



# The Person in Psychology and Christianity

*A Faith-Based Critique of Five Theories of Social Development*

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InterVarsity Press  
ivpress.com

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Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL. [www.ivpress.com](http://www.ivpress.com).

## CHAPTER ONE

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# Orientation

**THIS BOOK EXAMINES THE INTERSECTION** of Christian theology and theories of social development proposed by Erik Erikson, John Bowlby, B. F. Skinner, Albert Bandura, and Evolutionary Psychology. These theories were selected because nine standard developmental textbooks identified them as foundational to the study of social development. In their introductory chapters, all nine summarize psychoanalytic theory (Freud and Erikson). Eight introduce behavioral theory (Skinner) and social cognitive theory (Bandura). One textbook refers to psychoanalytic, behavioral, and social cognitive as the “grand theories” of developmental psychology (Berger, 2017, p. 37).

Attachment theory (Bowlby and Ainsworth) and an evolutionary perspective are also ubiquitous in the textbooks surveyed. Attachment theory is often presented as an ethological theory, but also as a standalone theory, an extension of Freudian theory, and a precursor to evolutionary developmental psychology (EDP). Evolutionary presentations vary a good deal. Four textbooks explicitly distinguish EDP from evolutionary psychology (EP), but five do not. This distinction is important because EP and EDP disagree on some important aspects of personhood (see chap. 9 of this book). For psychologists who study social development, the three grand theories and ethology/evolution are the standard *psychological* “lenses for looking at the lifespan” (Belsky, 2019, p. 12).

Christian developmentalists also look through *theological* lenses, seeking to synthesize the knowledge that God has revealed through the

Bible (often called special revelation) with the knowledge that God has revealed in the patterns of creation (often called general revelation; see Rom 1:20). To do this in a God-honoring way, we must first identify the seeming compatibilities between our faith and our academic discipline. We can then build on these compatibilities and describe development more comprehensively than those looking through only the separate lenses of theology or psychology.

We must also identify seeming incompatibilities. Some incompatibilities require us to reject a psychological claim outright. Other times, a biblical claim that initially seems incompatible with contemporary science may help us distinguish the theological truth God is communicating from the context in which it was first communicated. For example, the author of the book of Joshua claims that the sun stood still, permitting the Israelites to win an important battle (Josh 10). Although Christians in the prescientific world interpreted this claim to mean that the sun revolved around the earth, most contemporary Christians believe that the earth revolves around the sun. Looking through the lenses of both theology and astronomy, we can appreciate both the miracle being reported and the need for the author to report the miracle in a way that made sense to a prescientific audience who assumed a geocentric universe. In a similar way, looking through the lenses of both theology and psychology permits us to refine our descriptions of personhood.

The capacity to articulate compatibilities and incompatibilities across theology and psychology fosters trust in students and clients seeking to construct a psychologically informed, faith-compatible view of self and others. As a professor at a Christian university, I have learned that my (mostly Christian) students enter the classroom with diverse attitudes toward psychology. Some are wary, having been warned not to let psychology supplant their faith. Others are eager to move beyond the compartmentalization of knowledge they practiced in order to retain their faith and succeed in public school science classes. Still others are in the process of abandoning their faith because no one has helped them synthesize what they view as competing worldviews.

During my first decade of teaching, I was ill-prepared to mentor all three groups. Students asked questions about the assumptions and applications of developmental theory that I couldn't answer. Simultaneously, during my first decade of parenting, I asked myself a lot of questions that I couldn't answer. I'd look at a child who had just disobeyed and think, *Should I view that as rebellion or an inherently good but misdirected drive for mastery? Should I be more concerned with punishment or promoting attachment?* As I attempted to answer these questions, I discovered that I needed to expand my psychological knowledge by delving into primary sources and expand my theological knowledge beyond the specific Christian traditions with which I was most familiar.

The result is a broadly ecumenical exploration of the five developmental theories that have been most thought-provoking for me as a professor and a parent. In response to an anonymous reviewer who noted my failure to locate this exploration within a specific confessional orientation, I am guilty as charged. I was born into dispensationalism, educated in a Christian Reformed day school, and married by a nondenominational charismatic minister. In a time of difficulty, I benefited from the counsel of an Episcopal priest. I have always revered Scripture as authoritative while weighing different interpretations of it. At present I consider myself Reformed and still reforming. I am particularly concerned with reforming the very negative view of humankind held by some within the family of Reformed Christianity.

