

Chapter 2

A Comparison Between Theological Christian Approaches to Wisdom and Peterson and Seligman's Classification of Character Strengths and Virtues

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Introduction

We live in an increasingly interdisciplinary world. We are reminded that children require more flexible thinking and the ability to make connections across complex ideas (Gardner 2006). However, school's curriculum and architecture often promote siloed thinking and rigidity even though we invite our students to 'imagine' interdisciplinary landscapes. Over the past five years there has been a renaissance of articles reflecting on the intersection between psychology and theology inspired by the positive psychology movement (Charry 2011; Entwistle and Moroney 2011).

Charles Hackney (2010) identifies Nancey Murphy's integration of psychology and theology, using a neo-Aristotelian model of human flourishing, as one possible pathway to enable people to find connection between the seemingly contradictory empirical world of psychology and the metaphysical world of theology. What appears to be emerging is a Christian approach to psychology that can broaden and build an individual's engagement with the scriptures and develop reflective practices that could be seen to enrich the inner world of individuals rather than to diminish the science of psychology or the tradition of theology.

This chapter outlines the possible alignment between Christian and Hebrew wisdom theology together with positive psychology. The aim of this chapter is to put forward a method of teaching wisdom literature through a positive education lens. To guide our discussion we ask two questions in the context of school education:

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What, if anything, do theology and the positive psychology have to say to each other? What implication does this have when educating children for “well-being” in a faith-based school?

Well-Being at Schools

The remit of schools in the 21st century has expanded beyond the transmission of academic and vocational skills (Fielding 2001). Today’s schools aim to develop wisdom, moral virtue and lifelong learning with the goal of improving the students’ well-being and the quality of life of society more generally (Clonan et al. 2004). Student well-being has become a focus of international education policy as represented in the inter-agency initiative between WHO, UNICEF, UNESCO, Education International, Education Development Centre, Partnership for Child Development, and the World Bank “Focusing Resources for Effective School Health” (FRESH).

With this rise of emphasis on well-being in schools over the past decade there has been a growing dialogue between theology and psychology, most recently in the field of theology and positive psychology. Nevertheless, as Charry (2010), Brown and Strawn (2012) argue for many teachers, well-being in schools remains uncharted territory. In faith-based schools, well-being has interchangeably been the realm of the school Chaplain and school counsellors. What has emerged in schools is an unconscious divide between the world of the Chaplain and that of the psychologist—the sacred and the secular. In this chapter we seek to explore ways in which schools chaplains, school psychologists and religious instruction teachers can be united in their roles to enhance well-being in school students (Hackney 2010). More specifically, we aim to look for ways in which to integrate the Wisdom literature with positive psychology by exploring strength-based and appreciative verses and teaching from Jesus with the character strengths model in positive psychology.

For a handful of theologians, advances in contemporary psychology are grounded in the secular world and diminish the charism of God’s grace as they live the exhortation in 1 Peter 3: 15 to “[...] be prepared to give an account of the hope that is in you.” The role of the theologian to protect Biblical narratives from distortion, to interpret Church dogma, and to use methods of inquiry that highlight “political” readings of Scripture remain central to a theologian’s training (Metz 1994).

While it can sound clichéd to state that well-being is at the centre of everything that happens in school, the explicit teaching of whole-school well-being, or positive education, which is an approach to education that fosters traditional academic skills with skills for well-being and character/values, remains limited (Seligman et al. 2009). Typically, well-being is timetabled either through pastoral care classes or through a specific well-being program, rather than being diffused into multiple areas of school life (Waters 2011). This has meant that the topic of well-being may not have been adopted in Religious Instruction or Chapel as fully as is possible. The result, for students, is that they may not have been encouraged to think about well-being from a Christian perspective as deeply as they can because well-being has remained in the arena of psychology and pastoral care.

In the study of Religious and Values Education the connections between Christianity, wisdom and well-being are often achieved through the teaching of “ethical conundrums” and focuses on developing individual and community strengths. In this chapter we have chosen to focus on the Wisdom literature of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures and explore points of similarity and overlap between these writings and principles of positive psychology. We suggest an approach to exploring well-being from a Christian perspective by using positive education. Before we discuss the links between these two disciplines, we will provide a brief overview of each area separately as it is currently taught in schools.

