

Social Sciences Stream

The Social Sciences and the Christian World View (Friday)

Can the social sciences be trusted? (Saturday)

Friday 15 (all day) and Saturday 16 March 2019 (morning through lunchtime)

New College, Holywell Street, Oxford

Senior convener: [Donald Hay](#) (Economics)

Student co-conveners: [Jieun Baek](#) (Public Policy)

What does it mean to be human? How should societies be structured? How should we situate our Christian worldview within a pluralistic society?

How can postgraduates, postdocs, and academics at the University of Oxford approach philosophy and theology as Christians? What does it mean to respond to a Christian vocation and to honour God in university life?

The Social Sciences Stream is one of four disciplinary streams that make up Seeking Wisdom, the spring conference of Developing a Christian Mind. It includes law, business, and all other subjects in the University of Oxford Social Sciences Division. Past attendees are encouraged to come, listen to new talks, and take part in discussion with new attendees.

Friday March 15th

The Social Sciences and the Christian World View

Three sessions with break out groups to discuss the issues

9:00 am Registration begins at New College in the North Undercroft with coffee & tea

Three sessions with break out groups to discuss the issues

9:30 am Social scientific and Christian understandings of human beings in society ([Donald Hay](#), Economics)

Comparing and contrasting Christian anthropology with evolutionary psychology, rational choice theory, and social theory

11:00 am Coffee & tea

11.30 am Social ethics in the social sciences: theological and secular approaches ([Tom Simpson](#), Blavatnik School of Government)

In this session we explore the broad issue of how society should be structured. By the 'structure of society' is meant those laws and policies that govern how people interact with

each other. The task of social science is avowedly descriptive, aiming to identify and understand how people interact. But it seldom stops there; accurate description is a precursor to intervention and change, through such policies. We address three questions. First, in what way does the practice of social science have implicit commitments about the way society should be structured? Second, is there a Christian view on how society should be structured, and if so, what is it? Third, what are the dominant secular proposals about how society should be structured, and what should a Christian make of them?

1:00 pm **Lunch in the Hall**

2:00 pm **Christian political theory and liberal democracy** ([Paul Billingham](#), Politics, and [Joshua Hordern](#), Theology and Religion)

3:45 pm **Coffee & tea**

4:15 pm **The challenges of post-doctoral research in the social sciences**

Four Oxford post docs reflect on their experiences as researchers in diverse areas of the Social Sciences in a session chaired by [Ewan McKendrick](#) (Law): [Bernhard Kasberger](#) (Economics), [Mary Louis](#) (Saïd Business School), [Penny Mealy](#) (Institute for New Economic Thinking) and one other

The following events are joint with all streams at New College.

5:30 pm **Prayer in the Chapel**

6:00 pm **Drinks at the Bar**

6:45 pm **Dinner in the Hall**

Saturday March 16th

Can the social sciences be trusted?

The programme for the whole morning is a round table on the lack of trust accorded to the Social Sciences in public life, chaired by [Andrew Dilnot](#) (Economics). Those contributing will be, [Joerg Friedrichs](#) (International Development), [Jane E Green](#) (Politics), and [Paul Yowell](#) (Law).

The intended scope of the discussion is outlined in the note below, ‘Can the social sciences be trusted?’

9:00 am **Registration begins at New College in the North Undercroft with coffee & tea**

9:15 am **First session begins**

11:00 am **Coffee & tea break**

1:00 pm **Lunch in the Hall**

Social scientists to sit together to continue the discussion over lunch

Can the social sciences be trusted?

In recent years, the Social Sciences have attracted a good deal of public distrust, expressed by a range of commentators in politics and the media more generally. Much of this came to the fore with the arguments during the Brexit vote in the UK when ‘experts’ (especially economists) were ridiculed for the range of predictions about the likely consequences of Brexit; but it is a US phenomenon as well with President Trump regularly dismissing the views of ‘experts’ on a range of issues such as climate change, migration, and international trade. More generally the media have questioned the whole basis for international aid and assistance for development, and even the international liberal consensus on globalisation, the role of international organisations, and human rights. [Other examples can be identified in law, social policy, and education.]

