

2015

Studying Wisdom: Toward a Christian Integrative Perspective

Paul McLaughlin
George Fox University

Mark R. McMinn
George Fox University, mmcminn@georgefox.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/gscp_fac



Part of the [Psychology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

McLaughlin, Paul and McMinn, Mark R., "Studying Wisdom: Toward a Christian Integrative Perspective" (2015). *Faculty Publications - Grad School of Clinical Psychology*. Paper 138.
http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/gscp_fac/138

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School of Clinical Psychology at Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications - Grad School of Clinical Psychology by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.

Studying Wisdom: Toward a Christian Integrative Perspective

Paul McLaughlin and Mark R. McMinn

George Fox University

Wisdom is both a current topic of empirical investigation and a vital part of religious thought. What is the proper relationship between the science of wisdom and religious tradition? We suggest four possible approaches: remove the study of wisdom from its religious moorings, disregard the science of wisdom, look for commonalities in wisdom traditions, and look for particular contributions with religious faiths. Whereas the first two approaches introduce a number of problems for those committed to the integration of faith and psychology, the latter two approaches create a number of intriguing possibilities. Three potential areas of wisdom investigation are offered that fit within the fourth approach to relating wisdom and religion. Finally, a specific example of an empirical study is provided.

The historic connection between religion and wisdom is so close that the term "wisdom traditions" is commonly used to denote religious faiths (Novak, 1994; Smith, 1991); but how can this historic connection be considered in the context of scientific psychology where leaders tend not to prioritize religion (McMinn, Hathaway, Woods, & Snow, 2009; Vogel, McMinn, Peterson, & Gathercoal, 2013)? There are at least four possible approaches to this quandary.

Approach 1: Remove the Study of Wisdom from its Religious Moorings

One approach to the study of wisdom is to remove it from religious discourse and develop a contemporary

understanding of its virtuous nature without considering faith. Though religion and spirituality may be considered as variables when studying wisdom, according to this approach, they are not used to elucidate the construct itself. This is analogous to what has happened with forgiveness research in recent decades (Meek & McMinn, 1997).

Most of the positive psychology literature on wisdom reflects this non-religious approach to studying wisdom. Some might argue that wisdom studied from a purely psychological perspective is something different from religious or philosophical wisdom. Though we acknowledge that various types of wisdom might exist, we approach the topic as a single construct understood from multiple vantage points. Further, we begin with the assumption that religious traditions have something to offer regarding the study of wisdom.

A word search for religion and spirituality in psychology journal articles on the topic of wisdom yields little to no results. When religion or spirituality is mentioned, it tends to be as a passing reference or example but not in any formative way to help articulate the construct of wisdom. Rather, psychological models have tended to start with non-religious conceptual and theoretical perspectives, which have then been used to study psychological processes, such as distinguishing wisdom from intelligence (Sternberg, 1998, 2004a) and certain personality traits (Staudinger, Dörner, & Mickler, 2005), considering the role of emotion in wisdom (Csikszentmihalyi & Nakamura, 2005; Kunzmann & Baltes, 2003; Ruisel, 2005), and exploring the relationship between wisdom and life satisfaction (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Psychological definitions of wisdom have revealed both consistency and disparity. While some emphasize the cognitive dimension (Baltes & Smith, 2008; Baltes & Staudinger, 2000) others focus on the contextualized way wisdom is applied and on the means by which

Author Note: The authors are grateful for a John Templeton grant (#45112) that helped support this work as well as the empirical study that is introduced here.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Paul McLaughlin, Graduate Department of Clinical Psychology, George Fox University, Newberg, OR 97132. Email: pmclaughlin@georgefox.edu

wise individuals are able to balance their own goals and values with those of others and society at large (Sternberg, 1998). Yang (2008) emphasizes the “integration, embodiment and positive effects” (p. 62) of wisdom as it occurs in actuality, and Sternberg (1998, 2004a) looks at how wise people can apply universal values for the common good. There are also definitions centered around personality characteristics of wisdom (Ardelt, 2004), balancing subjective and objective forms of understanding (Labouvie-Vief, 1990), recognizing the uncertainty and relative nature of knowledge (Meacham, 1990), as well as an evolutionary model of wisdom put forward by Czikszentmihalyi & Rathunde (1990) that stresses cognitive and adaptive functions of wisdom. Some scholars are choosing to look at the specific neurobiology of wisdom, and rather than seeing wisdom as a single concept, are focusing on the different features of wisdom, such as prosocial behavior and emotional balance (Meeks & Jeste, 2009). This research may reveal biological markers of certain aspects of wisdom and provide concrete evidence for traits associated with wisdom. Bringing elements of these definitions together reflects a unique confluence of various human strengths and a special ability to think, feel, and act successfully upon difficult and important matters of life. This implies that wise people have the essential skills to perceive life in a particular way and to succeed in the choices they make where most others do not.

