

*Values, Philosophy and Religious Studies* .....

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# ***Finding similarities and points of connection between Positive Psychology and Christianity.***

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Within the context of Independent Christian schools, including schools in the Catholic system, Christian education is viewed as a central part of developing the whole child. Often named RAVE (Religious and Values Education), it includes values and ethics education. As a part of RAVE, students are usually asked to consider and explore sacred texts and current theology, and respond based upon their own emerging faith and spirituality. There appears to be an alignment between Christianity, values and ethics education, and a Positive Education approach that aims to build the good in each individual and community by focusing on strengths and virtues. This paper takes an interdisciplinary approach that seeks to explore the possible alignment between Christian theology and Positive Education. The paper will then focus upon the practise of contemplation mindfulness, which has been used in both theology practise and psychology. We will end by providing examples of the ways in which St Peter's College, Adelaide, has incorporated mindfulness, as a positive education practise, within the teaching of RAVE and within Chapel services.

## **Teaching our students about human nature: Are we good or bad?**

Although theology and psychology each have multi-faceted areas of inquiry, it can be argued that a core connection between both fields is their search to understand human nature. Theology seeks to understand human nature by exploring human beings' relationship with God. Psychology seeks to understand the inner workings of the mind within the context of culture and the environment. In both fields, there has been considerable divergence regarding the degree to which human nature is inherently good or bad.

Within Christian theology, different strands have emphasised different foci with respect to the status of creation. For example, creation has been made subordinate to redemption,

to the extent that the status of the material world has been brought into question. In other words, the physical has been made subordinate to the spiritual in the work of both Origen and Augustine of Hippo. Origen taught 'that the material world is essentially a secondary purpose of God, produced in order to provide a place of education for the fallen spirits' (Gunton 1998, p.168). His work was followed by Augustine's less extreme but nonetheless problematic teaching that, 'the material world was less real and important than the spiritual' (Gunton 1998, p.168). As a result of this line of thought within Christianity, there have been those who have emphasised the sin and flaws of humankind. Augustine postulated that because humankind inherited the sins of Adam and Eve, we are born into sin. Augustine's doctrine of original sin has had considerable traction within Christian theology.

In contrast to these ideas, Irenaeus' unequivocal affirmation of the goodness of creation (Gunton 1998, p.168) and the work of contemporary theologians such as Denis Edwards (2004) and Mathew Fox (1983), have emphasised the positive qualities of human nature through God. For example, Edwards has positively described the relationship between God and the creation as that of trinitarian 'panentheism' (Edwards 2004, p.141). In theological terms, panentheism is an understanding of God which is neither pantheistic (wholly immanent), nor completely theistic (in the limited sense of God being completely transcendent). Thus, God is present in creation, yet allows that creation to have its own integrity. This theology affirms the inherent value of creation, and thus, of humankind.

In pneumatology (the doctrine of the Holy Spirit), God can be thought of as being present within each creature 'companioning each in compassionate love and leading each to its fulfilment in the divine Communion'

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(Edwards 2004, p.141). Edwards is suggesting that God is present within all of us, drawing us ever closer in our relationship to God and other creatures. Because our very existence is defined as being in relationship with God and one another, we are drawn towards goodness and to serve others.

Mathew Fox (1983), wrote within the Catholic tradition, and put forward the idea of original blessings. Rather than focussing on the tradition inherited from Augustine in particular, Fox sided firmly with Irenaeus in affirming the essential goodness of creation, and therefore of human beings. Creation, described as being seen by God as 'good' in the first account of creation in Genesis (Genesis 1.1 – 2.4a) is thus a place of blessing. It is from this understanding that all theology should proceed. Within this context human beings are to be viewed as being fundamentally good, having received God's blessings, and having something wonderfully creative to contribute to the world.

In summary, this brief review shows that there is disagreement in the Christian teachings as to whether humans are predominantly characterised by a sinful nature or whether humankind, by virtue of being a creation of God, is inherently good and characterised by virtue and blessings .

A similar divergence between the focus on the 'good and bad' of human nature can be observed in the field of psychology. Psychology has placed major attention on human pathology and what can go wrong with human nature. Freud gave dominance to the animalistic id and contended that we are driven by lust and anger. Evolutionary psychologists have placed an emphasis on the 'selfish gene' and survival of the fittest. Economic psychologists have also put forward the sovereignty of selfishness. The field has amassed a high level understanding of the negative end of the spectrum of human nature such as violence, addiction, relationship dysfunction, anxiety, depression, hatred, discrimination, schizophrenia and so on. In their critique of the field of psychology, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) argued that psychologists have "an almost exclusive attention to pathology" and "the worst things in life" (p.5). This has meant that our understanding of human nature, from a psychological perspective, is a model that sees the human being as fundamentally lacking in positive qualities. As such, the emphasis in psychology has to been to fix the deep pathology that sits within each individual and to repair "damaged habits, damaged drives, damaged childhood, and damaged brains" (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000. p.6).

