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Psychological type theory and Christian theology: A conflict between implicit and explicit religions?

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**Abstract**

This study analyses the relationship between psychological type theory and Christian theology through the lens of implicit religion, drawing on the conceptualisation of implicit religion proposed by Edward Bailey, on the methodology for identifying implicit religion proposed by Tatjana Schnell, and on an heuristic framework derived from systematic theology. The case is argued that psychological type theory can be conceptualised as implicit religion and implicit theology in a way that enables dialogue (and conflict) between psychological type theory and Christian theology to be reconceptualised within the established field of the theology of religions.

### **Psychological type theory**

Psychological type theory has its origins in the pioneering and innovative thinking of Carl Jung (see Jung, 1971) and has been developed and extended by a series of self-report measures of psychological type, including the Myers-Brigg Type Indicator (Myers & McCaulley, 1985), the Keirsey Temperament Sorter (Keirsey & Bates, 1978), and the Francis Psychological Type Scales (Francis, 2005). At its heart psychological type theory seems to set out to describe four key ways in which individuals differ. In this sense, psychological type theory belongs to the wider genre of personality theories shaped within the individual differences tradition, including Cattell's Sixteen Personality Factor model (Cattell, Cattell, & Cattell, 1993), Eysenck's Major Three Dimensions model (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1991), and the Big Five Factor model (see Costa & McCrae, 1985). What distinguishes psychological type theory, from these other three models, is the emphasis on typology rather than on continua. While Cattell's sixteen factors, Eysenck's three dimensions, and Costa and McCrae's big five factors all seek to locate individuals at various points along each of their preferred continua, psychological type theory seeks to divide individuals into two discrete categories (or types) in terms of each of the four constructs defined by the theory. The location of individuals within two discrete categories on four constructs generates sixteen discrete psychological types.

The four constructs of individual difference proposed by psychological type theory distinguish between two orientations (introversion and extraversion), two perceiving functions (sensing and intuition), two judging functions (thinking and feeling), and two attitudes toward the outer world (judging and perceiving). According to this model, the two orientations (introversion and extraversion) and the two attitudes (judging and perceiving) define the kind of context within which the individual human psyche functions. The two perceiving functions (sensing and intuition) and the two judging functions (thinking and feeling) define the mental

processes involved in interpreting and making sense of the world.

The two orientations are concerned with where energy is drawn from and focused. On the one hand, extraverts (E) are orientated toward the outer world; they are energised by the events and people around them. They enjoy communicating and thrive in stimulating and exciting environments. They tend to focus their attention upon what is happening outside themselves. They are usually open people, easy to get to know, and enjoy having many friends. On the other hand, introverts (I) are orientated toward their inner world; they are energised by their inner ideas and concepts. They enjoy solitude, silence, and contemplation, as they tend to focus their attention on what is happening in their inner life. They may prefer to have a small circle of intimate friends rather than many acquaintances.

The two perceiving functions are concerned with the way in which people perceive information. On the one hand, sensing types (S) focus on the realities of a situation as perceived by the senses. They tend to focus on specific details, rather than the overall picture. They are concerned with the actual, the real, and the practical and tend to be down to earth and matter of fact. On the other hand, intuitive types (N) focus on the possibilities of a situation, perceiving meanings and relationships. They may feel that perception by the senses is not as valuable as information gained as indirect associations and concepts impact on their perception. They focus on the overall picture, rather than on specific facts and data.

The two judging functions are concerned with the criteria which people employ to make decisions and judgements. On the one hand, thinking types (T) make decisions and judgements based on objective, impersonal logic. They value integrity and justice. They are known for their truthfulness and for their desire for fairness. They consider conforming to principles to be of more importance than cultivating harmony. On the other hand, feeling types (F) make decisions and judgements based on subjective, personal values. They value compassion and mercy. They are known for their tactfulness and for their desire for peace.

They are more concerned to promote harmony, than to adhere to abstract principles.