The Berlin wisdom paradigm (Baltes & Smith, 2008) reveals the importance of the quality and type of knowledge one possesses about the essential elements of life. Wisdom is defined by Baltes and Smith (2008) as “excellence in mind and virtue with a specific characterization of wisdom as an expert knowledge system dealing with the conduct and understanding of life. We call this domain of knowledge the *fundamental pragmatics of life*” (p. 58). They go on to describe the fundamental pragmatics as pertaining to life planning, life management, and life review. This definition provides a useful way to perceive wisdom and lends itself to a variety of interpretative perspectives.

It appears that assessing whether someone is wise depends on the quality of information the person has; the manner in which this information is used; and the ways this information applies to the most basic and important matters of life in light of past, present, and future considerations. If wisdom is rooted in knowledge, this leads to the question of what this expert knowledge might consist of. Baltes and Smith (2008) go on to provide a detailed analysis of this system of knowledge. First, the knowledge that supports

wisdom includes factual and strategic knowledge to assist in the decision-making process. Put another way, this first dimension of knowledge is about grasping the core aspects of life. Other dimensions of knowledge include “lifespan contextualism, value relativism, and the recognition and management of the fundamental uncertainty of life matters” (p. 58). These areas point to the fluid and relative movement of wisdom in space and time and the influence of postmodern theories of knowledge.

While we applaud the work done in positive psychology on the topic of wisdom, removing wisdom from its religious moorings raises potential concerns. In exploring the connection between wisdom and knowledge, one wonders how a non-religious model of wisdom may express itself differently when factual and strategic knowledge about the fundamental pragmatics of life is informed by religious and spiritual ideas. Baltes and Staudinger (2000) admit, “Equally central to wisdom-related knowledge and judgment are the ‘spiritual’ incomprehensibilities of life, such as the mind-body dynamics or the existence of a divine being” (p. 124). Aside from expanding the knowledge base through the inclusion of religious and spiritual ideas is the question of what happens when the space in which wisdom develops is open both to the transcendent knowledge of divine revelation and the intuitive knowledge taken either from spiritual beliefs and practices, such as prayer and meditation, or from unique conversion experiences that change the way one relates to the world. Relatedly, a non-religious exploration of wisdom necessarily overlooks some obvious questions with strong historical relevance such as why our most esteemed sages and wisdom figures in centuries past are almost all religiously-committed individuals, and what the effects of religious and spiritual life might bring to the cultivation of wisdom.

Religious adherents, both Eastern and Western, identify wisdom as a desired attribute. Whether portrayed as a divine gift bestowed by God as in the Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions, achieved through spiritual practices of meditation and detachment from transitory existence as in Hinduism and Buddhism, or realized through aligning oneself with the natural flow and balance of nature as in the Taoist tradition, the discovery and cultivation of wisdom is paramount in the attainment of salvation or enlightenment. Though it is beyond the scope of this article to give a detailed analysis of the many forms of wisdom within the religious traditions, see Walsh (2011, 2012) for a more detailed analysis on the different aspects of wisdom across cultural traditions and how various contemplative

practices might benefit our psychological understanding of wisdom.

Psychological models of wisdom could benefit from a stronger dialogue with religion and spirituality. The relationship between wisdom, religion, and spirituality appears to be commonly and implicitly acknowledged in associating wisdom with paradigmatic religious figures such as Solomon, Jesus, Mother Teresa, and the Buddha. Beyond acknowledging these associations, little in the psychological literature explores the quality and function of wisdom in these individuals in light of their religious and spiritual experiences.

Approach 2: Disregard the Science of Wisdom

A second approach—disregarding whatever science may have to offer in the understanding of wisdom—is one we will not spend much time discussing here because it is fundamentally opposed to the integrative mission of this journal and our own scholarly commitments. This separatist instinct in Christianity might be motivated by particular Christological perspectives and supported with biblical passages such as:

The message of the cross is foolish to those who are headed for destruction! But we who are being saved know it is the very power of God. As the Scriptures say, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and discard the intelligence of the intelligent." So where does this leave the philosophers, the scholars, and the world's brilliant debaters? God has made the wisdom of this world look foolish. Since God in his wisdom saw to it that the world would never know him through human wisdom, he has used our foolish preaching to save those who believe. It is foolish to the Jews, who ask for signs from heaven. And it is foolish to the Greeks, who seek human wisdom. So when we preach that Christ was crucified, the Jews are offended and the Gentiles say it's all nonsense. (1 Corinthians 1:18–23, New Living Translation)

Though we appreciate the Christological emphasis of this approach, and we agree that Christian spirituality offers unique perspectives on wisdom, to use Christian particularities to dismiss all other understandings of wisdom is to miss the possibility of natural revelation and preclude meaningful dialogue with scholars who do not share a Christian worldview (Carter & Naramore, 1970; Niebuhr, 1951). Moreover, supporting such an approach with this specific Bible verse seems to miss the broader scriptural context where wisdom is present even before Christ's crucifixion. For example, Israel's King Solomon is described as a paragon of wisdom centuries before the life of Christ.

Approach 3: Look for Commonalities in Wisdom Traditions

A third approach is to look for commonalities among religious traditions and then apply those to the contemporary study of wisdom. This requires stepping beyond empirical methods to consider various philosophical and theological resources, and is not limited to Christian perspectives.