Wisdom Literature

Wisdom as understood and portrayed in the Hebrew Scriptures is no easier to define than it is in a contemporary secular society. The term “wisdom” has been presented as having a number of different meanings ranging from the more practical interpretations of the word to the more ethical viewpoints. Alastair Hunter identifies wisdom as referring to “technical” and “administrative” skills, as well as the specific discernment and understanding given to King Solomon. Other meanings of wisdom include “native wit” (that is shrewdness or cunning) and “life-long learning”, which may be acquired through discipline and obedience. This obedience is usually linked to honouring one’s elders, particularly one’s parents and their teaching of the Torah.¹ Finally, wisdom includes an “ethical and religious quality”: wisdom is linked with a fear of the Lord, it is sometimes seen as a gift of God, it is an attribute possessed by God, and is personified, particularly in the books of Job, Proverbs, Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon (Edwards 1995).

Significantly though, while Hunter identifies a shift in the understanding of wisdom from practical definitions, (i.e. technical, administrative, discernment and native wit), to the more ethical and theological uses such as life long learning and ethics, wisdom is conceptualised as a skill and a quality that can be acquired and cultivated. It is available to those who make the effort, with the obvious exception of the definition of wisdom, which refers to wisdom being a gift from God (Hunter 2006).

In the biblical sense, personified Wisdom, or Sophia, may be described as God’s self-revelation (Edwards 1995). It is appropriate to concentrate on this understanding of wisdom for a moment, because of the New Testament links between Jesus and the personified Wisdom, which in turn form the basis of many Christian ethical beliefs and practices. There are several key passages in which Wisdom is personified, including Job 28, Proverbs 1, 8, 9, Sirach 1: 9–10, 4: 11–19, 6: 18–31, 14: 20–15: 8, 51: 13–21, Baruch 3: 9–4: 4 and Wisdom 6: 12–11: 1.

The Book of Sirach may be used as a way to illustrate the connection with the gospels. Denis Edwards suggests that the author’s theology “allows Judaism to understand true Wisdom in terms of the Torah and Torah piety (Edwards 1995).”

¹ Hunter, *Wisdom Literature*, 16.

Wisdom then, can indeed be found in an exploration of the law. This identification of Wisdom and Torah is found in Baruch 3: 9–4: 4. Sirach describes Wisdom herself as food and drink, that is, she is the source of nourishment and life. The Torah, which may be seen as Wisdom’s presence and expression in Israel, “is like the great rivers of the world, overflowing with abundance and life (24: 24–29) (Edwards 1995).” Wisdom, then, is clearly identified as a source of life and health for those who seek her and finds particular expression in the following of the law, that is, in Torah piety. This theme was echoed by early Christian writers, who understood Jesus as the one who provides the bread of life, meaning, in this context, true sustenance for life, and the one in whom they would find rest and peace.

Jesus, the Wisdom of God

One of the earliest theological approaches to understanding Jesus in the early Church was through identifying him with divine Wisdom (Edwards 1995). This identification of Jesus as divine wisdom is most clearly seen in the gospels of Matthew, Luke and John and in some of the letters, including Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians and the letter to the Hebrews. Finally, the Prologue to John’s Gospel (1: 1–18) and the hymn to the risen Christ in Colossians (1: 15–20) are two of the most celebrated passages exploring the role of the Christ in the creation of the world, with the theme of the cosmic role of Wisdom in creation finding expression in the new language of christology.

A clear connection may be found in the letter to the Hebrews, in which Jesus is presented as “the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being” (Hebrews 1: 3). It is “through him” the universe is described as being created (Hebrews 1: 2). As Edwards points out, this description of Jesus as a “reflection” of God’s “glory” and the “imprint of God’s being” is almost a paraphrase of Wisdom 7: 26 talking about the person of Wisdom: “She is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God and an image of his goodness.” (Edwards 1995)

Sharing a common source for some of the material in their gospels, often named “Q” by scholars, Matthew and Luke both identify Jesus with the Hebrew understanding of Sophia. As Edwards (1995) suggests, there are four clear links between Jesus and Wisdom in Luke’s gospel: Luke 7: 35; Luke 10: 21–22; Luke 11: 49; and Luke 13: 34. It is clear in Luke 7: 35 that Luke is including the disciples of Jesus, as well as those of John the Baptist, in Jesus’ words: “Nevertheless, wisdom is vindicated by all her children.”

Matthew extends the connection between Jesus and Wisdom even further than Luke and identifies Jesus as the divine Wisdom. That is, Jesus is understood not simply to be a prophet sent by Sophia, the Wisdom of God, nor simply Wisdom’s child, but indeed is seen as the very incarnation of Wisdom and, importantly, the embodiment of the Torah (Edwards 1995).