The two attitudes toward the outer world are determined by which of the two sets of functions (that is, perceiving S/N, or judging T/F) is preferred in dealings with the outer world. On the one hand, judging types (J) seek to order, rationalise, and structure their outer world, as they actively judge external stimuli. They enjoy routine and established patterns. They prefer to follow schedules in order to reach an established goal and may make use of lists, timetables, or diaries. They tend to be punctual, organised, and tidy. They prefer to make decisions quickly and to stick to their conclusions once made. On the other hand, perceiving types (P) do not seek to impose order on the outer world, but are more reflective, perceptive, and open, as they passively perceive external stimuli. They have a flexible, open-ended approach to life. They enjoy change and spontaneity. They prefer to leave projects open in order to adapt and improve them. Their behaviour may often seem impulsive and unplanned.

According to Jungian theory, each individual needs access to all four functions (sensing, intuition, thinking and feeling) for normal and healthy living. The two perceiving functions (sensing and intuition) are needed to gather information about the inner and outer worlds inhabited by the individual. These are the irrational functions concerned with collecting information, with seeing reality and possibility. The two judging functions (thinking and feeling) are needed to organise and evaluate information. These are the rational functions concerned with making decisions and determining courses of action. Although each individual needs access to all four functions, Jungian theory posits the view that the relative strengths of these four functions vary from one individual to another. The analogy is drawn with handedness. Although equipped with two hands, the majority of individuals prefer one and tend to develop skills with that hand to the neglect of the other hand. Similarly, empirical evidence suggests that individuals will develop preference for one of the perceiving functions

(sensing or intuition) and neglect the other, and that they will develop preference for one of the judging functions (thinking or feeling) and neglect the other.

Moreover, according to Jungian theory, for each individual either the preferred perceiving function (sensing or intuition) or the preferred judging function (thinking or feeling) takes preference over the other, leading to the emergence of one dominant function which shapes the individual's dominant approach to life. Dominant sensing shapes the practical person; dominant intuition shapes the imaginative person; dominant feeling shapes the humane person; and dominant thinking shapes the analytic person. According to Jungian theory, it is the function opposite to the dominant function which is least well developed in the individual (the inferior function). Thus, the dominant sensing type experiences most difficulty with the intuitive function; the dominant intuitive type experiences most difficulty with the sensing function; the dominant thinking type experiences most difficulty with the feeling function; and the dominant feeling type experiences most difficulty with the thinking function.

### **Psychological type theory and practical theology**

Psychological type theory seems to have been warmly embraced by practical theologians during the latter part of the twentieth century and employed to illuminate a number of themes relevant for the development of aspects of Christian ministry and mission. Key studies in this field have focused on understanding and developing clergy (Oswald & Kroeger, 1988), the people of God (Osborn & Osborn, 1991), and congregations (Baab, 1998). Other key studies have drawn on psychological type theory to illuminate aspects of the Christian life, including prayer (Duncan, 1993), bible study (Francis, 1997), preaching (Francis & Atkins, 2000, 2001, 2002; Francis & Village, 2008), and spiritual awareness (Goldsmith & Wharton, 1993). Clearly such writers assume the compatibility between psychological type theory and Christian tradition.