From this perspective, religious perspectives on wisdom complement scientific models, which provide precision in defining and quantifying wisdom's characteristic and traits, but may easily narrow the scope while limiting our ability to see the broader spectrum in which wisdom manifests itself. By overemphasizing practical wisdom (*phronesis*) over transcendent or philosophical wisdom (*sophia*), scientific models may have disregarded more universal and cosmic forms of wisdom (Trowbridge, 2011; it should be noted that the Hebrew term for wisdom *chakam* may serve as bridge between these two in that it seems to denote both practical and religious wisdom.) Ignoring these deeper philosophical dimensions keeps wisdom in the domain of pragmatically-oriented decision making.

Philosophers have noted the narrow understanding of wisdom found in scientific research. For example, Schwartz and Sharpe (2006) use Aristotle's notion of wisdom to uphold the essential importance of practical wisdom, perceiving it as the chief virtue that functions as the orchestrator of other virtues and as the executive of moral functioning, while contrasting it against the more narrow and reductionist forms of psychological accounts of wisdom that see it as one skill or strength among many. These philosophical criticisms find correlates in religious writings where wisdom is perceived as an attribute of the divine and prudence, which is the equivalent of practical wisdom, is considered the cardinal virtue directing and guiding the soul. Wisdom as *sophia* in the Judeo-Christian tradition is a gift from God and takes on a personal character that provides a relational dimension leading to piety and righteous living. Therefore, psychological conceptualizations of wisdom may want to consider a more expansive vision that includes these transcendent and sacred qualities.

Religious understandings of wisdom might also move positive psychology forward by providing ideas for how wisdom is developed and may add to the conceptual framework of happiness and well-being. Wisdom is commonly associated with happiness and living the good life, and there is growing empirical research to support this (Grossmann, Varnum, Kitayama, &

Nisbett, 2013; Le, 2011; Yang, 2013). For example, how might a life of prayer, self-sacrifice, non-attachment, and belief in a transcendent God contribute to the development of wisdom in our own time, and how might it have contributed to the level of wisdom in an individual such as Solomon? Is it possible to study Solomon's wisdom outside of his religious practices and beliefs, or are they so essential to his character that his wisdom is bound to them?

Religions postulate some form of knowledge that is primary and paramount before one can live life properly and to the right end. In this sense, religion offers salvation. Here we are interpreting salvation broadly in a pluralist sense, so salvation could be understood as *Moksha* freedom from birth, death, and rebirth in the never-ending wheel of *Samsāra*, or as eternal life in heaven with God. World religions offer knowledge about how to live in accordance with divine commands often prescribed in sacred writings. The Buddha brought awareness of the inevitable pain and suffering of a transitory life and so based the rest of his teachings on the first principle truth that all life is suffering. Likewise, Jesus taught and embodied the beatitudes, which reveal the necessary principles for living in the Kingdom of God. Because religion offers ideological links between metaphysics and wise living, it provides a *telos* (end purpose or goal) for one's life. One cannot be wise without a clear and deep understanding of what is most important.

Key differences arise around the source and purpose of such knowledge, with religious thinkers inevitably grounding the essence of such knowledge in some form of ultimate reality or God and focusing on the transcendent teleological ends of wisdom. Religious individuals are compelled toward these transcendent ends and so are motivated by particular forces towards cultivating wisdom. Yet it is not just the source and function of knowledge that separates secular from religious models of wisdom but the very quality and nature of the knowledge. For example, the saints of the Christian faith would be seen as exemplars in the knowledge of what is most important to living a Christian life. Essentially, they are experts in the knowledge of the revelation of God. This revelation consists of information that is imperceptible to human reason alone and requires an act of faith. For example, "Through faith, man [*sic*] possesses a knowledge of God totally unattainable by natural wisdom. As a valid intellectual grasp of the unique highest cause, faith in some sense might also be considered wisdom, a wisdom of the supernatural order" (Conley, 1963, p. 62). It follows that in this particular model of wisdom, additional infor-

mation is made available through faith that shifts the essential nature and function of wisdom by locating it as a gift from God. Therefore factual and strategic knowledge is informed by additional information not present from a non-religious perspective.

As appealing as this third approach is to us as scholars and people of faith, it may have more value in helping scholars understand the philosophical and theoretical complexity of wisdom than in designing empirical investigations. Although all religions are likely to make important contributions to understanding wisdom, their pluralistic breadth is staggering. How does one study all religions when each of them are believed and practiced in their particularities? Attempting to level different faith experiences into a general term such as religion or spirituality and then apply these general findings to a science of wisdom seems ultimately unsatisfying.

