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Religious Problem-Solving as Pragmatic Theology: Reflecting on

the Religious Problem-Solving Scale

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Abstract

Religious problem-solving is part of the religious coping literature in psychology, concerned with how religious people approach life's difficulties with reference to God. Three separate problem-solving styles are described and measured by the Religious Problem-Solving Scale: Deferring, Self-Directing, and Collaborative (Pargament et al., 1988). Each style has a distinct approach to issues of responsibility, power, and meaning-making within religious coping. Each style then has embedded within it a pragmatic theology of divine and human efficacy. That all three styles are found in a variety of Christian samples can be attributed to the ambiguity of the theology of God's action in the world, combined with the human need to have a meaningful context in which to make choices and solve problems.

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Psychologically speaking, a person's religious problem-solving style refers to "…approaches to

responsibility and control in coping," (Pargament, 1997, p. 180). Rodgerson & Piedmont (1988,

p. 518) describe religious coping, saying: "at a trait level…one's relationship with God may

impact the kinds of appraisals and coping techniques one might employ in managing stressful

situations."   From a theological perspective, a person's religious problem-solving style

represents his or her pragmatic resolution of the theological conundrum of God's power and

human agency, both in terms of how a problem is approached and how meaning is made of it

afterwards.

Pargament and his colleagues (1988) developed the Religious Problem-Solving Scale

(RPSS) and found three distinct problem-solving styles. The first, the *Deferring* style, places the

responsibility for coping with God. Typical items endorsed by those of the Deferring style

include: "Rather than trying to come up with the right solution to a problem myself, I let God

decide how to deal with it," and "I don't spend much time thinking about troubles I've had; God

makes sense of them for me." The second style, *Self-Directing*, places the responsibility for

coping with the person. Typical items endorsed by those of the Self-Directing style include:

"When deciding on a solution, I make a choice independent of God's input," and "After I've

gone through a rough time, I try to make sense of it without relying on God." The third style,

Collaborative, regards coping responsibility as shared between God and the person. Typical

items endorsed by those of the Collaborative style include: "When it comes to deciding how to

solve a problem, God and I work together as partners," and "After solving a problem, I work with God to make sense of it," (Pargament et al., 1988, pp. 96-97).

To many, the Deferring and Collaborative styles will sound like familiar adaptations of Christian theology. Certainly popular themes for sermons include "God is in control" and "seek to obey God and God will provide" (Deferring), as well as the more Collaborative themes: "God is always with you as you go through life" and "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (referencing Philippians 4:13). The Self-Directing style however, with its refutation of God as a source of solutions to problems, may at first sound like an atheistic style. This would be a misunderstanding however because all three styles emerged from the actively Christian samples used to develop the scale. The original Religious Problem-Solving Scale was developed in a sample of Midwestern Presbyterians and Missouri Synod Lutherans who attended services regularly (Pargament, 1988). In subsequent studies, all three styles have been found in samples of pastors (Rodgerson & Piedmont, 1988), Christian college students (Kaiser, 1991), Presbyterian and Assembly of God church members (Hathaway & Pargament, 1990), and South African Christians (Paltzer, 2002).

One may then ask, what are the ramifications of having substantial minorities of Christian samples, ranging from South African undergraduates to American pastors, consistently report using a Self-Directing style? This is the style that specifically denies that God is involved in problem solving or even a source of meaning making; only the human being is considered to be active in solving problems and making meaning. There are multiple possible interpretations of Self-Directed coping theology, ranging from a Deistic God who creates problem-solvers and then lets them go at it unaided, to a profound sense of God's work through Christ and creation being supremely exemplified by the choices of human beings. Pargament cites a study member

as saying "God put me here on this earth and gave me the skills and strengths to solve my problems myself," (1988, p. 91).

Unlike what is implied in Pargament (1988), I do not think we can readily conclude that these are the theologies operating behind all self-directed coping. Self-directed coping is perhaps in some cases associated with times of spiritual struggle and seeking, when the person cannot trust that God's outcomes will be any good or when they doubt that God really exists or does anything at all. Sincere and mature Christians can and often do go through this kind of struggle. Consistent with this interpretation, the Self-Directing style is associated with more anxiety, and with concepts of God that include false, deistic, and worthless, while being negatively associated with concepts of God as benevolent, wrathful, guiding, stable, powerful, and caring. For the Deferring and Collaborative styles, the results are exactly the opposite: less anxiety than for Self-Directing, and concepts of God as benevolent, wrathful, and powerful (Schaefer & Gorsuch, 1991).