Psychological type theory has also been warmly embraced by practical theologians working within the tradition of empirical theology (see Francis, Robbins & Astley, 2009). The constructs of psychological type theory have been employed to shape testable hypotheses within the field of empirical theology and the measuring tools developed by psychological type theory have been employed to test such hypotheses. One group of studies has discussed and assessed the psychological type profile of church congregations, including research conducted in North America (Gerhardt, 1983; Rehak, 1998; Delis-Bulhoes, 1990; Ross, 1993, 1995), in Australia (Robbins & Francis, 2011), and in the United Kingdom (Craig, Francis, Bailey, & Robbins, 2003; Francis, Duncan, Craig, & Luffman, 2004; Francis, Robbins, Williams, & Williams, 2007; Francis, Robbins, & Craig, in press). A second group of studies discussed and assessed the psychological type profile of religious professionals, including research conducted in North America (Cabral, 1984; Harbaugh, 1984; Holsworth, 1984; Bigelow, Fitzgerald, Busk, Girault, & Avis, 1998; Francis, Wulff, & Robbins, 2008), in Australia and New Zealand (Francis, Robbins, Kaldor, & Castle, 2009), and in the United Kingdom (Francis, Payne, & Jones, 2001; Francis, Craig, Whinney, Tilley, & Slater, 2007; Craig, Duncan, & Francis, 2006; Francis, Nash, Nash, & Craig, 2007; Francis, Gubb, & Robbins, 2009). A third group of studies has discussed and assessed the association between psychological type and different expressions of religious and spiritual experiences, including studies concerned with attitude toward Christianity (Jones & Francis, 1999; Fearn, Francis, & Wilcox, 2001; Francis, Robbins, Boxer, Lewis, McGuckin, & McDaid, 2003; Francis, Jones, & Craig, 2004), concerned with mystical orientation (Francis & Loudon, 2000; Francis, 2002; Francis, Village, Robbins, & Ineson, 2007), concerned with charismatic experience (Francis & Jones, 1997; Jones, Francis, & Caig, 2005), concerned with different styles of Christian believing (Francis & Jones 1998, 1999; Francis & Ross, 2000, in press), concerned with biblical hermeneutics (Village & Francis, 2005; Francis, Robbins, & Village, 2009; Village,

2010), concerned with dogmatism (Ross, Francis, & Craig, 2005), concerned with belief about the bible and the Holy Spirit (Village, 2005), concerned with responses to Celtic Christianity (Francis, Craig, & Hall, 2008), and concerned with appreciation of sacred buildings (Francis, Williams, Annis, & Robbins, 2008). Clearly many of these writers also assume the compatibility between psychological type theory and the Christian tradition.

### **Theological objections to psychological type theory**

Another group of scholars has taken serious objection to the alliance that seems to have been forged between Christian theologians and psychological type theory. The first major attempt to give articulation to these objections was provided in the collection of eight short essays edited by Leech (1996) under the title, *Myers-Briggs: some critical reflections*, a pamphlet of 38 pages. In a subsequent article, Lloyd (2007) analysed the arguments offered by these eight essays and identified four dominant objections.

First, Woods (1996) and Ward (1996) objected to the misuse of psychological typing in spiritual formation, possibly even elevating psychological type to the status of a spirituality itself. Woods argued that ‘When used for guidance it is only a map, not the territory, and emphatically not the journey itself’ (p. 17). Ward argued that type practitioners are in danger of replacing theology and ontology with psychology’ (p. 8) and that ‘a spirituality based upon personality growth paradoxically leads to a state of arrested spiritual development’ (p. 9).

Second, Davies (1996) and Delmerge (1996) objected to psychological typing as a simplistic analysis of human personality that fails to take into account environmental and contextual influences. Davies amplifies his argument with the following illustration of how scores may be influenced. ‘Suppose one dresses a research colleague in the guise of a terrorist and indicates ... that anyone who comes up with high scores for extraversion will be shot ...’ (p.20). Delmerge offers a brief overview of the philosophy of Being ‘according to ancient Greek and modern German thinkers’ (p. 36) and concludes that ‘we must reject easy answers,

admitting that we are a people who no longer understand our being and are in perplexity and darkness much of the time' (p38).

Third, Reader (1996) objected to psychological typing as a restrictive pigeon-holing of human beings. Reader argues that the theory simply provides individuals with an excuse for inflexible behaviour patterns: they see themselves as bound to react to certain other persons or situations in this way. Reader concludes that psychological type indicators 'may be of a slightly higher order than horoscopes ... but they are certainly not the key to the mysteries of human personality.

Fourth, Reader (1996), Egan (1996), and Joyce (1996) objected to the unethical use of psychological typing. Reader argues that 'the potential for abuse of the Myers-Briggs is vast' (p.34). Egan criticises the use of psychological type measures in his own experience of the assessment of his vocation to the Jesuit order. Reader asks 'how long will it be before someone decides that only one personality type is suitable for ordination' (p.34).