Approach 4: Look for Particular Contributions Within Religious Faiths

Whereas Approach 3 reminds us that religion is important to consider, it does not lend itself to specific research hypotheses or interpretation of findings. Approach 3 may also lead to a syncretistic view of religion and end up obscuring and minimizing important religious differences. Each religious tradition has unique emphases and so can help highlight particular aspects of wisdom research. For example, Buddhism's focus on the mind and mental purity may lend itself to the cognitive dimension of wisdom, as Christianity's focus on love and charity likely correlates with the prosocial and relational aspects of wisdom. Approach 4, then, is to study wisdom empirically within particular faith communities and traditions and then contribute the knowledge attained to the growing scientific base of wisdom. Rather than trying to understand all religion and wisdom in any single study or series of studies, it seems more prudent to understand how wisdom is related to one religion embedded in a well-defined cultural context.

Returning to the topic of salvation and *telos*, how reasonable is it that one's ultimate goals be considered as a single religious topic when these goals may differ so greatly from one faith tradition to another? The Christian's understanding of patiently enduring struggle in the current life because a life in Heaven awaits almost certainly leads to different assumptions, values, and life choices than a Buddhist's understanding of the Four Noble Truths about suffering. Both religions are likely to contribute importantly to the understanding of wisdom, but it is unlikely that either will be fully

represented by a generic study that tries to assess how religiously committed individuals approach wisdom.

In considering a Christian theological view of wisdom, Goldsworthy (2011) prescribes a particular methodology where one begins with Christology (the person and work of Jesus), then moves to the messianic narratives of the Old Testament, then considers the more general wisdom literature of the Old Testament, and finally makes connections between wisdom and how God is revealed in the world. This specific methodology avoids the separatist impulse previously described in Approach 2 while still honoring the particularities of the Christian faith. Though Goldsworthy is not intending to engage science with his article, his proposed methodology is well suited for scientific inquiry. In the final section of this article, we describe a specific study looking at wisdom mentoring in a Christian congregation, which clearly illustrates the methodology described by Goldsworthy. Each religious tradition will have its own methodologies for how to understand and study wisdom, and it seems prudent to honor these methodologies rather than leveling them into a single category of religion.

Taking this approach, scientific books and journals become the repository for whatever information can be obtained on Christianity and wisdom, Islam and wisdom, Judaism and wisdom, Buddhism and wisdom, and so on. No single study is attempting to answer questions about all religion and wisdom, but over time common themes emerging from the scientific literature on wisdom will likely resemble the sorts of philosophical and ideological observations coming from Approach 3. Approach 4 allows for the particular distinctiveness of each faith tradition, which then also allows for contrasts in how different religions approach or understand wisdom and what implications these differences have for defining and assessing wisdom.

Potential Areas of Study

Given our inclination toward Approach 4, we offer several areas of study where a particular religion might be helpful in promoting a scientific understanding of wisdom. These areas of study include religion and uncertainty, faith and humility, and morality. We offer these as illustrative rather than exhaustive, as many more could be listed. In each instance we describe how these areas of study might be applied to a particular religious faith system. Our examples are offered in the context of Christianity, which is our primary area of experience and expertise. We then conclude the article with an example of studying wisdom in a highly specific faith context.

Religion and Uncertainty

The notions of lifespan contextualism, value relativism, and understanding the fundamental uncertainty of things, which Baltes and his colleagues describe, are broad postmodern categories and are perceived as specific characteristics of wise individuals (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000; Kunzmann & Baltes, 2005). These principles address how expert knowledge interacts with the ambiguities of real life. Because religious and spiritual traditions are more than mere systems of knowledge but are meant to actualize the spiritual potency within those systems, they can also provide ways of approaching these more fluid characteristics. Even the most basic aspects of Christian life, such as belief in the active presence of a caring and compassionate God; the spiritual awareness and guidance of the Holy Spirit; and the assistance of communal worship, can provide light in traversing the matrix of wisdom.

Lifespan contextualism, which recognizes the changing course and context of knowledge over time (Baltes & Smith, 2008), can be viewed through the Christian idea of cultivating an awareness and trust in the providence of God. This idea can provide a sense of stability in certain forms of knowledge regardless of the vicissitudes of life. Consequently, the believer learns to evaluate past and present events through the lens of God's omniscience and care. In this case, wisdom exists not just as relative knowledge towards shifting circumstances but as awareness of a deeper contextual presence of God in the changing fluctuating moments of life. This broadened perspective of knowledge increases the ability to accept ambiguity and fosters a sense of detachment and transcendence by opening up space for meaning beyond our own capacities, which further serves to lessen the anxiety that often accompanies the desire to comprehend the incomprehensible mysteries of one's life.

As a brief aside, developing a sense of detachment and transcendence is familiar language in both Eastern and Western religious and spiritual traditions. Detaching from selfish desires or worldliness and moving towards a greater awareness of the transcendent dimension of life brings one closer to various forms of ultimate reality: God, Brahman, Nirvana. Recently, similar psychological concepts have been cited in wisdom research under the terms self-transcendence and psychological distance (Kross & Grossman, 2012; Le, 2011; Le & Levenson, 2005). These terms have come to express the positive way that thinking from an emotionally detached perspective and seeking stronger interpersonal connections can enhance the ability to mature in wisdom (Le, 2011). That these aspects may

cultivate wisdom is growing in empirical support, and the relationship between self-transcendence and religious traditions has been acknowledged; though, no known studies have been undertaken to assess how certain long-held religious or spiritual practices may enhance psychological perspective-taking.