This understanding of Jesus as the divine Wisdom has some very practical theological ramifications. Not only is Jesus someone who speaks “in the Wisdom categories of proverbial saying and parable” and demands a new way of thinking, but in fact as the divine Wisdom, Jesus demands a new way of living, that is, of practical action or ortho-praxis (Edwards 1995). This practical action is based in his radical, wisdom-based teaching on mercy (Luke 6: 36 and Matthew 5: 7), the unity of love of God and love of neighbour (Mark 12: 30–31; Matthew 19: 19; Luke 10: 27), the command to love one’s enemy (Matthew 5: 44; Luke 6: 27) and the command to love one another (John 13: 34). We find it in his extraordinary teachings in the parables, perhaps most famously in the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15: 11–32) as an expression of God’s generous love and the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 30–36) as an expression of love of a neighbour. The practical expression of this wisdom is then found in Jesus welcoming of the “sinners”, including prostitutes and tax-collectors, the outcast and the poor, as well as in his compassionate healing of the sick, the lame and the blind, and feeding of the hungry. As Edwards puts it: “In each case the strong inner feeling of compassion leads to direct action: feeding, healing, teaching, liberating.” (Edwards 1995)

Wisdom in the Context of Christian Education

In the context of Religious and Values Education the wisdom tradition can be used to give students practical knowledge to guide their lives. However, the reality of teaching values in a school context to help students make meaningful connections between some of Jesus’ wisdom based commandments and their day-to-day lives is not always easy. This is particularly so, given that today’s teenagers receive many competing messages from popular culture as to what “wisdom” is and how it can be embodied. Deep knowledge and appreciation of the biblical stories and themes is less widespread amongst young people today than in previous generations. Thus, contemporary Christian educators are asking, “How can we return young people to the wisdom of the Bible?” One potential approach to reconnecting students with the wisdom literature is to adopt a more appreciative, strength-based assessment of the Bible.

A traditional approach has been to focus on the 10 commandments (Exodus 20: 1–17 and Deuteronomy 5: 4–21) and then to refer to Jesus’ summary of the commandments in the two great commandments (Mark 12: 30–31; Matthew 19: 19; Luke 10: 27). Certainly this approach has some merit. However, the 10 commandments, speaking critically from an educational point of view (and in this context only!), consist of two commandments that encourage positive practices, number three: “Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy” (although even this commandment continues with the instructions *not* to work on the Sabbath) and number four: “Honour your father and your mother”, while eight commandments order us to avoid “negative” behaviour. These commandments are “to have no other gods

before me”, not to “make an for yourself an idol” nor worship them, not to “make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God”, not to “murder”, not to “commit adultery”, not to “steal”, not to “bear false witness against your neighbour” and not to “covert your neighbours wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour”.

Educationally, the question can be asked whether teaching wisdom should begin by focusing the students on what they should NOT be doing (the emphasis of 8 out of the 10 commandments) or whether there are other teaching strategies that connect students to Christianity by showing them more of the positive behaviours and practises that the Bible has outlined will lead to wisdom through positive verse and parables. We contend that wisdom is not simply the absence of negative behaviours. People are not automatically wise simply by following the 8 commandments that tell them not to steal, kill etc). Rather, we argue that wisdom is *both* the absence of negative behaviour *combined* with the presence of positive qualities and behaviours such as discipline, respect, obedience, perspective, ethics and love.

Wisdom in the Context of Positive Education

Positive Psychology is the branch of psychology that conducts scientific inquiry into the factors that help people and communities thrive by building on their strengths and virtues (Gable and Haidt 2005). Positive psychology aims to expand the field of psychology from its focus on repairing the negatives in life to promoting the positives in life (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000). Wong argues that a key goal of positive psychology to is “develop good and decent people as well as a civil society by promoting meaning/virtue.” (Wong 2011) The emphasis of positive psychology on well-being, character, meaning and virtue align strongly with Christian Education (McCall et al. 2012). Wisdom in Judaism, Christianity and positive psychology is considered a source of health.

Green, Odes and Robinson define positive education as “applied positive psychology in education.” (Green et al. 2011) Positive education seeks to ensure that a student’s academic abilities are developed in unison with his/her character development and the promotion of virtuous behaviours (e.g., respect, fairness, civility, tolerance, fortitude, self-discipline, effort, perseverance).

Waters (2011) and Pawelski and Moores (2013) both contend that students can be exposed to positive psychology through the inclusion of positive models into the curriculum of traditional academic disciplines. Pawelski calls for academic curriculum to take a “positive turn” in the topics studied within the academic curriculum, so that the teachers’ present topics and subject matter which seek to understand human flourishing. In the context of Christian Education, McCall et al. (2012) contend that a positive turn can be infused into religious and values education, where students are taught about the virtuous qualities and grace that God bestows upon them through studying topics such as Irenaeus’ unequivocal affirmation of the goodness

of creation, (Gunton 1988), Denis Edwards' (2004) writing on "panentheism" and Mathew Fox's writing on original blessings. Rather than focussing on the tradition inherited from Augustine in particular, Fox (1983) sided firmly with Irenaeus in affirming the essential goodness of creation and therefore of human beings. Creation, described as being seen by God as "good" in the first account of creation in Genesis (Genesis 1.1–2.4a) is thus a place of blessing.