In contrast to the focus on pathology described above, movements such as humanistic psychology and positive psychology place emphasis on the positive aspects of human nature such as our strengths, virtues, capacity for altruism and

our search for meaning. These fields take a more appreciative view of human nature, and focus on the fact that the majority of people transcend their base-urges and damage to "live their lives with dignity and purpose" (Sheldon & King, 2001, p.216). According to Pawelski (2001), positive psychology has shifted the balance of empirical studies in psychology so that we now better seek to understand human potentials as well as positive motivations and capacities such as kindness, gratitude, fairness, hope, wisdom, creativity and so on. The foundational paper introducing the field of positive psychology by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000), called for the field to "move individuals toward better citizenship, responsibility, nurturance, altruism, civility, moderation, tolerance, and work ethic." (p.5). Wong (2011) emphasizes that a key goal of positive psychology to is "develop good and decent people as well as a civil society by promoting meaning/virtue" (p.77).

In summary, just as we see competing ideas about human nature within theology, there exists debate about what lies at the core of mankind within the field of psychology. The extent to which we are we a mass of dangerous and lustful impulses or to which we are highly evolved, compassion beings, is still under debate.

**Positive Education**

The debate above has implications for the way we approach education and what a teacher focuses upon in each student – the problem or the promise? Positive psychology calls for educators to adopt a strength-based approach

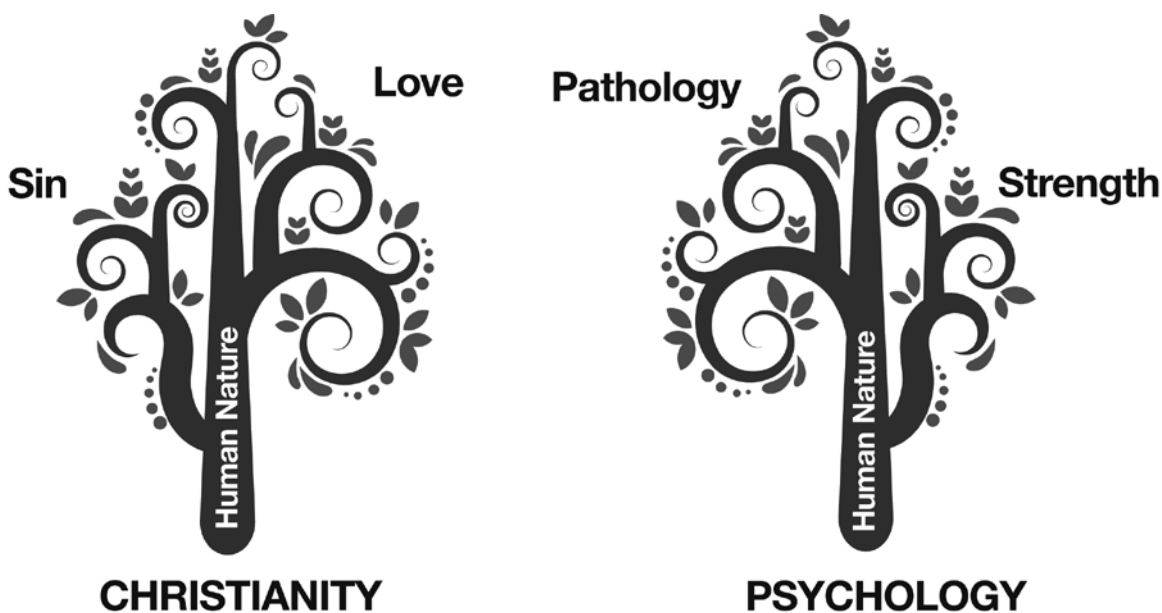
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to teaching, to work from the assumption that there is good in every student and to adopt a growth mindset.

The sub-field of positive psychology that has been studied within education has been termed 'positive education' by Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich and Linkins (2009). Seligman et al. (2009) define positive education as an approach that fosters traditional academic skills together with skills for happiness and well-being. Positive education works on the precept that the skills and mindsets that promote positive emotions, positive relationships and character strengths, also promote learning and academic success (Bernard & Walton, 2011). The emphasis of positive psychology on flourishing, meaning and virtue align strongly with the ethos of RAVE.

Waters (2011) argued that positive education is well aligned with the whole-student approach advocated in the twenty first century learning paradigm that calls for students to be developed socially, emotionally, morally, spiritually and intellectually. Yates (2007) argues that:



While older educational agendas such as literacies and numeracy remain significant...education is increasingly important for its role in assisting young people to develop the capacities and skills that will enable them to live well and that will enhance social cohesion (p.35).