Returning to the topic of wisdom in the realm of uncertainty, the notion that values exist relative to time and space at first seems at odds with certain religious ideas of eternal unchanging truths; however, the Berlin wisdom paradigm is not arguing against universal moral principles but rather is expressing the nuanced approach that wisdom possesses when discerning complex and confusing situations. When approaching problems, wise thinkers are able to incorporate the values of the different people involved.

In Christianity, learning to apply eternal wisdom—often imbedded in biblical texts composed in a pre-modern world—to situations that are sensitive to the competing values of modern life requires developing spiritual awareness and insight capable of handling ambiguity. A host of disciplines exists to this end. For instance, Quakers have a spiritual practice of listening to the Inner Light, which through quiet contemplation is meant to lead one to follow Christ. This seems a useful practice when traversing difficult problems with no foreseeable solution as well as during times of intense suffering. The early Quakers used this practice to overcome despair during their persecution by Cromwell and the English monarchy. The experience of the light within was always meant to be shared with others: “Over their history, Friends have described the dynamics of the spiritual life in a variety of ways. Consistent, however, has been a pattern of interior struggle, resolution, then reaching outward to change the world” (Birkel, 2004, p. 22).

This contemplative practice has influenced the Quaker emphasis on egalitarianism as well, allowing each member or “friend” the opportunity to share the light within with the community. Relating this back to the criteria of value relativism in which wisdom develops, it seems the practice of cultivating the light within gives space for wisdom to manifest while remaining open to the presence and voices of others. This process allows for a Christian understanding of wisdom to be actualized in the present moment and applied to relevant problems of the day.

A similar spirituality based on discernment and practicality, whereby the light of Christ illuminates an active life of contemplation in the world, is found in the mystical tradition of St. Ignatius of Loyola and

the Jesuits. In this instance, wisdom is an active ingredient which creates stability in the chaos of life and functions to balance the various goods of creation: “Wisdom is also the gift that helps discernment, aids people to set order into life by choosing the right goals and the proper means to attain those goals” (Lonsdale, 2007, p. 86). If wisdom is able to find a way through a multitude of relative values, then having a way to perceive what values may be more important than others seems sensible. A hierarchical ordering of values does not lead one to dogmatically apply absolute principles uncritically, but rather provides a compass to navigate the path of wisdom.

Faith and Humility

Looking at uncertainty directly, religion and spirituality contribute the virtues of faith and humility. Faith brings a sense of trust in the presence of crippling doubt and humility gives permission for one to admit limitations. If wisdom is an art form then faith lends a creative spark in dark times and humility grounds one in the reality of the situation.

Faith and humility may be exactly what is needed not just for wisdom to develop but also to overcome the inevitable heartbreak and disillusionment of life. One clinical application of wisdom is its ability to bring people out of the despondency of what has been called PTED (post-traumatic embitterment disorder), which is a special type of adjustment reaction resulting from negative life events (Linden, 2008). One of the ways wisdom is applied to heal the patient suffering from PTED is by helping them come to accept the uncertainty and powerlessness imbedded in their lives. Linden (2008) writes, “Patients have to learn that fighting is good when you can win and get control over events, but that acceptance of the inevitable is also a very important and valuable human capacity” (p. 10). Accepting unfortunate life circumstances seems prudent advice for someone struggling with feelings of lingering regret, fear, and despair. For the person of religious faith this acceptance occurs in communion with a power beyond one’s own and with the support of fellow believers. For Christians, uncertainty is ameliorated by placing trust in God:

And why worry about your clothing? Look at the lilies of the field and how they grow. They don’t work or make their clothing, yet Solomon in all his glory was not dressed as beautifully as they are. And if God cares so wonderfully for wildflowers that are here today and thrown into the fire tomorrow, he will certainly care for you. Why do you have so little faith?

So don't worry about these things, saying, "What will we eat? What will we drink? What will we wear?" These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers, but your heavenly Father already knows all your needs. Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need.

So don't worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring its own worries. Today's trouble is enough for today. (Matthew 6:28–34)

The virtues of faith and humility provide access to ancient traditions of wisdom, with examples from which to draw inspiration and emulate. One thinks of the biblical figure of Job as an example of wisdom working through unfathomable misery and uncertainty yet, through perseverance, coming to an even greater understanding of wisdom than was previously possible:

Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you declare to me. I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eyes see you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes. (Job 42:4–6)

These final words of Job unveil a form of wisdom that stems not so much from living in accordance with righteous principles but from faithful surrender to the darkness of uncertainty that brings about a deeper experience of God's presence and majesty. Job's wisdom comes to embrace human suffering in the broader context of all creation and unites faith, humility, and wisdom:

There, in the midst of measureless natural grandeur, the ambiguity of human life can be confronted with the honesty and humility that it requires.... Creation itself has expanded Job's vision and called him to a deepening of faith that goes beyond understanding. (Bergant, 2000, p. 107)

Finally, Job's unyielding patience and resiliency serve as an example of the emotional strengths commonly associated with wisdom.