Some of this no doubt reflects ideological stances or just prejudices, and unwillingness on the part of policy makers to see their cherished projects undermined by social science. Some reflects misunderstanding about the nature of predictions made by economists about the outcomes of particular political decisions (notably in the case of Brexit), or by pollsters about the outcome of elections or referenda. Some is frustration with the absence of simple answers to complex social issues, such as the prevalence of gun and knife crime in large cities, the provision of health and social care to an ageing population, or international measures to deal with climate change or mass migration.

More concerning perhaps is the now prevalent view that we are living in a post-truth world where according to popular post-modernist thinking there is no such thing as truth, but only opinions. In which case, the role of social science is to provide arguments or evidence to support whatever opinion you happen to hold about an issue. Or perhaps just to illustrate the range of views on offer, and explain them by reference to the social class or ethnic or gender group to which proponents belong. There is, in this understanding, no way in which evidence or analysis is going to decide between the views, and persuasion depends more on the way in which a particular view is marketed. The views that are marketed best will attract adherents, and so will eventually win out.

How is a Christian social scientist to proceed in these circumstances? We are committed to truth, and that is not just revealed truth about God, humanity and salvation, but must include truth about the world, both the physical creation and the moral ordering of the human world. We are made in the image of God, even though fallen; so human life is ordered even if there is also disorder arising from human sinfulness. We should expect to find that order in our world. It is therefore entirely correct to hold that there is truth to be discovered about humanity, and about the social and economic order. Moreover we have a responsibility under God to care for the created order, and to ensure human flourishing. So a concern for law and good governance, rooted in effective social sciences, is part of our calling.

So what are the implications for a Christian social scientist? First, we must be committed to the pursuit of truth in our disciplines. That means, among other things, being alert to the biases that may exist in the tools we use for our research and in the topics we choose to study. The Kuhnian analysis of scientific research programmes almost certainly applies with extra force in the social sciences, if only because there is a range of paradigms to choose from. Perhaps the best advice is to be open to interpretations of social and economic phenomena from disciplines that differ from our own. Second, there is an obligation on the Christian social scientist to search diligently for evidence, and not allow research to be dominated by theoretical constructs and arguments. [We might note that the progress of physical science has always been stimulated by the search for evidence, and there are surely good reasons for that: the objective reality of the physical world acts as a constraint on most physical theories, and the objective is always to explain real physical phenomena.] Third, much social science has a normative basis – the social sciences seek not only to understand humanity and society, but also bring about change. But that is always motivated, at least implicitly, by some vision of human flourishing. A Christian social scientist needs to consider whether that vision is compatible with Christian understandings of what makes for human flourishing in society, and be ready to reject mainstream vision which falls short.

There is another consideration that should characterise the Christian social scientist, and that is research integrity. Given the pressure to publish, and the importance of research reputations in modern universities, it is always tempting to ‘cut corners’ in research. This can include, for examples, not reporting evidence that would count against our hypotheses, claiming more for our results than the analysis actually supports, and not acknowledging materials or contributions from other researchers. The ‘peer review’ system is far from being fully effective in exposing such behaviours. And it is far too easy to succumb to ‘group think’ in order to please those who might support the publication of our work.

The programme will include the following elements:

- A brief theological introduction to the concept of truth as it might apply in the social sciences.
- Four established researchers (across the main disciplines) reflecting on their own research – focussing on research frameworks and tools, the significance of evidence, the vision of human flourishing that underlies their work, and the issue of research integrity.

Donald Hay
25th January 2019

Reading Suggestions

Christian and social scientific understandings of human beings in society

C. BEED, C. BEED (1999), ‘A Christian perspective on neoclassical choice theory’,
International Journal of Social Economics, 26, no 4, 501-520

A. BIELER (French original 1961, English translation 2005), Calvin's Economic and Social Thought, WCC, Geneva, Switzerland, Chapter III sections 1-3

D. M. BUSS (1999), Evolutionary Psychology, Allyn and Bacon, Boston

J. ELSTER (1985), 'The nature and scope of rational choice explanations' in E. LePORE, B. MCLAUGHLIN eds. Actions and Events, Oxford, Basil Blackwell.

