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The Limitations of Science — A Timely Reminder

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Richard P. Sloan, professor of behavioral medicine at Columbia University, argues that scientific studies of religious faith are useless, and a display of scientific reductionism at work. Writing at The Chronicle of Higher Education, Sloan argues, “Religion and science are independent approaches to knowledge, and neither can be reduced to the other.”

Consider this section of his argument:

It undoubtedly is true that we can submit religious ritual and experiences to scientific study to determine if they are associated with beneficial health outcomes. But to do so runs the risk of trivializing the religious experience, making it no different from other medical recommendations made by physicians. If attending religious services becomes no different than consuming a low-fat diet or getting regular exercise, a great deal will have been lost. Bringing religion into the world of the scientist must by definition reduce religion to measurable indices that strip it of the sense of transcendence that distinguishes it from other aspects of our lives. Doing this dumbs religion down, making it so bland and universally acceptable that it has lost all of its meaning.

Sloan’s article is timely for more than one reason. His main point is essentially sound. Scientists should not assume that they can study religious experience by reducing it to something science can comprehend or analyze. Furthermore, he argues that scientists who insist on this approach refuse to press their approach to its ultimate conclusion.

As examples of the reductionistic approach he rejects, Sloan points to studies claiming to prove or disprove the healing effects of prayer or church attendance. Bad science, he says.

Bad theology, I say. I am shocked when I see evangelicals citing so-called scientific studies that supposedly prove that those who pray heal better or faster, or that attendance at “religious services” is tied to physical health. Too many preachers hold these “studies” before their people (often based in nothing more than a short news article), presumably as a way of encouraging prayer and church attendance.

This is fraught with danger. First, we should not encourage prayer and faithful church participation on the basis of promised health benefits. Following Jesus can get you killed. We are not promised health, but we are promised eternal life. Science can’t touch that.

Second, almost all of these studies include participants of various religious commitments, not just Christians. We must be very careful at this point. We do not believe that *prayer* heals, but that God heals. And the God who heals is the God of the Bible, the Trinitarian God — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We do not pray to a generic deity, and we do not recognize the validity of prayers to false gods. Many of these studies classify inwardly-directed meditation as a form of prayer. Such meditation may have a therapeutic effect, but talking to yourself is not prayer.

Professor Sloan’s article presents a good argument. Christians need to take his argument several steps beyond the question of scientific validity.

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