Sternberg (2004b), in an article titled "Why Smart People can be so Foolish," addressed how certain errors in judgment can lead seemingly smart individuals to make unintelligent mistakes. The cognitive fallacies of unrealistic optimism, egocentrism, omniscience, omnipotence and invulnerability are described by Sternberg as flaws that keep smart people from growing toward wisdom. From a Christian perspective these fallacies all possess an inflated sense of selfish pride—the counter vice to the virtues of faith and humility. It

seems that "smart people," who have a strong ability to think logically, could still benefit from the traditional religious ideas centered around God as singularly all-knowing and human intelligence as participating in this knowledge in a limited and finite manner. When God is not considered, knowledge is not derived as a gift and reflection of eternal wisdom but is derived from the confines of one's own natural abilities. This serves to further the selfish game of competitive forms of knowledge and encourages the fallacies of foolishness.

If Sternberg's (2004b) assertion is correct that "In wisdom, one certainly may seek good ends for oneself, but one also will seek good outcomes for others" (p. 147), then Christian ideals of self-sacrifice, charity, and universal moral principles may be essential. Intelligence is not enough; it needs religious and spiritual values to open broader categories of knowledge that can lead to wisdom. Faith in a power beyond one's own, humility to ground knowledge in reality, and self-sacrificial love which places others before oneself are just some of the virtues that can keep smart people from becoming foolish and light the path of wisdom.

Morality

The virtues just mentioned may mediate the connection between wisdom and morality common to traditional religious beliefs. Some psychologists also recognize the connection of moral development to that of wisdom (Levenson, 2009). Jordan (2005) writes, "Wisdom-related knowledge and morality share many attributes, making it conceivable that the possession of one may lead to development of the other" (p. 176). While few would argue that one might be wise without having a strong sense of the ethical and moral dimensions of life, morality derived from traditional religion struggles to find a voice in a growing postmodern context. Yet the nature of wisdom allows for a dynamic interplay between subjective and objective forms of morality.

What is the relationship of morality to wisdom and how can religion and spirituality contribute? Whether scholar, sage, or saint, a sign of wisdom is the ability to flourish in difficult times of doubt and despair. Of course, flourishing can take on a very different meaning when morality is involved, and wise decisions are seen as benefiting not only the individual but the common good as well—for this is how wisdom differs from tactical and practical knowledge (Sternberg, 1998, 2004a). Furthermore, flourishing from a religious standpoint can even involve a complete negation of all self-interest and the loss of one's life. How do morality and wisdom interact when the martyr makes a choice to

surrender his/her life? For example, did St. Maximilian Kolbe apply wisdom in his decision to trade his life for that of another, a choice that brought no recognizable benefit to his own life from a purely secular perspective? Perhaps one could argue that Kolbe was able to make a wise decision based on the values most important to his religious and spiritual life, which included self-denial, belief in eternal life, and the idea that an act of sacrificial love was worth more than preserving one's own existence. This may be an extreme example, but it stresses the point that the usual criteria of wisdom development can be approached in such a way that they are transcended and a different form of wisdom comes though—one not based on cognitive and affective skills, but on sacrificial love that seeks a wisdom beyond this world.

Wisdom Among Friends: A Research Example

With the help of a John Templeton Foundation grant, I (McLaughlin) am studying wisdom in a particular congregation for my dissertation research. Though the study is ongoing and no data are yet available to report, it serves as an illustration of Approach 4 where wisdom and faith is studied in the context of a particular faith community.

The study involves developing and testing the effects of a wisdom mentoring program in a local Evangelical Friends (Quaker) church. Importantly, the wisdom intervention was being developed collaboratively with leaders from the congregation, the dissertation student (McLaughlin), and the dissertation supervisor (McMinn). Designing the intervention together assured that the wisdom intervention had contextual relevance and increased both the congregation's commitment to the project and the possibility that the some ongoing ministry may continue after the study is completed (McMinn, Aikins, & Lish, 2003).

Because the psychology literature suggests that the rate of wisdom acquisition is highest between the ages of 15 and 25 (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Staudinger, 2008), this study is designed to promote wisdom among young adults between the ages of 18 and 25. This is being done in a small group format of approximately seven participants and one or two mentors. Five cohorts are meeting over the course of an academic semester. This is a quasi-experimental design where an age-matched control group completes the same questionnaires as those in the wisdom cohorts, but without the experimental intervention.

Because of the particular religious values of the faith community involved in the study, we began with the assumptions that Christian wisdom is formed relation-

ally in the context of community, and that it is best understood as a 3-step process of discernment:

1. Experiencing Christ through a variety of spiritual practices;
2. Considering one's own experience in the context of trusting relationships with others who share common core values;
3. Understanding, adapting, and appropriating the values and practices that have become a vital part of this particular Christian community.

