



Matthew S. Stanford

Psychology, Neuroscience, and the American Scientific Affiliation

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Several years ago my wife and I attended a fund-raising dinner for an international ministry with which we are involved. I was excited to go to the dinner for two reasons. First, I am very supportive of this ministry's work in advancing the gospel message around the world. Second, I wanted to hear the invited presenter. The guest speaker, a retired professor of psychiatry, was to talk about his involvement with the ministry's efforts in several foreign countries. But that is not why I was so interested. What piqued my curiosity was the qualifying label that had been printed under his name on the flier, "Born Again Brain Scientist." When I first read that description, I laughed. I thought, "Isn't it obvious that anyone invited to speak by the ministry would themselves be a Christian?" Or is there something inherent in the title "brain scientist" that would lead people, especially people of faith, to think that such an individual is not a believer? Unfortunately, I think the latter may be true. The fact that many in the Christian community equate the title "brain scientist" with an atheist is troubling to me, because much like the invited speaker I also am a "brain scientist."

As a believing neuroscientist, I recognize that God's majesty is reflected in how our neurons function, the biological and environmental factors that affect the formation of our personalities, the mechanism by which memories are brought to consciousness, and the precise balance of neurotransmitters that are the foundation of our thoughts and behaviors. Sadly, my own research on mental illness and the local church has shown that many in the Christian community are fearful of psychology and neuroscience and often deny the very existence of mental disorder.¹ As one who recognizes that the church has a significant role to play in the recovery and

treatment of the mentally ill, I am passionate in my belief that Christians in the psychological and brain sciences must work to build bridges with the faith community. I also recognize that the American Scientific Affiliation (ASA) is uniquely positioned to help in such an endeavor.

From its inception, the ASA has always provided a unique and open forum for discussions on issues of faith and psychology and later neuroscience. For example, in only its second year of publication, the *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* published two articles on the topic of psychology and faith: M. J. Beukema's *Christian Treatment of the Mentally Ill*² (a paper originally presented at the 3rd annual meeting of the society) and Bernard Ramm's *Behaviorism and Philosophical Psychology*.³ More recently the ASA has attempted to facilitate discussion and debate in these areas by designating *Neuroscience and the Image of God* as the theme of the 59th annual meeting and by inviting prominent neuroscientists such as Bill Newsome (Stanford University) and Mario Beauregard (University of Montreal) to conduct plenary sessions at subsequent meetings. The points of intersection between psychology, neuroscience, and issues of faith are immense and increasing every day. Evolutionary psychology, the development of moral behavior, the biology of belief (neurotheology), faith-based treatments for mental illness, mind/consciousness, and the relationship between faith and health/well-being are only a few of the controversial and important topics being discussed today within the discipline.

Despite the openness to the topic and many proactive attempts at engaging members within the discipline, the ASA has few members who designate their main area of interest as either psychology or

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neuroscience. This lack of involvement from the psychology and neuroscience community first became apparent to me while I was setting up my online profile through the ASA website (www.asa3.org). When attempting to select my academic discipline from a drop-down menu, I found that neither psychology nor neuroscience were listed as options, and I fell into the highly prestigious and much envied *Other* category.

While I have found my interactions with ASA members outside my discipline to be intellectually stimulating and spiritually edifying, I have longed for a greater level of involvement from my Christian psychology and neuroscience colleagues. In conversation with Walter Bradley, a fellow Baylor faculty member and at the time president-elect of ASA, on how to increase the involvement of psychologists and neuroscientists in the ASA, the idea of a special issue of *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith (PSCF)* focusing on psychology, neuroscience, and issues of faith came up. That led to several conversations with *PSCF* Editor Arie Leegwater, which have resulted in the issue of the journal you are presently reading.

This special issue was developed with two goals in mind: first, to continue the long tradition of the ASA and *PSCF* in publishing quality, academic discussions in science and faith; and second, to serve as a resource that ASA members might use to engage their Christian psychology and neuroscience colleagues. It is anticipated that a common point of contact, such as this special issue, will open opportunities to invite your colleagues to attend the annual meeting or at least to visit the website to learn more about the society. The strength of the ASA has always been in its diversity—chemist meeting with anthropologist, physician talking with physicist, biologist debating philosopher—men and women of science, regardless of discipline, who recognize the hand of the Creator in the creation they have been given the honor of studying. Increasing the involvement of those in the behavioral sciences within the ASA will only strengthen us as a society and hopefully open new areas of inquiry and discussion for years to come. □

Notes

¹Matthew S. Stanford, "Demon or Disorder: A Survey of Attitudes toward Mental Illness in the Christian Church," *Mental Health, Religion and Culture* 10 (2007): 445-9; Matthew

S. Stanford and Kandace McAlister, "Perceptions of Serious Mental Illness in the Local Church," *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health* 12 (2008): 144-53; Matthew S. Stanford and David Philpott, "Baptist Senior Pastors' Knowledge and Perceptions of Mental Illness," *Mental Health, Religion and Culture*, in press.

²M. J. Beukema, "Christian Treatment of the Mentally Ill," *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 2 (1950): 24-7.

³Bernard Ramm, "Behaviorism and Philosophical Psychology," *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 2 (1950): 28-37.

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In This Issue

As indicated in the guest editorial by Matthew Stanford (Baylor University), this special issue of *PSCF* is devoted to "psychology, neuroscience, and issues of faith." As co-editors of this theme issue, Matt and I invite you to read the five major articles which explore these matters. The articles by Paul Moes (Calvin College), Kevin Seybold (Grove City College), David Moberg (Marquette University), Thaddeus Trenn (University of Toronto), and D. Gareth Jones (University of Otago), take the reader on an exciting journey: viewing humans as being embodied persons, exploring the biological basis of human spirituality, evaluating research on "measuring" spirituality, reflecting on conscious experience and its objective correlates, and investigating neuroscience's intrusion into our brains. All of the book reviews explore recent reflection on the intersection of religion and psychology.

In addition, this issue contains an essay by Denis Lamoureux (University of Alberta) reviewing a book by G. K. Beale that treats the erosion of biblical inerrancy in evangelicalism. Several letters complete the issue.

I welcome further suggestions for a *PSCF* theme issue. Such a venture requires sustained planning and a relevant topic.

Arie Leegwater, *Editor*

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