

Science and Religion Forum Conference 2017

Mental Wellbeing, Neuroscience and Religion

Bishop Grosseteste University, Longdales Road, Lincoln, UK

Closing Remarks

Gillian Straine, Director of The Guild of Health and St Raphael

There is much that I will take from this conference, both personally and professionally, as ever with the science and religion forum

Many images and ideas are resonating: The woman dying and the maggots; 'Don't touch me'; The empty spaces in the corridors of the mind caused by neglect; The stories of mental breakdown. At the last conference, after a focus on the philosophical limits of knowledge there was a call for a more practical conference, and my feeling is that we got one. Further, that this is an important limit place and one that we only just began to touch in these three days, because science has only just begun to touch on.

I think you might agree that this conference has had a more personal, emotional feel than previous years. In my opinion, this is not only unavoidable if you decide to have a conference on neuroscience, mental wellbeing and religion, but it is probably correct and honest given the human experience which lies at the heart of this part of science. Many of the papers reflected this, particularly the paper from David McDonald and the theories of infant development and the effects of trauma. I felt reassured by Roger Bretherton's introductory caveats to his work, and perhaps they could be applied more widely to our entire conference – we are the revolutionaries of religion and science and wandering around in the fog and hoping for something more unified yet to emerge.

There are three main themes or reflections that I will leave this place equipped with:

1. The continued growth of the evidence of the inseparability of the physical and the mental. A number of papers touched on this, particularly the paper from Suzanna Hyde where she showed the neurobiological effects of trauma. In this forum, the interface between the mental and the physical is a common topic, especially given our focus on theological naturalism last year, but I think that the work of the interconnection of the mind and body in the science and religion dialogue is new and important for those outside of the academy, and to those who are suffering.
2. The second point I will take away is the role of compassion which came up in a number of papers. Liz Grant's paper was fascinating, and prophetic in terms of the calls for governments to act across silos to solve global health. Enormous problems with a solution that is so personal and small: Compassion. 95% of complaints to Scottish ombuds could have been avoided

if compassion had been shown. To suffer with another human, to interconnect, to understand, to seek a common language, an idea with powerful theology in the Christian tradition, a tool to solve small problems and big ones – compassion has many guises and enormous potential. We are the privileged and ones with this knowledge, but lest we slip into gnosticism, I feel this is a call to action, or a continued call to action.

3. Thirdly, I am leaving wanting more. I feel that we have only begun and that this is a limit area of the science and religion conversation that is sparsely furnished. There are great gaps in knowledge, both scientific and theological, and we end where we start with the great challenge that Ben Ryan gave at the start of the conference – we need to get a theology to underpin not only mental health response in churches, but what neuroscience is telling us about what it means to be human. As an outsider to psychology, I was fascinated by Roger's work and look forward to hearing more, more interactions of the fields, more theologians, psychologists, scientists willing to come up with theories that might make their colleagues squirm, in an attempt to understand the human experience.

Neuroscience which can be interpreted as the interplay of the physical and mental, strongly rejecting dualistic models of the mind and body, draws up therefore important theological concerns. I think therefore that there is urgency, given the rise of mental health problems, to develop a theological anthropology which draws on neuroscience and mental health studies such that the church and those who seek to help are empowered in a role to add to this important national issue and debate.

But this work needs to be done with proper caution and reverence for scientific methodology and a demand for rigour in these conversations, as we heard in Fraser Watt's paper. There is a danger that our popular theology is flattered into the more fuzzy end of the wellbeing popular market, and so there is a great need that good theology is communicated from the academy to the pews, if you like, to those hungry to understand mental health from their perspective of their faith, and I think there is a responsibility to make this happen. I was particularly taken with that model Fraser outlines at the end of his talk, the vision of the complementarity of faith and medicine, reflecting the science and religion dialogue, in the pursuit of health and healing.

The short papers added a great deal to the conversation this year. I won't comment on them individually as I for quite obvious reasons didn't see them all – it seems like the laws of physics hold, even at a neurobiology conference. But my experience was that they were of a very high standard, the ones I heard were the foundations of where the field is going. I was very grateful to all these speakers too, and again, I was left wanting more.

The Guild of Health is at its core multidisciplinary, not only working in healing, mental health and religion, but attempting to do so with parishes, individuals, professionals, and now through The Raphael Institute with academia simultaneously. As such, it has been wonderful to be in partnership, and I feel it has been enormously fruitful. I leave here with challenges as to how we as an organisation can play our part in what has been discussed.

The Raphael Institute is a place for academics to come with their work and to get it into the community and to translate it such that it will be useful to ministers, community leaders, church organisations – we have a network all over the country, including Scotland, for this work to happen. And I am seeing a need for this, both from academics who want to communicate and parishes who are calling out for help.

The conversation after dinner between Michael Harvey and Sarah Lane Ritchie, is one we hope to replicate across the country and across different scientific disciplines asking how science can be used in pastoral ministry and in church life – if you want to get involved, let me know. *Chrism* is our academic journal and I am working with a number of people to get it to morph into a professional peer reviewed journal – please do take a free copy. And join The Raphael Institute before I achieve my aim, as then it will get more expensive! Join online and then you can log in to get all our back copies too.

As I mentioned, there is I feel a job of translation and communication to those on the ground in parishes about the type of work studied in the conference, and to those working professionally in the health care systems. And here is the message: the Christian faith and our theological tradition has important insights. The Guild publishes magazine and holds conferences, and if you are interested it would be wonderful to have you help us in all these aspects of our vision. Again you can join online, and (having just heard Roger's work on the place of virtues I feel now more confidence in being humble and vulnerable) I need help in this task, it is important and urgent work for wellbeing and flourishing of those in need. Please join me.

Finally, thank you, to Mark, Julie, Gavin, Hilary, Michael for this conference and for letting the Guild work in partnership with you.