Within these writings, human beings are viewed as fundamentally good, having received God's blessings, and having something creative to contribute to the world. We wonder whether student learning might be more effective if the wisdom approach was to emphasise the positive lessons that students can learn and the positive qualities (e.g., humanity, courage) that students have within them to lead a wise and ethical life in addition to emphasizing only the negative qualities/sins to avoid (e.g., greed, lust)?

If we connect students to their inner "grace" and educate them as to their own virtues (delivered to them through God), does this make it easier for them to navigate the world and follow in the footsteps of Jesus? Is it easier for students to follow biblical principles relating to ethics and worship if they do so with the knowledge of their God-given strengths and virtues? Which is more effective—to scare a student into NOT stealing or to connect the student up with their own inner compass for honesty?

Research in positive psychology has shown that strength-based approaches to motivation and change are more successful than deficit based approaches. That is, when people are provided with a positive reason to change and are supported by the inner strengths they have to create change, the change is more successful than when people are provided with negatives/weaknesses they need to fix. In the motivation literature, approach-goals are seen to be more effective, in many circumstances, than avoidance-goals (Elliot and Thrash 2002). That is, people are more motivated to approach something desirable (e.g., a state of health, being an honest person) than avoid something undesirable (e.g., avoiding illness or trying not to be dishonest).

We propose that a strength-based, approach-goal pedagogy may be an effective inclusion when teaching the wisdom literature to students. For example, in addition to exploring the consequence of infidelity and why it is that God has made a specific commandment on this matter, it might be helpful for students to explore the positive opposite of this commandment. That is, by adopting a positive psychology approach, teachers can help students to think about what their life would look like if they proactively chose to lead a life of fidelity McGovern (2012). What are the rewards for choosing this positive path? How does a life of fidelity bring one closer to God? What are the strengths that a student can draw on to ensure they will be faithful to their spouse when they marry?

One of the major topics of study in positive psychology is that of character strengths. Character strengths are defined by Brdar and Kashdan as "pre-existing qualities that arise naturally, feel authentic, are intrinsically motivating to use and energizing." Strengths of character are different to abilities and talents (such as intelligence, sporting prowess, music ability or artistic ability). Not everyone may

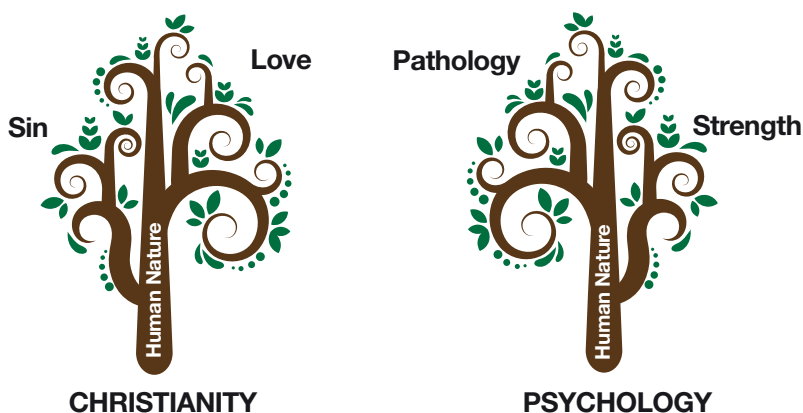


Fig. 2.1 The trees of christianity and psychology

be high on talent, but everyone has character. In 2004, Professor Chris Peterson and Professor Seligman developed the “Values in Action” (VIA) framework, which identified 24 character strengths (Peterson and Seligman 2004). The framework is useful because it provides teachers and students with a language to discuss what is good about students.