While this is not a lockstep process, the order is important. If a wisdom mentor rushes too soon to the final step of this process it may foreclose the possibility of personal growth and problem solving. Simply announcing, "this is the way we have always done it" may or may not result in compliance, but it is unlikely to promote wisdom. In contrast, by inviting a young adult into a relational process then granting enough freedom and guidance to learn how to discern and grow in virtue, the mentor invites the development of wisdom.

Wisdom cohorts meet bi-weekly, with exercises assigned between meetings. After posing a particular contemporary problem where wisdom is sorely needed, each group meeting begins with spiritual exercises, including considering an event or teaching from the life of Jesus, an Old Testament passage from the wisdom literature, and a time of silent waiting with the goal of experiencing the light of Christ in the present moment.

This study illustrates Approach 4 in several ways. First, religion is not limited to an independent variable. That is, we are not merely importing a positive psychology wisdom intervention into a faith community to see if it is effective. Rather, the intervention itself is being shaped and developed in the collaborative context of a faith community. What we scientists are calling an intervention is being called a ministry by the church staff because they understand it as a natural extension of the values and commitments they care about as Christian leaders.

Second, no attempt is being made to study all religion in relation to wisdom development. Rather, we are considering one particular faith tradition and have designed the intervention collaboratively with leaders in that particular tradition. Just as Goldsworthy (2011) suggests that a Christian approach to wisdom must begin with Christology, so this particular Christian denomination affirms the importance of beginning each wisdom meeting and exercise by be-

ing aware of the presence of Christ in each moment. This Christological emphasis then spreads outward to consider the Old Testament wisdom literature and the real-life demands of the current situation. This methodology is uniquely Christian, and so would likely have different results with individuals in a different religious faith community.

Third, note that the results of this study are not going to shake the psychology of religion world because they cannot be generalized beyond one particular faith tradition. Rather, this is a slow, patient approach of studying religion in all its particularity, assuming that the gradual accumulation of studies within various faith traditions might ultimately lead to a broad and general understanding of religion and wisdom.

Conclusion

Although wisdom has traditionally been the domain of religion and spirituality, these areas remain quite unconsidered by psychologists studying wisdom. This approach of largely ignoring religion and spirituality in wisdom research, which we have called Approach 1, is ultimately unsatisfying in the psychology of religion, as is the approach of insisting that only Christians are capable of understanding wisdom (we have called this Approach 2). Another alternative is considering the wisdom traditions and all that religious faith has to offer the empirical study of wisdom (Approach 3). We have argued that this seems natural.

One cannot design empirical studies that consider all of religion. Unless one settles for broad correlational designs, the breadth of religious expression and experience is simply too large to study empirically in relation to wisdom. Thus, we have suggested and illustrated a fourth approach to the empirical study of wisdom. In this approach a particular faith community collaborates with psychological scientists to design and assess a wisdom intervention. This allows wisdom to be studied in an ecologically valid context and ultimately contributes to a greater understanding of how various religions understand and promote wisdom.

References

Ardelt, M. (2004). Wisdom as expert knowledge system: A critical review of a contemporary operationalization of an ancient concept. *Human Development*, 47, 257–285.

Baltes, P. B., & Smith, J. (2008). The fascination of wisdom: Its nature, ontogeny, and function. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 3, 56–64.

Baltes, P. B., & Staudinger, U. M. (2000). Wisdom: A metaheuristic to orchestrate mind and virtue towards excellence. *American Psychologist*, 55, 122–136.

Bergant, D. (2000). Israel's wisdom literature and the intrinsic integrity of creation. In W. S. Brown (Ed.), *Understanding wisdom: Sources, science & society* (pp. 103–119). Philadelphia, PA: Templeton Foundation Press.

Birkel, M. L. (2004). *Silence and witness: The Quaker tradition*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

Carter, J., & Narramore, B. (1970). *The integration of psychology and theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Conley, K. (1963). *A theology of wisdom: A study in St. Thomas*. Dubuque, IA: The Priory Press.

Csikszentmihalyi, M., & Nakamura, J. (2005). The role of emotions in the development of wisdom. In R. J. Sternberg & J. Jordan (Eds.), *A handbook of wisdom: Psychological perspectives* (pp. 220–242). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Csikszentmihalyi, M., & Rathunde, K. (1990). The psychology of wisdom: An evolutionary interpretation. In R. J. Sternberg (Ed.), *Wisdom: Its nature, origins, and development* (pp. 25–51). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Goldsworthy, G. (2011). Wisdom and its literature in biblical-theological context. *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, 15, 4255.

Grossmann, I., Na, J., Varnum, M. W., Kitayama, S., & Nisbett, R. E. (2013). A route to well-being: Intelligence versus wise reasoning. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 142, 944–953.

Jordan, J. (2005). The quest for wisdom in adulthood. In R. J. Sternberg & J. Jordan (Eds.), *A handbook of wisdom: Psychological perspectives* (pp. 160–188). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Kross, E., & Grossmann, I. (2012). Boosting wisdom: Distance from the self enhances wise reasoning, attitudes, and behavior. *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 141, 43–48.