The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2006) states that:

If we really want to build a strong platform for healthy development and effective learning ... then we must pay as much attention to children's emotional wellbeing and social capacities as we do to their cognitive abilities and academic skills (p.7).

Writing from a Christian education perspective, Peter Vardy (2002) argues that:

there is more to being fully human than simply the acquisition of knowledge and that part of the task of education is to help our young people to 'become more fully human'.

His analysis puts forward five strands that Christian education can cover in order to assist our students to become 'more fully human': 1) Biblical & Christian Strand; 2) World Religions Strand; 3) Philosophy of Religion Strand; 4) Values & Ethics Strand and 5) Affective Strand – Silence and Stillness.

St Peter's College has long moved forward from the historical idea that education is purely an academic/cognitive endeavour and has embraced a positive education approach that assists our students to become more fully human.

### **Mindfulness, Positive Psychology and Christian Education**

A key topic of study within positive education is that of mindfulness, which is defined as "a process of paying attention, often to a particular object designated as the focus of concentration" (Campion and Rocco, 2009, p.47). In adult samples, the practice of mindfulness has been shown to promote serenity as well as increase compassion, reduce anxiety, improve physical health, facilitate self kindness, heighten self knowledge, and promote self regulated behaviour (Davidson et.al., 2003; Grossman, Niemann Schmidt & Walach, 2004; Kabat Zin, 1994). Researchers and educators have called for the use of mindfulness as a school

based practice to assist the well-being of students (Campion & Rocco, 2009; Huppert & Johnson, 2010). Although the evidence in this area is new, it is promising, and research has demonstrated the potential of mindfulness practices to support the goals of education such as improved attention, concentration, creativity, and self-regulation (Cowger & Torrance, 1982; Goleman, 1995; Mayer & Salovey, 1997).

Broderick and Metz (2009) evaluated a six-lesson mindfulness meditation curriculum delivered at an all-girls Catholic school in Pennsylvania. One hundred and twenty seniors (average age 17.4 years) participated as part of their health curriculum, and 30 junior students from the same high school served as the control group. A pre-test, post-test design was used. The results at post-test (1 week after the mindfulness curriculum was completed) showed that, relative to control students, the intervention students reported increased feelings of calmness, relaxation, and self-acceptance as well as decreased negative affect. Emotion regulation improved, and somatic complaints decreased at the conclusion of the program in the intervention classes.

In Australia, Camion and Rocco (2009) investigated the effectiveness of a mindfulness program that was instituted across 31 Catholic schools in one diocese in Queensland, involving more than 10,000 students between the ages of 5 and 18 years. The qualitative analysis found that mindfulness was a beneficial practise for students. Specific outcomes reported by students, teachers and parents included greater attentions in class, less conflict in the schoolyard, less stress and higher compassion.

The fifth strand of RAVE is to "provide children with an appreciation of the value of stillness," and whilst the research in positive education has evaluated mindfulness in terms of its benefits on well-being, a Christian perspective of mindfulness would also seek to extend the practise so that it promotes spiritual growth.

In this respect, mindfulness can be used in schools as a practise that draws us towards



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self-transcendence. This idea follows the work of the highly influential Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner, that God draws us closer to the divine, in other words, to transcendence. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit we are drawn closer to God, a process of becoming which manifests itself in self-transcendence and seeking the greater good. This process may be present during mindfulness which can be used as a time 'to be quiet, to listen, and to be open to whatever the Lord might wish to impart' (Michael & Norrissey 1984, p.33).

### **Mindfulness at Saints**

Established in 1847, St Peter's College, Adelaide, Australia, is a leading independent Anglican day and boarding school providing the highest quality education for boys from Pre-school to Year 12 (1338 students). Our vision is to be a world-class school where boys flourish. Based on Christian values, St Peter's College aims to provide an education that brings out the best in every boy. St Peter's College focuses on boys' education, values diversity and individuality, and welcomes students from a broad cross-section of society.

St Peter's College aims to develop educated, considerate and outward-looking young men who will use their talents responsibly for the good of the wider community. With a strong commitment to social justice and building character amongst her alumni are 3 Noble Laureates, 42 Rhodes Scholars and 8 South Australian Premiers. In 2011 St Peter's College commenced incorporating wellbeing as a central part of school life. One method central to this has been to integrate positive psychology into areas of curricular, co-curricular and pastoral programs.

At St Peter's College, although the full human spectrum is acknowledged, the school works with its students to bring forward their positive qualities and to encourage a view that they are virtuous beings. As such, the school leans towards the contemporary writers in both theology and psychology who seek to understand how it is we can bring forward a person's inherent goodness.