Lloyd (2007) found these four dominant objections voiced more widely in the theological literature critical of psychological type theory. Rowan Williams (1992, p. 214-215) is concerned at the 'mechanical fixed ways in which personality types are sometimes presented in the self-help books generated by the popularity of this style of interpretation. Alan Billings (2006, p. 230) argues that 'accounts of personality assume that we behave in broadly similar ways in all circumstances, but we know from our own experience that this is not so.' In a letter to the *Church Times*, Barry Williams (2005) argues that 'the Myers-Brigg system ... directly contradicts the doctrine of grace.'

The contributors to the Leech (1996) collection of essays also broaden their criticism of psychological type theory to a wider rejection of psychological theory within the fields of Christian discipleship and ministry (See Coxon, 1996; Reader, 1996), including making specific references to Frank Lake's *Clinical Theology* (Lake, 1971) and James Fowler's

Stages of Faith (Fowler, 1981). This wider rejection speaks of ‘fads and foibles’ in the contemporary church and of ‘uncritical acceptance’ of psychological theories.

In order to understand theological objections to psychological type more fully, Lloyd (2007) wrote to a number of Christian leaders known to take a critical stance on the issue. They were invited to identify and explain the reasons for their misgivings. The response to this exercise was not good. Only four of those to whom Lloyd wrote offered considered replies, some failed to reply (even after a repeat letter), and others made it clear that their view of psychological type was so negative they did not wish to take time on the enquiry. Here is one anonymous response.

Others, better qualified than I in psychology and theology, have discredited MBTI totally and completely. This has gone on relentlessly over nearly forty years with everyone coming to the same conclusion. (Lloyd, 2007, pp. 112-113)

### **Psychological type theory and implicit religion**

The notion of implicit religion was pioneered and developed in a series of studies by Edward Bailey, as summarised by Bailey (1997, 1998). Bailey’s notion of implicit religion suggests that there are systems of behaviour and patterns of believing in contemporary culture that can best be understood by the features of explicit religion and that can be seen to serve similar functions to those served by explicit religion. It is the intention of the present study to apply Bailey’s notion of implicit religion to psychological type theory in order to test the extent to which psychological type theory may be seen to function as an implicit religion. The thesis is that the conflict between psychological type theory and Christianity may be reformulated in terms of the confrontation between two religious traditions and in light of the various responses that have historically emerged between religions and that have been expressed within the theology of religions.

Bailey’s notion of implicit religion is a rich and polyvalent construct, expressed

through a variety of research traditions. The present study has been consciously shaped through the tradition pioneered and expressed by Tatjana Schnell (2000, 2003). Operating within the discipline of psychology, Schnell argues that this discipline is concerned with three fields of enquiry. According to Schnell (2003, p. 87) 'Psychology is the science of human cognition, behaviour and experience.' Schnell's inter-disciplinary analysis (drawing on anthropology, sociology and religious studies) of all kinds of explicit religiosity (primal religions as well as contemporary world religions and religious movements) identified three common structures that 'could be located in every religion' (p. 88). These three common structures are myth (located in cognition), ritual (located in behaviour), and experience of transcendence (located in experience). As structural terms, myth, ritual and experience of transcendence can be 'found in association with all kinds of contents, sacred as well as profane' (p. 89). Schnell's argument maintains that for phenomena to be properly classified as implicit religion, such phenomena need to reflect this same common threefold structure as reflected by explicit religion. This structural criteria alone, however, is not adequate to turn any content into implicit religion. Schnell argues as follows:

Since religiosity is a subjective experience, the individual must choose a certain content to be personally meaningful to him or her. It is therefore impossible to ascribe implicit religiosity by simply checking the existence of certain patterns of thinking, behaving or feeling. We cannot avoid asking people themselves what *they* find relevant and meaningful.

A myth only turns into a 'personal myth' for a person, if it holds a relevant content and gains a special meaning and relevance for that person. The same is true of a ritual, which, otherwise is just a meaningless pattern of behaviour. And, of course, the experience of transcendence is only an experience of transcendence if interpreted as such by a person who has it. (Schnell, 2003, p. 89)

Schnell's framework will now be applied to test whether psychological type theory can be said to fulfil the functions of implicit religion for those who are committed to the application of this theory, say as type practitioners, trained, qualified, registered, and certificated within the Myers-Briggs family of practitioners.

