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Do We Need God to Flourish? The science might say yes.

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Is religious belief a fundamental human need? What is the difference between desiring God and needing God? Such were the questions raised by New Zealand theologian Christa McKirland at the first of a series of online conversations run by ISCAST in Australia and Christians in Science in New Zealand.

During the conversation, McKirland spoke to 60 people about her research into the increasingly evident relationship between human needs and faith. Then followed a fascinating time of discussion.

McKirland's doctoral research categorised fundamental human needs within a philosophical and theological framework, and her ongoing research is into Self-Determination Theory, resulting from her interest in how our theological understandings of needs map onto reality. In her presentation in April she asked, 'what does it mean to flourish?' and whether a misconception of the complex faith-need relationship has led to psychological and spiritual starvation.

Defining Desires and Needs

McKirland's discussion focussed on fundamental needs by distinguishing between *needs* and *desires*. She drew on philosopher Garrett Thomson's book called *Needs*, which describes needs as experientially distinct from desires. His classification of a need adheres to three strict criteria (they are inescapable, non-derivative, and non-circumstantial) and he suggests that needs are present regardless of whether we have a conscious awareness of them. "I need food even when I am eating" Thomson says.

This classification is dispositional McKirland clarifies, "You might think of it as a property of a certain entity to have specific needs." Desires, however, are constituted by a conscious longing, or acknowledgement of a lack; "if I desire to see a movie, once I have seen it, that desire is satisfied." In contrast, a need may be a continuous property of the entity: "Even as I'm drinking, I still need the water."

After reading Thomson's work, McKirland describes how her thoughts turned towards the theological significance of this distinction: Do humans have distinct 'theological' needs? She summarises three relevant ideas for theology from Thomson's book:

- A person could have a need, which could be met, and yet the need persists (unlike a desire). For example, our need for relationship with God may be met but is also ongoing.

- Additionally, a person could have a need and be ignorant of it without negating the salience or immanence of it as a property. For example, irrespective of our awareness of the need, all humans may need relationship with God.
- The language of need is stronger than language of desire. For example, our need for relationship with God is more than a desire that people may have for that relationship.

A Theology of Needs

McKirland's ruminations on this distinction between needs and desires led her back to theology where she wonders what biblical authors might have thought of as a fundamental need. McKirland explains how her research delved into a branch of Hebrew scholarship which emphasised the Presence of God as a driving narratival and theological force in Old Testament writings. She observed that this line can reasonably be extended into New Testament scholarship.

McKirland referred us to the creation narrative, where a theological understanding of God's presence is established. The first signifier of presence we see is humanity made in the image of God (Gen. 1:27). Following creation, Adam and Eve enjoy the unmediated presence of God. However, this intimate and immanent connection is severed once Adam and Eve partake of the forbidden fruit. We then see that the primary instinct to separate emerges from humankind:

"They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden." (Gen. 3:8)

After the subsequent confrontation, they are driven from the garden, and consequently from the unmediated presence of God. McKirland asserts that, although she does not take a literal interpretation of the narrative, "this is still a story that has large theological significance, and would have had to its first readers." This origin narrative offers a picture of a state—dwelling in the unmediated presence of God—which is desirable to return to.

What follows, and largely characterises the Old Testament narratives, is a pursuit by God to bring his people back into his presence. This is achieved at various times through the prophets, the priesthood, the temple, and the laws. Significantly these are all mediatory institutions, a substitute for the direct, continuous presence of God amongst his people.

This leads us to the New Testament Gospel narratives which, McKirland asserts, "pull from the Hebrew Bible for their conceptual repertoire." For example, the metaphor of water for the work of the Holy Spirit elides with the New Testament where the same language is used, particularly in John's gospel, to emphasise the presence of God on earth through Jesus, the "living water." Descriptions of and by Jesus draw on pre-established understandings of fundamental needs: he is the "living water," the "bread of life," and "rest for the weary." This language emphasises that Jesus has come to "radically embody the divine presence and

grant new access to it.” The Gentiles are now included in the covenant and consequently the option to eternally dwell in the presence of God is available to them.

This theme continues into Revelation where the garden narrative is recapitulated and enriched. The new heaven and new earth become the holy of holies, the cubic measurements of the tabernacle John describes are instantiated, and at the centre of this expanded tabernacle is the lamb of God. Because of this McKirland suggests that the world becomes a sacred place within which God dwells, resulting in a restoration of creation and the unmediated relationship between God and his people.

McKirland concludes that by using Thomson’s rubric, we could argue that “a property of human-ness is to need the grace of God’s personal presence.”

Self-Determination Theory

Having suggested that the personal presence of God is a fundamental human need, McKirland pivots to the social sciences, specifically to the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) of Richard Ryan and Edward Deci. SDT is a theory of human motivation that challenged the reigning idea that we are motivated primarily by external rewards. Of interest to McKirland is the basic human needs sub-theory which goes beyond physiological needs and asks what our fundamental *psychological* needs may be.

McKirland refers to three innate psychological needs proposed by Ryan and Deci: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. These can be defined as follows: *autonomy* is the ability to make decisions without coercion, *competence* is the ability to effectively deal with tasks, and *relatedness* is about feeling supported by those significant to the individual.

Although these categorisations are helpful, McKirland clarifies that this study’s use of need lacks the nuance of Thomson’s definition. They describe it as a nutrient necessary for the vitality of the individual, which, according to McKirland, better fulfills the function of a *need satisfier* rather than a need itself. In her research, the need itself is the relationship with God, while the need satisfier is God. With this nuanced understanding of need, she examines whether this research can support her hypothesis that we have a fundamental need for the presence of God.

McKirland also referred to recent research that examined how different conceptions of God map onto Self-Determination Theory (the multi-authored study is entitled *The Mediatlional Role of Psychological Basic Needs and the Relation Between the Conception of God and Psychological Outcomes*). The research found that conceptions of a *controlling* God were associated with feelings of need and frustration, while conceptions of an *autonomy-supporting* God were associated with feelings of need-satisfaction and vitality. While the study was limited in scope, the findings suggest that the link between spirituality and psychology are significant to the well-being of the individual and warrant further investigation.

Arising from this study, McKirland asks her key question: What does the relationship between psychology and spirituality look like at its peak? What does it mean to flourish in this way? She uses this question so as to interrogate the practical implications of her research in the church and society.

In the Church

In the case of the Christian church, McKirland suggests that if congregants are experiencing high rates of depression and need frustration due to their understanding of God, then we must strive for a more robust theology and teaching of God's character. If, there is an accepted notion of a controlling God within a community then "we need to ask whether this is a scriptural portrait of who God is."

McKirland is also executive director of Logia, an international organisation concerned with promoting women in theology, and so she is attuned to how her research intersects with women in the church. If the autonomy of women is threatened, if they feel they cannot choose their actions freely or exercise their competence, then these are significant psychological needs which are not being met in an ecclesial context.

McKirland's research has far-reaching implications for the way church teaching and practice are pursued. The complex negotiations between psychology, philosophy, and theology promise a nuanced discussion of what it means to flourish, and how institutions, communities, and individuals can strive towards that goal.

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Christa McKirland's presentation and discussion was the first of this year's online 2021 Conversations hosted by ISCAST—Christians in Science and Technology and New Zealand Christians in Science. Details and registration for the conversations, which continue weekly until July 1, can be found at www.ISCAST.org/2021conversations.