Kunzmann, U., & Baltes, P. B. (2003). Wisdom-related knowledge: Affective, motivational, and interpersonal correlates. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 29, 1104–1119.

Kunzmann, U., & Baltes, P. B. (2005). The psychology of wisdom: Theoretical and empirical challenges. In R. J. Sternberg & J. Jordan (Eds.), *A handbook of wisdom: Psychological perspectives* (pp. 160–188). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Labouvie-Vief, G. (1990). Wisdom as integrated thought: Historical and developmental perspectives. In R. J. Sternberg (Ed.), *Wisdom: Its nature, origins, and development*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Le, T. N. (2011). Life satisfaction, openness value, self-transcendence, and wisdom. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 12, 171–182.

Le, T. N., & Levenson, M. R. (2005). Wisdom as self-transcendence: What's love (& individualism) got to do with it? *Journal of Research in Personality*, 39, 443–457.

Levenson, M. R. (2009). Gender and wisdom: The roles of compassion and moral development. *Research in Human Development*, 6, 45–59.

Linden, M. (2008). Posttraumatic embitterment disorder and wisdom therapy. *Journal of Cognitive Psychotherapy*, 22, 4–14.

- Lonsdale, D. (2007). *Eyes to see, ears to hear: An introduction to Ignatian spirituality*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- McMinn, M. R., Aikins, D. C., & Lish, R. A. (2003). Basic and advanced competence in collaborating with clergy. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 34, 197–202.
- McMinn, M. R., Hathaway, W. L., Woods, S. W., & Snow, K. N. (2009). What American Psychological Association leaders have to say about Psychology of Religion and Spirituality. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 1, 3–13.
- Meacham, J. A. (1990). The loss of wisdom. In R. J. Sternberg (Ed.), *Wisdom: Its nature, origins, and development*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Meek, K. R., & McMinn, M. R. (1997). Forgiveness: More than a therapeutic technique. *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, 16, 51–61.
- Meeks, T. W., & Jeste, D. V. (2009). Neurobiology of wisdom: A literature overview. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 66(4), 355–365.
- Niebuhr, H. R. (1951). *Christ and culture*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.
- Novak, P. (1994). *The world's wisdom: Sacred texts of the world's religions*. Edison, NJ: Castle Books.
- Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2004). *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook of classification*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Ruisel, I. (2005). Wisdom's role in interactions of affects and cognition. *Studia Psychologica*, 47, 277–289.
- Schwartz, B., & Sharpe, K. E. (2006). Practical wisdom: Aristotle meets positive psychology. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 7, 377–395.
- Smith, H. (1991). *The world's religions: Our great wisdom traditions*. San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco.
- Staudinger, U. M. (2008). A psychology of wisdom: History and recent developments. *Research in Human Development*, 5, 107–120.
- Staudinger, U. M., Dörner, J., & Mickler, C. (2005). Wisdom and personality. In R. J. Sternberg & J. Jordan (Eds.), *A handbook of wisdom: Psychological perspectives* (pp. 191–219). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Sternberg, R. J. (1998). A balance theory of wisdom. *Review of General Psychology*, 2, 347–365.
- Sternberg, R. J. (2004a). What is wisdom and how can we develop it? *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 591, 64–74.
- Sternberg, R. J. (2004b). Why smart people can be so foolish. *European Psychologist*, 9, 145–150.
- Trowbridge, R. (2011). Waiting for sophia: 30 years of conceptualizing wisdom in empirical psychology. *Research in Human Development*, 8, 149–164.
- Vogel, M. J., McMinn, M. R., Peterson, M. A., & Gathercoal, K. A. (2013). Examining religion and spirituality as diversity training: A multidimensional study of doctoral training in the American Psychological Association. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 44, 158–167.
- Walsh, R. (2011). The varieties of wisdom: Contemplative, cross-cultural, and integral contributions. *Research in Human Development*, 8, 109–127.
- Walsh, R. (2012). Wisdom: An integral view. *Journal of Integral Theory and Practice*, 7, 1–21.
- Yang, S. Y. (2008). A process view of wisdom. *Journal of Adult Development*, 15, 62–75.
- Yang, S. Y. (2013). Wisdom and good lives: A process perspective. *New Ideas in Psychology*, 31, 194–201.

Author Information

McLAUGHLIN, PAUL. MA. *Address*: Graduate Department of Clinical Psychology, George Fox University, 414 N. Meridian Street, Newberg, OR 97132. *Title*: Doctoral Candidate, Clinical Psychology. *Degrees*: BA (Religious Studies) University of California Santa Barbara; MA (Theology/Christian Ministry) Franciscan University; MA (Clinical Psychology) George Fox University.

McMINN, MARK R. PhD. *Address*: Graduate Department of Clinical Psychology, George Fox University, 414 N. Meridian Street, Newberg, OR 97132. *Title*: Professor of Psychology; Director of Integration, Graduate Department of Clinical Psychology. *Degrees*: BS (Psychology) Lewis and Clark College; PhD (Clinical Psychology) Vanderbilt University. *Specialization*: Integration of psychology and religion, positive psychology.