## **FOUR THEMES**

As a developmental psychologist with no formal theological training, I am most qualified to speak on the temporal characteristics of personhood. By *temporal* I mean physical and psychological features overtly manifest in our relationships with other humans and the rest of creation—as opposed to characteristics that are first and foremost spiritual (e.g., our relationship with God, redemption, life eternal). In class discussions, these temporal characteristics tend to converge around four themes that I have used to organize this book. The four themes are as follows:

1. Essence: What characteristics are core or indispensable to personhood? How influential is our morphology (i.e., physical structure)? What indispensable qualities *emerge* from our morphology?
2. Purpose: What are humans supposed to do? What are our primary motivations? Is there a universal, intrinsically motivated, telos-like aim to human development? Is purpose specific to the individual?
3. Moral-ethical tendencies: Are humans more inclined toward good or bad? Are moral-ethical tendencies universal or particular? Are they inherent or learned?
4. Agency/accountability: Is human behavior volitional or determined? To what degree are humans accountable for self and responsible for others?

## TWO PARTS

This book is divided into two parts. Part one examines the person through the lens of theology, introducing some of the diverse Christian perspectives on essence and purpose (chap. 2), moral-ethical tendencies (chap. 3), and agency/accountability (chap. 4). My goal for these chapters is *not* to provide a comprehensive treatment of these themes but simply to set up part two by identifying some areas of convergence between Christian theology and developmental theories. To facilitate critique of the five theories, I use part one to construct brief working models for each of the four themes.

Part two looks through the lenses of the five developmental theories. Chapters five through eight each consist of three sections: a biography of the theorist, an overview of the theorist's primary contributions to our understanding of social development, and a delving into the aspects of their theory most relevant to the four organizing themes of the book. The biographies are motivated by a growing awareness that the writings of social and personality theorists are best understood in the context of their own socialization (Demorest, 2005; Martin, 2017). The biographies are written to be appropriate for general academic use (e.g., as part of a course packet at a public university). Chapter nine focuses on a paradigm rather than a single theorist but is organized to approximate the structure of

chapters five through eight. My goal for chapters five through nine is for Christians to learn from these developmental theories, assimilating wisdom that is compatible with Christian theology and rejecting claims that explicitly contradict it.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF GENESIS 1-3

In both parts I make frequent appeals to the biblical creation narratives in Genesis 1-3 (also called origins narratives). Per Francis Schaeffer (2010, p. 9), “In some ways these chapters are the most important ones in the Bible, for they put man in his cosmic setting and show him his particular uniqueness. They explain man’s wonder and yet his flaw.” These creation narratives are particularly important to a faith-based *psychological* analysis of personhood. While many sections of Scripture describe human characteristics, the first chapters of Genesis establish characteristics that all humans share. Extracting universal characteristics is necessary for the evaluation of mainstream psychological theories, which make no distinction between theological categories of people (e.g., believers versus unbelievers, righteous versus wicked).

Genesis 1:1-2:3 (henceforth called the *Genesis 1* account or the *first* creation story) establishes that humans were created in the image of God. Many biblical scholars think that Genesis 1 was written in the sixth century BCE during one of Israel’s periods of exile by an author who was familiar with many existing Hebrew writings, including Genesis 2-3, psalms that allude to creation (e.g., Ps 74; 90), and texts that wrestle with God’s power over evil during Israel’s extended periods of foreign captivity (e.g., Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah 40-55, and likely the book of Job).

With the Genesis 1 creation story, the author “took on” the cosmology of the surrounding cultures, which viewed both the material world and humans as a product of evil chaos in the heavenly realm. The author countered this pessimistic worldview by asserting God’s preeminence over evil and chaos, and humans’ special status as God’s good representatives on earth. The author’s purpose was to give hope to an oppressed people.

Genesis 2:4-3:24 (henceforth called the *Genesis 2-3* account) includes the *second* creation story and the events traditionally referred to as “the

fall.” This origin story establishes that humans sinned. In doing so, we damaged our relationships with God, fellow humans, and the rest of creation. Our good creational structure was not obliterated; we are still able to participate actively in the restoration of our damaged relationships, but we do this in a sin-warped way. Many scholars believe that the transcription of the second creation story predates the first, some dating Genesis 2–3 as early as the tenth century BCE. In contrast to the message of empowerment intended by the author of Genesis 1, the author of Genesis 2–3 sought to explain the pervasive suffering and evil in the world.

So if Genesis 1 was written *after* Genesis 2–3, why does it appear first in the biblical canon? Some scholars believe that the order communicates the importance of Genesis 1. Smith (2010, p. 136) writes, “For although Genesis 1 came at a later point in the order of historical composition (compared with many other creation accounts), it was given pride of first place in the Pentateuch, in what its compilers regarded as more properly reflecting the order of reality. This placement—and all that represented hermeneutically—thus serves as one of the Bible’s greatest acts of commentary.”

Genesis 1 also receives pride of place in this faith-based exploration of social development. The point of developmental psychology in general (not just a faith-based exploration) is to identify the potential built into the human person and then describe how development is *supposed* to unfold. Without a particular emphasis on the built-in or supposed-to, we have no basis for discerning how and why development goes right or wrong, or the degree to which temporal restoration is possible.



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