### **Myth**

Schnell defines myth as a holy story, including archetypal characters, by means of which individuals create a framework for meaning in life. Individuals who are initiated into the family of registered Myers-Briggs practitioners are introduced to the grand mythic narrative of a mother (Katherine Cook Briggs: 1875-1968) and a daughter (Isabel Briggs Myers: 1897-1980) working in isolation from the mainstream intellectual tradition of their day who uncovered a rich source of hidden knowledge into the functioning of the human mind. The mission of these heroic women was to set free this new-found wisdom for the benefits of humankind. The neophytes initiated into the wisdom of these founders of the Myers-Briggs family of practitioners share the mission of the founders to bring the insights of their wisdom afresh to a new generation. Having themselves been enlightened by the wisdom, the newly certificated practitioners discover a new purpose and meaning in their lives as they offer new levels of self-insight to others. So here is a holy story, including archetypal characters, by means of which individuals create a framework for meaning in life. In this sense, the foundation narrative behind the practitioner's craft becomes a personal myth of personal significance. On this account, psychological type theory passes the first test for being classified as implicit religion.

### **Ritual**

Schnell distinguishes ritual from non-instrumental repetitive habitual acts by emphasising the symbolic expressive dimension of ritual, pointing beyond itself. Within explicit religion two distinct forms of ritual may be distinguished: initiation rites that are

formative and not repeated (like Christian baptism) and sustaining rites that are repeated to nurture the participants (like Christian eucharist). The initiation rites for Myers-Briggs practitioners are sophisticated and intensive. For example, the present author's initiation in the early 1990s involved a four day residential experience during which twenty or so neophytes were introduced to a range of bonding exercises and gradually introduced to the body of wisdom by experienced practitioners. At the end of the training, formal assessment of learning took place and the names of those who successfully passed this threshold were recorded in the register of those permitted access to purchasing the 'restricted' materials required for practising the art (the psychological test materials). Once licensed to practise, practitioners are required to follow the ethical code of the test suppliers and to engage in the three stage ritual of practice: inviting clients to complete the Type Indicator, scoring the responses, and offering feedback to the clients. So here are both an initiation ritual and a sustaining ritual, both of which convey powerful symbolic expressive dimensions pointing beyond themselves. In this sense, the rituals behind the practitioner's craft become a personal ritual of personal significance. On this account, psychological type theory passes the second test for being classified as implicit religion.

### **Experiences of transcendence**

Schnell is careful not to equate transcendence with the idea of metaphysical power, or of God. She takes the root of the term *transcendo* literally to mean 'I go beyond', pass a border, go over a certain limit, and cites with approval Maslow's (1962) notion of 'peak experiences'. Individuals who are initiated into the family of registered Myers-Briggs practitioners are invited during the training process to acknowledge the revelatory power of the theory to deepen awareness of self, to deepen appreciation of others, and to experience the skill of leading others to such deep personal and inter-personal awareness. So here are experiences that accord so well with Schnell's explication of the root of the term *transcendo*,

as the individual practitioners literally go beyond the boundaries and limitations of their previous knowledge and their previous experience of self and of others, as they pass a border and go over a certain limit. Moreover, it is precisely this experience of transcendence that the licensed practitioners are commissioned to pass on to others. On this account, psychological type theory passes the third test for being classified as implicit religion.

### **Psychological type theory as implicit religion**

Schnell's criteria for classifying psychological type theory as implicit religion only goes part way in profiling the religious character of psychological type theory. Working within the broad framework of the psychology of religion, Schnell's model approaches the problem from a religious studies perspective. A second and complementary analysis needs to be developed from a theological perspective. As yet, however, no comparable framework has been tested within the implicit religion literature working from a theological perspective.

