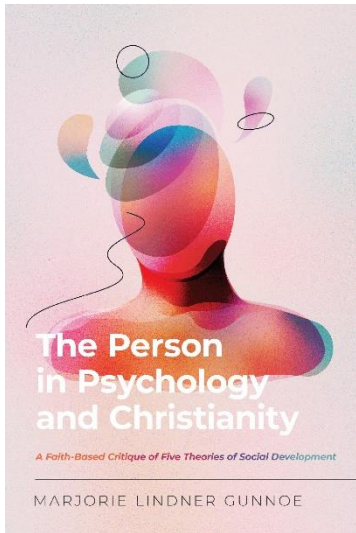
The capacity to articulate compatibilities and incompatibilities across theology and psychology fosters trust in students and clients seeking to construct a psychologically informed, faith-compatible view of self and others. As a professor at a Christian university, I have learned that my (mostly Christian) students enter the classroom with diverse attitudes toward psychology. Some are wary, having been warned not to let psychology supplant their faith. Others are eager to move beyond the compartmentalization of knowledge they practiced in order to retain their faith and succeed in public school science classes. Still others are in the process of abandoning their faith because no one has helped them synthesize what they view as competing worldviews.



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During my first decade of teaching, I was ill-prepared to mentor all three groups. Students asked questions about the assumptions and applications of developmental theory that I couldn't answer. Simultaneously, during my first decade of parenting, I asked myself a lot of questions that I couldn't answer. I'd look at a child who had just disobeyed and think, *Should I view that as rebellion or an inherently good but misdirected drive for mastery? Should I be more concerned with punishment or promoting attachment?* As I attempted to answer these questions, I discovered that I needed to expand my psychological knowledge beyond the coverage afforded in standard textbooks and expand my theological knowledge beyond the specific Christian traditions with which I was most familiar.

The result is a broadly ecumenical exploration of the five developmental theories that have been most thought-provoking for me as a professor and a parent. In response to an anonymous reviewer who noted my failure to locate this exploration within a specific confessional orientation, I am guilty as charged. I was born into dispensationalism, educated in a Christian Reformed day school, and married by a nondenominational charismatic minister. In a time of difficulty, I benefited from the counsel of an Episcopal priest. I have always revered Scripture as authoritative while weighing different interpretations of it. At present I consider myself Reformed and still reforming. I am particularly concerned with reforming the very negative view of humankind held by some within the family of Reformed Christianity.

As a developmental psychologist with no formal theological training, I am most qualified to speak on the temporal characteristics of personhood. By *temporal* I mean physical and psychological features overtly manifest in our relationships with other humans and the rest of creation—as opposed to characteristics that are first and foremost spiritual (e.g., our relationship with God, redemption, life eternal). In class discussions, these temporal characteristics tend to converge around four themes that I have used to organize this book. The four themes are as follows:

1. *Essence*: What characteristics are “core” or indispensable to personhood? How influential is our morphology (i.e., physical structure)? What indispensable qualities emerge from our morphology?
2. *Purpose*: What are humans supposed to do? What are our primary motivations? Is there a universal, intrinsically motivated, telos-like aim to human development? Is purpose specific to the individual?
3. *Moral-ethical tendencies*: Are humans more inclined toward good or bad? Are moral-ethical tendencies universal or particular? Are they inherent or learned?
4. *Agency/accountability*: Is human behavior volitional or determined? To what degree are humans accountable for self and responsible for others?

—Taken from chapter one, “Orientation”



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