S.T.EMLEN (1995), 'An evolutionary theory of the family', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 92(18), 8092-9

R. H. FRANK (1988), Passions within Reasons: the strategic role of the emotions, WWNorton, New York.

D. GREEN, I. SHAPIRO (1994), Pathologies of Rational Choice Theory, Yale University Press

R. GIBBONS (1997), 'An introduction to applicable game theory', *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 11, no 1, 127-149

I. HACKING (1999), The Social Construction of What?, Harvard UP

R. LAYARD (2006), Happiness: lessons from a new science, Penguin, London, 2006

S. PINKER (2002), The Blank Slate: the modern denial of human nature, Allen Lane, London

A. K. SEN (1976-7), 'Rational fools: a critique of the behavioural foundations of economic theory', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 6, 317-344

C. SMITH (2003), Moral, Believing Animals, OUP

C. SMITH (2010), What is a person?, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, Chapter 1

R. TRIGG (1999), Ideas of Human Nature: an historical introduction, Blackwells, Oxford

E. O. WILSON (1999), Consilience, Abacus Books, London

[A written up version of the lecture is available on the DCM website:

[Donald Hay, What does it mean to be human? Christian and social scientific understandings of human beings in society.](#)]

Christian theological traditions and political life

R. BAUCKHAM, *The Bible in Politics* (2nd ed., SPCK, 2010)

- R. BENNE, "Christians and Government" in G. Meilaender and W. Werpehowski, eds, *The Oxford Handbook of Theological Ethics* (OUP, 2005).
- N. BIGGAR, *Behaving in Public: How to Do Christian Ethics* (Eerdmans, 2011).
- N. BIGGAR & L. HOGAN (eds), *Religious Voices in Public Places* (OUP, 2009)
- L. BRETHERTON, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics: The Conditions and Possibilities of Faithful Witness* (Wiley Blackwell, 2009)
- L. BRETHERTON, *Resurrecting Democracy: Faith, Citizenship, and the Politics of a Common Life* (CUP, 2015).
- J. BURNSIDE, *God, Justice and Society*, OUP, Oxford, 2011
- J. CHAPLIN, "Government", in *The New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology*, ed. D.J. Atkinson and David Field, London: IVP, 1995.
- J. CHAPLIN, *Talking God: The Legitimacy of Religious Public Reasoning* (Theos, 2008, accessible free at <http://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/>)
- D. FERGUSSON, *Church, State and Civil Society* (CUP, 2005)
- G. FORSTER, *The Contested Public Square: The Crisis of Christianity and Politics* (IVP, 2008).
- D. KOYZIS, *Political Visions & Illusions: A Survey and Christian Critique of Contemporary Ideologies* (IVP, 2003)
- C. MATHEWES, *A Theology of Public Life* (CUP, 2008)
- A. MCGRATH (ed), *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Modern Christian Thought* (Blackwell, 1995), articles on 'Kingdom of God: Political and Social Theology' (R. Preston), 'Social Questions' (D. Forrester), and 'War and Peace' (O'Donovan)
- O.M.T. O'DONOVAN, *The Desire of the Nations* (CUP, 1996)
- O.M.T. O'DONOVAN, *The Ways of Judgment* (Eerdmans, 2005)
- O.M.T. & J.L. O'DONOVAN (eds), *From Irenaeus to Grotius: A Sourcebook in Christian Political Thought* (Eerdmans, 1999).
- J. RAWLS, 'Idea of Public Reason Revisited', originally published in *The University of Chicago Law Review* 64(3) (1997): republished in the expanded edition of his *Political Liberalism* (2005), and in *The Law of Peoples* (1999).
- N. SPENCER & J. CHAPLIN (eds), *God & Government* (SPCK, 2009)
- J. WITTE JR. & F.S. ALEXANDER (eds), *The Teachings of Modern Roman Catholicism on Law, Politics, and Human Nature* (Columbia University Press, 2007)