Within the context of Christian theology, the coherence of religious tradition has been tested by means of the systematic integration of key doctrines. Classically the building blocks of Christian doctrine have been conceptualised in terms of the doctrine of creation, the doctrine of fall, the doctrine of redemption, and the doctrine of sanctification. This framework will now be applied to test whether psychological type theory can be said to fulfil the functions of systematic theology among those who live their lives within its teaching.

Within the framework of systematic theology, the doctrine of creation affirms the primordial special character and essential goodness of human beings. In the Christian tradition men and women were created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). Psychological type theory, too, shares a strong doctrine of creation. An individual's type is understood to be a deep-seated and immutable part of who that individual is intended to be. An individual's true type is, as it were, part of the created order. Moreover, each of the sixteen complete types is seen to be wholly good and fully worthy of respect. On this account, psychological type

theory passes the first test of comprising a systematic theological system.

Within the framework of systematic theology, the doctrine of fall affirms that the good intentions of the created order have been subject to corruption and distortion. Human beings do not reflect in practice the goodness for which they had been intended. In the Christian tradition, men and women share in the sin of Adam and in Adam's fall from grace (Genesis 2). Psychological type theory, too, shares a strong doctrine of fall. An individual's true type is, as it were, subject to distortion and corruption. The expectations of parents, family, school and work may all serve to suppress the individual's realisation of his or her true type and lead to the individual missing the mark (sin) of the true image in which he or she was created. On this account, psychological type theory passes the second test of comprising a systematic theological system.

Within the framework of systematic theology, the doctrine of salvation offers individuals a path to return to the original good envisaged in the doctrine of creation. Human beings are not consigned to living their whole life bearing the full cost of the doctrine of the fall. In the Christian tradition, men and women are afforded salvation through Christ. Just as in Adam all died, so in Christ all are made alive (1 Corinthians 15:22). Psychological type theory, too, shares a strong doctrine of salvation. Here the place of the Christ figure is taken by the founders of the tradition (mother and daughter) who obtained special knowledge that offers the promise of restoring the individual's recognition of his or her true type. Here (as in some strands of the Christian tradition) is a gnostic pathway to salvation through the intervention of the saviour women. This gnostic pathway of salvation depends on rites of initiation (not dissimilar from Ambrosian catechesis). On this account, psychological type theory possesses the third test of comprising a systematic theological system.

Within the framework of systematic theology, the doctrine of sanctification discusses ways in which individuals appropriate the fruits of salvation offered to them through the

doctrine of salvation. Human beings realise within themselves the gifts that salvation offers. In the Christian tradition, men and women learn to live the holy and sanctified life, sustained by spiritual practices (prayer) and sacraments (eucharist), shaped and shared by the holy institution (church) and administered by the authorised holy functionaries (priests). Psychological type theory, too, shares a strong doctrine of sanctification, shaped within a gnostic framework. Here the holy and sanctified life is sustained by spiritual practices (type-talk) and sacraments (the questionnaire), shaped and shared by the holy institution (Consulting Psychologists Press) and administered by the authorised holy functionaries (practitioners). On this account, psychological type theory passes the fourth test of comprising a systematic theological system.

### **Conclusion**

The present study set out to examine the dialogue and relationship between psychological type theory and Christianity. A review of the current debate illustrated two opposing positions. One position identified close alliance between psychological type theory and Christian theology and practice. The second position identified strong hostility toward psychological type theory from Christian thinkers and Christian leaders. In order to illuminate this ambivalent relationship between Christian theology and psychological type theory, the thesis has been tested that psychological type theory fulfils the criterion of implicit religion. The thesis has been tested by drawing on Edward Bailey's notion of implicit religion, on Tatjana Schnell's model for identifying implicit religion, and on a model proposed from systematic theology for analysing the theological claims of psychological type theory. The analysis supports the view that psychological type theory can be properly conceptualised as implicit religion. As a consequence the conflict between psychological type theory (implicit religion) and Christian theology (explicit religion) can be reconceptualised in terms of the dialogue between religions and the established field of study recognised as the

theology of religions. It is to this established field of study that future research now needs to turn in order to illuminate further the dialogue between psychological type theory and Christian theology.

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