Rather than concluding that the Self-Directing style is "bad," or "atheistic" however, it is worth considering that it may constitute a stage, perhaps even a necessary stage, towards more mature faith. No studies have been done that seek to put the problem-solving styles within a faith development paradigm, nor are there correlational studies that suggest that maturity in faith is associated with any religious problem-solving style. There is, I believe, some maturity judgment implicit within Pargament's theoretical concept of religious problem-solving, but in his scheme Deferring represents immature religion and Collaborative represents more mature religion. This is very likely too simple, and the studies do not bear him out strongly on this point. Outcomes, with the exception of "personal competence" (which in some ways begs the question since it is self-oriented), tend to be highly similar for Deferring and Collaborative

copers. In studies where the empirical prediction value is considered most important, Deferring and Collaborative are often lumped together (e.g. Nairn & Merluzzi, 2003). The difference does not seem to be so much whether someone has a style of deferring to God or collaborating with God, but rather whether God is seen as being involved & powerful, or not, within the coping and meaning-making process (Webb & Whitmer, 2001).

The discipline of psychology focuses on religious problem-solving style as a characteristic approach to responsibility and control in the coping process, which can then be found to correlate with non-religious psychological variables, mediate the effects of other variables on outcomes, and predict outcomes. The kind of statements found in the Religious Problem Solving Scale, however, have obvious theological content which psychology does not examine directly. These items implicitly tap into a person's understanding of divine vs. human responsibility and control, and therefore divine vs. human power to effect solutions.

The question of divine and human power and efficacy is fundamentally theological. Our understanding of God's nature is influenced by our understanding of God's action; our understanding of our nature is influenced by our understanding of our actions in the context of God's. Is God really active in the world of human affairs? In what ways? Do human beings have genuine choices? In what ways are human beings called to act? These are questions that Christians must answer for themselves pragmatically, even if the formal theological question of human agency and divine power remains open to speculation. When a problem arises, it is insufficient to say that the question of God's power and human agency is a great mystery; the human must act, must decide, must place a wager amidst uncertainty.

God may be theoretically all-powerful to most Christians, but how does the all-powerful God actually affect human life? Arminians and Calvinists traditionally agree that God is all-

powerful, but disagree as to what this means for human life and the reality of human choice. On the Calvinist side, taken in its strongest form, all of human life and choice is predestined and therefore predetermined. On the Arminian side, the all-powerful God holds back and human beings have some genuine choices to make about their lives. Both of these classic theological stances pose pragmatic difficulties for people attempting to live lives consistent with their theology.

Two competing sources within the Christian tradition illustrate the tension between divine power and human efficacy. The first is frequently-cited but of uncertain origin (but it is *not* Luther, Wesley, or Augustine): "pray as though everything depended upon God; act as though everything depended upon you." In contrast, Ignatius of Loyola advised: "confide in God as if the success of those undertakings depended completely upon you and not at all upon God; nonetheless give your whole self to the undertakings as if you yourself would be doing nothing in them but God alone would be doing everything" (Padberg, 1978). In other words, Ignatius advises us to pray as though everything depended upon us and act as though everything depended upon God.

A person's religious problem-solving style constitutes their personal pragmatic integration of these issues of divine and human efficacy and roles in solving problems, amidst theological uncertainty. A religious problem-solving style is a person's practical theological approach to dealing with life's difficulties and challenges. Embedded within the psychology of religious problem-solving then is a theology of divine efficacy—what does the relationship with God actually accomplish, with respect to solving problems? In what ways is it active and helpful? In what ways is it better to think of another source of agency? Perhaps the sole activity is God's and humans merely wait on God's action, as a Deferring style might say. Perhaps the

sole activity is human, and the relationship with God is the context in which the activity occurs, as a Self-Directing style might say. Or perhaps the relationship is the activity through which God and human beings work together, consistent with the Collaborative style. That all three styles are found in a variety of Christian samples can be attributed to the ambiguity of the theology of God's action in the world, combined with the human need to have a meaningful context in which to make choices and solve problems.

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