When developing the VIA framework, Professors Peterson and Seligman wondered whether there are character strengths that are universal to the human species regardless of race, religion, culture, gender, or period of history in which one was born. To answer this question they conducted comprehensive research looking into which character strengths might be ubiquitous and morally valued across cultures. They read Aristotle’s account of virtues, they surveyed all major world religions and philosophies, they analysed classic children’s stories from various cultures to identify the virtues displayed by the positive role models in the story, they considered contemporary virtue inventories (e.g., the Boy Scout codes) and they analysed the empirical research (Peterson 2006). Their research identified 24 character strengths that are universal to the human species. Each of the 24 strengths fall under one of six core virtues: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance and transcendence as shown in the diagram below. A clear point of connection between the character strengths model and Christianity may be found in the “fruit” of the Spirit in the letter to the Galatians. “By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things” (Galatians 5: 22–23). These fruits, or character strengths, are a critical aspect of well-being, and of following a path of wisdom and union with Jesus. (Fig. 2.1)

How do these character strengths relate to well-being? Character strengths such as love, hope, curiosity, and zest have high correlations with life satisfaction, pleasure, and engagement in adults (Peterson and Seligman 2004). Hope, kindness, social intelligence, self-control and perspective have been shown to buffer people

from the negative effects of stress and trauma (Park and Peterson 2008). In middle school students, Park and Peterson found that the character strengths of persistence, honesty, prudence, and love were negatively correlated with aggression, anxiety and depression (Park and Peterson 2008). In an Australian study with school boys aged 10–12 years, when the teacher deliberately taught her students about character strengths and when the boys identified their own character strengths, they reported higher levels of hope and life satisfaction Madden et al. (2010). In a study conducted in the United States of America where 347 year 9 students were taught about character strengths and were encouraged to work with their own character strengths, the students reported higher levels of enjoyment and engagement to school. The teachers and parents of those children reported improvement in social skills (Seligman et al. 2009).

What is important about the strengths framework is that character strengths can be developed over time. We can always develop our social intelligence, we can grow in bravery and we can cultivate a sense of fairness and judgement. In this way, the character strengths framework, although secular, is aligned with the Wisdom literature in Christianity in that both are based on assumption that wisdom/virtue is desirable and that it can be developed. Using a strength-based perspective can shift students from fear or merely following the doctrines of wisdom, to move towards a relationship of love and intimacy with Jesus through serving him and others by using one's unique strengths. It can move students from scriptural study to a practical wisdom that is enacted each day.

Positive Verse and Positive Parables: Connections to the Character Strengths Model

We suggest that Chaplains and religious education teachers can link Christian Education to positive education in four key ways: (1) students exploring their own character strengths and how it is they can use their character strengths to serve Jesus; (2) the use of positive verse to connect students up with the positive behaviours they can adopt, as preached in the Bible, to become wise, as summarised in Table 2.1; (3) an analysis of parables using the character strengths model and; (4) analysing the actions of Jesus towards others from a strength-based perspective.

1. Students exploring their own character strengths and how it is they can use their character strengths to serve Jesus

The VIA Institute on Character has developed a free, on-line survey that provides students with a personalized profile which rank orders their 24 character strengths. <http://www.viacharacter.org/www/>. The VIA framework is worthy of consideration within Religious and Values Education. The VIA framework assists students to identify their own strengths but the Christian Wisdom literature can help the students to connect to Jesus by exploring questions like: Why did God give me these

Table 2.1 Comparison between Jesus' teachings on wisdom and Peterson and Seligman's classification of character strengths and virtues

Positive psychology Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman, <i>Character strengths and virtues: a handbook and classification</i> (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004)	Christian theology New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America
Wisdom and knowledge "Strengths of wisdom and knowledge include positive traits related to the acquisition and use of information in the service of the good life." (p. 95)	"Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock." (Matthew 7: 24–25)
Transcendence Forging "connections to the larger universe and thereby [providing] meaning to our lives." (p. 519)	"Ask, and it will be given you; search and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you." (Matthew 7: 7)
Temperance "The positive traits that protect us from excess." (p. 431)	"Blessed are the meek." (Matthew 5: 5)
Humanity "Strengths of humanity include positive traits, manifest in caring relationships with others. A disposition to tend and befriend." (p. 291)	"Blessed are the merciful." (Matthew 5: 7)
Bravery "Strengths of courage entail the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, either external or internal" (p. 119)	"And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid." (Matthew 10: 30–31)
Justice "Strengths of justice are relevant to the optimal interaction between the individual and the group or community." (p. 355)	"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness." (Matthew 5: 6)

strengths? What is my purpose to serve with the strengths I have? How can I cultivate the lower strengths so as to strive for wisdom?

In the first letter of Peter the writer instructs his readers to, "Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received" (1 Peter 4: 10). Religious and Values Education teachers can design lesson plans that help students "flesh-out" what these strengths mean in service to God. For example, teacher could ask students. "What strengths does it take to Love your Lord God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind?"

2. *The use of positive verse to connect students up with the positive behaviours they can adopt, as preached in the Bible, to become wise*

Chaplains and religious instruction teachers can adopt a positive education approach by presenting bible verses to students that encourage positive behaviour and strengths. These verses can come from various sections of the Old and New Testament

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