J. WITTE JR. & F.S. ALEXANDER (eds), *The Teachings of Modern Protestantism on Law, Politics, and Human Nature* (Columbia University Press, 2007)

N. WOLTERSTORFF, *The Mighty and the Almighty: An Essay in Political Theology* (CUP, 2012)

Social ethics: theological and secular approaches, and the basis for social and economic policy

S. ALKIRE (2002), Valuing Freedoms. Sen's capability approach and poverty reduction, OUP, New York and Oxford

J. ATHERTON (1994), Social Christianity: a reader, SPCK, London

BENEDICT XVI (2009), Caritas in Veritate: on integral human development in charity and truth (Papal Encyclical)

A. BIELER (French original 1961, English translation 2005), Calvin's Economic and Social Thought, WCC, Geneva, Switzerland, Chapter IV sections 1-3, and Chapter V

T. BURCHARDT (2007), 'Welfare: what for?', chapter 3 in J. HILLS, J. LE GRAND, D. PIACHAUD, Making Social Policy Work, Policy Press, University of Bristol.

C. E. CURRAN (2002), Catholic Social Teaching: 1891 to the present, Georgetown University Press

J. FINNIS (1981) Natural Law and Natural Rights

A. HARTROPP (2007), What is Economic Justice? Biblical and secular perspectives contrasted, Paternoster Theological Monographs, Milton Keynes and Colorado Springs.

D. A. HAY (1989), Economics Today: a Christian critique, Apollos, IVP, Leicester (especially chapter 3, section 2; and chapter 4, section 4)

D. HOLLENBACH (2002), The Common Good and Christian Ethics Cambridge.

PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE (2005), Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington DC

PAUL VI AND THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL (1965), Gaudium et Spes: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Catholic Truth Society, London

A.K.SEN (2009), The idea of justice, Allen Lane, London

A.K.SEN, B. WILLIAMS (1982) Utilitarianism and beyond, CUP, Cambridge

C. SMITH (2010), What is a person?, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, Chapters 7, 8

WILLIAM TEMPLE (1942), Christianity and Social Order, Penguin (reissued in 1976 by SPCK and other publishers)

C.J.H. WRIGHT (2004) Old Testament Ethics for the People of God, IVP, Leicester (especially Part One)

[A written up version of a lecture on this topic is available on the DCM website:

[Donald Hay, *Social and economic ethics and the basis for public policy*](#)]

[No session in 2019, so for reference only]

Epistemology, science and hermeneutics in the social sciences: how do you do ‘good’ social science?

C. BEED, C. BEED (2006), Alternatives to Economics: Christian Socio Economic Perspectives, University Press of America, Lanham, Maryland (to be read very selectively, especially chapters 9, 10, 11, 13)

S. DOW (2002), Economic methodology: an inquiry, OUP, Oxford, especially chapters 3-6

D. A. HAY (1989), Economics Today: a Christian critique, Apollos, IVP, Leicester (Chapter 3, section 1, and references)

F. A. HAYEK (1967), ‘The theory of complex phenomena’, in Studies in Philosophy, Politics and Economics, University of Chicago Press, pp 22-48

H. KINCAID (1990), ‘Defending laws in the social sciences’, *Philosophy of Social Science*, vol 20, pp 56-83. [For a fuller account of his views, see H. KINCAID(1996), Philosophical Foundations of Social Science, CUP, Cambridge]

A. MACINTYRE (1981), After Virtue: a study in moral theory, Duckworth, London (chapters 7, 8)

L. McINTYRE (1993), ‘Complexity and social scientific laws’, *Sythese*, vol 97. [For a fuller account of his views, see L. McINTYRE (1996), Laws and Explanation in the Social Sciences: defending a science of human behaviour, Westview, Boulder, Colorado]

C. SMITH (2010), What is a person?, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, Chapters 3-7

[For a wide selection of classic readings in philosophy of social science, see M. MARTIN, L. McINTYRE (1994) eds., Readings in the Philosophy of the Social Sciences, MIT Press]

[A very preliminary written up version of a DCM lecture on this topic is available on the DCM website: *Donald Hay, Epistemology and methodology in the social sciences*]