Within the context of St Peter's College, and by extension within Independent Christian schools in Australia, the potential for positive psychology to inform School Chaplaincy and vice versa is worth exploring and developing. As this paper has sought to demonstrate, there are clear points of contact between much of Christian theology and positive

psychology. An exploration of these contact points within the formal Chapel services is one way forward, for example, through: homilies making those connections explicit; worship styles using positive psychology principles (gratitude and hope, for example); structured Bible studies looking at the Wisdom literature of the Hebrew Scriptures or the gifts of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament and making links with the students' own character strengths and virtues following Peterson and Seligman's (2004) character strengths framework. In a less formal sense, the chaplains have the opportunity to link the principles of positive psychology with Christian theology when talking with staff and students alike.

Three practical examples shall serve as models of how the links between positive psychology and School Chaplaincy might be made explicit. Firstly, chapel services incorporating stillness and mindfulness can be easily initiated in the context of regular chapel worship. This has already commenced at St Peter's College, using the model of 'paying attention to the world around us and thus to God'. Historically, and more recently in the Christian tradition, this model has been associated with the Benedictine model of prayer known as '*Lectio Divina*', particularly the fourth step of the tradition: '*Contemplatio*' (Michael & Norrissey 1984, p.33). It can be a

time of great inspiration and creativity or, in the context of a busy school, simply a time to catch one's breath. The great advantage of this type of contemplation is that it is open to students of all religious traditions and none. Whilst at a school like St Peter's College this contemplation will normally occur within the context of a Christian chapel service, it can equally take place in the classroom or during designated mentor times, when a teacher spends time at the start and the middle of each day with a group of his or her mentors.

Secondly, Christian educators can incorporate mindfulness using the technique of remembrance. A variation on the Benedictine tradition of *Contemplatio* comes to us from the traditions of St Ignatius of Loyola, although its roots are much older than Ignatius himself and date back to the Jewish tradition of remembrance. An event is so vividly imagined and remembered, that the praying people participate in and, in a symbolic way, make real those past events (Michael & Norrissey 1984, p.46). So, for example, students can be lead in a meditation in which they imagine themselves being present with Jesus by the Sea of Galilee while he teaches the people from the boat near the shore (Luke 5: 1-3). A variation on the Ignatian model would be for the students to remember a beautiful and safe place known to them, where they enjoy relaxing, and to picture themselves there,

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having let go of all their worries and concerns.

Thirdly, there is the opportunity to use the positive education practise of mindfulness through the exercise of 'Walking the Labyrinth' based on the labyrinth at Chartres Cathedral. At Chartres the pilgrims would walk the labyrinth while meditating, using such techniques as reciting the Rosary or meditating on the journey of Christ to the cross. In the context of an Anglican School for boys, the appeal of getting the boys to do something physical in the context of spirituality is appealing, given the physicality which teenage boys tend to display. The style of meditation used while walking the labyrinth would be flexible, but the Ignatian model of imagination, for example, imagining oneself walking the streets of Jerusalem with Jesus, would potentially work very well.



## Conclusions

The 'whole-student approach' advocates that students need to be developed socially, emotionally, morally, spiritually and intellectually. As such, schools are not only in the business of developing students' academically, but also of developing good character. Therefore, it is important that teachers and Chaplains think deeply about their own conceptions of human nature. Although, historically speaking, theology and psychology have placed emphasis on the sins, flaws and pathology within human nature, contemporary writings bring forward views that highlight the love, strength and virtue within us.

By adopting a positive education approach, St Peter's College, Adelaide, seeks to fully develop students' appreciation of the interior life as well as traditional educational goals. Positive Education is used as an evidence-based framework that supports objectives aligned with RAVE, and is consistent with the traditional values of a faith-based education that stimulates students' capacity to reflect more deeply on the search for meaning and purpose in their lives (Palmer, 2007; Wong, 2010).

This paper has explored how St Peter's College, Adelaide, has aligned positive education with RAVE through the practise of mindfulness. More work is needed to connect positive psychology principles with Christianity. One area of focus could be the Wisdom literature of the Hebrew Scriptures, exploring the explicit points of overlap between that literature and the principles of positive psychology. Another focus of study could be the gifts of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament (Galatians 5: 22–26 and 1 Corinthians 12: 4–11, 13: 1–13) and making links with the students' own character strengths and virtues following Peterson and Seligman's (2004) character strengths framework, and the writings of Julian of Norwich, St John of the Cross, Thomas Merton and Parker Palmer. As such, we end this paper with some further questions for the reader to reflect on.

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## For discussion

- 1. Do the references to particular gifts in the New Testament (Galatians 5: 22–26 and 1 Corinthians 12: 4–11, 13: 1–13) align with Peterson and Seligman's character strengths framework?**
- 2. Is there a danger of Christian schools watering down their Christian focus in an effort to use Positive Psychology?**
- 3. Is Christianity's claim about the uniqueness of Christ at odds with the generalist and universal principles of Positive Psychology?**
- 4. Is it still acceptable to talk about 'sin' in the Christian context and 'pathology' in the Positive Psychology context?**

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